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Interviewee: June Hartley Howe
Interviewer: Mary Bielenberg
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Mary Bielenberg: This is an interview with June Hartley Howe. June, when did your father and mother come to Hamilton?

June Hartley Howe: Mother and Dad came from Missoula in 1904. They had been married in 1903 in Missoula and then they came here the next year.

MB: But they were Missourians?

JH: That's Dad. Dad arrived from Missouri in about 1901. He had finished college and taught school for two years. He decided that he had always wanted to come to Montana, so he came in 1901, and that's where he met Mother, was in Missoula.

MB: What was her maiden name?

JH: Her maiden name was Anna Svoboda. She was born in Prague, Czechoslovakia.

MB: What was she doing in Missoula?

JH: Her family had moved to Missoula after coming to this country when she was one year old. They had gone to Spokane first, but then finally they landed in Missoula.

MB: Had he been involved in the dry cleaning business before he came up here?

JH: Yes, he worked in a laundry and dry-cleaning in Missoula, so that's where he got his experience. When he came to Hamilton, he bought the two-story brick building that stood on the corner where Citizens State Bank now is.

MB: I wonder if he might have worked with the Missoula Laundry.

JH: Yes.

MB: On Higgins?

JH: Yes, north on Higgins.

MB: I know Higgins very well. When they came then, they set up this...you mentioned it was a steam cleaning plant.

JH: It was a steam...Bitterroot Steam Laundry. Everything was run by steam not electricity.

MB: Where was it located?

JH: On the corner of First Street and Main, where the Citizens State Bank is right now.

MB: Tell me about why it was such a prosperous little business.

JH: Hamilton was really booming then because of the mill, so there were lots and lots of men. Little rooming houses and hotels were full of men. The eating places were always busy. They needed linens washed and the hotels needed laundry done.

MB: How many hotels do you think there were back then?

JH: The Hamilton Hotel was right across from the laundry. The First Hotel (?) was on the corner of 7th and Main where the little mini-market is right now. It was a two-story building and lots of men stayed there. There were hotels upstairs over businesses on Main Street like the European Hotel, the O'Brien Hotel, and Oscar's Hotel. They were all just upstairs rooms.

MB: Where was the mill at the time?

JH: The mill was at the west end of Main right on top, where the bridge is, just inside of where the bridge now stands.

MB: What did the little steam laundry look like?

JH: On the first floor, there was the office, the marking room, and then the big mangle. In the back, there was the washroom where there were three big washers and extractors and tumblers, and then the drying room. Upstairs were three or four big steam pressers and a hand dryer.

MB: How many people were required?

JH: I would say about eight because there was driver with us. First, it was a horse and wagon.

MB: It was used for delivery?

JH: For delivery, yes. They picked up laundry later when they had automobiles. They picked up laundry in Darby, Victor, and Stevensville.

MB: They did? All the way from there? Once a week?

JH: Yes, once a week. The driver would take off for the other valley.

MB: I bet it was a hot steamy room.

JH: It was very hot and very steamy. It was really quite unpleasant in the summertime.

MB: What time was the ironers' time to work, for example?

JH: Everyone came to work at eight o'clock, when the whistle blew. We had a big, big whistle at the laundry. The press steamed up all the time, so the whistle blew at eight, twelve, one, and five. The time it blew the loudest was when World War I was over. Dad went down and fired up the boiler, so he could blow the whistle for a half an hour. (Laughs)

MB: I would think that those women must have stood there all those hours just ironing away.

JH: It was hard. I suppose you get used to that kind of heat.

MB: They did lots of shirts I imagine?

JH: Lots and lots of shirts. That's mainly what they did: shirts and trousers on the steam press.

MB: What about women's dresses? Did they send them to the steam laundry or were they done at home mostly?

JH: Really, a lot of women's things were done at home, although in later years, people got to the point where they would send most everything.

MB: I was thinking of those blouses that have the little pleats on them.

JH: They did lots of those, too, but, way back then, people didn't think about using commercial laundries so much for their own things, women's clothes.

MB: Lots of sheets?

JH: Lots of sheets, and pillow cases, and towels, and bath towels, et cetera.

MB: I imagine all the restaurants used tablecloths in those days?

JH: Yes, in those days, they used tablecloths and napkins, cloth napkins. There was a lot of laundry.

MB: How long was he in business?

