

Maureen and Mike

Mansfield Library

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

Archives and Special Collections

Mansfield Library, University of Montana

Missoula MT 59812-9936

Email: library.archives@umontana.edu

Telephone: (406) 243-2053

This transcript represents the nearly verbatim record of an unrehearsed interview. Please bear in mind that you are reading the spoken word rather than the written word.

Oral History Number: 065-001

Interviewee: Mary E. Mista Bell

Interviewer: Susan J. Buchel

Date of Interview: December 5, 1979

Susan Buchel: I'm talking with Mrs. H.O. [Mary] Bell in her home in Missoula, Montana, and this evening is the 5th of December 1979. I think that's right. Okay, so start out with how you came to be involved somehow.

Mary Bell: Well, I came here from Minneapolis. In fact, I was connected with Glacier [National] Park in 1941 and '42. That was just the beginning of the war at that time. There were two of the directors who were connected with the hotel, with the Florence Hotel Company, which was just built. It wasn't about a year old at the time, and they'd been having problems with their food operation. So they asked me if I would mind coming out and taking possession of this—taking over the food operation—the catering, and that. I said, well, I said that I had promised to go back to the Minneapolis Club in Minneapolis, you see. I wasn't really sure whether I would take it or not. Well, they were quite insistent—the background that I had in the hotel club and resort operations. So that was the beginning of this operation.

I came here in September, the 17th, 1942, and that was just at the beginning of the war [World War II] of course, and during that time, just shortly before I arrived, they had two head people who were head of the kitchen. It was the chef and his assistant at that time, and they both had to go to war. It meant then...With the prisoners that we had out at Fort Missoula who were then captured, or taken over I should say, by our U.S. military out of New York—this was the passenger ships that came in on the Italian lines—and they were taken in and brought here. It was George Shepard who was the attorney for the Missoula Mercantile at that time, and the Missoula Mercantile had about 67 percent ownership in the hotel—in the Florence Hotel.

Now, it was a community thing. Many of the people in Missoula were shareholders, which my husband at that time saw that the hotel was built, of course. It had been burnt down, and, of course, it had been standing vacant there for so long. He finally insisted that this hotel had to be built. He went to C.H. McLeod [Charles Herbert McLeod], and he said, "Well, fine, Harry, if you can go ahead and get the money," he said, "we'll put up the insurance money that we have in this and be happy to go ahead and build a hotel." So this was the beginning of this operation then.

George Shepard, who was the legal counsel for the Missoula Mercantile and, naturally, looked after all of their enterprises that they had. It came to the point that we had to get someone to operate our kitchen. So they went out to Fort Missoula, were able to get two young fellows. One was a chef on the Italian passenger line, and the other one was his assistant. Now, I don't know the names of either one of them, but anyway, they were very good and they were very

cooperative. We got along beautifully with the operation. We went all through the war, and then, of course, when the war was over with, naturally, they were replaced. But we also had people that were connected with the housekeeping department.

We had young men that were maids or, "maid boys," you might call them, and we even had some busboys. We had them helping all through. I can't remember how many we employed, but it was quite a few. Maybe, I would say, maybe, between eight to ten probably—in that neighborhood. They were employed by different people in Missoula here. They were very reliable. They weren't the kind that you felt that you had to have tremendous supervision over them. They had their places, of course, where they could live outside of the fort. Although, they were on parole, you might say is what it was.

This was the beginning of this situation that I know at that time, and we added to as we went along—filled in with our own people whenever we could. But that was the beginning of this operation at that time, and I don't know of anything I could add to it but they were very helpful, I would say, because I was a head of the catering and the service department of this operation.

They knew how to prepare food, and, of course, at that time, we had to buy turkey. There was no other meat to be had. We bought it by the tons and froze it. There was frozen fruits, frozen vegetables—all these kind of things we brought in. Of course, the point of sugar was being rationed, butter was rationed, so there was always this point of talking with them, "We've got to conserve here, we've got to conserve there," and they were very good. They were really very cooperative.

We never had any problems with them at all in any way. There weren't any alcoholics among them that I knew of at all. I know that during the time that I was with the hotel company, and that was about two years or three years of that connected with them that I know of at that time. So how many more were around town I don't know, but I know there was quite a few out here at the fort. What the number was I haven't any idea because it's just one of those things that never got involved into that part of it, you see. But this part I was involved with. I was directly connected with it.

SB: Just from that, a lot of questions come. First of all, just for curiosity's sake, I've worked in Glacier Park for a number of years—

MB: Did you?

SB: Where did you work in the park?

MB: I worked at Glacier Park, the east entrance. I was in charge of their dining rooms there. That was in '41 and '42. They wanted me to come back again in '45, I think is when we re-opened, and I said, "No." I said I wouldn't go back as much as I wanted to. I really enjoyed it

very much. It was really a fun experience and meeting a lot of lovely people, and I did enjoy it tremendously. But, outside of that, was all. There wasn't anything else, and that was really what...There were two of the directors that I had talked with.

