

INTERVIEWEE AGREEMENT

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

BUTTE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

The purpose of this program is to gather and preserve information for historical and scholarly use.

A tape recording of your interview will be made by the interviewer, and a typescript of the tape will be made and submitted to you for editing. The final typescript, together with the tape of the interview will then be placed in the oral history collection at the University of Montana. Other institutions or persons may obtain a copy. These materials may be made available for purposes of research, for instructional use, for publications, or for other related purposes.

* * * * *

I, ROBERT E. MELVIN, have read the
(Interviewee. Please print)

above, and in view of the historical and scholarly value of this information, and in return for a final typed copy of the transcript, I knowingly and voluntarily permit the University of Montana the full use of this information. I hereby grant and assign all my rights of every kind whatever pertaining to this information, whether or not such rights are now known, recognized, or contemplated, to the University of Montana.

Robert E. Melvin
Interviewee (Signature)

March 17, 1980
Date

University of Montana
Missoula

BUTTE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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I, Mary Murphy, in view of the historical
Interviewer (please print)
and scholarly value of the information contained in the
interview with Robert Melvin, knowingly
Interviewee (please print)
and voluntarily permit the University of Montana the full use
of this information, and hereby grant and assign to the
University of Montana all rights of every kind whatever pertaining
to this information, whether or not such rights are now known,
recognized or contemplated.

Mary Murphy
Interviewer (Signature)

3-17-80
Date

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Robert E. Melvin (1914 -)

Robert Melvin is the son of Irish immigrants drawn to the West by Butte's high wages. His mother was a schoolteacher in Ireland, his father, by trade, a stationery engineer. Mr. Melvin was born in 1914, the second of six children, and grew up on Hungry Hill. The family moved to Centerville in 1924 when their house burned and then to Minah Street, where he still lives.

Mr. Melvin has worked at many jobs, selling papers, in a hardware store, for the CCC, as a laborer. He worked underground in the mines at "everything that had to be done," and he eventually became a hoisting engineer. He joined the reorganized miner's union in 1933, has always been a strong union man. He worked for seven years to get a comprehensive health plan for the Engineers.

In 1962 he was nearly killed when he tried to stop an explosion at the Bell compressor room. After two and a half years of hospitalization and recovery he returned to work for the post office. He remained there for fifteen years, retiring when sixty-five.

In 1943 Mr. Melvin married Dorothy Hurley. They have three children.

BUTTE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
TAPE INDEX

Interviewee:	Melvin	Robert	E.
	Last	First	Middle
Date of Interview:	March 17, 1980		
Place:	Butte		
Interviewer:	Mary Murphy		

Context of Interview: I thought it would be appropriate to interview my first Irish miner on St. Patrick's Day, so after corned beef and cabbage at the M&M I walked up to the Melvins' house on Minah St. It sits below the wreckage that was once the Mountain Con mine, a few last survivors clinging to the hillside. Mr. Melvin has added on and improved his house, built the garage and other out-buildings. We sat in the living room for the interview, in the midway, Mrs. Melvin joined us, and later we had tea. Mr. Melvin is slightly deaf, the result of an accident at the Bell & Diamond Mine in the sixties which nearly killed him. Sometimes the interview reflects that deafness. According to his son, Paul, Mr. Melvin was quite a hell-raiser in union circles and lead a wild life as a youngster, none of that comes out in the interview, either he no longer wishes to talk of those days or his memories have mellowed with age.

Tape # 1
Side # 1

Mother and father born in County Mayo, Ireland. Came to Philadelphia, that is where they met each other. They only lived twenty-five miles apart in Ireland. Father came to Butte and went to work in the Diamond Mine. In Phil. he was a boilermaker. When he got settled he sent to Phil. for Mr. Melvin's mother and they got married in St. Patrick's Church. Came from Ireland in 1905. Mother did housework in Philadelphia. Moved to Bell St. for a year, sister Catherine was born. Then moved to Hungry Hill, the top of Dublin Gulch. He and his sister were born in the house there, he in 1914. Then brother Ed and sister Rose born. In 1924 house next door caught on fire and theirs burned to the ground. Then moved to Pacific St. in Centerville for a year. Then moved to house on top of Minah St. Irish, Scots, English and Welsh neighborhood. "They were all union. If a piece of clothing didn't have a union label on it, they wouldn't buy it." Another sister was born in the house on Minah. Mother always had doctors. Had women who were nurses took care of the mothers at home.

