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Summer 2000
Mary Melcher: Okay. You came from Utah when you were a child to Butte, is that right?

Catherine Mulcahy: Yes, in 1911 we came. November 11, 1911, we came to Butte. I was just around the first grade starting school.

MM: And your father came here to work in the mines?

CM: Yes, to work in the mines. And we went to school, the various schools here.

MM: How were they? Did you feel you got a good education?

CM: Yes. Yes I did. They were very adequate. They were large classes at that time but still we felt that we got a very adequate education at that time.

MM: How did they discipline you in school?

CM: Discipline was never a problem in those days. There was never an uprising in the class rooms and children were...I think they were more controlled by their parents.

MM: The teacher didn’t ever have to swat you or anything?

CM: Well, if she did the children got a swat when they went home if the parents knew about it so the teacher had good control of the children.

MM: And you had four brothers and sisters?

CM: I had one brother and three sisters.

MM: And you were the second oldest in the family?

CM: And I’m the second oldest.

MM: Okay, and your father died short...a little while after you got here? Is that right?
CM: My father died on January the 1st, 1916, and my mother died January the 2nd, 1918, at the time of the flu—with the Asian flu.

MM: Did you get sick, too, with that?

CM: I did. I was real sick with it but I seemed to get over it and I...so I’ve been very fortunate. I was one of the few that did probably got over that.

MM: Was that a real scary time? Was it...

CM: Oh, it was terrible. There were several, sometimes maybe four, five, and six in a family that died with it at that time.

MM: And you would know these people?

CM: I was too small at that time to know... to remember much about it.

MM: Did your brothers and sisters get sick too?

CM: No, I don’t remember that they did, no. At that time they weren’t but I do remember back when four of my...four of my brothers and sisters all had small pox and I didn’t get it. This was when my Mother was living.

MM: Did you help nurse the children then?

CM: No, I was too little. I was a little youngster and...I was vaccinated later, seven different times, but I never took once because I was...Doctor said I was sort of immune to it so I’ve never had a mark. The families in those days did have small pox, and they were quarantined in the house. There were big signs. It was a sign put up on each door so nobody could come in and nobody could go out until the Public Health allowed them to do so.

MM: Was that the same thing with the flu? Were people quarantined then?

CM: Not with the flu. I don’t remember that they were quarantined with the flu but it seemed like you were told to keep away from groups and in those days they didn’t have antibiotics, they didn’t have the drugs to take care of things so that was one reason they lost so many people here in town.

MM: Did your mother...did a nurse or doctor come to see her?

CM: Oh, I’m sure. Yes, we always had doctors because I remembered a doctor...a doctor coming to me. They said his name was Dr. Shandly but I never...I was too sick. I never did see him.
When I get sick, I get delirious. I wouldn’t see a thing or know a thing. But Dr. Shandly came and he later passed away. I don’t remember why or anything about that.

MM: So, had your mother been working before she got sick with the flu? When she was widowed? Do you remember?

CM: She had...she took in—

MM: Boarders?

CM: No, not boarders. She took in like a small rooming house and they had...the men at that time, we had so many men working in the mines and they just roomed in the rooms and they ate out at restaurants or in boarding houses, but my mother never had a boarding house.

MM: She didn’t cook?

CM: No, she never cooked for anybody outside of our own family.

MM: Did you help her take care of the rooms and do chores around there when you were growing up?

CM: Well, I was very small but we would, you know. We would do little dusting and things to help our Mother but we were all quite small, we weren’t very big, you know. We did do some, you know, helped to make the bed on the other side and whatever, dust the rooms with her and run a vacuum with her...I suppose it was more a carpet sweeper, in those days, it was than a vacuum, I don’t remember the vacuum. They were carpet sweepers.

MM: So, after your mother died you went to the orphanage in Helena? Is that where it is?

CM: In Helena. Yes, St. Joseph’s. We were, I don’t know, I was there a few years. We worked while we were there and I did go...Yes, I guess all I could say is that I worked there. I finished the 8th grade there.

MM: Was that a real difficult time, do you remember?

CM: Well, nothing is very easy, you know. You’re separated from your family and times were hard at that time for the Sisters as well as for the children, you know.

MM: For the Sisters who ran the orphanage?

CM: Well, yes, you know...while we had big fields full of vegetables and raised most of their own...They raised their own beef, and they raised their own...They had their own milk and they raised their own vegetables and whatever. We had big silos there. The boys did their share of...
the work on one side of the building, and the girls were separated. We were all separated. The girls did their share on the other side. You would be assigned special work and those buildings were spotless. They were shined every blessed morning. You were up at 5:30 and—

MM: And the nuns ran everything?

CM: The nuns ran everything. You were to mass every morning by 6:00 and—

MM: They did the ranching and farming too, they managed that?

CM: Well, yes. Well, they had a few men who worked there to help, you know. But the nuns would oversee everything.

MM: And were your sisters there or—

CM: Yes. My brother never was. He went with relatives but my sisters were there for a while, yes. My three sisters.

