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Oral History Number: 038-001

Speakers: Terrence McGlynn, Dick Maney, Joe Boyle

Speakers' Dates of Birth: Not listed

Date of Interview: circa 1975

Project: Ghost Towns of Montana Audio Recordings Collection

[introductory music; "Old Settler's Song"]

Terrence McGlynn: Ghost towns of today are tangible evidence of the mining and transportation frontier important in the history of Montana. The rush of gold-seekers to Montana Territory about 1864 was responsible for the foundations of the economic and social structure of the state. Among the reasons for investigating the remains of the boom-and-bust mining era, consider the following: the ghost towns are fragile, what remains is fast crumbling into nothingness; they are an important part of frontier history. The settlements stimulate curiosity—the who, what, where, when, why of mining assumes real importance. Since most people are interested in history, the ghost towns have a nearly universal appeal. If, as one historian has said, "Montana never had time to develop a history," maybe the crumbling buildings in our midst are a reminder that today is almost too late. It is time to take time.

The purpose of this project is to present interesting facts and fiction about a few of Montana's ghost towns—to bring those towns from then to now—in an attempt to investigate a part of history that has never been recorded. The three towns represented in this part of the program are Elkhorn, Granite, and Marysville. Elkhorn is located in an area that has 33 types of ore deposits; an area with a peak population of 2,000, and a population of about 20 today. But listen now to part of the story of Elkhorn.

[transition music]

Dick Maney: Elkhorn is a partial ghost town; there are people who live there year-round, and there is a deputy sheriff to see that what remains of the town stays intact. Because the town may again experience a boom, there is an air of quiet excitement about it, which contrasts greatly to such towns as Granite, where most of the time there is intense silence. There is a sign at the beginning of the town of Elkhorn that detracts from any overall impression of desertion. Some of the buildings have been partially restored, and, since approximately 20 people live in the town, it does not have any real air of seclusion. Yet, if one is to compare the population of today with that of the peak population in 1889—approximately 2,500—there is a great contrast.

Elkhorn is located about 19 miles east of Boulder on a well-marked road. The principle building of interest is the Fraternity Hall, which has been partly restored and is of some architectural interest with its imposing false front.

The town of Elkhorn, which, according to the USGS [United States Geological Survey], is situated in an area in which the geology is more complex than in any other district, has seen mining of many minerals: gold, silver, lead, copper, small amounts of zinc. The area produced \$14 million worth of metallic products in the time from 1875 to 1928. The town was named for the large numbers of elk that once roamed in the area. A man named Peter Wys, originally from Switzerland, discovered silver in Elkhorn in 1870. Wys died only two years later; a monument to Wys is located in the old Elkhorn cemetery. A.M. Holter developed the Elkhorn mining property for a time, but, in 1889, the mine was sold to the London Swansea Developing Company. The price: variously listed as “several thousand dollars” and “more than a half million dollars.” The camp was important enough to have a branch line of the Northern Pacific Railroad built to it in 1887.

Elkhorn housed mine and mill workers—mostly married men—along with as many as 500 woodchoppers and, of course, the miners. The town had four side streets, named Boulder, Killborn, Holter, and Wy [?]. There were boarding houses near the mine and as many as 14 saloons. Elkhorn also had telephone and telegraph service; both services coming into the town about the time of the railroad. The railroad was taken out in 1918, and the last telephone operated in 1928. The last legal saloon was operated by a man known as “Joe By-Golly” in 1938. The cemetery is of interest, aside from the monument to Peter Wys, because it is one of two cemeteries in the area on Forest Service land, the other being located at Philipsburg, and because there are several interesting tombstones, especially those marking the children’s graves. The disease that resulted in the death of many children was called “brain fever.” It is reported that the epidemic lasted from 1888 to 1891, and that at one time there were only two children under the age of five left in the entire town. One person, in speaking of Elkhorn, commented that the town had a “fast-moving history” with the first labor riot in Montana, two diphtheria epidemics, and fabulous wealth, resulting from the mining in the area. The houses are interesting in that they had imported French wallpaper, root cellars, and almost all were multiple-room structures. One interesting artifact to the entrance of the town proper is the remains of a 24-horse wagon, used to bring in a 30-ton transformer from Boulder.

