CHAPTER SEVEN

Memories of a McQueen Childhood

Steve Sherick grew up in the McQueen Addition. His recollections take us to the heart of Butte childhood in the post–Great Depression Era.[1] They provide a child's-eye view of mining life and community culture. And they paint a vibrant picture of the energy and curiosity children bring to their everyday worlds of school, work, and play.

Steve's story of childhood is inseparable from that of his father's boyhood story of immigration and arrival in Butte.

> I was born in Butte at the Murray Hospital, January 22, 1935. My dad was a miner, and my mother was a housewife. By today's standards, it was a mixed marriage because my dad was a Croatian and my mother was Slovenian. It's a story in itself how they got together. The name was Americanized. It was originally "Seric," and then it became "Sherich" and "Sherick," and here's where we are. Anyway, my dad had been married before, and he was working in the woods as a logger in Oregon and Idaho. His wife died, and his baby died. The baby died at a month old, and his wife died from pneumonia about a month after that. So he was in a state of mourning, and he headed for the Fort Peck Dam, which was being built at the time, about 1933. My mother had been married before to a man who was a miner, and he died from silicosis as a young man. Now, his name was Sherick also. They were not related, and they came from different villages. My dad knew about those people because his mother used to say, "Never marry anybody from that village. It's too close." So, anyway, as he was traveling through, he stopped to see my mother and give her

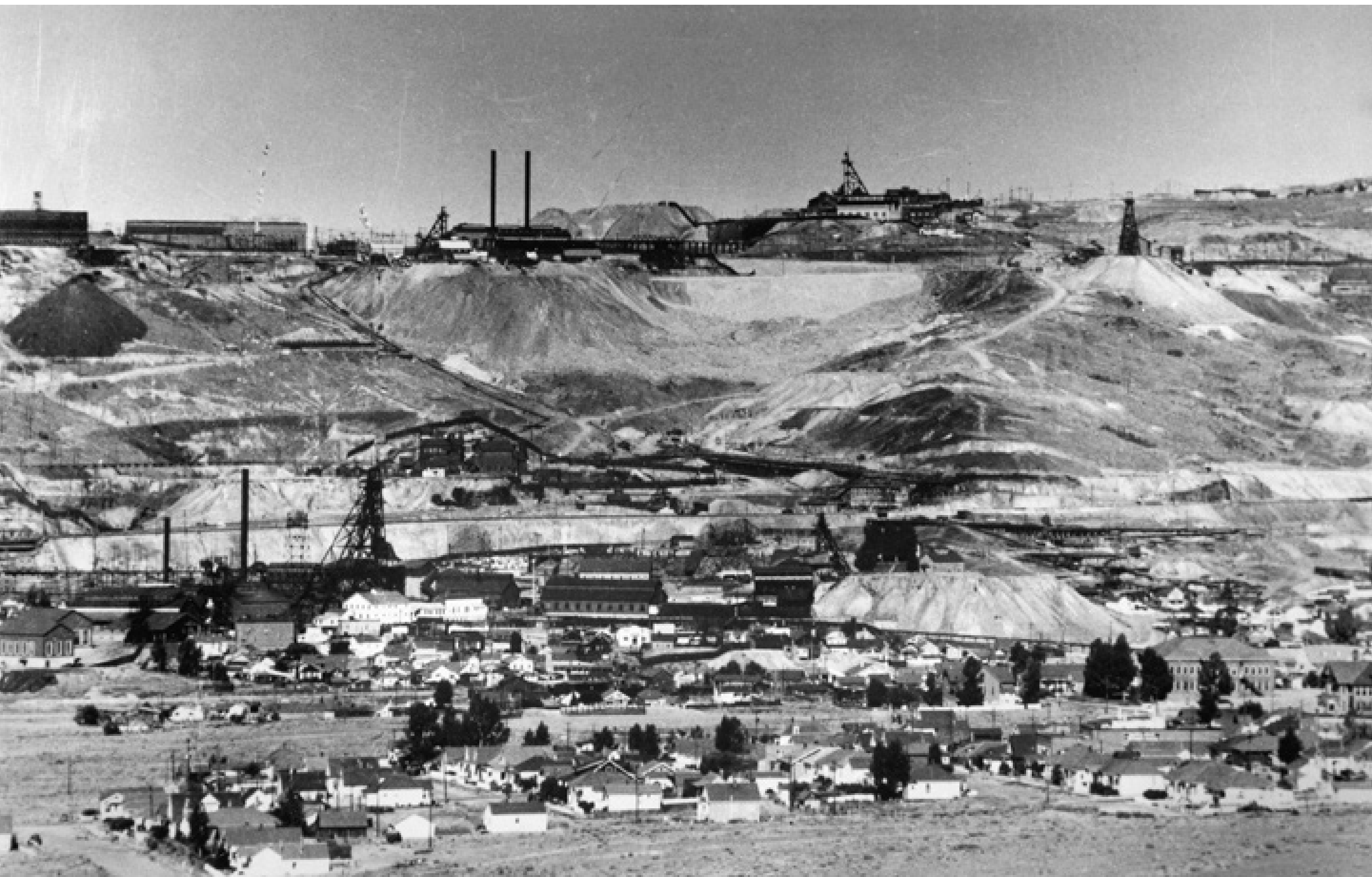
his condolences. Then he went to Wolf Point and worked on the dam.

Well, prior to my father stopping at the house, my mother and my grandmother, who were very superstitious, had gone to a fortune-teller. The fortune-teller said she would need a twenty-dollar gold piece before she could tell my mother the whole story of what she saw. So they went home and my grandma had a twenty-dollar gold piece. They brought the twenty-dollar gold piece to the fortune-teller. The fortune-teller takes off her silk bandana, lays it on a table, and takes the twenty-dollar gold piece. She puts it in the bandana, ties it up, and puts it in her bosom. And then she tells the fortune. When she got done with the fortune, she takes this silk bandana out, unties it, and the twenty-dollar gold piece is gone. All that's in it is dust.

So, being superstitious, my mother and grandmother thought, "Man, that's a hell of a message there." Well, what story did the fortune-teller tell my mother? This lady told my mother, "You've had a tough life. You've got two kids and your husband just died, but things are going to work out." And my mother had a lot of bills; they had just built a new house. The fortune-teller told her, "Things will work out because a man is going to come to your house, he is going to carry a suitcase, he is going to stay, and you are going to have one more son." Anyway, my dad shows up, carrying one suitcase. I still have the suitcase. And here I am.

I was born in 1935. When I was born, my brother was living at home, and he was twenty years older than me. He was in love, and he got married and left the house. I had a sister who was two years older than him, and she had left also. She was married and working as a nurse at the Murray Hospital. And they were named Sherick, which was kind of a crazy thing. So, anyway, that's how we grew up. We had this twenty-year span. I grew up in a different generation than my brother and sister, who were really my half-brother and half-sister. But I had the basic values that they had, being that their father was an immigrant and my dad was an immigrant.

