

Idaho Panhandle Oral History Project
Interview with Maidell Clemets
October 26, 1979
Smelterville, Idaho
Interviewed by David Barton
Questionnaire Information

MC = Maidell Clemets
DB = David Barton

Tape 20; Side 1

MC: This area here?

DB: Aha.

MC: They came to this area here, about the same, they came here about 1902. Of course, they came to this area here, this is my mother. My father been in this area prior to that time, and ah...he must have liked this area 'cause he came back here again.

DB: About when did he show up first?

MC: What?

DB: About when did he come?

MC: Well, he came here when he was a very young man, about 19 years of age. That would be about 1890s, around there. He was here, shortly after the discoveries near Bunker Hill. See, the result of it was, they made this area their home. Of course, mining in the early days, even up to the present day, you might say, it is a very hazardous occupation. And, in the early days, it wasn't so much the hazards of the occupation, like an accident, or something like that. Although there were many of them. Was industrial diseases. And one of the biggest industrial diseases of most miners was tuberculosis. And ah, I can remember when I was a young man, I started to work for the mines, and there was very few drilling machines that were, what you call it wet machines, to keep the dust down, you see. The water would come up through the drill bit. Most all of the machines were dry, the miners would take these here machines, they were called like the Buzzy or a Stoffer, or Hall. The machines were pneumatically powered. It would hold the drill up against the face of the rock and beat upon it. It would require a twister handle on it, you know. The steel would be of a rib shape so the dust could come out. And he would turn this, often times he would come out looking like he worked in a flour mill, dust would be so bad. The dust would go to all different areas. Also he would have, in those days they used Number 2 shovel, and a wheel barrow, and would stand over the top of this wheel barrow, sort this rock, get the waste rock out. And, result was his face was always over a shovel full of dirt and he'd get a certain amount of dust. And ah, the miners

would breathe this silica, rock is what it was. This fine silica dust. And it would dissolve in your lungs and it would form like a silicone acid. And ah, also it would have sharp edges on it. This same thing as black lung amongst the coal miners. And, it was called silicosis just like the miners, hard rock miners mining coal, they have coalatosis. And ah, they would be very susceptible to industrial diseases. Well, if he's exposed to tuberculosis, why, they had what they called the miners con--consumption it was. They wouldn't live very long after they contracted that disease. Because the lungs were in very poor condition.

DB: What kind of jobs did your father do in the mines here?

MC: Well, my father, he worked, I guess probably every type of mining that they had underground.

DB: Did he every do any placer mining?

MC: What?

DB: Did he ever do any placer mining?

MC: Well, I imagine he did. And ah, in Alaska. I never became too well acquainted with my father. My father died in 1915. And ah, he was still a young man. He was about 41 years of age. Result of it was he left my mother with seven children to raise. And ah, my mother, she could talk quite a few languages. She could talk Norwegian language, she could talk the German language, and Spanish, and she was learning to talk the English language, here. And ah, they talked very little Norwegian around the home because they both wanted to learn the American language. And ah, so my mother, she was left the responsibility of raising seven children, the youngest was three months and the oldest 13. And ah,...

DB: So, you were born in Norway?

MC: Yes.

DB: And then when did your mother come over with the family?

MC: Well, my mother first came here in 1902, I have an older brother and sister that were born in this here country, and then returned back to Norway for a visit, and that is where I was born. Then came back again.

DB: Your father went back?

MC: No, my father stayed here. It was just mother that went back. So, they came back here while...

DB: When did they come back, what year was that?

MC: Well, they came back...they left here in, oh, about the Spring...my mother left here in the Spring of 1900. Or a little later, probably about the Summer of 1907. And I was born in April.

DB: So, when did you move to this country?

MC: Well, we came directly from Norway right back here. Right back the same residence here.

DB: Where did you live at that time?

MC: Well, at that time we lived up in Wardner. Ah, it was a, it was right at the bottom of the Last Chance mining dump. Well, you are not acquainted with the area, so I don't think it would mean much.

