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**JOE LEE**

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## Oral History Transcript of Joe Lee

*Interviewer: Clark Grant*

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**Joe Lee:** Full name. Joseph, J-O-S-E-P-H. Middle initial, E. Last name, Lee L-E-E.

**Clark Grant:** Great. OK. Looks good. All right. So, you know, a couple of topics I do want to touch on - Hibernians and your involvement there and the history of that organization. And then if I'm not mistaken, you were involved with a presentation on grocery stores here, right? I'd like to touch on that.

**Lee:** Jim Michelotti and I did that one.

**Grant:** And is that ongoing?

**Lee:** They asked to come back some time next couple of months to do an evening one. The morning that we had that one, it was an overflow. It was a great turnout.

**Grant:** I couldn't find a seat.

**Lee:** A lot of people left. They had to leave because there wasn't enough room in there. A lot of people were standing. So yeah, it was a great turnout. We were happy with it.

**Grant:** Okay. Well, I'd like to go over those things and then, of course, wherever else the conversation goes. It's pretty informal, you know, so there's no set answer or anything like that at topics. Okay. Okay. Well, yeah. Thank you again for coming up to the archives today. I'm here with Joe Lee and I know you from the Carpenters Union Hall, being involved with the Hibernians. So I do want to talk about that. But normally we start by asking people what they know about their grandparents. And so you can start either on your mother's side or your father's side. What do you know about them?

**Lee:** Okay, On my father's side. My dad was Robert Lee. Robert E. Lee. Actually, I believe he was named after Robert Emmet, the Irish Patriot that was executed. I think back in the early 1800's. So my dad's name was Robert Emmet Lee and Emmett, E-M-M-E-T, same as Robert Emmet. I'm Joseph Emmett. But I'm with two T's in my name. So that was my dad. His father was Hugh, H-U-G-H. Hugh Lee. Born in Ireland about 1862. I'm not sure when he came to the United States or who even came with, when he came to the United States. Hugh worked in Leadville, Colorado. He also worked in Cripple Creek, Colorado, doing mining work for a number of years, came to Butte about 1908, 1910, worked at the BlackRock mine. He died in 1920 from silicosis or tuberculosis, from working in the mines. My dad's mother was Rose Lee. She was born in Lawrence, Massachusetts.

And I'm not sure how she met my grandfather, Hugh. Possibly met in Colorado, but uncertain as of that. I don't know a lot about Hugh as far as where he was born in Ireland, trying to do some

research, but haven't come up with very much. Grandma Rose, like I said, she was born in Lawrence, Massachusetts. I don't really know that much about her either, you know, and there was quite a difference in the age. I think Hugh was about 16 years older than my grandmother. So my grandmother died in 1916. He died, like I mentioned, in 1920.

On my mother's side of the family. I don't know a lot. My mother's maiden name was Wedlake, W-E-D-L-A-K-E. Her mother's maiden name was O'Donald. And I also understand that they were in the Leadville, Colorado area also during the mining back in the early 1920s. I had a great grandmother, lived in Meaderville. Her name was Bessie Wedlake. Her husband, Charles Wedlake. Don't know much about them. I recall as a young boy visiting their home in Meaderville, and if I'm not mistaken, their home was located right next to O'Sello's gas station. Back then, I think it was on Main Street. The only thing I really recall about the house itself is that it had a big wraparound porch and a player piano, which us as young kids enjoyed using the player piano. George and Bessie Wedlake. I believe he was a miner also. I don't know that much. They were notary publics down in Meaderville at that time.

So that was my great grandmother's. Their son George would be my mother's father, George Wedlake. He also worked in the mines and he worked for the Montana Power for a number of years. Grandma Helen, which would be my mother's mother. She was a homemaker. Never worked, as far as I know. She died in 1958. And I think my grandpa George probably died sometime in the 60s or 70s, but I don't quite recall. But that's about all I know.

My dad's side of the family. My dad was about the fourth youngest of nine children. Three children died shortly after birth. I haven't been able to do a lot of research, exactly, when they passed away. My dad worked at the Leonard mine down in Meaderville. He was a shift boss. He had a brother Hugh worked in the mines. He had a brother, George started working in the mines when he's about 14 or 15 years of age. He worked in the mines for over 50 years, retired from the High Ore mine. He worked on the pumps for a lot of years. They had a half brother, Tom. I didn't really know Tom because he only visited Butte a couple of times. He lived in Minneapolis. And then my dad had five sisters and a lot of them when they were younger, as my dad, they worked out at Hansen meat packing place out on Hansen Road.

My dad, in 1946, when he was working as a shift boss at the Leonard mine, there was a strike in April. He walked out with the miners. When the strike ended, which was a nine or ten day old strike, a very short strike, but a violent strike. Had a lot of troubles during that strike. There were a number of homes in Butte that were actually thrashed by some of the . . . it sounded like a lot of women and younger kids at that time that were going around, thrashing the houses. My research, I couldn't find where there were any miners actually involved in thrashing the houses. After my dad was blackballed by the Anaconda Company, he and the other shift bosses, my dad went to Ketchikan, Alaska for a short time, worked in a sawmill there. He and another guy named Bill Holloway. Bill died a tragic death in Ketchikan. My dad came back to Butte due to the fact that one of my younger brothers was quite ill. So he had to return to Butte. When he came back to Butte, he opened up a grocery store down on 2nd Street, 1140 East 2nd Street, called Bob's Market. Dad worked there for 30 years, seven days a week, seven days a week, probably 10 or more hours a day. So it was pretty confining, store business.

**Grant:** How many of those folks, Hugh, among them are buried in Butte?

**Lee:** My relatives? Most of them are. My mother's side of the family. They're all buried in Butte. My dad's side of the family, all but a sister, buried in California and his half brother Tom, buried in California. Other than that, they're all interred here in Butte.

**Grant:** Can you tell me a bit more about your impressions of Meaderville as a child?

**Lee:** You know, I don't recall Meaderville all that much because they're quite young. Well, I shouldn't say quite young. Because I do recall in high school maybe being a freshman or sophomore in high school. High school proms, we would go down to Meaderville for dinner. I remember taking your date down to the Arrow Club, down in Meaderville. You could probably get a chicken dinner, spaghetti, raviolis, all the trimmings for about five dollars. So I do remember that. I don't really remember Meaderville all that well. I think it was about 1962 when the Anaconda Company contracted out to FNS. And that's when they went in there, started doing a lot of digging to move the homes out of Meaderville, started back in 1962. It was the same year that I graduated from Boys' Central.