My dad came to this country when he was fifteen years old. When the kids became fifteen, they would head for America. My dad said he didn't come to America because it was so good in America. They'd come to America because it was so bad in Croatia, back home. Well, two of his brothers had already gone to America. He's fifteen years old, and his



Steve Sherick grew up in the McQueen Addition on Butte's east side. In this 1930s view, McQueen is in the foreground, Meaderville in the center, and mines on the Hill in the background.

mother gets his ticket for him. He caught the boat in Bremen, Germany. I'd ask him, "How the heck did you get to Bremen, Germany?" And he'd say, "I walked." Sometimes you'd get in a cart, and somebody would give you a ride. And if you look on the map, that is a long ways. Bremen is on the North Sea. That's where he caught this boat. He gets up there, and he couldn't speak the language. But, he said, any dummy could say "Bremen," and people would point him in the direction, and he'd keep going.

He gets to the ocean and gets on the boat. He said they treated him like a piece of livestock. They put a tag on his collar, and he is on the ship. It took him, I don't know, it must have been a hell of a long time to come across the ocean. Then he had a train ticket to Chicago. But he has no concept of what these distances are. He was heading for Las Vegas. So, he gets on the train, and he had one crown with him. A crown

was about fifty cents. So, he bought a pie from a vendor on the street and got on the train and headed for Las Vegas. He is going to meet his brother in Las Vegas, except he doesn't know where Las Vegas is. Well, he gets to Chicago, and the conductor points to get out. That is all he has a ticket for. He doesn't really know where he is except that it's Chicago. He still has no idea where Las Vegas is.

He gets off the train, and he is walking down the street, and he's lost and wondering, "What the heck am I into?" And comin' down the street toward him is a young guy who was about a year older than him. The guy looks at him and says, "Stevo, what are you doin' here?" Well, it was a kid that grew up in his same village. He said, "Well, I've got to go find my brother. He's in Las Vegas." So, the kid said, "I don't know where that is. Come on home. My father knows where those places are." They go and see the father, and the father says, "Las Vegas, that's farther than you have come so far. And you have to have a train ticket." Well, he didn't have a ticket, so the father says, "I'll get you a job laying track for the trolleys in Chicago." The father was working for the trolley company in Chicago. He said, "You save your money, and when you get enough money, you'll get a ticket and go to Las Vegas."

So, my father stayed with these people and got a job laying track. Now, he's got two brothers working in Nevada, he thinks. But the last word was "meet in Las Vegas." So, he saves his money, buys the ticket, catches the train, and away he goes. He said when he crossed the Mississippi River, it was like the end of the world. There were no lights at night. There were no houses in the daytime. We have a word called *polje,* which is like a desert, and he said that was all that was there—nothing. He said the only time the train would stop was to get water. It took him four days to go from Chicago to Las Vegas. And as the train is pulling in, the conductor yells, "Las Vegas, Las Vegas." The train stops, and he's the only one who got off.

At that time, there was the depot, the hotel with a bar, and that was it. My father said the only person he saw at the depot when he got off was the guy with the shade on, like they used to wear, the telegrapher. He said, "All I could hear was tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick." The guy stopped, came out, and pointed to my father. He had a bucket of water with one of those big ladles in it in case my father wanted a drink. My father went back outside, and he sat there wondering, "Now where in the hell am I?" There's nothing here, and his brothers

aren't here. He didn't have any more money. He said all that was there were bumbleweeds—he called the tumbleweeds "bumbleweeds"—and the wind was blowing. So, he was sitting on the bench outside the depot, and all of a sudden he could hear Croatian singing—guys singing. He said, "I thought I was goin' crazy." And he looked, and here comes a team and a wagon with some guys in it. They were singin' to beat hell. And they had a jug of wine. They drive up, and it's one of his brothers. So, they hugged and had a drink and drove to the shade and cooled down. And his brother said, "Now we've got to go back" because he had taken this whole crew. The companies had these ethnic crews. They had a Croatian crew and a Serb crew and an Italian crew and an Irish crew. That's the way the companies would do it. They were building railroad. They were making cuts through Nevada and that part of the country. That crew was working at Ely, Nevada. Now, that's a long ways from Las Vegas. My father's brother had borrowed the team and wagon, and he told the foreman, "I've got to pick up my brother. He's in Las Vegas."

I don't know how long it took them to get down there with the team and all these guys, the whole crew. They said, "We're going to pick up Stephen." They had a big party that night. Then my uncle said, "We've got to go back. These horses and wagon aren't ours. And they are holding our jobs for us, so we've got to get back. And when we get back, you can't work with us. I've got another job for you with another crew until you learn how to work these kinds of jobs." They were paid by contract. They got my father a job as a water boy with a Mexican crew. So my father's second language became Spanish. I don't know how long he worked with the Mexican crew, but he could speak pretty good Spanish. When he worked in the mines, he could talk to those guys.

When my dad got to Butte, he and my mother decided to get married. And all this happened within a month. They get married, and he needs to get a job, and work was really hard to find in Butte at that time. But there was a fellow that came from a village that was close to the village my father was from who was Serb. Now, the Croatians and the Serbs are not in a love fest. But this guy who was Serb grew up in a part of Croatia. There are a lot of ethnics involved in all this stuff. It's not just a Croatian. It's a certain kind of Croatian. Anyway, they both came from an area called Lika, which made them like blood brothers. So, they found each other in Butte, and

> my dad said, "Geez, I just got married, and I have to get a job." The guy said, "Okay, I'll talk to the boss tomorrow, and we'll have a job for you." He came to the house and said to my dad, "You're going to work tomorrow. You and I are going to be partners." Now, that was unbelievable. Here are these two guys—a Croatian and a Serb. Some people would think they didn't have anything to do with each other. But they had this commonality in that they grew up in this neighborhood. A neighborhood was what it really was, only it was a geographic neighborhood.
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> My dad's partner and his family lived about three houses from us. He and my dad worked together as partners for a long time. They had an outstanding relationship. They'd come up to the house, and they'd drink. We always had a lot to drink at our house. And they'd drink wine and grappo and argue about politics that were a hundred years old, but they would never fight. They worked at the Mountain Con Mine, which was up the Hill, and they had to walk down to catch the bus on Park Street. If there was a problem, the two of them would stand back to back. They were both big guys, and there was no problem between the two of them. It was a beautiful relationship.
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> My dad was a miner, a contract miner. There were different kinds of miners, even contract miners. There was a drift miner—they are the ones that dig the tunnels. Then there was the stope miner—they are the ones that went up and broke the rock and cut it down. There was the raze miners that made the holes between the drifts. But my dad was a drift miner. And the reason they were contract miners is because they made a little more money. They got paid for how much rock they broke, how much pipe they laid, and how much track they put down.