Above the town proper of Elkhorn is a collection of buildings called “Dagotown.” These buildings are in a restricted area since there are private mining claims here. The deputy sometimes gives permission, however, to drive into that area. There is an excellent view of the town, and there are some remarkably well-preserved buildings in this area.

[transition music]

Why go to Elkhorn? The Fraternity Hall and the Metropolitan Hotel are worth seeing. The town is part ghost and part alive. The cemetery is worth inspecting, and many, many people go there because the town is accessible and retains the flavor of the old mixed with some stirrings of the new.

[music plays; unidentified song]

TM: From Elkhorn, travel west through Butte and Anaconda, past Georgetown Lake to Philipsburg and up the hill to Granite: a true ghost town because it has no residents. But, Granite has survived two boom times, and some old-timers say it could boom again. Part of the story of Granite follows.

[music plays]

DM: Granite has been called by such names as “Silver Queen,” “City in the Sky,” “City Without Night.” It was in 1873 that silver was discovered on Granite Mountain by James Hill and Eli Holland. The story says the vein was literally kicked open by a deer or elk in final death-struggle. Opponents of that story submit that the story resulted from pure speculation. Many mining towns are located at the top of a mountain, and Granite is no exception. One drives up about four miles east of Philipsburg, a town of about 1,100 people, surviving on mining hopes and a position as county seat of Granite County. Granite, at one time, had a population of 3,000, that was about 1886. Many of the people who worked in the town of Granite lived in Rumsey, southwest a few miles; a few lived in Princeton, over the mountains to the north; and a number of people lived in Philipsburg, where the bimetallic operation was to be located.

Granite produced more than \$45 million worth of silver between 1882 and 1893. The Panic of 1893 emptied the town of population, and Granite was a ghost until 1898. From that time, 1898, to 1906, Granite again produced silver, producing about \$1 million worth every year. Only a few years ago, Hecla Mining Company attempted to reopen a shaft to claim some of the silver that still remains. The silver is not exhausted today, but water in the lower depths of the mine proved to be a large problem and the mine was again shut down.

The town that was famous for producing a two-ton block of ore, assaying 973 ounces of silver per ton, is falling apart today with the exception of two buildings. The first building has attracted attention from architects, artists, photographers, and, unfortunately, vandals. That building is the Miners’ Union Hall.

[music plays]

The Hall was dedicated in January of 1891 and, fittingly enough, was built almost entirely of granite. A man named Gilman dedicated the hall and spoke of the wages at the time—\$3.50 per day—as assuring the miner and his family a comfortable living. The Hall was used for dances and had, at one time, one of the best dance floors in the entire Northwest. Minstrel shows, vaudeville acts, and melodramas were performed in the ample Miners’ Union Hall. Top entertainers, such as Harry Lauder, played to a full house. That was in the days of Granite’s prosperity.

The Hall remained in good condition as late as 1938, but since then the building has been almost destroyed by time, weather, and vandals. There may be some help available to restore

the building; one would hope that this structure, built to last two centuries, could be brought back to some semblance of its early beauty and dignity.

The mine superintendent's house is in excellent restorable condition at this time. Funds are supposed to be available soon for touch-up work on that remarkably sound structure. The hospital and the livery barn, however, offer little hope of restoration. They are gradually settling in to complete disrepair and will probably soon disappear. The ruins of the mill and the area containing what is supposed to be the old company vault are worth examining, especially during the short summer season when the contrasting colors invite sketching and picture-taking.

