

Child's Play

Risk and Resilience

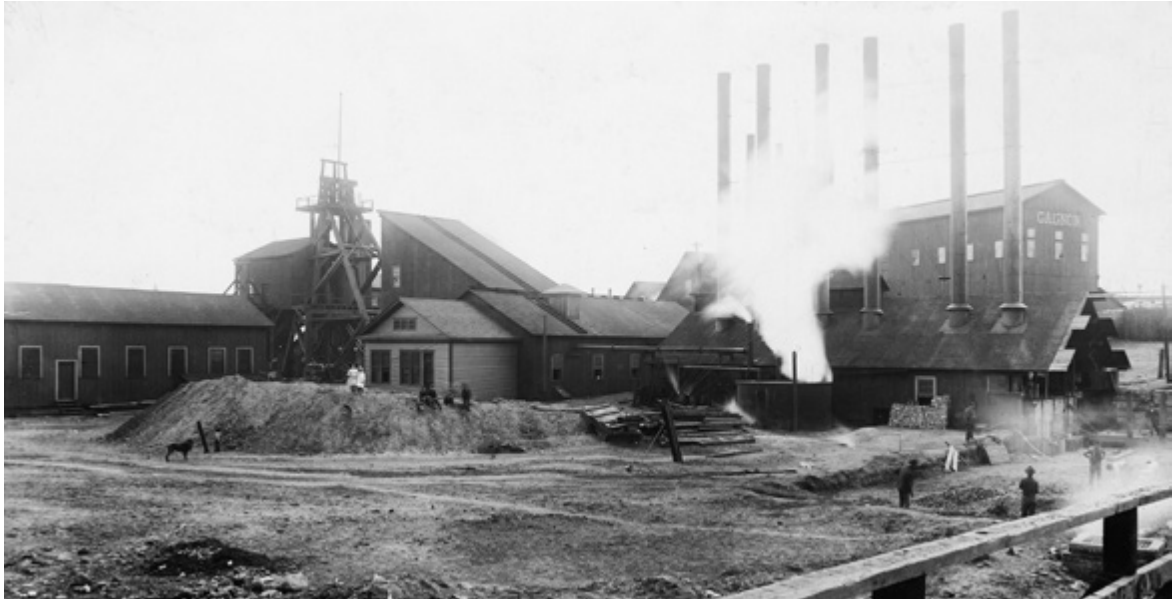
We used to sleigh ride. It wasn't sleigh riding. It was tobogganing. And these toboggans were homemade. You know, two sleds, and it would hold sixteen kids on that toboggan. We would pull that toboggan all the way up Anaconda Road for about two miles, and then we'd ride down, which took us about five minutes. It took us about two to three hours to get up there. That was really something.

—Catherine Hoy

BUTTE CHILDREN grew up in a rough-and-tumble world as they claimed slag heaps, mine yards, and city streets as their playgrounds. Stories of child's play in early Butte are rife with danger and derring-do, but as Butte youngsters played with and around the dangers of mining life, they forged their identities as hardy survivors in the process. Stories from the streets, school yards, and sports teams provide insights into children's collective strength and competitive spirit. These stories reveal both tough and tender moments as children established their turf, protected siblings, built alliances, and negotiated power. Memories of childhood escapades are marked with both pride and chagrin as adults recall their brash acts and shake their heads wondering how they survived. They are also marked by losses as mining life took its toll across generations.

Power in Numbers

Even as Butte's population peaked in 1917 and then began to decline, the number of children continued to rise, and children and miners vied for space on the Butte Hill. Memories of childhood are marked



Butte children grew up in a rough and tumble world as they claimed slag heaps, mine yards, and city streets as their playgrounds. Above, children play at the Gagnon Mine, circa 1900.



These six at right may be posing in their Sunday best (circa 1940), but their playground stretches out behind them.

by stories of groups of youngsters who organized themselves in their neighborhoods, created their own forms of play, and took responsibility for watching out for one another. As Catherine Hoy stated:

There were, I'd say, fifty to sixty kids in [our] area. And they all went to St. Mary's School at this time. We had to cross the railroad tracks from our house to St. Mary's School. And, believe me, it was snow. They say ankle deep, but it was knee deep getting back and forth to that school. But it was nice,

and we got along real well. [There were] lots of fights and lots of quarrels. But they managed. There was one thing about the kids on Anaconda Road and the people in Dublin Gulch. They all stuck together. They had their fights and their quarrels, but they stuck together. If one was in trouble, you'd best know everybody was on the helping side of it. But the miners were really something else. You know, as I said, there'd be from two to three thousand miners going up and down that road every day. And you got lost in the shuffle if you happened to be on the road at the changing of shifts.¹

John Onkalo grew up in Finntown, where the houses were “skin to skin” and the neighborhood teeming with children.

There was always a gang around to play with. As far as excitement, there was always something to do. Like this hillside here, this was our favorite playground, up on the side of the hill. We had what we called cabins. We'd just dig a hole, a hole in the ground high enough to stand up in, and we'd cover it over. We'd rustle scrap nails and pipe, anything we could find on the hillside, and then we'd go up to the dumps and pick up sheet tin and boards or anything we could find that we could use to cover it over with and put a layer of dirt on top of that. Then that would be our secret meeting place.²

As Packey Buckley, Patricia Canty, Kay Antonetti, and John Onkalo described, children occupied a wide swath of the social and physical space of Butte. They were intrepid explorers, continually staking claims to their turf and embarking on new adventures.

We played up on the side hill. We would make up a game, you know what I mean. They had a football field up there, and you would play—it was right up there above the first tracks, and we called it the “side hill”—and all of the guys would stand beneath the bridge. Twelve and fourteen guys would stand beneath the bridge just talking, just talking.³

When we weren't in school, we were outdoors playing. We played on the Cinders, the ball field down there. We used to go for long walks with our lunch tucked under our arms or bike rides. We went for lots of hikes in back of Big Butte, down to the Brown's Gulch area. And then, of course, all of the neighborhood kids were involved, too, so we had lots of friends that did all kinds of things with us. . . .

We played an awful lot of really wild games when we were kids. We used to go running through the neighborhood playing chase and “commandoes.” . . . We had what they call rubber guns. You could put a clothespin on top of a gun-shaped thing and snap them. You’d make these long rubber bands out of inner tubes that could shoot about twenty feet. We also dug a lot of foxholes in our backyard, and I can remember one time at dinner my dad saying, “I’m going to make a rule. You can’t dig foxholes any closer than five feet to the foundation of the house. Otherwise our house is going to fall down.” We actually dug long, skinny foxholes. We played war with each other.

Other girls might have been out playing dolls or something like that, but I was always playing war and “commando” with my brothers. So, all around the neighborhood we could shimmy up between the garages, especially the two garages next to the family next door to us, and get up on the roof. And we used to walk around on that roof all the time, surveying the neighborhood. My dad would have killed us if he ever found out. But that was our lookout, and you’d look over the neighborhood—make sure none of the enemy was coming. We played stuff like that all of the time. . . . We kind of protected our neighborhood.⁴

Everyone in the neighborhood, all around, everyone knew everybody. And all us kids played together. There was a playground across the street from us. We played ball and kick-the-can, and we’d go around and ring neighbors’ doorbells and then run, you know. We had a wonderful childhood. We had a big hill behind us that we’d sleigh ride down and skied a few times on funny little old-fashioned skis. Then Big Butte was just over Zarelda Street, just four blocks up. And we’d go up there and bring our lunch and play. And we’d play in the Gulch. We went all over. Nobody worried about their kids. We’d go play in the morning, come home at noon for lunch, then go again ’til dinner. And then we’d played outside again in the evenings. Everybody knew you, so you could never do anything bad.⁵

Weathering Winter

The mile-high city of Butte is precipitously perched on steep hillsides that descend abruptly to the flats of the Summit Valley floor. Just as miners made their way up and down the Butte Hill to the mines each

day so did children come to know the steep streets, gullies, and gulches that shaped the contours of school, work, and play. Butte winters were long and harsh, and children weathered them with aplomb. On snowy days, eager children, with Flexible Flyers and homemade toboggans in tow, shared the Hill with weary miners trudging their way to and from their shifts. John Onkalo remembered:

As far as the mining population, man, the hillsides used to be black with men when they were changing shifts. You'd see men walking up the Hill and other men walking down the Hill. I remember as a young boy we used to do a lot of our sleigh riding on the hillside up here behind the old Pennsylvania Mine. We'd go up what we called the "first tracks"—railroad tracks—and we'd coast on our sleds from there down to Broadway. A lot of times if there was fresh snow during the night, that snow would be soft, you know, not good for sleigh riding. But after the shift had gone that morning, why, man, it was packed. There was a hard-packed trail. We'd get up there, and we'd come scooting down that hard-packed snow, which, of course, made it tougher for the poor guys that had to come down that after the next shift again.⁶

Butte's topography provided children a ready-made ski hill in winter, with cross-streets and railroad tracks serving as only minor inconveniences. Bobsledding and tobogganing were favorite past-times, despite the potential for disaster. As Elinore Sterrett Shields Penrose recalled:

Centerville had a very steep hill coming down, with a railroad track that crossed the street at right angles. One winter when I was old enough to ride the big sled—we had a great big Flexible Flyer—Dad told me that I could go up the hill in Centerville with Kenny and Cliff, who were my friends. We started out on a beautiful winter's night, sparkling snow, and we walked from our houses, from Zarelda and Alabama streets. We went up Alabama, and then we cut across the Gulch, and we went up Centerville Street and went way up beyond the railroad track even. I don't know why none of us thought about the train track. We just should have had better sense. Here we were coming down, and I think Kenneth was lying down and Cliff was on back. When they got on, I pushed and then hopped on, and off we went. It was a little bit icy and very cold, and suddenly I saw the track. We went over it, and we

jumped six feet. With the three of us on that sled, we landed hard and the runners were bent underneath it, and we were just sick. . . . Well, we turned it over, and the fellas pulled the runners back into place as best they could. And we got on and went on again, but more slowly and a little bit more scared.

