

Interview with Rich Choquette
By Beth Halvorsen

Beth: I am meeting with Rich Choquette, at his home in Whitehall.

Beth: How long did you work in the mines?

Rich: Approximately 32 years between the Butte mines and the Golden Sunlight in Whitehall.

Beth: O.K. How did you come to work there? How did you acquire your job?

Rich: As soon as I got out of the Marine Corp. I went and talked to Jim Carden and he put me on as an oilier at the Kelly Mine and I oiled for 3 years until I was able to get a hoisting license.

Beth: What did your job entail?

Rich: I was a hoisting engineer in the underground mines in Butte, at the Kelly, the Mountain Con, and the Belmont. On both underground and surface hoists and I went to work for 22 years as a mine foreman at the Golden Sunlight mine in Whitehall.

Beth: So when you did your job exactly what did you do? What does a hoisting operator do?

Rich: You hoist rock, material, and men on the chippy is the man hoist rock hoist the number one at the Kelly is the rock hoist number two was mainly a rock hoist the chippy hoist was the number three hoist.

Beth: Did you sit in a room? I mean what did you do?

Rich: You sat in a little room inside a building, it was like a room in a room and you hoisted to whatever the bells were. One was a stop bell, all clear was two one and two, all the levels were different bells, the 2000 would have been five and five just like that what ever level they wanted they would ring you and there was radio bells on the cages and on the skips in case there was an emergency or something and there was also the station bells.

Beth: So they just would ring the bells how would you know where they were? Could you see them?

Rich: No, you couldn't see them you ran all strictly by, strictly by it was all gages you had the big dial gage that gave you roughly where you were at then as you came close to the station you watched the drum and you had the drum marked to the exact levels you had to change them every once in a while if it was new ropes because they stretched but you could never see them, they just ring you where they wanted you to go and you just went strictly by, strictly by bells there was telephones too they could call you on the telephone and talk to you too but all your hoisting was done strictly by bell signal.

Beth: And you worked underground as well?

Rich: I worked underground hoist at the Kelly, I was at the Mountain Con underground on the 5100 for about 5 years, I work the 4550 at the Kelly quit a few time, I worked at the Fire fill at the a.. I can't think of the name of the Liquidator maybe it was the Liquidator I can't remember one of the underground ventilation hoists for fire fill.

Beth: What does that mean?

Rich: Well they keep their shafts open for ventilation and a to make sure everything so the mine vent and exhaust right.

Beth: Any incidents when you worked on the hill?

Rich: No, nothing to serious I can think of off hand that happened to me anyway.

Beth: O.K. What other mines have you worked in?

Rich: I worked at the Golden Sunlight for just about 22 years until I retired. I started out as an equipment operator, shovel operator for about 5 years and then I went as a shift foreman for the next 15 or 16 years.

Beth: Is that an underground mine?

Rich: No, it's an open pit mine. A gold mine near Whitehall it all open pit all equipment.

Beth: You also worked in Clancy didn't you?

Rich: I worked in a little mine in Clancy for about 2 years. Up on the right up on the divide, it was just a little operation

Beth: What type of mine, gold?

Rich: It was a mainly a little silver mine, some gold but mainly silver.

Beth: What is the biggest difference between the different mines you worked in? How are they different and is mining different?

Rich: Underground is totally all drift or rays or following more or less following veins where open pit is stripping everything and just getting rid of the waste and milling the good ore or stockpiling the low-grade ore in the pit you had all kinds of different stockpiles, you had high-grade waste, low-grade, and the good ore was shipped right to the crusher and milled or you hauled it.

Beth: You had a crusher on site? You milled on site in Whitehall?

Rich: Is there a what?

Beth: A mill on site.

Rich: Yea the mill is right there we hauled it right out of the pit right to the mill and we crushed it right then and milled it. It was almost all mainly all gold.

Beth: O.K. Did you grow up in Butte?

Rich: Yea I grew up in Butte and went to Boy's Central High School, graduated went into the Marine Corp got out came back and went to work in the mines.

Beth: What are some of your memories of Butte as you grew up, and how has it changed?

Rich: Oh it's changed a lot since I grew up there it the old Butte was I can't think of a better place to have been raised than Butte. It was a real fun place in the 50's and it changed a lot driving around Butte and how there's it fun to think about how the old up town used to be and everything compared to how it is now, but it's pretty much the same old Butte.

