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Oral History 98-11 & 12

Butte Oral History Collection

Interviewer: Mary Murphy

Interviewee: Blanche Copenhaver

February 21,1980

Blanche Copenhaver: In 1900, my parents were migrating to the Big Horn Basin in Wyoming where a reclamation project had been set up. I held up the wagon train.

Mary Murphy: You did? (Laughs)

BC: So, I took my first trip when I was three months old.

MM: Amazing. (Laughs) How long had your parents been in Utah? Were they born there?

BC: They were born there. We built a home in Lovell, Wyoming. I attended schools there, but I left at a very early age.

MM: Do you remember how old you were?

BC: I was about 17.

MM: Why did you decide to leave?

BC: I wanted to make a living for myself. Times were rough on the farms. It got better when my father went into construction work.

MM: But he had been a farmer?

BC: He had been a farmer and construction worker. He dug the canals... with the horse teams, the Harp way (?), the Fresnos. He dug the irrigation canals that made that country. It was just a wild sage brush country when we moved there. He was superintendent of the whole irrigation district for long time for that whole Big Horn County.

I wanted to get away from home. So, I went to a little town in... well, it was a big town then. I went to Basin, Wyoming. I went to work at a boarding house.

MM: Oh, you did?

BC: ...as a waitress.

MM: What was that like? Was it.. .What kind of people boarded there? Were they miners? What could of country was that?

BC: No. It was the county seat. A lot of. It was a hotel along with the boarding house. People stayed there. They would have to go the county seat to do their state business like Helena, or Deer Lodge rather. We're the county seat here. It was on that order. I worked there all through World War One. I was there when the armistice was signed.

MM: Was it hard to find work then?

BC: Very hard. You had to be a hard worker.

MM: How did you get that job? Did you know someone?

BC: It is kind of hazy, but I think I knew somebody. (Laughs)

MM: (Laughs) Did you live in the boarding house as well?

BC: Yes, I had a room in the hotel.

MM: How many days a week did you have to work?

BC: Seven. Don't ask me how many hours because you worked as long as there was work to be done.

MM: Did you have to help out in the kitchen? What were your duties?

BC: Waitress work. We helped out in the kitchen like cutting pies and fixing salads. It didn't have classifications for a person.

MM: Yeah. Do you remember how much you got paid?

BC: I sure do. I got thirty dollars a month. Lots of money.

MM: Did you like that work from the beginning?

BC: It was all the work I could get. I wasn't trained for anything else. So...

MM: Yeah

BC: And I was left to work (unintelligible) Most of the time I didn't mind.

MM: But you didn't like working on the farm?

BC: I sure didn't. (Laughs)

MM: (Laughs) Had your mother ever worked. ?

BC: My mother was a midwife.

MM: Oh she was!

BC: She worked at that almost until the time she died.

MM: Did she teach you any of her skills? Did you ever go with her to deliver?

BC: No, I never did.

MM: That must have been interesting.

BC: Yeah.

MM: In the boarding house, how many women were working there and living there? Do you remember?

BC: Yeah. There were two in the kitchen and me.

MM: How many people stayed there? Was it a large house?

BC: It was the largest hotel in town. I would say that they possibly had fifty rooms, but they weren't filled all the time. People stayed there.. .some workers.

You did mention industry. There was an oil field out from Basin. Some of the drillers and tool pushers boarded there or stayed there. (Unintelligible)

MM: Yeah. Did they have maids that cleaned the rooms?

BC: One maid.

MM: She took care of all the rooms?

BC: Yes.

MM: Who owned the house?

BC: Their name was Booth.

MM: Would they. Who did the cooking?

BC: Mrs. Booth.

MM: She did it. Then her husband ran the house.

BC: Yes.

MM: Gosh. What did you do after? You stayed there through World War I?

BC: I went to Casper, Wyoming and worked in a restaurant for about two years. Casper was the largest city in the state.

MM: Why did you leave that boarding house?

BC: I just wanted to travel. I was born traveling (Laughs)

MM: (Laughs) It sounds like it. Did you do all the. You had told me before your sister went with you. Did she?

BC: At that time, she was married. I was alone. It was later that she.

MM: Was that unusual for a 17 year old girl to go off on her own?

BC: I was 18 by then. I'm not sure. I certainly wasn't alone. There were other people that wanted to get off the farm and go to town.

MM: Did you keep in touch with your parents all that time?

BC: Oh yes.

MM: What did they think about you leaving?

BC: They couldn't do anything about it. I just left. My dad did come over once and try to get me back. We had quite a battle, but I stayed.

MM: (Laughs) You stayed in Casper for two years?

BC: Yes. Then.. .This sister of mine, her husband had passed away.

(Phone rings)

She had gone to work. She got an opportunity to work as a cashier in a big hotel in Amarillo, Texas. I was getting sick of Casper and wanted to see the country anyway. She wrote me and got me job as a cashier on the opposite shift in this hotel.

There was this big oil boom in that area.

MM: This is around 1920 or so?

BC: No, it was later than that. It was about 1925. I went to Amarillo. I left Casper. We worked there for possibly six or eight months. It is so.. .I told you my memory is fading.

They opened up a big oil field about 60 miles from Amarillo. It is now a big city called Borger, Texas. It was the most interesting deal I ever got into in my life. The town originally contained about two hundred people and, in three months' time, it contained a hundred thousand people.

MM: Oh gosh.

BC: It was a big oil field. There was lots of money going around. We had to make a living. We wanted to make the best we could. A friend had one of the only two restaurants in that big town, boom town. She asked us if we wanted to work as waitresses. I had had the training. My sister hadn't. So, we went to work.