DB: Well, we drove up to Wardner earlier today.

MC: Well, I lived right at the bottom of the Last Chance mining dump, which was a big mining dump which you see right at the end of Wardner. Right at the end of Main Street, practically. That gate was there. And ah, my father worked for various mines around there. There were quite a few mines in Wardner at that time. There was the Bunker Hill, mine, the Sullivan, the Last Chance, which was Federal Mining Company--American Smelting and Refining. Also the Tyler mine.

DB: Were they all located up in that draw?

MC: Yes. They were located in the center of Wardner. Wardner was a trading center; people lived there. Ah, some might be over the hill little ways. The Caledonian Mine, let's see, Nevada, Stuart mines...

DB: Were these all private mines?

MC: What?

DB: Were these all private mines?

MC: Yes these were all incorporated, these were. They were incorporated mining properties. Ah, except probably, the Stuart. It was not so much an incorporation. And ah, that mine--Stuart, was controlled by Mr. Heinsy he came over here from Butte Center. Heinsy and he came into the Coeur d'Alene in the same fashion that he came into Butte, Montana. He came in like an old bulldozer went right into mining where it didn't belong to him. He used the same tactics which he used in Butte. Because they had the Apex Laws of 1872. And, the person had to prove that you were trespassing, under the Apex Laws until such time you could prove that he wasn't trespassing, he went right on mining. And ah,...

DB: Was he moved around very much?

MC: What?

DB: Was he moved around very much, when people claimed that he was trespassing?

MC: Well, ah, not too much. They brought lawsuits against him and forced him out, you know. And, the same way they did in Butte.

DB: Who were your neighbors when you were living in...?

MC: Well, now Wardner, Idaho, was divided up according to the way the immigration came. There was people of all races, and all types there, of all nationalities, I should say not all races. They were mostly from Northern Europe. We had the Welsh people there, English people, few French, Germans, and Scandinavians. Result of it was they lived together, so they could talk to each other practically. They'd have one part of town, why it would be, where we

lived, why we'd have ah...quite a few people of Scandinavian origin, often there was quite a few Welsh children there. And ah, each one of these groups of people, it seemed like, they had a spokesman who was their main person, who see, was what you call, they used to have, why, he was the Kingpin. And ah, the result of it was, they had a city council in Wardner, Idaho, they had representatives sitting on these here. Like Cris Wise, he was the German representative, and Fred Ellis, he was the English, and Charlie Rosenow, he was Scandinavian, and then the Italians and the Austrians--John Vokovich and people like that. And ah, most of these were people who came over from Europe, at that time, were probably better educated than the people here. They had enough ingenuity about them that they could amass a sum of money, and pick up and leave their home place and leave, and make their way over here and establish themselves. And ah, they, most all of them seemed that period of time they must have had the same type of basic education in the schools in Europe. Because they brought it here in the United States. And ah, all of these families were very religious people.

DB: Were the spokesmen elected, or how were they chosen?

MC: Yes. They were chosen amongst the common people. You know, he was, he was just the same as the modern day politician. He was the hand shaker, the gladhand boy. He's the one always used to say, we ought to do this, we ought to do that and...and ah, you can go to any group of people, I don't care where you are, there is always one that stands out. He become the bold one and...of course, as they say, "The big dog gets the bone."

DB: Did any of your relatives live near by you?

MC: We had no relatives in this country, at all. Except, oh, my brother...my father's brother came here. And ah, he was killed in a train accident. And ah, we never had any relatives here in this here country. I never did have any relatives, in this country as far as, cousins or aunts or uncles.

DB: What were some of the towns that were near by Wardner?

MC: Well, Wardner up here, they then had Kellogg, which is right below Wardner. And, then there was outlying here, coming from this direction from Kellogg we had this small town called Deadwood Gulch. Deadwood Gulch was located, Caledonia and Stuart mines, and Ontario mines. And this come over where the Zinc Plant is. Why up in there, there were silver mines in that draw there. That was called Silver King. There was stores and post offices and things like that. This area, right in here, didn't grow until 1929. They built lead smelters here in 1915. And complete in '17. They built the Zinc Plant here. They started it.

