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Interviewees: Dorothy Melvin
Interviewer: Mary Murphy
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Note: Dorothy’s husband, Robert Melvin, contributes occasionally throughout the interview.

Dorothy Melvin: My father was Jack Orly (?). We called him Jack. His name was John. My mother was Catherine. Helming was her maiden name. She came to the Big Hole Valley, Jackson, with her family in 1893. She had one sister and six brothers. One died in infancy and her mother died at an early age of 47.

Mary Murphy: Where did they come from?

DM: Iowa. Waukon, Iowa. They settled up on the ranch. My mother died...When her mother died, she was only 12, so she helped raise the family. She got through high school by staying at a person’s house and cleaning and things like that until she graduated. She worked on ranches, cooking. She met my dad. He had come from Chicago. He was raised in a big city, and he hated it. He rode the rails and came to Montana. In 1905, he was washing dishes down in the Finlen Hotel and he eventually went to the Big Hole Valley where he generally loved it because he liked to hunt and fish. He worked at odd jobs. My mother and dad would go out on a ranch, and she’d cook and he’d stack hay.

MM: Where did they meet? Was he working at a ranch where she was working?

DM: They met at the John Jackson Ranch because of their mutual friends John and Margaret Jackson. He hunted a lot for pelts and trapped coyotes and badgers. He would sell those. My mother would cook in the summertime, and she had boarders. It was hard going because right after they got married, my dad had to have a mastoid operation. That just set them back for years with the medical.

MM: Did they own their own ranch, or did he just go from place to place working?

DM: From place to place. One time we were in Elko, Nevada, for a short time. He painted cars and was a good painter. He also did that out here when I was about six. Everybody moved backed to Big Hole. I there (?), and my mother cooked for different people. In those days, it was hard. Finally, they built their own bar and hamburger place. That was in about 1932.

MM: Was this still down in the Big Hole Valley?

DM: In Wisdom.
MM: In Wisdom? Okay.

DM: I went to my first year of high school in San Diego, where my aunt lived. I had so many colds in those places they might have thought the climate might be good for me, but leaving home at 14 after going to a grade school that only had 60 pupils to a junior high that had 2,000, at that age was quite an adjustment for me. I was homesick most of the time.

MM: What was that story you told me before about they would kid you about living in a tipi?

DM: Bob started that because I was born in St. Ignatius, but we were only there a couple weeks before we went back to Wisdom. When the kids were grown, Bob would always say I was half German and half Indian. I went to my first year of high school in San Diego. Then I came back and went to Butte High.

MM: They had moved to Butte by then?

DM: No, they were in Wisdom, and they had their beer parlor and ice cream place. In those days...they have a bus that takes all the kids to high school in Dillon, but my mother didn’t want to send me to Dillon or my sister either. We got an apartment out there and we’d go back and forth. She’d come out and get us on Friday after school and bring us back Sunday night.

MM: Did you and your sister live here by yourselves in an apartment when you were going to high school?

DM: Yes.

MM: Wow! And are you the oldest?

DM: Yes. I have one sister, Mary Manard (?), and she’s two years younger than myself.

MM: What was that like? You must have been very independent.

DM: No, we were lonesome most of the time because we felt like outsiders. We were from a small town. We didn’t get into any of the activities because we were gone at home on the weekends. It was kind of a lonesome time as far as I was concerned.

MM: Did you cook for yourself, or did you go eat in the boarding houses?

DM: No, we did very little cooking. We used to go out to Woolworth’s where the meals were inexpensive. My mother always had a care package with cake and cookies and things. We had a girl that we knew from home that was in nurse’s training. She used to come over and help us eat it.
I graduated in ’36. My sister then went down to California. What was the year she went down there...I was down there in ’32. After graduating in ’36, I went back down there and went to Kelsey Jenney Commercial College and took their business course. My sister went down after I came back, and she graduated down there where I graduated from. After that, she went into nursing in Great Falls at Deaconess. I got a job at New Method Laundry—it was called—for the whole summer for 15 dollars a week.

MM: What were you doing?