MM: So they kept you company a little?

CM: Well, yes. So we were kind of together but—

MM: Separated by age?

CM: Separated by age groups. You had the small girls department. You had the babies department, the small girls department, and the larger girls department. Then the boys were off on another...they weren’t...you never spoke. If you had a brother there, you didn’t speak to that brother unless you had permission. There was no such thing as—

MM: Really? That’s something.

CM: They would have to get special permission from both sides, and then they’d given us maybe, you know, fifteen minutes, half an hour, maybe, a couple times a year to visit. You could see them in the distance but that’s all.

MM: So there was no chance for little romances or anything?

CM: No. Times have changed now. They go skating and they go...they have a great time now. Well, the fact of it, they don’t have it anymore, I mean everything’s torn down and eliminated. But after our day they...they did things very differently because we didn’t have all the...The facilities that they had and we didn’t have the recreation that they had. They did things very differently. They went up town, I believe, to school where we stayed in the same building for school.

Catherine Mulcahy Interview, OH 049-055, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
MM: And where exactly was it located?

CM: It was located in Prickly Pear Valley, that’s all I could say. An earthquakes tore it...ravaged
the place and they tore it down, you know, destroyed the buildings.

MM: Is that near Helena? It is in Helena, oh. Okay, so you went through 8th grade there?

CM: Yes, then I went to St. Vincent Academy for four years.

MM: And you worked your way through high school?

CM: I worked my way through high school, yes.

MM: Now, were there lots of other girls who chose not to go to high school and got jobs
working as housekeepers at that time, do you remember?

CM: Yes, there were a lot of other girls that were sent out, they were sent out to different
places and maybe their relatives. If they did have relatives that could come and take them, they
would take them, but not too many had the opportunity to, I should say it that way, to go to
the Academy and work their way through but—

[Break in audio]

MM: So, some of the girls, they finished 8th grade, and they got housekeeping jobs. They just
had to start working. They didn’t get to go to high school.

CM: That’s right. A lot depended on their relatives and whatever but I didn’t seem to have any
relatives so I got to have the opportunity of going and I really grabbed it, I’ll tell you, and I went
up and I did very well in high school. I worked my way through. I did any kind...any and every
kind of work from teaching down. Sometimes a sister would be ill and I would just go and take
her class for one day or two days at St. Helen’s School, the elementary children, you know, until
she, you know, for just a couple of days when they didn’t have any substitute or I would...I
would do everything scrubbing floors and washing dishes and working in the laundry and
running errands and everything.

MM: You kept real busy. Did you have time to study?

CM: Well, yes I did, I managed to get my studies in. But I did work pretty well with the studies,
you know, because I tried to carry two courses. I carried the classical course and I carried the
business course, which I suppose the classical course was the one that I used most because a
lot of the -- taking four years of Latin, I mean, I think it does help with nursing. However, after I
left there I went to...I went down to Dillon and I took classes at Dillon.
MM: Did you board some place? Where did you stay during high school?

CM: Right at the Academy.

MM: Right at the Academy. Did everybody stay there?

CM: Oh, yes. And all those girls that were there were all...came from rather wealthy families because it cost considerable money, you know, to attend school. Now the girls were supervised, well, continuously. You were not allowed to leave the grounds. The sisters knew where you were every minute of the day. You just had special places where you could go. If you went out in the evening there was a—

MM: Chaperone?

CM: —chaperone went with you, yes. They took us to plays of whatever. You marched two by two all the time. We went for walks everyday but the sister went with you, there was a sister at the back and—

MM: Did you wear uniforms?

CM: Yes, we wore uniforms and we also wore the caps with the tassel all the time. You had to.

MM: Was there anyone else there who came from the orphanage with you?

CM: One my sisters, I guess, went there. Maybe the two, my two younger sisters ended up going up there, but my sister next to me never did. She ended up going to...entering the order and joined the...then joined the sisters. She went to Leavenworth, Kansas and then she...she’s still in the order.

MM: The nuns saw some promise in you and ability and they wanted to help you in your education?

CM: I suppose so.

MM: Okay. Was there any snooty feeling among the girls that came from families with money?

CM: Well, no, not really, because I had a lot of wonderful friends which some of them I still have. I suppose they figured that somebody had to do...they weren’t so inclined to work, and I really did the work. They weren’t that inclined to do work so I...I don’t think they had any jealous feelings at all.

MM: Okay. AYou went to church every day during this time?
CM: We got up every morning at 5:30 and we attended mass every morning at 6:00. We went for a walk...Well, we had breakfast after mass, and I didn’t always get on the morning walk with the girls because had...I might stay in the dining room and do the dishes after. But, then we...I took care of all the bells for the...I think almost for the four years and our classes started at 8:00 in the morning and we had classes right through till 4:00 outside of...just except for the noon hour, we got out of classes at 4:00 so our school day was a long one.

MM: And you would ring bells between classes?