Danette Harrington spent many a winter's day playing on Anaconda Road.

Half the time you couldn't get the car up the road. You had to leave your car and pack your groceries up. My father spent the best years of his life shoveling this road, which was about six hundred yards long. It was wonderful to sleigh ride. Dad would spend all day out shoveling and sanding. He would shovel it manually and sprinkle a box of sand. And then he would go in and have dinner, and we would go out with our little shovels, and we would be throwing the snow back so we could sleigh ride for the night.⁷

Sledding down Butte's steep streets was risky business. Reports of accidents and injuries from children's winter adventures were commonplace in both personal stories and the daily news. The *Butte Miner* described one such accident in December 1909:

Sled Crashes into Pole Injuring Two Little Maids

Coming at top speed and crashing into a telephone pole with a frail sled was the experience of Laurine Thurwell and Madeline McCroon of Centerville last Tuesday. Stunned and bleeding, they were picked up and carried home where physicians were sent for. It was discovered that Miss Thurwell had suffered a broken nose and severe bruises and her playmate Miss McCroon had her scalp laid open by its contact with the pole. Both girls are recovering rapidly and will be at play again soon.⁸

Butte's winters provided Butte children with a long skating season as well. The Holland Ice Rink was a second home for many Butte youngsters over the years until its closure in 1951. As an article in the *Montana Standard* reported: "Rosie DesJardins, now 90, recalls the many times she skated there. Rosie won skating medals in Butte and at competitions in Canada in 1932 and 1933. . . . On Friday nights at the rink, she remembers that the band closed with 'The Olde Gray Mare She Ain't What She Used To Be,' which was

appropriate because, after everyone cleared off the rink, a horse stabled nearby would pull a scraper over the ice before crews flooded it for the next day.”⁹

Elinore Sterrett Shields Penrose also enjoyed afternoons at the Holland Ice Rink as a young girl: “We’d go down there, and they had big, high fences so that when the sun came out it didn’t spoil the ice. I loved to skate. But I was light, and I wasn’t big, and every once in a while they’d get me in the crack-the-whip. One time the whip broke in the middle, and I was at the end. And you should have seen what happened. I went flying, and I hit my hip, and it scraped away the flesh clear down to the hip bone. I never showed it to my mother.”¹⁰

For many Butte children, the free neighborhood rink was the draw. Kids would strap on hand-me-down skates and wobble their way from home to rink for a hockey game, racing practice, or a few rounds of crack-the-whip. John T. Shea grew up in Corktown during the Depression. A little ingenuity went a long way in winter as John and his friends crafted makeshift hockey equipment from the materials at hand.

When I grew up, it was tough times, and you become acclimated to those times. We played hockey. “Shinny,” we called it. Little Sego milk cans, we’d fill them full of water and freeze them. And then you would get a broom with everything cut off of the broom, you know, the bristles. And we’d play shinny with them. You put cardboard inside your overalls, in case you get hit in the shin. Oh, I got hit right above this eye. There is still a scar up there under that eyebrow. Boy, it hit me. Blood all over the place. I went up to the drugstore. They had a drugstore up there. He put something on a chunk of gauze, slapped it on. They weren’t too worried about it. But then, I’ll tell you one thing, kids took care of kids. The older guys made sure nobody picked on the younger guys. And as you got older, you know, you did the same way.¹¹

Given the popularity of skating and the recognized need for recreation, ice rinks began to receive government support during the Depression years. In 1936 young people were hired through the National Youth Administration, a New Deal youth-employment program, to create and maintain skating rinks around the city. On December 6, 1936, the *Montana Standard* proudly announced that “22 rinks comprising 249,000 square feet of ice will be operated in the city this winter.”¹² The largest was at Clark Park, where a new hockey rink was added.

Youngsters flocked to skating events and competitions over the years. They practiced on neighborhood rinks and converged on Clark



Butte's cold winters provided Butte children with a long skating season. They practiced on neighborhood rinks and converged on Clark Park (above, 1940s) to compete for their schools in citywide speed-skating contests.

Park to compete for their schools in citywide speed-skating contests. Each year, the Clark Park rink was the site of an ice carnival, which began in 1919, and various speed- and figure-skating competitions. Children cheered on the city's best as they defended their titles and moved on to state and regional competitions. In 1939 the honor of Ice King and Queen went to Babe O'Farrell and Patsy O'Connor, who went on to represent Butte at the Banff Winter Carnival. In 1952 Butte's state-of-the-art Civic Center opened. Among its special features was an indoor ice arena that hosted hockey leagues, visiting professional ice shows, and training space for local speed and figure skaters. For fifteen cents, Butte children could use the rink during public skating hours. While the smooth ice was a treat, it did not replace the pleasure and accessibility of the neighborhood rink.

And when the temperatures warmed and the ice melted, children took their competitive spirit outdoors with track meets in the spring and jacks, marbles, and hopscotch on street corners in summer. In the 1940s and 1950s, the sounds of the "Play-Go-Round" bus, sponsored by the Butte Junior Service League, signaled mobile neighborhood fun ranging from spirited volleyball matches to pet shows in which bunnies and mixed-breed mutts squared off with snakes and occasional bear cubs for "Best of Show." And in the fleeting dog days of summer, youngsters headed for Bell Creek to try their luck in a fishing derby. On July 4, 1953, Tommy Laird and Maureen Tinsley were the first-place finishers.

Tommy caught a one-pound, eleven-ounce rainbow—and Maureen an eight and seven-eighths-ounce rainbow.¹³

Mine Yards as Playgrounds

Year-round, Butte children honed their risk-taking skills in and around the workings of the mines, incorporating the gallows frames, slag heaps, settling ponds, and train tracks into their social worlds. In contrast to expert calls for safe, designated sites for child's play, Butte youngsters preferred the allure of the mine yard. They built forts from pilfered mine materials, organized potato roasts behind slag heaps, and dangled from ropes suspended from ore train trestles. Memories of play are intertwined with elaborate details of the mechanics of mining itself. Frank Carden grew up on Butte's East Side, where he developed a fascination for the grit and intrigue of the mine dumps and shafts.

We used to drop rocks down the holes in the coverings of the old mine shafts and listen to them as they'd hit the wooden walls on the way down and finally splash in the water at the bottom of the shaft. No one knew how deep these shafts were or if the covering was rotten and would let one fall through. But no one ever fell in that I know of, and no mining company ever put new covers on or fenced these dangerous holes to keep the kids out. When you think of the immensity of these dumps and how close together they were, it makes you think the underground must have been pretty hollow with drifts, raises, tunnels, and shafts for all that dirt to come out of and



Year-round, Butte children honed their risk-taking skills in and around the workings of the mines, incorporating the gallows frames, slag heaps, settling ponds, and train tracks into their social worlds. This boy swings on a guy-wire.

what kind of dangerous chemicals the present environmentalists would have found in those dumps.¹⁴

Lucille Martinesso Sheehan was drawn to the copper tanks—large tanks containing scrap iron used to precipitate copper from mine water—as her playground in the 1920s.



Lucille Martinesso Sheehan, circa 1926

We always played in Meaderville. . . . We used to play in the copper tanks. We'd play with the copper water. [It was] just about three or four blocks from home. We'd have little milk cans, and we'd fill 'em with water, and we played in there. It was all around the copper tanks. They had these piles all over, you know, of their debris. And we'd play around there. They were like big troughs, and we'd go around there and play in the water. I'm ninety years old and still here, so it didn't do any damage to us.¹⁵

Copper ponds and tanks captured children's imaginations for decades. Danette Harrington, who grew up in the 1940s, recalled:

When we were kids, up above our house in the back, between Anaconda Road and the Bell Diamond Mine, were the copper ponds, and we used to go swimming there. My mother used to get so angry because my brother, the only thing left on his jeans were the brass little pieces of buttons, and the pants just got eaten alive, and the tennis shoes. Back then kids wore the black canvas tennis shoes, and the eyelets would rot out of them. They didn't last three weeks. Then we'd go over to the cement ponds that were on Anaconda Road. That's where the Company had its own cement company. And they went up and emptied their trucks out, and it was wonderful because it ran downhill. And when they flushed the trucks out, the cement that wasn't used eventually made a wonderful cement pond. So then we would go up after the shift closed down, and we would turn the hoses on and fill that with water, and that's where we swam.¹⁶

As Danette's childhood experiences reveal, girls and boys alike tested their mettle with their mine yard adventures.

We had a transformer that was huge. It was probably one hundred feet high or bigger. We used to spend all the time

in the world up there. We'd go and hang ropes on it. We'd go steal some rope from the mine yard and tie it to the thing and make a swing. You'd climb the first eight feet, and then you'd get on the level. The brave guys would go up to the next level and tie the rope on the second level. You would spend all day taking turns, throwing the rope from corner to corner. . . .