**Grant:** Oh, I see. Okay. And when were you born Joe?

**Lee:** I was born in 1943. September 7th, 1943. You want a little history of myself?

**Grant:** Yeah. I would definitely like to get there. I'm curious, though, if your father or any of his brothers were in the military, did they go to war?

**Lee:** Uh, my dad's half brother, Tom. He was in the war. I know he was wounded in the war, but I don't have a lot of information on Tom, because he lived in Minneapolis. I did hear that at one time that he was a press agent for the Minnesota Twins. And I only met him once or twice when he visited Butte. So I don't really have a lot of information on brother Tom. He would have been the oldest in the family. And then, of course, my dad's brother, George, and Hugh, they worked in the Butte mines as my dad did.

**Grant:** And do you have fond memories of them growing up?

**Lee:** Yeah, I do. Uh, George was quite a guy, like you mentioned, he started mining, had his own mine. I think it was something like the Purple Pig. Believe it or not. And the only reason I know that I was talking to an individual that ran the post office up in Meaderville and he had a number of pictures on the wall up there, my dad and my Uncle George. They were with the volunteer fire department in Walkerville. And he mentioned to me about my Uncle Pigger, said that he had a mine called the Purple Pig. And I know he mined, probably when he was about 15 years of age, all the way up to the time he retired. So he put over 50 or 60 years in the Butte mines. Like I mentioned, retired at the High Ore. He worked on the pumps for a lot of years. And I talk to younger people now. And they know George, they remember. His name was Pigger. They called him Pigger. That was his nickname. Everybody had a nickname. My dad's nickname was Gub. My uncle Hugh, he died from cancer probably when I was in my teenage years. So I don't have a

lot of history. I know that he moved to Wallace, Idaho, and he worked for a mining company as a certified public accountant in Idaho for a number of years.

**Grant:** Did he have a nickname?

**Lee:** See, I don't recall. I don't recall any nickname for Hugh at all. But they all worked back in those days, you know. They lived up in Walkerville, way up on Cora Terrace, 23 Cora Terrace, which is close to the Granite Mountain mine. Of course, all that area has been reclaimed up there now. And the brothers and sisters, they all worked somewhere at one time because their father died at a fairly young age and nine children in the family. So they all had to find a job somewhere working. Like I mentioned, a lot of them worked out at Hansen Packing company. That's where my dad learned his butcher trade.

**Grant:** That he later used at the grocery store.

**Lee:** I did a lot of research on grocery stores over the years, and there were as many as 300 small grocery stores back in the late 1920s, 1930s. Where my dad had his grocery store at the corner of 2nd and Emma. There were three small grocery stores on that intersection, one ran by a lady, Charlotte Johnson, and another ran by a lady named Agnes Leisen. And prior to Agnes Leisen getting into the grocery store, the grocery store was an Eclipse store, which was a chain store here in Butte at one time. There were maybe half a dozen Eclipse stores. And they closed long before my dad ever closed his store. And I think the reason my dad's store stayed open as long as it did was because he had a meat block there. People used to come in and trade with him. A lot of miners that he worked with, even though they didn't live in the neighborhood, they'd come in to trade with him. A lot of them for groceries and a lot of them for the meat, because there were a lot of good meat products.

**Grant:** Did you ever go out to Hansen?

**Lee:** Yep, many, many times. I'd go out there Saturday mornings with my dad when I was in grade school and high school. It was a major meatpacking company. It was huge. I recall the big racks of hams and bacons on the big rotisseries. And the rotisserie was probably 20 feet. I remember looking down at it as the hams and the bacons would be coming back up. It was huge. And, of course, you go back, Dad would pick up on Saturday mornings. He might pick up some baloney or hotdogs or whatever. They used to have the big round hot dogs. And I remember the people working there would always make sure that I had a hot dog before I left. It was a major concern in those days.

**Grant:** Now, did they serve just Butte or all the way to like Deer Lodge?

**Lee:** It was kind of a regional meat-packing company. I don't know the extent of area wise, but they covered a large area, I'm sure.

**Grant:** And so tell me a little bit about the store. What was the atmosphere like when you walked in?

**Lee:** It was a busy place. Dad would start out in the morning, probably get up about 6:00, 6:30, have a very small breakfast. Again, it is 1949 or 1951 Hudson that I recall. He'd hit the produce houses, Butte Produce. [Inaudible] Robertson pick up fresh produce every morning. Go out to Hansen Packing and pick up the boloney hams or whatever to get for the meat block. And after Hansen's Packing closed, he'd go out to Shoemakers, which was located west of Butte and buy Stocks' Meat. He'd go out there also and pick up a lot of his meat goods. Return to the store and, you know, get ready for the day. Count out the currency, check his books from the day before. I don't think he was a very good bookkeeper, but like I mentioned before, he was never audited by the IRS. So I guess he did okay.

But yeah, he would get ready for the day. Then while he's getting ready for the day, some of the salesmen would start coming through, the bread people, you know, Eddie's bread, Town Talk bread, Dutch Girl bread. They had about three or four different creameries here in Butte. There was Meadowgold, Miner's Dairy, Community. And there may be one or two other ones. They'd be coming in as he was getting prepared for the day. Then on Tuesdays was really a busy day because that's when the big order that he'd have to come in from Associated Grocers out of Helena. The big semi would pull up usually about 11:00 or close to noon. It would block the entire street on Second Street. So it made it very difficult traffic wise for the other vehicles trying to get through. Unload the groceries, which would take probably, oh, maybe half hour, 45 minutes. Everything, a lot of your regular canned goods. Grocery items, frozen goods, what not. All that stuff would be stacked in front of the store until you could finally go ahead and stock your shelves. Put it down in the basement, which was called the sump. You move the goods down there.