They know they were going to build it about 1920, but they conducted various experiments on the ores. Established what was called the Tainton Form Refining.

DB: How do you spell that?

MC: T-A-I-N-T-O-N. Which was an electrolytic process. And ah, after it was determined successful, why they built there. But Smeltonville here it didn't grow, there was no adequate water system. And after many disputes with the water company and the state there was finally established a water system here. And ah, then a little further west of here, there was a little community which is now called Page Idaho. But ah, at that time it was very small. The mine was called the Coridon Mine. And the ore there, the ores there were very complex. And they had not established a milling system that could separate them. But later when, about 1925, metal prices were favorable, and there were methods of extraction, why they built up a community, then.

DB: Did people think of themselves as living in communities, or were they living in mining camps?

MC: What?

DB: Did people consider they were living in communities, or was it more like mining camps?

MC: Well ah, it was considered cities. The cities were incorporated. And ah, they functioned with a very high degree of efficiency, probably as equal, as good as they do today.

DB: Did they start out a mining camps, and then start developing?

MC: Oh, that's the first things that you must understand, is that a mining camp is very orderly, system--a society. Because, the first thing in a mining camp...the first thing you must do...you must establish a mining district and a recorder of mining claims. The law is brought to a mining camp just as soon as the location is made. Those are processes that must be fulfilled. And ah, according to the mining laws of the states. So, the result of it is the mining camp is not a disorderly organization, as people would like to think it is. Mining is one of the oldest man's know arts--trades. Historically there is no trade or industry that compares with mining. Because, you can even go back to the book of Genesis, it will tell you about it. You can read about it in the book of Job, in the Bible. Give you very good descriptions of mining. And ah, in the second chapter of like Genesis, it will tell you in the Garden of Eden, in the land of Havelin, they had gold. Said it was good. And Moses who led the children of Israel into the promised land, he told them that they was going to find this here brass. Stones, stones that had brass. That was copper and zinc that they's find. And then there were old Kind Solomon's mines, things like that. And Job, he gives a very good description of mines. So, mining is a

very old trade, is a very old art. One of the oldest in the world.

DB: Did people homestead here, or how did...?

MC: Oh, yes. It was customary for people coming into this area, this wilderness area, to use all of its resources. To use the game and the fish. Even like commercially here in some of these here streams, like coming out of the North Fork, of the Clearwater here, before it was being polluted. They would dynamite or blast some of these here streams and sell the fish commercially on the markets. And ah, wild game was sold and hunted.

DB: Did your parents homestead, or did they but a piece of property outright?

MC: Well, like it was customary, like I know my parents bought their home. And ah, you ought to remember that amongst the miners there was not much opportunity to do much hunting. They worked 10 to 12 hour days. And ah, they worked a close, very tight schedule. They worked six day week, sometimes seven, right straight through. And the result of it was, if you was a miner you wouldn't have much time to do any hunting. And ah, of course mining had with it, ah...mostly ah...mining in the early days had more of an attraction, they wanted single men. People were there, would be no relationship so if there would be an accident, or anything, so there wouldn't be any industrial compensation, or anything of that nature. No families to support, things like that. The result was these mining camps if you had, you might have been married in Europe or some place like that, your family was in Europe, probably some, others were single. They stayed in these here boarding and rooming houses. And, some of these boarding and rooming houses they were, they'd go to the specialties of nationality. Maybe it'd be a Scandinavian boarding house, there you would hear the Scandinavian language talked. Or you'd go to a German boardinghouse and hear it talked. Like that. Then...

DB: What? Excuse me, go ahead.