It was really something. In order to get drinking water, you paid 50 cents a bucket for your water.

MM: Really?

BC: For a bath...we didn't have a bathtub in this little house. Everything was just thrown up, just boards. We had a stand with a wash basin in it. We had to buy our bath water. (Laughs) There was no running water. We had outdoor toilets.

It was quite an experience, but we made quite a bit of money. We bought a car. We decided to leave Norbord. We were there possibly two years.

We went to Midland, Texas, where they opened a big hotel. Somebody knew about us and wrote for us. They promised good wages.

MM: Was your sister older than you?

BC: Yes, she was five years older.

MM: When you were in Borger that must have been kind of like what I image Colstrip boom town now.

BC: Except Colstrip is much more civilized.

MM: You must have been a real minority there as a woman.

BC: There certainly was a minority. (Laughs)

MM: (Laughs)

BC: Nearly all the way up to... some of them had their wives and families. It was real interesting. Everyone was so friendly. We worked our tails off. It was a busy place because there weren't many places to eat.

MM: You always hear about how, in the West, men really respected women. Did you ever have trouble in these in the boom towns being a single woman?

BC: Not the slightest. I never even locked the door. We never...but walk home at night..If we worked late, we walked to our room. We stayed in this house that the people who owned the

restaurant owned. They had a spare room. We were living there. We walked about two blocks. We walked through oil wells that were being drilled. Men were everywhere. Nobody ever bothered us. It was a lot different than nowadays.

We went to Midland and worked in this very high class hotel. I think we worked there about a year. We got itchy feet, I think. We decided to go to Phoenix. We got sick of those dust storms. Those terrible dust storms. They were bad, too. We decided to go to Phoenix.

We drove to Phoenix. We worked in (indistinct phrase) for two different winters. We just worked in the winter time. Then we would drive the car back here to Montana. Home we called it. We would visit our folks all summer because it was too hot to live in Phoenix. There was no air conditioning in those days.

MM: Do remember what kind of car that was?

BC: A Chevy.

MM: A Chevy?

BC: Oh yeah. (Laughs) I well remember. It covered a lot of miles.

My sister. We worked there for two years. Then she went down to California and remarried. That broke us up. So, I bought her half of the car. I went back to Casper.

MM: Now did you never want to get married during this whole period?

BC: No, I was having too much fun.

MM: I can understand that.

BC: I liked to dance. I still would if I didn't have achy, itchy feet, but I can't do it. I really enjoyed it. I loved seeing the country. I love to travel.

I went to Casper. I worked there, until I came to Butte in '37. I worked in a hotel there.

MM: In Casper?

BC: Yes

MM: As a waitress?

BC: As a waitress. It was the largest hotel in Wyoming. Would you like.

MM: Do you remember what the name was?

BC: The Henning. It's since been tore down. They left it to urban renewal.

I went to work at six o'clock in the morning. (Unintelligible) I worked until ten and went back home until eleven thirty. I had an hour and half space. You can't get much rest in that length of time. I went back at eleven thirty. I worked till two. I didn't have to come back till six at night. I stayed until ten. We called it a three split shift.

If there were people in the place at ten o'clock at night when I closed up.. There were other waitresses, but that was my shift. People in the house.. It was a very high powered place, a service house. You didn't run them out. You stayed until they left. For all of this, we got the very large sum of forty-five dollars a month.

MM: Now did that include. Were you living in the hotel then? Did you have to pay rent?

BC: No, I had to pay rent. I had to walk five blocks too. All these three splits back and forth ten blocks.

MM: Did you get tips them?

BC: Did I get what?

MM: Did people tip then or was it just.

BC: Oh yes, but not like they do now. (Unintelligible) You couldn't live on your tips, no way.

That continued for two years. I was thoroughly disgusted. You never had a day off. Any of these places that I worked that I mentioned before, if you were off a day, you were short a day in your pay.

MM: There was no simple.

BC: There was no anything but work seven days a week. No vacations.

The head waitress decided. She read some article about Butte. It was a wide open town with lots of activity. There was lots of work. She was having a few home problems. I still had the car. She said, "You're sick of this and I'm sick of this. Let's go to Butte. We can get work." We were both service waitresses. We came to Butte.

MM: Was it mostly single women that worked as waitresses?

BC: It was in those days. As a matter of fact, in one place a worked in Midland, they wouldn't allow married women to work because there are always problems at home.

I came to Butte in March 1937, Hel (?) and I did. This friend of mine.. We went to work. She went to work right away in Gamer's. I was a little bit.. It took me a little bit longer to get a job because I didn't belong to the union.

MM: Had you belonged to a union?

BC: There were no unions in any of the places I had worked, never. I had never heard of a union. Nobody knew of one in those towns.

The town here was just coming out of the '36 depression. They were putting their own people to work, but we were out-of-towners. We did finally find work. That led to joining the union.

MM: Was your first job at Green's?

BC: My first job was at the Main Grill. It is no longer in existence.

MM: That was in Meaderville?

BC: No, that was here. I didn't work there very long. I didn't mention that. I only worked there. I think I only worked there about four or five months. Then Meaderville was really. Maybe you have heard of Meaderville? Meaderville was really the heating spot of Montana, in fact the entire West. It never settled . with these Italian restaurants. I went to work in one. I found out about the opening and I grabbed it.

MM: Where were you living when you came here? Where did you find a place to live?

BC: When I came to Butte, I was living in Casper.

MM: No I mean when you got to Butte. Where did you move?

