

'We Are Women Irish'

Gender, Class, Religious, and Ethnic Identity in Anaconda, Montana

by Laurie K. Mercier

In 1904 Ellen Mulkerin joined thousands of other single young Irishwomen who had sought a better life in the United States. Leaving behind parents and customary life in County Galway, twenty-one-year-old Mulkerin headed to Anaconda, Montana, the copper smelting town where her sister Nora had immigrated earlier. The thriving industrial community twenty-five miles west of Butte offered Irish immigrant women job opportunities and familiar surroundings, for it was, as one commentator complained, dominated by Irish Catholics and "getting to be thoroughly 'Mick'."¹

Mulkerin found work at the Gavin House, the Anaconda Copper Mining Company's large boardinghouse on East Park Street. There, she met Tim Tracy, an Irishman from County Waterford. The two soon married and adopted Anaconda as their permanent home, becoming United States citizens in 1911. Once married, Mulkerin quit her job and raised eight children of her own and seven assorted cousins, nieces, and nephews. She also participated in community institutions that she considered essential to her identity and her family's welfare, primarily the Daughters of Erin and St. Peter's Catholic Church. Long after her death in 1943, many of Ellen's children and grandchildren remained in the Anaconda area, an indication that the transplanted Irish had helped mold the kind of community their children and grandchildren wanted to live in.²

Ellen Mulkerin's story parallels the experiences of many Irishwomen who came to Anaconda at the turn of the century. Although at first fewer in numbers and less visible to chroniclers than Irishmen, Irishwomen cooperated with other Catholic and working-class women to shape their community through

their productive roles, kin and neighbor relationships, preservation of ethnic traditions, and participation in institutions such as the Ancient Order of Hibernians Ladies' Auxiliary and the Catholic Church. As they laid a firm foundation for their "New Ireland," Irishwomen adapted their cultural heritage to their particular needs in Anaconda, an isolated community dependent on a single industry.

Irishwomen were unique among female immigrants who came to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Unlike other immigrant women, they comprised more than half of the Irish who emigrated, and for the most part they came alone, free to create new lives in a new land. More women than men emigrated during this period because the United States offered economic and personal opportunities—a chance to earn wages, find a suitable husband, and escape the watchful eyes of parents, priests, and neighbors—no longer available to women in post-famine Ireland. Pushed by conditions at home and pulled by letters from relatives abroad, two-thirds of a million Irishwomen, most unmarried and under thirty-five years of age, immigrated to the United States between 1885 and 1920.³

East Coast cities such as Boston and New York were the destinations of most female Irish immigrants, who sought established ethnic communities as well as economic opportunities. Women had fled hardships in Ireland and were not anxious to embrace the challenges of raw, new towns farther west. The 1895 Anaconda census, listing almost twice as many Irish-born men as women, contrasted sharply to general Irish immigration trends and reflected the preponderance of males in mining and industrial communities of the nineteenth-century Rocky Mountain West.⁴



Courtesy Isabel McCarthy, Anaconda

Ellen Mulkerin and Tim Tracy (front) pose for a wedding portrait in 1906 with Tillie King, maid of honor, and her brother William, best man.

When Irish-born Marcus Daly began building the Anaconda Smelting Works at Warm Springs Creek in 1883 to process the rich copper ores from his Butte mines, immigrants streamed to the new community in search of employment. Within fifteen years Anaconda had one of the largest foreign-born populations in Montana, fully one-half of its population. Italians, Slavs, and Scandinavians swelled the town's numbers, but the Irish were by far the largest ethnic group. By 1900 more than a quarter of Anaconda's total population of 9,500 were either born in the Emerald Isle or had Irish-born parents, and the Irish comprised 25 percent of the city's foreign-born through the first half of the twentieth century.⁵ Their large numbers offered them better economic, social, and political security than in most other United States cities where the Irish were not so large a minority and often faced discrimination.⁶

Most single Irishwomen migrated to Anaconda at the encouragement of a relative already settled. Others followed siblings to eastern urban centers or western mining camps, where they found employment and often married before eventually moving to the smelter town of Anaconda. Margaret and Edward Kelly, for example, met and married in the mining town of Leadville, Colorado, and fled to Anaconda in 1896 after soldiers repressed a strike at Leadville and threatened their lives. Madeline McKittrick Heaney's Irish parents also met in Leadville and later married in Anaconda. Delia Vaughan left Ireland at eighteen to join two sisters in Pittsburgh, where she worked until she met and married a countryman who was recruited by the Anaconda Company to work at the Montana smelter in 1919.⁷

Although excluded from working at the Anaconda smelter, Irishwomen found plenty of opportunities in the service sector that housed, fed, and entertained smelter workers. Help-wanted ads in the Anaconda *Standard* illustrate the great demand for female housekeepers between the 1880s and the 1930s. One employment agency in 1905 sought twenty "girls for housework," and other ads begged for waitresses, chambermaids, seamstresses, laundry girls, and dishwashers. Three Irish sisters, Jessie, Kate, and Mary Crowley, found jobs as chambermaids at Anaconda's Montana Hotel in 1895. Domestic jobs paid poorly, however, and women often sought opportunities to improve their economic status. Kate Tracy, for example, worked at a boardinghouse when she arrived

in Anaconda in 1903 from County Roscommon, but she soon learned how to sew and hired out as a seamstress. Some Irishwomen managed or owned businesses catering to smelter workers. Lydia McCarty advertised laundry services out of her home; Jennie O'Brien owned an inn, the Deer Lodge House; Ellen Fitzpatrick managed the Commercial Hotel; and Maggie Lynch ran the Anaconda Restaurant.⁸

