Mary Bielenberg: The following is an interview with Catherine White Byrd of Hamilton. Catherine, were you a child here or were you born here?

Catherine White Byrd: I was born in Hamilton.

MB: You were? How long ago?

CB: Seventy-nine years ago.

MB: Seventy-nine years ago, so you remember Hamilton when it was at its almost beginnings.

CB: Yes.

MB: Now, where were you born?

CB: I was born in what is known as the McCracken house.

MB: Was there no hospital here?

CB: At that time women didn't go to the hospitals to have babies. They were delivered at home.

MB: Were you living at the McCracken house?

CB: My parents were living in Hamilton, but not in the McCracken house at that time.

MB: Who was Mr. McCracken as far as you were concerned, a relative?

CB: He was my grandfather who came from Butte to Hamilton.

MB: Now, your home here in Hamilton when you were growing up was located next door to the McCracken's, was it?

CB: Yes.

MB: Where the Hartley house is now?

CB: Yes.
MB: That is across the street from the high school.

CB: Yes.

MB: How many children were there in your family?

CB: There were the two sisters. I was the eldest.

MB: You were the eldest. When you were growing up, now, there was no pavement on the roads—

CB: No.

MB: —and you used to walk to school, the bus didn't come by and pick you up?

CB: No buses. We walked. We walked on board sidewalks. One time I lost a nickel in a crack and that was a great tragedy.

MB: Oh yes. I wonder if they ever found those after they took the boards up.

CB: I doubt it.

MB: [laughs] Where was the school at this time?

CB: The school where I went was the Jefferson School. [pauses] No, it was the Central building which has been razed, the location where the courthouse is now.

MB: Oh, I see. Oh, I remember that.

CB: I was at Jefferson School later. So then also I attended the Washington School in the second grade, and it since has been razed to provide the building, the new building.

MB: About how many children do you think were at school when you went to school?

CB: Well, the classes were rather small. I would say, perhaps 20 in a class.

MB: Oh, well that a pretty good size, though. Did you have eight grades?

CB: Yes.

MB: Had eight grades and eight teachers?
CB: Yes, different teachers, and nothing was departmentalized at that time.

MB: Yes, I see. Who were some of the other close friends of yours who were in the same grade that you used to go to school with that are still here?

CB: Zelma Hartley was my very, very close friend, and we have known each other since we were three years old.

MB: You used to go to school together?

CB: Yes.

MB: Now, you mentioned that Wallace McCracken was your grandfather.

CB: William Wallace.

MB: William Wallace McCracken, okay. Now, he was also a banker here in Hamilton.

CB: Yes.

MB: [coughs] Pardon me. When did he come to Hamilton?

CB: He came to Hamilton in 1895 to help Mr. Daly [Marcus Daly], the copper king in Butte, organize what became the Ravalli County Bank. I have some papers telling about the organization. My grandfather and one other man ran the bank, and they opened with the capital of only 40,000 dollars, which was a goodly sum at that time for a bank, a new bank. The bank was named Ravalli County Bank in honor of Anthony Ravalli [Antonio Ravalli], the Jesuit priest who did so much for the Indians in this area.

MB: Was this called Ravalli County at that time?

CB: Yes, it had been named Ravalli County. The one account I read said that Mr. Daly did not want the town of Hamilton named for him or the bank named for him. He was an admirer of Father Ravalli, and since the county was Ravalli County, that became the name of the bank.

MB: Where was the bank located?

CB: It was at the corner of Third Street and Main on land, of course, donated by Mr. Daly. It was a two-story brick building—a good looking building for that time—and it has since been occupied by the Bank Restaurant after the new Ravalli County Bank was opened.

MB: That bank was in use a long time, though, wasn't it?
CB: Yes.

MB: About 30, 40, 50 years?

CB: Oh yes, I would say that long. I remember as a child going down to the bank to watch circus parades because the bank, the front of the bank, had two very large plate-glass windows with wide shelves underneath. My sisters and I would climb up on the shelves and have a fine view of the parade as it went by.