MC: And then, some of these mining compaines they established, just like you heard of the old song "The Company Store". They had...they tell the story like in Wardner, the Page's Hotel, which was affiliated in turn with the Federal Mining Company--the Last Chance Mine. If you worked there it was prerequisite that you board and room there also. And, if you didn't, you didn't work there. And ah, young man an' 'is folks got in an argument, back East and the young man, he came to Wardner. Finally corresponded with his parents, and they were pretty much worried that he was in a rough mining camp. And he was staying at Page's Hotel. Well Page, he was on the Idaho State Legislature, and he wrote back and told his parents that he was staying with the Idaho State Senator. And he oft times thought of leaving

but the Senator always insisted he stayed with him. So, ho, ho--it wasn't a matter of desire or anything like that. Of course, in the mining camp up here we didn't have any company store. But they did have company boarding houses. And ah, so, that was one of the things that they had there.

DB: What was your house like?

MC: What?

DB: What was your house like, the one you were born into...?

MC: Well, I...

DB: I don't mean born into, but the one that you first lived here, in Wardner.

MC: Well, in these mining camps these houses were quickly erected; they weren't any great things as homes. Put a few boards down and...

DB: Was it a frame house?

MC: ...nail it together as rapidly as possible. It would take most of these houses basically built, what you call, balloon building. Ah, they just laid out there sills, and laid the joists across 'em, and set up st...some of 'em didn't even have studs in 'em, except one-by-twelve boards, put 'em up on the corner, nail the edges together, run a ribbon around, two-by-four timber around. Nail the boards, up and down, put some battens on em, like that. And, ah, they weren't put on too good either. Sat in some of the little houses, and the wind would blow, why you could see the walls creak, and the ceilings bulge.

DB: How many rooms did they usually have?

MC: Well, they weren't big homes. No. Most of them, I would say, about four room houses.

DB: Two story or one story?

MC: Well, some of 'em were two-storied.

DB: What was your house, your first house?

MC: Well, the house that we first lived in, it was, it was a four room house. Later on we lived in a four bedroom house that was two stories.

XF: It still stands in Corn Hill.

MC: It still standing up there today. It was a large home. It was one of the larger homes in town. And ah, we ah...

XF: Kitchen, bedrooms, living room.

MC: ...Went through high school why our family was growing very fast. I was working in...I had about half a dozen jobs, it seemed like. When I went to high school, I peddled milk in the mornings, and also by the time I got out...everyone of us had to work very hard. And ah, also had a janitor job cleaning the bank, an' janitor job cleaning the school. Worked in the mines on Saturdays and Sundays. Didn't have much time for myself, but the result of it was, my older daughter...my older sister, got married. And then my next sister, she, graduated from high school. And my older brother, he was pretty near through Normal School. Well, I

was buying this house we were living in. My mother was also working. And ah, so...

DB: About how long was the house?

MC: The house that we bought at that time, was ah...it was...it was one of the older homes in the community. It was approximately about 20 years old, when we bought it.

DB: So, it was built about 1900 or earlier?

MC: I think it was built about 1900. You can still see it up there in Wardner, it's kind of a gingerbread on it yet. It was one of the better homes in town. It was plastered. Had a basement.

DB: How many of you lived in the house?

MC: Well, ah, there was six of us children, my mother lived there. And ah, result of it was, it was...

DB: Well, did you have a garden around the house?

MC: We never had much agriculture, garden. All we had, a little strawberry patch in the back of the house. And ah,...

DB: Did many people have gardens?

MC: What?

DB: Did many people, in Wardner have gardens?

MC: Oh, there was...everybody raised a few flowers. There wasn't much agriculture. Well, hah, little garden spot be not bigger than this room you know. And ah, of course, now when I was a boy...this thing I was talking about the other day. Everybody was, there was quite a few horses in town, you know. And people had some chickens, things like that. And ah, Wardner was a narrow gulch and there wasn't much room for anything. Matter of fact, I have an old picture, an old picture of Wardner, you might want to see it sometime. They was pretty tight together in that canyon, some of the places you couldn't walk between the buildings.

DB: How many families do you think lived there, how many houses were there?

MC: Well, ah, Wardner had a population of, I would say, approximately 2,300, 2,400, in its heyday. It was about its best.

DB: Is that about when you were born?