But you always had to work around it all day long until those groceries are finally on the shelves or down in the basement. And then you had customers coming in during the day while you're trying to get the groceries on the shelves. So it made for a pretty hectic day. During the wintertime, very cold in the store. It only had one overhead, gas heater. It had two doors, a front door and a back door. So whenever those doors opened, you lost all the heat in the store. Dad would usually wear long underwear. Wear a flannel shirt, wear his white apron. Sometimes you'd have to put a jacket on or a sweater on to keep warm in the store. So pretty trying times back then. Sometime in about 1958, I don't know how he found time to do this, but he got involved in politics. He became a city alderman. There were eight wards in Butte at that time. Dad was the alderman for the Fifth Ward. They redistricted at a point and the 5th Ward became the 3rd Ward, if I'm not mistaken. But the council, they'd meet on Wednesday, Wednesday nights. I can't recall how many times during the month they met, but there were a couple other store owners in Butte that also got involved in politics. Tom Powers was one, ran a big grocery store on East Park Street.

Later he became mayor of Butte. Vern Griffin also ran one of the Eclipse stores on Harrison Avenue. He later became mayor of Butte. Nick Siadovich ran Cobban Market on the corner of Cobban and Harrison Avenue. He was a city alderman also. So I'm not sure where they all found the time to do it. As I say, the store took pretty much all their life.

**Grant:** And you said your dad did it for 30 years.

**Lee:** He did it for 30 years. And like I say, he never had a day off in 30 years. I can tell somebody that and they may not believe me, but it's the truth. We, as kids, never had a vacation with our family. One year, an individual named Roy Pankey, he was a miner with my dad, he took myself and my three brothers out to Potosi Hot springs in Pony, Montana, for a week. And that's only vacation that I recall that we had as a kid. And I think about that quite often and how thankful we are to Mr. and Mrs. Pankey for taking four kids up to Potosi together with their two children. And it was the time of our life. We really enjoyed it.

**Grant:** That's the one vacation.

**Lee:** It was the one vacation. Yeah. And a wonderful vacation, I'll never forget it.

**Grant:** Sounds like you worked in the store then.

**Lee:** I did. I worked in the store when I was in high school. I went to Boys' Central. I'd walk home from school and probably get down to the store at maybe 3:30, quarter to 4:00. Then I'd stay there until closing time. And delivered groceries. A lot of neighbors would call in. Older people, clients in the neighborhood, so we would deliver the groceries on foot to the neighbors. Dad had a couple people that lived up in the Columbia Gardens, actually. They traded with them. And my Uncle Pigger, of course, lived up on Cora Terrace up in Walkerville and every once in a while we'd make a delivery up there in the car. Of course. But I know in the wintertime making deliveries on foot in the neighborhood and it was quite cold. That's when you had temps at 30 or 40 below zero.

**Grant:** Not like it is now.

**Lee:** No, no. We got a lot milder temperatures now. Winters and what we used to have. My dad also had a sister that worked at the store with him. Her name was Helen. She was married to an individual named Ed Austin. Ed worked on the pit. He was a diamond driller down in the pit. He was one of the first people to work in the pit in 1955. Helen would work sometimes, come up in the afternoon and work, and work all day Saturday. Saturday was your busiest day of the store week. People were buying groceries for the week. And back then you could buy groceries for the family for 30, 40 dollars for a week. A lot different than what they are now. The price of food anymore is sky high.

But I still remember some of the prices of the food, you know, quart of milk for 21 cents, a loaf of bread for 21 cents. So we had a good clientele in the neighborhood. Then, like I mentioned, a lot of people came from Columbia Gardens and other areas of town, just mainly to buy the meat from the meat block there. During the summertime, he had a different clientele. The hobos from up on the railroad tracks. So they would come down with their knapsacks and come into the store and Dad would slice off a few slices of baloney for them, wrap it up, give them a loaf of bread. They'd get a few potatoes and I know they'd go into their pocket and get out some change, 25 cents, whatever. Dad never accepted any money from them. He always gave them whatever they needed. They'd leave the store. They'd go to what we called the Diggin's, which was just south of the Great Northern Railroad, and it was an old mine area. The reason they called it the Diggin's is because the old mine diggings up there, tailings up there. And that's where they would camp



out. They'd camp out for a couple days until another freight train came and then they'd be on their way. But they never harmed anybody, never bothered anybody, I recall. And nobody had locked their doors, you know, and they would go around. They'd go round to see if they could do any yard work.

And I'm not sure too many people actually had them doing any yard work. I don't recall. But never bothered anybody. It was a good time back then. We had three mine dumps. We had three mine dumps right there in the area of our neighborhood. And as kids, we would ride our bicycles up and down the mine dumps. In wintertime, we'd sleigh ride up and down the mine. There were still a couple of shafts, but the shafts only went down maybe 15 feet back then. And we used to go down inside the shafts a little bit. But nobody ever got hurt. There was no real danger involved with it.

**Grant:** You said it was around 62 or so that the pit really began to displace people in Meaderville. What can you tell me about that time? What do you recall?

**Lee:** You know, I don't really recall that much about it. I just know it happened in 62. I did a little reading on it. I know FNS was contracted with the Anaconda Company when they started moving the houses and that out of there. But I really don't recall that much. I had an individual that lived next to us. We lived on Ferrell Street when we were growing up. 1128 Ferrell, which was one block south of my dad's store. So we were only a block from the store, which made it very convenient. When my dad first opened up the store, we lived out on Gilman Street, which is quite a distance from the store. So we bought a house. I'm not sure. I'd say probably about the late 1940s, 1950s, we moved up to that area.

There was an individual that lived next to us. His name was Earl Casagrande. He's the one that plays Santa Claus or played Santa Claus in Butte for a lot of years. I think he just retired here this last year. He was a fireman here in Butte, but he also delivered papers. I think it might have been on Tuesday evenings. I'm not quite sure. The Seattle P.I. paper. He had a green panel truck. He would go out to Meaderville and deliver papers. We'd hop in the back of the truck and help him. And we were quite young at that time, grade school kids. I remember going to Meaderville delivering newspapers with him, but I don't recall though I don't have a good recollection of Meaderville other than going to maybe the Arrow Club. Like I mentioned before, dinner after prom and grandma's house, which like I say I think it was on Main Street in Meaderville. But other than that, I don't have a lot of good recollection about Meaderville at all.