CM: Well, yes, I took care of the...to ring the bells for the classes—for to change classes, you know, changing rooms. All the girls moved from one room to the other for the various classes.

MM: What sort of bell was it?

CM: Just electric. Press a button. But I had track of the bells when I’m in each class, and I could get up and walk out and ring bell for them and everybody moves along—groups that moved to different rooms and settled down again. I took care of that for four years I remember.

MM: So you had to be real responsible?

CM: Oh, yes. I was one of the ones that was responsible. In fact, in the last year, I think, she even...I even did some chaperoning, which I objected to finally because I knew that girls were skipping ranks and—

MM: Well, what would happen to rebellious girls that didn’t follow the rules? Were they disciplined in some way or did every one follow the rules?

CM: They followed the rules pretty well or else they would...I imagine that they would call and talk to their parent about it. Their parent was paying plenty of money to keep them there and a lot of them came from various ranches around Montana, you know, different places.

MM: Was it a good education?

CM: Very good, excellent. Yes, I had four years of Latin, four years of English, two years of Spanish, four years of different mathematics. I had about a good three years of history, and I had...I also took...and I had science—two years of science. I had bookkeeping and typewriting and commercial arithmetic, plus music, so I did real well.

MM: Why did you decide to take both business and classical studies?

CM: I really don’t know. Very few had the opportunity but when I asked they let me do it. They didn’t do it after that, I don’t think, because the girls said they asked but they wouldn’t let
MM: You just wanted to cover all the bases and make sure you could make a living afterwards?

CM: Yes, so that I could do what I wanted later on. If I wanted to go to an office, I could, or if I wanted to go into teaching or whatever I could do that.

MM: How old were you when you started there? Started school at the Academy?

CM: Oh, let me see. I must have finished boarding school at 14 so I’d have to be 15, at least 15, I guess, going in there.

MM: And then you finished when about... when you were about 19 or so?

CM: Something. I imagine about 18 to 19.

MM: And at that time you went to Dillon, Montana and took some courses?

CM: Yes. I went down to State Normal College, it was at that time, and I did take courses from there and I also took an awful lot of... I took a lot by correspondence, too during the fall.

MM: How did you support yourself at that time?

CM: I was still living with nuns that were down there because I didn’t have any means of... I had no relatives.

MM: Were they friends to you then?

CM: Who?

MM: The nuns?

CM: At that time, yes, but I always worked. I still worked. I worked for anything I got, believe me.

MM: Okay. So, you took different courses then to be a teacher?

CM: To be a teacher.

MM: And then did you teach?

CM: One year I taught... I taught not, I did not have my certificate but I did help the sisters one year to compensate for what they did. They were short and I did teach one year for the sisters.
MM: What subjects?

CM: Oh, all elementary for the little first and second grade, I believe it was.

MM: In Dillon?

CM: No, it was in East Helena. A country school in East Helena. Then I decided that I wasn’t...that I’d rather go in training. So I came over to Butte and went in training the following September.

MM: To be a nurse?

CM: To be a nurse. And I stayed there until I graduated in 1928.

MM: And where did you stay? Where did you live while you were in training?

CM: Well, you had to live in the...right in the nurse’s dormitory. You lived right there and you were supervised every minute. You had to be in by 10:00 at night. You weren’t allowed to be out after 10:00. The rules were really drastic in those days. If you smoked you were put out of training.

MM: Out of town?

CM: You were just put out of training. You were—

MM: Oh! I thought you said you were put on a train [laughs]. Okay. What was your school called?

CM: It was St. James Hospital School of Nursing.

MM: Oh. And they had real strict rules for you?

CM: Oh, yes, we could have strict rules in those days. Now they say—

MM: So, did you date during that time?

CM: Very little. Very, very little.

MM: Was that allowed?

CM: Well, I suppose that if you were back by 10:00, unless you had special, very special permission and the sister was there at the door to see that you got in on time, you weren’t five
minutes late either. The doors were locked promptly at 10:00. The nursing doors were locked promptly at 10:00 and the head sister was there at the door all the time, Sister Corona.

MM: This was run by nuns too?

CM: Oh, this was all, yes, this was part of the hospital. In fact, in our day in training we didn’t…you had no such thing as registered nurses working, being employed by the hospital working on the floors. All the nurses that were in training took care of everything. Student nurses handled everything.

MM: Were there any registered nurses around?

CM: On private cases there would be, but not working for...not the hospital itself.

MM: Was that because there were just very few registered nurses?

