



Mary Murphy. *Mining Cultures: Men, Women, and Leisure in Butte, 1914-1941.* Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1997. xviii + 279 pp. \$21.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-06569-9; \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02267-8.



Reviewed by Peggy Pascoe (University of Oregon)

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Surviving on Stories

Mining Cultures is an engaging, well-written social history, an urban study that focuses on what many readers may think is the unusual site of Butte, Montana.

“Butte, Montana,” Mary Murphy asserts at the beginning of the book, “was a hard place to call home” (p. xiii). It is also a hard place to write about, especially if you are, as Murphy is, a historian more interested in gender dynamics than in any of the city’s previous claims to fame: the dynamic battles among “copper kings” who fought for and won corporate hegemony at the turn of the century; the determined resistance of union workers (the town still celebrates an annual “Miners Union Day”); the tales of immigrant life in a town that was once, as Murphy notes, “the most ethnically diverse city in the intermountain West”; or the environmental eyesores that mar the city’s twentieth-century skyline (p. 9).

For a would-be historian of Butte, moving the focus to something new demands more than just reinterpreting the past. It also requires reckoning with the fact that local residents will be watching every word, for, in a city that has been declining in wealth, population, and sheer liveliness ever since World War I, longtime residents of Butte

often seem to have more control over the past than they do over the present. They guard their memories fiercely.

I should know. I grew up in Butte. Before I even knew what the word “historian” meant I was learning about the city’s fabled past from parents and grandparents who trace their local roots back to the immigrant miners, teamsters, and jacks-of-all-trades that flocked to the “richest hill on earth” in the 1880s and ’90s. For me, then, reading Mary Murphy’s book was a rather unusual experience, and not only because it is the first academic book I can remember that my parents read as eagerly as I did.

In my mind, the book offers an admirable example of how to treat local memories with respect even while challenging the version of history they represent. Three of these challenges recur throughout the book. The first is a matter of timing. Murphy seeks to examine the city not in its supposed “glory” days as a turn-of-the-century immigrant mining town driven by the designs of corporate capitalists, a period that both local residents and subsequent historians have already examined. What captures her attention is the generation after that, a time when

corporate battles were at a low ebb, the union had been broken, and the town had begun what would eventually turn into a century-long decline in population and power. This was the time, Murphy argues, when the city that showcased the favorite vices of young, single men would turn itself into a town that catered to families.

The second of these challenges is that Murphy pushes consideration of mining, miners, and corporate power to the margins of her study in order to focus on gender and leisure. Contrasting the working man's town of the pre-World War I period with the later, more family-friendly city of the early 1940s, she explores the ways in which women and men challenged and ultimately transformed their way of life in the one arena, leisure, in which she argues they had more control than any other.

Third, and finally, Murphy challenges the notion that Butte was, as its residents would so dearly like to believe, exceptional. She does this partly by bringing the range of her reading in various subsets of twentieth-century history (labor & leisure history, women's history, consumer culture, the history of sexuality) to bear on her local subject. But she also uses the history of Butte to offer a critique of urban history in general. Although Butte is, Murphy admits, a city with a "unique character and voice," it is also an "exemplar of the rush into an urban, industrial age" and a town that "offer[s] insights into the urban development of many cities in the United States" (pp. xiv, xvii). Urban history, Murphy argues, takes too many of its paradigms from New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago, the nation's three largest cities. Most mid-century American urbanites, she maintains, lived in towns closer to the size of Butte than to New York City.

After an initial chapter sets the scene, these three themes run through chapters that explore particular arenas of social change. In the first, and, I think, the most innovative of the chapters, Murphy examines changes in the production, sale, and use of alcohol, arguing that prohibition led to significant changes in the traditional gendering of "habits of drink." Building on the work of historians who have portrayed saloons in and outside the West as indispensable centers of male public culture, especially in immigrant industrial towns like Butte, Murphy argues that the enactment of prohibition had an ironic effect. "Prohibition," she writes, "allowed women to rewrite the script of acceptable behavior and transform one arena of commercial leisure bounded by rigid gender roles" (p. 43). Using vivid examples of women bootleggers and tippling club women, Murphy shows that "[i]n all aspects of the liquor business women moved into spaces that had

once been reserved exclusively for men" (p. 43).