MB: Was this the only bank in the valley?

CB: At that time, yes, it was the first bank.

MB: Was it even before the Stevensville Bank?

CB: Yes.

MB: Oh, I see. Your father, then, was Mr. White. Now, your mother then must have been a McCracken, is that right?

CB: Yes. My father had known my mother in Butte when she was just growing up as a child. After he was asked by my grandfather to come and help him at the bank, he fell in love with my mother. The wedding was performed here in Hamilton. It was a very large social event. The first wedding in what is the Episcopal Church here. People came from Butte and Anaconda that had known both families on the train, which ran daily at that time, and spent the weekend here in Hamilton.

MB: As a child growing up and walking down as you would walk downtown, it was all board walks, then, in Hamilton.

CB: Yes.

MB: And people had horse-drawn carriages, I suspect—

CB: Yes.

MB: —and it was muddy and dusty. [laughs]

CB: Yes.

MB: I remember reading in an old newspaper at the museum [Ravalli County Museum] the other day—it was in 1894—that they were complaining about how dirty the streets were and how poor people had been about keeping their homes painted here in Hamilton. They were
hoping that if they were going to be the county seat that they would brighten up their homes a little. Now, do you remember, did they have painted...They paint on their houses, didn’t they?

CB: Oh, certainly. I don’t remember that houses weren’t painted.

MB: But of course that was some time ago.

CB: Yes. People owned their own homes, they kept them in good condition.

MB: Now, was your grandfather and Mr. Crutchfield were close friends?

CB: Yes, Mr. Crutchfield became the attorney for the bank, but he had been in Missoula also as an attorney there for years.

MB: I see. He was a friend of your father’s before he was a friend of Mr. Daly’s, do you remember? Or was one instrumental in getting the other one here?

CB: I don’t know. I think probably Mr. Daly chose him. I don’t know I’ve never heard how it happened they chose Mr. Crutchfield.

MB: Maybe you know this, when the bank began, do you have any idea about how many employees they had they had?

CB: They had two.

MB: They had two.

CB: My grandfather and his assistant.

MB: The cashier.

CB: Yes.

MB: I see. Do you remember, do you know who the cashier was at that time?

CB: I remember Mr. Dick. Whether he was the first one, I don’t know, but I remember Mr. Dick (?) very well. George Dick.

MB: Now, your home where you were raised was pretty far from the downtown area, isn’t that right? It was quite a little—

CB: No. Two blocks.
MB: The downtown was right over on Main Street?

CB: On Main Street, yes. Hamilton was platted to be a city. It didn't just evolve from a few buildings. Mr. Daly employed two men to plan the city, and the town was named for one of them—Hamilton. So it really was a planned community, which at that time was rather unusual because most of the small towns in western Montana just grew.

MB: Well, I remember your speaking about Finntown, here in the valley.

CB: Yes.

MB: Or in Hamilton. Now, where was that located?

CB: It was the area around North 6th and 7th. They had a meeting house on 7th Street.

MB: Now these are the Finnish people?

CB: Yes. They were employed in the mill. They were brought in as workers for Mr. Daly's mill. They had a community all their own. Of course, being laborers, they really weren't involved socially in Hamilton.

MB: When do you remember that they decided that they would have sidewalks in the city? Was it quite a while into the century?

CB: No, no...I remember learning to roller skate on the cement sidewalks.

MB: Oh, I see. So it was several years after you were born almost or during when you were in grade school.

CB: Yes, let's call it around 1910, 1912, I think, there were sidewalks.

MB: I see. When you would go to school, how were you dressed?

CB: [pauses] Well, during the winter, we had woolen dresses, and because people didn't patronize dry-cleaning establishments at that time, my mother, every week, would launder the collars and cuffs on our dresses and then sew them on again so that we'd be all prepared for school on Monday morning.

MB: You didn't have boots like they have today?

CB: We had leggings.