(We are now joined By Rich's wives Karen)

Karen: The neighborhoods that we grew up in above Front Street were really cool little family neighborhood and now they have become rentals. The people who lived there have gotten old and passed on and their kids are no longer living in those homes so those homes have become rentals or low income homes and some of those neighborhoods are not as desirable as they were when we were kids.

Rich: Tell her about the Meaderville Christmas decorations.

Karen: Oh yea at Christmas time I mean every year since I was a little girl and carried right on through to my kids and me growing up and my kids we went to the Meaderville fire department for their display every year and then we took a ride out on the flats or what we called the flats which was below front street and we saw all the houses because that's where the decorating of home began in Butte out on what was that street Rich?

Rich: Floral Blvd.

Karen: Floral Blvd. that completely every house decorated just like the whole flat does now but that's where it started in Butte. Everybody decorated inside their houses but there wasn't a lot of outside decorations at that time except on Floral Blvd., and up in the McQueen edition.

Rich: And now McQueen is gone with the pit.

Karen: McQueen is gone you remember living in McQueen Beth and going to the Holy Savior School which is now gone that is where you made your first communion up there you and the rest of the kids were baptized at Saint Joes which was my parish church but then when you made your first communion up there in Meaderville and then your conformation

Rich: My parish church is Saint Ann's

Beth: Saint Ann's?

Karen: Saint Ann's Parish where all the snobs lived.

Rich: You're lucky you got one of them.

Karen: Um and what else lets see oh you know all of the little parishes each little parish when we were growing up um had their own ice skating rink that they froze from the first of October.

Rich: The one thing that your mom didn't tell you is that Saint Ann's thumped Saint Joe's in football every year without batting an eye.

Karen: Yea but we had the cutest girls.

Rich: No you didn't.

Karen: And then we had our own little skating rink every single school had their own skating rink that they flooded in October we all skated all winter long we all took our Christmas trees down to the

Rich: I won't tell you that I skated at the Country Club then.

Karen: See, I told you.

Karen: And everybody pulled their Christmas trees down to the ice rink after we took our down the trees and we had a bonfire every night with Christmas trees by the side of the rink.

Rich: One of the fun things young in Butte growing up was cruising the drag in uptown Butte which is something that doesn't exist any more I don't think.

Karen: Cruising the drag in uptown Butte.

Beth: Where was the drag?

Rich: The drag was mainly down Main Street or I mean down Park Street to Main up Main to Broadway over to Montana and then down again.

Karen: Park Street which was one way to up Main Street to Broadway over Broadway which was one way at that time down Montana like a big octa or big triangle or a rectangle.

Rich: It didn't become one way until later on when we were young it was still two way but that was, that was the drag.

Karen: You're older than me then because it was one-way all the time when I was young.

Rich: That was the drag in those days the downtown flat area didn't really exist. There was not much out in the flats. The drive-ins, the Donna-Bell.

Karen: Rich and his friends were. Who were you coming who were you in the car with when the car in front of you stopped to let a little old lady out and you guys were waving at some girls and didn't know?

Rich: Might have been Gary Panion and Jim Fisher.

Karen: And any way they were waving at some girls and this car that was right in front of them on Park Street stopped to let a little old lady out

Rich: Get in, yea.

Karen: Oh, get in.

Rich: She was trying to get in. She was walking to the door to get in.

Karen: And they hit the back of the car so hard that the car flew forward

Rich: When she put her foot down, she was in behind of both cars.

Karen: That happened sometimes on the drag.

Rich: The incident where my hoisting partner that I relieved and was running hoist same time as him. We were working at the East Colusa underground East Colusa on the 2900 level. We'd go down the Kelly to the 2000 over to the Leonard down the Leonard to the 2900 and over to the East Colusa.

Karen: On a man train wasn't it?

Rich: Well we walked from the Leonard over quite a ways, probably a half-mile underground to the East Colusa. And I was coming to work one morning I was day shift and I thought I saw a guy that I used to fish and hunt with some of the time Fats Riordan who was a hoisting engineer and I thought I saw him on the hill heading out fishing and I was thinking to myself how was he going fishing on a I thought he was supposed to be at work and I got to work and found out that he got killed that night at the end of the shift climbing out of a pump compartment because they lost the power to the hoist or something in that order and he was climbing up the pump shaft and the ladder caved out on him and he fell down the pipe shaft and got killed and that was pretty uncool.

