

Maureen and Mike

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Oral History Number: 120-021

Interviewee: Mabel Maxwell Fullerton

Interviewer: Mary Bielenberg

Date of Interview: circa 1984

Project: Bitterroot Historical Society Oral History Project

Mary Bielenberg: —with Mabel Fullerton of Hamilton. Mabel, when did you first come to the Hamilton Valley, or were you born here?

Mabel Fullerton: No, we came from Colorado in 1909 to here.

MB: And how old were you then?

MF: About 12, I think, I was going into ninth grade.

MB: And where did you live when you came here?

MF: Oh, all around. (laughs)

MB: (unintelligible) here?

MF: I don't know. I've often wondered. (unintelligible) He went right to work on the Daley Ranch.

MB: Oh, I see.

MF: He must have had worked that way.

MB: And he worked as a ranch hand?

MF: Yes, he worked as a ranch hand with the rancher.

MB: Then you lived out in some of those Daley houses or did you live in town?

MF: No, we lived in town.

MB: Oh you did?

MF: (unintelligible) rented houses for a while and then we bought a little house down on Adirondac Street and then after a while, in these last years, my mother got that great big Martha J. Allison-Reinkeh House, we'd call it, the great big...It's in the historical book.

MB: Oh yes, is it the historical registry?

MF: It's in the book, and it says when it was built and when, who built it.

MB: It's a pretty old house then?

MF: It was built before 1900, before Amy died.

MB: Oh, I see. You don't happen to know who built it.

MF: It was Martha J. Allison-Reinkeh.

MB: Oh, she did?

MF: She was a peculiar person around the whole valley. It told all about her in this historical book and explained about her life here (unintelligible). She lived there a while.

MB: It's a two or three story house isn't it?

MF: It has a, what you call it, an attic. (unintelligible) There are about four rooms upstairs.

MB: Now were there any others in your family besides you?

MF: I had a brother, but he was...what do you call it, a druggist. He was a druggist and he didn't come here until quite a long time after we were here.

MB: Oh I see. What was your maiden name?

MF: Maxwell.

MB: Maxwell. Now you went to the school here. Where did you go to grade school?

MF: I went to Lincoln School, over there with (unintelligible), then the four years of high school.

MB: And high school at that time was?

MF: The Jefferson School. We were the first ones to graduate up there.

MB: Oh, I see. Do you remember who the principal was at that time?

MF: No, we tried to think of him the other day, and I can't think of him. (laughs)

MB: (laughs) Who were some of your classmates?

MF: Well, Ellen Wayne is here. She was (unintelligible) who graduated in my day. She's here currently. (unintelligible) Helen (unintelligible) is still around town.

MB: Were the Harvey girls in school with you?

MF: They were not as old as me. They were down in the Great Swan. There was the (unintelligible) and the Thorntons, too. (unintelligible)

MB: Did your father have horses or did he have a car? How did he get about when he first came to the Valley?

MF: I don't remember him having anything.

MB: Did you come in on the train?

MF: Yes.

MB: Oh you did?

MF: I was in Illinois. I had gone back east with my grandmother. She was an old lady and she went to visit her sister. We've often wondered, why we came up here and how they knew about it. Now they picked me and my grandma up here in Chicago or something (unintelligible) along the way, and I went the rest of the way with them.

MB: On the train?

MF: From Illinois.

MB: Was that your first train ride?

MF: Oh no, we had train rides. Our big deal, when we lived on the ranch in Colorado was to get out there and wave at the people on trains, you know.

MB: Freight trains?

MF: Freight trains. They all waited for us. If my brother was out there, they would kick off coal and wood to him. They cut the wood, you know.

MB: Oh, I see.

MF: (unintelligible) My mother had got me a pair of overalls and I was around six or seven. I don't know how old I was, I think I was seven. I was so proud of them. Girls didn't wear those

then. I heard the train coming and I went busting out there. That fireman (unintelligible) at me and I tried to get behind a pole, and you could just see him laugh. (laughs)

MB: Well, train rides were lots of fun and they were the main source of travel for lots of people.