We used to give the gunmen [security guards for the mine yards] a run for their money. The gunmen at all of the mines had a little gunman shack. Every hour the gunman would punch his clock. They had a little clock that they wore on their hip on a heavy two-inch strap. It looked like a canteen. The gunman had certain rounds he had to go on and punch the clock to designate that. We used to play around the machinery or wherever. The minute he would leave, we would go in the gunman's shack. He had naked ladies, like out of *Playboy*, along the walls. We would tear them off because, oh, yuck, what did he want to look at those filthy women for? It became a wonderful game. The minute he left the shack we would go in and tear all the stuff down.¹⁷



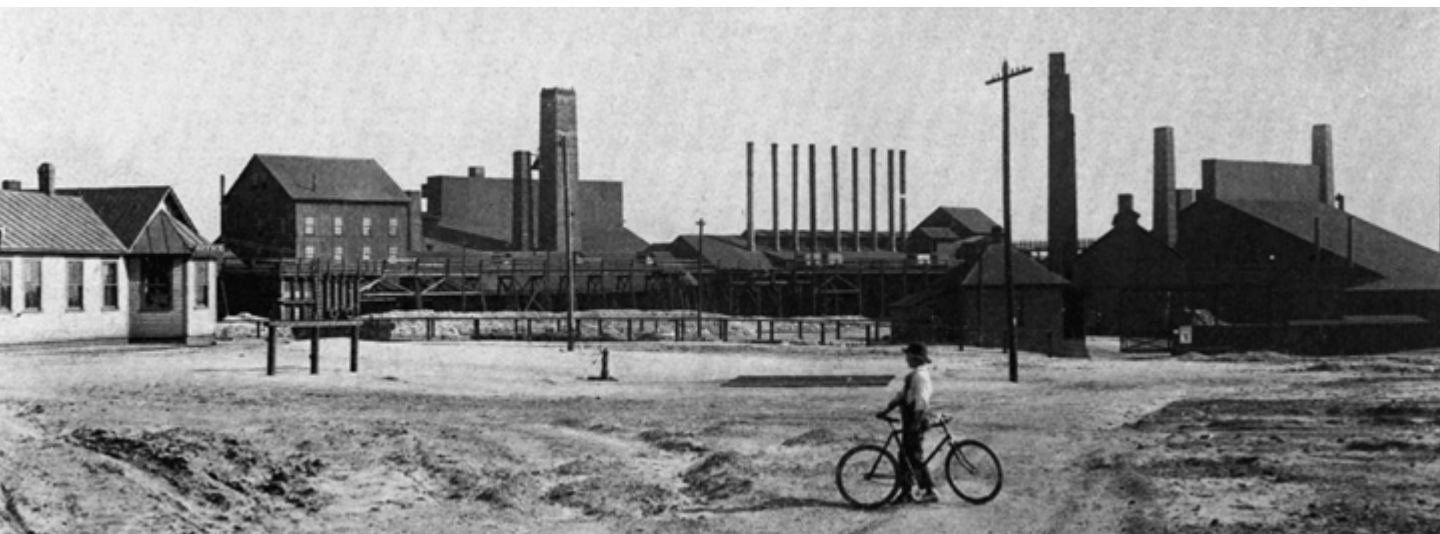
When not playing on mine features, the gang might gather for a more traditional game such as marbles. Pictured circa 1920 in Finntown are (top, left to right) Mary Takala, Lempi Koski, Helen Amtilla, Vera Bendio, Minnie Trevithick, Hilea Takala, and (bottom) Jack and Walter (no last name listed), Emil Koski, John Button, Hjalmer Koski, unidentified, William Vincent [?], Charles Griffis, and John Takala.

Some adventures were a bit more tame yet rich in ingenuity and discovery. Tom Holter grew up in McQueen. His childhood forays to the mines led him to the discovery of other treasures.

When we were kids, we had the Main Range just east of McQueen. It wasn't a working mine. We'd go up there, get a bunch of wood, and come down and build a cabin, a skating-rink cabin. The Main Range had little tunnels, and we'd climb through the tunnels. We'd bring empty buckets, and we'd walk from McQueen up to Black Rock, and we'd bring home buckets full of wild raspberries. And our parents would make raspberry jelly or raspberry pie. My aunt Mamie and I would go up there and pick them wild raspberries. East of McQueen . . . there were a bunch of chokecherry bushes. We'd go up there and pick buckets full of chokecherries. By the time we got home, our teeth would be all black. People would make chokecherry wine, chokecherry jam.¹⁸

Linda Raiha's family relocated from the East Side to Company-built housing in McGlone Heights, at the base of Big Butte, when Linda was eleven. At first she found this foreign terrain daunting, but she and her siblings soon adapted.

We did a lot of climbing up the Big M. Mom would give us lunch, and we would climb the Big M and spend the whole afternoon up there, just inventing our games up there. There were caves and rock formations, and they would become our



Lucky children like this boy at the Parrot Smelter had bikes with which to get around in Butte and the nearby countryside.



The Meaderville girls softball team (left, circa 1920) included (front row, right to left) Margaret Pierce, Annie Moore, Dillis Pierce, Loretta Moore, Sally Pierce, (center row) Theresa Ferrando, Inga Johnson, Julia Morello, Hazel Pomroy, (back row) coaches Dominick Ruffato and Anton Bertoglio. The child in front is not identified.

houses. It was a lot of fun. You'd use your imagination a lot. We'd spend hours and hours up there. It took half a day to hike up there. It kept us out of Mom's hair. We had a lot of neighborhood kids at that time, and we organized all kinds of games.¹⁹

Linda was the only one of her siblings with a "store-bought" bicycle, which she shared. Her younger brothers, however, put their ingenuity to work to acquire their own bikes. They scavenged enough old parts to build themselves serviceable bicycles. Their universe expanded as they biked to Brown's Gulch to camp and Bell Creek to swim.

Children crafted their play to the contours of mining. Whistles from the mine yards sent them running home for lunch, and the 9:00 siren was the warning to head home for the night. And in between time, many children honed their athletic skills on makeshift playing fields built from the vestiges of mining. As John Sheehy, who grew up on Butte's north side, explained: "We didn't have ball fields really. . . . One of the things that happened was that the Company, with all those forges, had cinders that they had to get rid of. They had all kinds of places on the north side where they brought those cinders up by horse and wagon and deposited them on their property in the neighborhood. They'd become the basic platform for a ball field, especially the football field."²⁰

Makeshift baseball was a favorite of Catherine Hoy.

We played baseball, and at one time it was called "tippy." We had a big, flat stick, you know, and I don't know what it is called now, but we used to call it a "tippy." A flat stick, it was

shaped like an oar. And we had fights. Girls on one side, boys on the other, and we'd hit that stick back and forth. We had bases that we used to run back and forth like the baseball team. The girls could play ball as well as the boys. I don't think there was any difference in the girls and the boys in those days.²¹

By Danette Harrington's time, the game had changed a bit. A Dublin Gulch neighbor had a backyard pond that had fallen out of use. It was filled with empty beer cans. When bats and balls were scarce, Dublin Gulch kids would grab sticks and cans for a rousing game of beer-can baseball.

Children on Butte's East Side congregated on the upper and lower playgrounds at Grant School, which had been created by leveling two large lots that had formerly served as mine tailing dumps. As Edward Jursnich described, they were completely barren of grass, and their "only semblance to playgrounds was that they were located near a school and often crowded with children."²² They served as the playing fields for endless variations on baseball in which the rules changed depending on the number of players.

Dozens of gallows frames, the above-ground structures for the hoists that carried miners deep beneath the ground, towered over the city. From a child's-eye view, the formidable frames were the ultimate monkey bars, and only the best and the bravest could scale them.

Kids would tie a rope on the Belmont gallows frame or the East Park Street Bridge, hang onto the rope, and swing off the ground. . . . The Belmont ore trestle was about seventy-five feet above the street level and built in such a wondrous manner that the kids could climb up the steel support towers without any trouble whatsoever. Most of us could not go any higher than fifteen or twenty feet before we got scared and had to come down to think things over. But there were those who could climb clear to the top and, wonder of wonders, without any trouble get right up to the top deck, where they would shout down to us groundlings so we would know they were brave enough to make the top deck.²³

At times, children made it home safely by sheer luck, as Danette Harrington's experience attested.

Another night we decided to do something a bit more adventuresome. We went to the Kelley Mine. There were five of us, four girls and a boy. We went up in the crusher. We snuck in

and went in the crusher and rode the conveyor belt to the top of the ore bins. We got caught, and everybody started to run. The ore bins at the Kelley are big. They must have been about six stories high. The rocks came out of the crushers and down those chutes and came out on the conveyor belt into those bins. They drove the trains up, and there was a platform where the ore cars would come over. They would open the chutes, and the rocks would come down and fill the ore cars. We had never been up there, and we thought it would be fun. I was no little girl. I was probably twelve or fourteen at the time. And we got caught, and they chased us. I came down those six stories on a rope. My hands were just all raw coming down the rope. And, well, you were out for yourself then. You couldn't depend on the other person, and you couldn't take care of anybody. We ran and ran. There were cop cars and gunmen. They chased us for almost four hours.

Danette and one of her companions, who sported a bleeding lip from the incident, took refuge in her friend's house, hiding under the bed until the coast was clear.²⁴

Adventure by Train

With mining came the hauling of wood, coal, and ore and the perpetual rumble of freight trains. Children found plenty of adventure to be had along the tracks. John Sheehy's North Montana Street house was located directly above a tunnel for the Butte, Anaconda & Pacific Railway.

I spent a lot of time as a young kid at the sides of that tunnel—first of all, playing on that grade. We would take railroad spikes and pretend that they were trains or railroad cars. We'd dig trenches around and run the spikes on the rails, playing railroad. And another thing that I can remember us doing is going down and sitting on the side when the train passed. And if you sat at the head of the underpass and just stared straight ahead, pretty soon you were moving. It was an optical illusion. You were moving, and the train was standing still. I did that often. It was a wonderful sensation. I was always, always fascinated by those trains. They would pass by every two or three hours. They took ore out of the Hill, and they brought lumber back and coal back.