As Steve described, McQueen was defined both by its geographic boundaries and its cultural character. It formed the contours of his childhood experience.

> Well, McQueen . . . there was no end going north. The old highway used to make a big swing around McQueen and go up on top of the hill. To the west, Meaderville and McQueen were separated by a creek that ran through there. The creek didn't have a name as far as I know. On one side of the creek was Franklin School and the other side was Holy Savior

School. Holy Savior was in McQueen, and Franklin was in Meaderville. The playgrounds for the two schools were between them. And then on the south the separation was another creek that separated McQueen from East Butte. All of the streets in McQueen were named for trees.

When we grew up in McQueen, it a diverse ethnic community. We had Croatians, Slovenians, Serbs, Swedes, Finns, English, and Irish. So it wasn't a solid block of ethnics. And within that there were two churches. You had a Catholic church and a Methodist church. The Methodist church was known as the Protestant church. People belonged to one or the other. In McQueen we had two bars. One of the bars was

These underground miners, identified as Schmooke and Larson, are "setting up a drifter" to drill holes to fill with dynamite and blast the rock loose. They may have been working as stope miners, "the ones that went up and broke the rock and cut it down," according to Steve Sherick, or as drift miners—"the ones that dig the tunnels" (also called drifts).

run by a guy named Baldy. And the other was run by a fellow named Nick. So, one was run by an Irishman, and a Serb was running the other one. They were kind of the center points of communications. They organized some of the athletics. Athletics was always a big thing in Butte. Nick had a bowling alley. There was a baseball team based out of the bar called Baldy's, and that became the McQueen Club.

In McQueen we had the two grocery stores and two bars as well as a candy store that sold candy and ice cream. We called that the Tipperary, and it was run by people by the name of Pencrazzi. They sold penny candy and ice cream for a nickel. In Meaderville they sold all the same kind of stuff. Meaderville had a lot more bars because they had the main drag down there. They had two or three grocery stores. They had a place right below the Franklin School that sold penny candy—we called it "pick candy," one cent a piece—and ice cream.

We had a barbershop in McQueen, and there were two barbershops in Meaderville. At the barbershop in McQueen, we had a barber who had cataracts, he couldn't see very well. When he held the hand clippers—he didn't have electric clippers—he had to tip his head back, and he'd hold his eye open with the other hand and clip your hair. You could watch him in the mirror in your barber chair. Geez, he'd pull off as much as he was cutting.

Well, when you were old enough to get out of this sphere of influence and get to Meaderville, they had two barbers down there. They were both Italian. On Saturdays Texaco and somebody else had opera on the radio in the morning and afternoon. One barber's name was Fontana, the other guy was Orzo. And those old radios at the time had the copper wire up for an antenna. They'd turn the radio on in front of Fontana's. Fontana's was on the sunny side of the street, and he had benches. They were probably made at the Leonard Mine because he was not too far from there. These old guys would sit out there and listen to those operas. And in the back of the barbershop, they would play bocce, which is an Italian game with a small ball. I don't know how to play the game, but it was kind of a cross between bowling and marbles, I think. . . . And they would play that opera, and as kids, if we made noise, we'd catch hell. They tell you, "Be quiet, go on home" because they wanted to listen to the opera. And they'd play some of those songs that they all knew, and all those miners would be

> out there singin'. Now, that is some memory I've got of those guys—I can still see it. I was probably about eight or ten years old then.

Butte children grew up with expectations to be "good Americans" even as they were surrounded by the sights, sounds, and smells that marked the richness of Butte's cultural diversity. In spite of his parents' best efforts, Steve was absorbing Croatian language and culture along with his American experience. His McQueen neighborhood became the bedrock for a lifelong appreciation of language and culture.

> It was kind of a crazy thing. Our folks had the mentality that they wanted all of us kids to be American, so they didn't speak the language to us unless it was a big secret. They'd tell you how to behave in Croatian, but they wouldn't have a big conversation because you were supposed to be American. As a result, we grew up with this crazy language. My dad spoke very broken English. My mother spoke perfect English. She had gone to the eighth grade. She could speak Slovenian, and she could speak Croatian. And she was a big lady. A lot of people thought she was Croatian because she could speak the language.
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> I have an accent. People comment about my accent. But the way we grew up it was kind of neat because you had all these people who are trying to speak English. And English was really bastardized. You had a Swede trying to speak English, and it was kind of a singing voice. I used to love to hear those guys who were Swedish talk. And the Finlanders had a different kind of accent. They didn't have a lilt. You could sense the difference. The Italians had a different accent. Slavs a different accent. So, that's what we grew up with. My grandmother would make a list to go to the grocery store. Bread would be "brd"; butter was "bdr."
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> The smells were just unbelievable. [If you were at a friend's house who was Italian,] it smelled different, and it tasted different, but it all tasted good. There were some outstanding cooks. My mother would make bread, these nice big loaves. She'd make a half dozen loaves every time she made it. And she didn't want you to cut those loaves while they were still hot. She took them out of the pan and put them on the racks in the kitchen, and, gee, they smelled good.
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> I came home from school one day, and there they were. They smelled so good, and the Devil made me do it, and I

cut into a loaf. God, it was good. It was still warm, and I put butter on it and ate that. And it was so good I thought I better have another piece. I ended up eating the whole damn loaf. I thought she would never miss one loaf out of that bunch that was there. See, that piece of gold on that tooth? I swallowed the gold—it went down with the bread. So I had to tell her I ate the bread, and the tooth was gone. It was probably a good thing I swallowed that piece of gold. She didn't thump me too hard. I had to go to the doctor, and he said, "What the hell, it looks like you'll get to eat some more bread because you've got to pan for the gold."

In the early fall, my dad would buy a pig. That pig was kept in a little fenced area that wasn't much bigger than that piano. But he could lay down and eat, and it was clean. There was no odor or anything. And other neighbors did the same thing. Then when those pigs were about the right size to eat, that became a ceremony, killing those pigs. So, tonight we're going to do our pig, so my mother would make a lot to eat, and my dad would have a lot of wine and stuff. Guys would all come over, and they had a big vat, and they'd boil water

Butte families often raised much of their food in backyard gardens. (top) Youngsters posed circa 1910 at 20 O'Neill Street in the Centerville neighborhood with a dog and goat in a yard where turkeys, chickens, and geese also lived. (bottom) This family at 145 East La Platte owned a turkey and a goat.

so they could shave the hair off of the pig. They'd cut the pig's throat, and they'd save the blood because they were going to make blood sausage. There wasn't a damn thing they didn't use. If my mother knew how to make toothbrushes from the bristles, we would have done that, too.