MF: For years, if we wanted to go places, we used to go down to a—what do you call it—a platform and get on the train there instead of going to a depot.

MB: Oh, I see. The (unintelligible) didn't have a depot here in Hamilton?

MF: Yes, they had a depot but then they (unintelligible) down the train and then you went to...I remember when we would go down to Corvallis, we would ride a lot of times, to the depot in Woodside. They had one down there. And we'd stop there and walk over to Corvallis.

MB: Oh, you would? That's quite a hike!

MF: Yes.

MB: Everybody did it?

MF: Yes, (unintelligible).

MB: When you (unintelligible) high school, what did you do? Did you get married? What did you do after you finished high school?

MF: Well, the first thing I did was work for people in their houses. My idea is if you really want to do something and you put yourself to it, you learn more inside of you than you think. The first year I think I went over into Big Hole and each year over in Big Hole, those big hay people, you know, they always grew hay. They would each bring nine or ten young fellows from Butte over to put up the hay. I went up to the old Anahee family, and began cooking and helping in the kitchen and stuff like that. That was (unintelligible). Do you have time to (unintelligible)?

MB: Oh sure!

MF: Well, one night I went for a ride on horseback, with one of those little, young Butte guys. And we came back and stopped at the gate and talked and it was fine (unintelligible) him. The next morning as I started pouring coffee around our table, one man said what I said, and the next man said what my friend said, and that went clear around the table. I was scared because I didn't know what I said. (laughs) And those guys just split laughing.

MB: You had to be careful what you said then!

MF: (unintelligible)

MB: That was on one of those big ranches you worked? Was it the Anahee Ranch?

MF: The Anahee Ranch.

MB: How many years did you do that?

MF: Just that one year.

MB: Oh yes. Then, what did you do, in the way of...Did you get married pretty soon?

MF: I didn't get married until '22 [1922]. When I came from over in Wisdom, I don't know what I did then. For a while, I went to work at the telephone office in about '16 [1916]. It's the way I remember it.

MB: When did the telephones first come out here? Were they here when you came to Hamilton?

MF: Yes, I think so. At least everyone seemed to have one (unintelligible).

MB: Now where was the telephone office?

MF: Do you know where (unintelligible) is? Well it was right across there. The Western News was on one corner, and then there were other offices and then the whole thing on top of that was the hospital, the Hamilton Hospital.

MB: And the telephone office was downstairs?

MF: It was under that.

MB: Oh I see. And how many operators did they have?

MF: Well, I think we had around nine or ten because there would be several, I think two per night, and they had a machine operator, and they had three or four of the others. I don't know how many.

MB: Now what was the operation like? You had a board or something?

MF: We had a big switchboard with (unintelligible) over to the door. (unintelligible) I think 12 feet.

MB: Twelve feet? Fifteen? Yes?

MF: Twelve feet, 15 feet long. And then we had (unintelligible), I don't know, we didn't...none of the other places in (unintelligible) didn't have any (unintelligible), but Stevensville had a switchboard later.

MB: And there was no dial system yet, all the calls came through your board?

MF: Right.

MB: Oh, you got to know practically everybody in town!

MF: And out of town. (laughs)

MB: (laughs) How long did you work? Did you 8 hours a day at this?

MF: In '15 or '16 [1915 or 1916], I took a trip to Yakima with the Sandersons. Got there that night and (unintelligible) came home and he delivered things to the town, to the big stores all over town. He said, "We just delivered a big telephone, a new telephone booth to the new Donnelly Hotel and they're looking for an operator." There I was, and I got in and worked there for a year, a little over a year there in that big hotel.

MB: In Yakima?

MF: In Yakima. I said the fun of that was you went to work at seven in the morning and all the people upstairs had to get up and go to work. There was something, just the way all the (unintelligible).

MB: Were trying to get up.

MF: (Unintelligible) "Oh thank you!" and everyone had a different one. (laughs)

MB: Now, what were some of the interesting experiences you had working here as a telephone operator here? You mentioned that one of the fires was called in.

MF: Yes, and I called home.

