Oral Interview
History of Wyoming
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Lalita Hansen
"In the coal mining life you're all brothers and sisters...

Everyone that went into the mine was his brother's keeper. You were responsible for your partner's life and he was responsible for yours. The greed and the ill feeling, the striving for top position that you see today—that was foreign to the coal mining way of life." William R. Gibbs misses the secure feeling he had among the "coal mining family" at Reliance, Wyoming. "You hardly know your neighbor anymore," he says, but that isn't the way it used to be."

How it used to be began for William Gibbs on Nov. 21, 1906 in Cumberland, Wyo. Like his five brothers and two sisters, he was born at home with the help of a midwife, and perhaps the company doctor. The fee then was $20. "We were taken over to Granny Higgins for dinner and stayed over night," he says of a younger sister's birth. The neighbor was also the midwife. His mother stayed in bed for several days while Granny cooked the meals. Although his mother nursed some of her eight children, Bill Gibbs remembers stirring Eagle brand milk and licking the spoon before it was poured into bottles to be sterilized.

Descended from Welsh, Scotch and Irish forebears, Mr. Gibbs' father worked in the coal mines as a master mechanic. The family moved from Cumberland, to Superior, back to Cumberland, then to Reliance in 1918, where he has been ever since. He is truly one of the "coal mining family." He went to the company schools, shopped at the company store, rented a company house, supported the unions, and worked all his life for the coal mines. If a miner was killed, it was Mr. Gibbs' job to tell the man's wife she had become a widow. Yet life was good. Homemade games, fishing with the family, intense rivalry among the nearby towns in sports, an occasional free-for-all, and frequent dances kept things interesting.

As a boy, Bill Gibbs wore Levi's or bib overalls to the one room company school house in Superior. Most of the teachers were single. When his family moved to Reliance, one of the three teachers in the three room school house, Dolly Libby, "took a big heavy ruler and she hit her nephew across the palm. But she
never got him to cry." His eighth grade teacher, Miss Lucille Boze, had a pillbox hat decorated with Birds. "Ispent half my time watching those birds on her hat," Mr. Gibbs remembers. Negroes mixed with the whites at school, he says, but they "were just the same as anybody else." One of the Negro Epps brothers was the source of a real revelation when Bill Gibbs was in high school.

"The most startling thing happened when Epps took a chunk right out of his finger. Instead of me running for first aid I was fascinated because it was red—he was bleeding red. Underneath that black skin he was just the same as me...that blood was just as red as mine. Somebody else went and got the first aid kit!"

The company store's prices were competitive with the town prices. "We really depended on it. It had everything from a suit of clothes to baby rattles." Meat came in on the hoof from Lyman. Gasoline for the cars that began to show up about 1917 was gotten from the company store for twenty five cents a gallon. During those early days, cars would run all right in the summer, "but in winter they would jack them up, take the tires off and take out the battery. You'd freeze to death before you'd get one of those tires changed." Goods from the company store could be deducted from your wages, or you could buy a coupon book with coupons from five cents to a dollar. These coupons were used just like money. And just like the song "Big John" in which a coal miner sings "I owe my soul to the company store," Mr. Gibbs affirms that "lots of people never drew a lick of money. They were completely in debt to the store."

Company houses were rented to the miners. A small house was $10.20 a month, and had no indoor plumbing. A larger one was $14.70. The rents were deducted from the miner's wages. There was a water hydrant between each two houses so water could be hauled in. Tiring of that, Bill Gibbs himself ran a pipe to his house for running water, enclosed the back porch and put in a shower. He also turned a pantry into a bathroom, although other people in the mining camp did not at this time have indoor plumbing.
Today, Mr. Gibbs' innovation is still evident in a year around greenhouse complete with orchids and a timed automatic sprinkler system of his own devising. When the mines closed in 1954, Mr. Gibbs bought the house he lives in today. Other company houses were transported to other areas in Wyoming, where many still stand.

The importance of baths was brought out in the union demands during strikes. Along with better wages and safer conditions, the miners demanded a bath house. Some of the strikes lasted six months. In 1921 "they sent soldiers here." The whole union body refused to work. "If anybody did go up, they left town as soon as the strike was over. No one would talk to them or work with them--they made it too tough on them." The unions made a great improvement in the miner's working conditions. "Instead of using carbide lamps with open flame, they got electric lamps. This mine was considered safe gas, but there's no mine that isn't dangerous. They put in fans. Open flame lamps are a hazard, and coal dust is as explosive as powder." Because of the unions, the dust was watered down, and bath houses were built. Wages were good for that time: $7.92 a day in 1924, although the mines would often work as few as two days a week. People just accepted irregular work--"that was part of mining." Mr. Gibbs remembers well the celebrations of Labor Day, which meant the beginning of the eight hour day. "It was a great day for the union men." Before that, miners had worked from dawn to dusk. Because of the unions, "things kept getting better. The only thing is, they kept going until they priced themselves out of business. They got the wages so high the company could switch to diesel cheaper than mine their own coal. Some people blamed the company for the mine closure in 1954, but it wasn't the company's fault."