Father was a stationery engineer, worked on boilers all the time he was in Butte. He came to Butte because they paid high wages, \$3.50 a day. Didn't work too long in the mines. "He rustled a job in his own trade, and he got it." He worked for the Anaconda Co. until he was 78. He was 84 when he died. He really knew his history. Mother was a beautiful women. They both went to school in Ireland, mother taught school there. She was 21 when she came here. One by one all their families came over. Someone had to sponsor them. They had to have a job or a place to stay. In Philadelphia his father belonged to the Steam & Operating Engineers. When he came to Butte he joined the Butte Miners Union. In 1914 that disbanded, then belonged to Engineers Local 83, until they went into the Operating Engineers Local 375.

Mr. Melvin joined the Miners Union in 1933. Joined in the Engineers Union because they were the ones sponsoring the Miners Union to organize. "That's when President Roosevelt wanted everyone to organize." Company didn't put up much opposition, doesn't think they cared one way or the other, "they knew it was coming." "Every miner in the city signed up for it."

The Depression was going real good and he signed up for CCC. Was going from job to job: in a hardware store, in a grocery store. You couldn't get a job on

the hill. Father was working two weeks on, two off.

Came back from the CCC and went to work in a mine for \$4.25 a day. Only one or two days a week. Went to work for a contractor, worked for him for a year. Joined the General Laborers Union. When that job ran out went to work in the Con mine. Worked underground: ran a motor, worked as a miner, broke rock, blasted, "everything that had to be done, I could do it." The station in a mine is just like a great big square room. Every hundred feet is a station, going off of each is a lateral drift, off that is a shorter drift called a crosscut, off that is a ladder going up to the next level, a raise. Off the raise where the ore body is the stope. It was hot, then they put coolers in and all you could see was fog. Awful humidity. It was all water cooled (Mrs. Melvin came in) Always worked with a partner, one of the things the union insisted on. Years later they didn't do that. In the early days, so many men who were all alone got killed,

Still a lot of accidents when he started working. Saw a man working on a mucking machine one night, the whole side of the drift laid on him and crushed him to death.

After that got a job boiling at the NeverSweat compressor plant. In 1938 all the mines went down, worked underground for a while, then went to work for a road contractor. From there up to the Butte Hoist Compressor Plant, became an engineer. The men he worked with taught him. Went to the Orphan Girl Mine, took care of the boiler and compressor. This is where he became a hoisting engineer. Took right to it, because he had worked underground. "...when you got all the men working under you and all their lives hang in your hand, you got to know what you're doing." Transferred to the Trevonia, then worked both. Was fixing up the house and could use the extra money. Was transferred to the Butte Hoist, then to the Bell compressor room. Didn't have any choice about where you would go, they just transferred you.

This was where the accident took place. The whole room filled with smoke, he was there alone. Used to be four on a shift, were cutting back, now only one. Called the Fire Dept. He went up to shut off a valve to try and save the plant up above when the whole air line exploded, three miles of it. "That's when I lost my leg, I lost side of my face, and almost died." After he got back on his feet he went to work for the post office. July 7, 1962; 6 p.m. Worked at the post office for 15 years, retired when 65.

The Company paid all the hospital bills, sent him to Mayo Clinic, to Spokane where they reconstructed his face. They give him a new leg every five years, and \$150 a month. "They're getting off pretty cheap." That was the third time he stopped the explosion, twice at the Butte Hoist. This time he didn't have any help. They had old machinery. The master mechanic screwed down the pop safety valves too tight. Mr. Melvin told him. He said, "You don't know anything. I'm the boss." There wasn't a safety valve on the hill that could pop. If he hadn't done that they would have blown and relieved the pressure in the pipe.

Lot of superstitions, premonitions about working underground. Two nights before he got hurt, he was working the night shift, walking upstairs from the pumps and his mother walked up with him. She was dead quite a few years then. She was trying to tell him something. When he was in the hospital she was there too, and showed him a beautiful valley. "It was beautiful, I'll never forget it." That was when they called his wife and kids to the hospital because they didn't think he would make it.

Mrs. Melvin: She and her daughter were cleaning out the bookcase and heard the explosion. When she got to the door saw the smoke and heard the fire siren blowing in Centerville. Knew her husband was the only one on shift. Went up the Anaconda Rd., but the ambulance had already gone down so went to the old St. James hospital.

describes seeing her husband on the table, describes his injuries, was in a coma for ten days. 51 days in old St. James, 51 in new, then in Rochester for 6 weeks.

Mr. Melvin was in the Centerville volunteer fire dept, for 25 yrs., they all went down to give him blood. Butte was a tight community, not so much snow. People used to build their houses right near the mines, why the streets are so close. Saw a lot of buildings built and a lot burned. Last fire he was on was the Silver Bow Block.

When their kids were small, yard was full of kids, lot more houses.

Tape # 1
Side # 2

Went to St. Mary's, most of the kids were Irish, few Dutch, no English, no Welsh. The head priest was Irish and all the sisters were Irish. On St. Patrick's Day all go to Mass, had Irish and American flag on altar, then 1700 kids would march around town.