BC: At the Concord apartments. It is up.. It is still standing. It's up on North Montana just before you go to the Courthouse.

MM: Yeah, I know where it is.

BC: It was a nice place though. When I first went to work, it was straight shift: eight hours. When those eight hours were up, I quit. I went home. That to me was the most unusual thing I had run into all those years that I had been working. I didn't have to stay over time for nothing.

MM: Now was it all closed shop? Did you have to join the union when you got the job?

BC: Just like it is now.

MM: Do you remember how much the dues were then?

BC: The dues were two dollars when I first came here. The base pay was three fifty. That was the scale. We worked seven. You worked six days a week. You had one day off.

MM: You had an eight hour day?

BC: We had an eight hour day. If you worked a split shift, you could only be in two splits and only six hours. That I liked. I liked the fact that I could have a day off to myself. If the boss tried to make me work over my eight hours, the business agent was in to see him promptly. She kept

good track of things. I thought, "My god, how long has this been going on?" (Laughs) I could have been doing this all the time.

I had time to myself. Boy, that union was something else. It really got me interested. I started attending meetings, finding out things, and reading my books. I got interested. I thought everyone should have a union because I had been exploited all those year.

MM: Was there good attendance at those union meetings?

BC: Very good, very, very good. We used to have one to two hundred people. We held them in the Carpenter's Hall, which has since abandoned. We had very good attendance.

MM: None of the other towns... they had never been taught to organize...

BC: Never had heard of a union. Once in a while, teamsters union.. .Some teamster was mentioned about being in a union. Never heard any talk of it even. It was all new to me. It was mighty welcome, I tell you. After some of the jobs I had held. In fact, we got a paid vacation.

MM: Oh you did.

BC: We got time and a half for overtime, if we worked overtime.

MM: Did you have sick time?

BC: No, there still isn't any sick time in our contract. We never were able to negotiate it. We got health and welfare plan but never any sick days. Our industry is too transient. They want too much, too mobile.

MM: Was there a lot of turnover.. .let me put it this way: have you noticed a change in transiency since you started? Do people seem to stay in Butte longer than they stay in other places?

BC: I think Butte is more or less stable right now. They are not coming in. They are going out. They are leaving. It is sad.

MM: Yeah. What about when you first got here? Was there a lot of turnover then?

BC: No. People stayed on their jobs. There was some who didn't, of course. But they had been through that Depression. If they had a job, they stuck with it.

I felt that we were fortunate to get work. I got into a good house. I worked there for a couple years. Then I got into a bad car accident on my vacation. We went to San Francisco to the World's Fair. This friend of mine was driving and we got in a car accident in Wyoming coming back. I got my back broken.

MM: Oh my goodness.

BC: There was about a year there where I didn't work. When I went back, I had to go back as a cashier. I tried the waitress work in Green's. I got a job there. Then the gentlemen that owned put me on this cashier because I couldn't cut it. That's why I wear a brace.

MM: Did you go to your parents' house when you were recuperating or did you stay here in Butte?

BC: I stayed here in Butte. That's when I got married.

MM: Oh!

BC: That didn't last very long. That's when I bought this house.

MM: What did your husband do?

BC: He was a bartender in Green's.

MM: So you met him when you were working there. How old.. .What year was this?

BC: 1939

MM: How long did you work as a cashier?

BC: From 1940 till 1963.

MM: You never went back to waitressing again after that. Did you find that. Did you prefer the cashier's job?

BC: Oh, yes. I liked that. I always liked to visit with people. You can do a bunch of that when you're at one table. (Laughs)

MM: That's true. My sister...

BC: I didn't mind. I liked waitress work in good houses.

MM: Is it a physically demanding job though?

BC: It is. I wasn't able to.. .well, I did it for a while even when I was in the brace. They were very patient with me. I did the best I could, but it was too hard on me.

My husband and I separated. It was my house. I bought the house out of that little settlement I got in the car wreck. He left. He has since died. He moved to Seattle. I never did divorce him.

After Green's closed, I more or less stayed home except when they had things at the Civic Center. They had quite a bit of action up there in those days like Holiday on Ice, basketball tournaments, and things of that nature. I worked there as a cashier.

MM: Did the Civic Center hire you or whoever sponsored the event?

BC: The Civic Center hired me. They had to hire union help no matter who was sponsoring. We have a contract with them.

MM: It was 1944 when you started getting involved in kind of the offices of the union?

BC: They needed somebody on the Executive Board. It wasn't an election. It was appointed deal at that time. Someone appointed me on. I have been on it either as a board member or chairman of the board ever since. I am still on it.

MM: The union all this time was all women until 1973 or...

BC: It certainly was. We were very proud. We were an original union. We were very proud of our.

MM: Your title?

BC: ...the Women's Protective Union. It was formed more or less to protect the working women in Butte. It carried that. As I told you the other day, when they merged us, we had to drop the title.

MM: What was the reason behind that merger?

BC: I have yet to figure that one out... except the International (indistinct) of Strength in Numbers (?) which of course (indistinct phrase). They are merging all over the country, the international union is. It isn't that all unions are. So, they merged us. They merged the big locals first like San Francisco and Los Angeles.

MM: Was there opposition from the women here?

BC: There certainly was, but we had to do it. It was an order. I was a chief opponent.

MM: Oh you were. What was some of the arguments women would put forward?

BC: We didn't want any men in our union. We didn't want those cooks and waiters. They are welcome now. They are union members.

MM: Do you think you were a stronger union without them?

BC: Yes, we did.