Beth: So all the mines were connected?

Rich: A lot of them were connected in one way or another. We used to go down the Kelly to the 2000 and take a man train to the Leonard underground and there was a chippy hoist and a rock hoist in the underground in the Leonard and the East Colusa.

Karen: Chippy hoist hauls men.

Rich: Chippy hoist hauls men rock hoist hauls just rock the East Colusa was almost mainly where we hauled down materials timbers and everything else for the underground Leonard and that hoist ran between the 1300 and I think I'm not sure what the bottom level was 3200 or something you sat right in front and the hoist ran in front of you at the East Colusa it was kind of a different setup

Karen: Is the East Colusa where the lake was behind you?

Rich: No that was the 5100 of the Mountain Con there was a lot of water running and big bore holes with water coming down and the temperature was always right around 100 and the humidity was 90% all the time too It was definitely warm winter and summer

Karen: And then what caused that?

Rich: It was how they drained and pumped and the pump stations were on the 4500 of the Kelly and pumped to the surface big huge pumps that pumped to the surface

Beth: Pumped the water to the surface?

Rich: Pumped the water to the surface.

Beth: And then where did it go?

Rich: Probably to Silver Bow Creek I'm not sure where it went.

Beth: Huh, so no designated place, it just pumped it?

Rich: It pumped out and pumped some place when after it got to the surface I'm not exactly I think I assume it probably pumped down to the Hooligan Cans or whatever down toward Meaderville or McQueen some place.

Karen: Now that would be the same water that is causing the pit or raise now isn't it

Rich: It's underground pit water that they pumped out and is not being pumped out now so now it's just

Beth: So now are all of the mines flooded now?

Rich: Yea up to a certain level yea all the levels I worked on once upon a time are totally underwater.

Karen: That's because they quit pumping the water.

Rich: They quit pumping and it filled

Karen: It's filled.

Rich: The underground mines are filled as deep as the pit is.

Karen: The underground mines are filled as deep as the pit is

Beth: Really, so how far apart are all of these mines that are connected?

Rich: Some of them are a mile or two

Karen: All you have to do is look at the galas frame up on the hill because each one of those galas frames is a mine.

Rich: When I was working at the Belmont Mine they started resurrecting that again and they were going to tie it in with the Kelly Mine and we were timbering and I was running hoist there at the Belmont in fact I think I probably ran the just about last shift at the Belmont when everything finally shut down all the mines and now the Belmont is a senior citizens center but.

Beth: Really, any way you were running the hoist at the Belmont...

Rich: Yea, I ran at the Belmont while they were getting the shafts back in shape and thought the mines were really going to get going again and that didn't last very long at all.

Beth: So is there still a lot of ore underground?

Rich: There's still quite a bit of copper ore well they're mining the east pit right now that's up where the Columbia Gardens used to be there's another thing about old Butte that's gone the Columbia Gardens that was one of the neat things about growing up is the Columbia Gardens it's long gone

Karen: Thursdays were kids days all summer and they had buses running all day that would take the kids out to the Columbia Gardens and bring them back in

Beth: And that's where you guys had all of your proms and dances isn't it?

Karen: Butte High had all their prom out there every year at the gardens pavilion

Rich: I graduated from high school in the pavilion at the Columbia Garden

Beth: Really

Rich: Probably one of the last before it burned down

Karen: And our the Catholic school grade school picnics

Rich: Were in Gregson.

Karen: Well only after you got to the eighth grade from first, second, third, fourth, up to through eighth grade until you got up to the eighth grade we had our picnics out at the Columbia Gardens once you were a eighth grader you got to go to Gregsen Hot springs for your picnic.

Rich: Another incident at the Golden Sunlight Mine. I was graveyard shift and 3 mechanics two mechanics and a one boilermaker were up on the hill fueling and they went to fuel the light plant before they went home and they went home around 3 o'clock in the morning they went to fuel the light plant and one young mechanic and they had the wrong nozzle he asked if I'd give him a ride down to the shop to get it so he wouldn't have to drive down in the truck I did and we started talking about I knew his did from the underground mines in Butte and we started talking about the underground mines he was saying how he would never work in the underground mines it was way to dangerous as he didn't think that would be any good at all and I made the remark that it was just and dangerous in the open pit and there was no limit to danger it wasn't one thing or another they're no worse than the open pit mines and I brought him back up and 15 minutes later he was dead they lost their brakes on their service truck and crashed at the bottom of the yard two of them got killed and one get hurt real bad.