DM: Waiting on customers, taking the laundry in and marking it, and doing a lot of typing and filing and machine bookkeeping. I was there a year and half and then I went up to the courthouse. I was a stenographer up there for six months. In the meantime, I had taken a civil service test and worked at the (unintelligible). Then I met my husband-to-be in November of ’40.

MM: Where did you meet him?

DM: At the Eagles Lodge. They had a dance. We were married in June of ’43.

MM: When you were growing up, did your family move around a lot, or were they settled in Wisdom by that time?

DM: I really don’t remember too much about it except Elko is where we were young, and I know that we went to school one year out here that I can remember—probably first grade. We went up to the Jackson School, which is 18 miles from Wisdom, for a year because my folks were working on the John Jackson Ranch. But most of my childhood was spent in Wisdom. My sister was born there at home.

MM: Were you born at home, too?

DM: No. I was born in the hospital in St. Ignatius.

MM: Not in a tipi? (laughs)

DM: (laughs) Not a tipi. I had Carol in ’45, Paul in ’47, and Johnny in ’49. They were two years apart. Now my baby’s going to be 31 this month. (laughs)

MM: What was Butte like during that time when you were in high school? Did you walk around much, or did you kind of go to school and then go home? Do you remember what town was like?
DM: Yes, that was about it. I remember the streets being real busy uptown. There would be a lot of people walking the streets and they'd all be speaking their own tongue. I presume it was Italian more than anything then. There were other mixed languages. In later years, you could hear the Spanish. Of course, I haven't been to town in five years now. We don't have people uptown because the shopping mall took them south of Butte.

MM: In school, were there immigrant children that spoke different languages, too?

DM: Not that I remember. When I was going to high school, it was the old Butte High. It was very crowded. It had narrow halls. We had two shifts. I didn't care for that because with the early shift you would get out at two o'clock in the afternoon or whatever and had different schedules. In that way you weren't in school to do anything because they needed the room. I don't know what year the new Butte High School was built. I graduated in '36, and shortly after that that they built the new one.

MM: When you went to San Diego, did you like it better the second time you were there?

DM: No.

MM: No? (laughs)

DM: (laughs) I liked the course I was taking, but still I didn't know anyone down there.

MM: Did you stay with your aunt again that time?

DM: Yes. They took me places and to see the group (?) things, but it wasn’t like being in the young crowd (unintelligible). I guess I just wasn’t ready for that big a town. (laughs) I suppose if I had stayed and gotten a job after graduating I would have liked it better.

MM: You just finished the course and then came back?

DM: I worked for about a month and then came back.

MM: Was there any chance of getting work in Wisdom? How did you decide to work in Butte?

DM: I worked for a short time for the ranger station in Jackson and Wisdom. It was just a part-time deal. Of course, when my folks got the ice cream parlor, both my sister and I waited tables, mixed up sodas, and what have you.

MM: Was that different from the first place they had with the hamburgers?

DM: No, except that they added on and made it longer the second time. They just got the bar first and then built on the hamburger and ice cream place. Then they made the ice cream parlor
bigger. After that, we served food. At first, we didn’t serve food just the ice cream. We were the only one in town that had that much choice of ice cream and other things. We had a trade with the Maid O Clover Ice Cream. They would come out on the stage in those padded packets to keep them cold until you got them in with the ice. Later, we had an electric one.

MM: They still had stages running?

DM: They would just come at the stage. It was a car, a truck, with a panel deal on it so they could haul freight. We would always just call it the Wisdom Stage and the Jackson Stage. I don’t know if that’s a carryover from the olden days or not, but that’s what they called it.

MM: Your mother must have had a lot of experience having cooked for all those different ranches.

DM: Yes, she did. When my dad died in ’51 of a heart attack, she went to work on Helming Brothers, which was her brother’s, pumping gas and keeping books until Bruce came back from the service. Then he went in there and bought his father’s interest out. From there on, she waited tables and cooked until she died. She was 80. She had arthritis, but it wasn’t so bad that it held her down. She said she was tough, and I believe her.

MM: She must have been. Was it common in those days for a single woman to go and work at different ranches, cooking and stuff like that, or was that something unusual for her?