MM: Why?

BC: I can't give a real down to earth reason for that. It seems like we were more together in most ways than we are now.

Our class of people, they were born into unions. They were born into the labor movement here in Butte. They took it for granted. They took the union for granted. I didn't. I came into the union the hard way. The union helped me. I tried to help the union.

MM: Your union had always been affiliated with the AFL [American Federation of Labor].

BC: Always.

MM: There was any kind of.. .Was there any kind of reorganization in the thirties when the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] started up?

BC: We were strictly AF of L. CIO was the miners, and I think the teamsters. I forgot what others. I merged. I can't think of the exact date. I know I went to the merger convention. It was in Helena. I do have the stuff on it. I could get the date if it was necessary.

MM: I think the AFL-CIO merger wasn't until the '50s.

BC: It was in the '50s, but I mean the exact date. I can't give it to you. We merged with.. .There was a lot of bitter feelings for a while, but it calmed down.

MM: Were there. What I know about the AFL is that it's traditionally been a craft union.

BC: It was a craft union.

MM: In your particular local, were there specific job categories?

BC: Definitely and there still is. That was another thing I liked about the union. We have. I could get one of our union contracts. We have job classifications. It starts with the cook who is the mechanic, of course. Then there is the cook's helper. There's a pantry worker. There is a waitress. There is a dish washer and the yard girl. Not any one of those classifications can do the others' work.

That's one reason why we kept our union strong. You can't use a cook to wash the dishes, which I have seen done many times. They can't ask the waitress to come out and help the cook, which I have had to do.

MM: I think I am familiar with most of those categories, but what did a yard girl do?

BC: That is the girl that peels the potatoes, brings the stuff up from the store room, and fixes the salads.

MM: That was kind of the totem pole of craft.

BC: Yes and they are paid accordingly.

MM: Was there a lot of pay differentials between men and women when the union merged?

BC: Not too much. I would say the men got approximately two dollars a day more than the woman could. We had addendum to the contract. They still could continue on that wage base. Our women still got theirs because we couldn't open the contract in time. They are about even now.

MM: What was... Were there kind of support networks for the women? Did they get together outside of union meetings? When you said you thought they were more together than they are.

BC: Oh, we had little functions and.

(End of Side A)

BC: . . . to the union meetings. We really knew one another in those days.

MM: Was there a lot of women that moved from say one restaurant to another?

BC: There is now. There wasn't when I came, but there is now. I moved three times, like I said. I moved from the Main's to Meaderville to Green's.

MM: What was the name of the place that you worked in Meaderville?

BC: The Corner.

MM: The Corner. I want to get into what you have done here. What were your duties when you were appointed to the executive board?

BC: The executive board duties are also spelled out in the contract. They are the legal body of the union. They pass on all expenditures other than routine office work. They set the salaries for the office secretaries, the business agent, and all. They hold on all expenditures. For example, we would get lots of letters asking for donations for this, that, and the other. We would get letters asking for help from other unions from out of state or some in state. We would act on those. We would either pay them or place them on the. We have helped many unions in Montana when they are on strike. We would send them money. There is a central body in Helena that takes care of the strikers.

MM: Do you consider your union one of the strongest in state?

BC: I really do. Although, in all honesty, I can't say that it is as strong as it was back in the '50s and '60s. We have this whole Silver Bow County under contract for anyone who works at our craft. Other areas in the state only have certain places that are unionized. There are a lot non-union houses in Helena, for instance.

MM: Was that always true or was this a more recent phenomenon?

BC: When I came here, it was that way. You worked at the trade.. I found that out. (Laughs)
You worked at the trade; you had to hold onto the union. Now, they have the...since the
Landrum-Griffin law came in [1959], they have sixty days grace period.

The executive board also sets up.. They act on quite of few things, like grievances: people who
haven't got their proper pay or vacations. That is stuff brought into the executive order.

MM: Were those the most typical kind of grievances?

BC: The most typical kind is people not getting paid for their vacations and not given them their
proper scale. This is in the contract all spelled out. There are many employers who have tried to
get away from it. We have been. Then we have grievances with our members who want to work
two shifts in a day: work in this house and work in another house another eight hours. We have
to straighten them out on that because we have a 40 hour week.

MM: You do.

BC: The 40 hour week and. Three week vacation is all we get.

MM: That is still pretty good.

BC: It's good.

MM: Was this 1948 strike the first strike that you had from when you came to Butte, until 1948?

BC: It was the only strike we had.

MM: What were the reasons behind that strike?

BC: On the contract negotiations. We were in negotiations and the employers wouldn't give us a
raise. We met many, many times. I spent half my life up there in the negotiation committees. We
couldn't get anywhere, so we took a strike vote. The girls voted to strike. We took it back to the
employer's association and they said go ahead. They thought it would be easy. They found out it
wasn't.

MM: Did you get support from the male cooks and waiters at that time?

BC: And the bartenders. That local county (?) executive board takes care of that. The bartenders
in the Finlen Hotel, for instance, and the musicians all walked right out. The Finlen was a big
hotel then, very deluxe.

MM: What about some of the other workers in town? Did everybody honor your picket line?

BC: Everybody honored our picket line. We had.. The teamsters wouldn't deliver. The labor
building trades wouldn't do any work in the place. One place tried to fly open. We call fly
open. One place tried to open uptown. We were walking along the street from the Union Hall.

We kept a kitchen open at all times. People could come up and get doughnuts, coffee, or sandwiches. It was all free. Some of the merchants in town, like the bakeries, gave us a lot. We had a lot of support.