The next day, they'd go to the house next door and then to somebody else's, and so it would probably take a couple of weeks to kill the neighborhood's pigs. We all had smokehouses. They looked like little outhouses out in the backyard. My dad had barrels that he would put his brine in, and he would pickle his hams and bacons and the side pork. And the shoulders, he'd grind that up and make sausage, *klobase,* out of that. Then that would be smoked. It would take quite a while to cure the bacons and the ham.

Also in the fall it was wine time. My dad would make four hundred gallons of wine a year. The grapes would come in on boxcars from California. The Meaderville Mercantile handled the grapes. The first grapes that would come would be the zinfandel, the red grapes. It takes twenty-two boxes for fifty gallons of wine. Anyway, my dad would get the grapes, and we'd make crushed grapes. It takes about two weeks for the grapes to go through their initial fermentation. And then you drain it, rack that off, and squeeze off the mash. You either throw the mash away or give it to somebody with a still to make grappo. But then that wine that's racked off, you put that in different barrels, and you leave it for a year.

The whole process took place down in the basement. Where they made the wine had a dirt floor. It didn't have concrete because my dad said the concrete would screw up the wine. So, a couple of weeks later the white grapes would come, the muscatel. And we'd go through the whole process again. First of all, we had a thing that looked like a meat grinder, and we'd just throw the boxes of grapes in there and crush those grapes. And then when you're racking that wine off in two weeks, it's put through a press, and you squeeze those grapes and get all the juice out of them, and you come out with these little squares, and we'd throw that on the garden. We had a garden. In Butte you could grow outstanding vegetable gardens. You could grow potatoes, cabbages, turnips, carrots. It had to be cold weather stuff. We'd grow potatoes and cabbages and make sauerkraut.

Once in a while, Dad knew somebody who wanted to make grappo, and he'd give the mash to them to make grappo.

That wine they were making was a big thing. But making that grappo, that was the brandy they made after making the wine. First of all, a lot of people had stills. Then there was a law that passed that you could make two hundred gallons of wine for every male in the house. It didn't matter if you were one day old. My dad could make four hundred gallons. He had to get a permit every year to make the wine, and it had to be posted conspicuously down in the basement where we were making the wine. Well, the treasury people, they were called T-men when I grew up. They'd just randomly select houses in McQueen—they did it all over—they'd randomly select houses where they had a permit. And they'd check to see if your permit was on the wall and make sure you weren't making any more wine than your permit allowed. Now, my dad had a still. One day the word was out—T-men are in East Butte—but they're going to every door. So, the next day, the T-men were still coming, and they were working the south end of McQueen, and they were going to all houses.

Now, you could tell who was using a still. Did you ever smell whiskey or brandy being made? Did you ever smell a haystack when it was too hot? That's what it smelled like. Well, in McQueen, Meaderville, and East Butte, you could tell who was cooking the brandy. They'd take tires and chop them into pieces and throw them in the stove—they always had a woodstove—and burn that so it would go up the vent the same way, and, you know, a tire don't smell too good. But I know that cannot overpower the odor of brandy cooking. Guys like me could walk by and see who's got the black smoke and say, "They have a still going." And as soon as you took a deep breath, you knew what was cooking.

Here these T-men were coming on some kind of a mission. They were checking people for how much wine they had, and they were checking for component parts of the stills. Well, my dad, instead of hiding the still, didn't think they'd ever make it up that far. But, by God, here they come. So my mother runs down the basement, and there was a little sledgehammer down there. And she pounded the hell out of that [still]—it was kind of an inverted funnel over the top and then the coils—probably the hardest part to make. And she pounded the hell out of it. She broke the wrong part. Anyway, the T-men came to the house, checked it out, and said, "You got the parts for that still?" My mother told them, "No." "What

do you use that tub for?" "My laundry." A lot of women did use the copper tubs for laundry. Well, my dad never did use the still after that because it was broken, and he'd have to find a craftsman to make those parts. But he could find somebody who had a still, and they'd make the grappo.

. . . I never liked wine. When I was a little kid, I must have been about six or seven years old, it made me sick. When they were racking that wine off, it was a real pretty red and it's sweet. It tastes like strawberries. And so, as they're racking that off, my dad and his friends are there. My dad had a cup, and he filled that cup and gave it to me. Dad and his friends were drinking the good stuff—the real wine. Well, I can remember this just like it happened today. My mother come down those steps and sees me with this cup of wine and says, "Don't be giving him that. He'll be sicker than hell from that. He'll be drunk." My dad says, "No, that's just the first run." Well, I did drink a lot of it, and I did get sick. I mean I got sick. And as a little kid when you are throwing up, it's coming through your nose and mouth and eyes and ears and every place else. That damn smell of wine, it gets to me today.

My dad, when he came home from work, he'd drink about a quart of wine before supper. When he came home from the mine, my mother always had a bottle of wine for him, and he would drink that waiting for her to put supper on the table. Then he'd be done drinking unless somebody came over that night. And in the summertime he'd drink beer instead of wine, and I'd go after the beer for him. They sold beer in buckets. You had a little bucket, the kind that Hansen Packing had for their lard cans. My mother would know what time he'd be coming home, and she'd say, "Go get the beer." And I'd take my quarter and run up to the bar and set it up on the bar. The bartender would fill the bucket up with beer and take my quarter, and I'd go back home. I'd get home about the time my dad was coming home. I was pretty small at the time. I had to reach up pretty high to get that bucket up on the bar. I delivered a lot of beer.

As Steve described, Butte children got their social bearings within the safety of their close-knit neighborhoods, which often took on the character of an extended family. Over time, their spheres of social life expanded beyond the neighborhood, providing both challenges and opportunities.

Butte's close-knit neighborhoods often took on the character of an extended family. Steve Sherick posed with fellow McQueen "relatives" at a youth picnic held by the St. Philip and Jacob Society at Nine Mile Reservoir about 1945. They are (row one, left to right) Bobby Pajnich, Joey Petrin, Leonard Gorsh, Bill Malesich, Lavenia Petrin, Donna Lubick, Beba Antonovich (holding an unidentified boy's head toward the camera), Grace Marie Odonovich, Butch Williams, Robert Kovacich (in cowboy hat), Joseph Gorsh (holding rope), Evelyn Kovicich, Joe Kovacich (holding watermelon); (center row) Eleanor Crnich holding Vincent Crnich, three unidentified boys, Betty Lou Balkovetz, Jo Ann Carsh, Liz Culum, Millie Oreskovich, an Antonovich boy, Danny Pajnich, Steve Sherick, Vince Crnich; (back row) two unidentified boys, Donny Orlich, an Antonovich boy, George Antonovich, and Beans Pajnich.