JH: He sold the business in 1946 to Glen Mitchell.

MB: The building was still there then?

JH: The building was still there, but just about that time, the property was sold and Glen moved the laundry to 3rd Street next to the Masonic Temple.

MB: Oh yeah. There's a laundry there now?

JH: There's still a laundry there.

MB: You and your sister worked at the laundry when you were growing up?

JH: We did, but not regularly. We just were that dumb and thought it was fun. (Laughs) I stood on a box lots of times, helping feed the sheets through the mangle. I'd be on one end and some girl on the other end. I would stand on a box so I would be tall enough to put some through. If Dad was in a pinch, we would work—if someone was ill. Zelma and I could always come down and help.

MB: John was mentioning that all of the belts that carried this material around in the laundry, everything was operated on a 10 horsepower motor. Is that right?

JH: Yes. There were no electric motors on each machine. Everything was run by belts and all of the belts were overhead on the ceiling. It was really a maze of belts all over the place.

MB: Wasn't it noisy, too?

JH: It just depended on which the machines were running. It wasn't terribly noisy. The upstairs wasn't noisy at all with the presses, and the mangle was quite quiet. But the washing machines, of course...that was noisy.

MB: You mentioned that the steam was up all the time. All night, too?

JH: They kept it up to a point during the night.

MB: Did you have man on duty there all night long?

JH: No, they would just stoke the boiler and keep it hot so that it wouldn't take too long in the morning to get the steam up.

MB: Would your dad come earlier in the morning?

JH: Either Dad would go early or the washer man would arrive an hour early.

MB: As a girl growing up in Hamilton, you mentioned—one time when we were visiting—the Ravalli Hotel. When was that built?

JH: It must have been built very early in 1900. I can't tell you exactly.

MB: Was it built before 1900 when Daly was still alive?

JH: Daly built it, so I would imagine it was built before 1900.

MB: 1894?

John Howe: (unintelligible)

JH: The hotel burned down in...I was in the third grade. They let us out of school. That was right across the street in the old central school building. That's where the new courthouse is now. When the hotel was burning, they said, "You can all go outside, if you just sit on the grass and watch."

Mrs. Patterman (?), who was the mayor's wife, was up in her room at the hotel and she would not come out because they'll get the fire out, so why should I leave? By the time they convinced her she should leave, they had to put a ladder up to her window. She was a very heavy woman, so out came this great big woman, with her birdcage in one hand and hanging on to the ladder with the other, with two or three firemen trying to help from top and bottom. It was really quite an experience to watch that beautiful building go up in flames.

MB: Why did it burn to the ground?

JH: I think we had less adequate fire equipment and probably the water was not a very good pour (?).

MB: How did it start? Do you know? Did it start in the kitchen?

JH: I think it started in the kitchen. From what I remember hearing people say, something happened in the kitchen. They thought they could put it out and they didn't call the fire department very soon. It had a raging start before they called for help.

MB: It was really the main hotel in town where people came for an extended time.

JH: That's right. The people used to flock here from Butte. They came here for the races. The train came in twice a day, so it brought in all these people. They'd spend the entire summer.

The hotel had a beautiful veranda. I can remember the big chairs out there and people sitting there just having a marvelous time all summer long.

MB: Laughing and laughing.

JH: Yeah, laughing and laughing.

MB: I suppose women with their beautiful big hats?

JH: Lovely hats, beautiful veranda. The trains were so much fun to me. The laundry was near the depot, so if I was...

MB: Where was the depot?

JH: The depot was right...on the corner by where the insurance building is, by the track there, north of the...

MB: The Chamber of Commerce building?

JH: Yes, it was just about that location. If I remember, there was such a nice little park right near the depot. It had a fountain and they stuck fish in it and they had flowers all around it. My dad would take it upon himself to keep it well-watered because he thought it was so attractive for Hamilton to have this right down near the depot.

MB: I remember that park myself.

JH: Do you?

MB: Yes, when I visited here. What a tragedy it was when they sold that building, or that platform (?), to Safeway and they cemented it all over. It was really a beautiful...

(unintelligible, both talking at same time)

MB: Where did the depot move? Or was it torn down?

JH: I don't remember. I really don't because the Chamber of Commerce building, for a while, sat in back where the Safeway is now. Do you remember? Then they put a museum in there.

MB: I see.