Beth: Really, there's no safety mining.

Rich: What's that

Beth: There's no real safe mining at all

Rich: It was one of them freak things the breaks went out of the service truck they weren't able to stop it coming down the hill and they kept gaining speed

Karen: Your dad worked all the whole time he was a foreman at the mine he had no loss time accidents on his crew.

Rich: No I was lucky that way I had a good record and a good crew that worked safe and I never had a lost time accident in 15 or 16 years of foreman.

Beth: That's pretty good.

Rich: Yea, I was proud of that record.

Beth: So what are the biggest changes in Butte?

Rich: Things like the Columbia Gardens, things that we knew as kids, everything was uptown Butte the whole uptown Butte.

Karen: The flats didn't the flats didn't go beyond

Rich: Front, well Floral Blvd well yea they went out to Hawthorn, they went out to the Hawthorn school as far as residential district there was no shopping malls the furthest out.

Karen: What was the street that went out to your mom's?

Rich: Albany

Karen: Elizabeth Warren was no mans land that was the end of Butte the end of the city.

Rich: When we lived on Albany there was only 3 houses there.

Beth: So there was no airport.

Rich: There was an airport

Karen: There was an airport

Rich: And the Country Club was in the same place but it was old, it's changed totally when I lived there when I was a little kid the old Country Club

Karen: The Country Club was cool big old log building

Rich: It wasn't log it was like a shingle type a thing it was brown

Karen: It was wood

Rich It was wood, lets see what was going to say, I'm trying to think of something the drive-ins in Butte they were all neat they're all gone now too, Leon & Eddies is where when we used to win a football game at the football field which is where Albertsons is now the grade school football games we used to play there they bought us a root beer at Leon & Eddies every time if we won a game. Martha's which was a sit down café it was kind of a hang out when your cruzing. And there was Tinkerbell and everyone used to listen to the radio to the Tinkerbell request hour to see if any girls or guys I guess made a requested to them

Karen: And when you went out there and bought a hamburger or french fries or whatever they gave you a request slip and you request a song to a specific person or whatever and that night they would read those on their request hour they would read them and play the songs

Rich: And the Tinkerbell Drive-in is where Leiphmiers is now on the westside of the street where Leiphmiers car lot is that is where the Tinkerbell and the Donnabell is the building is still

there it's a flower shop or something out there on Harrison Ave. now on the westside I can't think of what all is there a flower shop and stuff kind of out across from...

Karen: Robbie's In & Out was out there somewhere too but I can't remember where right in front of Albertsons.

Rich: Robbie's In & Out was wasn't Robbie's In & Out what was where the Community Gas station was wasn't that Robbie's In & Out cuz Leon & Eddies was where Cobra Tire is now

Karen: Robbie's In & Out was right directly across the street from it

Rich: That was where we had our football field was

Karen: Maybe behind it

Rich: I can't remember where Robbie's In & Out was. Burrs, which had the first escalator in Montana in its department store

Karen: Hennessey's had the first mezzanine

Rich: Hennessey's building is still standing

Karen: We would have never learned ever heard the word mezzanine had it not been for Hennessey's.

Rich: Burrs building is still standing too it's been a lot of things since then the old Penny's burned down a lot of the block

Karen: There were a lot of fires in Butte

Rich: There were a lot of fires in the one period of time and burned down a lot of historic old buildings.

Karen: I grew up next door to a fireman and so when ever he got his calls to go to fires his wife always called me and said meet me out in front and her and I would then go to the fires and I kind of learned to be a firebug I love to watch fires still to this day.

Rich: I remember when Safeway on Harrison Ave. it's now Ace Hardware in was Downy Drug and is now its Ace Hardware it was a Safeway and it burned down. That's something else that's changed in Butte there used to be about 5 different Safeway stores for all different neighborhoods in Butte

Karen: Almost every neighborhood just about had a Safeway Store.