DM: You mean to put herself through school? Yes, it was. It’s hard to find. Haying season was only a couple months long depending on how big a ranch it was.

MM: She must have seen a lot of the country just going around and doing that.

DM: No, it was a small area really, because Dillon is only 60 miles from Wisdom, Jackson was only 18 miles, and the ranches could maybe be five or ten miles out. No, she didn’t...outside of going to Nevada and coming out here and going to Dillon. It was really not a very big place.

MM: Did she ever come into Butte to work here?

DM: No, she never worked here. Of course, when we were small, she just took care of us. We lived in Wisdom then. She had a couple of brothers that hadn’t married so that was her boarders.

MM: Did she teach you how to cook?

DM: Not really. I used to watch her, and we would help when we got older. When we had the bar and the ice cream place, my dad would take care of the bar, and she would be on the other side. When it was time to cook, she would go out and cook, and Mary and I would stay...one of
Mary or I would go with her and get the dinner ready and eat. Then we too would come down. My father and one of us would go up and eat. When you have a bar in a place like that, you just had to stay there long hours because you couldn’t afford to hire anyone and make it go.

MM: Did you live in the same building with the bar and the ice cream parlor?

DM: No.

MM: You had a separate house?

DM: Yes. First, we rented a two-story home. In ’37, my mother had started building a log home. She had carpenters and had a log house. Later, she put siding on it because it was so hard to find anyone to do a lot of jobs up there anymore. She split her own wood and carried it up those stairs. We had a big basement...throw in...have the poles run in and saw them...rack them up down in the basement. She was wonderful.

My dad died at an early age—62—compared to the length of what people live now. He had a bad heart attack. Now they have intensive care and things like that, but he would never...he said he wasn’t going to die in a rocking chair because he was an outdoorsman. My mother took care of the bar while we took care of the other side. We needed one to take off and get away from it because, when you run a place like that, it gets on your nerves after a while.

MM: Did you ever work in the bar?

DM: No. We had a window that we could slide open. If someone wanted food on the other side, we could pass it over. My girlfriend, Eunice Tubby (?), and myself came out to Butte in...it must of have been 1940. I went to business college. I took a refresher course. That was before I got the job at the laundry. Everybody used to kid me, Do you work on tub number two or four? (laughs)

MM: (laughs) There must have been a lot of laundries in town then to take...

DM: Quite a few. Now there’s the Independent Laundry, the CLB (?) Laundry, the Taylor (?) Laundry, and the Method. I don’t know. Is that one that’s still going, the Montana Laundry?

MM: I don’t know.

DM: If it is, I think it’s about the only one in town.

MM: Did you and your girlfriend get an apartment here in town?

DM: Yes, we did.
MM: Where was that?

DM: At 322 South Montana Street, upstairs. We had two rooms up there, (unintelligible). Our rent was about 30 dollars then. We thought that was terrific. I was only making 15 dollars a week. (laughs) My girlfriend got on WPA [Works Progress Administration]. She made more than I did.

MM: What kind of work did she do for that?

DM: Census...stenography. (talking at same time as MM)

MM: A lot of people tell me that the jobs on relief paid better than the regular jobs. One man that was working in the mines kept holding on and holding on and finally went on relief and made more money.

DM: It’s true. I think the purpose of the program was real good but the wrong people got at the head of it. They already had a business or had a good income. The purpose was for the poor people. A lot of them had influence or they knew the head guy. It’s like any other program. It’s not always fair.

MM: Did the Women’s Protective Union try to organize clerical workers then?

DM: Yes. They founded a union. I don’t know about this (unintelligible) at the post office. I suppose she belongs to the clerks’ union. We call them an association, not a union. They have bargaining, but they can’t strike. Therefore, they’re not a true union. I never had to belong to any union, and of course, out in Wisdom and Jackson and Beaverhead, especially, that was non-union.

MM: Would you go to a lot of dances and stuff on weekends?