When you started out, you had a range of a block, maybe, but you had both sides of the streets. And on the corner was an empty lot, so we could play ball down there, baseball, softball, whatever. And we played the normal games of kick-the-can and hopscotch and that sort of stuff. When you got a little older, you got to go to the next street. Well, when I grew up on that block, there were hardly any boys. Across the street, there was a girl, and then that family left. And I'll be damned if another family didn't move in who had a girl. Two doors down was a girl, the next one down was a girl. And across the

street from them was a girl. So my range was pretty limited to the bossy females when I started out. But once I moved out a block, the world changed; there were some males.

That was another thing growing up in McQueen—you grew up on this island, and you got to go a block, and then you got to go two blocks. I was, I don't know how old, ten, twelve years old, and my neighbor gave me a bicycle. Well, now you've got some range. You could travel. McQueen was built on a hill, and Meaderville was down at the bottom. You could fly down there on your bike, dink around, and ride on the old hills that were built on the mine waste.

Then we had that dump between McQueen and East Butte. That was there forever. During World War II, they'd have these scrap drives. As kids, we'd go pick up all the iron we could. And sometimes, in McQueen and Meaderville especially, there were houses that were vacated. So we'd go in and magpie all the stoves and pieces of stuff, and then we'd go down to the dump and haul it all down. It was great as a little kid. You'd get all dirty.

As little kids in McQueen, it was no big deal to take a gun and go hunting. A friend of mine and I used to go hunt jackrabbits, or at least shoot at the jackrabbits. We'd do things like that on the weekends as little kids. You know, Butte was pretty barren as I was growing up. There wasn't much vegetation. North of Butte was where the railroad track and the highway went around north of McQueen. When you went up past there, there was a nice draw that was green. A beautiful green. It had some quaking aspen in there growing. We called it "Pretty Place." The kids in McQueen, we called it "Pretty Place." And you never desecrated the place. It was unbelievable how beautiful it was up there. There was a little spring, and the water was running. "Pretty Place," that was above Yankee Doodle Gulch. We'd just walk and walk and walk.

There was a guy who lived up north of us, and he had a little pig farm. He had a few sheep and horses, and everything ran loose. The animals would come down between Franklin and Holy Savior School, where there was a dump. They'd come down there, eating what little bit there was to eat. And then they'd turn around and go back. There always were a couple of nice-looking colts, and I always liked animals. So, I said to myself, "I think I'm going to catch a horse." Well, down by the dump, they had two telephone poles. So I went to the dump, and I collected a lot of wire. I made a corral out

of the wire between these poles. I made some jacks and hung up these wires and dropped some clothes and made some big wings out of these wires that I could run these horses in and catch these horses. And I thought what I could do was just narrow it down. I had the perfect plan, and I could have myself one of those colts. Then somebody blew the whistle on me being down there building a corral. It was a lot of work, [but I never got a colt].

There was a guy above him who raised goats. The man and his wife had claimed the mountain up there and had all these goats. My dad liked lamb and goat, so I went up there. Anyway, I don't know how I caught a kid, but I caught one. I thought, "Wow, my dad's going to be happy." So, I packed this goat home. And I must have been about ten years old then. I wasn't very old. This goat, to me, was a lot of weight. I'd throw him over my neck for a while and hold him in my arms. And I walked all the way home with that goat. I got a piece of rope out of the shed and put it around his neck, and he was jumping around out there. Then my mother says, "Where'd you get that goat?" "I got him up on the mountain. Daddy is gonna like that goat." "Did you steal that goat?" "No, I didn't steal him. I took him. He was just standing there." Well, my mother had a hell of a temper. She got all unglued that I stole this goat, and she said, "You've got to take that goat back."

And this is uphill, a couple of miles up there to that place. And you don't lead the goat. You can't keep him on a rope; you've got to carry him uphill. And Mother is hollering the whole time. So, I've got this damn goat, and I'm back out on the street, and she's following me, yelling at me all the way—threatening to beat the hell out of me if I don't get that goat out of there. "Go see that goat herder and tell him you stole his goat and you're bringing it back." She followed me halfway up there hollering at me, so I took the goat back.

Children knew the intimate details of their neighborhoods, from the rumble of the mine workings beneath their feet to the cinder-lot ball parks, train trestles, and slag heaps. Butte, however, was a wild patchwork of ethnic neighborhoods. As Steve described, once outside the safety of home turf, youthful bravado was tempered with uncertainty.

None of us knew anything about the other kids that were in the other schools. Now, we knew about the Harrison School because we went to Harrison with boys from Franklin and

Holy Savior schools on Friday afternoons for manual training. The girls came to Franklin School from Harrison and Holy Savior for home ec. We started that in the seventh grade.

Now, we're in the eighth grade, and sports were not nearly as organized then as they are today. For some reason, we were a lot smarter kids, and we knew how to organize a baseball game. We didn't need anybody telling us what size of rocks to throw and not throw. You did what you had to do. But in the eighth grade, they had a program at the YMCA. Well, we're all going to go on Saturday, and we're going to the YMCA, and we're going to play duck pins. I didn't have a clue what a duck pin was. A duck pin is a bowling pin, only it's much smaller, and it has a rubber band around it. You set the duck pins on the same spots you do a bowling pin. But you don't bowl with a bowling ball, you bowl with a duck pin ball, which is about six or eight inches in diameter with no holes in it. The game is played the same as bowling. We used to play up at the YMCA. And we'd be in teams. The teachers had us all organized before we got up there—who is going to be on what teams.

We're going into strange territory. We caught the bus and got off the bus in front of the Rialto Theater, which was on the corner of Park and Main. Now we have to walk to that YMCA over there, tell somebody who we are, and sign in. Well, there's a lot of strange-looking guys running around town on Saturday morning. You think about it, they were as scared of the world as we were. So, we get to the YMCA, but we knew some of those guys from these Croatian parties. These guys from Parrot Flats and the East Side and Floral Boulevard. Our fathers and their fathers belonged to the same lodges, so you went to the same churches and you went to the same funerals and you went to the same weddings. So, all of a sudden there is this bond of some kind because we knew each other a little bit. We didn't really know them, but I was a lot more comfortable with Yelenich than I was with O'Shea. The trip to the YMCA was a big, scary adventure. That was a big experience for the kids from McQueen to go up to the YMCA.

Many Butte children cultivated their entrepreneurial talents from an early age. Music played a key part in the cultural life of Butte residents, and some youngsters, like Steve, turned their musical talents into money-making opportunities.

I wanted to learn how to play the accordion. In 1943 my dad bought an accordion. I took lessons from a gal in Meaderville. She studied in Naples, and she was a hell of a good musician. Gina Zanchi was her name. I took lessons for about twelve or fourteen years. At that time, there seemed to be a streak of kids taking accordion lessons. I would guess that in McQueen there were maybe a dozen of us, all about the same age. Well, four of us hung together. One of us lived out at St. Ann's, but he still took lessons from Gina. The four of us started playing together. We probably had been taking lessons for a year, and we played together all through high school. When we went to college, those of us that were together played in college.