In one of those years, I had a neighbor named John Connors. He was a remarkable climber. He could climb anywhere.

His nickname was Dead Eye, Dead Eye Connor. Anyway, we were good pals, about the same age. We'd go over to the Stewart Mine where the woodyard was. The woodyard was on one side of Main Street, and the mine was on the other. And in that woodyard, the train came in on a high trestle. And then you came to a fence right below the end of that trestle. It would be maybe thirty feet high at the end of the trestle. So, we'd climb the fence and get over to where were called lag-gins. I guess the word is "lagging." And it's a piece of lumber. It would be about two inches thick and about twelve feet long and about six or eight inches wide. They used those for timber down in the mines. They must have been pine, I guess. And you could split them right down into the size that would fit in your kitchen range. We'd go there, Dead Eye and I, and get three or four of those things and go to the end of the trestle and throw them off. And we'd throw them so that they would land on the end, and they would not break. And then we'd go outside and pick them up and take them home and chop them up right away. And I think about that now. The top of that trestle was right about the same height as the sixth floor of the Hennessy Building [Anaconda Company headquarters]. And we were only about a quarter mile away. I'm sure those men looked down and saw the two kids out the window.²⁵

Betty Henderson shared the love and adventure of trains. "Oh, I love trains. As kids we used to dam up the railroad tracks, and the engineer, he'd come, 'toot, toot, toot.' 'You damn kids, get them dams down.' Oh, we'd lay under the track and hold our breath as the train went over. We'd lay under the water trestle. We'd lay there and let the train go right over the top of us."²⁶

Through their fascination with trains, Betty and her friends met a lot of travelers, whose company and conversation enhanced their adventures.

The bums would come off the trains, and they'd come down for food. . . . My mother and dad were better off for food than some people. We always had food. Dad said he never had food when he was a kid, and, by gosh, we were going to have food. . . . Mom and Dad didn't know about it until we were grown up, but we'd bring the bums back to the house. They'd say, "You got anything to eat?" and we'd grab some canned food for them.²⁷

For some youngsters, the proximity of a train yard simply meant access to an easy, if illicit, form of transportation. When Danette Harrington's father was working at the Anselmo Mine, he would drive to work. Keeping with Catholic tradition, the Harringtons did not eat meat on Friday. On occasion, Danette and her brother would hitch a ride on the westbound train running through the mine yard adjacent to their house and hop off when the train slowed at the Excelsior Street intersection near the Anselmo Mine. They would borrow the car, drive to a place on the Flats that made great fish and chips, order takeout, return the car, and hop an eastbound train home, fish and chips in hand.

Play and Piracy

For many Butte youngsters, there was a fine line between play and piracy. Just as miners' stories are laced with accounts of smuggling Company supplies from the mines in their lunch-buckets, so do children's stories tell of theft from the mines and railroads as an accepted practice.²⁸ The gathering of coal, wood, and scrap metal as part of child's play often helped to supplement the family income or keep the stove going on a frigid winter night. Catherine Hoy described the necessity of what she termed "petty stealing":

We used to steal coal. Get sacks of coal and put it on our sled and sleigh ride down the hill with the sacks of coal on it. You had to, with those big pot-bellied stoves, you know, try to keep warm, to keep warm, ten below zero, and every one of the kids would be just freezing to death. And we'd all congregate around that great big stove, trying to keep warm.²⁹

Ann and John Onkalo lived, played, and scavenged by the St. Lawrence Mine as kids.

[Ann] They used to dump lumber up by the St. Lawrence Mine down onto the dumps. Why, women and kids would go rushing up to bring home wood to burn. They'd dump it, but it was just waste wood. Boy, any mother that noticed it would whistle to her kids, and when you'd see somebody going, you'd all scramble for it. . . .

[John] I used to enjoy that rustling wood. I used to go up on the Hill all the time and rustle wood off the dumps. That's when they used to dump everything outside. There was no

using it for fuel down in the mine, you know. Each scrap would come up with the waste, and they'd put it over the dump.

[Ann] We used to get sawdust down at the Belmont Mine. Fill gunnysacks with it. Five gunnysacks on a wagon. I remember another girl and I, we made the rounds of every butcher shop Uptown once, and nobody would buy it. Then we got back to the house that her parents were renting. The building, it had a row of outdoor toilets, . . . and the landlord bought fifty cents worth of sawdust from us.³⁰

Sometimes children and adults conspired in appropriation of minor items from the mines for the common good of the neighborhood kids. As Danette Harrington described: "Mickey Kelly was a carpenter at the Kelley mine yard. He was great. He would build stilts for all of the kids. We would use them for awhile, then it would be time for a potato roast, so we'd take the stilts and burn them for the roast. About a week later, we'd be back at the mine yard to get more stilts, and Mickey would always build us some."³¹

As these stories suggest, children's play offered up-close experiences with mines and risk. Children honed their skills and bravado as they embraced Butte's industrial terrain as their playground.

Death and Loss

Stories of childhood also reveal that the consequences of play could be serious, and at times fatal. The detritus of mining could turn playgrounds into mine fields, robbing youngsters of life and limb. While memories of broken bones and bruised bodies are common place in adult recollections, newspaper accounts document the frequency of debilitating and fatal injuries resulting from children's play in and around the mines.

For example, nine-year-old Frank Shovlin, son of a local police officer,

had one eye probably totally destroyed and received other injuries shortly after noon yesterday through the accidental explosion of a percussion cap. The little boy was not far from his home and he and three other children had found the cap with a small end of fuse attached to it. The children lighted the fuse and then the Shovlin boy held the match under the cap. Immediately there was an explosion that cut the right eye

of the boy badly and also lacerated his fingers. None of the other children were injured.³²

In 1910 Percy Honeychurch, fifteen, and Frank Barry, thirteen, died of electrocution while they were swinging a piece of baling wire over the transmission line of the Rarus Mine. According to the newspaper report, they had cast the wire over the power line and then were swinging on the wire, apparently trying to break down the line. In the process, they sawed the insulation off the cable. Their bodies were badly burned. The news account first described the teenage victims as “little boys, ignorant of the danger,” then noted that the boys had “flirted with death before.” Numerous complaints had been made regarding the “mischievous pranks of this crowd of boys,” and they had been brought to the attention of the sheriff’s office.³³

The mixing of child’s play and danger is a recurrent theme in news reports. Curiously, the fact that explosive devices were often found about town in the path of children’s play was not questioned, nor was mention made of Company accountability for the mine fields that extended well beyond the mine yards. Decade after decade, the injuries continued. In June 1916 thirteen-year-old Willie Ritchie lost a thumb and two fingers in an explosion “when a giant cap he was playing with near his home exploded. Neighbors attracted to the scene by the report of the explosion found the lad in great pain but his first words were, ‘Don’t tell mother.’”³⁴ In 1934 ten-year-olds Robert Olson and Clarence Lemier were hospitalized for injuries received when a dynamite cap they were playing with exploded: “They were playing near the Blue Bird gas station on the Anaconda Highway. First they found an ice pick near the Oro Fino Ice Company at the foot of Big Butte. Then they found the dynamite cap and started picking at the cap, which exploded.”³⁵

The city of Butte was rocked by tragedy on July 4, 1932, when six young men were killed in an explosion. The group, all from McQueen, had lifted some blasting caps from a mine yard and begun to set them off around town in the early morning of July 4. About 1:00 A.M., when they ran out of explosives, they returned to the mine yard to find more caps, and the pile exploded. All six were killed. Residents came together in mourning, and a joint funeral for the six was held at Holy Savior Parish. News reports of the tragedy refer to the victims as “boys,” even though all were over age eighteen.³⁶

However, the deaths of friends and schoolmates did not seem to serve as deterrents for other young adventurers drawn to the pleasures—and dangers—of risky play. Children died on train tracks and under streetcars. They lost life and limb from explosions and accidents. They bore witness to loss from early ages. And they joined in the curious

fusion of grief and celebration at wakes and funerals in a community where premature death touched so many families. Childhood memories of wakes and funerals provide windows into children's understandings of death and loss and their efforts to assimilate profound events that adults failed to explain to them. It is notable that the same sense of wonder, curiosity, and emotional energy that children bring to play comes through in accounts of witnessing and making sense of the rituals around death. And play provided children with a way of coping in the moment.

Jule McHugh was born in Dublin Gulch in 1906. Her father died when she was eight. His body was brought to the family home for the wake and covered with sprays of flowers. Jule was one of ten children, and her father's wake was on Halloween. Caught in a powerful mix of emotions, Jule and her siblings invented their own way of coping:

We had a circus. We soaped windows. Joe had a bogus ten-dollar bill on a string, and he would set it outside the door. Everyone that saw it would stop to pick it up, and Joe, around the corner, would pull the string. At one time, they were three or four deep trying to grab it. We stayed over at Mrs. Nugent's, a boardinghouse, and we never saw such an abundance of food—cookies in big boxes, cases of oranges—and did we have a party. We were trampolining on the bed in our black sateen bloomers, and someone came over from the wake and told us to pull down the shades. Best Halloween we ever had.³⁷

As a child, Catherine Hoy was taken by the activities surrounding a funeral.

