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DON PLESSAS

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Oral History Transcript of Don Plessas

Interviewer: Aubrey Jaap and Clark Grant
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Aubrey Jaap: It's Friday, September 28, 2018. We're here with Don Plessas. Don, I'd like you to start and talk to me about your parents.

Don Plessas: OK, parents. Katie Plessas, originally, Katie Guido from Meaderville and she was born in Meaderville and raised in Meaderville. So that's where I get a lot of my knowledge about Meaderville. I was only there until I was six years old. My dad, Don Plessas, and he was raised in the central part of Butte up around Mercury Street. His father came over from Greece and started a couple of restaurants. He had one on North Wyoming, right below where the Finlen hotel is now. Currently, it's a used car tire place. And he had a couple of restaurants there for a while and then he moved down. His restaurant was where the Craven Garage is now. It's down on the main floor of the Craven Garage. It was called the Drop in Café. I asked my dad if he did Greek food and said he didn't. He just did regular sandwiches. The miners would come down and they would have breakfast there. He'd fix them a bucket. They'd work at the Emma mine. Then they'd come back and they would get dinner there. So he had them coming and going to his restaurant. And that's when my dad got his start.

He was doing a lot of dishwashing in the restaurants. And what happened was my dad's mother died when he was about four days old. So he was raised by the Allen family for quite a while. Fred Allen, who used to be a boilermaker in Butte. And then when he was old enough, he would start working in a restaurant with his father. But his father got diabetes and died when my dad was about 15. So he was on his own. And what he did is he ended up living with some of the Greek men in the community and they all got him jobs. So he didn't go to any orphanage or anything. He just worked in the restaurants. And that's where he met my mother because he was working as a busboy in the Finlen hotel and she was a waitress at the Finlen.

As the story goes, there were these swinging doors between the coffee place and the restaurant there. The people would just push to go in and or else the waitresses would, lots of times, kick them. And he says, "She kicked the door and came through the door and I knew I was in love." So they got married in 1940 and he felt that being a busboy was no job for a man with a wife. So he went to work at the mines and made almost half the amount of money working in the mines, as he did as a busboy.

And what happened was he was working in the mines when World War II happened. And he and my uncle both enlisted and went off to two different places. He ended up going down to California and my mother actually followed him down there. And she became a Rosie the Riveter and he became a military policeman. And so he didn't go overseas. He would transport prisoners around the country, which would turn out to be GI's that got into trouble. So after the war, they came back to Meaderville. And actually what happened was he stayed in the military police even after the war ended. They were just charging people for about another year. So that's why I was born in California. I always wanted to be a Butte native, but I was born in California.

Jaap: You can't claim that.

Plessas: So I got here when I was seven months old and I've been here since. But, you know, I wasn't born here. All the rest of my family were all born here. And we went back to Meaderville

down at 48 Leatherwood, it was either 48 or 46, I can't remember the address. It was my grandmother's house. But at that time it was my uncle's house. And we stayed there.

We stayed there for probably about a year or so. And they bought a house in North Meaderville and we moved into the house in North Meaderville. And so my first memories are actually at that house in North Meaderville because it had a really big, long backyard and behind there was my first buddy, Chuckie Lombardi.

And Chuckie and I would get into a little bit of trouble. What we would do is come up behind Chuck's house and up further to the north, he had an uncle that had a barn. So we went up to the barn one day and the barn had all kinds of windows. And we found this nice big block of wood. So we'd stand inside the barn and we'd break the one window pane out and go around and get the block of wood and we'd come back and we do another one. So we went across the bottom and probably broke about 20 windows on the first row. Then we couldn't reach any further. And so we did get into quite a bit of trouble down there, being about four or five years old.

So I stayed in Meaderville until I was about six years old and that's when we moved. My father was working on the Kenwood Project in Butte, building the houses up in the McGlone Heights. And so he was working there and he was always trying to get back into the police department. And he got appointed in 1952 to the Butte Police Department. And so what happens there is you can't live in the county. You have to move in the city limits. That's why we had to leave Meaderville. And we moved just briefly to Granite Street. After that, we moved down to Carter Street, where I was raised from the age of six. But we always had ties going back to Meaderville because most of the families were still there. And it worked out. Probably a really good thing because moving out of Meaderville probably saved my life.

This is what happened. I was about five years old and there was some of the older boys there. One was a paper boy and he was about 10 or 12. And they were in the garage right across the street from us. I felt pretty good to be invited in by these boys. So what they did is, they gave me some candy. They called it candy. And what they did was they put some peas into a little cup and it was yellow. And they wanted me to drink the candy. Well, the kid next door, Genie Puccini, he saw what was happening. So he ran over, grabbed the cup, and told my mother. And so my mother came back and she confronted all the boys. They had all peed into the thing and had me drinking. So what happened was she had me pee in the cup and she grabbed the one by the throat and told him, "If you don't swallow this, I'm going to choke you." So he swallowed it. And then she told the other boys to go get their fathers to come up here because she can make them drink it, too. So it was a good thing we got out of Meaderville.

So I talked to a friend of mine, Jimmy Rolando, afterwards, and he said, "You were lucky because those same boys tied me to a tree and punched me." So it wasn't all glorious stuff down there, you know?

But some of the things I remember about growing up there, though, was we had a lot of various activities with all kinds of people. Miners' Union Day, we'd all go to the Columbia Gardens. Actually, the kid that had the garage, we had his birthday party up in the Columbia Gardens. And we would go to the Columbia Gardens for big parties and we'd have three-legged sack races that we'd try to do. And it was just a pretty joyous time with, you know, lots of families.

And as I said most of the people down there were Italian. My dad was the only Greek in Meaderville. And next to him was Joe Stevens. And Joe Stevens was English. Later, I did research on Joe Stevens and Jen Stevens. They were quite old when I was a little kid. I think they were probably in their late 80s at that time. And lived there probably into their 90s. But they were from

the English people that settled Meaderville first. Because Meaderville was originally known as Gunderson. That was because they had all these miners coming over that had experience from Cornwall. And so the Stevens and Hornsby, his wife was Hornsby. Her father was the justice of the peace. And as you were first coming into Meaderville, they still had quite a few Cornish for a while, even after the turn of the century. But what happens? As Jim Michelotti used to always say, "You leave a couple of Italians and we run everybody out." So it became mostly Italian. So those are the recollections I can think of just off-hand of Meaderville.

Jaap: So your mom cooked in restaurants for a while?

Plessas: No, she did waitressing. My mother and my aunt both waitressed. After the eighth grade, my mother went to work in the restaurants and she worked at the Golden Fan. It ran for about a year and then it became the Rocky Mountain. Because the Rocky Mountain burned down. And Teddy Parish moved over there. She worked in the restaurants.

I'll go back to my mother's background. What happened with her was. Her father was a miner and he ended up dying of black lung back in 1922. One of the weird things that we found (Jim Michelotti and I've been friends for a long time) is that my grandfather died in the house they were renting. And the house was owned by Jim Michelotti's grandparents. So we had kind of that link right there. And so what happened is he had come over from Italy and mined down in the coal mines in Kansas for a short time, and then came up to Butte. And then he worked in the mines here in Butte. And I always wondered if he ever became a citizen. Because I found my grandmother became a citizen in the 20s or early 30s. But I thought he never tried because he died in 1922.

But we went with Ellen [Crain] and searched and we found his citizenship application. And Ellen said it was lucky that he didn't get deported because on the back, he was denied citizenship in January of 1918 because of association with the IWW Workers. My mother was born in September 1918. So it's amazing. If he had been sent back to Italy, maybe I would have been Italian, I don't know. Anyway, he had worked in the mine. He must have been a union guy because that's what they were trying to do.

And there was a weird coincidence. On his side of the family and on my Finnish grandfather's side of the family, there was an association that I found with my research, too. What happened was my grandmother (my father's mother) who died in childbirth. There was five kids in the family - 1905, 1906 and so forth. And by 1917, there was only two left out of the family. The oldest sister ended up catching pneumonia and dying. And the second oldest sister, Hilda – there's a newspaper article that says Hilda died in her mother's arms. What happened is she got herself into a family way and stayed with some people in Meaderville.