CM: Well, no, that was their theory in those days and they had…probably had more sisters for supervising. You had a sister on each floor to supervise the floor and you had one sister in the hospital at night, too, supervise the whole building at night. In those days you worked, you were on duty at 7:00 in the morning and you may not finish until 7:00 at night because you’d work a split shift. You’d work till maybe 7:00 to 11:00 and be off from 7:00 to 3:00 or 7:00 and work till 12:00, and you’re off till four or whatever but you came back. You had classes all afternoon. You had to be in classes and doctor’s lectures during that time off in the afternoon. Then you came back on the floor in the evening and did your evening work and got the patients ready for visitors and took care of everything in the evening. Your days were long in those days, and we did all the menial work. We did not have maids that took care of our… the floors in the patients rooms because we had to do it. We took care if the patients. You might have as high as—if you worked in the wards—you might have…you might have ten men in that ward easily. You could try to give them all…you’d have to give them baths and change their beds and get their…get their teeth washed and take care of their… each person and take care of their treatments. Well, partially take care of their treatments. You did have the head…whoever was on the floor at the desk, take care of some of the treatments for you, but you still had all of these things to do. Then you’d have to scrub your floor. You scrubbed that floor every second day.

There was times that I had two wards. I had one big ward across the hall and one ward here. This day I could do all the men on one side and do the floor and the next day I’d…I’d have to go across the same day and just, you know, make up their beds, and rub their backs, and brush their teeth and give them fresh water and this type of thing and dust...run the dustless mop on that floor. But the next day I’d have to go back to the same day and just come back to the first ward again and just give them their back rub and straighten their beds and whatever, but you did it every alternate day.

Catherine Mulcahy Interview, OH 049-055, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
MM: Now, did you have to pay any room and board?

CM: No, no, the sisters, in those days, were supposed to be paying us ten dollars a month but in most days they never...I don't ever remember seeing the ten dollars because at the end of each month the nuns, we actually owed the hospital money.

MM: For your uniforms or—

CM: No, no, our uniforms...we supplied our own uniforms and that, but we...each nurse was given a box—a big tin box—and in that you had all your medical...a lot of medical supplies in a...What shall I say? You had bandage scissors, a large one and a small one and you supplied then the medicine glasses, I mean, and I'd have as high as 15 or 16, if I was in charge of the floor. I could pay for that myself to get the medicines out, and we had to have our own syringes, our own needles. We had to have our own catheters, we had to have our own glass catheters and our own rubber catheters and our own colon tubes. We had our own enema tips. We had everything of our own. The hospital had given it to you but charged you for it, and it was yours to keep. But you used—

MM: But how could you pay for it? How could you pay for it?

CM: They took that 10 dollars a month that you were getting and it paid it...it gradually paid for all of this.

MM: So, in other words you were working but you weren't making any money—

CM: We didn't make any money doing that.

MM: —and you were working really hard.

CM: In fact, you ended up paying. During that time, you really did work hard. Because when a patient left the room, you'd even have to...we'd wipe the walls down and we'd wash the...clean the mattresses with Lysol and everything. I don't know what they do nowadays because I haven't been around there for so long. It's been too many years.

MM: How had you decided to be a nurse?

CM: Oh, I don't know, I always liked nursing.

MM: So, these were really busy years. I imagine that you were really tired at the end of a day and you didn’t even want to go out, is that true?

CM: Well, yes you were too tired most of the time because you got up too early and you had too much work to do on the floors and we did not have, you know, as much help as they do
now. All the registered nurses now take care of so much and they have a treatment nurse now and they have ladies that do the rooms and clean the rooms after a patient goes and all these things where we had none of that. We didn’t have any nurse that was a registered nurse working for the institution itself.

MM: So, as you say, got along into your third or fourth year did you get more difficult duties with patients?

CM: Oh, yes, you’d have charge of a whole floor, you know, you’d go in charge of a floor then and that meant you’d have to take care of the treatments yourself. Then you were in charge of the treatments for all of the patients. You’d have to go around with the doctors and when he’d visit his patients and you’d take the orders, you know, you got the orders then and you knew what was going on and you’d have to help him dress the incisions and you supplied the instruments, he didn’t supply them. I got three sets of instruments, at that time and you had to keep them sterile and rolled up, which was a tweezers type of instrument and a...step...What should I say?

MM: Stethoscope?

CM: No.

MM: That’s okay.

CM: I’m trying to think of the three. One was a hemostat, and one would be a stitch scissors where he would take stitches out. Three instruments. We kept those sterile all the time and so that if you went you would have the instruments with you going around with the doctor. He didn’t bring his.

MM: And you bought all those yourself?

CM: Yes, the hospital gave...supplied us with these and we paid the hospital then in turn for these things and they were our own to keep. Nowadays, I think they have a big cart that the doctor...they take a big cart around on the floors, and everything is supplied right on the cart. Everything is plastic more or less and disposable and we didn’t have any of that. Even the needles that we used for our hypodermic needles had to be sterilized right there in boiling water every...We’d had a flame, little...What do you call it? Gas flame. We kept those things sterilized all the time like that.

MM: Was someone making money off your labor, do you think? Was the hospital making any—

CM: No, I don’t think in those days that they made very much. They got by but I don’t think that anybody made that much labor off, you know, because after all we were eating too and I don’t know how costly food was, it wasn’t that expensive in those days but they weren’t taking that
much in either, you know, if you look at that. I mean, the patients, people weren’t paying that much either that came in there as patients.