One of them was Sid Howard (?) at the time. He was one of the directors on the board, and there was another gentleman and I can't remember who he was. Then there was a lady, Mrs. T.E. Moore (?), and her daughter. They lived at the hotel, and they were visiting at the park at this time and she was telling me the situation. How sad it was for the beautiful hotel, and they just couldn't get anybody to go forward with the catering as well as the kitchen operation. Excuse me. [coughs]

SB: When you said those, at least, the two fellows that were in the kitchen, it sounds like they were professional chefs?

MB: Oh yes, yes, they were professional men in their field because the head chef was a man that was head chef on the boat. These were passenger ships that they were on, or this one was the passenger ship that they were on when they were brought in. How many of them I don't know. Usually, on those they run 200 to 250 employees, you see, on a ship—a passenger ship—because some of the cruises that I have been on, anyway, usually run about that.

SB: These gentlemen worked, then, a regular full-time day?

MB: Yes, yes. They were full-time, and, of course, like with the chef, he was fully responsible and saw that the buying of the merchandise, of the food that had to be brought in. All of this he was very capable to do, and his assistant was the same way. Then we had other people, I mean, who could help in any way, don't you know, because we had quite a staff. That usually run around about 100 those days when I was with the company because I had a tremendous servicing staff to take care of all your catering plus the regular employees only for the coffee shop and dining room plus those in the kitchen. I can't remember how many we had at that time in the kitchen alone. Because we had two full time salad people—salad and sandwich people. Then we had a man who had taken care of the bakery. Well, he was very good at decorating cakes and everything like this also. He could build up figures, don't you know, for banquets—arrangements. Could be done up beautifully and, for buffet dinners and so on. It was really very lovely.

SB: I'm surprised in Missoula there was a lot of call for that sort of thing.

MB: Yes there was, yes.

SB: Why is that?

MB: Well, I don't know but, the hotel was the only place, really, to do any catering. They had no other place. The hotel was the main thing. The Florence Hotel at that time was one of the finest operations in the country for a small hotel of 150 rooms. We had a large banquet room downstairs that would take care of five hundred, and we had the governor's room and the Mayfair room which is now called the McCall (?) room, I think—if they still have food. It isn't the food operation that it used to be.

We'd take care of 250 people, plus all of our small rooms that we had up on the second floor that would take care of from, oh, anywhere from a group of 10 to 15 or 25 people. Then we had two rooms off of the dining room downstairs on the main floor that would take care of 100 when they were opened up, plus your dining room and your coffee shop. So this was quite an operation. It was really a very fine business. Wasn't anything to serve between 12 and 1,500 people a day.

SB: Oh my word!

MB: And you wouldn't believe that.

SB: I really, you know, in Missoula! Who did you cater to mostly? What kind of groups?

MB: Groups? You had your social groups, you had women who had bridge parties, you had wedding receptions, cocktail hours. There were conventions. We had conventions. We were booked beautifully for conventions and could take care of them, up to 500, you see. Then we have the smaller hotels, I mean, that were around, like the Palace could have the overflow, and then there were some smaller ones, I mean, that did some of the overflowing but the hotel was the place.

SB: And I suppose in western Montana that was—

MB: That was it! It was the meeting place. We had a beautiful lobby, and people came here and if they were going to meet you anywhere they'd say, "Well, we'll meet you at the Florence." It was just a natural thing, just like you would have a beautiful club that you belong to. "I'll meet you at the club." That was the occasion of it, but if we hadn't had these young Italian men to carry the battle it would have been pretty hard.

SB: You'd been up the creek!

MB: Yes, it would have been hard to do. It worked out really very well all the way through.

SB: Were these men paid a salary commensurate to what a person would have made?

MB: Yes, oh yes, they were. They were paid just like if we would have paid anyone else because we had to have people. They were competent, they could do the work, and it was fine. They were reliable, they were honest and sincere, and there wasn't anything wrong that way.

SB: You said you didn't remember their names, but do you remember anything about them? First of all they, evidently, these two gentlemen spoke English then.

MB: Yes, they spoke some English—enough to get by. Yes, it was broken English, but then you could understand them and you could converse with them very easily. It wasn't difficult at all. There were probably some, maybe, that we had in some of the departments that—I couldn't say right off hand—maybe, that had a little problem. As far as I know, with people that I had with me in the food operation, it wasn't difficult at all. They worked really with you very, very well—very cooperative. As I say the only thing is that they were prisoners of war, and they were just on parole is all what you would say.

SB: Just the situation.

MB: Just a situation. We didn't condemn or anything. It was one of the things that had to be done at the time.