Although she was Finnish, her boyfriend was from Meaderville and stayed with them. And then they had a botched abortion. And then she died in 1912 of that. And what was kind of interesting was that her boyfriend turned out to be one of the people that signed for my grandfather Guido, being of good character, trying to get him a naturalized citizen. They're all linked somehow. Even though it's the Finnish part of town and it is completely separate from the Italian part of town. There were these different associations. There were these links that turn out to be pretty interesting.

So back to my grandmother Guido's situation. She lost her husband in 1922. So she's got three children: a 12-year-old daughter, Mary; 8-year-old boy, Joe; and my mother, Katie, who was 4. She was basically taking care of my grandfather as he had the black lung. So she couldn't even work at that time. So they were destitute. So the people in Meaderville actually took up a collection to bury my grandfather. So they paid to bury him. And then Mrs. Bonetto, she had the cotton candy shop in Meaderville. Mrs. Bonetto, she sold my grandmother a house for a dollar. And that was always the

family home. And so my grandmother ended up scrubbing floors, taking care of laundry and doing that kind of a job or raising the kids. It turned out to be, during the 20s, not too bad. But when you got into the 30s, it was pretty tough scraping. But she raised the three kids on that. And they all knew how to work. There's just no choice about that. They all had to work.

Jaap: So did you have family traditions? Did you practice any Greek traditions or Italian traditions? Or did one outweigh the other?

Plessas: The Italian outweighed the Greek. My mother was very forceful. And my father, you know, he really didn't have much of a family because he was the only child, and he lost his parents and that. But my mother never would cook lamb. She wouldn't cook lamb because she said it was too oily or greasy. Because the way the Greeks used to cook it was in pure olive oil. She didn't want to do that. So we never, ever tried that. I was probably in my 30s before I ever tasted lamb. But Italian? Yes. We would have either a Thanksgiving in my aunt's house, down in Meaderville, and then maybe Christmas at our house down in the Longfellow area. And I look at the house now and I can't believe we had that many people. We'd probably have 20 or 25 people or more in there along the big tables, and we would have all kinds of Italian dishes - Italian raviolis and spaghetti.

And always the homemade wine. Because my uncles always did homemade wine and they always drank it. And now there's an Italian term I've been trying to find for the little glasses that you use. All those glasses are little jelly glasses. We never, ever drank wine out of wine glasses. We didn't know what a wine glass was, but everybody had a little glass. My Uncle John would always say, you know, have the glass of wine. It thins your blood. It's good for you. So we'd always be thinning our blood at our dinners. So we didn't have any trouble. We had real thin blood. And my uncles always did make the wine.

A quick story about that. My Uncle John. They had their house in Meaderville and they moved their house down to Wharton Street. And he was always dreaming about having a whole nice basement. So he had a great basement down. And the basement probably was about eight feet high. So he had a wonderful basement with rooms separated. And he made his wine that year and it was terrible. It was the worst wine you ever had. And he was just throwing it out. And he figured out what was wrong. He had this nice, clean basement and he didn't have the natural yeast for it. So what he did the following year is, he got some guys and they jackhammered out the floor and they got rid of the cement floor in that room. So you're back to a dirt floor and you hung gunny sacks that were dirty along the walls and you got the same thing as it was in those old dirt basements that they had in Meaderville. The wine was good again. That's all there was to it. It was too clean.

So when my other uncle, Joe, moved up from Meaderville to the McGlone Heights, he had a dirt basement and he didn't mess with it. He kept the dirt basement so he could do his wine. So that's a little secret about wine and too clean a basement.

Jaap: I've never heard that before.

Plessas: Yeah, well, I don't think they ever threw yeast into their wine. I think it was all natural. My mother told me that when she went to school in the fall, she always had purple feet because she was one of the little ones and they had to do it. She was being raised basically by her mother. But her mother always made the wine too. Everybody made their own wine.

They made all kinds of wine. And we were talking a couple days ago about some of the people that brought in all the grapes. And one fellow that I was trying to find was called Maggio. And I've never found out who Maggio was. But he used to bring the grapes in before Mazzolini did. Maggio was doing it probably in the 30s, and he'd be in charge of bringing the grapes. And I traced him

down that he was also a swamper for the Arrow Cafe. And he also lived right below Fagan's grocery store in some log cabins. But I never did figure out who Maggio was. He's one of the mysteries that we have when I did Katy's story.

So after that, do you want me to transfer to Longfellow?

Jaap: Yeah. I have one quick question about your dad working for the Kenwood Project. So we just got a whole bunch of Kenwood's records. We got a bunch of records from the Anaconda company about the Kenwood project. What did your dad do for the Kenwood project?

Plessas: He wasn't a carpenter; he was just a general laborer. So he was up there doing general labor. That's how I got my first dog, too. He was up there working on the Kenwood Project, up in the McGlone Heights. And this dog was hanging around. It was a collie. And so he brought the dog home one day. And I remember running back and forth on the porch with this collie. And I had this collie all the way until I was about 12 years old. I'm not too sure about what was going on up there, but I know he was just doing general labor. Some of my first memories are of that house, though, down in Meaderville. Because my mother would make her own soap. And it would be the lye soap. She'd make her own soap and make her own bread all the time too.

And so when I was a little kid - some of my first memories are of making bread. She'd be making loaves and she'd roll out some bread. And she'd put some jelly on it and she'd put a little sugar and cinnamon. And we'd roll it up and bake that there and that was a special treat. So when I was a little kid at home with her, we'd be making bread. She'd be making soap. She always canned things. She canned peaches and pears. All kinds of vegetables were canned. My aunt Mary had one of the most wonderful gardens down in Meaderville. She just had a real plush garden with all kinds of stuff. And the plum tree, I remember as a kid.

So growing food down there in Meaderville seemed to work pretty well. Maybe it was like a little microclimate over there. They all had the gardens all worked very well. Maybe they were far away enough from the smelters and that. Although, originally Meaderville, when you'd go down towards Guido's grocery, right behind there on Silver Bow Creek, that's where some of the first smelters were. And they were just those open burners down in Meaderville.

And one of the things about researching it, we always think about Meaderville, going down, coming across Main Street and going down Leatherwood. Well, that didn't become Leatherwood till 1939. Heading down that first part was called Smelter. And then this upper part was called The Atlantic. And then it all became Leatherwood. A lot of interesting things I found by going down and researching a lot of those things that we didn't remember.

Jaap: So do you want to talk about school then? So you went to Longfellow?

Plessas: Yeah. So I went to Longfellow. Backtrack one thing, though. Every year, we always went back down to Meaderville for Thanksgiving or Christmas, but we always went down to the Meaderville fire department because they'd have their display up and they would always have their party for the kids. So we all went down there and Santa Claus would come. That worked out good. So it was kind of back and forth for special things. But when I left Meaderville, we ended up in Longfellow and that was way out in the country. We had about three or four houses on our block. And it was just mostly open country.

We lived only two blocks away from Longfellow School. So we had lots of roaming area. Riding our bikes. We had really "neighborhoods" because we probably had 20 or 30 kids within the two block area. So there was always somebody to play with. When I first got down there, one of the kids

who was a couple years older than me, came over, taught me how to play baseball. So right away, I had no idea what that was when I was hanging around down in Meaderville. But we got the big open fields and we were doing baseball.

And one of the things that I remember about Longfellow a lot was my parents. . . Money was scarce and that. So they didn't buy me a small bike. They bought me a really big tall bike. So I had to grow into it. So I had to put wooden blocks on it so that I could reach the pedal. And then some of the kids had the small bikes. So we headed down the road and they would be a block or two down the road before I could catch up with them. We didn't have gears on our bikes at all. So I'm trying to get that thing going. By the time we'd get to Joe's grocery store, which was two blocks away, I would almost be caught up with them.

Once we get going there. So we'd go to Joe's grocery store and we did a lot of sandlot baseball. We'd just pick up games and that. And we'd play baseball and go over to the grocery store. And one of the favorite things we'd always do was - pop was 10 cents and Russian pie was 15 cents. So if you had a quarter, you could get your pop and your pie. Everybody would kind of hang out there. You'd get the pop and pie and talk to each other and visit. And just a lot of running around all the time.

