

Oral History 194-01

Interviewee: Walter Gnose

Interviewer: August Ore

February 20, 1988

August Ore: So you think [William R.] Allen was an honest man?

Walter Gnose: As far as I was concerned. Other people will tell you no. I think that came from bookkeeping and keeping track of hours. He always paid. He bought groceries from me when he moved here. He wasn't here when I came, he was back there in Boston. ...a man by the name of McKerken(?) was, ah, trying to run the mine. The railroad [Montana Southern], that was just dressing, because they never had anything to ship.

AO: The mine was not working at that time?

WG: No. See they ran into, ah, a bad situation, a fault. And in those days they had no way to control it.

AO: So you mean that it kept caving in on the miners.

WG: Four or five years ago the Geological Survey were in here doing, just tramping the hills finding the old claims, and this man told me that on one side of the fault was, ah, tungsten, and the other side was...what's up Cyprus Mine...I'll think of it. I don't know if in those days they used tungsten, but not like today.

AO: And they were after Silver weren't they?

WG: Yea. They had a terrific set up there. When I first came here there were the steam engine and the round house down behind here (gestures North).

AO: I was going to ask you that.

WG: There was a steam engine there, and there was a couple of ah, coaches. There was what they called a "speeder," it was a small car run by automobile engine.

AO: I think there was a picture of it in Wirtz's book.

WG: It never even went up the track after I came (1934). Even after they rebuilt it. Montana Power rebuilt it because they had to because of the flood. I don't know where the engine went to, but I do know where the railroad tracks went to. They went to Japan and we got 'em back.

AO: Do you know about what year those rails went out?

WG: Oh, must have been just before World War II...(The company) had two or three assessments on their stock.

AO: During the thirties?

WG: Yea... actually the railroad was a subsidiary of the mine.

AO: So every time the mine reorganized, so did the railroad.

WG: Yea... you see, the town was named Coolidge. Allen was a Republican. He was a Lieutenant Governor [1908]. He always had a cigar in his mouth he twisted until it was brown, and tobacco juice runnin' into his whiskers. We had the only phone, and he'd come over here to talk on the phone and when he got through you had to scrape the tobacco juice from the phone. I think he and I got along all right -- I don't know about the rest of his cohorts.

AO: Did you know anybody else working at the mine.

WG: Just Mr. McKerken, all the rest of them were gone. It was in the middle of the depression, 1934. They never did do any more mining. They did on the upper level, on top, but not on the big tunnel. What concentrates they did run through, were all there in a bin. When I came, some guy, some Jew came in here and sacked them all up and hauled 'em down by wagon. I remember they piled them all up in the dark. They eventually took 'em to Helena 'cause they had too much arsenic in 'em.

AO: So the concentrates were strong enough to haul them out and have them smelted.

WG: Well he didn't have to mine 'em. They were just sitting there. So there was, you know. . . Governor Allen was always after someone with sell job. Now, the house across the street Mr. McKerken (lived in) and there was two houses here (gestures west) and two houses down below (north) one of the houses where the post office is... When I first came here Mr. McKerken lived here and he was the boss, and when the Second World War started, why he went back to work for a railroad back in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

AO: He must have had a lot of experience in railroads.

WG: Yea, ah, well at that time anyone with a little experience could get a job. He had a heart attack, he dropped dead on the way to work. Those top guys were all easterners. They always paid all their help -- eventually.

AO: Was he a bad guy to work for?

WG: No, huh uh. Not to my knowledge when I came here. I don't know what happened before that.

AO: Did you ever meet Otto [L.] Heater?

WG: No. The Heaters were gone, when I got here. I don't know if he was the railroad man, or was there another guy in charge of the mine. There was two of 'em. Now which did what, I don't

know. They were all gone when I got here. Now Louise Jones would be able to tell you about that. So would Ralph Potts—lives at 1 Cedar Lake Drive in Butte, right out the at the country club.

AO: He must be fairly old?

WG: He's one year older than I am. But he was a kid when he worked on the railroad. I don't know whether he worked on any other railroads or not.

AO: Was that dam (on the Wise River that broke in 1927) ever replaced?

WG: No, it was just left.

AO: Do you know why it washed out?

WG: Well, whoever was tending the dam didn't open the dam didn't open the overfill, you know, it got till it started splashing over the top, and it was just an earthen dam.

AO: It wiped the town out?

