

**BUTTE IN THE FIFTIES:  
An Interview with Tom Billteen, Sr.**

**Interviewed by:  
Dena Billteen**

**Prepared for:  
Mr. Jim Harrington**

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We, Thomas A Billheer Sr and Dena Billheer  
(Person Interviewed) (Interviewer)

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Signed: Thomas A Billheer Sr  
(Person Interviewed)

Dena M Billheer  
(Interviewer)

11/27/99  
(Date)

Butte MT  
(City & State)

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What was it like to grow up in Butte in the fifties?
2. What types of jobs did you have?
3. How was the city different (geographically)?
4. What types of things did kids do for fun?

*Note: Mr. Harrington, I have known Mr. Tom Billteen, Sr. for about 13 years. I have heard many, many humorous stories about him growing up in Butte. When I decided to interview him, I hoped he would start talking and "take off" with some of his stories, and that's pretty much what he did. For this reason, I did not prepare a lot of interview questions.*

## INTERVIEW OUTLINE

- I Introductions
- II Selling Papers for the Daily Post
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**INTERVIEW WITH  
TOM BILLTEEN, SR.  
November 27, 1999**

*Mr. Billteen was born in Butte in 1946. In the 13 years or so that I have known him, I have heard many stories of growing up in Butte in the 50's and 60's. I asked Mr. Billteen if he could share some of those stories for this interview as a way of reflecting on the ways being raised in Butte has changed over the years.*

**I Introductions**

**Dena:** "Interview with Mr. Tom Billteen, Sr. November 27, 1999."

**Tom:** "This story is true. The names have been changed to protect the innocent--mainly me."

**Dena:** "Tell me about growing up in Butte; the jobs you had, selling papers."

**II Selling Papers for the Daily Post**

**Tom:** "In the fifties in Butte there were two papers. One come out in the morning, and come out in the evening. We sold the evening paper on the street corners. There were delivery ones that do houses like they do now, but. Back when ya had to go down the old Post which was in the alley. There was always somebody getting pants. They actually took somebody's pants off and threw them up on a roof, that was something to do. I was one of the lucky ones, I never got pants. And everybody got their papers and they went up on their corners which was considered your turf. You didn't go on nobody else's turf. I sold papers up on the corner of Broadway and Main and it was about time for day shift to get off from the mine so I caught a lot of miners coming off the hill. Think I sold 150 papers in an hour or so. There was a lot of weird things with papers. I don't know what they was. I remember one Thanksgiving I ate dinner real fast. I was about 3rd grade. Run down to sell papers to make a buck. They come out in red ink. They run out of black ink. We had a hell of a time selling papers in red ink. I even tried to sell yesterday's paper today to make a buck. Most people didn't look at the date. It was in the bars so they didn't care what it was anyway."

**Dena:** "How much did they cost?"

**Tom:** "A nickel."

**Dena:** "How much did you make?"

**Tom:** "I don't know. 'Cept on Sunday. I tried that. I didn't do that a lot. Cause that was a morning paper. On Sunday I don't think they had an evening paper. I don't remember."

**Dena:** "I don't think they did. 'Cause in the archives the Daily Post just went Monday through Saturday. There was no Sunday."

**Tom:** "The Standard was Sunday. And that was in a different building. That was up on Broadway I think. Right down from the Bus Station. Then they moved the old Post to up to where it is now. I remember selling papers during the earthquake, or right after the earthquake. The day after. We got rid of a lot of papers then. Usually Christmas was good cause ya got a lot of tips. It'd be snowing and you'd be standing there freezing your ass off. One Christmas I didn't get a cryin dime so I think that's when I kinda give it up. The generosity was not too good in that day. But that was when Butte was still half way tough. I mean ya didn't go into any one else's selling area. If ya did ya get your ass kicked. If ya got caught. Ya snuck in once in awhile. Ya got too many papers ya couldn't get rid of em on the corners, ya had to move on down the line and hit the bars which was always somebody else's turf."