MM: Was there ever any feeling among you and the other nurses that you should be paid more? Did you talk about that?

CM: Oh, no. We never questioned it. Never, no. We never gave it a thought. If we had a few cents, why, we would go up to Tosalino’s in the evening. They had a little cafe up there on Park Street. We’d go up and have a cup tamale or a dish of chili or something, you know. Oh, no, we didn’t.

MM: Did you ever go to dances or—

CM: No, I never remember going to a dance or anything. I don’t know. They have a lot of activities now that we never did.

MM: You didn’t. Did you know any young men here in Butte?

CM: No, I really didn’t.

MM: How’d you meet your husband? You met him in 1927?

CM: [192]8. I don’t even remember how we met. That’s funny but I don’t. Somebody introduced me to him, I suppose and then—

MM: Did you get married right after you finished nurses training?

CM: Yes, I did.

MM: Did you continue working?

CM: Not really. Not very long because I got pregnant and Gail was born in 1929.

MM: And what work your husband doing?

CM: He was city farm… and I don’t want them to hear… He was working for the city.

MM: Okay. So you had a child pretty quickly and you had—

CM: The year after, ’29, and one in 1930 and one in 1932.

[End of Side A]
CM: —the doctor until you were ready to go in. You didn’t see him much in between unless you would have a problem, I guess, but I don’t think I had problems so I don’t believe I ever saw him.

MM: Then you went to the hospital and had your babies?

CM: Yes. Went to the hospital and had the babies.

MM: Were there midwives around in Butte at that time?

CM: Yes, there probably were but I had, as long as I was a nurse and was accustomed to the hospital and had worked in the hospital and worked in the nursery and knew all the doctors. I just was quite at home. I didn’t worry a bit. I didn’t…I would rather go to the hospital.

MM: Did you know women who had midwives in the different ethnic groups?

CM: Yes, I did.

MM: Was it a thing where foreign born women were more likely to have midwives, do you remember?

CM: Oh, I don’t know. I don’t think so. I knew one woman that just…who took care of all the women in her own neighborhood but I didn’t do it and I didn’t have a midwife at any time.

MM: Do you remember if more babies were lost in childbirth? And if the women got sick afterwards or—

CM: No, I don’t. No, I thought they did very, very well. Very well. I don’t think we had that loss of children at that time.

MM: Okay. Did you plan to have three children? Was that how many you wanted or—

CM: Well, I don’t think. It seems like they came and that was it. That was it. I’ve been very happy with my three. They’ve been wonderful really.

MM: When did you go back to work as a nurse?

CM: I went back during the war when the hospitals kept calling, come out and give us…will you come out and, you know, just work a few hours now and then that would have been the 1940s, the early ‘40s.
MM: And were your children in school?

CM: Yes, they were in school and by that time they were quite, you know, kind of rugged, very, quite responsible and capable of taking care of...of watching themselves so that I never did have a baby-sitter, didn’t need any. They were pretty good size, you know. if they needed anything or if they wanted anything they would call me at the hospital so I knew where they were at all times. I had no problems. Even with the boys.

MM: During the war, you started working—

CM: I started working at Murray Hospital.

MM: And you were just part-time at first?

CM: I started, yes, I think I started maybe about three days a week at first just to give them time and then they gradually kept after me, won’t you come back and work, you know, they needed the help and you stayed...I went on five days anyway, I think later. Then I did general duty for...I don’t know, on a surgical floor, I imagine, for a couple of years. Then I went just in pediatrics with babies for two whole years. Stayed with Dr. Gillespie in pediatrics for two years.

MM: Okay. I just realized that we skipped over the Depression period. How was that for you and your family? Was that a real difficult time?

CM: It was a difficult time, and the reason why was my husband who was working for the city was getting 128 dollars a month. Finally, they wouldn’t cash...the city would not...nobody would cash the city warrants because the city did not have any money to redeem it. So we had quite a time for about six months where our warrants weren’t getting cashed at all.

MM: The city didn’t have any money to redeem it?

CM: No. Some of the stores would...we were lucky that the stores would give...I could get plenty of credit because my credit was good so I didn’t have any problem like that with food. I never was short food but—

MM: What about rent? Were you paying rent?

CM: Yes, I was paying rent, and the rent was low. It was, I think if I remember right, maybe only 25 dollars a month. But you were only making 128 dollars a month so you still had everything to pay out of that 128 dollars which was something but food wasn’t high at the time. You could get like 100 pounds of potatoes for 98 cents. At the first of the month, you had to get a whole order to hold you for the whole month, I mean when you were getting you money. But, of course, when I...you could get credit, I was getting credit from one of the stores that knew us so I had no problem that way. But in the meantime, I still did not to go out to work. Well, of
course, in the meantime...I had the two babies then.

MM: Did you think about going out to work?

