

Oral History
History of Butte
Sarah Nyland

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Questions for Interview

1. Where are you originally from?
2. Did you have a job before you moved to Butte?
3. When did you move to Butte and why?
4. What were the differences, if any, between Butte and where you used to live?
5. You have six children, two of which were born in Butte. Were there any differences in healthcare between Butte and where you came from?
6. What is your opinion of healthcare in Butte today?
7. Where were your two children in Butte born?
8. Did you have a job when you moved to Butte, or was raising to children enough?
9. What did your husband do for a living?
10. What was it like raising six kids while your husband was gone so much?
11. What would you say have been the main improvements in Butte since you came here?
12. Is there anything that isn't here now that you miss?
13. Did any aspects of the mines affect your family?
14. Do you feel that Butte is a good place to raise a family? Why?

Outline of Interview

- I. Introduction
- II. Questions about origin and reasons for coming to Butte.
- III. Questions about healthcare.
- IV. Questions about employment.
- V. Questions about Columbia Gardens/Lady of the Rockies.
- VI. Questions about the mines.
- VII. Questions about current house and history.
- VIII. Questions about old and current buildings.
- IX. Questions about owning a business in Butte.
- X. Questions about teaching.
- XI. Questions about laws.
- XII. Questions about entertainment.
- XIII. Tape cut off. Concluded interview by thanking Shirley for her time.

Transcription of Interview

SM=Shirley McCloskey I=Interviewer

I: This is an interview of Shirley McCloskey conducted by Sarah Nyland at Shirley McCloskey's home at 4800 Harrison on April 1, 2002 at 7:00 p.m.

I: Where are you originally from?

SM: North Dakota. Stanley, North Dakota.

I: What part of North Dakota is that in?

SM: It is in kind of the northwestern-ish part.

I: Did you have a job in Stanley before you moved to Butte?

SM: Um, no. Actually, we didn't live in Stanley before we moved to Butte; we lived in a little town called Keene. It was in the oil fields.

I: When did you move to Butte?

SM: In 1961.

I: And why did you come here?

SM: My husband worked the construction and he got a job in Belt. Actually we moved to Belt, MT first and we wintered in Butte.

I: What were the differences, if there were any differences, between living in Butte and living in Stanley or that other town before you moved here?

SM: Butte was a much bigger town. There were more places to shop and more things to do.

I: What was the population of the town where you lived before you came to Butte?

SM: The town of Keene had probably 50 people.

I: And how many were in Butte when you came?

SM: Forty thousand. It's at thirty-five now, isn't it?

I: I can't even imagine there being that many then and not that many now. It seems crowded now.

I: You have six children, two of which were born in Butte. Were there any differences in healthcare between Butte and, did you have your other for children in Keene or in Stanley?

SM: In Stanley

I: What were the differences in healthcare between the two places?

SM: Stanley was a much smaller hospital, so it was more personal care because I knew just about everybody who worked there.

I: If there were only fifty people in the town I imagine they all worked there!

SM: Stanley had twenty-five hundred.

I: Oh yeah, that was Keene that had 50 people!

SM: The town we lived in only had a lesser amount. Stanley was about 60 miles from there and that's where I grew up.

I: So, um, what is your opinion about healthcare in Butte today, as compared to the past?

SM: I personally haven't had to have any healthcare, but friends of mine that have seem to be fairly content with it.

I: Where were your two children in Butte born, because there used to be two hospitals in Butte, right?

SM: Right, they were born in St. James.

I: Were they both called St. James?

SM: No.

I: What was the other one called?

SM: The other one was the general hospital? Or the community hospital?

I: And that's where the Butte Convalescent Center is now, and that treatment center?

SM: Right.

I: Did you have a job when you moved to Butte, or was raising six kids enough?

SM: Raising six kids was plenty.

I: You already said that your husband worked construction. Did he do that the whole time you were living in Butte?

SM: Yes, until he went to Alaska to work construction, but he worked construction around here most of the time.

I: What was it like raising six kids with your husband gone to Alaska?

SM: Not bad, they were old enough to help with a lot of things.

I: That's good. What would you say have been the main improvements in Butte since you've been here?

SM: Really I can't see that there's been many. They have cleaned up some of the buildings that should have been taken out long ago, but there's still a lot of that that needs to be done. It would make the town cleaner looking, it is a very shabby looking town compared to Bozeman and Billings and...

I: I've even seen recently uptown where they have been tearing down buildings on Montana. It makes it look a little bit nicer, but...