MC: Yes. It was about that same period of time. And ah, Wardner stayed up as a good community until about 1916. 1916, why some of the mines began to fail. And ah, Wardner began to deteriorate rapidly then.

DB: What happened to the houses, did they start...?

MC: Well, miners, just like any other thing, when the industry was down, there was no places for employment for 'em, the property was valueless, practically. You could buy the best house in town for practically nothing. Some people just went off and left 'em. And ah, also at that same period of time, that period, now we had Prohibition. Which closed the saloons. Affected quite a few businesses, of course and things. And ah, the result of it was, that

ah...board sidewalks, things like that, there was...city had no money to maintain them, or anything like that. They soon went into deterioration, and they were done away with. Things, just in general, just began to fall apart, you know. Just like, any other place would be if you took all the revenue away from the city, why there'd be no garbage systems, there'd be volunteer, just complete volunteer, work. That's one thing that could be done, you'd have to get together and do things. That's the way they did. They got together then and there was, repair the streets themselves. And ah, maintain a volunteer fire department, and things like that.

DB: Where did people take the trash when you were a boy? Where did people take their trash?

MC: Take their what?

DB: Trash. Their garbage, when you were a boy?

MC: Oh, they had a system of garbage collection. Fellow would come around, about every week and do that. And ah, there were quite a few little small farmers around the area, raising pigs and stuff like that. They'd come around the boarding houses to pick up the swill, and things like that.

DB: How about water, was there city water?

MC: Yes. They had a very good water system, in Wardner, one of the finest. Good deal of pressure, well maintained and well cared for.

DB: Did people have any kind of sheds or barns in their back yards?

MC: No. No. Only if you had a cow or a horse, or something like that. Ah, you might find that. I can probably, maybe to clarify it, maybe I can get you a picture, or something. Show you what mining camp looks like. You can see, that these types of questions you are asking are not relevant to a mining area.

DB: OK.
(BREAK IN TAPE)

DB: Well, when did the railroad come in?

XF: About 1885.

DB: And Kellogg was called what at that time?

XF: Well, it was all known as Wardner. Because the town was up the gulch where Wardner is. Maybe we should take you up there to see where Wardner ends.

DB: We were up there. We were just up there.

XF: You have been up there.

DB: Oh, there are quite a few more houses there.

MC: Well, I lived. When I was a boy, I lived right over there. Later on I owned this house right here. And this house over here. This is the Federal Mining Company here. See, see...

DB: So, you lived on the east side of the gulch.

MC: We lived here. My folks when they first came to town lived over here.

DB: Is this where the turn-off for the Silver Horn is, here?
MC: Yes. Right around here. Yes. Right here. As a matter of fact, is where the turn is. That the house we lived in they knocked it down, in order to...and, my wife lived there, when we were first married. This here, is the old Federal Mining Company's power house. See, you can see, that land was at a premium. When there was no transportation they had to get us close to the work as possible. You had to walk there.

DB: What were these little sheds in the backyards? Were these wood sheds?
MC: Coal sheds probably, woodsheds.
DB: Did they have any kind of root cellars?
MC: What? Yes, they dug root cellars into the side hills. And, there was no opportunities for agriculture or things like that. Many of these here houses, in these mining areas here, they would take the standard lot. Say, break it up you know. 37 1/2 foot lot. Some of them, still quite a few of 'em that way. Today in Kellogg, Idaho, you'll notice along the east canyon there. Look at it, you'll see this. Houses are just...

DB: So, were property values very high before the...?
MC: Yes. They were very high considering what you was getting. You got here, and you buy a piece of land standing on the side, where you can barely hang on to it. You have to dig a hole in the side, in order to build a house. Why, then you have to at that time, probably pay \$300, \$400 for the lot. Relative to the wages, which were about \$3, \$3.50 a day, at that time, it was high-priced.

DB: Was everybody in the area pretty friendly with one another?
MC: It was very ah, very, very, friendly atmosphere. I played with Welsh children; Austrian children was...

(END OF TAPE 20; Side 1)