CM: Oh, I had, no...I had to hire a baby-sitter. In those days it was even hard to get a baby-sitter, and I couldn’t pay them. It would be hard. Of course, I could if I went to work maybe. But I don’t remember how I...whether I thought there was enough work at that time because, you know, people couldn’t pay the nurses either. Work was very bad. Work was very, very hard to get. The most of the miners worked two weeks on and two weeks off. So they were only getting two weeks a month. They worked two weeks on, two weeks off.

MM: Were there beggars that would come to the door and ask for food?

CM: No, I don’t remember that. Not in Montana. I do remember the Indians doing that in Utah. Knocking at the door and ask for something to eat, you’d give them...my mother would feed them, and they’d go on. But not in Montana.

MM: Well, was there...you were living in Butte. Was there much division between say the management and the company and the workers during the Depression? Was there resentment of the management because they had money and other people were really poor?

CM: I don’t think so because I think that at that time the company was trying to play fair by giving them two weeks on and two weeks off so that everybody could get...could try to manage on what they were making. But I don’t remember how much they were, at that time, how they were making. I can remember when my father was getting 3.50 dollars a day. That’s all he was making, and of course, they considered that good money at that time.

MM: What about the different ethnic groups that live here in Butte? Did people get together according to what their nationality was?

CM: Yes, yes, the Finn miners, they were down on the East Broadway, for instance. The Irish, mostly, lived up what they called Northeast up toward what they called Dublin Gulch, up that way. It seemed like that those people were quite clannish in those days.

MM: Was there much intermarriage among the nationalities?

CM: No, I don’t believe, you mean among different nationalities?

MM: Yes, like if a Finn would want to marry an Irish person?

CM: They could, yes. There was no resentment or anything. I don’t believe in that, that we had that. Then we have never really had much trouble, many black people around Butte so there was no intermarriage that way with black people. We never really had many black people.
MM: Would religion stop a couple from marrying if they—

CM: Yes, sometimes it would because, especially with the Catholic religion they would object. Sometimes they would kind of rather object to it, but as a whole they seemed to get along. I don’t remember too much dissension among them.

MM: Okay. So, do you remember did neighbors help each other out during the Depression?

CM: Oh, yes, neighbors were very good to one another. I mean some of the people, for instance, some of the older women would help another woman if she had sick people in the house, come and give a hand which was very good because lots of time she needed a help. You know. I don’t remember whether they, I guess they did bring food, too, if they had it but then no one had an awful lot during the Depression.

MM: Did you ever hear any talk of abortion around here?

CM: No, I never did.

MM: I heard that midwives sometimes performed abortions? Did you hear about that?

CM: No, I never did.

MM: What about birth control, was there any of that around here?

CM: Oh, no, you didn’t have...there was no such thing as the birth control pills or any of those. You never heard of it anyway. In those days, people never did, the older people never, never discussed anything of that sort. Never out in the open like it is now.

MM: What about working as a nurse was there—or during your training—was there every any talk of that?

CM: No, no, there was no...there were certain surgeries that were not allowed in the Catholic hospitals. You know that, you know, there were a lot there weren’t permitted. I don’t know whether that rule still holds or not. I have no idea. I haven’t been in surgery for the past 18 years. I don’t remember.

MM: Do you remember any single women who were supporting themselves during the Depression? Did you have any friends who were single?

CM: Oh, yes, I had some nurse friends and they did very well, they did pretty well because they got, they did private duty. If you did private duty in my day you got, you would work 20 hour shifts and you slept in your patient’s room, you know, at night, the hospital would have a cot in...
there and you’d have to watch your patient at night as well as during in the day. I believe we
got 7.50 dollars for the 24-hour duty so that, well, that was considered a lot too at that time.
Otherwise, I believe that if you worked a 12-hour shift, it was five dollars. We did not have such
things as eight-hour shifts.

MM: They could support themselves pretty well?

CM: Oh, yes, they could, they could. They got by nicely. A couple, two or three would go in
together and pay rent in an apartment, and they managed very nicely.

MM: Was there much pressure then on women to get married so they wouldn’t be called old
maids?

CM: I don’t remember that.

MM: You don’t. So those women, they liked being single, your friends that were?

CM: Oh, yes, yes. Of course, eventually I think almost, I think most of all of my friends got
married. The nurses that were in training with me and that I rather chummed around with
them, those are still living, but most of my class is dead. I started out exactly with about...Let
me think, maybe about 25 nurses, and we ended up with about 12, I think, by graduation time.
Then one of those nurses went to surgery the morning we took State Board over in Helena, and
she died. See, in those days they didn’t have antibiotics or they didn’t even have...they didn’t
have penicillin or anything in those days or else she could have lived. Then a short time after
one of our nurses died with, from an appendectomy operation. She just went in, walked in and
said that she was having trouble with her side. The doctor put her in, but she never did come
out. She was in my class. So that gradually we lost some of the 12, too.

MM: And you kept in contact with them after you graduated?