We were walking along and we see the shades pulled in this restaurant. We peeked through the crack. The family was in there painting the building inside. We picked up the phone and called the painter's union. Believe me; they laid their paint brushes down. We had tremendous support from the other crafts.

MM: Did you have enough money in the union to give strike benefits?

BC: International gave us one thousand dollars. We would pay our pickets two dollars for their two hour shift. That's all we could pay out of this. I was in charge. I was picket captain. I was in charge of this. I had to ask for a helper. I got one, Margaret Harrington. She was later a secretary. We would pay them off. We kept records on every penny that was spent.

At our union meetings, which were very well attended through that strike, we would pass a coffee can. Some of the restaurants had stayed open. They had signed the contract. There were places for people to eat, but not many. The girls that were working would kick in.

MM: Most of your members would picket?

BC: The members had to picket.

MM: They did.

BC: We had picket lists, charts, hours, and days. They were all assigned. If they didn't picket, we could fine them. That was fair...

MM: What.

BC: We did run into two cases where they refused to picket and we fined them.

MM: What reasons did they give? Do you remember?

BC: I don't remember. They just wouldn't do it.

MM: At that time, were there many married women waitressing? Or was it sit still...

BC: Oh no, there were married women coming into it at that time.

MM: What about. Were their husbands supportive of the strike?

BC: Oh yes. Their husbands were all workers. Of course, the mines weren't closed. Most of them were married to fellows who worked in the mines or the pay office. Some were connected to the Anaconda Company.

MM: Yeah. Was there any kind of daycare programs or anything?

BC: Not at that time. Government didn't have programs back then. We had nothing like that. No one was asked to picket over once a week over two hours a day. We kept a 24 hour picket line on the Finlen.

Here was an amusing thing. You might get a kick out of it. I was working practically 24 hours a day in that union office on assigning the jobs, taking care of everything, and keeping the kitchen running. Something happened. One of the pickets didn't show up at the Finlen. We had to picket at the front and the side entrances. There were two entrances. One of them didn't show up. I had to fill in. We couldn't get a picket right away.

I had to go and get under the banner. I was picketing with this girl. We saw a big car. No other car was behind it. It pulled up across from the Finlen where the Acoma is. This gentlemen and his entourage get out of the car and start across the street. I heard him say, "My god, it's a women's picket line. We're not staying there." It was Bing Crosby.

MM: (Laughs)

BC: I tell you it was the biggest thrill. I wrote him a letter and thanked him for. (Laughs) I recognized him and his voice. He said, "My god, that's a women's picket line. We are not going there." We went across and told him he could go to Anaconda instead.

MM: (Laughs)

BC: They were booked somewhere around this area. They had reservations at the Finlen.

MM: (Laughs)

BC: There was lots of interesting things that took place.

MM: At that time, were the people that worked in the theaters in your union?

BC: They had always been in our union.

MM: Were they on strike as well?

BC: No, not the theaters, just the culinary.. Just the food. Of course, it did include the maids because they made the beds in these places, but not the maids in the motels. There were very few motels here at that time. There was no food connected.

MM: That would have been in restaurants, hotels, and boarding houses?

BC: yes. There were a couple of boarding houses left at that time.

MM: Yeah. I remember I asked you before. Do you remember which of the big boarding houses were still around when you came?

BC: The Reapee (?) and the Mullan House. Val can give you a background on the rest of them because she worked in them. They were on the way out when I came to Butte. They weren't the single miners the town was composed of at one time. They were married and had families. The boarding houses were no longer a necessity. They slept and ate both in these places.

MM: How was the strike finally resolved?

BC: Getting back.. .The employers got sick of seeing their places deteriorate, get dirty, and locked up. There was no business or money coming in. Nobody was going hungry. They were all eating in the . We called them the fair houses. These were the ones signed up. They were getting food. It was a little bit harder to get at. (Laughs) It was harder than anything I have done. They finally gave in.

MM: That was after seven weeks. Was the employer's association pretty solid? Did they represent most of the restaurants in town?

BC: Yes. We had quite of few independents, but the majority and the big houses are all part of the employer's association.

MM: You were a secretary in the negotiating committee until that time then.

BC: No, I worked. I served on the negotiating committee.

MM: Oh I see. Then what year were you elected as president?

BC: I got that down there. I looked that up. Wasn't it 1950?

MM: No, you got.. .No, you don't have anything till you say you retired as president. You were serving on the negotiating committee at that time, a post you held until you retired.

BC: When I retired as president was in '75.

MM: So, were you president at this time when the International took over?

BC: No. When the International took over, I was recording secretary.

MM: Okay. Now, what was all that about? Why did they did they take over?

BC: Internal strife between the officers. It got so bad that they were quarreling on the floor and disrupting the meetings. The women, the sisters, would get up and walk out. They didn't want to listen to it. It got so bad that they finally got a petition and asked International to come in to straighten this out.

MM: The membership did.

BC: I was one of them, too. Some of the officers signed it because it was beginning to be, really, a tragedy.

MM: What were the arguments about? Union policy or was it personal?

BC: Personal stuff. Strictly, (unintelligible) spite; it didn't belong in the union.

MM: Did that happen often? Was it a problem?

BC: It wasn't a problem until that period. It really got... it got so people wouldn't come to the meetings. I just dreaded going there because I was taking notes and writing minutes. I wasn't about to put all that stuff in there.

MM: Yeah.

BC: That had nothing to do with union meetings, business meetings.

MM: Do you think there were or are special problems that are special to women that interfere with their belonging to a union or doing union work?