SM: I haven't been up there, but the old main part of town, I don't understand why they even put money into fixing up some of this stuff when everything around it should be torn down.

I: Uh, huh. Is there anything that isn't here now that you miss that was here when you came? Anything this is closed or...

SM: Not that I really miss. When the kids were younger they tore out the drive-in theatre and they missed that. That was where the Copper King is now. Other than that, no. I think they probably have improved the shopping around.

I: That's hard to believe!!

SM: They didn't have a mall when we first lived here?

I: Oh!

SM: And, um, there were two grocery stores, the big grocery stores.

I: Did you spend any time at the Columbia Gardens when they were here?

SM: A lot of time. Whenever we had company that had kids that's where we would spend the day.

I: What were they like?

SM: It was wonderful! They go up there and the kids had merry go-rounds and the roller coasters. They had all kinds of different rides for the kids to go on. They had a big area that they could just play in too. I think concession stands were still open then. It was just a beautiful place that had big flower gardens that really took a lot of care with.

I: And where was it at?

SM: I really couldn't tell you how you could get there now, but it was basically where the I-15 goes up to Helena, in that area up in there.

I: Why did they close it?

SM: Because they wanted to mine more in there.

I: That's a shame.

SM: It was because they didn't actually do anything with their mining.

I: And they just closed it and didn't want to open it up somewhere else?

SM: They just took everything out and they had big intentions of moving in out to Beef Trail.

I: Beef Trail?

SM: I think that's where they put the arch part.

I: I'm not sure.

SM: Somewhere out that way anyhow. And they were going to put in the whole thing, but cost-wise, they couldn't do it.

I: And so Columbia Gardens closed, and when did they put in the Lady of the Rockies?

SM: That was in 19? It was in the late eighties, I couldn't tell you for sure what year, but I know it was the winter that my mother lived here with us because she was getting a little senile. Swede (her husband) thought she would be real excited when they started taking it up on the hill with the helicopter. He wanted her to look out the window at it, ya know, and see this big statue going up on the hill. She's say, "We've got statues at home in our cemetery." It was quite exciting to see it go up.

I: Did they, or is there a tram that goes up there now, or are they in the process of putting that in?

SM: They are hoping to.

I: You can only hike up to it now can't ya?

SM: Buses.

I: Buses go up?

SM: Yeah.

I: Oh, I've never been up there.

SM: They take tours up there I think? They are free. Different relatives have come and they've wanted to go up and see it and it's quite a trip with a big long bus on this mountain dirt road. I know the one curve, I think he had to back up three or four times in order to get the bus to turn.

I: Oh my God!

SM: And then the tail end of the bus would be hanging clear over.

I: That would be scary.

SM: Actually the trip in the bus was almost as much fun as actually getting up there and seeing everything. And when you get up there you can look out, I think it's Whitehall you can see from up there.

I: Really?

SM: Quite an area.

I: I'm going to have to go up there sometime.

SM: It's really interesting. They have a chapel-like up there that they have had weddings in and receptions.

I: Really?

SM: The wedding parties can only go up on the bus; there are no cars up and down the road. So they bus them all up there and...

I: Wow!

SM: It's really a pretty place.

I: There's an idea for a wedding site!

SM: Yeah!! They figure if they get the tram in they'll have a lot more of that, but there have been weddings up there already.

I: I bet if they get that tram in there will be a lot more people wanting to go up there, and they could probably build some more stuff up there.

SM: If you ever go up there you would be surprised how many people... Well, even if you go down to the place in the mall where you go to get on the bus to go up there (I think they have it there) for all of the people, they come from all over the world to see the Lady of the Rockies and they have there... Oh, it isn't there. It's at the one up on the top of Montana Street, up at the old church. But they have a big map with pins in all the countries where people have come from.

I: That's cool.

SM: It's really quite interesting.

I: World famous!

SM: Yep!

I: Did the mines... Did any aspect of the mines affect your family? That's why there were so many people here when you came, right?

SM: Yes. Us not directly, but it did hurt the whole area when they would go on strike.

I: Uh, huh.

SM: But, uh, Swede worked road construction mainly and building missile sites and things like that. He never did work in the mines.

I: How was the pollution and everything? Was it pretty bad because of them?

SM: No, the pollution wasn't I don't think any worse than it is now.

I: Uh, huh.

SM: You would quite often hear blasts, or have the house shake because of the blasts.