MB: Oh, someone called in, and you had to get the fire engines (unintelligible). Was it the (unintelligible) that the big fire was going or something?

MF: We always (unintelligible). We always pushed the fire button.

MB: Oh, I see.

MF: The first fellow that got into the fire hall, put the receiver down, and we told him where the fire was. Then they called us, which was a bad thing, a hard thing, people with their house burning, calling you up. "(unintelligible) out the fire trucks fast (unintelligible)." "Well, who are you, what or where do you live?" They were so scared, they couldn't even tell you. That was the hard part of that.

MB: Oh yes, you almost felt responsible?

MF: Yes.

MB: Someone was telling me that during the war, you received all kinds of messages and were part of sending messages to people?

MF: I don't remember that part of it. I remember (unintelligible) calling their kids at those different camps and all and getting them. But I don't—

MB: You worked through two wars. You worked through World War One and World War Two as an operator?

MF: Yes. When my boys started the war, I began as a night operator. So I worked on that, and that was when they moved the telephone over opposite the post office.

MB: (unintelligible) Oh I see.

MF: The joke was on me. (unintelligible) You can't have your life up there, you might still (unintelligible). (laughs)

MB: Did you enjoy that work?

MF: Yes, I did. Of course, at night, I like telling about how I worked at night. All of the mothers and grandmothers, their husbands had gone to war. They would dress up and go pile into the bars and things, leave their kids in. (unintelligible) come to the telephone and they're crying, "I can't find my mommy!"

I'd say, "Why don't you go to the bathroom and then you go back into bed and cover up good. And if you can't go to sleep, you call me again." I haven't thought of this in a long time after, but nobody called me back.

MB: Oh, wasn't that nice, at least they were comfortable.

MF: (laughs) They had something else to go by.

MB: Yes. When you were growing up in Hamilton, do you remember some interesting things that happened, that maybe you wouldn't read in the newspaper or anything? Here on the west or the north side of town, how many houses were there do you think, when you first came?

MF: To the north side of town?

MB: The north side, yes.

MF: That's where I live. There weren't too many. They were just scattered, kind of. There was this great big one, the big one that I own now, in the historical book, that's the one that Martha J. built. We lived in the one across from it. I managed to fix that all up. There weren't very many houses (unintelligible) in the place where we lived, that (unintelligible) grapes and lots and lots of back there of old apples. We had an apple orchard back in there.

MB: Oh I see.

MF: And now there are some houses.

MB: Now who was that?

MF: Ritchie. Tom Ritchie. He was the popcorn man. He was always uptown on a Saturday night with his popcorn machine. (laughs)

MB: Oh, is that right? Did they have a movie downtown that everybody would go to?

MF: Yes, they had a movie at the Frazer. (unintelligible) I think they had (unintelligible) up in the old opera house, the old Daly Opera House.

MB: And where was that?

MF: That is (unintelligible) store. That was the opera house and when Daly owned it, he had—we had some of the best—

MB: Entertainment?

MF: Oh you bet! The best Western players there were around here.

MB: What would you see?

MF: I didn't get to see any of it because I was young and all, but I just heard about it, how he got all the players from every place in other states—

MB: Do you mean musicians?

MF: Yes, and they had shows.

MB: Oh I see, well that's very interesting, (unintelligible) for the whole year long, or just in the summer?

MF: (unintelligible) I think. All he had to do was advertise.

MB: What kind of movies would you see? Did they have talkies when you were growing up?

MF: Yes, yes.

MB: They did?

MF: Yes, the opera house was kind of opposite us there, for a long time. We always went to the Chinks and ate, you know. The Chinamen were awful good to us. They had one time, there were two boys that came to China and they were nice to us. One night I was going to stay all night with one of the night operators. She was my chum, and she wanted a sandwich. Our favorite sandwich was to go the Chinks and get a hot pepper with a big slab of red onion on it. So I went over there and got it for her, and started back. And I got back in our box and they all (unintelligible). I didn't want them to smell the onion and I didn't want them to know I had bring it all back. (laughs) I went on through and didn't go in. I didn't even go in. I went up to the picture show (unintelligible). At last they ended up with seeing a picture show up there for a long time. But now it is a skating rink as far as I know. So I went up and there was a (unintelligible) I went up to that. And pretty soon, see I had that onion, and everybody started smelling, and I couldn't stand that so I went down (unintelligible). (laughs)

MB: Now there was a (unintelligible) at the old telephone company. Is that right?