CM: Oh, some, yes. There were only, in my class there are about five living, I believe, four or
five living, five I think. That’s all.

MM: After you were married would you go out much and would you go visit your friends?

CM: No, not really. I had my children too close together because I...when my last boy was born,
the oldest one wasn’t yet three years old so that I had...you’ve got three babies and you’ve got
babies on bottles. You’ve always have two on bottles, and two on diapers so what do you do. I
mean you were nursing, I forget I think I nursed mine. But—

MM: Would you visit with your neighbors?

CM: Oh, yes, with the neighbors and a few relatives, my husband’s relatives.
MM: Was that hard on you to be staying home all of a sudden when you’d been out in the world for years and—

CM: Well, I should say yes and no because you were so busy with the babies and you were so tired being, you’d be up half the night anyway with one or the other that you were tired, too tired to be worried about what, you didn’t give that much thought I don’t think.

MM: Okay. So then you went back to work during the War in the hospital and did you stay there for years?

CM: Oh, I stayed, yes, I stayed working, then after I quit the general nursing, I did private duty. Then you could work when you wanted, you know, as they called you or you’d work if you, I’d go on a lot of surgery cases, you know. We didn’t have what they call recovery rooms like they have now. They’ve eliminated the private duty nurse, you know, by putting in recovery rooms and so on. You would go on for maybe, I just didn’t mind going on for three days or even to the fourth day but the I’d tell my patient that, you know. Because surgery day, you know, the surgery day, you’re with them and coming out of the anesthetic and watching them and then you had your first, second and third post-operative days and by that time you had them up walking around and they could sleep at night. They didn’t need, really need you anymore. The floor could take over then. So that they were pretty well, feeling pretty well.

MM: You’d be on private duty in the hospital?

CM: Umhm. Oh, yes, we worked private duty in the hospitals.

MM: And you were paid by the patient?

CM: Paid by your patient.

MM: That’s interesting. And did you like that type of work better than the general hospital work?

CM: Yes, you did because you stayed with your one patient instead of running through those floors. My heavens, some of the running that you did there in tremendous. It’s just too much. Of course, I don’t think right now...I think that they have fixed all that. They’ll be a desk here and a desk there and at one end of the floor so that you don’t have all that running, but years back you would just run from one end of the place to the other all day long. Half the time...what shall I say...What do you call wasn’t working, to be called—

MM: Loudspeaker?

CM: Loudspeaker. Well, no, not a loudspeaker. You had a communication from the desk after

Catherine Mulcahy Interview, OH 049-055, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
the Community opened over here, and you talked to the patient in the room and find out what they want. If they wanted something where you could bring it in instead of going all the way and then coming back and getting it and going back again and back and forth. But, half the time those things didn’t work so...You did a terrible lot of running in general duty, but you didn’t have to do that much running in private because you were right there taking care of your one case. You stayed right with that patient. Put your eight hours in, and sometimes they’d have three nurses so that...You still have private duty here in Butte. You still have it on home cases, on some of the home cases. It’s very expensive right now so they have to be...they have to have plenty of money to pay them. I don’t know what they nurses get right now, something maybe, I couldn’t say. If I say it, I might be wrong. Thirty dollars, some a day probably up to 40 dollars. I don’t know.

MM: Did you see a lot of changes in nursing technology?

CM: Everything, yes. Everything has changed and changed and changed.

MM: Including housekeeping too, right? Like did you use to beat carpets and hang them out on the line and beat them?

CM: My mother did. No, I never did do that. But my mother did that when we lived in Utah when we were just little youngsters. They would take the big carpets out and put them on the line and beat them, but that was before they got vacuums. But in my day, we’ve had vacuums and—

MM: What about washing machines? Did you—

CM: My mother had a washing machine and old, old, old type washing machine when we were even little down in Utah, surprisingly enough, but because it had a big, big cover on it and it had something like a...Well, it was almost like a stool that was on to the cover, and then when you put the cover down and you kept winding, you just had to wind the big, big handle and it would keep the clothes moving and going around and round and round. Really, I didn’t see any after I came to Montana like that because we just...we just even left ours there. I don’t know that we ever got it.

MM: How was the wash done in the orphanage?

CM: Oh, we had big laundries.

MM: You did.

CM: Oh, yes. I worked in the laundries there.

MM: With wringer washing machines?
CM: Every kind. Well, they had...I don’t know what they had. Great big, big machinery and great big, big mangles. I don’t remember that the students...that the children put the clothes through. I think there might have been somebody...I don’t know whether it was sisters on that side that put the clothes through, but as they came through we would fold them. We folded all those sheets and everything, because we had, we probably had up to 250 beds every week to change. We had all those sheets. Not two sheets. You only changed one sheet a week. You always took the top sheet, and then you’d put it on the bottom. We didn’t have contour sheets in those days. So you’d put the top sheet on the bottom, and you’d out the clean one on the top. Then next week you’d put the clean one, the top one the bottom again. Every week about 250 beds got changed. But they would...you didn’t change two sheets. I suppose one reason was that the sheets lasted longer then. They wouldn’t get worn out.