**Dena:** "What other kind of things did you do when you were growing up in Butte?"

**Tom:** "Seems like every Sunday morning I sold papers I came home with a dog. Always a stray dog I'd take home. He'd stay for a couple of days and then mozy on. One time some unknown characters which I was acquainted with took some papers from Blind Frank. Trying to make a couple of quarters. We found out later his name was printed on the inside and one guy got caught. I don't think they did much to him. They told him quite stealing from a blind man. Well he wasn't there so I guess it wasn't stealing from a blind man. He was gone. He'd be there sometimes. Sometimes he wouldn't. He was on the corner of Broadway and Main too. That's why I figure I knew a lot about the bars, cause I sold papers in the bars. The drunks'd say 'Well we can't read.' We'd tell them to turn it upside down and laugh at it or funnies for dummies. The drunker they was the more generous they was. We come out with some pretty good change. I remember it was weird getting a dollar bill cause around here we never had no dollar bills. We always had silver. So if ya got a dollar bill ya thought ya had something. We were always trying to find a way to make a buck. We'd get cardboard boxes and take em up to Safeway and sell em. They'd by the boxes to put groceries in. Then as a sideline we always shoplifted. I always watched . . . Well, let's see, TV was just coming out. Or was just coming out to afford it. I used to think pickpockets was neat so. I kinda liked shoplifting. It wasn't really to get anything. It was just the idea that I could get away with it. I used to be pretty good at it."

### III The Happiest Little Guy in the First Grade

"I had a buddy from the 2nd grade on. Oh I remember going to the old Washington school. It was down on the east side toward Fin town. That's where all the Swedes lived. In the first grade on the way to school I'd come down the alley over the hill and through the Butte Brewery. And ya walking through he brewery, it was like a double alley and ya come out right by the school. It was a shortcut. But where they brewed the beer there was vaps like, I don't know, water treaters or something. There was always a beer missing there. I think I was the happiest little guy in the first grade walking through there. I always come back in the afternoon happier than the morning.

### IV Pranks

#### a) Caps

"We was always doing something. Pranks. I think we got the pranks from listening to the old folks. My grandmother, my uncles and that. My cousin one time had a empty can, like an soup can. And he had some caps from a cap gun. And we're trying to figure out what were gonna do with these. We didn't have no cap gun. And there was a car parked on the corner kind of on a hill. They must have put too much gas in it. It was dripping out the tank and down the running boards. So we went over and got some gas and put it in the can and we lit it and forgot there was gas on the ground though and the whole car went up. He did it, I didn't do it. We run to school and got back in school. And the fire department come. I don't know, I was always sitting there waiting for. I was in the first grade I was waiting for the cop to come drag me out of school. The car went poof as soon as we lit the caps. Must of been gas on the ground went back to the car. Like a James Bond movie.

#### b) Twins

"I don't know why, I stuttered up til I was 40. I don't know why but. There was another guy around butte, stuttered as bad as I did. I think he stuttered worse cause he was still stuttering when he died. But he was my buddy when I was in the first grade. He was in the 3rd. Kinda like my big buddy. I don't know. I think, being a humorous type fellow, I think I got laughs from stuttering so maybe that's why I never quite. Never read a lot. Stand up and read them damned here comes spot shit and I had too many S's and too many T's. I got through the 1st grade though. My cousins didn't. They were twins. I don't know why, everybody was trying to pull pranks. I know, like I said a lesson from the old people. They used to do it. Tip over shit houses and everything else. My two cousins were identical twins. At recess, the teacher could tell them apart, she'd put a blue ribbon on one and a yellow on the other, or whatever color and they'd go outside and switch em and she wouldn't know who in the hell they was.

### c) The Tire and the Window

"We lived across from where the old Federal Building was. The Federal Building's there but it used to be the old Post Office. And there was a whole bunch of apartments on the one side and we lived in there. There was a bunch of us out in the alley one day and we got a tire. And it's pretty steep grade going down into, probably Granite Street. Sears and Roebuck was there anyway. And they had a big picture window. So we all got. It was a big tire, took a couple of us to pick it up. We gave it a shove and that sucker went down, down, down, picking up speed, hit a car parked and went right into Sears and Roebuck window.

### d) Frozen Pop

"Then down the two blocks down the street there was a Harkins Bottling Co. They kinda watched that pretty close but we heisted a pop now and then. Talken about pop. When they built the Junior High, the first year they took all the grade schools and only brought them up to the seventh, sixth grade. So we were the last ones in the sixth grade at Lincoln. So we thought we was big shit like the eighth grade used to be. And then I went to junior high. I used to take the bus from junior high, and I'd meet my buddy, in McKinley, cause he was a year behind me. There was no more Lincoln school, they tore it down. But when he went home for lunch everyday, and walking back, probably every other day or so, there would be a pop truck delivery pop to the store and he'd heist about 4 bottles of pop and then hide them in the alley. I'd get off the bus, meet him and we'd walk home from his school, and drink the pop. Well this went on for quite awhile. And one day the guy come out when he was helping himself to the soda pop and grabbed him and give him a bell for all the goddamned pop he stole. It was getting close to winter anyway so the pop was freezing. We had a hell of a time drinking that frozen pop."