BC: I don't think so. There's nothing demanding of their time. They don't have to go to meetings. They don't have to serve on committees. They can go to the job and come home. I don't believe there is any problem with those. They pay dues. They must pay them or they get suspended in sixty days. For those dues, they get an increase every year. The union negotiates for them. That far outweighs what they pay in dues.

MM: Right.

BC: But to answer your question about the presidency, I think I got the date there. When we were given back our local autonomy, we had an election. I was elected president. I believe that was in 1950. Wasn't it?

MM: I'll have to check again. Were you.. .Did you have to campaign or were you voted in by acclamation?

BC: I was voted by acclamation the first time. From then on, every election I ever entered, I was contested by the same person.

MM: Really? Who was that?

BC: I don't like to mention names.

MM: Okay.

BC: I don't think that would be fair. She is still a union member. She wanted to be president.
(Laughs) Let's put it that way.

MM: (Laughs) How about during other strikes in town... let's say the miners went on strike or one of the other unions, would you. What kind of support did you give to them? Was it.

BC: There wasn't any support we could give them other than when they had that bitter strike. I think I have outlined that as well as I can remember it. When they had that eight month strike, we supported them then. We gave them money. We gave the donations and took up money for them. As far as being helpful, we couldn't picket the mines. We certainly didn't go through any picket lines. (Laughs)

MM: (Laughs) This was in '58 and '59. Was there... Did those strikes effect the community in a sense that there were layoffs? Were there any layoffs in your field because business was down throughout the community? I mean with the mines brining in the money.

BC: Oh yes. Through that bitter period, through that one. There's been other miners' strikes. There was one in '54, but it didn't last long. But that one, some of the help had to cut down their crews in the wintertime. Not in the summer because Butte was quite a tourist town at that times. Quite a tourist attraction.

MM: Oh, really?

BC: There were lots of tourist attractions.

MM: Was there employment compensation then?

BC: No, not at that time.

MM: How did people get along?

BC: We took up money for them. There were truckloads of food coming in for them all over the state. There were truckloads of clothing. Ranchers donated whole beeves and butchered it for them. This food and clothing... I think I mentioned this. We couldn't store it in the Carpenters Hall. It was all stored on the third floor of old city hall. Anyone in need could go up and get food and clothing for their kids. With the cash, I remember one purchase: we bought one hundred and forty dollars' worth of shoes. That was a lot of shoes in those days. Kid shoes weren't what they are now. We bought hundred and forty dollars' worth of shoes for kids in the Scared Heart Parish. That's down about where the pit is now. Just down in that one area, we bought those!

MM: Gosh.

BC: There were privations, of course, but nobody went hungry. Everyone had the clothes they needed. They were second hand, but clean. We insisted on that. You send them, you send them clean.

MM: What about. To go back a little bit, during World War II. That most have been a prosperous time here in Butte because.

BC: It was very prosperous.

MM: .the need for copper. Were you able to win better contracts during that time?

BC: Somewhat better yes. Better than what we are doing now because Butte was prosperous. Butte was kind of a mecca for the Canadian soldiers, too.

MM: Oh really?

BC: There was quite a bit of gambling going on in Butte then. We had lots of Canadian soldiers on R and R come into Butte.

MM: What kind of things did you used to do for recreation?

BC: Play slot machines. (Laughs)

MM: Did you! (Laughs) I would have liked to been able to see Butte in those days.

BC: I liked to dance. I liked very much to dance.

MM: Where there a lot of places to dance here in Butte?

BC: Yes. We would get through work. It was nothing for three or four women to go in to the cabarets or night clubs. We would sit and have a drink and dance. You knew everyone in the place. People had a different lifestyle then. People did like to dance. They liked to meet and fraternize.

MM: Do you think it was a livelier place than it is now?

BC: It was a lot livelier. At that time, you thought nothing. For a while, my shift went till three in the morning. I could walk down the street. I had another friend that worked in another house. We could walk down the street to the bus or, if we felt like going somewhere and dancing, a couple of dances before we went home. We were never molested, never, never molested. You go to any part of town. It was just part of the action. They expected to see women out just the same as they did men.

At that time, they had what was called the line. This isn't in labor history. (Laughs) I am just telling you. There were no streetwalkers.

MM: I was interested in that because that is another hidden part of history. You read a little bit about it in Butte. I wonder if those women ever tried to organize or if they just kind of informally set their rates.

BC: (Laughs) We used to give our secretary. He was an old time fellow. He was a character! He said, "I'm not having you damn women in this organization." He wouldn't either. There were no lady bartenders. We kid and tease him at that local joint board. We would say when are you going to take Mercury Street in your union... and take the girls in. He would just have a fit.

I lived out here. My brother was in the war, and my sister was still living in California with her husband. I lived out here alone. I couldn't tell you how long, but I never even locked my doors at night. It was that kind of a town.

MM: That's really great.

BC: I would get off. They ran an owl bus for the miners. It would start with the mines out in Meaderville and McQueen. They would go up over the hill. There is no hill there now. It is all the Pit. It would stop at all those different mines and pick up the miners. Then it would go uptown. I would be the only woman on the bus. The bus would be crowded. I never had a problem. I would laugh and joke with them.

I would get off over here. I walked from Wall Street, over here. There were no street lights. I never thought anything of it. I would walk alone. That's another thing that I liked about Butte. I would never live anywhere else. Things have changed now. I keep my doors locked now.

MM: Yeah, I know. It is unfortunate. When you.. One of the other things that are so well know about Butte is all the different varieties of ethnic groups that were here in town. Was that ever a problem in your union with languages?