It just seemed like we were outside most of the time, even in cold weather. We had the skating rink over there. We'd have the people bringing the Christmas tree. So we'd be burning the Christmas trees to stay warm. And so it was just a whole ton of outside stuff.

I'm trying to remember really about the Longfellow area. And it wasn't as colorful as the story of Meaderville. But it was families coming in there and then all of a sudden the houses started coming in. And we started losing a lot of the openness. But in the same instance, we ended up having a whole bunch more friends. Parents didn't worry about the kids running around. We were always told, you hear that 9:00 whistle, you'd better be around somewhere. But still, we would be running and we'd go to one kid's house or the other. And we played Pinnacle or that till midnight, one o'clock or something like that. And the parents weren't worried because it was a neighborhood. And one parent or the other is always watching over after the kids anyway. So it worked out really good that way. So I guess I don't have too much to say about the Longfellow area. I thought I did.

Jaap: Did you go to Butte High School?

Plessas: Yeah. I went to Longfellow and then I went there. And I went to East Middle School. Well, it was called East Junior High. I was just thinking about that the other day. I don't like to stand around and wait in lines or anything. And I was just thinking about that because when we would go to East, we would go and the bus would come right up behind our house. But instead of waiting for the bus, we'd start walking up towards where the bus would come. So sometimes we would walk up four blocks one way - up on Kennedy Street and we'd go up on Dewey. And we'd probably walk about five blocks and we would catch the bus. So you were walking into the bus. Instead of standing around waiting for the bus. We'd always walk to the bus or we'd walk from Longfellow over to junior high or ride our bikes over to the junior high. We have people that are two blocks away from the Whittier school and they're driving their kids to school. So we didn't have that much of a worry.

My dad was a police officer, and when radar cars came out, he was one of the guys on the first radar car. And so he did the radar and picking up the speeders. So I wasn't always that most popular of a guy in high school because my dad usually gave all kinds of people tickets.

And I was thinking about this the other day. Some of those guys that got tickets really made some money on it. And I don't know why we all fell into this, but somebody would come by and they'd have a speeding ticket. So everybody in rounds would be giving them a quarter or 50 cents to help pay that 25-dollar ticket. I bet some of those guys made 50, 60 bucks on that speeding ticket. But I'd get this, "Your dad and Mosher gave us a speeding ticket."

So they had the radar cars. I think the first one was like around a 55 or 56 Ford. Then they got one that was called the Edsel. And the Edsel, my dad hated that car because more people got away from them. Because the Edsel didn't get up to speed very fast. It took a long time to get up to speed. So a lot of people, they'd be speeding and they'd turn some corners and they're gone. So they weren't too happy with the Edsel. They didn't have the quick acceleration. It was great for high end, you know. But it's sort of like my bike, it took me forever to pump it and catch up with everybody. So that's what happened with that.

Jaap: With the Edsel.

Plessas: So I went to Butte High. I went to junior high for, I guess it was three years, seventh, eighth and ninth grade. And then up to Butte High. And I took mostly the science type of classes because I had this feeling...I didn't have a feeling. My mother told me. She really ran the whole show. She told me that I was smart and I was going to become an engineer. I had no idea what an engineer was. But all I knew was that I had no choice. I was going to college. So she instilled that in me. And so I did go to college. And after a couple of years at Tech, not studying very well, I decided maybe engineering wasn't the route for me. And so I just continued doing some. And all of a sudden I said, you know, someday I've got to get out of here.

I went to the University of Montana. I figured I got to do something. So I ended up looking at all the classes and I was pretty close to a math degree, but I had to take German, you know, a language. And I thought, boy I had a heck of a time in German. Although one of my best friends, Bob Facincani, was my German teacher. So I looked around and thought, Well, I can get through it, if I just take a couple education courses. So I did that with no intention of teaching. But, what happened was, I went out there and did the student teaching, I just fell in love with doing it.

Backtracking on that there - When I went to University in Montana, when I left Butte, we had the strike of 67. I think it was. And so I had been working for the Anaconda Company while going to go into Tech. And when I originally started it wasn't Tech, it was the School of Mines. So I'd work the weekends and I'd work all vacations. So basically, I worked my way through college. At Tech I'd get off on Friday and I'd be down at 4 o'clock down to the Anaconda company. So I'd work for Friday afternoon and Saturday afternoon shift. So I'd get the two afternoon shifts working there. And then if there's any other days off, I'd get those days to work then. And then once the summer started, I'd work full time. And I remember Danny Metosi said, "Don't worry, Don, we've got a lawyer over in Billings and we're not going to be on strike very long. He's going to have us back to work on Monday." And this is like on Friday. So I was like, "That's pretty good. Don't have to worry about it." Well, about two years later, we were still out of work. What happened was they started hiring people back at the time I was doing my student teaching.

And so I was doing my student teaching and I had to go up to the hiring office. And Jim Carden was one of the nicest men you'd ever wanted to know. And I said to Jim, "I'm doing student teaching. Can you hold off on hiring me back?" He says, "Yeah, Don, I can do that. You just keep coming in here on Fridays." So each Friday, my name would come up to the top of the list. And it was about four weeks of that before I could finish my student teaching. And Jim would sign the thing and put me back one more week. And then when I finished student teaching, I went back and

he got me hired back. And I went to work at the pit. And at that point, I had worked my way up to be an oiler on a shovel.

And I really wanted to go into computers and I wanted to teach. Both things. And what happened was there was a job that opened up at Safeway on a computer. So I worked for maybe a month or so at the Anaconda Company and then ended up going to Safeway. Worked on the computers. And then I wanted to teach. One of the things my mother taught me is, if you want a job, you got to go and go after it. So every Wednesday, I would sit, just before 1:00 or around 12:45. I would sit up at the school district office on the bench waiting for Charlie Davis to come back through. He was superintendent. Each week he'd come through and I'd say, "Any job yet, Charlie?" And I can't remember, I think it was like on a Wednesday that I did it. So he knew I was a fixture. That went on for about four or five weeks. And the week before school started, he comes through and says, "Don, I got two jobs. Come on in here." So I went in there and I had a choice between West Junior High that was just opening up and the Blaine School. And so that's how I got the job over at West. And ended up teaching at West for three years and then went to Butte High. Leonard Dellari who was one of my teachers decided he was going to retire. And I took over. He had one computer class, a Fortran class, at that time. And besides knowing that I wanted to teach later, I really loved computers. So both of it worked out. So I did the computer program for the school district, starting about back around ’73 or ‘74. Something like that.

Jaap: We were talking about that. You changed the computer labs. I mean there were really nice articles about you. Was it East having one of the nicest computer labs?

Plessas: Well, we kind of got the computer program going in Butte. Originally the computer program started out with the kids learning how to use the punch cards. And then all of a sudden we have these newfangled things. They were these portable ones. They looked like they were a heavy suitcase. They were terminals that we could hook onto a phone. And we'd shove the phone into them. And so we had a couple at first. And then eventually at Butte High, we ended up getting some money to do a computer lab.

And I think we had like 15 terminals at that point. About that time, we were trying to get the junior high and the other schools going. So I got some people. And actually the first time I did this was like 1981. And they decided that they needed to kind of coordinate this. So I became the computer coordinator. So I would teach a couple of classes at the high school. Then I'd go out to the junior high. And I got some people at each of the schools involved. Originally, I went out to the Hillcrest and I got Sharon Bond involved. She was at the Hillcrest at that time. And each school I'd get somebody that was going to be the torchbearer for the school to get going.

And micros are starting to come in at this time, too. So we were working with Laszlo up at the Montana Power Company, and he got us involved with quite a few of the business people. So we put on some programs for the business people at luncheons and that. And we got various businesses to each donate like five hundred dollars apiece. So they were buying a computer for each of the schools - the elementary schools and junior high. So a lot of it was the PTO's or the PTA's and the business people that were buying the school equipment. Later, the school district found that it was important enough that they would buy into this too.