If Hill and Holland discovered the Granite riches, it remained for Charles McClure to develop the area, but he had problems, such as raising money, developing paying claims, and working with his creditors. One story suggests that had it not been for the delay of a telegram, caused by one of Montana's famous blizzards, a telegram asking that the "mine be closed," a rich discovery that extended the life of the mine would never have been made. The mine paid great dividends: \$100 thousand per month for about 11 years.

[music plays]

Granite, a city without a graveyard, a city in which businesses never closed, thus, "City Without Night." A city perched in the sky, a most unlikely place for a city except that mines are often at the top of mountains. Granite has become a kind of graveyard with everything of value, including the very bottles hauled off, torn apart, moved out. It could have been restored at one time, and no doubt would have been an outstanding attraction. Tourists would willingly have paid two dollars each or more to see the remains of this boom-and-bust cycle: a part of the mining history that caused Montana to be settled.

[music plays]

Why go to Granite? It is easy to find when the weather is mild, and it is located in particularly beautiful surroundings. There is some activity in the old mine town today, but most of the time the place is peaceful and it starts one thinking about history. If there are Granites and other ghost towns—at least 227 of them in Montana—why isn't it possible that there will be mining towns again? The mineral has not all been discovered, and, then, it is interesting to speculate about the poor people who managed to get rich in such places as Granite. And maybe ghost towns are incorrectly named, but, then again, they remain a stimulating, tangible part of history. One would hope that many pictures will be taken, many stories captured and set down on paper. The mining history of the state has not been written; the stories of the towns are little-known. Montana received a big push from mining activity, and the remains of that story are there. The digging becomes harder each year, but the rewards and pictures, stories and history, are there for those who want to seek them. Why not go to Granite?

TM: Drive from Granite to Helena and 14 miles northwest find Marysville. Alive today, but barely so. At one time Marysville had 3,000 people; today there are about 50 in the town that was the state's leading gold producer in the 1880s and '90s.

DM: When the circus came to town, an impromptu performance resulted in which the animals were turned loose, and one miner was reported to be riding a zebra. The tragic fires that destroyed most of the mill operations in the town resulted in a tragic comic episode in which the firetruck was destroyed. One miner was very short, so short that the miners who followed him found it difficult to crawl into his drifts; he was truly an individualistic miner. Another miner located a promising lead and operated the strike for some time. He then sold his mine, returned to his home country, spent every cent, and came back to work in the same mine he had discovered and sold.

[music plays]

The stories briefly mentioned here indicate that Marysville has a most interesting history. The town is part alive and part ghost town today, but it is popular and it's easy to find. A good road leads to the town located 21 miles northwest of Helena, and a few families still live in what was once a town of 3,000 people. One description of the town today includes this account:

Joe Boyle: As we rounded a curve in the road, the first thing that came into view was a huge, decaying mill. Then, as we glanced to the right, we saw the small town spread before us. It was much larger than I expected, and several of the homes were occupied. We wandered up the main street observing two old stores next door to each other. The display windows are now gaping, glassless holes, the interior dust-covered, but the old shelves remain on the walls. You mustn't get too close because there are excavations under these buildings and you could easily fall through. One storefront is completely overgrown with trees. As we came back down the street, there was a large vacant lot diagonally across from the store where we were to meet. The only thing remaining at the lot was a rock retaining wall at the extreme rear. The Northern Pacific Railroad turntable had been in that lot. The track came right into town up to that point where the engine would be turned around for the return trip. The building across from the vacant store is used for meetings of the Masonic lodge. We walked past the former schoolhouse; it is well-kept up, painted white, with a large yard. The school is being turned into a museum. Almost across the street is the little, carefully preserved Catholic Church. Just beyond the Catholic Church is the remains of the old Methodist Church.

DM: So much for Marysville today. Marysville yesterday is mostly the story of Thomas Cruse and the Drumlummon Mine. It is a true rags-to-riches story. Cruse was born in Drumlummon Parish in County Cavan, Ireland, and came to America when he was 20 years old after almost starving in Ireland. He landed in New York, worked various areas, and came to Virginia City, Montana, in 1865. When Cruse came to the Marysville area, he met a man named William Brown, who became his best friend.