BC: No, I think most of them were second generations. We had our Finntown. We had the Austrians in McQueen and the Italians in Meaderville. The English and Cornish were concentrated in Centerville and Walkerville. The Hungarians were over in what was called East Butte, the Slovaks. They all had their own area they lived in. The Irish were everywhere.
(Laughs)

MM: (Laughs) You obviously didn't have any trouble getting a job in the Italian part of town. Did people by the time you came here hire anybody? Or were Italians more apt to hire Italians and the Finnish. ?

BC: No, they weren't at all. No, I don't think.. Of course one of the restaurants, the big Rocky Mountain, he was Yugoslavian, Teddy Traparish. They were all Italian except him. I don't remember. There were three Italian waitresses in the whole town. They hired somebody to work and work hard. You worked hard. You had to put out a day's work.

MM You were saying that you though the Union was strongest in the '50s and the '60s. Was that because you had bigger membership or. ?

BC: No, our membership is more or less stable. It stays around the thousand mark. It will go a little under because they take withdrawal cards. Then it goes over in the summer time when there is extra employment.

People were more interested in that union then. They had just come through a serious depression. They were protected in that union. They knew they could get their money. They knew they didn't have to work overtime. They took an interest in their union.

Now they are born into it. They, the majority, don't realize what the union really does for them. In fact, you hear that quite a bit. They say, "What the hell did the union ever do for me." Then they get that negotiated paycheck that is quite a bit above minimum scale, plus vacations, holidays, and double time.

MM: Did the union ever have education programs?

BC: No, we have never had people go into that. It seems like they just want to work and go home. We did try to set up an apprenticeship school here one time to train cooks, but it wound up in Missoula. We didn't get it.

MM: Oh, really?

BC: It was government project. We never had anything of that nature.

As I said, our people are too mobile. They are here for a while. Then they quit work for a while. Then they move somewhere. They are back and forth. Of course, there are a lot them that stay on one job, but there is a lot of jumping around.

MM: When they would move, they would get a withdrawal card. Whenever they went somewhere else, that would readmit them into the local where they were?

BC: There is also a traveling card that takes care of that, a TC. They can take that out. It only cost them a quarter. When they think they want to go to Helena to work, they can just deposit that TC and a month's dues. Then they are automatically in the union.

Withdrawal card is a little more expensive. They have to pay a reinstatement, which is ten dollars.

MM: This is one kind of odd, off the track question: when you were talking about the government program... somebody had told me that here in Butte, during the '30s, they had a CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] camp her for women. Have you heard about that at all?

BC: I haven't. I have read every book that has ever been written about Butte. I have some of them. I have never heard that. They had CCC camps here. They built all those picnic grounds all around us, but they were not women.

MM: I know. I was going to try and track that down, but so far I only have one source on it. So, I am not real sure.

BC: I have never heard of it.

MM: Did attendance drop off in the '70s?

BC: Yes, you will find that in every union in the United States attendance is down.

MM: Do you think that is only a function of people being born into it?

BC: They are born into it. They never had to fight to get one thing. It is the old gals like me that had to fight for everything that appreciates it. You have got to really work at something before you really can appreciate it and realize what it is doing for you. They don't. They come up and get a permit to go work. They go to work and pay their dues to the business agent. They never see the inside of a union hall, majority of them.

MM: Do you think opposition by employers has increased in the last few years?

BC: No, I think they are mellowing a little. I really do. They are not mellowing terrifically. You still have to fight to get a quarter.

MM: (Laughs)

BC: ..in negotiations. But.. .Of course, we have to give a little too. We had a pretty strict contract. We had to give up a few things. My niece. My niece was coming home from the sheltered workshop (unintelligible). No, I think that they have realized that our pork chops cost the same as theirs. It's not so hard to get.

MM: It sounds like the union has really been your life.

BC: In Butte, it has. I have other interests. I like to work in the flower garden. I like to work in my garden. I like to keep the yard up. This was all gravel when I moved in here.

MM: God, it is beautiful now.

BC: Hello, hon.

(Unidentified voices saying hello)

BC: I took an interest in it and I stayed interested. I said they helped my lifestyle and my living, not financially. I was never on the payroll to speak of. I get my expenses to conventions; I get expenses going to meetings; strictly no salary.

MM: Yeah. When you. Before the merger with the cooks and bartenders, the Butte local was all women, but the International was mixed.

BC: Oh yes, definitely.

MM: When you went to the International convention., what role did you play there? Were you a delegate or did you just go.

BC: Oh delegate.

(End of side B)

(Beginning of Tape 2 [98-12] side A)

MM: Would most of the delegates be men, or was it fairly equal?

BC: In the East, they are primarily men. In New York and that's Florida also. I don't know if you call that east or... From Canada.. .We would have a few delegates from Canada, but I have never seen a woman delegate. From the Middle West through the West, they are about the same.

MM: Oh that is interesting.

BC: We only have them about every five years now.

MM: Oh, really? They are not annual events?

BC: The last one was in Palm Springs in '76.

MM: Do you remember where the first one you went to was?

BC: Chicago

MM: What year was that?

BC: 1948

MM: Were there differences between the interests of workers in the east and the interests of workers in the west?

BC: No, we were all after the same goal, a better living for our people, better conditions, and better wages. Nearly all the resolutions had to do with that, of course.

The union officers in the east are primarily Jewish.

MM: Oh really?

BC: Yes. But, they are all in there fighting for the same goals.

MM: Is there any kind of regional organization like in the northwest, or is it Butte level then state?