1934 strike, went back to work for 50¢ a day. No one had any money, when relief started "You couldn't buy a job here. There was good men out of work." If one man quit there were 15 or 20 to take his place. The company and all the merchants would donate so much. The men would have to go up to the school of mines and put in so many shifts for so much food.

When FDR came in had real relief. F.E.R.A., nobody liked it. Talks some about the boarding houses. Thinks the Company bought out Mrs. Riipi. Mrs. Melvin ate there.

During Prohibition he knew everyplace that sold whiskey, blind pigs. They'd go in there and to get rid of them, they'd buy a paper. Had a relative, Jack Cafferty, a bartender. He would serve the time for the men who got arrested for running blind pigs. He had him bring a paper every night. Had his own bar and cook up there, lived like kings, and got paid every day he was there.

Mullen House had about 200 men. There was one man who exploited the Austrians coming over who didn't speak English. Would get them a job in the Anaconda mine, and could stay in his cabins, but they signed over their checks to him for room and board and paid double because they didn't know any better. Another lady who ran a grocery did the same thing, made a fortune.

Jerry Murphy's son was a bootlegger. Had an eye sharp as an eagle. If you were ever arrested by him, he would always remember. Jerry the Wise.

Women were safe on the street, never locked doors. Knew a schoolteacher who had come from Virginia City, told him she was "never afraid to walk the streets, day or night, in Butte, Montana. It was that honorable." Men would always tip their hats. On the streetcars, would always give women a seat.

Change in the atmosphere of town just before WWII. Has really changed more since the Pit came in. As the Pit grew they closed down the deep mines and covered over the shafts. The union didn't fight the coming of the pit. "Anytime the Company wanted something, the Company got it. And it's still like that." When union re-organized, engineers and miners affiliated with Mine Mill. First meeting he went to was in Butte High, elected Neil Weston president.

Wanted collar to collar--eight hours from the time you got to the collar of the shaft until you got out. Never got it. Supposed to stop work 4:30, didn't get out till 5:30/ Mt. Con had 2,000 men, put 7 in a cage, had 4 cages. Chippy hoist had 4 cages. Every man accounted for at end of shift. Thirteen bells was accident, hurt man was 9.

Talks about history of CIO, AFL, Phil Murray. Mr. Melvin was called a communist. "If you had any ideas at all, they called you a communist." He asked a man at the union hall one night what a communist was, he didn't know. "It was just a word everybody was using." Bill & Joe Mason were Communists, were from Yugoslavia.

They had a lot of support in the union. "they were communist dominated, all right, but they weren't, 'you better join or else'."

1946-- didn't know about house break-up, never went out; didn't think it was company inspired, because they put people up in the Finlen Hotel.

There was talk of strikes in 1938-39. He thought of moving to Alaska, was tired of strikes. Didn't have another strike until 1944, only lasted a week. The bad one was 1946, for two weeks. "If you're a working guy and you've got a family to support, and the kids are hungry and your wife is hungry, and you don't feel too good either, you'll go back." The Company could hold on. No union can break a corporation. Strike in '54 for 54 days. Strike in 1959 for 6 months. The company wanted that one, wanted a shutdown, the price of copper was low. 9 month strike in 1962.

Mrs. Melvin: when he started at the post office it was a big relief, didn't have to go through any more strikes. In 1959 the Engineers union gave strike benefits, \$26 a week. They were the first to do it. He was a trustee then.

When they called him a communist it was because they wanted to lay off 30 young men so the older men could get six days. He had his union book and was going to rip it in half. A guy got up and called him a Communist. He replied, "you dirty Cousin Jack, son of a b, you don't know, tell me what a communist is."

Tape # 2

Side # 1

Mr. Melvin's definition, a communist is an atheist. "You didn't like what they were trying to pull, and the next thing you know you were a communist."

The English were the Cousin Jacks, the Irish were Harps, both as tough as the other. They'd wallop the hell out of each other. But if something happened to one of their families, they'd all help. Fighting was just a way of relaxing. He saw a lot of good fights growing up. Mrs Melvin: "no t.v., so have a fight." The Scots were funny, fight amongst themselves, when they got mad didn't know what they were talking about. Welsh were nice people.

Marcus Daly raised race horses down in Hamilton. John Gagnon, who Mr. Melvin later worked for, worked for Daly, told him all about it.

When they started tearing down Columbia Gardens, he and Dorothy went out there that one night, just reminiscing. Used to have Lake Avoca, had to drain it to get rid of mosquitoes. Did a lot of hiking, picnics, played ball. Games were well-attended.