But at first, not everybody was all that excited about these computers or why we needed this. So we kept working there. And then Sharon Bond moved to the junior high and got the lab at the Junior High going. And I had the high school lab going. And the computer coordinator job only lasted for a year because they funded it for that long. And then I was back in the classroom. And so I had already established enough people in contact. And even though I wasn't going out and visiting, we'd all stay in contact. And we were doing this new thing called telecommunications.

And our first thing on telecommunications was we took a RadioShack computer at the high school; and we took McKinley, a pet computer; and we had an Apple. (I can't remember where the Apple was. It was at another school). And we had this idea that you couldn't shove the disk of one into the others to share stuff, but you possibly could send it over telephone lines. You could send information back and forth to them. Or you could send it to another computer, which we called "bulletin boards", to do that. So it was a lot of trial and error and all kinds of exciting things because you're on the cutting edge technology.

We had no idea about anything. We didn't have Internet or anything. So we started doing those communications and then we got a few bulletin boards up. And I put a bulletin board up at the high school. I had it up in the early 1990s. And how it worked was the people at the high school would get an account and they could put their messages out there and send messages out to other people. And then the junior high was hooked into it and other schools hooked into it. And one example of how it worked really good was Dave Lubick had the Russian class. And they used to have pen pals. And it would take four weeks to get over to Russia. And about four weeks to get back.

Well, this still wasn't Internet at this time. Although we heard about the Internet. We heard these people in Canada had this thing called the Internet. It sounded pretty neat. But anyway, we were using our bulletin board. What happened was the bulletin board of Butte High (and all the bulletin board was that a computer had dedicated, that it would receive the information and it just would save the information), in the middle of the night, it would call over to Dillon. And there was a guy named Frank O'Dessa that was teaching us how to do this.

And his computer would call one in North Dakota and the one in North Dakota would call one that went either overseas or to Pennsylvania and then went overseas and bounced over to Russia. So in the middle of the night, all these computers are sending out the messages and they're also getting the messages that are coming back. So Dave's Russian class would compose some messages to their pen pals in Russia and it would go overnight to Russia. They would read it the following day. OK, then they'd probably compose it. So it was like about a three day or four day versus eight weeks. It was all of a sudden, this is wow. This is pretty neat stuff.

So that's the kind of thing we did for a few years there. And we got some labs going. And it wasn't until 1997 that Jim Michelotti invited Sharon and I to come up to Tech because he had this new thing called Internet. He wanted to teach us about the Internet. And he had this new browser called Mozilla. No, it was a precursor to that. I can't remember the name of it. It was a new browser. We went up there and we learned what's a browser and what's this and what's that? So I went up there and did that and we both got that and started to run with that because he got us an account and then we were able to get an account from a company here in Butte called Butte Net. And that was in the NCAT building.

And so this is like 1997. And so we started building labs at that point and getting a lot more people involved in building labs. And in 1999, we were trying to get them going. And I started doing this new thing called wireless. And it was kind of funny because I listened to party line because somebody said Dennis Nettle was gonna have Conrad Burns on there. And Conrad was always about telecommunication, talking about stuff. Somebody told me I should listen to this today. So I did. And I listened to it. And Dennis Nettle says to Conrad, he says, "What's this crazy idea that Don Plessas has about doing wireless?" And it was crazy in 1999. Nobody really believed about wireless. And Conrad says, "Well, you know, there's a lot of dirt between light poles. Makes a lot of sense to me."

So you know, you look back and you laugh at stuff like that. But people fought all these ideas. We're going to wire everything through the holes, you know. And so we started putting some wireless nodes down in different parts of the high school. Although, they weren't as efficient as a hardwired. But, you know, it turned out to be the future what was going to happen. So we went through a lot of different phases. When you look back, you think how primitive that was and where are we now compared to that. So I left the teaching in 2001. And at that point, I had gone from teaching Fortran with cards to BASIC to Pascal.

Then we got into the applications such as WordPerfect and some various databases. And then we got into a lot of the Microsoft stuff. We had to switch over to Word. Originally, at the Apple labs, but I had to change those into PC labs because kids that I was training were gonna go out and work in companies like the Montana Power Company, and various companies that were all doing PCs. So we had to switch the labs to the PCs. So later we had big battles in high school. Some wanted Apple, some wanted PCs, and they weren't really that compatible. So we had battles of that. Nowadays, you don't even think about it because everything just kind of communicates. Even though, there's some hitches here and there, it's pretty easy to have things communicate. In those days, they didn't communicate that well. But that's kind of the story.

Jaap: So the work you were doing with computers here, was that going on around the state as well? Or were you the only one? Was Butte at the forefront of that? Or, was this movement going on all across the state of getting these computer labs?

Plessas: What happened was, probably about '76, '77, when they had the first Apples. I saw one of the first Apples coming out. I was teaching the computers. And the school district was allowing me to go to a computer conference like once a year. So I'd go over to Missoula to the computer conference, and we would see what was coming out with computers. Basically, what was happening was computers, dependent on financing, some of the small school districts and small schools were doing some real neat stuff because they had somebody backing them. And so we had some backing. I think after going and seeing an Apple and the RadioShack. I actually saw one of the first ones, it was called a Lisa. And that was one of Apple's kind of failures, because it was their business machine that they had out probably in '79 or '80. And it used the mouse. And that was new. The original Apples, Apple 2's didn't have a mouse. They didn't have a mouse until they had the GS system. And so they narrowed that down and turned it into the Macintosh, which, all of a sudden, people could afford. That Lisa was like a $10,000 system and it just didn't fly.

So back to your question, Butte did a lot on the forefront because we were able to go to a few of the conferences. I took, in 1982, 52 people up to Great Falls to a computer conference up there, for a three-day conference. That was the biggest thing. I went in and pleaded my case to Bill Milligan. And Bill listened to me on that and he allowed me to get all these people from every different school - so many from the junior high, so many from the high school, and in different disciplines, and the elementary schools. And we took them up and they had three days of computer training. All of a sudden their eyes were opened to what was possible back in 1982.

So everybody came back and they did their own presentation to the various parent organizations to buy computers. So that's when computers, the micros, started getting into all the schools. Some schools had a lot more than others because their association went out and did more fundraising. And there's all kinds. Most of our stuff there was all fundraising. And money has always been tight for the school district no matter what. So that was the way we did it. And as much as you could say we were on the forefront, we were because we got to go to these conferences. Somebody would tell us, "Okay, I was able to make this Apple talk to the Commodore over the phone lines. That's what gave me the idea. And I'm going to do that, too." And so I started trying that there. And I'd have contacts with these computer people throughout the state. So we'd be sharing information about what we

were trying to do. And we had some college people doing it. Franco down in Dillon was great. He was helping us with everything. And so was Thompson down in Dillon. Jim Michelotti up at Montana Tech. Lou Lucky, he was from Montana State University. And then he went up to Northern. And they were all forefront people that worked with us to help get the computer education down to the kids.

So actually, by the time I left the high school, we finally had some Internet. But, you know, some of the things we did, we were doing at 300 baud. 300 baud is 300 bits per second. And I was so happy when we got ourselves up to 56k as far as speed. And when I had 56k up there - We had some neat projects that we jumped into. And one of the projects, we would be downloading information from some college like Dartmouth or something. And we had a link to it that we were able to download things for our kids. We had a few kids that would be taking a course from them. So in the morning I'd get there and I push the button to let it download and that would be around 7 o'clock. And by 8 o'clock it downloaded maybe a megabyte or two megabytes' worth of information. Now it's barbaric what you had to do. And then you're downloading and all of a sudden it crashes on you and you started over again.

One of the kids that I had, he's retired now, Dave Burt, he was one of my first computer kids. And he was able to figure out how to crash our computer in about three or four keystrokes. And then he went and got a job for the county and he went up and helped patch up the holes in the county system because they were renting time from Tech. But he was also able to break into things. So when he went to college over at Montana State University, he got a job during the summer with Honeywell to crash their computers or break into their computers so they could put patches on it. So once he finished college, Bell Labs wanted him. And Dave was one of the guys that started working. He worked in Denver. Then they sent him to Italy and they sent him to Japan. Because those were the three places they were having satellite uplinks to send computer information for Bell Labs that started out what we're doing now. So they send information up, bounced it off the satellite to Italy, also to Japan. So that was the original connections of what was going on. And Dave was one of the lucky guys to do that.