JH: Then that was torn down to make way for Safeway and part of the depot was put over north where it is now.

MB: When you were a little girl, were there grocery stores and such in town?

JH: Yes, little grocery stores. Fanton Grocery (?) was in the building where the surplus (?) is. Town Grocery—Mr. Town and Mr. Lunder (?) had the store—was about where...Robert's Bookstore was there, but it would be right next to Robert's Bookstore was Town Grocery. It was called Town Grocery for a while and then it was White's Grocery.

MB: I've heard of that myself. Very nice little store!

JH: Very nice! Spaulding Grocery Store was over near the Paper Clip...

MB: You wonder how many little grocery stores like that could be kept busy. I suppose they...

JH: I don't think anyone was making a great, big living, but they all managed. Those were the three main stores (unintelligible).

MB: Tell me about the Mercantile. The Valley Merc.

JH: The Valley Merc, yes, when the Valley Merc was there, it took the corner, the whole corner, there on 2nd and Main.

MB: The Bower Building.

JH: The Bower Building. It was a lovely, two story, brick building and it had many, many departments: it had a grocery store department; it had a hardware department, a men's wear department, and a fabric department. That was all downstairs. There was a big stairway that went upstairs and the furniture upstairs, the ladies' ready-to-wear, and of course a big millinery shop. Lots of hats.

MB: It must have been kind of a nice little store to visit.

JH: It was a really a fine store.

MB: It was built by Daly?

JH: By Daly. He built this as a company store really. All the departments were open, so if you went into one, you could always go through the whole store.

MB: June, in talking with John, he mentioned, at that time when you were both growing up, there were lots of saloons in the city.

JH: I think that we heard that there were probably over 20 saloons.

MB: Was this during the Daly days?

JH: Yes. I remember, when I was about six years old, I would walk from home down to the laundry to see Father and Mother, and Dad would always say for me not to walk on the south side of Main Street, that last block, from where Downing's Drug Store is to where the Hamilton Hall (?) was, because it was solid saloons. He said I could walk on the other side of the street. Even to this day, when I walk down that street, I think about the days when I wasn't supposed to walk down there.

MB: Actually, that part of the street and that block still hold what is left of the saloons.

JH: Yes.

MB: That brick building.

JH: They still have lots bars on that street, but it really tickles me now when I think about my dad not wanting me to walk down that side and he said get over on the other side.

MB: John, you mentioned that, of course, with all lumbermen in town there had to be red light districts and there were a couple in Hamilton.

John Howe: Yeah, the only one that I remember was Mammy Smith. The one guy at the creamery went to (?) this notorious place they called the Black Diamond. Mammy Smith was run by a black couple. I never did lay eyes on her, but he used to walk uptown all the time, smoking a pipe, and he had the biggest potbelly I ever hope to see. They rotated their girls from all over the country, but they had one one-legged black girl that was a prostitute. She hobbled around on crutches.

MB: I would think that the ladies of the town would have been horrified. Of course there weren't very many. (Laughs)

JH: You mean ladies? (Laughs) I don't think that the girls were out on the streets much. It was very quiet around there. I don't think that people really paid enough attention to them.

John Howe: At that time, we employed about 40 or 50 single men. They'd come to town and go to a barbershop and get a bath and a haircut. Lord knows what they did after that. Besides, (unintelligible).

MB: That's right. There must have been...How many of those men were living in Hamilton at that time?

John Howe: I'd have to think to say, but the whole north end of town was known as Sandtown (?). From that little corner on down, they'd (unintelligible) sidewalks for years and years.

MB: There were cement sidewalks in Hamilton early?

JH: Yes, we really had cement quite early. I do remember roller skating from the burnt hotel on down to the mill because I had a good friend whose father was head of the mill. Our house was right down there by the mill. We would have to skate on wood from the burnt hotel down to the mill.

MB: John, you were talking about the fun days, the days when people supported the baseball games, and as many as 800 would come out. Was it the football game you were telling me about that Stevensville hired a couple of cars?

John Howe: Yes, Stevensville defeated Hamilton in a football game for the county championship. All the schools played for a championship in Ravalli County. Stevensville won the game, so the Stevensville businessmen hired a special train from Missoula to come up and pick up the people and come to Hamilton and have a parade on Main Street which ended in a big fight. (Laughs)

MB: You mentioned that the man who owned the O'Brien Hotel was one of the main participants.