There were a lot of heartaches, you know. Children got killed in the cars up on Anaconda Road, you know, fell between the cars and were killed. There was a lot of heartaches. But you hadn't seen anything until you went to an Irish wake up there. Didn't you ever go to an Irish wake? Well, then you missed something. They kept the bodies at home. You didn't take them to the undertakers like they do now. They prepared the bodies and fixed them at home. They had them in a big room, and all the mourners came up. And everybody in the neighborhood cooked something. They had a big ham, chicken, dessert, cakes, and so on. Then they'd have this wake, and all the neighbors would come in and say how sorry they were and so on and so forth. Then at midnight, you know, they'd have this big feast in there with all the liquor they wanted. There

was twenty, thirty saloons on that highway, so we weren't short by any means. But then they'd all eat and have a good old time up to the wake and enjoy it. And then the funerals were something else. [Undertaker] Fat Jack [would drive] the hearse on funeral day. And all the Irish drinking. . . . Of course, the kids weren't allowed, but lots of times the kids got in on it. We made it our business to attend.³⁸

John Onkalo was four years old when he attended his first funeral.

I remember my fourth birthday. That was in 1916. A good friend of the folks died, and we went to the funeral. In those days, it was mostly horse-drawn vehicles. There were some automobiles but not very many. When you'd go to a funeral, why, you'd go and rent a horse and buggy in the summer or in the wintertime a horse and sleigh. That's the way you'd go to the funeral. Well, the Finns, a lot of them it seemed, after the funeral, they'd go charging around to one of the roadhouses after the funeral. I enjoyed that. They'd go to the roadhouse, and you'd get some pop to drink. I really got a kick out of that.³⁹

John T. Shea revealed his Irish humor as he recounted memories of a funeral he attended as a child.

When I was a kid, we lived up on Missoula Avenue. When I was little, right across the street was Guinness Shea, and their daughter was my godmother. They were like grandparents. Guinness died, and they had the wake at home. Right away, my mom started cooking, and she put the big wreath on the door. They had the three wooden chairs [to hold the casket], and then they put down the kneeler. The first night went well. They had more or less family. The second night they had the "keenies," the ladies who sit at either end of the casket and wail and cry. Then the third night it was more or less for everyone. Sometimes they'd say, "The wake was so good they postponed the funeral." Anyway, the ladies were in the front room saying the rosary, the "keenies" were wailing, and the guys were in the kitchen, drinking and smoking big cigars. Pretty soon, they run out of chairs. And O'Neil says to Murphy, "Well, himself is just laying there. Aren't there three chairs in the living room? [So they take the chairs supporting the corpse.] Well, about that time doesn't himself Father

O'Brien arrive. Seeing the corpse standing in the corner, he says, "It's a sacrilege" and comes into the kitchen and says, "Can we have three chairs for the corpse?" And the fellas say, "Hip, hip hooray! Hip, hip hooray! Hip, hip hooray!"⁴⁰

Helen Evankovich grew up in Finntown. Each week a neighbor woman would drive Helen and a group of children to Sunday school classes at the Finnish church. After Sunday school, the children were given Finnish language classes. One time, Helen recalled, the neighbor woman took Helen and her young friends along to a wake. "Well, us kids never could go to wakes. But we all ended up going to the wake with her, . . . and she made us each go up and kiss him. I remember that I didn't like it. . . . And if you didn't kiss him, you at least had to touch him and that was so he wouldn't come back, which I think was a pretty good thing."⁴¹

Kay Antonetti recalled the death and wake of her uncle when she was a little girl.

That was when they waked them at home. They had him in the living room by the window. We kids would stay out and play, and they had a big porch in front. Everybody was there at the house, in the dining room and the kitchen and outside, eating and drinking. Then when it cleared out pretty much, my cousin Marian and I climbed up the little steps, and we felt him. I remember poking him with my finger. We tried to lift his hands, and they were hard as a rock. He'd always lie down after supper, and when he'd get up, there would always be quarters or nickels or dimes between the couch or on the floor, and he'd always say, "You can have it." I remember the two of us, Marian and me, looking at each other. I said, "No more nickels and dimes." And she said, "No."⁴²

Tom Holter was an altar boy at Holy Savior Church, where he participated in many funeral services as a boy. The service itself offered the opportunity for some fun.

From Holy Savior you could see when the funeral procession was coming, passing over the bridge towards East Butte. You could see the funeral from there, and when the funeral reached there, we started ringing the bell. And we'd jump up with the bell. We were able to go up with the bell. The bell was so strong and so forceful that it would lift us right up. We thought that was something. We'd jump right up on the rope,



Tom Holter, Meaderville,
circa 1935



Kids hung out in self-organized groups, looking out for one another. These boys and girls appear to have stopped to admire a car while en route home from school, circa 1910.

and we'd go up and down with it. But we had to watch and see where the funeral was, coming over the overpass, and then we'd start ringin' the bell, so the bell would be ringin' when the funeral procession came in.⁴³

Butte children transformed the machinations of mining into child's play, the mine yard terrain as familiar to many of them as to those who mined the copper. In turn, their playful spirits provided a buffer and source of resilience in the face of adversity and loss that touched many young lives.

The Gang's All Here

Butte children took pride in the camaraderie of their neighborhood gangs. Stories of neighborhood youth gangs and turf battles at times take on legendary proportions in Butte. William Burke's colorful account captures a bigger-than-life image of Butte's boyish brawlers and of the wink-and-nod acceptance of physical force as a form of play.

Butte had a great gang of kids in them days, too. They were tough, and their reputations had traveled far and wide over the country. You could write a book on their carryin' ons in Dublin Gulch and the East Side alone. It is the truth that

Father McGlynn used to ride with the grocery wagons when they were makin' their deliveries up Dublin Gulch. The kids respected the priest, and he was about the only one the little devils would listen to.

... They traveled in gangs and could throw a rock through a knothole at a hundred yards. It's a fact they had to build a separate correction school out on the Flat just to take care of them. They were as wild as the hills that surrounded them and fought like devils amongst themselves and with the other gangs. There were very few of them that didn't have scars all over their noggins from the belts from rocks they'd received.⁴⁴

Reports of gangs and violence seem prone to exaggeration. John Onkalo offered a more tempered perspective. John grew up in Finntown, and when asked about trouble with the boys from Dublin Gulch, he replied:

I guess you might say that we were friendly enemies. I don't know. In fact, it got to be such a habit. When I was going to Washington Junior High, there was a kid there. We were good friends, but he was from the Gulch. Naturally, we were kind of opponents. We used to arrange to have rock fights after school. We'd go, "Okay, you be down there at the Moonlight dump." He says, "We'll come down." So I'd get a bunch of guys together, and we'd go up to the Moonlight dump, and pretty soon we'd see a whole bunch coming over from the Gulch, but they'd be uphill from us. Boy, then the rocks would start flying. But it was never really serious. There were a few scratches and knobs and stuff, bloody noses, maybe. Sometimes you'd get into a little hand-to-hand combat. But outside of that, why, it wasn't too bad.⁴⁵

John T. Shea contended that trouble arose only if you strayed outside your turf: "The real trouble was between the kids from Centerville and Walkerville. There were lots of problems when those two groups got together. The Centerville kids went to the Dream Theater in Walkerville on Saturday afternoon. Once that show was over, you were expected to get back over that hill where you belonged. If you didn't, there'd be trouble brewing with the Walkerville gang and the local sheriff, Mike Peters."⁴⁶

Catherine Hoy wanted the record to show that fighting was not solely the domain of boys in Butte.

You know, my grandkids ask me, “Grandma, who was the best fighter?” Of course, I had to tell them I was. Because I was. I was, really. I came out ahead all the time. . . . We [girls] loved [to fight]. We were in the battling just as well as the boys. We had sides, you know, one side and the other side. Well, then the fight would start with two, and by the end of the fight there was about fifteen or twenty kids all mingled and mixing it up. . . . Boys and girls mixing it up at the same time.⁴⁷

In Linda Raiha’s experience, fighting was just something you learned to do to protect younger siblings and stick together as a group.

My younger brother was always getting in fights, and my brothers and sister would come and get me. The neighbors always said, “You didn’t fight one Raiha. You had to fight them all.” We defended each other. There was that family unit there. We had to fend for ourselves a lot of the time, so we clung together. We were one unit.

I remember when we moved to Walkerville. They did not like outsiders. My brother, who liked to fight anyway, fought almost every day until he finally became one of them. I had to defend my brother. I spent all of my time defending him. He was terrible. He’d start fights, then he’d say, “My sister Linda is going to come and get you.” He always got beat up because he had a big mouth and a little body. I got tired of it. Finally, there was one time when I was in junior high. This big, huge guy was sitting on our lawn waiting for me when I came home one day. He said, “Your brother says you’re going to take care of me” because he had beat John up. He looked like a house. He looked like a grown man. I just looked at my brother and said, “I don’t think I like you that well. . . . He’s yours.” That was the last time I ever had to fight.⁴⁸

For the most part, talk of gangs in Butte is a reference to close-knit groups of neighborhood youth who played together, competed against one another, sometimes fought one another, and watched one another’s backs. For example, Edward Jursnich described his “gang,” the Rangatang, as a group of East Side boys who developed strong and lasting friendships as they went to school and played sports together, organized wienie roasts and other outdoor adventures, and talked about girls.⁴⁹ However, when those growing up in Butte in the 1920s and early 1930s spoke of gangs, they told stories of the fabled Overall Gang. Catherine Hoy recalled them as a group of pranksters rather than thugs.

They were a rough-and-tumble bunch of kids, from age sixteen to about twenty, I guess. Mischievous. They'd steal tires when the car was running. Tires and hubcaps, stuff like that. Or take a horse and buggy and put the horse in backwards. Or unharness the horse, and when the driver got in, the horse walked off, and the wagon stood there. They weren't as bad as some of the kids' gangs nowadays. They got blamed for everything, but they stayed pretty much to their own community up on Anaconda Road, Dublin Gulch. . . . They'd go down in Finntown and all those places to fight.⁵⁰

John Sheehy recalled a more serious side to the Overall Gang's activities and contended that these were not "boys" at all, but young men, out of work and in trouble.