So that gave us a really different perspective. We had some different aspects for looking at that culture. You know, it was working class in McQueen. They partied hard, and they worked hard. The church at Holy Savior was probably the center focus of all activities, even though they did have activities in those bars. But they weren't bluenoses in Holy Savior Church. When they threw a party, there'd be a lot to drink down there and a lot to dance. So we played for a lot of the dances. As we got older, we played all over town. It gave you a different realm of reality.

I was eight years old when I started to play the accordion. When school was on, I got to practice an hour a day and then four hours a day in the summertime, which gets you pretty good at it. [I started playing] around town when I was probably ten or eleven years old. When I was twelve years old, I was playing in Finntown at the Alaska Bar. I played from 9:00 P.M. to 2:00 A.M. The Alaska Bar was kind of a tough joint. And it belonged to a guy named Antonoli, and his sister lived across the street from us. Antonoli would come down to visit his sister, and my mother would have the doors open while I was in there practicing. He called her and wanted to know if I could go work in his bar. And he paid—I don't know what it was—maybe twenty-five dollars a night. It was a lot of money, so my dad would take me up there at 9:00, and I'd go get in the corner and start playing. And at 1:30 or so my dad would come up to the bar and sit there, and at 2:00 I was done.

I'd have a kitty out there, and I'd get a lot of tips. I played up there a lot of weekends. When I was twelve, I had an uncle who lived in San Francisco, and he came up to visit. And he was a general agent for the Union Pacific Railroad. So, it's Saturday night, and he and his wife are going out with some

This youth musical ensemble gathered in the early 1950s: (front row, left to right) Pene Osello, Jim Troglio, Tom Holter, Guido Bugni, Vic Romano, Anthony Barango, Martin Favero; (second row) Bob Pajnich, Virginia Rosellini, Hazel Palagi, Mary Bianchi, Ann Bersanti; (third row) Jack Russell, Elsie Madlena, Dolores Conta, Tom Ciabattari, Minnie Petroni, Marie Lazzari, Marie Bersanti, Emily Fontana, Audrey Silva, Bernardine Silva; (top row) Steve Sherick, Jim Konen, Danny Pajnich, Danny Konen.

people. I'm getting dressed, and he wanted to know where I'm going. I said, "I'm going to work." "Where are you working?" "I'm playing at the bar up there." He thought I was kidding. So, the party they were going to was at the Finlen Hotel, and they came down to Finntown later, and here I am in there playing. He got so damn mad he could hardly wait to get home to ball my mother out for letting me play in the bar. He said, "Did you ever go up and see that bar? Christ, they're in there fighting and pushing and shoving each other." It never bothered me, you know. They were good to the kids. I can remember my uncle saying, "Twelve years old. You shouldn't be playing in no damn bar." I played in that bar a lot of times, and I played in a lot of bars.

Another friend of mine, Matt Mattich, also lived in McQueen. I don't know how, but we got a job setting traps for the trapshooters. I must have been twelve or thirteen. You'd set all these clay pigeons. They didn't have automatic pigeon

setters. So one guy would have to be in the hole setting these clay pigeons, and the other guy would be sitting back here, and when somebody said "pull," you'd pull this lever, and it would kick these clay birds out, and they'd shoot at them.

That was on weekends, Saturdays and Sundays. And it paid good. That was out at the Five Mile. My dad had a car that was used on weekends. He didn't drive to work; he'd catch the bus. So, I get that job out there, but I don't have a car, and I had to get out there. I had to swear on a stack of Bibles I wouldn't speed, I wouldn't go any place else. Matt and I could make some big money if we can go out there. So Dad gave me the okay to drive the car so that Matt and I could go out there and set trap.

I also worked setting pins. Nick's Bar in McQueen had a bowling alley—one lane—and so on Sundays guys and gals would like to go up and have a beer, and they liked to bowl. They needed somebody to set pins for them. I only lived across the street from the bar, and somebody would see me down the street, and they'd whistle and holler, "Hey, you want to set pins?" So you'd go up there, and, of course, it was all by hand because there was no rack to set the pins. And you'd set up the pins and get paid twenty-five cents a game or whatever. And sometimes some change would come down the alley as a tip. And then there was the Winter Garden, I set pins there, too. You could go there on a Friday or Saturday night and work for as long as you wanted to set. They had a rack so you could throw the pins in, and once you set it, then you could jump over to the other one. You could do pretty good. You could do that every Friday night.

Steve was introduced to the value of union labor at age twelve.

I went to work for a tire shop in Butte changing tires. I was about twelve years old. It was a tire shop on Montana Street, and they paid me seventy-five cents a day. And it was four of us changing tires, and it was a busy place. Then one day here comes these three guys, and they're suited up. They come over and talk to the four of us, and they said to me, "How old are you, kid?" "Twelve." "You do everything they do?" "Hell, yes." "You do it as good as them?" "Yeah." I was pretty good sized, you know. They talked to these other guys, asked them what do they do. They went in the office with Old Man Barry. Next thing, they are comin' out of the office with Old Man Barry.

They said, "Hey, kid, Mr. Barry wants to tell you something." He was kind of kicking at the ground, and he said, "You're going to get a pay raise starting yesterday. You're getting a dollar and a half a day." Well, he doubled my wages—it was union wages. Three Butte teamsters had come down there, and they said to me, "Hey, kid, how do you get home?" Well, there was a guy I was riding with, Mel. They said, "Have him stop by the union hall up there, and we'll get you signed up, and we'll take care of you." Well, that wasn't hard. We stopped that night, and all was said and done. I think I did have to give them two dollars. So, I had those kinds of experiences, and as a kid growing up, you heard a lot of those kinds of things.

Some of Steve's most memorable work experiences occurred in the lively restaurants of Meaderville.

In Meaderville they had all these restaurants, the Rocky Mountain, the Savoy, the Top Hat, and all of that. They had regulars that they hired, the girls. And the gals wore little

Some of Steve Sherick's most memorable work experiences occurred in the lively restaurants of Meaderville. Among them was the Top Hat (left).

short skirts with a lot of petticoats underneath. When they bent over, the skirt would flip up. That was before panty hose, and they wore these tall socks with the garters. And so that was really a big deal. If they were having a big night, the floor managers would come out in the back and us kids played back there. They'd say, "You, you, and you." And they'd hire you. They might want three of you, and they'd say, "Go in and wash your hands." They'd give you a little coat, a little white coat, and you'd be a bus boy. I think they paid a buck a night to go in there and clean off the tables. But these young gals in their little outfits, when they bent over the skirts would tip up, and there was always some guy in there who'd had a couple of belts and would give one a pat on the rear end, you know. And when she'd come back out, she'd really be insulted, and she'd say, "Give the guy in the grey suit the spaghetti." And you'd walk out there and—boom—you'd dump the spaghetti on him. Then you got your towel, your white towel, and you start wiping spaghetti off a grey suit or a brown suit or anything else. There'd be so much commotion out there. There'd be people jumping up and down. Teddy Treparish's brother—his name was Gino—Gino spoke very little English. He was hard to understand even when he wasn't excited. He was the guy that would come out and pick out all of the people they needed. He was kind of the floor boss. He'd go crazy out there trying to clean this poor bastard off.