John Howe: It was the O'Brien of Hamilton and Jumbo (?) Smith of Stevensville I think had the best fight. (Laughs)

MB: How many people were involved in it?

John Howe: I think 100 or 150. I think the train was a three car train as I remember.

JH: Did anyone tell you about the Lucas Opera House?

MB: No, not at all.

JH: It was...We had a fabulous place, I tell you. We thought it was so big and (unintelligible). When we were kids, it was just a lot of fun because we had things come to town: music, theatre, and Toby shows. The Toby shows were just really something.

MB: What were the Toby shows?

JH: The Toby shows, they would put on a plays, and they would go through the crowd selling candy kisses, and they had prizes. We all lost them (?) trying to get a prize. I'm told it was a prize about like a Cracker Jack. It was so exciting. Our high school, the class of 1929, was the last class to have its commencement exercises at the Lucas Opera House. That was always the place where the commencement exercises were held.

MB: Was there a stage?

JH: There was a stage and a balcony. We thought it was quite the place. After '29, when the new high school was finished, from then on, the commencement was held at the high school.

MB: When you were growing up, I meant to ask you where your home was.

JH: Our home was on the property where the Vann Building stands now by the high school. It's the house that is now just across the street north that Mrs. Schumacher owns. That's the house that I was born in, and we lived there until 1920, and I moved across the street to the house that Marty White (?) built. He was an assistant (?) at the Ravalli County Bank.

MB: Right across from the high school?

JH: Right across from the high school.

MB: What was on the lot that the high school now has?

JH: There were just two houses. Our house was on the corner lot and there was another house next to it. The rest of the block was pretty vacant.

MB: Just a plot (?)

JH: All they had to do was move those two houses off to have a block for the high school.

MB: The high school was the same size then as it is now?

JH: Yes, except the (unintelligible) at Lincoln.

MB: Right.

JH: The high school, of course, before that was the Jefferson School on 5th and that was the high school up until the class of 1930.

MB: Where did you...you went to high school here, but where did you go to grade school?

John Howe: I completed my sophomore year at Stevensville and then moved to Hamilton for my junior...

MB: Where was the high school in Stevensville?

John Howe: Same area where it is now.

MB: I see.

John Howe: It's the old brick building. They remodeled the top. It's a three story building.

MB: Kind of way out there though, wasn't it?

John Howe: On the edge of town, yeah.

MB: Strange that it would be that far out, or was most of Stevensville out in that area?

John Howe: No, it was originally built as a religious school. I don't know if it was Presbyterian or Methodist or what, but then they changed it to a high school.

MB: You had a number of close girlfriends, June, that are still around, that you're still close to. Who are these girls?

JH: Leona Carl Brunswick (?) was a girl who grew up with me. Her father was a barber. His shop was right near the Hamilton Hotel. Carol Braxton Smith, her father was a manager at the mill. She's lives in California. Helen Newell Patterson (?) grew up right about that time. Her parents...I'm not sure what they did, but he had a store in Grantsdale. Helen graduated in '29 and worked at the Ravalli County Bank for many, many years.

MB: What about the White girls?

JH: Of course the three White girls, Katherine White Burn, Dorothy White Braxton (?), and Virginia White Bordeaux.

MB: They're all here?

JH: They're all in Hamilton now and they all lived in the house that Zelma Hartley lives in now. We lived, of course, right across the street, so we were always good friends. (unintelligible) between the McCracken and White House as we grew up.

MB: Were you all members of the Methodist Church?

JH: We were members of the Baptist Church. We had a little church on 4th Street where the Christian Church is now, right next to the old hospital. Then we built a new church over on 3rd Street, which was the Christian Church at one time, but they have now vacated. Then about 1930, the Baptist and the Methodist federated, and so that church is now on Sixth.

MB: You had been the organist there for a number of years.

JH: I'm afraid I've been there a number of years, yes! (Laughs) I started playing at the Baptist Church when I was in the eighth grade. I played all through high school, and then went away to college and had a little rest. I came back and by then the federation had taken place.

MB: Did you major in music?

JH: Yes, I did. I majored in (unintelligible) Music.

MB: Did you graduate from the University of Washington?

JH: I went to the University of Washington for two years, but I graduated from the University of Montana.

[End of Interview]