Well, it was a group who lived in the north side, pretty much around our neighborhood. This was in the early period of Prohibition. These men were young, really. I would guess in their twenties. They couldn't have been too old because they died fairly young. What they would do is that they would drink whatever kind of alcohol they could get because Prohibition had closed down the saloons and so on. They had the bootleggers to get booze. And there was quite a crew of them. Once they got addicted to that alcohol, they quit working. Wherever they could pick up some money, they'd steal something, and they were just a problem around that neighborhood. There must have been about ten or fifteen around our area. What they drank, among other things, was rubbing alcohol and Sterno. And what they would do is take the Sterno and put it in a stocking, a silk stocking, and squeeze it, and the alcohol came out. And they drank it. They died young.

The Overall Gang disappeared in the early 1930s. They died, most of them. They had names like Gyp the Blood. I do recall that one of the Overall Gang was charged with stealing something downtown. His trial came up in Justice of the Peace Court. . . . This man was charged with [theft], and the rest of the gang came down and testified that he couldn't have been there, he wasn't there that night, and the man got off free. And the thing that was nuts about it was that they each got two dollars for being a witness, [and] they spent [it] that night.⁵¹

While talk of gangs takes on a mythic quality, a fundamental truth remains: Butte children had power in numbers and were a force to be



When John Shannon photographed his daughter, Marian Shannon (left), and her friend Patricia McCauley in the 1920s, he caught members of the infamous Overall Gang lurking below the water tank on the upper right of the photograph. The gang was made up of young men who roamed the streets and caused trouble in the Dublin Gulch and Finntown neighborhoods.

reckoned with. Adults put considerable effort into building youth organizations and offering entertainments to harness or quell young energy. Children were courted each week with free trolley rides to Columbia Gardens, and they were gathered by the thousands to take part in Arbor Day celebrations there. And, for a time, children were treated to free entry to the “pigpen” to enjoy Mines League baseball and football games at Clark Park.

On summer afternoons, the stadium at Clark Park would be packed to capacity with thousands on hand for the start of game. As Vince Dowling recalled: “I remember spending a lot of time in the ‘pigpen’ watching those Independent League games. Only a handful of kids had enough money in those days to go to the games, so the way to get in was to go to the ‘pigpen’ at the end of one side of Clark Park and watch the game for free behind this wired fence. The ‘pigpen’ was always filled with kids when the Independent League teams played at Clark Park.”⁵²

The 1923 League playoffs were a classic example. The Butte Electric Railway ran trolleys to shuttle fans to watch the Clarks, who had won

eleven straight games in the Mines League. The Clarks were facing their rivals, the Anaconda Anodes. A record crowd surpassing ten thousand watched the Clarks defeat the Anodes 13 to 5 to win the series. Over eight hundred of those in attendance were children who had gotten free admission to the “pigpen.”

By the following season, however, Butte youngsters were at risk of losing their “pigpen” privileges due to the actions of a few “hoodlums.” According to May 1924 news reports, children had been caught using mirrors to reflect blinding lights in the eyes of ballplayers, and such “dangerous as well as uncalled for tactics is only one of the offenses that have justly stirred the powers that be to arms.”⁵³ The final straw came with a case of auto theft. Butte youngsters had regularly earned pocket money at the games by watching cars to prevent vandalism. At



Butte children enjoyed power in numbers and were a force to be reckoned with. Adults put considerable effort into building youth organizations and offering entertainments to harness or quell young energy. Children were courted each week with free trolley rides to Columbia Gardens (above, circa 1905) for activities that would keep them out of trouble.

the May 16 ball game, one of the young watchmen made off with the car he was being paid twenty-five cents to watch. Benevolence gave way to ire and harsh warnings. Butte youngsters were publicly chastised: "Youngsters of Butte are on the verge of forfeiting their privilege of seeing all ball games at Clark Park free. . . . A few young hoodlums, showing more than anything a lack of training at home, have become so obstreperous at recent Mines League games that officials have declared an ultimatum, ordering the section closed to the youngsters for the rest of the season and possibly for all time if order is not voluntarily maintained."⁵⁴

While Butte's youngsters may not have acquiesced gracefully to the expectations of adults, they must have managed to maintain a modicum of order in their own ranks as "pigpen" privileges continued. At the same time, they sought to push boundaries, reinvent rules, and claim their own spaces. As John T. Shea described, all it took was a little ingenuity: "Another way to get in free was to carry the headgear for some of the players. You walked right on the field with them and served as manager for the day."⁵⁵

Butte children were also team players. Although the playing fields may have been leveled slag heaps and the equipment makeshift, many children pursued a passion for sports. Children both created their own informal neighborhood teams and took advantage of the formal, adult-organized sports activities available to them. Hodgepodge East Side baseball teams with shifting numbers of players practiced before, during, and after school, running around bases made of gunnysacks. Some went on to play for Grant School and on citywide leagues.⁵⁶ Grade schools sponsored baseball, basketball, football, and track teams in which students took part in neighborhood and citywide competition. From the 1930s, the Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) sponsored athletic and social programs for boys and girls in Butte's Catholic schools. CYO boxing was a favorite among the boys as they filled the Knights of Columbus gym to train and fight. Girls turned out for basketball. Pat Sullivan was a star hoopster, leading her St. Lawrence O'Toole team to victory in the CYO league in 1939 and to the state Class A championship in 1940.⁵⁷

St. Lawrence O'Toole School was also home to a scrappy young football team in the mid-1940s. At that time, with men away at war or engaged in war-production work, adult coaches were scarce. Eighth-grade boys were called on to coach the newly formed fifth-grade football team. Jim Cortese, a member of the fifth-grade team, wrote:

Undaunted by the lack of gear or adult expertise, we practiced on the rocky soil near the Blaine School each day in

September and October. We did drills and a bit of training and ran, tackled, and kicked. We made a lot of noise, dispersed a lot of energy, went home and ate big dinners, and formed lasting friendships with our teammates. And frequently at the end of practice, the whole team climbed up on the rock wall, and each kid lit up a cigarette. In these ways, the St. Lawrence No-Name team prepared to take on the world. The following year, the team got sponsorship from the Men's Club, a coach, helmets, and uniforms. In 1948 they won the Class C championship.⁵⁸

The East Side Neighborhood House provided youngsters with a hardwood court for basketball until it was converted into a church after World War II.⁵⁹ East Side youth then joined youngsters citywide for Saturday basketball leagues sponsored by the YMCA. Saturday trips to the "Y" could be challenging ventures for children who rarely left the confines of their neighborhoods. The YMCA offered free swimming lessons for children. Learning to swim often entailed a long walk or a bus ride and the potential for confrontation. As Edward Jursnich described: "My very first visit to the 'Y' left an indelible impression. At about six years old, I tagged along with my older brother Ray, reluctantly undressed in front of everyone, and entered the pool. It was different and scary. I did not know how to swim, so I climbed into the pool and stayed at the shallow end where I could stand on my tiptoes and keep my head above water level."⁶⁰

Just as Edward was gaining some confidence, an older, bigger kid came into the shallow end and began "ducking" the little kids, holding them underwater until they were gasping for air and terrified. An older East Side boy came to the rescue, grabbing the bully by the neck and "giving him a taste of his own medicine."⁶¹ Even though the YMCA and other organizations offered adult-supervised activities for youngsters, children also learned to count on the neighborhood gang and the protection of older youth to keep them safe.

Happy Halloween

At times grown-ups were simply willing to recognize the power and place of children and give them cause to have some fun. Halloween in Butte is a case in point. Of all the holidays, Halloween stood alone as a celebration by and for children. Butte children took their Halloween fun seriously. They were eager for treats and ingenious with tricks. John Onkalo described Halloween antics of his youth:

Mostly we made a lot of noise and were kind of mischievous. I can't remember the kids every really doing any real damage, outside of maybe making a mess. We'd dump garbage cans, then roll the cans around and maybe stack them up in the middle of the street. But there wasn't much traffic in those days. . . . You'd have an arc light at an intersection. Well, the rope from the arc light would be hooked up to the telephone pole on the corner on a ring, but it was way high up. You'd shimmy up enough to get hold of it, and then you'd pull it off the hook and release it. Of course, that would drop the light down, so it would be just hanging a few feet off the street, you know. Then the power company would have to come down. Somebody would report it, and then they'd have to pull it back up into place again and rehook that ring on the telephone pole. But as far as any real damage, I don't think there was much of that. We'd rattle doors and knock on windows and soap windows. And stuff like that was about the worst part, the soaping part.⁶²

Principal Isabel Kelly seemed to embrace the philosophy "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em" in initiating Halloween parades at Grant School in 1924. The parade became an annual event with costumed youngsters from schools across the city marching in force.

The celebratory spirit of Halloween also came to life in an unexpected place: Charley Judd's New Deal Bar. Charley Judd and Esther Zannon were newlyweds in 1942 when they purchased the New Deal Bar on South Arizona Street from Esther's father, an Italian immigrant who had operated a drinking establishment at that location during Prohibition. Across Arizona Street from the bar was Silver Bow Homes, a New Deal housing initiative and one of the country's first public housing projects, which replaced the Cabbage Patch shantytown. Initially, Silver Bow Homes housed older people, especially widows. Women raising children on their own during World War II joined the mix, followed by young families after the war.