**Dena:** "Did you ever get caught?"

**Tom:** "Doing what?"

**Dena:** "Any of this?"

## V Shoplifting

**Tom:** "I got caught shoplifting once. The guy just said don't come here. One day I thought I was really cute. I was at a souvenir counter at the dime store, Woolworth's, whatever ya call it. The Five and Ten. And the lady was talking to me and my buddy and said 'Ya know you guys are in here an awful lot. I think you're shoplifting.' While she was talking to me I stuffed 3 knives up my sleeve. I got pretty good at it. Little knives. Souvenir knives. There was a little kid up on the streets, I mean this kid was like 5 years old. He smoked like a chimney. Ya ask him for a smoke he had a Prince Albert can full of butts or he had some good stuff. We used to send him into Payless, and a carton of cigarettes, one



would fit down each leg of his pants and he'd walk out with them. They even through him in jail once. He was so damned little he got between the bars. He wasn't too good a shoplifter. Christmas time I'd go out with ten bucks and come back with fifty bucks worth of stuff.

## VI The Movies

"Never did pay to get in the show. Always snuck in. There was a fire exit on the side of, which is the Mother Lode now, which was the Fox, which was the Bow, it kept switching back and forth. But you could get that side door open sometimes and we'd go through there. But you had to be quiet. It was go through the curtain. There was some big idiot with us one day. I don't know, we just pick him up around there. We all go under the curtain and crawl real sneaky and get into a seat and sit like. Well the big idiot flops the curtain out, comes walking in there like he's gonna take on the world and shines all the light in the dark theater. And the manager starts chasing him all over the place. He stops, turns around and punches the manager in the mouth. I think after that they put a buzzer on the door, that buzzed up there where they took the tickets. He Sunday'd him. Just turned right around and popped him. I didn't stick around to see what happened after that either.

## VII Climbing Roofs

"Here about Halloween, I think, they used to. One time I lived on Washington Street, and across the street was a house and they were in there interns. There was Philipinos. Intern doctors. And they lived there while they were doing their internship at the old St. James Hospital. Well we went over there and goes trick or treat and they didn't know what the hell was going on so they gave us each fifty cents. So we thought hey we're gonna milk this puppy for all we can. So we went and changed a little bit, outfit, went back over, banged on the door again, got another four bits. Tried it again a third time they wouldn't answer the door. They figured that's trick or treat enough for the American way. But we did, if you didn't have nothing when we come to the door, we soaped your windows. We didn't sit around. Used to like to climb around. Climb buildings. We'd go climb around. Couple of nice roofs. You could jump from roof to roof. So we went up, Ya had to go up the alley side cause it was the low side. We went up there and I ran over to the church, that was a nice steeple. I was always gonna climb that a little bit. I'm running like hell across the roof and hit a guide wire right in the mouth and landed on my ass. Must of made too much noise. The guy that lived underneath in one of the apartments or something come out. He's walking back and forth, back and forth in the alley waiting for us to get down and my dumb cousins says 'Come on. We can get down this way.' And I don't know if he didn't see him or what but jeez that guy grabbed him and put him in a full nelson. The rest of us got away and he went to jail."

**Dena:** "Are those the cousins you always used to get picked up for cause you looked like them?"

**Tom:** "Yeah. Walking over the street one day and the cop comes over and puts me in the car, and puts me in juvenile detention and I said 'What the hell I do?' He didn't say my name, but he said my cousins name so I sat there until they figured out who in the hell I was."

### VIII The Cat Houses

**Dena:** "You said you used to watch the johns coming out of the Dumas."

**Tom:** "I don't know anybody named john. That was way when we was in junior high. It was me and one guy that run around together from the second grade. He didn't have a dad and I didn't have a dad, so I guess maybe that's why we always got along. We was always venturing away, going someplace. We'd go any goddamned place. We'd hitch hike."