SB: Do you know anything about...Remembering them and maybe talking with them, do you remember anything at all about, oh, their own private lives a little bit as far as what they did when they got off work, where they went?

MB: Well, as far as I knew, from what I knew of them, I don't...They had social lives, yes, because they would, they would go out and be with other people in a group. Like my employees or the employees of the hotel which they were working with, and they would get out and they would see the town. They would go out sociably. It wasn't anything wrong. Now, the chef, if I recall, he and one of my top girls—ladies that I had in the dining room—were really, pretty much in love at one time.

But, of course, he had to go back, and I don't think he was married at the time. I don't think. I don't think either one of these gentlemen that I remember of. Now, maybe they were and probably never discussed it at all, don't you know. You just don't know those things because I never did get intimate with them that way. If it was, it was always in a business way and nothing else. I know that part of it, and I suppose some of the others maybe did the same thing with the employees that they were connected with with the hotel.

Also, probably, some of the others that were out to the fort that were working in the Missoula area too, because I know some of them if I recall were doing even housework and cleaning for other people within the town where they were making extra money that was theirs. They were allowed to keep it as far as I know. It was never taken away from them or anything of that sort.

SB: You said that they lived somewhere in town. Do you know what they all lived together somewhere in town?

MB: No, they lived in different areas. I think the housing was probably taken care of for them. I mean, they would have to pay, but it was taken care of to see that they were in good quarters, see. That they weren't in quarters that weren't desirable for them. As far as I know. Now, some of them did go back, they...I know they had to report, to the fort and how often they did that, that I do not know.

SB: Do you remember very many...Did the immigration officers come very often to places of work, or did they not?

MB: If they did, it was probably off shift maybe. They would probably come in and probably check, but as far as I knew, I don't remember of it—of any incidents like that at all. They probably were in checking, talking with them because when they were on duty, of course, it was times that there just wasn't any chatting to be done. I mean, if they were, it had to be done off-duty, really, when they were finished. No doubt they had to report. This was a must, that I know.

SB: Do you remember any extra paperwork for yourself that occurred because of them?

MB: Yes, well, there was paperwork that was through the main office, through our bookkeeping department, and there would have to be...there was a report on their behavior and so on. Yes, that was. Of course, that went to Fort Missoula. But the only way that a person could check that back, if the hotel company would have had those books yet. See, payroll books would have shown that. Would have given you a good...the names of all of them very easily, you see.

SB: Well, I'm just getting started looking at some records at Fort Missoula, and maybe there'll be something on that end.

MB: Well, there could be, yes, there could be. There could be at that end. That's very true. That would be the place, but I don't...but I know also, from the hotel company, would have been records also of them on the payrolls because here were their names and their earnings.

SB: So as far as the report on their conduct and all, that would have been your responsibility?

MB: Yes. The report that I would relay was always very good, and they were never out of line. You never saw any drinking. I never saw it and, you know, come to work under the influence of liquor or being smart or anything like that. We treated them just like if they were another person employed there under the same supervision, and it was never anything different that I know of.

SB: By any chance, do you...a lot of the chefs that come from Europe were sometimes trained in some really fine places. Do you have any idea where this gentleman...Do you remember offhand him saying anything about where he had been trained?

MB: No. I know he was from Italy, but the part of Italy, I couldn't tell you. And how long he was on the boats that I do not know. He did mention it, but I mean, so vaguely then I didn't...you just don't pay any attention to it. Now, that you're bringing this up, I could have probably told you very easily, but I didn't...I don't remember right off hand. I know that they were with us, well, pretty close to two to three years before we were able to replace them, you see. What happened to them, of course, many of them returned, and they went back on their boats again too.

Some of them returned home. Some of them didn't return. Some of them stayed, got married, and stayed right in the country—didn't leave again. I don't know just how that affected their livelihood or, from an immigration standpoint, whether they could stay or not or whether if they married American girls—citizens—if that would keep them here then. I imagine it probably did.

SB: I would like to do some checking on that too.

MB: There would be a great deal on that that I would think that you would be able to check through and find out.

SB: Yes, well, as far as someone who lived in the community, I read in the paper—in *The Missoulian* at that time—just some vague mentioning of, “Oh sometime we'll have to have a concert or have them have a concert.” Some back and forth with the community, but then I never read anything in the paper that really talked about, there was a concert such-and-such a night. Do you recall any of those kinds of activities?

MB: There was some, yes, but I don't know how thorough they were at the time. There were some that I know that was connected with music or in vocal and so, but I couldn't give you any information on that. I know that they were because, actually, some of them on the boats, don't you know, working in different ships, they also entertained. They had to, I mean. That was part of their job.

SB: Do you remember going to any concerts?