So, you'd trip and spill the spaghetti, and then you made it worse trying to wipe it off. And when you were going out the door, the waitress would give you a wink and give you a buck. So, what the hell, you made two bucks, and you got out of there. So any time I am at a restaurant and see some plate

Croatians were spread out in Butte's neighborhoods, but they came together for holidays and other celebrations. Pictured here is the St. Philip and Jacob Society (named for the St. Philip and Jacob Church in Novi Vinodolski, a city from which many of Butte's Croatians immigrated) posing in front of the Holy Savior School (left) and Church (right) in McQueen circa 1928, the year the church was dedicated. The photograph may have been taken on May 1, a feast day.

> fall, I always wonder if that was real or not. I was about twelve or fourteen, in there you know—old enough to stay out late at night. Not too late, though. My mother was a pretty good watchman, so you'd have to be home at ten o'clock on a school night. And weekends we'd play, and we had our jobs.

For many Butte children, religious and ethnic celebrations combined to create formative parts of family and community life.

> In McQueen we had a Catholic church. It had a Croatian priest. Meaderville had a church with an Italian priest. In fact, Meaderville's old church, St. Helena's, is up at the mining museum now. It had a charter that all the Italians in the area had to belong to that church. It didn't make any difference whether you were in Brown's Gulch or up Elk Park. If you were Italian, you went to St. Helena's. Holy Savior was just for the neighborhoods of McQueen and East Butte. I went to Franklin School, the public school, but I went to Holy Savior Church for catechism. One time the nun sent my friend and me to go do something in the sacristy. Well, my friend finds this box of hosts in there; they came in something like a cigar box. He says, "Did you ever eat these?" We had to try 'em, and they were not too bad. My friend says, "You gotta eat more than one to get any flavor out of 'em," so we ate that whole box of hosts. Well, now what do we do? We just threw the

MESOPUST

Mesopust was a celebration of the Serbian-Croatian community. *Mesopust* comes from the Croatian word for "meat fat." According to the February 15, 1931, *Butte Miner,* Mesopust was an old Slavic celebration that resulted from a calamity three hundred years ago in a little Slavic village. The Slavs adopted the ceremony in gratitude that their sufferings were no worse than they were.

A carnivalesque event, Mesopust took place in the days before the start of Lent and was a time to cast off old fears and grudges, settle debts, and be renewed. For the occasion, community members created the Mesopust, a straw-filled figure, to personify the evil committed during the previous year. The trial of the Mesopust was held on the Tuesday night before Ash Wednesday. Each year, a prosecutor would be chosen, and the Mesopust was always found "guilty as charged" and then "executed"—carried in effigy, beheaded, and burned—on Ash Wednesday. All evil of the previous year was thereby reduced to ashes. Mesopust festivities also included a door-to-door collection for butter, eggs, and money used for the festivities.

Mesopust was celebrated in Butte from about 1915 to 1955. By 1932 over 2,500 people participated, involving the entire community. A highlight of the Butte Mesopust was a big dance at the Rose Garden Dance Hall.[2]

Butte's Serbian-Croatian community celebrated Mesopust before the start of Lent. In this 1914 image, the dummy that personifies evil in the community perches below the eaves of the saloon. Each year, the effigy was tried, convicted, found guilty, and burned on the Tuesday night before Ash Wednesday. The Croatian words written on the photo translate to "Men's Mesopust Organization."

empty box in the garbage, hoping maybe Sister will think it didn't show up. Anyway, Sister found out the hosts were gone. She was a really nice gal, and she just scolded us a little bit. Then along comes this other nun, I'll never forget her; her name was Sister Prudentia. I'm sure she was a golden gloves champ someplace in the world, and she beat the heck out of the both of us.

The Croatians were kind of spread out in Butte. You had the ones in McQueen, the ones in East Butte, the ones on the East Side there, and the ones out on Floral Boulevard. But they had a central location that was in East Butte. They owned a building which was called the Narodni Dom, which was the "People's Place." There was a big sign out there that said the "Narodni Dom." They would hold tons of dances, and they had a big stage and plays and that sort of stuff, and they had a big back bar in there. It was nicknamed the Bubniga, which means "Hit 'em." That was because they'd go down and have a party, and as time went on, depending on how much they had to drink, somebody would holler "Bubniga," and then the fight was on.

Oh, there were a lot of Croatian activities there. . . . And there was a place down on Floral Boulevard because there were so many Croatians down there on South Montana, down by Hansen Packing. There was a place down there that was a meeting place for the Croatians also. Mesopust was a Croatian Lenten celebration. That was really neat. Butte would have a big event. People would come from all over for that. And we'd have a trial. This was before Lent, like the Mardi Gras, with lots to eat and drink. Everybody would go, but certain people were designated to be the actors. There was the judge, the jury, the accuser, and the dummy, who was the accused. They had this big trial. The dummy represented all of the ill will and sins of the past year. So, they would hold up signs, you know—sickness, theft, all kinds of stuff—so whoever was the attorney opposing this thing, he'd be giving a hell of a speech on every one of those issues. And some of the other people would be saying that this dummy had really done all of these bad things. They would sentence him to death. Now, they did it two ways. One, they'd chop his head off, and they'd do that with a big sword. And they'd haul the parts off, and they'd put them on a pile of debris and have a big bonfire. Or two, they'd just cart him out and put him on the fire. They would always burn him at the end. The purpose was a cleansing of the past and

starting anew. Tomorrow starts anew. . . . It would take place right out in front of the Narodni Dom. Sometimes they did it out at the Floral Boulevard, either place. They'd light the fire right out in the middle of the street.

They had a parade, and we got to go in the parade. They'd have a big drum, and somebody would be pounding the drum, and they be marching around. They'd march through the building a couple of times and around the outside and down the block, and then all the kids would be hollering, too. And then you'd have this big trial. After the trial, there'd be this big fire and more parade marching around. Things will be okay now. All the kids participated in Mesopust.