The theory that Cruse used in finding gold was based on the idea that placer gold came from large quartz leads at the head of placer mining gulches. Most miners thought Cruse was crazy to dig into the side of a mountain to find gold. In 1876, Cruse located the motherlode and named it the Drumlummon. He was short of money and sold the mine to the Montana Company Limited for about \$1.5 million dollars and one-third of the mine's stock. Cruse was now a millionaire. He developed the Bald Mountain Mine that later produced millions of dollars-worth of ore and left Marysville to go into the banking business in Helena.

Many mills were built at Marysville, beginning with a 20-stamp mill and working on up to two larger mills powered by steam turbines, using cordwood for fuel. Later, one of the mills was converted into the cyanide process to keep material from being lost in tailings. Not all mills were converted. There are tailings in Marysville today that probably have as much as a million dollars-worth of gold and silver discarded in the refuse.

About 1890, the mines began to produce less and less ore. There were various legal battles, and the Montana Company sold out. The mine was worked for a time by the St. Louis Mining and Milling Company, later sold to the Montana Rainbow Company under William Wade. The last major operation was in 1940. A modern flotation mill was built but burned in 1950.

The town itself was named after Mrs. Mary Rolston, the first woman to arrive there. The town came to life in 1876. By 1890, there was over a million dollars coming out of the area each year, and there were over 100 business establishments. The five big hotels were named The Peterson, Samson, The Dunn, Ann Dylan, and The Benton. There were several restaurants, two doctor's offices with doctors named King and Lanstrom, two drug stores named Dudley's and Murgatroyd's [?], two butcher shops, blacksmith shops, Chinese laundries, livery stables, candy stores, a bakery, opera house, a bank and a jail, three churches, and four newspapers called *The Berrypicker*, *Mountaineer*, *Gazette*, and *Messenger*. Finally, there were at least 27 saloons. The school in Marysville at one time included eight rooms and six teachers; today, there are only six students.

The railroads both wanted to get into Marysville in 1887; the Northern Pacific put a trestle across the gulch at the lower end of the town. The trestle made it possible to move into the business district, with a depot and a turntable. The Great Northern built a station in the gulch below the town. The Northern Pacific had the best position, the best business, and stayed longer than the Great Northern.

Fire has been a problem in Marysville since the early days. In 1910, fire burned the entire business district. There have been fights, killings, and fires in Marysville. Today, the town is a shadow: windows are gone, tunnels caved in, few houses remaining. The glory of the town today is the colorful history, and the idea that riches remain in the area just waiting to be discovered.

[music playing]

TM: So much for Elkhorn, Granite, and Marysville, three important ghost towns of Montana.

Unknown Speaker: Ghost Towns of Montana was funded by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare through the Center for Continuing of Education and Summer Programs at the University of Montana, Dr. Patricia Douglas, director. Ghost Towns of Montana was produced and narrated by Terrence McGlynn, from the Montana College of Mineral Science and Technology in Butte, Montana. Sound mixing by Dave Edelman of Montana Tech and the production staff of the Center for Continuing Education. Songs are traditional American and Irish folk songs sung by Walt Robertson, Cisco Houston, Pete Seeger, and the Almanac Singers. The stories of Elkhorn, Granite, and Marysville were told by Dick Maney, with an additional story of Marysville by Joe Boyle, both from Butte. The story of Pioneer, by Dr. Dennis Haley, Rimini, Dr. Charles Wideman, Red Lion, Dave Edelman, Virginia City, Leo Maney, Garnet, Bill Black, Highland City, George Lubick, Pony, Rick Gleason, Castle, Elaine Harvey, Neihart, Dr. Jack Goble, Landusky, Marlys Hansen, all from the Montana College of Mineral Science and Technology.

[End of Recording]