And we had a few of our original kids that ended up going to Microsoft right away, too. So some of them had a pretty good jump in computers because we've had it for quite a few years.

Jaap: That's fascinating.

Plessas: It was a neat project. I forgot. I've actually got here at the archives. I've brought up two volumes of the whole computer history. These are the notes, the school board notes and all that. There's two great big notebooks that are here at the archives that had all the meetings and all the PTA things that we were trying to do with. So I figured someday it might be a history of computers. Basically, what I was telling you here.

Jaap: So did you have a hard time getting buy-in for that? Did you have people think that computers aren't going to go anywhere?

Plessas: I had people, I had teachers saying, "I'm going to retire before I have to use one of those computers." And I had quite a few that decided to do that. It was kind of funny at breakfast this morning, because there's a couple guys that still don't want to do computers. And one of the guys says, "Hey, you have to get online to renew your driver's license." And he says, "What?! I don't want to use a computer." So they were really bothered. And the other guy says, "No, maybe you can still go out there." But one guy says, "No, you can't go out there. They won't take you. You got to go online." So, you know, we still have people that have that feeling.

Jaap: Yeah. There are still people that don't do computers. They don't touch them.

Plessas: I had quite a few that just did not want to do it. When I was teaching at the high school, I also taught for Western Montana College. I would teach night courses, mostly computer literacy back in the early 80s. And I'd get whole classrooms full of teachers. And that's basically how I met Sharon Bond. She brought me down to earth because what I did, I was teaching this BASIC class, in BASIC programing language. And with my kids in high school, I always said, "OK, we're going to use this here and we're going to figure out how you can plug in and solve the quadratic equation." So I started that class at night and I had about 30 teachers and most of them were elementary teachers. So I just set up the quadratic equation and we're going to do this here. And there's a hand going up in the back. "Excuse me. Excuse me!" I look and Sharon goes, "Can you tell me how to make the computer just say spell "cat."" Okay. Now I know where we're at. So, it dropped me down from the high school level real quickly, to "We got to get it for everything."

I was also involved in 1987 or '88, in a project called Impact. And what they did was take a high school teacher from all the different schools around the state. They took 30 of us and we had a six-week training session that we worked together over in Bozeman. Our whole goal was to use the computers where they are best used. Because at that time they were used for, well, basically, they used them for everything. A lot of times you could use a blackboard, or a whiteboard, or you could use a workbook. But they were using them for everything. So we were trying to find a way to use computers where the computer can do things that other things can't. So we were learning some of the software that was just coming out in the Sunburst Corporation.

They had this really great software that made people think and you could interact with it. And there was one called Safari Search and so forth. It was really great for elementary. So we started getting programs that would help you on the computer in a way that you couldn't do it other ways. And so that was the whole focus of that project. And we had 30 teachers from around the state and we communicated together during the summer. And then we'd come over and we'd put on presentations to each other's school districts. Because a lot of people will not listen to somebody that they know every day. So a lot of the stuff that I wanted to show them, I'd bring somebody out from Great Falls or from Hamilton or whatever. They come in, put on a presentation. My fellow teachers would be all excited and they'd go and do it. But if I put on the same presentation, you know, you're never an expert in your own situation. So we worked out that Impact project. We would coordinate that. And I went out and I'd go to Anaconda and go to different places and put on a presentation. And they would listen to you a lot more than they would listen to the person right next to them that knew the same stuff. But, you know, you get the outside.

And so we worked together for a few years on that. We did another summer over in Missoula. And so that was another effort that they were trying to get computers to do what they're best at rather than trying to get them to do everything. Because the whole thing is, you know, if the only thing you have is a hammer, everything starts looking like a nail. So that's what we had on the computers. They're sitting there doing a workbook. You could have just as easily done a workbook, but if you did a program that was interacting with you and asking questions back and forth, you'd get a lot further. And they would bring in some real good experts.

Thomas O'Brien showed us a different way of thinking rather than just straight out of the box. We had a lot of people that made you feel not very smart because they give you a bunch of questions like "What's the capital of Zimbabwe? And what's this and what's that?" And you're thinking, "I don't know. I must not be that smart." But then if they give you questions that just ask you to describe some things like your thoughts about San Francisco. Well, even if you haven't been there, you might think about the trolley cars, the smell, the Chinatown, the baseball teams, football teams, the Golden Gate Bridge. You got all this knowledge that you do have and you don't feel so, you

know, because it's so it's you start to think in a different way of teaching so that you associate things rather than one to one correspondence of memorization. That's the way they develop their software. To do that, which made the best use for the computers. That's a long ways from Meaderville, isn't it?

Jaap: So did you retire from teaching in 2002?

Plessas: I retired in 2001 from teaching. And when I retired, the last classes I was doing was web design. And after that I had my own real estate office. So I did that, too. So 2001, I retired from teaching. 2009 is when I ended up finding I had lymphoma. And so I had to go through treatments. And so I basically put my real estate license where you still have it, but it's inactive. I keep it just in case I want to go back some day. And we started going out and traveling south and smelling the roses and stop running down basements and doing that kind of stuff. Doing fun and coming up in the archives. And that gave me the time to start doing some research for like Katie's story and things like that.

Jaap: Yeah.

Plessas: Because Katie's story, all that was, is she filled up a couple notebooks. Originally, I gave her a tape recorder. She said, "I want to tell you about Meaderville." And I gave her a tape recorder. She kept goofing up with the tape recorder and said, "I can't do this." So she just filled up a couple notebooks. And then I was trying to figure it out. She says, "Okay. Somebody lived here. And next to me was here. And across the street was here." And how am I going to find this? And so Jim Michelotti told me to take a look at the map down at Guido's. So I went down there at Guido's bar, but it didn't have everything that she was talking about because that was made in 1948. So I came up to the archives and one of your magic people took me back and showed me the Sanborn maps. So I got those Sanborn maps. I stood up on the table and took pictures of the Sanborn map. And then I used Photoshop and put in all the names with that. Then along the line Jim Michelotti came by and he says, "We got those orange cards."

Jaap: Yeah, we kind of got those done at the perfect time.

Plessas: So you had the orange card. So I would just list out the street and you'd bring me the whole stack of, you know, like illustrator, whatever. And I would go through and I'd take the pictures of the houses. And so I had the houses. And then all I had to do is, I put the houses next to the story that I had from my mother and I had the maps to associate with. And I said, "Okay, I got this for my kids, Jim." I actually just sent him the file over an email. And he comes up to meet me. (Jim's always organized.) I'm the guy that goes out and runs in all directions and tries to figure out and do a lot of stuff. And I always like to bring things back to Jim. So he comes back and he has this three ring binder. All he did is he took what I had, punched holes, stuck in the binary system. Said, "You almost got a book here." So then I had to make sure I got after and did all the correcting.

And a couple of neat things I had to do is I had to check a few names like let's see, Dolf Puny. As a kid his name was Farmer and nobody seemed to know that. I to go check. I went to see Pete Zanke. And he said, "I don't remember." But he says, "Go see Lucille Martinesso." Lucille Martinesso. So Lucille was over it the at the Crest. So I go in there and I asked. No, the other one, she was at Copper Ridge. And so I go in there, asked for Lucille Martin. The people said, "I don't think we have that person." I said, "Jeez, I'm sorry. How about Lucille Sheehan?" "Yeah." So I'm walking down the hall and I see Lucille. I says, "You know, I almost didn't find you because I said I asked him for Lucille Martinesso. She says, "Donny, nobody called me that for over 70 years." So we sat down and I went over and asked through the questions and she said, "Oh, yes. As a kid, he was

always named Farmer as a kid. So I had to verify a whole bunch of things. So it was kind of fun catching up with her and Pete Zanke and a few people.

As soon as I had the preliminary book, I gave them a copy of it so that they could have it. They're not here now, but at least they had a chance to see what they contributed to it.

Jaap: That's fascinating. Now, did your mom tell you stories a lot then? Because the things she remembers in this book are fascinating.

