

Ruth Dockins, Butte High School teacher, interviewed at her home by Teresa Jordan, 2/7/86.

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Notes taken at time of interview; not audited against tape.

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Ruth was born and raised in Tacoma. Born, 1924. Came here with her husband Bill in 1953. Didn't start teaching until her kids were in junior high and high school. Got her teaching degree from Tech and Western; commuted to Dillon, terrible road. Got her degree in 1968, immediately got a job at Butte High. Now she teaches U. S. History; International Relations; American Government; Geography. See sees a cross section of students.

She started teaching at the end of the 60's, very different time. Butte was kind of behind the rest of the country, but the unrest was reflected in Butte. Students were aware of what was going on; it was an interesting time, with interesting students. The school had a mini-rebellion--over the dress code. The kids walked out. They didn't know that the administration had already decided to drop the dress code. But, the conflict was probably good for both students and administration.

Butte kids are no tougher than any other kids; they are, on the whole, pretty nice.

In the 60's, the kids were very aware of the world; the rebellion had trickled down, and it was interesting time. The 70's were a little calmer. Now, seniors are a little more serious--more worried about the future. They know they can't step out of high school and get a good paying job with Anaconda Co.

Q: Have you seen effects of the shutdown on the kids?

That's hard to pin point. They may be more aware of economic security; they know there isn't a job waiting. But kids at the HS level don't talk as much to the teacher; they don't articulate these things, so Ruth is not aware of it.

Today there is a push toward college. Ruth is looking into comparing college bound students now with before ARCO shut down--the percentage. Also, she is interested to compare the % of Butte kids who go to college with state-wide numbers.

A lot of kids are interested in more education, though many worry about how they are going to do it, afford it.

Q: Are these the kids of miners, or more from professional families?

Probably more from professional families.

Q: Do you see kids more interested in professional fields than in a liberal arts education?

High school kids aren't aware of the need for well-rounded education. They just think in terms of going to college and getting a degree. They don't really know what it entails.

Q: Do you see many kids now who might be interested in a degree in philosophy, or who talk about doing something flaky like being a writer or an artist?

Ruth did have one student a couple years ago who wanted to be a studio musician, do music for soundtracks, etc. But so many high school kids don't know what they are going to do; they just want to go to Bozeman and get a degree. They talk a lot about having to leave Butte to make a living.

Q: How do they feel about leaving?

Like kids everywhere, they want to leave. And the lack of opportunity is not just Butte, it's Montana. Ruth hasn't taught elsewhere, so doesn't feel she can compare Butte kids to other kids; when she sees them in big groups of other high school kids, she doesn't see much difference.

Q: Do you see much drug and alcohol abuse?

Ruth is not involved in treatment, but she knows there are excellent programs. She doesn't know how extensive the problem is. She does have kids with problems, but she doesn't know how extreme they are.

Q: Do you see any noticeable effects of the shutdown?

The kids dress well, much better than in the 60's and 70's. They looked disgraceful in the 70's. Now, some of the dress is really interesting--the Madonna look. But now, in appearance, she can't say. Perhaps you could tell more through sales of I.D. cards, which let you into extracurricular activities, run about \$12 or \$15, and annuals, which are expensive.

When Ruth first came, she was appalled at the ugliness of the uptown. She came from Tacoma where the climate was much easier, and the Uptown was much nicer. But she and Bill stayed by choice. They like the access to remote areas--they fish; Bill is an avid skier. And the people here are friendly. Especially coming from the Seattle area where people don't talk with each other.

Q: Did you have any trouble because you weren't Butte born?

Ruth says that you hear a lot about that, but she never experienced it. She had no trouble being hired in the district; never felt any prejudice.

Q: I know that you use an oral history assignment in one of your classes. What is the kids response to it?

At first they gripe; then they find it interesting. They are scared the person won't respond or have enough to say. Ruth gives an option--they can either do a tape or write a paper; most do the tape. They are to tape someone who lived through either the depression or the 2nd World War.

Some of the depression tapes are fascinating. They say, I hope we don't have to go through this.

Q: What are some of your other assignments that you really like?

When she is teaching government, she takes the kids into district court, federal court, tries to take them into a swearing in of aliens ceremony--it makes it more real to actually see it. In the early 70's, she taught a class in minority problems. They went all over town--into the synogogue; lots of people came to talk to class.