Charley and Esther turned the New Deal Bar into a community gathering place, selling "pick candy" for kids and welcoming their Silver Bow Home neighbors. During their first year in the neighborhood, the Judds hosted a Halloween party for the children at the housing project. The event was a success, and the community space at Silver Bow Homes could not hold the number of children in attendance. The next year, Charley and Esther moved the event to the New Deal Bar, and so a Butte tradition was born. For one day a year, the New Deal did not



Every year, Butte photographer C. Owen Smithers took photographs at the annual Halloween party at Charley and Esther Judd's New Deal Bar and made a poster showing the night's activities and participants.

serve alcohol, and children were special guests for a night of revelry and treats, where they could fill pillowcases with candy, popcorn, and toys.

The party became an annual event, open to all Butte children. The Judds raised four sons in the apartment above the New Deal and created an extended family of Butte children every Halloween. Charley initiated creative fund-raising efforts over the course of the year to purchase party supplies. Two spaces in every football pool were designated "Halloween," providing a chance for the party fund to win one hundred dollars. The party budget quickly surpassed two thousand dollars, as did the number of children in attendance each year. In 1952 two thousand children consumed one ton of candy, fifteen boxes of apples, four barrels of popcorn, and thirty pounds of cotton candy. For a few years, Charley added fireworks to the festivities, until an errant rocket targeted a group of young ghosts and goblins, and Charley had to fling himself in its path, sustaining a serious wound to the face in the process.⁶³

Over the years, patrons gave up their favorite seats at the bar for the night and helped distribute candy. In 1950 the Butte stockyards donated a large stock tub so kids could bob for apples. The mayhem was such that the tub was first moved outdoors, then abandoned altogether. But

November 1 would roll around again, and New Deal patrons would start contributing to the following year's effort. Over the course of the year, Charley Judd and the New Deal Bar would also lend support to student scholarships, Little League baseball, CYO basketball, and the Sacred Heart football team. And once television came to Butte, the New Deal hosted children and adults to view weekly favorites such as *Chicago Wrestling*.⁶⁴

Saturday Matinee

Uptown Butte was a cosmopolitan center with a host of department and specialty stores, restaurants, ice-cream parlors, dance halls, and theaters to attract young and old. Children were early and enthusiastic patrons of Butte's many show houses. And, by 1907, city officials were preoccupied with the influence of stage entertainment on the young people of Butte. For example, in October 1907 a city ordinance was passed that forbade showing performances judged to be "immoral." Alderman Jerry Mullins was vocal about his concern over recent productions at the Grande Theater: "I think it is a shame and disgrace for any playhouse to be permitted to be able to hang out any such sign as the one now in front of the Grande Theater. . . . I have noticed young girls standing opposite the theater reading the title of the week's bill, while their young minds were becoming to some extent polluted by the morbid thoughts aroused by the suggestive title, 'Why Girls Go Wrong.'"⁶⁵ Alderman A. B. Cohen concurred: "We must take steps to stop this evil, which has been the cause of great harm to the young people of Butte."⁶⁶

But the power of the stage and silver screen outweighed the pomposity of city officials, and young people flocked to the theaters. For the modest price of admission, they could be transfixed and transported. Ads in the *Butte Miner* circa 1914 offer a taste of local theater fare. The Ansonia featured the three-reel motion-picture drama *The Billionaire*, along with a two-reel drama *The Toll*, a short comedy, and music by the Ansonia Orchestra. At the American Theater, audiences were treated to *Million Dollar Mystery*, while the Orpheum was presenting *The Voices of Angelo*, *The Mysterious Package*, and a performance by singer extraordinaire Alex Barthild. The Empress, not to be outdone, featured performances by the Jackson Family Cyclists, the Roland West Players, the motion picture *The Criminal*, and the melodious surprises of Bert Ralton and Lucille Latour. By 1915 Uptown Butte housed nine theaters featuring an array of vaudeville entertainment and motion pictures.⁶⁷

The stage and screen made an impression from the start. Children attending a live performance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* watched transfixed as Little Eva, played by a Butte girl, was hoisted on a cloud in a jerky

ascent to heaven. Images of the Ku Klux Klan were seared in their memories after viewing *Birth of a Nation* at the Ansonia Theater. They remembered the smell of garlic that permeated the Elysium Theater, a favorite of Butte's Italian community. And the Liberty Theater had a reputation for easy entry; boys and girls could sneak in at the end of one movie and be set for the next show.⁶⁸

Stories of Saturdays at the movies held a special place in memories of childhood. Butte children were eager and savvy consumers of movies and tucked away precious earnings for the price of admission. When money was short, children pooled their pennies to pay for one admission, and the intrepid ticket holder would then make his or her way to the alley exit where friends would be awaiting illicit entry. Kevin Shannon remembered: "It was great sneaking into the show. You were frowned on if you paid. So one guy would pay. We'd raise the dime between us. One would open the exit, and we'd go in."⁶⁹

Boys were not the only ones who dodged the ticket booth to see a show. Dolores Barsanti would sneak into the Rialto Theater with her sister and girlfriend: "Dan Kailin [ran the theater]. He was a big man, and he used to catch us by the nape of the neck and throw us out. But then he got to liking me and my sister and girlfriend, and he used to let us sneak in."⁷⁰



Entertainment in Butte theaters attracted old and young alike. In this case, "Caribou Bill's Famous Dog Team" drew a mixed audience of spectators to the Orpheum circa 1902.

John Sheehy recalled sneaking into the movies at times and other times paying with money from his newspaper sales. Once he had established his corner as a newsboy, he was lucky enough to have a regular customer who provided him with free movie tickets.

Movies were great for us as a kid. I liked the old cowboy movies, with a guy playing the piano. When I was selling papers, there was a guy who took a liking to me who played the piano at the Ansonia Theater. That was located right next to the Symon's Department Store, the next building over. That was one of the theaters. On that street, you had the Broadway and the Ansonia. The Rialto, it was a beautiful theater on Park and Main. But, anyway, when I was selling papers on Saturday nights, that man, when the theater closed down, would come over and give me five tickets for the theater for the next day. That was kind of a treasure. I could take some friends the next day, on Sunday, and see him playing.⁷¹

For Dorothy Martin, movies offered a great way to learn to read.

Going to the movies, that's where I learned to read. I could read before I went to first grade. That's probably why I got my first promotion. My Uncle Isador loved to go to the movies. Charlie Chaplin and all. He always liked to take me. I went a lot. He used to read the subtitles in the beginning, but then as we went more frequently, he got kind of tired, and it was annoying to the other people around. So just watching and hearing and seeing, I picked up the words. It's like flash cards. That's what they really were, flashing on the screen.⁷²

John Wallace Cochran became an avid fan of Westerns at an early age: "Some of my spending money went for movies, and many were the Westerns featuring Harry Carey, Hoot Gibson, or Tom Mix that I sat through. Admission at the Ansonia on West Park Street was a dime, while at the Liberty on West Broadway it was only a nickel. Occasionally I delivered handbills for the Harrison Avenue Theater and received free tickets as pay."⁷³

Frank Carden spent many a Saturday at the Lyric Theater on Butte's East Side.

The Lyric Theater was also known as the East Side Opera House. It operated for years, mostly as a "B"-run house—mostly cowboy Westerns and serial movies. The serials would

run over a period of a couple of months, and each serial would be half an hour. The actors, during the thirty minutes, would get themselves out of one jam and end up getting themselves into another jam just at the end. You would have to come back next week to find out how they would extricate themselves from this dangerous and life-threatening situation, only to have to come back next week and so on and so on until the end of the serial.

These usually would be run in mid-week to bolster attendance, which was not as good as it was on weekends. They told us of the dangers of the “Yellow Peril,” . . . which threatened our way of life, and the perils of Ruth Holland and Pearl White, two actresses who made a good living playing in these pictures.

On Saturdays and Sundays, you’d usually have what we later called a “cowboy opera,” which consisted of Cowboy Pete Morris being shown riding his horse from east to west and then west to east to rescue the heroine. Pete never kissed or hugged the heroine but was often seen hugging and kissing his horse. He had a great following of kids at that time, and every time he kissed the horse, they would whistle and cheer him like the girls of a later period did to Frank Sinatra. However, none of them got to the point where they fainted like Sinatra’s fans, but you could tell they practiced hard on the whistling bit. These movies were in black and white and were silent.⁷⁴

Movies held their magic over time. John Mazzola and Kay Antoinetti recalled Saturdays at the movies in the 1930s and 1940s. Kay remembered:

As a child, we’d go to movies. These two cousins who lived down the block were cowboys. They were, like, five and six years younger than I. I would take them every Saturday to the Park Theater for all the cowboy shows and Abbot and Costello. We’d get in for a can of soup that would go to the poor people or else pay something like a dime. All we would see were all the cowboy shows. And these little guys would be in their cowboy outfits. They had the holsters and the cowboy hats and everything.

Then when we got in high school, my friends and I would go to every military show, and we’d cry our eyes out. All the old shows with John Wayne and all. . . . And then I worked as

an usher at the old American Theater when I was sixteen. And that was a ball. It was right on Park Street, so you saw everybody. I had a wonderful time.⁷⁵

For John Mazzola, movies provided his first opportunities for dating.

We'd go up on Saturdays to the Park Theater for a nickel. They'd have two features, the Three Stooges, cartoons—they'd have some news, for a nickel. Then on weeknights you'd go to the Montana Theater or the Fox Theater. Pal Night, they called it. Two could go for fifteen cents. Big bag of popcorn was only a nickel. [Sometimes we'd take girls to the movies.] We'd try to get them into dark places. I liked being around the girls, but I didn't like my friends to know I liked being around them. So I'd get off in a dark corner. We never smooched or anything like that, but we'd watch the movie and laugh and have a friendship. But I'd have been mortified if somebody I knew saw me with a girl. And most of the time they had to pay their own way.⁷⁶

Theaters offered both escape and connection as children joined their friends and heroes riding into the sunset. Closer to home, radio continued to captivate children throughout the 1950s, until its magic was eclipsed by the arrival of television. Linda Raiha remembered the importance of radio in her childhood.