Plessas: The things she remembers in the book she just wrote down in two or three notebooks. It's all over the place, you know, and I was trying to get it organized especially for my kids**.** And one of the things, there was a band room where the [inaudible] Montana under Sam Trolia used to practice. Couldn't find that on that 48 map. And I tried to find people that remembered where the band room was. They'd say, "It's somewhere behind Guido's, across the bridge" or whatever. But when I came back here, Fred Sanborn. I found that. And then I found a picture of the assessors. It's pretty shabby but it's an old barn-type shape where that was.

So you've got a wealth of information up here. I was hoping to get somebody to do Finn Town, you know. And the problem with trying to do it is I did all of it basically myself. But you really need somebody that can do the Photoshop, can take the pictures and put them on Photoshop and then get somebody else to get the pictures and get a decent picture and crop them.

Jaap: I think you should do that.

Plessas: No, no, I don't. I never was raised in Finn Town. So I don't know very much about it. But, you know, after I finish here, I'll give you a couple of their names that are associated with Finn Town. You might want to interview them; they'll tell you some. So we were talking about some of the bars up there, like, you know, and Johnny and the Hot Shots and different ones that played up there. So I'll get you lined up close. I had breakfast with a couple guys. I told them I'm coming up here and that. And they said they'd be willing to come up and talk. It's amazing. Our memory is a lot better now of what happened 60 years ago than it was what happened two days ago. And, you know, our memories are getting better. My memory keeps improving because I'm starting to remember things that never happened.

Jaap: Yeah. So did you, with your family, do your Italian traditions? Did you carry that on?

Plessas: Well, my family always ended up having spaghetti as a mainstay of the meals. The only thing we did in Greeks is we did have some friends. The name was Colson that lived down on Dewey. Gus Colson. They would make the Greek cookies every year. So we'd go over there and get the Greek cookies. We'd get the baklava and then we get the little cookies that had the powdered sugar. Every Christmas we'd go over and visit with them. And they would have all these Greek cookies, which was really fantastic. So hardly any Greek traditions. But I grew up on...Now it's kind of a modern fad, food or whatever. Polenta. I mean, polenta was part of our staple. You know, we had polenta all the time. My kids had polenta because it was inexpensive and we had a lot of spaghetti. And sauces of that. One of the interesting things I found out about polenta, though, is my friend Herb Venner, his grandmother was Italian also, and he hated polenta. But they were in a different part of Italy.

My grandparents all came from northern Italy. And it's interesting. They always say they're from northern Italy. They're not from southern Italy. I found my grandmother's information for citizenship. She's got it down, "northern Italy." They let it be known. And so some of them, I think, mostly probably the southern. They'd make the polenta with cornmeal. And then they would make a

sauce and they would have cod. You'd have fish. And they pour that over there. And I don't know anybody that I know here that really liked it. Where my family, they would make up a hamburger mix sort of like, and so it'd be a hamburger mixed with tomato sauce and that, like you'd find in spaghetti. And then we always had to ruin it. I didn't call ruin. I thought it was perfect. We get the hot polenta cut out and some chunks. And what melted the easiest was Velveeta.

So you put some chunks of Velveeta in there and then you cover it with the really good sauce that had the hamburger in there all mixed up. You know, it's a tomato sauce over the top of it. It all kind of melted together. We loved it. And then the extra polenta that we had on the following day, we put it into a pan or, you know, a little glass pan and leave it get hard. Then we'd slice it and we take it out the following day and put some butter into a pan. And then we would heat it up with the butter on both sides and take it up. And then you put syrup over the top of that. So that was really, really good.

Jaap: I should have told you to bring samples.

Plessas: Pretty much our tradition with my kids - they always got to go down to grandma's house and eat. And she'd take two of them a weekend for the weekend. So she would spoil them. And we never had a meal down there that you didn't have some spaghetti. The other thing that we had a lot of was some cheeses, some sliced cheeses and some salami. When I went to Italy. I thought that was a fantastic meal. Just get a piece of bread, some cheese and some salami and what else, I like, and a little wine. I mean, perfect. So that was pretty much it. We didn't have a lot of different ones that you see, you know, of the various stuffed...I go to the Italian restaurants and what the heck are these here? We just didn't know that at all. We just knew the basics.

And one of the guys here, Don David, gave me a picture not too long ago. And I think you just had it in the archives about his family down there that had the macaroni factory. And one of the pictures I'm pretty sure that we gave you at the archive has all of the whole family that had the Macaroni family, which was the David family. And David, actually, they were Italian. You wouldn't with the last name David. Don related to me what happened.

His grandfather came over and his name was David Dominic. And when he got to Ellis Island, the guy at Ellis Island says, "Okay, you're Don David." He said, "Good enough for me." He wanted to get in. He wasn't going to argue. And the Dominic came from because they were on the border of Italy and France. And just like Shaunsperg's were on the border of Italy and Germany, although they're Italian, they got the Shaunsperg name. So a lot of the border ones you couldn't tell. I thought, you know, David, this is more of a Jewish name. And so I asked him, "How do you get that name?" "Well, it's a long story, but I'll tell you."

Jaap: In Meaderville, when people were moved out of there, how was that?

Plessas: Pretty sad. All of a sudden, everybody's torn apart because even though you didn't think about it, it was like one really big family. Everybody knew everybody. And actually still the ladies of Meaderville, there's not many of them left. They still have their luncheon. So that bond. It was really sad watching all the houses go down. And we went down and seen the house that we had and it was disappearing. And all these people were getting moved to different sections. So, you know, my aunt ended up over on Wharton Street and they didn't have anybody from Meaderville there. A few people were up in the McGlone Heights. So there were a few that stayed there.

My uncle had two or three people on either side of him that were all from Meaderville. So that worked out pretty good for those few. But, you know, we're talking, I looked back in 1893, I found this little record that had the top populations, cities in Montana and Meaderville was number 10.

And I think Walkerville was like number eight. And we're talking a population in Montana in 1893. There is there's more people, Meaderville than some of the ones you expect to be on the list in Bozeman, Billings and so forth. They didn't have the population back then. It was by the chamber commerce. I posted that every so often. It's interesting that they had such a large population down there. There was a lot of people down there still in the 50s. And we left in '52 and I think a lot of people left by the late 50s. And then the ones who were just barely hanging on left in '62 or so.

It was a great place. It had a great main street. I always remember the main street had all kinds of stores and bars. My mother said our town had everything and it had its own post office. It had its own churches. Any kind of stores that you wanted. She said it was a community all by itself, basically.

Jaap: You didn't need to leave.

Plessas: Didn't have to leave. You had everything. And some of the guys would go and get you [what you wanted], like Bob [inaudible]. They would just go get you the Italian products that you want in contrast to a grocery store. They would do that. And you got Scoffian's that had the bakery and they had the best breadsticks ever. And there were people that came out of there like Lydia. That's a real Meaderville tradition. There was a book called *Glittering Hill* that I was reading. And *Glittering Hill* was always talking about the people in Butte would go down and have their meals down there. And most of the women down there, they cooked the meals in their houses and people from uptown would come down and get served the meals in the houses. That's how a lot of them survived. They didn't really have a restaurant. People from uptown would know about the various ones. They'd make arrangements. And so they'd bring people down and they go and eat in the people's homes.

Jaap: Oh interesting.

Plessas: I always thought everything was restaurants down there. You had restaurants a little later, you know, back in the 40s they started getting bigger restaurants. But earlier and even still, even at that time, there were dozens of people that had...They were fantastic cooks. And people would come down on the weekends or whatever and evenings. And that's how the people of Meaderville survived.

Jaap: So did your mom, did she work for Teddy Treparish?

Plessas: My mom did. Yeah. What happened is after that she ended up working uptown at the Crystal Creamery. Right over here. I have a picture of her and the employees of the Crystal Creamery sitting outside there. And then she also worked at the Moxon and at the Finlen. Because that's where she and my dad met at the Finlen. So she did a lot of different jobs. Her and her sister Mary both worked in restaurants as waitresses because Mary was working in the Finlen, too. I have pictures of them. They were hard workers.

Jaap: Clark, do you have any questions that you wanted to ask Don?

Clark Grant: In your research, what, if any, evidence have you found of resistance to the displacement?