MM: Okay. What about an ice box? Did you have an ice box when you got married? Did you have a refrigerator or—

CM: I had a refrigerator but my mother had an ice box. We had the ice box in Utah. I don’t remember, I can’t remember, but we must have had, we must have had an ice box when we came to Montana because I don’t think they had refrigerator then in those days. We had electricity in Utah. My father was very good with electricity. We had the electricity that far back we did. But we still had, there was an ice man that used to come around, and you’d put a sign in the window. When he’d come by, he’d just see the sign, “Ice”, and stop and bring you a piece of ice. Just dropped it in, and you had a container way underneath that took the water as it came out and it worked out nicely.

MM: Great. What about changes in medicine and nursing? What sort of changes have you seen there?

CM: In nursing? Well, you’ve got the...you have drugs for everything nowadays where we did not have those drugs years back and everything is so disposable now. I don’t care what it is. You go into the hospital everything you get is disposable. It’s charged to you and you can either take it home or do what you want. I’m not sure about the...even the water pitchers and the glasses, whether they’re charged to you or not. But everything is plastic. In those days we didn’t have that. In my day, everything was, well, stainless steel or metal.

MM: You had to keep it clean.

CM: Everything had to be just polished to the heavens, and you really worked to keep things up and sterilized and everything so you wouldn’t be transmitting one condition—whatever the last patient had—to the next one. Everything had to be sterilized and cleaned. Like I say, we even cleaned the mattresses with Lysol. I don’t know what they do, as I say, nowadays. But even if they still do, some of that it is done by help not by nurses. Of course, now they don’t have the school of nursing either. They have all RN’s or aides or practicals. We had no practicals and no
aides in my day.

MM: You did it all.

CM: Yes, the students did it all.

MM: Even the cleaning and everything.

CM: We did all the cleaning. We did every bit of that. It had to be done by the nurse. You had your patients, and you were responsible for them to see that they combed their hair and brushed their teeth. You did everything for them—their baths and beds and—

MM: What do you think about the changes that women have gone through? Like you said before if you smoked you were kicked out of training and you had very strict rules, what do you think about that now?

CM: Well, I think it’s fine. I think that that was silly in those days, but then that was their theory, I guess. Nowadays, I think that’s all right if they want to smoke. I don’t object to anybody smoking. I didn’t object to a woman who drinks, who smokes, who does anything. I think it their privilege and their prerogative. It’s not mine. It’s none of my business. So I always mind my own business, and I don’t care what anybody does just so I...if I don’t want to do it then I don’t have to.

MM: Was there any feeling that married women shouldn’t work during your lifetime, do you remember that? Was there any idea that—

CM: Yes, they did years back. Of course, after, I think during the war when you were married, it was...it wasn’t questioned at that time.

MM: It was your patriotic duty then?

CM: It was your patriotic duty to get out and work whether you wanted to or not. Like I said, I had been away from it, then, for a few years, I don’t know how many because my children were...I don’t remember what years they were, but I went and took a refresher course on the, they supplied us with a refresher course. I can’t remember if we paid for that or not so that we would be brought up to date on the new things. Then you were still, I should say, rather supervised for a little, short time to see if you could...you could ask somebody if you questioned any treatments or anything, but you did have a refresher course at that time and could go back if you wanted which was very good for people.

MM: Has there been any change toward attitudes around separation and divorce?

CM: Oh, yes, everything is so different nowadays. People are so liberal that...in those days, well,
there wasn’t that much divorce. People put up with a terrible not, I think, that sometimes they shouldn’t have.

MM: It was uncommon for people to get divorced?

CM: Yes...yes, especially Catholic. You didn’t do that. You didn’t get divorced.

MM: Do you think it was, if a couple was divorced, was a woman looked down upon? Was it considered her fault more that the man, do you have any ideas on that?

CM: No, not necessarily because it’s terrifically hard to put up with drink, especially, and sometimes you see more meal times than you see meals because you have...if the husband goes out and drink the money, then the children, what do the children have? What do the parents have? I mean, the wife. She has nothing. She can’t buy food, she can’t but clothes, she can’t do anything, so I think that nobody should ever look down on a woman. She shouldn’t have to put up with drink like that. They do say it’s an illness. I think they lack an awful lot of willpower for one thing. I think they’re selfish and lack a lot of willpower because if they could see the damage that they’re doing I don’t...I wonder if they would do it. I don’t know. I really don’t know.

MM: Did you know any women who left their husbands and got divorced?

CM: Trying to remember, yes, well, I’ve known through the years, but not way back then, too much. You didn’t have too much of that in those days because I think that they would accept most anything in those days, you know.

MM: What about beating? Did you ever hear of women that were beaten by their husbands?

CM: No, not in those days. I don’t remember any of it. I have no knowledge of it.

MM: All right, I guess we’ll stop there. Thank you.

[End of Interview]