**Grant:** Was it talked about as the pit began to expand in town?

**Lee:** It was. You know, when my dad had the grocery store there, being a city alderman. There were other individuals that would come into the store. It was kind of a nerve center, the store was for the neighborhood. A lot of people come in and they'd like to B.S. with my dad, talk a little bit about politics, talk about the Anaconda Company. Of course, my dad had no love for the Anaconda Company being that he was blackballed by the Anaconda Company in 1946. 1946 strike. So a lot of the old miners came in. They'd talk quite a little bit about the pit and what was going on with the expansion. Yeah. Quite a little bit. And they talked a lot about politics. Also,

you know, talk a little bit about the red threat of communism back then. There were just a lot of things going on back then.

**Grant:** Did your dad have a political platform that you recall?

**Lee:** He was a Democrat, of course. There were sixteen aldermen in 1958, when dad became an alderman. Sixteen aldermen represented eight wards, two aldermen per ward. There were 15 Democrats and one Republican. And the Republican's name was Lindquist. He was from the west side of Butte. Real nice gentleman. I used to go to a lot of the council meetings on Wednesdays and I'd go to a lot of the council meetings and I'd sit there. They didn't get a lot of people at the council meetings unless somebody had something going on or something coming before the council to be acted upon. But I enjoyed the council meetings, and I think that's one reason I kind of got involved in politics after I retired from being a police officer. But yeah, it was a good time back then.

But no, I don't recall that much about the pit. I recall them talking about it a little bit. And how far were they gonna go with the pit, stuff like that. Of course, there was talk at one time too, that they were gonna take the whole uptown area. You know, of course, that never came to fruition. Thank God.

**Grant:** What about Central as a boy? Was that kind of at the height of Central's enrollment?

**Lee:** Yeah, I don't recall exactly how many people. My memory isn't that good. I'm not very good for numbers. How many people we had or students at that time, but probably around 100. We were separated from girls. We had Boys' Central on Idaho Street and Girls' Central, which is across the street, north of us. And the only time we really had any association with the girls was at a dance after basketball or football games, so. Never knew a lot of girls back then. And it seems, though, if you dated a girl from Central and you broke up with her, that was the end of the dating with any other girls at Central. You kind of got blackballed from them. You definitely would not date a girl from Butte High School.

**Grant:** Why not?

**Lee:** There again, it was kind of taboo. It was just something you didn't do. My wife, she went to Butte High School. Of course, I met my wife later when I was going up to the School of Mines. And there were a couple individuals back then that I recall, a couple of the athletes that did go with girls from Butte High School, and they were few in number.

**Grant:** And how do you feel about the education you received there?

**Lee:** It was good. It was good. We had a great education. The brothers were excellent. When I went to Central at that time, the classes were divided up. You took a test to enter Central, an IQ test and aptitude test. And they'd grade the tests and put you in classes according to how well you performed on the tests. So when you're a freshman, they had a 1A, 1B and 1C class. Okay. I recall I was in the one C class. Okay. So I didn't take any higher math or anything like that. When I was a sophomore, I was in the 2B. Junior and senior year I was in the 3B, 4B classes. I

didn't take any chemistry or trigonometry, anything like that, you know, I took the biology classes. Algebra. That was about it as far as the math goes. It was a very good education. Brothers were very dedicated, very dedicated. A lot of discipline in the class. I mean, you could walk in Boys' Central any time of day or night. You could hear a pin drop in there, when classes were going on. You never spoke between classes. You walked down the halls and everything was very quiet. It's a lot different than what I see now when I go to high school and different places. Yeah, very disciplined curriculum back then. I guess I want to say.

**Grant:** Do you think that was a good thing?

**Lee:** Yeah, it was. The brothers also had what they called a leather strap. And if for some reason, you got out of the line, they'd take the strap out. You'd go up in front of the class. You put your hands out and they'd hit you with the strap on the palm of your hands. Every once while it got a little bit high and got up on the wrists and it'd break a blood vessel which happened a couple of times. But, yeah, I got the strap a number of times. I do recall that and I don't recall too many that didn't get it for one reason or another. It might be talking or chewing gum or whatever. It was a good education and I don't regret it for one minute. I think we should have more of it.

**Grant:** More straps.

**Lee:** Yeah, well, maybe not necessarily more straps, but a little more discipline than what I see now.

**Grant:** Do you recall why you got the strap?

**Lee:** Probably for talking in class. Or maybe if you didn't have your homework in on time. I do recall one time taking an English class down on the first floor, the basement area. It was springtime and it got a little hot and another student and myself, I went to open up one of the windows and we were taking class in the mechanical drawing classroom and the frame of the window broke completely off. It was all rotted, came down. And Brother Roland, I was doing English class. Brother Roland was our instructor at that time. So after that, every day we'd have to go up in front of the class and get two hits with the strap till the end of the school year. It was an accident, but, you know, that's the way it was back then.

**Grant:** And your dad, did he have thoughts when you came home with red hands?

**Lee:** You never said anything to your parents that you got the strap. You never said a word to your parents. If they heard that you misbehaved in school or whatever, they'd further discipline.

**Grant:** They'd give you another round.

**Lee:** My dad was an individual that did use a strap. He used his belt when we were kids. Yeah. He did not spare the belt. If we got out of line, we were a little mischievous. We were pretty close in age. With the three brothers and myself, there was only probably a year between one and the other down there. And when we lived out on Gilman Street, my dad was running the grocery store and we were quite young. I was probably six and my brother Bob was five and Billy was four and Tom was three. We could get ourselves into a little mischief. And when Dad came

home and my mother would tell him, the kids did this or that. As soon as he reached for the belt, we took off running under the bed. The last one under the bed was the one that got the leather, got the strap. So being the oldest, I was usually the first one under the bed, but I'd make some yelps as if I was being hit with the strap. So yeah, he did not spare the belt and it didn't hurt anyone. I looked back at it now. It was not a bad thing. I don't feel it was a bad thing.

**Grant:** My mom used to use the fly swatter.

**Lee:** I had an aunt that used a wooden spoon and I had another aunt that used a broom. So, yeah, they had different methods of keeping us in line, I guess.

**Grant:** So as a high schooler, I'm curious if you were to, you know, walk from school to the house, what kind of retail was in between those and what was going on uptown at that time?