Rich: There was one up on Broadway and there was one over toward the Westside there was about 5 Safeways once upon a time. Neighborhood grocery stores every where every neighborhood had its little neighborhood

Karen: Ours was the A & B.

Rich: Theirs was the A & B the one I had closest to me was the Lake Market

Karen: Everybody had they were almost all well Giovaninni's too there was Giovaninni's Grocery Store

Rich: And then the Floral Market it was a little bit bigger one and that was on Floral Blvd it was neighborhood grocery store but it was a little bit bigger

Karen: And everyone charged their groceries just about every family had their own little charge account.

Rich: When times were tough you could carry a slip carry a charge and pay them when you could which isn't really the case today too much they'd carry you during the times you were out on strike.

Karen: When we were kids we lived about half a block from Giovaninni's grocery store which is where mom and dad had their account and my sister and I both got so that we could eat 3 candy bars from Giovaninni's grocery store to our back door and dispose of the papers before we went in. Mom and dad never did know why their bill was so high and that's partly cuz we ate a lot of candy bars

Rich: I don't know if kids do it now day but when we spent most of our summers either fishing in Bell Creek or Black Tail Creek which ever you want to call it down around the Country Club or hiking up in Mod S Canyon we spent our summers that way

Karen: We hiked up to Saddle Rock quite a bit

Rich: Saddle Rock a good friend of mine that I went to school in grade school, him and another kid were hiking up at Saddle Rock, and rolling rocks and he push one and went over and fell in front of a rock and it fell on top of him and killed him we were in probably 6th or 7th grade I imagine, we were still in grade school then it was kind of a bad thing

Beth: Were the neighborhoods still ethnic driven then?

Rich: Oh yea you still had Fin Town

Karen: Meaderville was all Italian, but the neighborhood that I lived in wasn't ethnic there was a combination of every thing there

Rich: Yea, there was a mix there, but there was still a lot of ethnic Meaderville was mainly Italian, the Eastside was mainly Bohunks as they were called, out in Walkerville and some of that and of course the Irish were all over they were pretty well scattered once upon a time it was Dublin Gulch and that but, Fin town was pretty much mainly Finlanders. Most the Finlanders that I worked with in the mines were shaft men they worked in the shafts as your station tenders and thing like that I worked with a lot of Finlanders in any of the underground mines.

Karen: And what were the miners called that kind of contracted, contract miners?

Rich: Contract miners that mined they did contracts and there was rope men that took care of the hoists or I mean they took care of the cables and made sure they were in good shape and cut them every once in a while so they wore in different spots and kept them tarred up and everything so they, which made for a really a dirty job for the oilier when they had to change the tar paper in the pit in the hoist you had get down there to clean up and you were definitely a mess when you came out of there you had to almost bath in dissalit to get it all off of you before they could even shower

Karen: Was it the Kelly that the engine room had those pressured doors.

Rich: No that was the underground mines when you'd go into different drift ways to keep the ventilation running right they had air doors in the underground mines and you'd open one set of doors and get in and then close them and then you'd be in an area in between doors then and you had to go over the next one and open a little door on the side of it to break the pressure because you couldn't hardly open them other wise and it would just blow our hard hat off and everything else and then you'd break them doors open and push them open and then close them and then close the little trap door that way that kept the ventilation running the way it should in the mines other wise you'd lose the ventilation and it kept the air good for breathing and the air door kept the ventilation running the way it way supposed to run and the direction it was supposed to go.

Beth: Do the mines run 24 hours a day?

Rich: They did

Karen: 24 hours a day 7 days a week

Rich: Yea, Mills run 24 hours a day 7 days a week, Christmas, it doesn't matter, holidays they never stopped. Some mines some places still run 24 hours a day s far as mine go but most of the do.

Karen: The Butte mines did though didn't they?

Rich: Most of them but not necessarily all I worked at the East Colusa for quite while ad there was only two of us on a three shift job so we worked 16 hour shift every other day but not on weekends, we did it 5 days a week, on weekends we didn't run but we worked the day shift guy would work 16 on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, The afternoon shift guy would work I mean 12 hours not 16 yea 12 hours, no let me think here, yea, you worked 16 on Monday, Wednesday,

and Friday and the afternoon guy worked 16 on Tuesday and Thursday and then every 2 weeks you switch and you'd do the dayshift thing and he'd do the afternoon shift thing.