MB: Leggings.
CB: With numerous buttons. Had to be buttoned clear to the top and then they would get encrusted with ice and be just very hard to remove. I hated those leggings.

MB: I suppose when you got to school you had to take them off and they hung them someplace to dry.

CB: Yes, and then they’d drip in the hall. They were very awkward, but they kept us warm.

MB: Did you have the McGuffey Reader when you were young?

CB: Well, no, I don’t remember what they were called. It was a later edition of readers, I think, than the McGuffey.

MB: How about- do you remember who your first teacher was? Your first grade teacher?

CB: No.

MB: You don’t? Tell me, now, about your growing up with the Hartley girls. You’ve told me so many interesting little things. I’m kind of interested in, for instance, you mentioned the circuses coming to town. Where did these circuses come from?

CB: They were touring the United States, and some of them would come. For a while the circus and the Chautauqua, which came every summer, were located where the Ravalli County Creamery is now in that lot that’s extended from 4th Street to 5th Street, yes.

MB: They would have a tent.

CB: Yes. Then we had some circuses that were located where the American Legion Park is now.

MB: Oh, I see, but would they come in on the train?

CB: Yes.

MB: Oh, I see. They would stay overnight or they would be several days?

CB: Oh, they’d have one-day performance—afternoon and evening.

MB: Probably from Missoula and then they would go back and perform in Missoula or something.

CB: Yes, yes.
MB: Was it Barnum and Bailey’s?

CB: Yes, we had Barnum and Bailey’s, I remember that particularly, and then there were other smaller circuses that came through, too, but only about once a year. But the Chautauqua series was...everyone went to that, and it was the cultural event of the year, I mean, from outside. In the big tent, usually there was a stage, and I remember always we had a thunderstorm at least once during the week. Then the tent would sway and blow and looked as if it would collapse. It would leak, and it was really exciting to a small child to go through that storm.

MB: Did they have speakers and music, or what was the Chautauqua?

CB: They had quite fine speakers that would come and lecture on a certain topic. They had music that was very pleasing to a nondescript audience. It was a cross-section of the community, so they tried to please everybody with music.

MB: What would these speakers talk about? What would be the subject of their speeches?

CB: I really don’t remember because I was just a child. That was a bore to me, to listen to the lectures.

MB: But everyone else thought it was wonderful.

CB: Well, it was one cultural advantage that came to Hamilton.

MB: When the Ravalli Hotel burned down, you were allowed to see it. You were in school at the time, but they let school out, didn't they?

CB: Yes. I was attending the Jefferson School. It was quite a distance from the hotel, and when we heard that the Ravalli Hotel was burning, we just left. I don't think anybody could have held us in school. [laughs] So everybody congregated to watch the hotel. In the beginning, it was not thought a serious fire, and so the guests in hotel were not alarmed and they were not told to evacuate their rooms. But I think the most vivid remembrance I have of the hotel is seeing the wife of the mayor who was a very, very heavy woman clamber down on a ladder, because by that time the halls were filled with smoke, to get to the bottom—down onto the ground from the second-story. To watch her struggling down that ladder with her arms full of belongings was really a sight.

MB: Also, didn’t she have a bird cage?

CB: Yes. I remember that very vividly, and of course, we were all so sad and so shocked by the fact that that our hotel was gone.

MB: Well, actually, it was quite a lovely hotel, wasn’t it?

Catherine White Byrd Interview, OH 120-005a, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
CB: Yes, it was. I remember my aunt and my mother getting ready to go to a dance there. These dancers were really big social events. I thought at that time, as a child, that my mother and my aunt were perfectly beautiful in their long formal dresses.

MB: I can imagine.

CB: The men wore formal attire, and it was...I should mention that the Ravalli Hotel was sort of a mecca for people from Butte who would come over in the summertime and perhaps spend the month at the hotel just as a resort. So it was a great loss to Hamilton when the hotel burned, and we still feel the lack of that hotel.

MB: Would have been wonderful to have it now.

CB: Yes.

MB: I suppose the interior had lots of beautiful old wood in it, do you remember?