I was a great lover of the radio. I used to listen to all those stories like the Lone Ranger and Dick Tracy. There used to be a thing on the radio about the temperature from the School of Mines. I used to wonder all of the time, "Where is the School of Mines?" And when we moved up to McGlone Heights, lo and behold, we passed the School of Mines. I was thrilled. I didn't have any idea it was in the same town. To me, that was like a different town, so far away.

I loved the Lone Ranger on the radio. The radio was so warm. I used to sit in the kitchen and wrap my arms around the radio and listen to the show. We had a wood stove. We never had regular heating on the East Side, so the radio was so nice and warm.⁷⁷

Columbia Gardens: Every Child's Dream

While mine yards and movie halls provided the settings for many childhood memories, the most poignant place of child's play in Butte



Columbia Gardens—every child’s dream—included acres of lawn, forested picnic grounds, a lake, a zoo, a playground, pavilions, a penny arcade, and a roller coaster. This panorama is dated 1914.

was Columbia Gardens. Columbia Gardens was a lush and lovely sixty-eight-acre park purchased by William A. Clark for use as a community playground. Tucked in the folds of the craggy mountain ridge east of Butte, Columbia Gardens was a world apart from the gritty, churning, haze-filled Mining City.

Columbia Gardens opened to the public on June 4, 1899. Its first pavilion was built in 1900, and Clark invested one hundred thousand dollars in its expansion and development in 1902. It contained acres of



Columbia Gardens gardeners planted twenty-five thousand pansies each year to give children the pleasure of picking a handful once a week on Children’s Day, photographed here circa 1905.



grass, greenhouses, intricately designed flower gardens, and a lake, zoo, playground, pavilions, and penny arcade. Clark initiated Children's Day at Columbia Gardens in 1907, marking Thursdays as the day Butte children anticipated through the summer months.

Children and adults alike were captivated by the giant wooden roller coaster, the biplanes, and the carousel of hand-carved wooden horses. But beyond the amusement rides were the luxuriant grounds and gardens themselves. Acres of lawn and forested picnic grounds awaited eager children and their overworked parents. Massive greenhouses supplied the flower gardens. Twenty-five thousand pansies were planted each year simply to give children the pleasure of picking a handful once a week on Children's Day.

After Clark's death in 1928, Columbia Gardens was sold to the Anaconda Company, which kept it operating until Labor Day 1973. Much to the outrage and dismay of Butte residents, the Gardens were closed to make way for the mining of a new vein of copper. When the Gardens, including the beloved carousel, were destroyed by a suspicious fire in November 1973, it was almost too much for the hard-hit community to bear. For the better part of the century, Columbia Gardens had been both site and symbol of the joys of childhood.

Marie Butori offered her vivid memory of the Gardens, her words conveying the spirit of childhood.

Columbia Gardens was beautiful. The ACM Company thought the miners needed [a place like that]. . . . If you got the chance to ride to the Columbia Gardens on the trolley car, you thought you really had it made. . . . You went to the Gardens free 'cause they paid for everything. . . . And when you got up there, they had a popcorn stand just as you come in the gate. Then they had that little fish place where the kids could fish and get little prizes. Then you go up farther, and they had ice cream there. And then when you got to the top, they had

airplanes. It was like a carnival, and they had airplanes that flew around and went up in the air. They had the [carousel], where everybody had their own favorite horse, and you'd fight for the horse when you went on. And when you left there, then they had a roller coaster. A lot of people didn't go on the roller coaster, but we always did. I thought it was great. It had about three big dips, and it went around twice.

They had these big pot stoves built into the ground. And every Thursday we all went out. . . . They were made like cement. . . . It was real old-fashioned, and everybody cooked on it. Everybody took their turn cooking. And they had one big pavilion, and it had all kinds of tables and benches, so you then could go in there and eat your lunch if you wanted to. But sometimes we just went and had a place by ourselves.

They had the cowboy swings, and they had a ring that you grab on to. It was just round and went around, and you'd hang on to it and swing around. And if somebody didn't like you, they'd push you into the pole. They had a beautiful garden there. On one side, they had a garden in the shape of a butterfly—big and all the different colors, you know, in there. On the other side, it was like an Irish harp. And they had a man who took care of it all the time. . . . It was really a beautiful place—and the Anaconda Company paid for all that.⁷⁸

Elinore Sterrett Shields Penrose recalled Columbia Gardens as

the most beautiful place for a place like Butte that for a long time had been ruined by smoke. Nobody had lawns. Nobody had flowers because of the soot from the smelters. . . . Once a week in the summertime, they had open streetcars, no sides on them, big red ones, and you could get in. And all the kids would run for the streetcar, take our lunches, and go out to the Gardens. Then just about three o'clock they'd open up the pansy gardens, and they'd let us all go in and pick flowers. Of course, by the next week there were hundreds more. We were doing their work for them. The fellows would put them in their hats to take home to their families.⁷⁹

For Lucille Sheehan, Columbia Gardens represented a precious place.

We'd have picnics when one of the kids had a birthday. We'd have everything ready, and we'd go out to the Gardens. And

there'd be big tables. And they had everything there for you to play with. And you'd bring your food, and, oh, we had such a wonderful time. And holidays we'd go up there, too. But you'd have to go early enough to get a table and so that you could get around a stove there. They had those big stoves. Oh, it was a wonderful place, and for the kids, they had everything. They had the cowboy swings and other kinds of swings, and, of course, they had the roller coaster and the biplanes and the merry-go-round.

[We would take] the streetcar. There was no other way. And then on Thursday they had Children's Day, and you could go out and pick pansies. They had this huge spray of pansies, and they'd open the gate, and everybody'd go in, and they used to mess up the whole place. And then it was so pretty, they had, in one section of the gardens, the butterfly and the harp.

They had so much, and you could stay out there all day long. They had the dance hall, and they used to have all the dances out there. And the main dances that came to Butte were out there at the Gardens. They were name bands. Frankie Clark was out there. Jack Benny was out there. Bennie Goodman, Glenn Miller, even Lawrence Welk. They said it was the best dance floor in the Northwest.⁸⁰



A special trolley (above, circa 1910) transported children to and from Columbia Gardens.

John Sheehy went every Thursday to Columbia Gardens as a youngster.

[We would go] on the streetcars. They provided the transportation on Thursdays for all of the kids, so you'd grab a streetcar on Thursdays about nine o'clock in the morning and go up there. Occasionally you'd bring lunch with you and eat lunch out there. Once my father took me to the Gardens when I was quite small. I'd guess I was four or five years old. We went up to the upper part of the gardens, and he found a grassy spot there where he laid down and fell asleep. And when he woke up, I was gone. I remember crying. Someone brought me down to the place where you got on to the streetcar. I remember crying there. And along came a neighbor boy. Well, he got me on the streetcar and got me home. Then my father came walking up the street. He was glad to see me, I'm sure.

Over the years, my mother loved to go up there. Any kind of a holiday in the summertime, we'd be out there. On Sundays, out cooking on that great big stove they had—beautiful, big stove. It had a big chimney in the middle and out on the sides a place to throw wood in, not just wood but logs. And you'd get that fire started, and on top of the stove was a piece of steel about [one inch] thick and longer than this table. There was plenty of room for lots of pots and pans on the stove. So, all those people who were out there picnicking on each side of that, it could take care of several hundred people that way. And nearby they did have a covered area with tables inside underneath. Usually by the time we'd get there, it would be occupied. But if it did happen to rain, you could go in there and get shelter. Besides, you went out there for the fresh air anyway. There were all kinds of tables outside, with benches and all that they provided. And down close to the arcade there, that was a place where you could sit on a bench and watch the people go by if you were a people watcher. And they had the rides, which I liked a lot. You could ride for a nickel on the carousel, and the airplane cost a dime, and I liked that. And I especially liked the roller coaster.⁸¹

For Nancy Klapan, Columbia Gardens “was just all by itself and a thing you can't even imagine unless you lived it.”

Thursdays, every Thursday, during the summer was Children's Day, and all of us, all my friends, packed a sack lunch and

waited at the bus stop. The city buses were free every Thursday for kids, and we would get on the bus. I lived down on the Flats, and we would take the bus up to the corner of Park and Main and get a transfer, all free, and then wait for the Columbia Gardens bus, and we would all go up to the Gardens for the entire day. The biplanes and merry-go-round were a nickel, and the roller coaster was a dime, but you didn't do that until you were a little older because it was really scary. You would spend the entire day at the Gardens. Not a care in the world, just eat your lunch, play on the playground for hours, on the cowboy swings and the merry-go-rounds up there, and then walk all the way home. It was magic. And every Thursday, every single Thursday, we did that. And as soon as Thursday was over, we couldn't wait until the next one. Then we would walk the boardwalk. They had all kinds of arcades at the boardwalk and an ice-cream store. All wood, all quite magic.⁸²

The magic of Columbia Gardens lived on in memories of Butte childhood, but the start of open-pit mining operations in Butte portended its demise. As Dolores Kangas stated, "I am sure W. A. Clark turned over in his grave when he heard it was gone. He fixed that up for the families so that the miners when they got off work, they had a place to go besides home. People aren't happy about that even today. But that's what they do, and it's hard to fight big mining companies."⁸³ The loss of Columbia Gardens brought to a close a special chapter on childhood in Butte.