**Lee:** Uptown was quite busy back in those years. As a young kid, I remember in grade school coming uptown with my mom. A lot of times she made me visit the Uptown maybe once a week, or once every couple weeks. She'd call a taxi or we'd take the city bus. City bus was only a dime, ten cents at that time. Sometimes she'd take a city cab which was 50 cents to take to the uptown area. Uptown was overflowing. I know the [inaudible] front of Woolworth's and whatnot on Park Street, you could not walk on the sidewalk. You had to walk out on the street, the curb area. It was that many people in the uptown area. And a lot of the kids after school were there waiting for the busses, of course, you know, so. It was a busy time back then. A lot of retail, as you mentioned.

I remember three or four furniture stores. I remember Shiner's Furniture Store, Rosenberg's. And there was one up on North Main, Fineburg's was uptown. There's a lot of furniture stores. Everything was going real well back then. The miners, I don't know what they were making as far as wages. Contract miners were probably doing pretty well back then. I had one uncle who was a contract miner. He was one of the top contract miners on the hill. And I don't know what mine he worked in, but life was going good back then. Everybody was working. A lot of employment. A lot of wives didn't work back then. They stayed home, took care of the family.

**Grant:** And now how does it make you feel to walk around the uptown now?

**Lee:** Yeah, it's a little sad to look back. I see a lot of the vacant buildings right now. You know, I can recall the Chili King was right down from where Metals Bank is right now. It's right around the corner, called the Chili King. Small place, maybe less than 10 people could sit at the counter there. Go and have a bowl of chili for probably fifteen cents or whatever. But, you know, there were taxi companies back then. You had City Taxi. You had the Owl Cab. You had Central Taxi. The Rialto Theater. That was a hub bug back then, right on the corner of Park and Main. There was a little confectionery next to the Rialto theater.

There was a jewelry store right on the corner. Couple of bars going east of the Rialto. But, you know, as kids, every Saturday we'd go to the Rialto, Montana, or the Fox theater for 20 cents. Two bits, you know, two bits, 25 cents, right? Kids don't know what two bits are anymore. Right. But, you know, go to the matinees and that. I grew up in a good time. Let's put it that way.

Anybody who grew up during the time that I grew up, we grew up in a good time in Butte. You'd go to the theater, sometimes you wouldn't get out until late at night. And you'd walk home. You'd walk home from the uptown. Go through the railroad yard. Never had any fear or threat of any type. The parents didn't have any real main concern about your safety. That's how Butte was back then. Everybody looked out for one another in the neighborhood also. So if you got in trouble in the neighborhood or whatever, the neighbor would take care of you or discipline you or they'd call your parents to let you know what you did wrong. They watched over you. Kind of kept all of us in line. That's for sure.

**Grant:** You said you went to the School of Mines, was that right after high school?

**Lee:** I did. I went to the School of Mines. Actually, I played football for the School of Mines my freshman year. I never played grade school or high school football because I was working all the time at my dad's store. But I did play football. And just as a sidelight, 1962, our football team. It was the first time in nine years that the School of Mines won a football game. It was the longest losing streak of any small college in the nation at that time. Ed Seminich was our coach. He was an all-American at Notre Dame. And Gene Lowney and Eddie McCarthy were the other and Tom Less or even Don Peoples at one time was an assistant coach up there. Our team just recently got inducted into the Montana Tech Hall of Fame. And Mike Yawba, a good friend of mine, we went to a great school, high school, college together. Both of us were in Vietnam pretty much about the same time. Mike was in the Marine Corps. I was in the Army.

But Mike called me one day, said, "I don't know if you've read the paper yet, but you might read the sports page and see where our team is being inducted in the Hall of Fame." Which was really a surprise to think, "Well, why would we be inducted in the Hall of Fame? We only won one game." And the reason was, I guess at that time, they were talking about discontinuing the football program up there after losing for nine straight years. And after we won the game, that's what kept the program going. They had second thoughts about discontinuing football at Tech. So that was the main reason that our team was inducted into the Hall of Fame. So kind of proud of that.

**Grant:** Yeah. Congratulations.

**Lee:** I was small. I weighed less than 130 pounds. We beat Northern at Naranche Stadium. That's when they had the sawdust dirt field down there. Beat Northern 33 to 7. I probably got in the game maybe the last three or four minutes of the game. I was the last one to get in the game. The coach hollered down. He said, "Hey Lee, get in there." I ran up to him, said, "Where do you want me, Coach?" He put me in as middle linebacker. 130 pounds. So if nothing else, I got to play. It's the only game I played in while I was at Montana Tech. I played when I was a sophomore up there and never got in the game. Not a real good football history, I guess. But the fact that we played in the one game they won was quite an accomplishment. Feel good about it.

**Grant:** You're a Hall of Famer.

**Lee:** Hall of Famer. Believe it or not. Still surprises me to this day.

**Grant:** And so in the classroom up there, what did you study?

**Lee:** I just took general courses, but I was not a good student. I'll admit to that. I like to play handball. And I played handball down at the Elks when I was in high school. So when I went up to the School of Mines, we had two handball courts up there. One of the courts was used as storage that was never used. I play a lot of handball. It would be time to go to class and I was still playing handball. I'd cut class. So I'd get on probation and then I'd get off probation and then I'd get on probation. Then I'd get off probation. And yeah, I was not the best student up there. I enjoyed my time at the School of Mines, but I was not the best student. And then I did go to work at the Steward Mine.

**Grant:** Oh, really?

**Lee:** On the weekends, I'd work afternoon shift at the Steward and then I worked day shift on Saturdays and Sundays. So I worked three days a week at the Steward Mine. So that was probably back in 1963, I believe.

**Grant:** Underground?

**Lee:** Underground. Yeah. So that's an experience that I'm glad to have had, being that my grandfather was a miner. My dad was a miner. Most of all our family, men were all miners. So it was a great experience. I'm glad I had that experience.

**Grant:** Did your dad have any thoughts about you going underground?

**Lee:** That's what surprises me, that he didn't. It surprises me at the fact that he was blackballed by the Anaconda Company and that even permitted me to work for the Anaconda Company. It surprises me to this day. No, he didn't have any qualms about it whatsoever. Never, never mentioned it to me.