Easter was also a big deal to the Croatians. First of all, you planted grain in a dish, just wheat, just set it in the dish and sprinkled it with water and had a candle in the middle, and the wheat would sprout. By the time Lent was over, it would be about twelve to fourteen inches tall. Then you would dye the eggs. With this egg dying, they cooked a lot of different foods. And before Easter, Easter Saturday, they would have a blessing of the food. I'm talking about people coming with their baskets, bringing them to the church. My mother made *povatica,* and my dad made *klobasa.* And they had *nadif,* and they had green onions and *flansi,* and they had the eggs, and they had big baskets. It was not like it was a little thing. And the church, it would smell so good in there. And this would be done, oh, about six o'clock, I think, late afternoon or early evening. Saturday used to be kind of a fast day before Easter. You had Good Friday and that Saturday. All of this stuff could be eaten after—you had midnight Mass on Easter, so you could eat it any time after church. If you didn't make it to midnight Mass, you'd eat it in the morning.

In the morning, you'd take some eggs and put them in your pocket. And you'd wait for your neighbors to come, and then you cracked eggs. You'd bestow a blessing on everything and have a drink. And you'd hold an egg and crack it. Well, one of those eggs cracked, and if yours cracked, your neighbor got the egg. And if his cracked, you got the egg. You'd wish him well and have a drink and go to the next house. That was a big deal to crack the eggs. . . .

We had a series of holy days here at Christmas as well. The twenty-fifth is Christmas, and the twenty-sixth is St. Stephen's Day, and he is the patron saint of Croatians. So if your name is Steve or Stephen, you got to have a drink,

> or you gave a drink. You got to have a lot of company on St. Stephen's Day. My dad was a Stephen, and I was a Steve. So there would be a lot to eat on those days. But there was always a lot to eat during the holidays.
>
> Then after St. Stephen's Day, the twenty-seventh is St. John's Day. Then all the Ivans, Johns, and Yonkos, they all have their day. So it would be more reason to eat and drink a lot. Then the next day is Holy Innocence—that's when Herod was going to kill all the kids, or did kill some. That was another day for another party. But every day was something, and you'd go to church. That little church we had, it had a big bell tower, and the bells would ring, and people would go to church and then have something to eat and drink during the holidays. And there was New Year's, it was a holiday. It was also a church holiday. They used to celebrate the circumcision then, but they don't do that anymore. Then on January sixth, that was little Christmas, and that was nearly as big a day as Christmas.
>
> [The Serbian Orthodox celebrated Christmas the next day.] This was their Christmas Eve. Because of the Three Kings, the Epiphany was on the sixth, and their Christmas Eve was on the sixth; it was another reason for a big party. Then on the seventh was their Christmas, so you'd start all over again. Because the eighth was St. Stephen's Day.

Another eagerly anticipated Butte tradition was Bohunkus Day, a carnivalesque affair held each spring. As Steve described it, Bohunkus Day was an ethnic day: "It started out as a spoof. 'Bohunk' was a derogatory terms for all of the Slavs. The Slavs did—they kicked it off. It became a hell of a deal. It was a big deal—people in costumes, clown costumes. And they had a big parade Uptown. Everyone would get into the hype the week before, [asking] 'What are you going to dress as? What are you going to do?'"

In 1951, however, the event took a sour turn.

> Well, George Haney was the principal of Butte High. He had an assembly for all the seniors. But, see, there were about four hundred to five hundred seniors. . . . So, George gives the big "thou shall nots" this day. And he said, "There won't be any pipes." Well, I was about a freshman then, and I thought he was talking about smoking pipes. But he was talking about beating each other with a piece of pipe. Well, there'd be no pipes, no alcohol, no anything else. He went over the rules

BOHUNKUS DAY

Bohunkus Day was launched by Butte High School students in 1910 as their first senior "skip day" in what was to become a forty-year-plus tradition. Xenophobia was running high in Butte in the wake of a wave of immigration from the Balkan region, and the term "Bohunk" was the hostile epithet used to label these newcomers.

On Bohunkus Day, students collectively "broke the rules" by skipping class and frolicking through the city streets and businesses. The raucous event was marked by elaborate and outlandish costumes, street dancing, and comic theater. As described in a feature story in the *Butte Miner* in 1920: "Bohunkus Day, according to high school traditions, originated years ago when students endeavored to emulate the attire characteristic of the 'bohunk,' a member of a wandering class of vagrants without visible means of support."[3]

Butte High School students launched Bohunkus Day, a carnivalesque affair named in spoof after "Bohunk"—a derogatory name for Slavs—in 1910.

about ten times. The same rules, everybody agrees, no response from the kids, and we all leave.

Well, the parade was on Wednesday, and the band was going to play. I played in the band. . . . And here's all these kids in costume, and there's no organization to it, and they're all spread out. And there's some booze out there. When I grew up, beer wasn't the big thing. You had a beer, but a bottle of whiskey—there was a lot more status to that. Well, they had the parade, . . . and by the time I got back up Park Street with the band, hell, they were going through [Uptown] again, everybody in costume. They were starting to get a little goofy. They had some hammers and pipes, and they were banging the cars, banging the windows. They took out Symon's windows—Burr's—they had the big plate-glass window. They knocked those out of there. They were just like guillotines falling. Breaking those windows started the trouble Uptown, and then it turned into a hell of a fight in Uptown. The next

Over the years, part of the play included both mimicking and mocking cultural traditions, dressing not only in wild but also in gender-crossing attire, and performing political satire. For one day each spring, seniors would "forsake dignity to honor Bohunkus, Saint of Tramps."[4] In addition to a motley collection of tramps, Bohunkus Day 1930 also boasted roller-skating hula dancers, Norse Vikings, and Yankee doughboys. Bohunkus Day 1935 was another madcap affair, with its vaudeville-style show "Laugh of Nations." The "Laugh of Nations" ended its "musical and terpachorial discussion of world problems with a grand finale in which the school song and 1935 class song [were performed]."[5]

Year after year, the ribald celebration continued. Even a blizzard did not dampen the spirit of Bohunkus Day in 1951 as "the weirdly daubed and grotesquely garbed class members snake danced through the streets of Butte then gathered for their performance of the 'Bungling Brothers' Circus.'"[6] However, 1951 was the last year Bohunkus Day was celebrated.[7]

On Bohunkus Day students collectively skipped class, dressed up, and frolicked through the streets. The costume of this 1927 participant required thirteen decks of cards.

day, we had another meeting in the auditorium, and that was the end of Bohunkus Day.

McQueen created the social and physical stage of Steve's childhood, where the worlds of work, school, and played melded. In 1955 the Anaconda Company launched large-scale open-pit copper mining in Butte. Over the next two decades, the Berkeley Pit would consume McQueen, Meaderville, and the East Side. Steve and his neighbors can no longer stand on ground that was once their home and community. It is through stories and storytelling that memory and history are kept alive.