DM: Yes. In Wisdom, during haying, we used to have lots of fun because they would have an orchestra come in the Masonic Hall. It was a good-sized building. During those days, the days I was there, mostly hay men were college kids. We used to have a ball on Saturday nights with our dances. They would serve a lunch at midnight and would play until two or three o’clock in the morning. Now they don’t hardly get enough people to have a dance. They have to hire outside music.

MM: Would these just be local people that played?

DM: From Dillon, mostly from Dillon, because it wasn’t as expensive as Butte. I played in the orchestra for a while.

MM: You did? What did you play?

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DM: Piano. We had the saxophone and a drum. It was noisy and they all danced. After you had a few drinks in you, you didn’t care what it sounded like!

MM: (laughs) Was that when you were single, you played?

DM: Yes. This was during the summers when we weren’t going to school. It was a lot of fun.

MM: What about in Butte? Were there a lot of dances here, too?

DM: Yes. They had the Winter Garden. I don’t know much about it because I only went to two or three dances. Bob took me there. I went up to Hibernia Hall on St. Patrick’s Day. The floor was...crooked and the band was terrible. It was terrible, but we sure had a good time.

MM: How soon after you met Mr. Melvin did you get married?

DM: Two years. November of ’40 to June of ’43.

MM: Did you think right off that you would marry him?

DM: No. I didn’t. Then came wartime when we were going together. 1941 was Pearl Harbor, and I thought sure Bob would have to go. Because he was in the defense industry, he was deferred, but they were about to draft him in the end of...his brother went. We saw lots of servicemen. He was with the mountain infantry (?). He trained in and lived in Colorado and was in Italy in the ski troop.

MM: Had he been working as a miner, too, or was he drafted right away?

DM: He must have been working as a miner. (unintelligible) He and Bob used to kid each other, “You’ll have to carry on the family name. Either one of them are never going to get married.” (laughs) We had two boys, and Eddy had eight children, two of which were boys.

MM: When you were married, did you worry about Mr. Melvin working in the mines? Did that seem dangerous to you?

DM: He was working on top. He was a compressor man. No, I didn’t worry about him working, except in cases of real bad lightning because he operated some of those great big compressors. They were huge. Since then, that building has been torn down.

MM: Where was that?

DM: The Butte Hoist. Sometimes there would be a fire. He had several close calls before the final explosion almost killed him. The oil in the lines would catch fire. All the oil in the lines for
several miles caught on fire and then the firemen came. I don’t know if they poured cold water on it. I don’t know if that caused the explosion or not. It was so intensely hot. Bob’s boss asked him to go up and turn off the valve, which he did, but it exploded before he had it turned off all the way. All I saw was the pipes...

[End of Side A]
DM: They had cut down on their man power. There were several hurt. He had one man in the phone booth. He said, “You wait there for calls.” It was blown up. Luckily, they escaped with minor injuries. His boss, Bonner (?), was burned on his arms, but nothing real bad. Another man, a volunteer fireman, his face was burned. (unintelligible) because they never thought he’d live. Every morning they’d get a call at six o’clock. My sister stayed with him because she’s a nurse. We’d all get dressed and rush down there, and somehow he lived through the day. It was terrible.

He was hurt so bad, cut by glass, and burned. I didn’t think he’d ever see out of one eye, and his head was so big from the concussion. The back of his head laid on one of those hot pipes. That’s why he has that scar on the back. But he had the will to live. Ten days after he was in the hospital, they amputated his leg because it just turned purple, even though he packed it in ice and everything. There were so many fragments blown into it. He was in the hospital, between the old St. James and the new Community, 51 days and then he went back to Rochester. They had to do more surgery on him. He had about ten surgeries in a year.

MM: Were you angry at the company? He had told me they could have prevented that accident.

DM: No, I didn’t have time to think about it. I was so worried about him all the time and was always down at the hospital. Carol was 17 then and she watched the boys. They were 15 and 13. The poor kids were left home alone quite a bit. Then we went back to Rochester and my mother took care of the kids. They didn’t mind because she was just like a second mother. She came to Wisdom on the weekends when school was out, and she would work at the restaurant. She had a really big job trying to keep up two places. She was wonderful.

MM: What was it like raising kids in Butte? Did they get in trouble around here?