Karen: Then the unions were in full force in Butte at that time.

Rich: I was in the operating engineers union

Beth: How many strikes were there when you worked there?

Karen: We worked through two. .

Rich: There was two or three.

Karen: The big long one is when your dad went to work for Pepsi, which was the only reason we got through that one o.k. That was a long strike. I can't remember now.

Rich: It was about in "69" or it seem to me it was in about "69" there was about three different ones during the time I was there.

Beth: And did that shut the mines down?

Rich: Pretty Much yea, pretty much it shut it down.

Karen: Except for the scabs who would go in and work.

Rich: Who?

Karen: The people who would go in and work cross the lines and go in and work. They weren't very well liked.

Rich: I never worked during any of the strikes. We always honored the picket lines. There wasn't am awful lot of strikes

Beth: Are the union as strong now?

Rich: No, Butte isn't. The Butte mines aren't anything like they used to be. There is still union and everything. Unionism I'm sure isn't as strong as it used to be in Butte. There just isn't as much there.

Karen: However, when Rich came out here to work at the Golden Sunlight and it is a nonunion job the but because of all years of union stuff in Butte got us the best wages because they had to compete.

Rich: Unions were responsible for what everybody gets now. They are responsible because all these places know that option is still available. You could still unionize again if things got bad. They defiantly treat you good.

Karen: Unions are responsible for every good thing that happened for us. I think that if the unions had stayed local and not gone national. I think unions would still be viable.

Rich: They were always national

Karen: What

Rich: They were always international they had to be.

Karen: I know but I mean the unions in Butte were unto themselves. When there was a strike in Butte it was local it was a local strike and then all of a sudden they got into the national level and then if somebody back in New Jersey had a strike we had to.. it was goofy it was goofy how the unions.. If they had stayed true to themselves it would have been better I think that's just what I think. Dad was a glassier and he was part of the glassier' union.

Rich: He was the painters' union

Beth: And yours was what?

Rich: Mine was the operating engineers.

Karen: Every job had their own union sometimes that wasn't always good.

Rich: Some people during the strikes were allowed to work to keep the mines from flooding pump man every once in a while were allowed to work to keep the mines from flooding. That was about all it was very limited work.

Karen: There was a time.

Rich: There was a time once upon a time, but it was mainly before my time, that they brought in a lot of scab labor but that was before I ever worked there, they brought in a lot of scab labor to try to keep the mines, and there was gunman. Guys were living inside of the fences at the mine yards.

Karen: *But their families weren't.*

Rich: It could get to be kind of a dangerous time. Things weren't too good then.

Karen: They were fighting for their jobs.

Rich: The scabs didn't come out because it wouldn't be good they weren't too crazy about them.

Karen: But their families were out and that wasn't a good thing for the families.

Rich: And then they brought gunman in to keep it from getting too bad. In the early days of Butte the stories that went on, that was way before my time, when they were first unionizing some pretty heavy-duty stuff went on.

Beth: Did your families work in the mines too? Your dad?

Rich: No, my dad worked to the Anaconda Company but he was a CPA for them.

Karen: Your dad knew Jim Carden Didn't he?

Rich: Oh, yea, he was a CPA for the Anaconda Company

Karen: My dad worked for the mines for only a very short time. He didn't like going underground. He went to work for Butte Glass for the rest of his work life.

Rich: My brother, Bob, worked for the Butte Water Company for a long time.

Karen: Which was also owned by the Anaconda Company. Your mom.

Rich: My mom worked for the Butte Water Company for quite a few years

Beth: So the Anaconda Company owned a lot more than just mines.

Karen: The Anaconda Company owned Butte.

Rich: We lived in Butte actually I was born in Kemmer, WY just because my dad was down there on a job for the Anaconda Company and my mom went with him and I happened to born while they were down there. We also lived over in Columbus for a while. The Anaconda Company had something maybe it might have been the Stillwater Mines. I think the Anaconda Company owned them once upon a time too. So we lived in Columbus my dad did some work there in those mines when Anaconda owned them. The Anaconda Company owned Bonner that was where most of lumber came from for the underground mines, the timbers and stuff. They had holdings all over the country.

Beth: Well thank you very much.