

Interview

William La Fayette Johnson

Born: Fort Belnap Indian Reservation

Year: December 3, 1929

1. What year were you born, and where. How was your upbringing your childhood.
2. How old were you when your family came to Butte, were you able to adjust to city life.
3. You joined the service at an early age and how long did you stay enlisted.
4. After your discharge from the navy were you able to find work on the reservation or did you return to Butte for employment.
5. What were the names of the different mines that you worked and did members of your family work at them also, were there accidents, and did you work mostly with indian men from the same reservation.
6. How many years did you work in the mines, and when did you retire. Also will you name some of the mines that employed you.

NOTES:

During World War II Indians were required to work in the mines at that time they were the Gros Ventre and the Assiniboine.

I was one of seven children born and raised on the Fort Belnap Indian Reservation. My family moved to Butte during World War II. I tried to live in Butte, but I could not adjust to the white mans way of life, so I moved back to the reservation and lived with my aunt Emily and my uncle Bill Berry ( he was a chief of the Assiniboine tribe).

I joined the navy at the age of 17, and stayed there for 5 years. After 4 years of my enlistment the service froze discharges because of the Korean War and I stayed for one more year in the South Pacific. After my discharge in November 29,1951 I went back to Fort Belnap to find work and only stayed for a short period of time. I came to Butte in 1952 and started working at the St. Lawrence Mine I was 23 years old. My father Dan and brother Martin (Swede) also worked the mines. It wasn't too long after I had started working that my father was injured underground he stepped on a large nail that went through his boot and later he developed gangereen in his foot and eventually died from it. My brother Martin there also was a tragedy he left the reservation to fight in World War II against the Japanese, survived the war, came back to Butte worked in the Lexington Mine and fallen ground fell on him and killed him, he was working with Mayhue Coxes, and I was working at the Kelly, my father was

at another mine at the time this happened. The various mines that I worked at was the Kelly, Mt. Con, Stuart, Badger Mine, East Kalusa, St. Lawrence, Never Sweat, Ancelmo, and the Belmont which was the hottest in Butte.

A lot of indians came to Butte to work the mines, but when they went under ground they could not stand the confinement, so many went back to the reservation, but a lot stayed too, they raised families and the mines provided a good living for all of us.

Some indian men that I can remember were:

Berry's, Buckman's all were cousins of mine

Perry's Aaron, Edwin, William

Charles Longfox

Gin Stiffarm

Belcourts, Clarks, Campbell's Snell's, Moore(Eddy), Bell

Bob Azure, he became superintendent of the Kelly mine.

A number of indian men that were such good miners they became supervisors. There were a lot more indians working in the mines, but I cannot remember all there names. Sorry

All of the people that left the reservation did not forget their heritage, we never lost contact and we always lived the indian way. We came back to the reservation for Pow Wow's and other activities. When one of our people died they are always brought back home to be buried. I have practiced my culture all my life and have passed it on to my children and grandchildren. My daughter is a traditional dancer and so is my grandson Mitchell. We attain Pow Wow's all over the state of Montana this

is part of our culture that will never be taken away. I am now 65 years old and have experience life. I worked in the mines as a contract miner for 23 years, and in 1972 I fell 25 feet down a man way fracture my arm and leg Chappie Longfox (whom I was raised with from the same reservation) helped me to the surface and got me to the hospital. When Arco starting buying the Anaconda Co. many miners were being laid off, after my accident the company retained me at the Vo - Tech as a mainance Engineer. My life as a contract miner was over and so was the underground mining.

Thank You:

William L. Johnson

Story done by his daughter:

Georgia L. Johnson Cunningham

Gros Ventre Tribe Fort Belnap Indian Reservation

## ORAL HISTORY ASSIGNMENT

An oral history is an attempt to document primary experiences in history. It is to examine an individual's personal involvement in past events, e.g. working in the Butte mines, life as a housewife on a farm in the Great Plains during the depression, restoration of cultural values on the Fort Belknap Reserve and its impact on daily life in the area, etc. It is an attempt to capture the stories, attitudes, lifestyles, and values of people that would otherwise be lost.

### PROCEDURE

- 1 Select an individual and make contact several days before the proposed interview. Request permission and select some topic in which the individual would feel comfortable.
- 2 Carefully prepare an outline of areas to be examined or questions that might be asked. Questions should be placed on a personal, perhaps emotional, basis, e.g. rather than asking a question such as, "Tell me about the strike in the Butte mines in 1959," it would get better results if you asked, "How did you feel about the strike in the Butte mines in 1959?"
- 3 Use a standard tape recorder, and if it operates on batteries, make sure that they are fully charged.
- 4 The interview should be conducted on a one to one basis in the person's home preferably with the tape recorder placed between the person being interviewed and the interviewer. Any background noise that might interfere with the quality of the tape should be eliminated.
- 5 Before the interview begins, the attached release form should be signed by both parties as the Oral History will be placed either in the Butte archives or with the state historical society's collection. The information may be used sometime in the future by individuals researching the topic of the interview. Some, of questionable value, may be returned to the interviewers.
- 6 Introduce the tape prior to your arrival at the interview site. "This is an interview of \*\*\* conducted by \*\*\* at (location), on (date and time)."
- 7 Begin in a conversational pattern, putting the person being interviewed at ease, e.g. "When did you arrive at \*\*\*?" "What did your parents do for a living?"
- 8 IF THE PERSON BEING INTERVIEWED BEGINS TO DIGRESS, BE PATIENT AND ALLOW IT. The information generally is of equal or greater value even though it does not necessarily deal with your topic. Come back to the topic gradually.
- 9 Label the Tape and Box: John Jones interviewed by \*\*\*, 6/06/94

Hand in: (Please type)

- 1 Preparation outline or questions for the interview.
- 2 The tape (Standard size) - at least a twenty minute interview.
- 3 The Outline
- 4 Transcript.

We, William L. Johnson and Margaret L. Johnson Pennington  
(Person Interviewed) (Interviewer)  
surrender all rights to all or any part of the material contained

in this oral history for future research, reference, or quotation.

William L. Johnson  
(Person Interviewed)

Margaret L. Johnson Pennington  
(Interviewer)

11-26-94  
(Date)

Butte, MT.  
(City & State)