Plessas: They knew they couldn't do very much because even the house we had in Meaderville. When we left Meaderville, we sold it to somebody. But all you could do is sell the house because the house was not on our own land. The land was owned by the Anaconda company. So there was no resistance. You know, they didn't like it and they really didn't have political clout.

Jaap: That was hard for Meaderville because when the company bought them out, they didn't give as much money because they didn't own the surface land.

Plessas: And what they would do is, some of the people that wanted to hold out, they would be knocking down the buildings all around them. And then they'd have all these mysterious fires. So I know the mysterious fires. When I was working at the pit, they would come and get a certain guy when he would leave. A few hours later and we're at the pit, we're close enough to hear the sirens. We'd hear sirens in there and there'd be a fire in Meaderville.

Jaap: Oh really? Was it always the same person?

Plessas: Yeah. Mm hmm. I won't put that on tape who he was.

Grant: I was going to say, I shouldn't ask who he was.

Plessas: He's a real big man. Let's put it that way. Yeah. I'll tell you afterwards.

Jaap: Was it a well-known thing? Did everyone know?

Plessas: Oh yeah. As soon as he's leaving most of us at the pit. See I was a college student then still. "Okay. There's gonna be another fire tonight."

Grant: So the company's tactics were...

Plessas: The company's tactics were different. They were known to be, you know...Let's put it at that. I think that almost anything would go because they really wanted to do this, you know. Basically, they wanted to take that and come right over and move Butte. That was the tactic for moving uptown Butte too. They had the plan for moving Butte out to the flats. And so we had all these [fires]. I can't say that the ones uptown were. But the ones in Meaderville, from what we knew, it was a darn good coincidence every time he'd leave, we'd have the fire. So you'd have a lot of the buildings down on like Main Street and different parts of Meaderville...a lot of the fires turned out to be abandoned places. But you know, the ones that are holding out, there's only them and a whole bunch of abandoned places. And all these places start going up in fire. Makes you a little nervous there, too.

So, yeah. They would not have gone if they weren't forced out of there. Same with the other parts of Butte, I'm sure. You know with the Eastside, they had the same kind of tactics. That's the way it was, you were just kind of a pawn in this. That's why so many of them and of us, anyway, grew up, you know, feeling that the only protection you had was the unions. The unions had their problems too. They had a lot of corruption. But boy, standing by yourself, you were hopeless.

Jaap: What are your feelings about the Gardens when they burned down? Do you think that all that was?

Plessas: Oh, yeah. I'm sure everybody knows that. That was so sad because they were moving it. They were gonna get rid of it. And why did they have to destroy it? Because now they had plans of getting all that stuff and moving it to another part of Butte. We lost the Gardens. They were taking it over. But it was just like a kick in the teeth or something because it was already gone. Everything was stored. Everything was shut down. And you still have to burn it down. And it just lit. Hindsight is great. Maybe if everybody got together and, you know, I don't know, I guess you couldn't have taken them on, but you had all of those horses and everything else that were just stored. And why?

Why did they have to do that? And I don't know. Maybe they didn't do it. Maybe it was an act of God. But I don't think God did that.

Jaap: Yeah, very suspicious.

Plessas: I'm not going to blame him for that one.

Jaap: It is heartbreaking. I was looking. I'd never really looked in the newspapers just chronologically before that event. But someone had asked some researchers or something. But you see the community as soon as they announced it's going to be closing. You see this huge rush of picnics there. And everyone, I don't know if they were thinking, like, if we start using it more now, they'll save it. And it was just very sad.

Plessas: It didn't work. Yeah. I had a couple of young kids at that time. My two oldest ones were large enough for us to bring down there. And we wandered through the Gardens. The Gardens were just an oasis. It was just a wonderful place. Some of the things that we played on in the Gardens was probably, nowadays, it would be too darn dangerous. We had some really, really tall slides. And those real tall slides, I don't know how tall they were, but they were really tall. And you get on them, you'd burned your butt going down those suckers. I mean, they were hot. They were hot as can be.

But we played on them and then we had some things - these various ring-type of things. You'd go around on that and get flipped off of that. It's amazing that we all survived those. But it was fun, you know. And the cowboy horses and it's used to scare me watching little kids walking by those cowboy horses because if you ever got hit. And we always had to crack the bars on the cowboy horses. And I'm glad to see the cowboy horses are out of Clark's park. They are still used. And they are still using the rings. I can't remember what they call the ring. It's kind of like an umbrella.

Jaap: I always called it a witch's hat.

Plessas: Something like that. And, you know, it was tucked away in a nice little area. And you had the water going through, the stream going through there. And the pavilion was always a place for where all the proms were and all the dances, so forth. It's sad that it all disappeared.

And actually right now you're trying to take a look and figure out where things were. I'm glad Richard Gibson has pointed out a whole bunch of places. I have no idea where in the heck, you know, where's the Leonard Mine? And he's pointing it out, “OK, on this corner of the inside of the pit right about there."

Because I worked at the pit when I was going to college. And Meaderville was still there and they were still dumping, you know, around there. Actually, when I was going to college, you could still go down to Meaderville. It was the Pioneer Club, but I think they turned it into the Brass Rail about that time because it was just about closing. And Sam's Club was next to it. And they had like a couple bars. And the reason people went down there, the kids went down there because they could get served in Meaderville. And so it wasn't that you'd always get served. You were just so far out of the way and not many people were going back down there. And it was kind of sickening. You'd go through there and you’d remember how robust it was.

Jaap: Oh, that would be hard.

Grant: Was it sickening to that effect when you were working in the pit? Were you hesitant to oil the shovels?

Plessas: No, actually, it wasn't even close to that area of where Meaderville was when I was doing the shovels. To be truthful, maybe, it was '65 or, no, '69 when I came back to the shovel. I might have been close to where Meaderville was, but I never even thought about it at that time. It was just kind of passed because everybody's gone. I don't know when everybody left. Probably around ‘62, ‘63 or less was the last remnants about. I think that's when the last of the city directory said anything on Meaderville. So that was when I was still in high school. So that was kind of wiped out. Although, we were down to Meaderville, when I was like at Montana Tech. At least I thought we did go down. I thought I was there. We went down to like the Pioneer Bar and that would have been about '64, '65. Nobody was living there. But I think the bar was still there about that time.

I'd probably have more harsh feelings if I was living there at the time and got displaced. But I was down in Longfellow. All of my family had already given up and my uncle went to the McGlone Heights. My other uncle went down to Wharton Street. Most of the other relatives were already moved out, too. Sad. But, you know, that was just kind of the eating away process. I always remember going down to Meaderville as a kid. We'd go across Park Street and go by Luigi's. Luigi's used to be right on the corner and you'd round the corner. Come down, go down through Meaderville.

And actually, one of my very first dreams was about Meaderville. We were moving from my uncle's house to our house in north Meaderville. And there was two ways to go there. One was going right through, down by Guido's grocery and up Main and over north. And the other was going round, which was called the old Helena highway. And they had a bridge right there on the old Helena highway. And what happened on the bridge was, I don't know why, but I dreamed about it because we were taking lots of trips from the one house to the other moving. And so I had this dream that the bridge was there. And one half of the bridge had fallen off. It was only one lane. And then my dad drove the car, went right over it. And I said, "How did you do that, Dad?" And he says, "Because I have air in my tires." So I've had weird dreams since I was a little kid.

My dad also made the mistake of when I was about five. I think we went to the gas station and he was filling a can of gas. And I seen that coming out and it looked like water. I said, "It looks just like water." And he didn't pay much attention. He didn't show me that it was really red in color. So about a week or two later, we're down at Henry Castenado's. And Henry is a mechanic down there. And he's working, trying to get my dad's car going again and he can't. And Henry and my dad are just like, "I don't know what's going on with this car." And my dad had brought me down because it was only a few blocks away. And I said, "Dad let me get the hose. I'll get you some more gas." Then they knew what was wrong. That I had put water into it. I'd tried to help him by giving them water in the gas. My dad for the rest of his life always had a locking gas cap.

Grant: After hearing about your work in computer technology, your mother's observations seemed correct, right? That you would be an engineer.