Talked about how no one, not even executives had health benefits, vacations, until the working man organized. Worked 7 yrs. on engineers' health plan. Insurance man told him the engineers had the lowest birth rate of any union in the city of Butte. Mr. Melvin told him it was because 2/3 were on the night shift. When the miners put a dollar a month into the hospital fund, half went to Murray and half to St. James. Hospital billed the Company. The Company started it and took it away because they were losing money on it. When he had his appendix out, it cost 40%. Gave the hospital to the sisters.

When father was working as stationary engineer, was a union, but the Company told them what they could have in the contract. Engineers had to pay dues, but it didn't mean anything. Company had barracks to house scabs. Every time was talk of strikes would haul in food. The Co. didn't want the 1946 strike. Had to have union card stamped when went on picket duty, if it wasn't stamped didn't get unemployment.

Pete Shea was trustee of the Miners Union. One Sunday he said, "Robert, you'll have to join the union." I said, "Pete, to hell with the union." Went to work and the timekeeper told him to report to the union hall. Went down, and the secretary pulled out his book, looked up his name, checked his dues book--was all paid up, turned to Pete and said, "He's got a lower number than you've got."

If the union found someone working who wasn't a member, they would notify the company and the timekeeper would send the man down to the union hall on Sunday.

Father asked him what he was bothering those old country harps for.

Pete said, "I come all the way from Ireland to make paths underground for you narrowbacks to walk on." Narrowbacks were Irish born here. Curtain lace Irish had money.

notes from the Montana Standard and Butte Daily Post on July 8, 1962, the day after Mr. Melvin's accident.

Robert Melvin, 48, critically hurt
Ed Bonner, 50, general superintendent of mines, Fair
Albert James, 26, serious
Arthur Gerry, overcome by smoke
three others received emergency treatment

"It was reported a certain amount of oil, mist-like in quantity in most instances, sometimes gets into the air lines. Heat or friction could cause the 12 inch, 90pound pressure lines to explode." (p. 1)

wrecked the Bell Compressor Plant (pictures, p.14)

"Melvin was believed trying to close an air compressor valve when the line "blew" and the major explosion occurred.
...Melvin was found lying inside the fence close to the big valve. His face was mangled according to rescuers.
...I just kept putting bandage after bandage on him, but the bleeding wouldn't stop"

(a fire had broken out at the old Diamond Mine and fire dept. had been called)

two miles of line were involved

"The explosion which was felt in East Butte, on the north west and south sides and which literally rocked Centerville & Walkerville, almost blew the Bell Compressor Plant apart. Walls of steel-beamed, sheetmetal and wood building were blown out by the intensity of the blast." (p. 14)

...At a point where the upper end of the Anaconda Road crosses the compressor line the roadway looked as though it had been upheaved by an earthquake" (p. 14)

(There was a follow-up story on June 9, no new information, report that Melvin's condition had not changed on June 10)

LIFE HISTORY

Name: Melvin Robert Sex: M Race: W
Last First Middle Maiden

Current Address: 123 Minah St. Butte Silver Bow MT 59701
Street Town County State Zip Code

Telephone: (406) 792-8022 Birthplace: Butte DOB: March 28, 19

Years of School: high school Church Membership: St. Patricks

Grandparents:	DOB	Birthplace	Yrs of School	Occupation(s)	DOM	DOD
FaFa:						
FaMo:						
MoFa:						
MoMo:						

Parents:	DOB	Birthplace	Yrs of School	Occupation(s)	DOM	DOD
Fa: <u>Michael Melvin</u>	<u>2-23-1875</u>	<u>Ireland</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>Stationery Engineer</u>	<u>1909</u>	<u>1959</u>
Mo: <u>Catherine McGeever</u>	<u>2-18-1883</u>	<u>Ireland</u>	<u>8+</u>			

Siblings (in order of birth):			Yrs of School	Occupation(s)	DOM	DOD
Name	Sex	DOB	Birthplace			
<u>Catherine McCarthy</u>			<u>Butte</u>			
<u>Ann Brasco</u>			"			
<u>Peggy Olson</u>			"			
<u>Edmond H. Melvin</u>			"			
<u>Rose (died when 18)</u>			"			

Occupational History (List jobs in order):		Date of First Employment:
Position	Company	Dates

Spouse:	DOB	Birthplace	Yrs of School	Occupation(s)	DOM	DOD
<u>Dorothy Hurley</u>	<u>4-18-18</u>	<u>St. Ignatius</u>	<u>high school</u>		<u>June 29, 1943</u>	

Children (in order of birth):			Yrs of School	Occupation(s)	DOM	DOD
Name	Sex	DOB	Birthplace			
<u>Carol Ann Reeves</u>		<u>1945</u>	<u>Butte</u>			
<u>Paul Edward</u>		<u>1947</u>	"			
<u>John Michael</u>		<u>1949</u>	"			