

Maureen and Mike

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Email: library.archives@umontana.edu

Telephone: (406) 243-2053

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Oral History Number: 362-005

Interviewee: Pat Williams

Interviewer: Dale Johnson

Date of Interview: May 12, 1997

Project: Pat Williams Wilderness Oral History Collection

Dale Johnson: This is May 12, 1997, oral history with Pat Williams and I'm Dale Johnson.

First off we'll have Pat give some background, some biographical information: where he grew up, what he did before he went into politics, and go from there.

Pat Williams: Well, to start at the beginning and be brief, Mom was passing through Helena when I decided, I guess, to be born, and so although raised in Butte I'm actually a birth native of the capitol city, Helena. Being as that's the seat of government that may have tattooed me somehow (laughs) that I was born near...born in and around the seat of government.

I was raised in Butte. My parents owned restaurants in the mining city, the most remembered of which went by the most unusual and colorful name of "The American Candy Shop". When this oral history is being taken, there is currently an "American Candy Shop" in Butte. I believe it's been temporarily closed this year. People that owned that asked if they could use the name of our old candy shop, and because they owned the building where the old "American Candy Shop" used to be and we said, yes. So that name was resurrected at least for a short time in Butte as an operating restaurant and candy store again.

I lived a lot of my early years...Because of the busyness of my folks and the fact that they worked very late hours in the restaurant so I lived with a grandmother, an Irish immigrant grandmother, at 204 and a half West Woolman (?) Street in Butte.

My grandmother's name was Elizabeth Keough—K-e-o-u-g-h. An unusual spelling for a common Irish name, her family came from Ireland to America but by way of England where they lived for a while before immigrating to the United States. My grandfather died just about the time I was born, and so I didn't know him nor did I know my grandfather and my grandmother on my dad's side. But my mother was a Keough, and so her mother was the only one of the grandparents that I was fortunate enough to know. I shuffled back and forth some between our place, the family place, and my grandmother's house. My grandmother used to gather the grandkids and nieces and nephews around her in her little house up on the north side on Woolman Street up in Butte. Once or twice a year she would go into her bedroom, open the closet, and there, in the corner of a tiny closet, was a rather large trunk—traveling trunk.

It was the trunk that accompanied them from Ireland and England to the United States. My grandmother would lift some of the more recently acquired articles off of the trunk—the inside of the trunk—and come to treasures in the bottom of the trunk. The greatest of which was

wrapped in a shawl, an old Irish woolen shawl. My grandmother would open the two carefully tied knots that held the shawl ends together and spread the four corners out on the carpet in front of all the wide-eyed grandkids and nieces and nephews. She would lift from the center of that shawl each item almost like a Native American lifting items from a medicine bundle. She would explain each of the items and their importance to her. They were all items that she had brought over with her on the boat. On the boat, as she called it, the ship.

Then finally when all the items had been taken off of the shawl, she'd hold the shawl (unintelligible), and with wet eyes and a quivering chin, she would repeat the words that she had told us each year, or twice a year, as if she had never told them to us before. She would say, "And here boys and girls is the shawl, the very shawl that me mommy put around my shoulders on the dock." You see, my grandmother came alone with her daddy, and they were never to see the mother again. She died shortly thereafter of pneumonia. Of course, the plan was to send home the paycheck and bring the rest of the family later. The rest of the family never followed, but my grandmother would hold that shawl up and she'd say, "This is the very shawl that me mommy put around my shoulders as I was about to go up the gang plank of the boat. She said, she put it on my shoulders and she tied one knot and then another and then patted me on the head and said, "There you go, Lizzie, in case you get cold on the boat." She said then she pointed at my daddy while still talking to me and said, "But remember, you two, when you get to the New World don't stop in America. Go straight to Butte, Montana." (laughs). I take time to tell that story because it was such a part of my growing up, as it was with a good many Butte people, I suppose, in those days who thought that Butte was a social and cultural and economic island unto itself.

Politics in Butte, of course, was special. Good many people, especially students, when I was a member of the U.S. House, would say, "Why?" or "How did you get in politics?" Of all the thousands of questions I was asked, that's the one I could never find a satisfactory answer for. I mean, satisfactory to me. I don't know how or why I got into politics. I know I was always enthused by government and how well, despite what people recently seem to think, how well government runs in this country. But I really began to answer the question this way, it was almost flippant, I suppose. I would say, "Well, I was born and raised in a city where politics was both the indoor and outdoor favorite sport. People in Butte weren't afraid of government, they weren't afraid of politics, they reveled in both, they liked both, and they understood the connection to their lives. So they were unashamedly involved in things political. It was one did." So it wasn't a jump for me to be involved in politics. It seemed like a very natural progression.

I attended both the Catholic and public grade schools, attended Butte High School, graduated from there—that is high school—in '56. I wanted to go to several colleges, one at a time, and did starting in Missoula at the University [of Montana] for a year, then going to a small school in a place called Liberty, Missouri, not far from Kansas City. The name of that school is William Jewell College and transferred after a year there to the University of Denver. Graduated there with a bachelor's in business and advertising. Attended Montana State [Bozeman, Montana] and Western Montana [Dillon, Montana] with enough credits for a master's degree but not

credits applied in the right way, so the master's degree was never rewarded. (laughs) But I did pick up another major which was in education because one of the things I wanted to do was teach. Then after working some in advertising and public relations, I went into the classroom and spent seven years—seven or eight years—teaching students of varying ages, primarily sixth grade, but I also taught students high school, junior high school, and then adults in the summers and in the evenings vocational, or rather remedial, work with adults.

With regard to education, I later worked in and ran the massive, multi-state vocational education program that was located on the old, then closed Glasgow Airforce Base. That program was called Mountain Plains Education and Economic Development Program. Its primary purpose was research but it conducted that research by actually providing hands-on vocational education to adults—adults who'd been unemployed for a significant length of time, many of whom were on welfare. We would find and screen these people in six states in the Rockies and the Midwest, bring them to the Glasgow Airforce Base, which this corporation had reopened, and give them a whole career education application. We would move the whole family—breadwinner, spouse—

[Break in audio]

PW: —children—all up to the airbase. There was a public school that we reopened on the airbase for the children. Families would stay there anywhere between four or five months to a year and a half. Then we'd move them back out and find them a job and then track them for research purposes to see how well they did on the job.

It was an interesting research effort and education effort. What it demonstrated after about seven years of existence—almost entirely publicly funded by the way—what it demonstrated was that with the proper application and with enough money, one can take hardcore welfare recipients and unemployed people—long-term unemployed—move their family, shake off the dust, give them intensity counseling, provide them with whatever basic skills they need, then take them into job training, continue the counseling, including quite often marriage counseling, then once they completed the appropriate education and they had the necessities and then some, move back them back out, hopefully to a location of their choice, find them a job—sometimes the two went hand in hand—and then track them with continuing counseling. What one found is, yes, you can get people off of welfare and you can keep them off of welfare and you can turn them into taxpaying citizens over the long-term. But you can't do it on the cheap. (laughs) It takes money to do it. Which was a good lesson for me, I think, a good effort for me, prior to having gone to Congress.

It was shortly after my conclusion with that program that I was elected to the House of Representatives in 1978. Took the oath of office early in 1979. Let me take a break there for a minute.

[End of Interview]