WG: No. The Wise River Club over here that's the original building. What happened was there was an overhang, it fell down and pushed the water around side the building.

AO: Kind of like a boat in the water.

WG: Yea.

AO: A lot of the buildings in town must be new (post-1927).'

WG: This building, that part out there (Gnose Mercantile) was built for Mr. Harvey in '32. And, there's another building over here that is an old building. It's a commissary.

AO: And the round house that was just torn down?

WG: Yea.

AO: I'm curious to know how they hauled the locomotive out of here, if they scrapped it or drove them out of here, or what.

WG: I think that they hauled the little engine out of here.

AO: I know they had two at one time.

WG: One of them was gone when I got here. It would be on some narrow gauge railway someplace. [new thought] O.K. Elizabeth Patterson was Governor Allen's daughter -- have you heard of her?

AO: Yea, I have her address. I have written her.

WG: O.K. and the Patterson boy the head of Butte water supply, under it's her son. So that would be two good sources. I don't know much, ah, of Governor Allen's belongings, records and such, but she may have some. Go to it.

AO: Most of the crewmen and engineers were gone when you got here.

WG: I doubt if that, if that thing ran a dozen trips.

AO: As far as the community goes, were there many hard feelings towards Allen and his operation (as there was in Dillon)?

WG: I have no idea, because nobody ever said that, you know. I know Les Jones worked when they were mining up there. He said they went through leads that they never put on the map, and,

the drivers, ah, the head guys were hired to drive this tunnel, were not going to slow up for it. They I think most people felt that this strategy made the difference. But I think actually that Governor Allen was actually sold on the fact that he thought that as long as the ACM company had proven the ore had been richer as he went down, that he felt that that was what went on up there. Well, it didn't. It's an entirely different case up there. There's no leaching done.

AO: The mine must be fairly deep then.

WG: No, no. All they did was run this on the lower level, they run this big tunnel in and when they hit that fault they were through. Never could get beyond that. Then they come down from the top, and the air got real bad on them. So, I don't -- course I never got involved in it, I was too busy raising a family, trying to make a living. I did go up in the fall to help Mr. McKerken fix the roof. It was the slope-puller all the machinery was in there. It was a real crystally. I got up on the roof there was that much frost (about 1/2 inch). Well, I could go up, but I couldn't go down. I tried to go down and I'd start to slide and I couldn't guide myself to the ladder. So finally I went clear up. It was too cold to be up in that ice. And since that day I haven't had any use for heights since then.

AO: I don't blame you.

WG: But that's the only time I, ah, ever had anything to do with the mine.

AO: About what time was that?

WG: Oh, it must have been just before the war.

AO: It was still in good shape then?

WG: Oh yea. There were still some, you know, buildings around.

AO: So the mill still had, ah, steam heat and electric power?

WG: The electric power lines ran right across the hill here. Montana Power wasn't even gonna let a contract, they wouldn't put in a substation, and there it was, right on the hill.

AO: And [the power] came up from the dam (on the Big Hole)?

WG: Yea, Uh huh...people would walk the lines and collect the insulators.

AO: Was Coolidge a "bona-fide" town, it had a post office didn't it?

WG: No, that was closed. I, I never did see a cancellation from Coolidge, up to Coolidge. But it must have, in those days, they didn't have sub-post offices south of Wise River. I suppose the train from the town, the speeder or, most likely the speeder.

AO: There was a road (to Coolidge) in good shape up there.

WG: Oh yea, there was a road. All the timber that was Oregon, milled, all the buildings. All that Oregon fir that all those big timbers for the buildings, were all hauled up the road.

AO: They weren't hauled up on the railroad?

WG: I don't know if the railroad was built. Then they did have a saw mill up there, and ah, I think that they cut most their boards for their housing.

AO: Was Allen pretty active in Montana politics in the thirties, or had he dropped out of it?

WG: He was dropped out of it. He'd been inactive for a long time. Well I think his reputation — he'd got the reputation for being from selling his mine. He never give any returns. So that hurt him.

AO: I guess we've covered everything I had questions for. Now I'd like to learn more about your life in Wise River.

WG: Well, it was in the middle of the depression when we got here -- and I mean a real depression, not like the Democrats say we have now. But it was a real depression. I couldn't get a job. We had had two stores there (in Anaconda) before we closed them up. My dad and I split the town, 'course we ran on credit in those days.