DM: No. At the time, there were quite good kids in my neighborhood. There are hardly any now, five or six now, but at that time there were quite a few. The boys played ball. Bob built a playhouse, and the girls played in the playhouse. We had swings. In fact, we had all the kids in the neighborhood because there were many other... But he had swings. Sometimes it was bad on night shift because it’s hard for a man to sleep with all the yelling going on, but I didn’t ever want him to go back to work for the company. I was just so worried about him getting better. It was tough going because we only had 35 dollars a week from industrial accident at that time in ‘62. I don’t know what it is now. I know it’s considerably higher. Of course, after he was hurt for six months, we got some social security.

MM: Did the company give you any money either?
DM: They did, but such a small amount. He didn’t work for two and a half years, so the industrial accident that we got during that time was deducted off his settlement and we only got 12,000 dollars. That was just enough to pay all our bills because he hadn’t worked for two and a half years, and we didn’t buy anything except what was absolutely needed. Any other state, we would have gotten a big settlement. He wouldn’t have had to go back to work.

MM: God, that’s awful.

DM: To lose a side of your face, lose part of your hearing, and part of your eyesight...his right side got hit the worst. It was hard to adjust when you’re 48 years old from being healthy and active. He was athletic in his younger years. To adjust to that and to get a leg that would bend so he could wear it and be comfortable, which is hardly possible because nothing would take the place of your right leg.

MM: Did your neighbors and people in the community help out while you were going through all this?

DM: We took up a collection, but the woman who I had in charge of it said that the money order must have gotten lost in the mail. The other one that took care of the flowers...we got the flowers. Of course, the family, they would bring us some roast or something like that to help out. We were lucky that Bob could go back to work. It was plenty hard for him to adjust to it for a long time, but he did, and he made good and made lots of friends.

MM: It must have been hard on you, too.

DM: It was terrible, going down to the hospital and seeing him suffering so much.

MM: Did you ever go back to work after you were married?

DM: No. I took the census in 1960 and I made about 60 cents an hour. (laughs) Now they mail it to your house, but in those days we had to go to every house and do all the marking down ourselves. No, I had my hands full with three little ones. Bob worked three shifts. We were working on this house, remodeling it. No time to catch your breath. Three shifts are hard, especially with a family.

MM: What kind of hours would that be?

DM: Let’s see. It started at six o’clock in the morning, six to three o’clock. That’s 9 hours, but they only had a half hour for their lunch and that was on their time, so it must have been six to two-thirty, two o’clock...They had lunch on their own time, and then they get off at seven o’clock in the morning. So a day shift must have been...

(Break in tape)
MM: You know what I wanted to ask you. The last time I was here you told me that Butte was a great place for nicknames. Do you remember what some of them were?

DM: Yes. Ask Bob, he’s the one that knows.

Bob Melvin: One of them was Redneck Kelly...Denny the Buck (?)...

DM: Mickey the Bird.

BM: Mickey the Bird.

DM: Redneck Kelly, Patty the Duck.

BM: Patty the Duck. Everybody had one.

MM: Those are great.

DM: They were something else.

BM: (unintelligible) That was another nickname.

DM: A bee just flew in, and it’s over there on my artificial flower.

MM: (laughs) He’ll get fooled!

BM: That’s a bee!

DM: That’s what I said.

BM: He went off. There wasn’t anything on them! (laughs)

DM: No nectar in those flowers!

MM: Did you used to go to all the Miners’ Union Day celebrations and stuff like that?

DM: We didn’t get to go to many because, working three shifts...if it came in the middle of the week, we couldn’t go out there.

MM: So one day he would work one shift and then...?

DM: One week. One week of each. He just barely got used to one shift except for night shift, and that was hard to ever get used to unless you worked it maybe and got used to working just the one shift. Day shift just seemed like awfully early. I think my husband liked night shift better.
because he could get a good rest and then he’d get up and work on the house. When you’re night shift, he could only sleep until about noon, and then he’d get up and work on the house and lay down at night. Sometimes you could sleep, and sometimes you couldn’t because you can’t turn it on and off like a faucet.