BC: Oh yes. That's what I just got the call from. The AFL-CIO Board, we're embraced by them. We are affiliated. That is strictly for Montana. Then the culinary and bartenders state alliance.. .We meet once a year. That is just for our group. We have a convention. It includes resolutions and all of that.

MM: Was.. .Did your union consistently.. .Politically speaking, did they always consistently support the Democratic Party?

BC: Most union people are Democrat. There is no place else to go. (Laughs)

MM: In the thirties was there any kind of socialist contingent in the union?

BC: No, there never was in our union. There were socialists in Butte, but they were primarily with the miners. There was just a little infiltration there. That is a different story.

MM: Neither in the '30s nor in the '50s during the Red Scare, there was never any problem in your union?

BC: I never had any problems whatsoever. To the best of my knowledge, the only people that had a communism problem were the miners' union.

MM: I wanted to thank you very much. This has been real interesting for me.

BC: If you can dig anything out.. .I really wasn't sure. I assumed what you wanted was my history in the union. That is why I wrote that because I couldn't sit here.. .Unless you asked me, I couldn't remember. By concentrating and sitting all day yesterday scribbling, it would come to me. I would walk around awhile and something else would come that I had been involved in.

MM: I really appreciate it. This is really wonderful. It sounds like you really enjoyed being president.

BC: Yes, I enjoyed it.

MM: It was never.

BC: I had made. Truthfully, I can say I made no enemies, even the gal that ran against me. She would get mad at me for a while. (Laughs)

MM: (Laughs)

BC: Val can tell you this. I was a very strict president. I went by the book. There was no quarreling, no personalities, none of that. I had had enough of that before we went to Trustricia (?).

MM: How long was that when you were in Trustricia?

BC: I would say off hand eight months, seven or eight months.

MM: Then that one woman came out and helped you straighten out the.

BC: She did straighten us out.

MM: You never found it to be any burden as far as time?

BC: Yes. A heck of a lot of times, I would have rather laid out under that tree and enjoy the fresh air and sunshine, but I had to go to meetings. One year. This was since retirement. I couldn't have done it before. One year, I went to thirty meetings in one month. The month had thirty-one days.

MM: My Lord.

BC: My Lord is right. It gets pretty tiresome when you try to keep up with your work at home. I got a little provoked then. We were in negotiations. You have to call your people in. Then you go back to negotiations. Then you have to call your people. Then you go in for another group. All contracts were negotiated separately. I got a little bit weary of it then. Overall, I have enjoyed it.

MM: It seemed to be worth it.

BC: I would have never.. I still get Hell from some of the girls for quitting as President. I never would have stepped down, if my eyes hadn't to start to fail. I had to proof read contracts, go over all the communications, and all that stuff. I just couldn't do it. I just didn't think I was giving them a fair deal. I just wouldn't take it again.

MM: Who succeeded you as president?

BC: Kara Dean Lewis, a cook from Gamer's. She was that. She isn't working now. She's still in there.

MM: It certainly seems to have kept you active and lively.

BC: Not very lively, but active yes. (Laughs)

MM: (Laughs)

BC: I like to stay involved. I have seen too many of my friends, my age. There is still a few of us left. I have seen too many retire, sit in a chair, vegetate, and they're dead in a couple of months. I have seen too much of it. I decided that wasn't going to happen to me. I was just going to keep interested in one thing or another. I would get involved in this or that.

I try not to overdo it. I mean I have been offered different positions on different boards and things. I have turned them down. I have just enough now between the Women Democrats, Status of Women in Helena, and my own Union work in the state body. That is enough.

MM: Yeah. Did you ever in all your careers as a waitress and cashier ever want to try some other kind of work?

BC: I did when I was a waitress, but I didn't have the education for it. I didn't have a high school diploma. You can't. Things were a little bit rough. I could have gone to Tech, I suppose. I didn't want it that bad. I managed to get along.

I took this office I hold at Montana Tech. I was a little fearful about that because I hadn't had the education. I am serving with the past editor of the Standard and a prominent attorney. I thought I didn't belong on an executive board at a college. They said, "Oh yes you do. Experience is what we want." It didn't do any good to resist. I got appointed and I am still on it.

MM: You're on the Status of Women's Committee out of Helena?

BC: Yes.

MM: This is kind of a global question. Did you ever find it a disadvantage to be a woman in your negotiations, dealing with any of these boards, or in these international meetings?

BC: Did I ever find... I didn't get that one. Can you reword it?

MM: Did you ever find it to be a disadvantage to be women? Did you ever find discrimination?

BC: No. I didn't understand that. No. I am quite proud of the fact. I am the only woman for the state executive board for the AFL-CIO. I receive a lot of compliments. They say it sure looks good to see a gal sitting up there. No, I have never found it a bit difficult. In fact, most of the men are helpful to me.

MM: Why do you think there are so few women in positions like that?

BC: That is what the Status of Women is trying to find out. (Laughs)

MM: (Laughs)

BC: That's a good question. I hope we get the answer. We are trying to put women in nontraditional job like plumbers and painters. We have succeeded to certain extent in getting some women lined up with different types of work. We want equal pay for them. We are getting it the hard way.

MM: You have to fight for everything. I hope you are successful.

BC: I got a brochure from the Women's Bureau this morning. I couldn't read through it. I read part of it and threw it away. They put out a regular brochure on their activities and achievements.

MM: Right. Well, I think what I would like to do is take this and read it over. Then if I have any other questions, I will give you a call.

BC: Sure.

(End of Tape)