Right now she has an assignment--each student is to choose three foreign countries at random and learn two things about them--what type of government they have, and how long that gov't has been in effect. The purpose is two-fold--she wants them to see that, though we are referred to as a young country, our gov't is older than most; and she wants them to discuss why ours has lasted.

In history, they are studying immigrant history; she has them read Giants in the Earth. She had them write an essay based on "I would rather be an immigrant kid growing up in Boston or New York than one of Per Hansa's kids on the prairie." Last week she had them write an essay about what it would be like to live without electricity for a week.

Q: Are the kids less rebellious now?

Kids are kids--they are going to try you. You do get kids who are tough cookies, but Ruth doesn't see a great many discipline problems; not the sort of rebellion you saw in the 60's and 70's.

Q: Are the kids as fun to teach?

Ruth gives a qualified yes, "pretty much." They may be a little more serious.

Q: Have you been directly affected by the layoff-- for example, in terms of friends' experiences, or have you had worry over job security?

Ruth had tenure, so she was not in danger for her job. But Bill, her husband, worked at Montana Pole for 33 years. It closed. He took early retirement. It closed because of the general economy--the decrease in construction and the decline of the timber products industry. He retired about a year ago.

Q: Have other friends been affected?

Most of their friends are their age, and some have already retired. Their church has lost membership, as have other churches around town. They belong to the Evangelical Covenant. But Ruth thinks that Butte has done remarkably well--the attitude is upbeat, they have made an effort to bring other things to Butte: small, high tech companies. Don Peoples has worked hard.

Q: How has your church responded?

The ministerial association has been very effective with the Food Bank; most of the churches support the Rescue Mission.

Q: What was your reaction to Our Lady of the Rockies?

Bill and Ruth resented the idea of it at first, and didn't want to see the East Ridge disturbed. It isn't as brazen or disruptive as they thought. Now Ruth kind of enjoys it up there. It has tied the community together; people disagreed with it, but they haven't been at each others' throats.

Q: Do you remember the Butte Forward movement? As a historian, what was your reaction to the idea of razing the Uptown?

Ruth would not have wanted to see them move the Uptown. She loves the Uptown; likes to look around.

Q: How did you come to change from viewing Butte only as ugly?

Perhaps it is defensiveness. Ruth is used to it, feels comfortable with it.

Q: Butte seems invested with a sense of its history...

Perhaps that is partly due to the fact that Montana history is taught in junior high, and Butte-Silver Bow history is taught in high school. Kids that take the Butte-Silver Bow class relate it to US history in Ruth's class. For instance, they were just talking about the Chinese exclusion act; those kids knew where the Chinese lived in Butte, what they did.

Q: What role do you think that sense of history will play in Butte's future?

Preservation of buildings; keeping the Uptown the way it was.

Q: Butte seems to fight for itself; yet, it is willing to give up whole neighborhoods. Why?

Butte looks at the immediate need. They are willing, for instance, to give up taxes to Washington Corps, for Butte to survive, to get mining going again.

Q: What sort of background do you have? Blue collar, white collar...

Blue collar. Ruth's father was a machinist in a logging mill in Washington. The values here are similar to what she grew up with--an urge for education; strong need for unions; parents that maybe demand more of kids in an old fashioned sense--behavior, school attendance. Tacoma was perhaps even more a union town than Butte.

Q: Do you see a clash of values as a blue collar culture is supplanted with a more professional one?

Ruth doesn't see it. The kids are cliquish, but all kids are.

Q: What do you see as the future of unionism?

Ruth hits union history pretty hard in her classes. She thinks its going to be interesting to see how the unions deal with Washington. There was a certain message with McDonalds and Arby's coming in, but it will be Washington Corps' experience that indicates the future.

A number of times, Ruth has heard kids say that the unions are going downhill and it's a good thing. She thinks these kids come primarily from professional families; they have heard this at home.

Q: What works in Butte's favor?

It's unrelenting optimism, it's refusal to die. It is bouncing back, luring industry. It has Mt. Tech, MHD, NCAT.

Q: What hurts?

The one industry economy; the weather.

Later, talking after the tape is off, Ruth mentions that Butte wiped out the rest of the state a year or two ago in the College Week scholarship contests in Bozeman. Also, in talking about the demise of unions, she notes that there is still strength. During the school administrators' strike, teachers were told they could work; only four people showed up--the superintendant of schools, his secretary, and two other administrators.