MB: No, I never. In fact, my work was so, so involved at the time I didn't have time for myself even. At the time when they were here, we also had a training program at the University [University of Montana] where we were training air cadets for the Air Force. They were doing all their ground work training there, and so we had...the University was filled at the time. So we

had those boys to contend with, and they were also in the military at the time. They were always let out on a Saturday afternoon. Had to return Sunday evening. I'm telling you it was a beehive. It was awful.

SB: Do you do you recall or have any feelings about having 800, 900 Italians there. Did you very often see many Italians in the area? Did they have any doings back and forth with the community?

MB: Oh yes, yes. There were, but how much of it I do not know. I have no idea how much converting they did back and forth and what their social life was, what kind of entertaining they were doing—socializing in any area. That, I do not know. The only socializing I knew is with some of the employees that we had at the hotel that were connected with us, of course, and that is all. That is the only socializing that I know. There were, as I say, there were ones that got married and didn't return. That I know.

SB: So, at least the ones that worked in the hotel became a regular part of the staff?

MB: That's right. They were treated as a staff. They were part of the staff. Long as they did their job and did it well, and if they weren't, well they were...we just absolutely said, well, they're going to have to be taken back. We report that so-and-so is not doing his job. He's been this way or that way, whatever the situation might have been.

SB: Did you have that?

MB: We never had it, but there was some of it though. But we haven't had any of that though that I know of at this time that I can recall.

SB: But there might have been some other places in town where—

MB: There could have been, yes, yes.

SB: You said that there were other places in town, do you remember any specifically about, as you think of it, where there were people working?

MB: Well, there could have been at the Palace Hotel at that time. That was the next hotel, and then as I say, there were other places maybe. They probably were working in grocery stores if there was or probably in the food and clothing operation maybe doing things that I don't know. I couldn't answer that one. I haven't any idea, but I know that they were scattered through. I know that there was quite a few being held at the Fort, though, all the time that were confined to the quarters and were not allowed to leave. That I know.

Of course, I think maybe those were the ones that they thought probably were the most dangerous. I don't know. Held there for security reasons. But these were picked out, and we did very well with them. It was just something that worked out very well during the war for us. It was a blessing really because they were just taking men—young men—in all fields. Didn't make any difference. All businesses were hurt by it because they had to substitute and fill in with capable...with people who weren't very capable. We had the same thing. As I said, we've had our top chef and his assistant had to go, and the assistant was a graduate in cutlery from France. That I went into business with later. So these are the things that come up.

MB: Well, this one that you went into business with, this is—

SB: Henri Ganier (?), who has the Frontier Lounge now, that I was in business with. He came back to the States just before the war broke out, and his father was here, Mr. Ganier, and he was married so they came back. He was visiting with his mother in France at the time, and, of course...Don't know whether he was born...I can't remember Henri ever saying whether he was born there or born in the States. I believe he must have been born here, because she never cared about the States. She did return so it could have been that he could have been born here and had to return. Because I know that after he graduated, he came here to stay then. He had his training there.

The other fellow, of course, was a man who had been, basically, a pretty good cook anyway. He was much more business minded. Of course, Henri was too, but he was so young at the time. He had to have that basic training, don't you know, under an older person who had the experience, but he was very good though. Now, there isn't anything else that I could tell you that I know. This comes just very vaguely to me, all of this. Much of it...It's been so long since these things have come up.

Now, like George Shepard was, as I say, the legal counsel for the Hotel and the Florence...the Missoula Mercantile and the Florence Hotel Company. He could give you much more on that you see than I could, but he was killed in an automobile accident not long after that. It was, well, shouldn't say not long after that. It was during the time I think I went into business with Henri in '49 or '48. It was during one of the times when the legislature was meeting in Helena, and he got into a snowstorm or something. Anyway, it was an automobile accident. Don't know whether he was involved with anybody else or whether he got a heart attack or something, but, anyway, it was one of those incidents. I just don't remember it right off now, what it was.

SB: Well, this all helps.

MB: I hope it will help you some. I'm probably not giving you, maybe, a great deal of information. I think maybe you could find out a great deal more.

SB: From this I can probably catch a lot of things.

MB: If I could give you some more information, maybe I can as this goes along and might pick it up. This fellow was a very tall thin man—

SB: Your chef?

MB: Chef, yes. He was tall and thin, very pleasant. Both of them were very hard-working young men though. They really did a good job, and they had a responsibility to do well.

SB: It sounds like it was quite a responsibility.

MB: Yes. Of course, they were used to the ships anyway, because if they had a large passenger ship, they probably were running around 1,000, maybe, to 12, 1,500 people anyway. So I know that they would have to have a staff. Nothing less than 250 and probably up to 3, 400 because you have...That's just a floating hotel is what that is.

SB: There is a lot to it. Well, thank you for this information that it will help—

[End of Interview]