**Grant:** For those of us who have never gone underground and I guess now really, we'll never be able to, can you walk me through it?

**Lee:** Well, my first shift, I believe, I was at the 4200 level. So I went right down to the bottom. There might have been one or two levels below that. But my first shift was just as a mucker, just kind of cleaning up, you know, around the railroad tracks. And then I worked replacing track, running a motor, pulling chutes, working on the grizzly. That's when you break the rock up, the bigger pieces of rock that come down that are too big to go through the grizzlies. Worked on that a little bit. I think I only worked once or twice, actually worked with a contract miner in one of the stopes, but I enjoyed it. It didn't bother me. I couldn't do it today because I'm a little claustrophobic. I don't think I could get in a cage today.

**Grant:** Oh, really?

**Lee:** Those cages, you know, six or seven people in the cage. So you're pretty crowded when you're going down and coming up. And I have to admire the miners when I think about it. You're

down there. And the Steward Mine was a hot mine, over a hundred degrees at some of the levels down there. Then when you come back up, say, come back up the last hundred or couple of hundred feet, coming back up to the surface when it was 30 or 40 below, you had a big downdraft coming down the shaft. And you gotta think of those miners every day coming up, all sweaty, sweaty clothes and then coming up. And then most of them lived near the mines where they worked and then walking home with their sweaty clothes. It was 30, 40 below. Until they finally got dries in a lot of the mines. The Steward had a dry, when I was there. So it was good to get over there to the dry and get changed into your street clothes. But it was good. I enjoyed it.

**Grant:** Would you say it's the hardest work you've ever done?

**Lee:** When you worked contracting, like I say, I only worked contract a couple times, yeah, it was hard work and dangerous work, but maybe I didn't realize the danger involved back then. I really didn't give it a thought. You just did your work. Never thought about any danger. We worked in the stopes. There was always a possibility of a Duggan, you know, something coming down, but never really gave it a thought. I was young. I was only about 19 or 20 at that time. So it never really bothered me. But then after I left the School of Mines, I went to work for the pit. I worked down there for nine months. I started out as an oiler on the drills, which is a job I didn't care for very much, doing the sampling.

And then I went to work on the shovels and I enjoyed working on the shovels. I worked with an individual. We worked a swing shift. So we'd work on different shovels every day as the other guys were off on their days, we would take work on their shovel. And I got broke in as a shovel operator. So I'd operate two hours a day over the eight hours. The smaller shovels were hard to work. They were really tough. You got a workout. Then when they got the new big shovels down there, they got a big pedestal. They were quite pleasant to work on. The only problem working with shovels is if you had a cable break. Then you had to work for a couple hours replacing the cables, pretty greasy work. And a lot of times when you had to move a shovel from maybe one tier to another tier, the big heavy electrical cable. They had what they called a boat behind the shovels where you put all your cable in.

As the shovel moved forward, the cable would come out of the boat and a lot of times you had to get the bulldozer that always cleaned up around the shovels to push the material in toward the shovels, make it easier to muck it. They'd usually move the boat up with the bulldozer to help you with that. But moving the cable was hard because it was heavy, heavy work. But I loved working on the shovels as an operator.

**Grant:** Back underground, you know, a drift on like the 4200 level, would it be as big as this room or smaller?

**Lee:** It would be a little smaller going through it. Yeah. Smaller than the room here. Didn't have a lot of room to get through there. There was room for the motor and the cars to get through. Didn't have a lot of room off to the side of the motors, just a couple of feet on each side. Yeah. Ceiling wise. Probably seven feet maybe in a lot of the areas.

**Grant:** So can you walk me through it? When you blast down there, where does the ore go once it's in the cars? The motor pulls it to where?

**Lee:** I wasn't involved in any of the blasting, when the blasting was going on. It was usually at the end of the shift. Everybody would get out. They'd let you know that a blast is going on. And you're down there sometimes when there's blast going on. You know, it would be a little concussion. The smoke would come up to the area where you might be working. After it was blasted, it was mucked in the cars and then dumped onto a grizzly. And like I mentioned, if you had the bigger rocks then you had to break them up with a sledgehammer. So it would go down the chute and then it would be transferred. I think it was about the 3600 level of the Steward where it was transferred over to the Kelley and then hauled out of the Kelley mine.

**Grant:** And so they'd have hoists that we're just for ore. And then of course you have the hoists that are just for men. And the two never really mixed. And so what is slime?

**Lee:** Slime. I'm not that familiar with it, but I know they used it a lot when they were doing the block caving and that. Different areas they used the slime in the areas that were closed off. I wasn't really involved with any of that at all.

**Grant:** When you drive by now, you know, they restarted the motor at the Steward, not too long ago. To me it was like the heartbeat of Butte came back.

**Lee:** I was up there when Larry Hoffman worked it. All the work up there. Larry and I were on the board of directors up at the World Museum of Mining. So I know Larry a little bit. Very knowledgeable when it comes to mining. Very, very knowledgeable.

**Grant:** Driving by now and seeing the mine yard just empty and quiet and fenced off. Does that evoke anything?

[00:46:45]

**Lee:** Yeah. I go by there quite often. I go up to the Granite Mountain Memorial. I don't know what it is. There's just something that draws me up there. Matter of fact, my wife and I were at a basketball game down at West Elementary the other day watching our grandkids. And we had a couple hours in between, so we didn't want to go home. So we drove and that's where I ended up. And I remember that area quite well when my Uncle Pigger lived up there on Cora Terrace and delivering groceries up to him. So I remember going up the old Anaconda road. You can still kind of hear the shift wheels still rolling. To this day, you can hear the sounds of the mine when you're in the uptown area. Yeah, I go by there now. I mentioned to my wife the other day when we went by the Steward, I pointed out to her on the West side there, I said, "That was the parking lot for the Steward back then."

And like I mentioned, a lot of the miners lived close to the mines they worked. Up in Dublin Gulch areas like that. Yeah. It made it a lot easier for them. Now, there's a lot of mines, you know, like I mentioned, my grandfather worked at the Black Rock and that was way north east. Up, up, up in the area of the Granite Mountain. There's a lot of different mines. The Bell



Diamond. A lot of other mines up in that area. So he lived real close to the mine where he worked. And I'm sure he walked back and forth from work to his home.