Plessas: I'm not really that organized, but I'm enthusiastic. Some of my engineer friends, and you go into the garage and everything is all in boxes and everything's all labeled. And I go in my garage and I go, "OK, it's in here" and I pull it out of the pile here. But I'm very enthusiastic. And I like to do interesting things and dig into new things. And that's what excited me about doing the computers. You're always on the new stuff and that. And you go out and find out about the new stuff and bring it back and show it to other people.

And that was the fun part about teaching. I always had this theory about teaching - any kid can take a simple subject and make it so it's not understandable. But it takes a real talent to take something

really complex and break it down to make it understandable. And that's the thing about being a teacher. If you can do that, then, you know.

I had one teacher at University of Montana and he had people that were going to be math teachers, people that were gonna be something else. And some people were gonna be elementary teachers and he'd go over something. And he'd say, "Did everybody understand it?" And some would and some not. "So let's look at it this way." And then. Nope. "Well, let's look at it this way." And he'd break it down two or three different ways because he started off being an elementary teacher. Later, he was a high school teacher and then he was a college teacher. So he knew how to break things down into different levels to make it understandable. His name was John Peterson. And I really learned a lot from him. He was also my computer teacher over there, too.

And so with that in mind, I always thought that the object of being a teacher is to be able to take something complex and break it down so everybody can understand it.

Grant: Did you have students that had a remarkable aptitude for technology? Did you identify that early?

Plessas: I learned real quickly. Every year I would get some whizz kids. And so I was teaching different things. One of the things I was teaching, like bubble sorts and so forth and that's not an efficient sort, but it's a good way of teaching the kids how to do it. And so I would get these kids...There wasn't any sense spending very much time with them because they're ready to fly. So I'd give them a project and they'd go out and figure out how to do something and they'd come back and teach me. And so I didn't spend all those hours learning how to do it myself.

You know, for trial and error, they would come back and teach me. And so that's how I could keep incorporating all these new things. So I'd get the whizz kids and just put them on to something and. "OK, why don't you try and do this here? Let's take this Wijngaarden's code now. And I want you to write a program that you can input stuff into the Wijngaarden code." And they'd come back in a couple of days and they'd have that all solved out there. And then "Show me how you did it. Okay." Now, I got these new techniques. Even when we left the programming languages and we started doing various graphics and so forth, I'd get them to go out. Originally, we had WordPerfect and they had a graphic program. WordPerfect wasn't really easy to use compared to the Mac graphics and that. And so I'd send them off and say, "I'd like to know how to do this. Can you take this?"

I remember one group of kids that we had, we had Chad Okrush. And years later, I went back and took classes from Chad. And I put him on some various things about using some instruments. We had the overhead projector and we could project colors up there. And we had these sensors that we could get a reading on what the color was. And we had this idea about trying to write up a program that we could identify colors so that we could identify colors for people that were color blind. So they were working on that. And then they came back and proved to me that it wasn't going to work. At least, with the colors that you have with the overhead projector. There's a difference between, and I didn't know it at that time, but we learned about there's a difference between light colors and the actual colors that you see and the colors projected out of light.

What they did was they put down an orange and it said orange. And they put on a green and it said green. They put on a purple. This is purple. Then they put an orange and the green together, something like that. And it came out and looked almost the same as purple. And it came out and gave us something completely different. It gave us a false reading. So when you had two cover films together, even though it looks the same up there, it wasn't the same.

So we always put kids on those kinds of projects. And that's how I really got into doing a lot of stuff. Web design, put a couple of kids out there. OK, let's try this there and then they come back. And then we're doing some Java programing. OK. How do you do this here? OK. I always used the really quick ones.

Back when we were trying to hook the computers together by this telecommunication stuff. We had three or four kids that were on those projects. And a lot of those kids, Laszlo Testmeier was such an ideal person for the power company. Three or four times a year he'd take me out to lunch. And we'd talk about some kids that were doing really great. And then I'd send those kids up to interview with him and he'd give them jobs for the summer. And Mark Pelogi is still working in the power company. And we had all kinds of people that went up there. I'm trying to think of her first name, Orvis, and she went up there and she ended up going off to work for Microsoft. But they would get jobs at the power company.

And he'd always get them jobs in the computer department. So they would take them one step further and then he would help them with their money to go to college. So we had a lot of help from different people that were really interested. Laszlo was the guy that really kind of got the computer committee going. That's what really got a lot of the stuff with the business people and everybody else together is we had the computer committee. In those binders and that you'll see all kinds of computer committee meetings and what they were trying to do.

Back in 1981, we ended up getting our own academic computer. There was a computer at the high school, it was for business. And a lot of times there was something that had to be done, so we got shut off completely. So what do we do? We have study hall for two or three days. That's a killer when you're trying to teach people on it, to learn. So we convinced them that we needed our own separate computer. And so we ended up getting the VAX and that VAX was kind of the most modern thing around at that time in about 1981, something like that. And so we had like 30 some odd terminals hooked onto it and we had terminals in East and West also hooked on onto the VAX computer. But that came about because of those people on the computer committee. We had Laszlo and then he had some of the top computer people within the power company, from the Anaconda company, and different businesses around town all on that committee and the school board would listen to them. I forgot. But that was kind of the background of getting things done.

Grant: Do you sell this book right here in Archives?

Plessas: Yes. Right here in theAarchives. Yeah, it's fun. Yeah. Learned a lot by researching that book. And I've continued it with a group called Meaderville Stories. Actually, it is Meaderville and McQueen stories because it's a Facebook group. So I wanted to try and keep the conversation going. And people keep adding pictures it. I'll show you it on the phone here, if you want to. But I have a page called Meaderville Stories, Meaderville and McQueen stories. Which when I find something like from the archives, I'll shove it onto Copper City and also there. And the page is controlled by me, but I really didn't want that. And I didn't know whether to do a page or a group. And if I had to do it over, I would have started just with a group and let the group alone and forget the page. But we do have a group called Meaderville Stories and a lot of people are contributing to that all the time. They're finding family photos and giving a little bit about the history. So it's going on.

Jaap: That's really cool. Don, I don't know if I have any more questions for you.

Plessas: OK, thank you very much. This was fun.

Grant: You don't make your own wine, do you?

Plessas: No, I tried it one time. What happened with making my own wine? I went and got some grape juice. I really faked out my friends because at that time you couldn't get the bottles. So I had a friend that was with me on the math project and back in around 1970. And he had access to the bottles that the Anaconda Company had over in one of their labs in Anaconda. One said on the outside, "Hydrochloric Acid" and the other said, "Sulfuric Acid." And the other one said, "Hydrogen Peroxide."

OK. So I had those three jugs. So I made one of banana wine, and a couple of a grape juice. And then I had my friends come down and I was getting the wine to come out. It was time to come out. And I was bottling the wine in Purex bottles. Old brown, Purex bottles. They were really bummed out about that. They're tasting the wine and they say, "This doesn't..." We were in my basement and the guy next door, he ended up crawling across out of the basement and crawling because he lived right next door. He crawled over the top of the fence and went home. The other guy drove his truck home and his dad woke him up the next afternoon and said, "What's your truck doing in the middle of the street?" So it was wine.

I was gonna do all this wine stuff. I almost got back into doing it after visiting with Jim Metosi a couple of years ago. I think Jim Wile is gonna do it.

Jaap: Jim is gonna do wine?

Plessas: He and I spent that day with Jimmy Metosi. And Jimmy is running the still. We learned right away about the still. That the very first bottle. He took the first jar. Threw it out. Otherwise it's like a wood alcohol and it can kill you.

Grant: Yeah. Toss that Mason jar.

Plessas: Yeah, get rid of it. And I was telling the guys this morning actually. One of the guys said somebody had made some and made a bad batch and a couple of guys died from it. From the grapple. We always called it grapple. And the actual term is "Grappa." Yeah. I didn't realize that till I went to Italy. What the hell? I'm looking for grapple.

Jaap: No, you always hear "grapple." Yeah, around here you always hear "grapple."

Plessas: As my mother said, you know, they have different dialects in Italy. And she went back and took her mother to Italy. Try and understand the relatives. None of them have a Meaderville dialect.

[END OF RECORDING]