SIDE TWO

AO: You grew up in Anaconda?

WG: Yea, I grew up in Anaconda. I worked on the (inaudible). I was very close friends with...we traded with his store, and we came out here (Wise River) to a dance... found out that the store was closed, went to the State Bank in Dillon and talked to them, borrowed some money from them. I tried to borrow from. . .

AO: May I ask when you were born?

WG: 1909, August the twenty-third.

AO: When did your dad come to Montana. Was he born in Montana?

WG: No. He came from Indiana. He came in, ah, 1889.

AO: He came at just about the birth of Anaconda.

WG: Well, the smelter, ah, the old smelter was here when he came here.

AO: In Butte?

WG: No, in Anaconda. You see there's an old smelter that, as your going into Anaconda the new smelter is on the left hand side, the old smelter is on the right side.

AO: And he [WG's father] started in the merchandising business?

WG: Yea, his brother had a store.

AO: Was it a general store?

WG: No, it was just a grocery store. Grocery store and bakery.

AO: It kind of runs in the family [WG's son Jim runs the Gnose Mercantile in Wise River].

WG: Yea, oh yea. I got roped into the grocery business quite early, and its changed a whole lot.

AO: How has it changed?

WG: Well, refrigeration for one. Nobody had gas in those days. There was no automobiles. I can remember (inaudible). The store was on East Merchant Street, the building is torn down, and (inaudible) with a bakery wagon on behind it with bread and rolls on it. They would go around and call on our customers, people who had asked us. They would take their orders and bring the groceries and deliver the bread, and they had a whole route, and back to the store. We had two horses on that wagon. We would deliver. When the depression came, we ran on credit... times were tough.

AO: But you made it in Wise River.

WG: Well I'm still here. From '34 to now, that's 55 years? 54. So... The most wonderful people in the world live here. I don't get along with all of them, but, they are still the greatest people in the world. Because they've let me live here, and ah, it's one of those things, we have a reputation now, so we do a good business. We can sell a lot. In the summertime, Jim is swamped, course I

don't have anything to do with it now. We have, we started it when I was running it, my grandkids come and work during the summer.

AO: Was Wise River ever called Allentown, do you know?

WG: O.K. Allentown, Governor Allen, he also had some property over near Anaconda. He got the logs, that's why there are no trees. Have you ever been on that road? Go up to Ralston and then you turn right and go across there. Well when my dad came those hills were covered with trees. Well then, they put in the big stack, after it was built when I was a senior in high school in '27. Then with all the arsenic came over the hill and it killed all of the trees. But they logged it off, too. Allentown was down at the end of the flume. They shot those logs down from the top of the divide on the other side of the flume, and they separated and one went to the smelter and one went to mines in Butte. As far as I know that's the only Allentown. I can remember Allentown, you know, I can remember guys riding the logs down the flume. They used the logs in Anaconda to fire the furnace. I remember when they switched from wood to coal, pulverized coal. Then they changed again -- when they went to nothing.

AO: On a map I have, it calls Wise River, Allentown.

WG: Allentown could have been at the mine. But as far as I know Wise River has never been called Allentown.

AO: So the Allen family must have been fairly affluent.

WG: I don't know about Governor Allen's family. I do know that he had large family. Biz, Elizabeth Patterson, was out of his second family. He had two girls and two boys in his second family, and he had three girls by his first wife. They were quite older. I never did see them. I can remember the house they lived in town.

AO: Do you know if Allen sold back his right of way for the train?

WG: I know that Phil Potts had got the right of way on his land just by paying the taxes. It was just abandoned.

AO: I understand that he paid quite a bit for the right of way when he built the line.

WG: I don't know that it was all that much. It might have been a lot money in those. ... I don't know if the bridge (over the Big Hole) was ever rebuilt. When I came here I used to fish - I don't remember it at all.

AO: Do you think Elizabeth Patterson would be willing to talk about the railroad?

WG: I think she would if she found out you were a historian. Ralph might be a little harder, but once you get him going... He may have a different idea about Allen then I do.

AO: What stores did you and your father have in Anaconda?

WG: Well we had the Central Market on Main Street, and the Bonner Grocery on East Commercial.

AO: Well I came here with all these questions, and I think you've answered them all.

WG: Well if you have anymore, come back again.

AO: I probably will.

END OF TAPE