I: Did there used to be a lot of contamination in the water and... because I can remember my grandma or someone telling me a story about that the women in Butte used to have the most beautiful skin in the world because of all the arsenic?

SM: Oh, really!

I: Yeah.

SM: I don't know, but when we first moved here the water was just really good. It was a good drinking water and it wasn't so hard that you couldn't wash clothes in it and things like that either.

I: I wonder where that arsenic story came from!?

I: Do you think that Butte is a good place to raise a family?

SM: I would say it is as good as anywhere now. There could be better places, and like I said the high school up here should definitely have some changes, but I'm sure it is as good as anywhere else.

I: How many different homes have you lived in, in Butte?

SM: Two, we had a mobile home when we first came here and when the twins were born we couldn't find a mobile big enough, so we bought this house.

I: And what's the history behind this house?

SM: It was built by the guy they named the airport after, Mooney. After that, I don't remember who owned it, but it was even run as a red light district place, you know.

I: A brothel?

SM: I imagine it was in the thirties when the house was built, so that was probably in the forties or so.

I: Was this whole street out here... did it have...

SM: Oh no, because basically this was in the country.

I: So, it was kind of in the middle of nowhere?

SM: Yeah, there was the cemetery across there and I betcha when we moved out here the only thing there was, was the cemetery and Lydia's and the old greenhouse to the north of us.

I: Lydia's was here when you moved here? That's been here a long time.

SM: A couple of bars were out further, but there weren't any homes up on the hill and very few in behind us.

I: Butte High was here, and was Butte Central?

SM: Yeah.

I: And was Montana Tech here, was it running then.... I guess it was. I think it's a hundred years old so...

SM: Yeah, it was here. I'm not a hundred yet!!!

I: So, what is the story you have about some visitor coming to your door thinking the brothel was still open?

SM: Well, I did have one that came after we moved in here, after we had been here a couple of years. Actually, I had forgotten all about that! They were looking for a lady by this name, anyhow, and found out that they had missed her by a few years.

I: Wasn't a brothel anymore huh?

SM: That was the first I had ever heard of it being that, but I have had a lot of people stop that their parents used to rent this when they were little that wanted to come back and see the house because they remember it as being so big when they were little.

I: That's always how it is. Everything looks bigger when you are small.

I: You owned a motorcycle business? When did you start that?

SM: That was in 1971, or so. 1970 or 1971. We didn't really start it; we took over the Damble(?) store business and they handled motorcycles and boats and snow machines. So, he ran the shop and he had a partner in the store part of it, until he found out the partner was not too honest. Then I ended up having to go down there to work and it just wasn't a profitable business to begin with. So, it was after that they he (her husband) went to Alaska.

I: So, how long did you try to keep that going?

SM: We were there for a couple of years. We did keep the building though, and have that leased out now.

I: And that's the Columbia Paint building?

SM: Yes.

I: How was the economy back then? You said it wasn't very profitable. Was that just because of the...

SM: That was because the strikes were going on then... and the old miners used to live in these shabby old houses, but they always had big boats and snow machines and things like that.

I: Yeah, cause I don't think the miners made too much back then.

SM: Well, they made pretty good wages, but they spent a lot of it drinking and gambling and hunting and fishing. They didn't put much into their homes. I don't think most of them were too good at handling money. When they were on strike, they were in bad shape and nobody could spend anything then. So a lot of them would just take their toys and go out into the hills and fish and hunt until the strike was over.

I: And you own this trailer court out here, when did you start that?

SM: Swede put that in just a couple of years after we bought the house. The construction company he was working for, the owner was killed in a plane wreck and they eventually just sold out the company. So he was really not working at the time that he put the trailer court in. He was working part time for a trucking outfit: mechanic. We, I think it was in 1968-1969 that we opened our first spaces out there. We only had about eight of them open to begin with and then eventually go the rest of them finished.

I: And there's 25 out there now?

SM: 30

I: 30?

SM: There were 31 until they fenced off that storage shed, or storage area behind the shop.

I: Did you go to college?

SM: Yes, I went to Minot State Teacher's College in North Dakota. I received my standard degree for teaching. I taught almost a whole year, the year after we were married, but then I got pregnant and I quit.

I: And then once you came to Butte did you teach?

SM: I substitute taught after my kids were in school. I did that for about three years.

I: What did they pay you per day?

SM: Umm....

I: Today, I think, it is \$60/day for a substitute.