What William Gibbs calls "the coal mining family" was quite a mixed community. The Old Timers Association once listed forty-six nationalities represented in the area. He recalls "a lot of Greek people, Slavish, Austrian, Italian, Japanese, Chinese and Finnish." When Washington Elementary was built on the site of the old Chinatown area, many artifacts found there were put on display in the Fine Arts Center. Many of the Chinese people lived in dugout caves in the banks of Bitter Creek. In spite
of their reputation from the days of the notorious Chinese riot, the Chinese got along with others well and were union members. Everyone who worked in the mines had to belong to the union. The English people introduced the game called "Quoits" that was similar to horseshoes except that a heavy solid metal piece much like half of a discus was used. "It was concave on one side and flat on the bottom. You would see how far you could throw it." The Italians and others made their own wine, and not on a small scale, either. Boxcars of grapes were brought in. The grapes were dumped into a tub, "then you get in there with your feet and squash them down, put it into a barrel and let it sit until it ferments." This is drained off for the first wine, and water is added to ferment again for second wine.

At Christmas time they had a common Christmas tree, and a company Santa Claus "took goodies to each home. I know, because I hauled him home and put him to bed many times--every house he went to served him some of that wine. His old beard wasn't very white after six or seven houses!"

"The Greek people are a very sensitive people," he muses. "It was my job to notify wives when their husbands were killed. I remember going to a little Greek lady down here when her husband was killed. If I remember correctly, it was a fall of rock out of the roof--a ton or so fell on him. Man, I'll never forget that. She just went to pieces. When they lost their husbands they wore black for the rest of their lives and never remarried." Although the union had a burial fund, there was no compensation from the company for a death. However, the company paid $200 for the loss of a limb.

"I started on the Tipple when I was 18 years old in 1924. My boss told me 'You know you don't get any wages the first two weeks.' I said, 'Why not?' He says, 'You pack home more grease than you put in the cars.' He was right--it was a greasy job. I worked from there right on up to every job in the Tipple: the repair shop, loading the cars, you name it. I ended up weighmaster, weighing the cars ready to ship. Then I worked up to be office manager until the mine closed in 1954."

Mr. Gibbs remembers the strong community feeling, the
"way it used to be. Concerts, dances, baseball teams, basketball." They would import ball players to work in the mines. "Chief White Tree, an Indian pitcher from one of the minor leagues, was given a good job in the mine so he could play baseball for them. There was terrific rivalry. If the Rock Springs gang came out and got tough, the company store manager would open the store and hand out the pick handles." No one was seriously hurt, though, he says.

Homemade games were the entertainment in his time. Kick the Can, Run Sheepie Run, Mumbly Peg, marbles, Quoits, soccer, a nameless game similar to bowling, and another homemade game like baseball made for good times. The latter was played with parts from an old broom stick. A three-inch piece was cut off one end of the broomstick and sharpened on both ends like a pencil. With the larger piece of broomstick, you hit downward on one end of the sharpened piece as it lay on the ground, making it flip up into the air. Then you struck it. The farther it went, the more points you got.

Although brothels constituted a form of entertainment for some, Mr. Gibbs says they were patronized frequently by the large population of single men who made up a sizeable portion of the town. They lived in the boarding houses, which were often run by the Japanese people. "I counted 22 bars one time." He knew where the brothels were, as did everyone else, but "the police didn't bother about it—they were kept decent. Nobody raised any fuss about it." Several were downtown, such as the Cheyenne Rooms on South Front Street. There was another over the North Side Cafe. A big white stucco building (still there) up on "H or R Street was in the red light district. There were no other houses within six or seven blocks." Now it's in the Prairie Addition. "I remember a lady came to me when I was a [Mormon] bishop and asked me to find her husband. That's where he was. The first one I went to, he was there. I said to my wife I hope no one sees me coming out of here and gets the wrong opinion."

It's not likely that anyone could have the wrong opinion about William Gibbs for long. He and his wife Daryl raised five of their six children to adulthood. They now have twenty-four
grandchildren (soon to be twenty-five) and two great-grandchildren in their closeknit family. At 77, he lives an active life and cares for Daryl who is partially incapacitated from a stroke ten years ago. "We talk about afflictions, we question: Why me? There's really no answers. Whatever comes, you either grow or you drop down. You either succumb or you rise above it." Only three weeks after serious surgery, he answers the doorbell himself, obviously determined not to give in.

A deeply religious man, he is completely tolerant of all other faiths. "I try to show them instead of tell them. If my example causes others to think that's what they would like to be, fine and dandy. But you can't live anybody else's life. You can't force any person. They have to respond to what they see in you." Someone should write the story of the "coal mining family" he feels. "Your troubles were everybody's troubles. There was a comradeship, a love, and understanding. There was giving without thinking 'what am I getting out of it?' Nowadays there's hardly anyone who doesn't look first to number one. In those days there was no number one--you were all one." The closeness of the "coal mining family" need not die out, William Gibbs says. With his great vitality, his quiet strength and warm eyes he pleads with the rising generation: "Get fully involved with your fellow man."