MF: (unintelligible) it was Mountain Bell.

MB: Oh I see. Well who was your boss at that time, do you remember?

MF: It wasn't Butterfield, I don't think then, Grant Butterfield, maybe it was...Yes, and I guess it was Grant Butterfield. His wife is still here. (unintelligible)

MB: Is that right?

MF: (unintelligible)

MB: Oh, I see. Well, isn't that interesting.

Who was your husband? What was his name?

MF: His name was Bill Fullerton. They came here about the same year we did, or I did. They had 12 children. I think they brought all but about three, I think, two of them were married, and another one was working. I One of the boys was my age in school. We came to the eighth grade, and he started up my aisle one day. You know how boys used to do, kick themselves behind their own legs and act like they're going to fall. Well, he was going to act smart like that, and he fell. This boy over there on that thing, he just laughed and laughed and laughed. The teacher said, "(unintelligible) what are you laughing at?!"

He said, "That new gal tripped Stewdie", but I didn't! (laughs) (unintelligible)

MB: They called you "Stewdie?"

MF: Huh?

MB: Did they call you "Stewdie?"

MF: It was him they called that, Stewart. They didn't call me "Stewdie."

MB: Oh I see.

MF: No, I was Max all my life, short for Maxwell.

MB: Oh yes. (unintelligible) what year were you married?

MF: [Nineteen] twenty-two.

MB: What did your husband do?

MF: The Fullertons owned a plumbing company and Bill was working in that. Bill was a tinner. My husband was a tinner and he ended up—you see, those men who sold things, at that time, instead writing to fix to the stores, they kept men around. The man that came for tin, tin stuff, (unintelligible) all around, and Bill was one of the best tanners in the Northwest. He made my kitchen (unintelligible), with the good wheels and all on it and a (unintelligible). He had a pattern for the hood, then he made at the same time...The Daly Mortuary was right up above the Fullerton Plumbing Shop down there on Main Street.

MB: Right where it is now?

MF: No, no.

MB: Where was the Fullerton—

MF: In that first block, as you go past the house on McKenna, going through that way. It was about in the middle of the block.

MB: Kind of where the C & B Cleaners is?

MF: Yes.

MB: Oh, I see. Then the mortuary—

MF: (Talking at the same time as interviewer) the mortuary was right above. Bill had a lot of help with him, if he had to ask for somebody he needed, like he said he went over, (unintelligible) over across the river and had about a week in building (unintelligible).

MB: No, no. That's an interesting thing. Do you happen to know when Dowlings moved there— mortuary?

MF: They (unintelligible). They were living up there in the new place, where they are now, when...That would have been when Bill made the (unintelligible) dollhouse. It was made like an orange crate and he made tin steps. (unintelligible)

MB: Oh he did?

MF: I'd ask about it not long ago and he'd say, "It's still working. My (unintelligible) daughter's using it now."

MB: Is that right? (unintelligible) the Dowlings. Now, they, of course, the Dowlings bought, it used to be the office of Daly, wasn't it?

MF: Yes.

MB: It's a lovely building.

MF: Yes, and (unintelligible) if it is or not, I don't know, but anyway, as they went along, if a baby was born dead, John burned it in the great big furnace. Well that furnace meant an awful lot to me because Bill switched the door of it with the old Daly furnace, and they wanted to take it off, they would have to take a whole room off because how big and wonderful it was. I heard so much about it. I had a baby that was born dead. Why, the best thing I thought could have had happen was to have John, I liked him (unintelligible) but Mabel (unintelligible), me and my big mouth, told (unintelligible), and he never burned anymore.

MB: Oh, but cremation is quite acceptable now.