CB: I remember chiefly the portraits. They weren't just paintings, they were portraits of Mr. Daly's racehorses. Some of those are now still, I think, in the stock farm office.

MB: It seems to me that it had a big porch when I saw pictures, and people would sit out and swing-

CB: Yes, there were verandas. They weren't covered, most of them. They were open. During the summer months, it was lovely to sit out there in the evenings or any time of day.

MB: The people would arrive by train, of course, from Butte.

CB: Yes.

MB: One of the Hartley girls was saying that she used to go down to the depot and watch these people come in with their finery.

CB: Yes.

MB: And it was so interesting and they all wore white gloves, the women did, and parasols—

CB: And hats.

MB: —And hats, yes. Well it must have been quite an interesting time. How about the fairs when you would go?
CB: Well, I loved the fairs, and we went every year.

MB: How were you dressed when you went?

CB: Well, we wore what we wore to school usually. It was not a dress-up affair. I loved seeing the exhibits, and the fragrance of the apple building.

MB: Yes. They had one special building just for apples?

CB: Yes, for the apples.

MB: Now, I suppose these people who had come over to stay for the summer would also stay on through the fair season?

CB: Some of them would. Of course, Mrs. Daly, being a resident of Montana, would stay to vote in the fall. Her birthday was the same as my Grandmother McCracken, so they would celebrate together in some fashion.

MB: Now, wouldn't she often entertain the ladies of the area?

CB: Oh, yes, and her luncheons—her bridge luncheons—were really important social gathering. During the summer that I was married, Mrs. Daly’s butler called one morning to invite me to one of Mrs. Daly’s luncheons. Of course, I was happy to receive an invitation. The arrangement always for the luncheon was that the older ladies would sit in the main dining room in the mansion and the younger women would be in the breakfast room. Then we would play bridge in the trophy room. The walls were lined with the heads of animals that Marcus Daly II had shot in Africa in various places, and it was rather strange setting for a very, very elaborate bridge party.

MB: Well now, Marcus Daly II, did you know him?

CB: I don't remember him. I remember his son very well because Mrs. Daly would always tell my mother to invite my sisters and me to come out to the use the swimming pool if we cared to.

MB: Oh, they had a swimming pool?

CB: Oh, yes. And we could bring our friends if we cared to. So I remember going out one day with Zelma and June Hartley and my sisters, and Marcus Daly III had been swimming in the swimming pool. When we arrived, he didn’t lose much time in getting out. I think he was very annoyed that we girls were coming to usurp his swimming pool.
MB: Now, when you would go to one of the luncheons that Mrs. Daly had, what was it like? Did she have lovely linens and beautiful—

CB: Oh, everything was very formal and very lovely and priceless china—a beautifully served luncheon. Then after, I remember I was not a very proficient bridge player then, and I always longed for one of her prizes. She gave the most beautiful prizes, and there were three and four of them but I never could qualify. [laughs]

MB: Isn't that something? You said that they had a big dining room. Did they have a large sitting room, too?

CB: Yes, and several parlors. Of course, at that time they were called parlors.

MB: Victorian furniture?

CB: Yes. I remember I just thought one floor lamp with a rose-colored shade was the most beautiful piece of furnishing that I'd ever seen, and I thought, oh, if I could just have that lamp.

MB: Did they have lace curtains or were there draperies?

CB: There were draperies over lace curtains usually.

MB: Yes. Did she have some kind of lovely floor coverings such as oriental rugs?

CB: Yes. Just beautiful, beautiful rugs, no carpeting. These lovely rugs on the lovely hardwood floors. I remember one time going up into the second story to one of the bedrooms, I think, to leave my wraps. The [unintelligible] bedroom was between it and the next bedroom was a bath, and everything very ornate and very delicate.

MB: Now, there were two Daly mansions, I mean—

CB: Yes.

MB: What happened to...The first one was built by Mr. Daly for her.

CB: Yes. Well, it was built as their residence and it burned, so then the second mansion was built for Mrs. Daly but Mr. Daly died soon after.