MM: Yes. It must be horrible to try and adjust like that. You’ve always lived up in this neighborhood then?

DM: After we became married. We’ll be married for 37 years in June. We were married in ’43. Since then, we’ve lived here except for one year.

MM: Where did you live then?

DM: We rented a duplex down on North Main. Since then it’s been torn out of there. It’s kitty-corner to the Stewart Mine. We lived on one side, and the landlady lived on the other.

MM: How come you moved for that just one year?

DM: We were working on this place. This place had no plumbing and no bathroom. We remodeled the whole house so that the front room had a small bedroom. In the front room you could hardly have room for a couch and a chair, so we made that all one room. Our bedroom in the front was just a small place. They were always going to put a bathroom in it, but they didn’t. Bob partitioned that and made a smaller dining so we could have a bedroom. These two bedrooms were built on. Bob built them on, plus he built the garage. We were seven years just getting things built. We were always thankful that we were married 19 years when he got hurt, and we were thankful we had our own home.

MM: Yes. When did they start tearing down stuff around this neighborhood?

DM: A lot of them were set on fire after the old people died. They rented them, and they weren’t taken care of. What would you say, ten years, Bob, that the buildings have been burned down up here and torn down?

BM: It was longer than that.

DM: Longer?

BM: Maybe 15.

DM: Of course nothing’s been replaced.

MM: Yes. Did you know mostly everybody in the neighborhood?
BM: We knew everybody in Butte.

DM: Bob did, I didn’t. I’m from Wisdom. I only knew who he knew! (laughs)

BM: I would take Dorothy to town with me, and we knew everybody...

DM: You did. Everybody said, “Hello Bob! Hello Bob!” That was when the streets were full.

I said, “Do you know everybody in town? (laughs) He did know a lot of people!

BM: You didn’t mind.

DM: No, sure didn’t.

MM: It was sure different then.

BM: It was a darn good town.

MM: A lot of the old-timers have died off. With strikes and lay-offs, they’d move away.

BM: They had a lot of Sullivans here. That’s where all the big things come from. They had Dan Sullivans around here. There was a hundred Dan Sullivans. He came from Park City, Utah, so they called him Park City Dan. Bangor Harris, his father came from Bangor, Maine, so they called him Bangor. That’s two of the Harrises for you.

MM: That makes sense.

BM: Gary Walsh, his people came from Gary, Indiana, so they were all just the Gary Walshes. (laughs) All the Scottish Scots, they were all just called Scotty.

DM: Scotty Senior and Scotty Junior (laughs)

BM: Could you stand a cup of tea?

MM: I’d love one.

BM: Okay.

MM: Okay, that would be great.

BM: How about you, Dot?

DM: I don’t think I’ll have...I have some milk here, thanks.
BM: Okay, would you like a piece of cheesecake?

DM: Well, as long as you have it...

BM: I'll get everything out here.

MM: It must have been real hard then during the strikes because you didn’t have any benefits or anything. How did you manage?

DM: We never went so far in debt that we couldn’t get out.

MM: Would the stores give credit to the miners?

BM: Yes, all the credit you wanted—just as long as you had a job.

DM: She means when the strike was on.

BM: They cut off credit when they went on strike.

DM: Some of them, they didn’t repossess because they...

BM: They knew they’d pay.

DM: Yes, as soon as they got back to work. Some of them were just good about it. It was a struggle.

BM: I got a teabag right alongside your cup.

MM: Here it is.

BM: I got everything else...

MM: Great! (laughs) You should come take care of my house!

BM: Would you like some cream?

MM: No.

BM: Sugar?

MM: No, just plain.
BM: You’re easily satisfied.

MM: Yes! (laughs)

DM: I believe he has the fork there somewhere.

MM: Yes.

BM: Yes, she’s got everything.

MM: Yes, I’m all set.

BM: (unintelligible)

DM: We didn’t go into debt like a lot of people, even though we were building. We bought 100- dollars worth of lumber and nails and things. We would pay that off before we order another 100 dollars.

I have my absentee ballot.

[End of Interview]