MF: Yes, but he just didn't want him to do it.

MB: Now your husband had several brothers that were in the plumbing shop with him?

MF: Well at that time, there was just him.

MB: Oh, and the father? Or was he the only one that had the shop?

MF: Just the father.

MB: Oh I see.

MF: But the next one down would have been that Stuart. Craig, another older one, had gone to California and Stuart had gone. They weren't here. (unintelligible)

MB: How many children did you have?

MF: I had two boys and this baby.

MB: One is John, and what's the other?

MF: Bill.

MB: They all live here now?

MF: They live in Missoula.

MB: Oh they do?

MF: They work for the Montana Fire Department.

MB: But John is still here?

MF: (unintelligible)

MB: I know he installed our furnace.

MF: He (unintelligible) nothing like that.

MB: Now you worked practically all of your working days, didn't you?

MF: Yes, with the telephone.

MB: Did you retire from the telephone company?

MF: Yes.

MB: You did?

MF: I worked 36 years. I went back (unintelligible) during that war and like I told you—

MB: WWII?

MF: Because my kids went to war and so they couldn't find an operator, and they couldn't find a night operator, so I took that night one and put the kids to bed. (laughs)

MB: That was a nice thing that you offered. It was a service, you know?

MF: Yes, for mamas.

MB: Tell me, did the telephone system change considerably over the years that you were working there?

MF: I think it did, but it was easy, we didn't notice it too much, except it was the long hauls and things like—

MB: When did the dial system come into Hamilton? Do you remember?

MF: Well it was after I quit, so—

MB: Oh, it was?

MF: Yes, so we didn't have any of that.

MB: I see. They just had how many numbers? Two or three? Do you remember? Or was it four numbers?

MF: Oh, for people. Four numbers. Of course, I have my four numbers on my telephone.

MB: Oh you do? I see. Can you add anything to our conversation that you think people would be interested in if they were doing some research? I'm trying to think of something that would be interesting, an experience you might have had.

MF: When the fire came, we would have to tell the whole town about it.

MB: Now which fire are you talking about?

MF: Any fire. Whenever the fire siren rang, they called in, “(unintelligible), where’s the fire?”

I said, “I would hate to be up there now with so many more people.”

But the night or afternoon, flour mill burned down by the big red bridge. It burned in the afternoon, they got rid of it in the town and then at night, the flour started to burn. It was black smoke and then the farmers all around the valley saw it. They called in, “Hamilton or (unintelligible), what’s that black smoke doing up there?” (laughs)

MB: It’s sort of difficult to see (unintelligible).

MF: Yes, yes.

MB: How long did that continue?

MF: That black?

MB: Yes.

MF: Oh they got it to settle down. I think before morning I think.

MB: And the mill was destroyed? The flour mill?

MF: Yes, the flour mill was destroyed.

MB: Who owned that? Do you remember?

MF: Yes, it was someone that owned all that land down there and he still owns a house down there...

MB: Parker?

MF: Yes, (unintelligible) Parker.

MB: Oh, it was his mill?

MF: Yes. He owned all that land south of that, too, (unintelligible). That was the mill. That was the big lumber mill. We had a train that went through town and on the other side of town right down to the river. It went right down here. It went right around down there and that went right through the mill. It was the big lumber mill. That was where my dad worked (unintelligible) after he got there.

MB: After he finished working for the Daley? And he worked for the mill?

MF: Yes.

MB: Oh, I see. Now, did your mother live to become quite an old lady?

MF: I think she was 83.

MB: Oh, I see. And how old was your father?

MF: He was older than her, so he, and he's been dead quite a while. I don't know. I don't know much about his age.

MB: I think you have nice people in your family! Well, I appreciate very much you giving me this time because this has been an interesting—

MF: (Talking at same time as interviewer) I just hope I thought of something that was real interesting and will mean a lot to somebody.

MB: Well, it will. You know, when people go through these tapes, they always pick up something they haven't read in the newspaper. That's what's interesting in visiting with people. Thank you very much.

MF: I hope they do like it, and that you do.

[End of Interview]