SM: I can't really tell you, I don't remember. But it wasn't too bad of a wage for working, but you didn't have any benefits or anything like that. And you had to work at just a few minutes notice. It was a good job when the kids were all in school, you knew you would be home when they were home and so you had something to do while they were gone.

I: Were the laws any different then, were they stricter or more lenient? Did they have an organized police department like they do now?

SM: I imagine it was all pretty organized. I don't know personally, but I have heard of several crooked cops and whatnot, that were in the area at the time. I do know that their laws on their driving, where we had to have a city permit to drive... a city license. I was ticketed for not having it one time when I was stopped in town. So when I took the ticket up to the judge, I told him I didn't think I needed it because I had a state license, and I didn't think I needed a city license.

I: Because you didn't live in Butte?

SM: Because I didn't live in the city. He asked me if I shopped in the city and I said, "Yes, but I don't have to." So he did sign the ticket for me so I didn't have to pay. I think it was only a dollar or two, but just the idea of it. Then they, a couple of years later, decided that the city driving license wasn't legal, constitutional, or whatever. So, they done away with them. I'm sure they took in quite a revenue with their city driving license over the years.

I: Did they still hang people and put people to death for committing crimes then?

SM: You know, that I couldn't tell you. I think hanging was still legal (the death penalty), but I can't, right now, think of anyone that was hung then. But there could have been, I just didn't pay that much attention.

I: On the road my mom lives on, it's called hanging tree road, there's a tree where they used to do hangings and you can see the branch and it's broken off. But, every Halloween they hang a dummy from the broken branch with a noose around its neck. That's where they used to hang people. It's pretty cool.

SM: Down in Virginia City there is quite a few of those. They have the old boothill cemetery and everything, with all the gangsters in it. Doug (her oldest son) was a dispatcher down there when him and Pam were first married, so we got to go through the old courthouse. That was after my days that we had all the gangsters. I imagine there was still quite a bit of that kind of stuff, like brawls at the bars with miners, and things like that. I think probably being a cop in Butte was a pretty tough job, because if you tried to stay honest you really had to watch your back.

I: Today, they are kind of more lenient. Today, I think they are lenient towards Butte residents, but I know a lot of people that I've worked with that out of state plates that get pulled over a lot.

SM: I've heard that too.

I: So, they are nice to the people that live here.

SM: Actually I know that's true because Doug first got his driver's license he hadn't even got the original, he had the one that got mailed out to you, a paper copy. He had this friend that had an out of state plate on his truck and he and Doug were out one night and Doug was driving and they got stopped. Of course, he was speeding a bit, but he had an out of state plate so he got stopped. The judge took his license away for, I think it was, two weeks. He got his one in the mail about a day before the time was up for the punishment, so he took it up. I drove him up so he could take it in without him driving. The judge told him that it was okay, that he could drive.

I: What kind of entertainment was there in Butte?

SM: Mostly bars. They had a lot of bands that, just about every bar in town had a dance floor in it. It seemed like eating and drinking and dancing was the main entertainment.

I: Are there any bars that were famous then that are still around today?

SM: I just don't get out today, so I don't know Sarah. I imagine there are still a lot... yes, the M&M definitely was there then. The one out here that we used to go to burned down and they had...the Acoma club used to be... they have their restaurant in their now, but that used to be a good place to go. Other than that, for a place like that, I couldn't tell you. Then there was this place I was telling you about, Luigi's. It was up on Meaderville that used to be uptown to the right. It was an old building and he had the whole thing hooked up to wires that he could run from the platform where he had his little one-man band. He had, as you come in the door, he would have different gadgets and things that would start working when you walked in. And if you went into the restrooms he always had something horribly embarrassing or something happen as you would come out. Most of the time if he was playing and you went into the restroom he would quit. It would be dead quiet, and when you would come out, then he would say, "Well, now we can start again." It was terrible, but it was fun. He was up there for years and very well known for states around us. When they expanded the mining up there, they had bought his place out. He moved it down onto Harrison, I can't remember which block it was on on Harrison, but I know it was on the flats. I know he was there for a few years, but it was never the same as the old place. He just didn't have all of his things in there.

I: Were there a lot of churches around then, I think there were a lot of Irish Catholic that came to Butte.

SM: Yes, there were churches of every religion and there were, I would say, probably eight catholic churches at that time. I think there are probably six now.

Tape cut off, but Shirley didn't have much more to say, so I concluded the interview by thanking her for her time.