In the second chapter, Murphy moves from "habits of drink" to "manners and morals," once again focusing on the extent to which women's behavior changed in the period that would later become known as the jazz age. In an interpretation that is less surprising than sensible, she charts the rise of women's public challenges to respectability and public displays of sensuality. Young women in Butte claimed a unique combination of models for womanhood, from fiercely independent pioneer women to first-generation women politicians like Montana's Jeannette Rankin and even prostitutes (who were, in Butte, numerous and highly visible). Although Murphy offers several appealing examples of rebellious women, including Butte writer Mary MacLane, and her account features the usual 1920s fare of movies, jazz, and dance halls, she emphasizes the limits of these highly visible changes. They were, she says, temporary at best, affecting mostly wage-working women, and even them for only a few years before they married. Much more significant, she says, was the much-less commented upon change of women becoming "independent wage earners and consumers."

The next chapter, my favorite, focuses a gendered lens on the activities of masculinity. Here Murphy argues that although gambling and fighting were, and would remain, pastimes crucial to male identity, they, too, lost their aura of masculine exclusivity during the inter-war years. Prize-fighting became so respectable that women claimed a share of seats in the audience, and even the once-male centered Miners' Union Day celebration began to cater to family audiences and adjust to notions of masculine domesticity. Although Murphy's point is to emphasize the extent of change, the greater value of this chapter lies, I think, in the detailed portrayal it gives of the elements of masculine identity formation in an early twentieth-century working-class town.

The next two—and, I would say, the least innovative—chapters explore the ways that local voluntary associations and a popular local radio station reflected and challenged the patterns of gender laid out earlier in the book. The chapter on voluntary associations emphasizes that clubs and organizations were both the "single most important force in meeting the needs of women and children in a community whose commercial culture primarily served the desires of men" and "one of the most persistent forms of gender-based leisure" (p. 161). It contains an intriguing account of the political battles that crippled the supposedly non-partisan League of Women

Voters, but otherwise charts patterns that will be familiar to most scholars. The chapter on radio station KGIR serves as a case study. It argues that the highly popular station succeeded because it built on established “gendered patterns of leisure and work” with a twist toward family entertainment (p. 169). Its best feature, I think, is its description of the extent to which “radiomania” was an activity gendered for boys (p. 172).

In the final chapter, which focuses on the New Deal, Murphy tackles a tricky interpretive task involving the one aspect of Butte history she thinks is truly atypical, the absence of an “effective” turn-of-the-century progressive movement (p. xvi). Particularly struck by the lack of community support for public recreation, Murphy argues that the New Deal pumped considerable money into Butte in an attempt to fill this gap with recreation and arts programs tied to themes of “family recreation” (p. 211). In the end, though, these programs failed to translate into significant social change. When the federal government stopped maintaining them, the city let them slide. In the final analysis, Murphy argues, the New Deal was less significant for the content of these programs than for one of its seeming side products: a book of local stories called *Copper Camp*. “Stories,” she concludes, “counted among the treasures won from the mines” and *Copper Camp* set the feisty patterns of historical memory that remain alive in Butte to this day (pp. xvii, xviii, 223).

Mining Cultures is a book written in the spirit of social historians who study ordinary people and everyday lives. It is built on a detailed examination of sources, including oral interviews, that Murphy, who was one of the first historians to work in the recently established community archives, has mined carefully and well. She treats her subjects with genuine respect, displays a fine eye for

a revealing anecdote, and places her story in the context of a wide range of social history literatures.

Murphy’s biggest contribution comes, I think, in shifting our attention from the turn-of-the-century to the inter-war period, a move that not only allows her to break new ground in the well-worn historiography of Butte but also to contribute to the gendered histories of women and men in this surprisingly little-understood period. She is so good at tracing the unlikely history of women during prohibition and the patterns of men’s involvement in street violence that I wish she had taken up a whole host of related subjects. One of these, violence against women, seems to me a particularly curious omission. I wish she had confronted more directly the tension between chapters that follow women’s rebellion against traditional gender roles and chapters that chart the development of a “family” community. Although both developments were challenges to the public culture of a working man’s town, they contradicted as well as paralleled each other. And I wished, too, that she had defined her subject more broadly, so that her analyses of gender in politics, economics, and ethnic dynamics would seem as central to her work as the focus on leisure.

In the end, though, *Mining Cultures* is a significant addition to the growing body of studies on gender in western urban cities and a study that speaks to scholars of labor, leisure, gender, and modern culture. It’s merely a bonus that what I’ll remember most about the book is how much it taught me about the stories my parents and grandparents didn’t tell me.

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