MB: Yes. Now, you mentioned burning. It seems to me that so many of the old historical buildings in Hamilton went the way of the cruel fire.

CB: Yes.
MB: What were some of them that have since disappeared? Now, the hotel and the first Daly mansion and—

CB: Yes. Then the flour mill burned, and the smoke from that lingered for a week because the material, of course, the flour, and it was a smudge. Then in about 1940, the mill [sawmill] burned, and it was a tremendous fire because it was a wooden structure. We went in the car with my three children at that time, and we parked at least two blocks away and we could feel the heat from that fire. Then we saw the whole skeleton crash into the...and the flames shot up, of course, high.

MB: Were most of the buildings in Hamilton when you were growing up wood?

CB: No. Now, the bank building—the Ravalli County Bank building—was brick that was manufactured here. I think the Valley Mercantile was also of brick. Of course, they used wood, too, in the structure.

MB: We had a brick—

[Break in the audio]

MB: —brick yard here.

CB: Yes.

MB: Where was it located?

CB: I don't remember.

MB: Oh, I see. It seems to me that when we bought a house on the west side that there were remains of a lot of old bricks, and I'm wondering if it might have been over there. You don't recall?

CB: I doubt it.

MB: Oh. Now, there was a hotel right on the Main Street, too, wasn't there?

CB: Yes.

MB: It seems to me, didn't Mrs. Crutchfield live at that hotel, or did she live at the Ravalli Hotel when she first came here?

CB: I don't know.
MB: Someone said that they remembered how frightened she was at night with so many bars on the streets. So there were lots of bars there then?

CB: Oh, yes. I think there were 14 saloons in Hamilton at one time. The Finnish men, the laborers at the mill, patronized the bars extensively.

MB: Now, Mr. Daly owned practically all of the big businesses in town, didn’t he? He had the mercantile and he owned the bank and of course he had the stock farm.

CB: Yes. He didn’t own the bank after the first year. My grandfather bought the bank. But he helped Mr. Daly organize it, and if it hadn’t been for Mr. Daly he would never have come to Hamilton because Mr. Daly asked him to come because my grandfather had had experience organizing the bank in Butte.

MB: I see. Which bank did he organize in Butte, do you remember?

CB: I don’t.

MB: It wasn’t Miners, or—

CB: No, he worked in Butte-Silver Bow Bank. I think he was an officer there before he came to Hamilton. That’s where my father worked as a messenger boy and got his start in banking working for my grandfather. That’s why my grandfather asked him to come to Hamilton.

[Break in audio]

MB: Your husband was not a native of Hamilton, but he was born up the valley.

CB: Yes, on a ranch about...that was adjacent to Chief Joseph Ranch.

MB: He was a twin, wasn’t he?

CB: Yes.

MB: What is the story about how his mother kept them—

CB: Well, of course, they were delivered at home as all babies were at that time. To keep them warm, even though they were born June 11, she kept them in small boxes lined with cotton wool. People would drive up to Darby to see the twins because they were a novelty in the valley. They hadn’t had twins here for quite some time.

MB: Now, your husband, in later years, became a banker himself, didn’t he?
CB: Yes.

MB: Did he work for Ravalli County Bank?

CB: No, he became an officer in the Citizens State Bank.

MB: Oh, I see. Who started that here, do you remember?

CB: Mr. Cooper. The bank was originally located where Downing’s Drug Store is now. I don’t know when it was organized. It was—

MB: In the ‘30s?

CB: Well, no, much earlier. It must have been before 1910, I think.

MB: Oh, that soon. You wouldn’t think that the valley could hold two banks to keep it going.

CB: Well, it was a growing community, and of course, these banks supplied services for the entire county.

MB: Right. Well, thank you very much, Catherine, for giving us this background, and I may call on you again.

CB: Well, thank you, Mary. I’ve enjoyed doing it. I love to tell about my childhood and the history of Hamilton.

[End of Interview]