**Grant:** Did you go underground in other mines in Butte?

**Lee:** I remember going over to the Kelley, at one time walking over to the Kelley and over to the Original, underground. And to this day, I don't recall why. And I think it only happened one time that I went to the Kelley and it might have been on the 3600 level. I don't recall and walked into the Original. I don't recall why, but I do remember doing that.

**Grant:** How far laterally might a drift go.

**Lee:** Well, I guess when you're working down there you don't think about it. You know, you just walk to your work area. Miles, they say there's ten thousand miles of underground workings, so. Uh. I don't know, I guess I can't answer that question.

**Grant:** Do you have an opinion about the pumps being turned off?

**Lee:** Something we didn't want to see, you know, with environmentally what's going on right now with the pit. I got a lot of concerns about the pit, like I think a lot of Butte people do. What could possibly happen if we had a major earthquake, some type of catastrophe? I'm glad to see the environmental work that's been done over the years. I was on the Butte City Council from 2003 to 2010, for two terms, and the issue was brought up pretty much weekly about the pit, in a committee or right on the floor. So I did a lot of research on it after I was elected. I met with Fritz Daly. I even invited Fritz to one of our council meetings. And people from the Bureau of Mines, invited them to one of our meetings.

Of course, I had to go through our chairman to invite them to our meeting, just so we all had a better understanding of what was happening in Butte with the reclamation. So I think we all have a real concern about the reclamation. I'm involved in the Beautify Butte. I've been chairman of the Beautify Butte program for a number years. A lot of concern about Butte and how it looks, not only for the people living here, but for people visiting Butte. And I just met with a couple people from the Clark Fork Coalition. We just had a meeting with them a little bit, how we can coordinate what we're doing with our Beautify Butte and working with them. I know they go down and clean the Blacktail Creek every year, you know, from Father Sheehan Park, and then they move down toward the Chamber, a pretty good area. So we got another meeting coming up this month sometime just so we can kind of coordinate some of the cleanup around the creek.

**Grant:** Do you hope to see a creek?

**Lee:** I do. I'd certainly like to see it. Of course, we all know we had the creeks coming in that were truncated by the pit. We no longer have that good pristine freshwater, which is unfortunate. But yeah, we definitely want to see a clean creek down there, that's for sure. I've cleaned that creek out a number of times myself just down there doing some volunteer work, cleaning the creek out a little bit. And I do see fish in there. I ride my bike on the trail just about daily during the summertime. I always stop along the creek and check it out a little bit. And I do see fish in

there, which is a good sign. Yeah. Yeah. I want to see everything we could do environmentally to make this a better place to live.

**Grant:** I'm wondering if we can go back to the 1960s. You said you were in Vietnam. Is that the only time you've left Butte?

**Lee:** When I came back from Vietnam, I lived in Bozeman for about a year and a half, finished my education. I got a degree, a bachelor's degree in education, secondary ed. But it was, yeah. When I was in the service, I went to Fort Lewis, did my basic at Fort Lewis, then went to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri for my AIT, which is called Advanced Individual Training. I was with the engineers and then when I graduated from AIT in Fort Leonard Wood. One class to go to Vietnam, the other class graduated the week after to go to Korea. My class went to Vietnam. That's the reason I got sent to Vietnam. And I didn't have a bad experience in Vietnam. I was one of the more fortunate people. I was on a demolition team there for the first six months. I was in a place called Koochie, Vietnam, northwest of Saigon. I got there during the Tet, right at the start of Tet, the first week at Tet.

And there were a lot of problems for a few months, a lot of mortar rocket fire and that coming into the Koochie area. But I was lucky. We did our demolition. We'd go out and clean the highway as far as booby traps and that during the day. A lot of rubber tree plantation areas that we had to clear out. Use explosives and stuff like that. And then you did your perimeter watch. The bunkers. You had duty, go out there at night. Of course, you set up your claymore mines in the perimeter and stuff like that, you know, but I had it easy compared to many, many people over there. I did not have a bad experience.

**Grant:** Do you think that that contributed to you wanting to get in law enforcement when you came back?

**Lee:** I always had an inkling to get into law enforcement. I don't know why, but I always did. I understand that one of the relatives on my mother's side of the family was a marshal maybe down in Meaderville. I never did do any research on it, but I always had an inkling to get into law enforcement. When I graduated from MSU in 1972 with my BA degree in education, I came back to Butte hoping to get a teaching job and there weren't any teaching jobs available. And there was an opening at that time with the sheriff's office. They had a special government grant that they were hiring five or six deputies.

So I got hired under that program. I stayed there for approximately 27 months and I transferred over to the city police department in 1975. And so I had 27 years of law enforcement. My last 17 years were as under-sheriff of Butte-Silver Bow County. So I had an extended law enforcement career. I also attended the FBI National Academy back in Quantico for three months in 1979. So I graduated from the National Academy. I attended many, many different specialized schools and traveled to different states going to specialized schools.

**Grant:** Does that training stay with you even now?

**Lee:** It does, yeah. Twenty seven years is kind of a long time. Working every day. I started out as a patrolman and then went to work as a detective. When I came back from the National Academy, I was promoted to Lieutenant and became chief of our detective division. So I worked there for a number years before being appointed as undersheriff.

**Grant:** What are some memorable cases?

**Lee:** I don't like to get into it too much. One of the most memorable. I'll talk just briefly about it. We had a lot of fires going on in Butte, arson fires. I was heavily involved in that for quite a while. Pretty interesting case. I don't like to talk about it too much. I do recall during that time period, you know, a lot of fires. The fires over here by the courthouse, a patrol office, NCAT. NCAT was one of the main reasons we caught the individual that was involved. We had some other information. There was just a lot involved. The FBI was involved with us, the ATF, Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms was involved. But I recall hearing that, laying in bed at night, three or four o'clock in the morning, you could hear the sirens go off. I tell you, I'd be jumping out of bed. Ok, we got another arson fire. You know, is somebody going to lose a life because of it? And that was our greatest fear that we were going to lose somebody.