**Dena:** "In the second grade?"

**Tom:** "Started. I think we was a little bit older we started hitch hiking. No, I hitch hiked. We hitch hiked to the gardens and back. I think we was in junior high and started smoking and we'd be uptown. One buddy's dad owned a key shop. A gun, a key shop. So we'd get some cigarettes and so we wouldn't be uptown smoking we'd go down the alley and over the alley and down behind the local cat houses and sit there where the parking lot was in the back and smoke cigarettes and watch the johns come out. Kinda neat watching, I don't know if it was kinda neat watching. They'd be looking at themselves, like if their attire was all nice. Checking their zippers. And smiling of course. They was smiling. They always come out smiling. Should of looked in the front door see what they looked like going in. I think I figured out their nationality. The guy going in the front door was Russian, the guy inside was Himalayan, and the guy leaving was Finnish. There was another guy, I won't mention no names, like to climb. And on Main Street, half a block around the corner from the first cat house, ya went up a little ways and there was an empty lot, and there was a sign board. So he climbed the sign board went in one of the windows of the Missoula Rooms, which was a whore house, looked around, found a purse, took the money out of it, come back down, went around the front door, went inside and spent it. So we kept saying that old gal got screwed twice. Two different respects though."

### IX The Butcher Shop

"I was always scared of Indians. There was an Indian that worked in the butcher shop on Main Street, on North Main. He come after me one day. Scared the shit out of me. Even when I see them in the parade I was scared of Indians."

He was a Indian with a pony tail and everything. Course the knife in his hand didn't do me much good either, being a butcher. The old butcher shops, ya go in there with your mom and dad they'd always give ya a nice big red weenie. Them were good weenies. Don't taste like them sawdust things they got now.

### **X Mogen David**

"My Grandma worked in the schools as a janitress, in the Washington. She used to get, they had some kind of liquid soap. It was kinda like jello. And it dissolved in hot water. Well she brought some home for the house and my mom had some. But she had it in a bottle, a Mogen David bottle, wine bottle. And I was in the pantry one day, it was dark in there. It was a big pantry, a walk in. And I seen the bottle of Mogen David wine and thought it was my old man's and took a big slug and the son of a bitch was soap. I farted bubbles for a week.

### **XI The Bonfire**

"In the old days after Christmas, a bunch of neighborhoods would have, build forts in a lot or something, tree forts. Kinda see who could get the biggest one. Well, we decided we would cut down the competition, so at night time we went and stole a bunch of trees from other forts. All the ones that hung out at the ice-skating rink behind the hospital. And we had over five hundred trees. And I found some more gas. I guess they shut the pump off and there was still gas in the line and we got some out of there. Where Jeep used to be. They sold Jeeps not too far from the ice-skating rink. We lit that puppy. We melted the rink. Somebody called the fire department. Kinda neat watching them fire engines try to stop on the ice rink. We had one hell of a fire though. Biggest bonfire we ever had.

### **XII The Hospital**

"Then that was kinda fun to go in the hospital, go in the back door. We'd go watch the rabbits and stuff they had and their guinea pigs. Kinda did what wanted to and go where we wanted to. Ended up downstairs in the goddamned morgue though and seen this stiff laying there with all these tubes in him so we didn't stay there too long. Sometimes we'd race the wheelchairs up and down the hall, until they'd kick us out. One day we got in a phone booth, I mean it wasn't like a phone booth outside. It was like a closet. Goddamned door stuck, we couldn't get out. Every time someone would walk by we'd bang and they couldn't hear where we was coming from. Finally, somebody let us out.

### XIII Skivvies

“Like I say, we got, the old folks used to tell us about pranks and tipping over outhouses and shit. Me and my buddy was hanging around this other neighborhood. It was always another neighborhood. I think we moved every time the rent was due. I never lived in the same goddamned place for more than a month. And it wasn't that nobody was working. I don't know why. Seem like we was always moving. I'd say we'd move every time the rent was due. And we go up this neighborhood where were still in grade school, probably fifth, sixth grade. And there was kinda a cutie girl there, I kinda had an eye for in that neighborhood. So we went to her house nobody was around and. We always went through the alleys. We was always casing stuff. I mean if ya left your pop bottles out on the back porch, we nailed them. Come back at night time. Deer hides, we'd nail them. Anything to make a buck. We'd borrow stuff. Anyways we go up there, we thought 'Nobody's around here. Let's have some fun.' The clothes were out on the clothesline and the one girl, we took her skivvies off the clothesline, went down the street where this kinda overly plump girl lived, and switched them. We never did find out what the outcome was but we thought that was kinda cute when she tried put that other girls skivvies on.”