**Grant:** I understand if you don't want to go too much into it. But a lot of these oral history conversations inevitably touch on the fires uptown. And whether it's the medical arts building or the Penny's fire or the Beaver Block or, you know, so many places are gone now. There's so much parking uptown because of that. And, you know, it's really hard to get anyone to even speculate about who it was or what the motive was. And people talked about friction mortgages. But it sounds like some individuals are known.

**Lee:** Well, you know, back in 1973, we had the Columbia Gardens fire, medical arts fire, Penny's fire, Pennsylvania Block. They were out right about 1973, 1974. The Pennsylvania fire, that was an arson fire by three juveniles back then. I believe it was two young boys and a girl involved in that. I wasn't involved in the investigation of it. But I do remember that fire real well. Medical Arts fire, I do recall that pretty well, too. I was off shift at that time. I was a deputy back then, 1972. The night of that fire, I was working a special extra shift out at Butte Speedway where they had the stock car races. Another deputy and myself were working. And you could see the fire from out there, the uptown fire. And I was a deputy at that time, I wasn't on the city police department. Of course, the city handled that fire quite a bit. Of course, the Columbia Gardens fire has always been reported as possibly being a fire that might've been started by the Company. But yeah, which is actually a possibility.

**Grant:** Impossible to prove, you think?

**Lee:** Definitely impossible to prove at this time.

**Grant:** I think it was Don Plessas that told us about something he called the ARCO Fire Squad.

**Lee:** I don't think I ever heard that terminology. The Penny's fire was another arson fire, and they pretty much had a suspect on that one. But it was never proven. Arson fires are very, very difficult to prove. We had White's Funeral Home burned down. We know that was an arson fire.

I don't recall the year. We had a suspect, even went to trial. But you got an arson fire. The jury pretty much wants you to have evidence that somebody saw the individual light the fire. That's how difficult arson fires are. Even though there is a lot of other circumstantial information, maybe. Business going south. Things aren't working well for them, heavily in debt. Whatnot. That's not enough in an arson fire, many times.

**Grant:** I see. Well, I know you're hoping to head out around noon. We're getting close to that. Sounds like you had a fascinating career in Butte in law enforcement. I feel like we could talk a lot about it. But one other thing we've heard about is that, you know, there was a lot of corruption in the city police until the city and county consolidated at which time they kind of cleared out bad apples. Is that your understanding?

**Lee:** Yeah, there was corruption going on. No question about it. It was not a good time, you know, being a police officer. You don't know how the public looked upon you because they were aware that there were a lot of things going on back then. We invited the investigation, definitely invited the FBI to come and investigate it. We were clean. But we knew there were some of those in our ranks among us that weren't clean. And yes, it was not an easy time to work, and thank God we had a few people, young people in the department and some of the older guys in the department were very good police officers and we watched out for one another. Not a good time in Butte history, that's for sure, with law enforcement.

**Grant:** You know, we did an interview recently with a gentleman, Mark Sullivan, who was a longtime judge here and district attorney. I asked him what he thought the main cause of criminality is. What causes criminality, and he said hunger. Well, I would ask you that same question. What do you think causes criminal behavior?

**Lee:** Well, you know, I don't know. Hunger is a possibility, I guess. I mean, it's just how they're brought up, how they're brought up, the family life and whatnot. Now, of course, we know that meth definitely is a huge factor in criminality and criminal acts now, especially with a lot of the thefts and robberies. Meth is a huge problem. Huge problem all over. We definitely got a problem here in Butte. If we were to go to the county jail right now and you looked at the bookings and that, I'd say probably over 90 percent of the people in there right now are people that use meth or got an alcohol problem.

And it's pretty much been that way, you know, with alcohol and drugs for a lot of years. There's probably a lot of different factors involved. You know a lot of money has been thrown out there with the meth program and as far as interdiction projects and whatnot. But I think more money should be spent on the prevention area of drugs, to hopefully keep people from getting started. Why anybody would ever want to use meth knowing what it will do to you is beyond me. That's why I think you've got to get out there with prevention and treatment. It's not so much a law enforcement end of it. Sure, you want to get the dealers and whatnot and they are doing that, but let's stop the people from using it in the first place. I think there should be more money spent there and helping those people that are addicted with treatment.

**Grant:** I feel like this has raised more questions for me than anything. I appreciate your time.

**Lee:** Oh, no problem. Yeah.

**Grant:** One question I'd like to ask to conclude, and I asked this to most everybody we talked to, you know, if you look at Butte's just population numbers from 1917 to now, last century, it is a pretty steady decline. It may have evened out, but I'm asking people, do you think Butte's decline is over?

**Lee:** I hope so, because when the Anaconda Company was running everything here in Butte, I mean, that was it. That was the Anaconda Company. I remember my dad telling me back, oh, back in the 50s, he said, it would be a better day for Butte if the Anaconda Company would leave Butte. I remember him saying that many, many times. We have more just diversification, more small businesses and other people coming in. Yeah. I think it is. Yeah. We've seen a lot, a lot of new businesses and whatnot opening up. Not a lot, but you see a few here and there. At one time they talked about bringing in I forget what it was.

A computer type of company was going to come in here, one time. They were talking about 30,000 jobs. I don't want to see anything like that in Butte. You know, pretty soon you'd have everybody out to the Big Hole River, you know, elbow to elbow. And, you know, I don't want to see Butte get too big. I like Butte the size it is right now to be truthful with you. And the people of Butte are great people. You'd like to see more diversification. There's no question about it. You know, we got the hospital, which does very, very well. We've got Montana Tech, which does very well. To see other industries come in here and maybe hire 15, 20 people. Yeah, I'd like to see something like that. Of course, we have Northwest Energy which is huge.

**Grant:** But you don't want out of control development.

**Lee:** Personally, I don't want to see Butte get real big right now. I like the size it is right now. You go over to Missoula, which is great. You go to Bozeman, the traffic and whatnot anymore just getting off the interstate to take the exit, you know. I mean, it's crazy anymore. I like Butte the way it is, but yeah. A little more diversification. Couple more smaller companies cropping up. Yeah. I'd love to see that.

**Grant:** Well, we didn't even get to talk about Hibernians, so we're gonna have to have another visit.

**Lee:** I will do that. I'd be happy to do that.

**Grant:** Great, we'll schedule one. Thank you. Appreciate it very much.

[END OF RECORDING]