At the turn of the century occupational choices for women depended not only on what services the smelter city required, but also on age, ethnicity, and marital status. Female immigrants soon found the same gender segmentation of labor as they had known in Ireland. Most single young Irishwomen worked as domestics, and more mature women, particularly widows, often rented rooms in their homes or ran boardinghouses. From the 1880s to the 1920s, Annie McDonald, Annie Lennon, Mary McDaniel, Nellie Mollene, Mary Morris, Ann McGreevey, and other Irishwomen dominated the boardinghouse business and competed for patrons among Anaconda's transient, bachelor population.⁹

For Irish smelter workers, the boardinghouse was a home-away-from-home, where newcomers reestablished kin and village ties, developed job networks, and partook of Irish talk and food. Boardinghouse proprietors, who often sustained newcomers until they found work, served as entrepreneurs, confidants, general contractors, and matchmakers for their immigrant guests. While they were scrubbing or cooking, many of Anaconda's unattached Irishwomen met beaux at one of the town's many hostels.¹⁰

Although marriages to countrymen in Anaconda reflected Irishwomen's preferences for Irish traditions and ties, such arrangements also symbolized a break from the old country as Irishwomen met Irishmen from unfamiliar counties, independent of parental and parish selections. Immigrant marriages nurtured a growing Irish settlement and insured a substantial marriage pool for their American-born children, who continued to influence Anaconda's character after 1920 when immigration diminished.

Many Anaconda Irish parents discouraged intermarriage among their American-born children until the 1940s when cultural and social mores were weakened by the urgencies of war. Virginia Cox Tracy remembered that marrying a non-Irish Catholic American "was a real taboo." The Irish community's

1. Isabel Tracy McCarthy, Tracy family history, copy in possession of author; quote by Spencer L. Tripp, correspondence to mother in California, February 7, 1892, excerpted in Mary Dolan, *Anaconda Memorabilia, 1883-1983* (Missoula, Mont.: Acme Press, 1983), 35.

2. Margaret Tracy McLean, interview by Ada Ewan, May 17, 1989, Anaconda, Anaconda-Deer Lodge County Historical Society, Anaconda, Montana (hereafter cited as AHS).

3. Fifty-two percent of Irish immigrants to the United States were female, as compared to 21 percent of Italian immigrants. Janet Nolan, *Our-selves Alone: Women's Emigration from Ireland, 1885-1920* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1989), 2, 27, 42, 49, 53; Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 406-13; Hasia R. Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the 19th Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 19-20, 34, 42; Robert E. Kennedy, Jr., *The Irish: Emigration, Marriage, and Fertility* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 16, 82-85.



With the Anaconda Smelting Works as a backdrop, two children pose in 1885 as a reminder of the rich family life that thrived amid Montana's industrial towns.

emphasis on family life, however, restricted possibilities for Anaconda's single women who chose not to marry. Many young women who would not conform to Irish codes of proper marriage left Anaconda to pursue occupational, educational, and other interests elsewhere.¹¹

For those Irish immigrant women who did marry and remain in Anaconda, most abandoned wage work to raise children and grapple domestically with the downswings and hardships of the smelter economy. Domestic and economic spheres nonetheless overlapped, and Irish working-class women had few "non-economic" activities. A smelter worker's income was not sufficient to support a large household, and like working-class women in other industrial communities, Anaconda's female Irish found ways to help families survive.

Married women often earned income by housing and feeding bachelor smelter workers. Some constructed and leased small cabins on the tiny lots behind their houses, while others rented rooms despite cramped family living space. Kate Tracy rented her family's only bedroom to bring in needed income. Like many Anaconda women, Madeline McKittrick Heaney's mother augmented her large family's diet by raising chickens and a garden. For twenty-five years, Delia Vaughan helped a neighbor woman do the laundry of the smelter superintendents in exchange for groceries at a discount from the woman's small store.¹²

Irishwomen served as general contractors, too, managing their children's labor both inside the home

and outside it. Girls assisted with babysitting, cleaning, sewing, and cooking, and boys collected bottles, delivered papers, and cleaned schoolhouses and churches. Several Irish Americans recalled their mothers procuring jobs for them and noted the common practice of contributing wages to the general household or paying mothers for their room and board until leaving home.¹³

Married women also maintained some economic autonomy by managing family finances. Delia Vaughan, for example, received her husband's paycheck and then gave him an allowance. With just a first-grade education, she taught herself to read and calculate to carefully manage family finances. Isabel Tracy McCarthy took her husband's paycheck and budgeted money to make household purchases and pay bills. Other women picked up their husbands' paychecks at the Anaconda Company pay office.¹⁴

A revitalized International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers (Local #117) negotiated better pay and benefits after 1934, but before that, smelter workers' families faced hardships from smelter shutdowns, pay cuts, and accidents. Workers often died young from consumption, an infirmity afflicting those breathing arsenic, sulfur, and other industrial poisons. Widows, although helped by the community, received little from the Anaconda Company. They had to take "anything they could get" in the way of work, and many widows supported themselves by

4. Stephen Thernstrom, ed., *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1980), 530. See also Diner, *Erin's Daughters*, 65, 126; Timothy Sarbaugh, "Exiles of Confidence: The Irish American Community of San Francisco, 1880-1920," in *From Paddy to Studs: Irish-American Communities in the Turn of the Century Era, 1880-1920*, ed. Timothy J. Meagher (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1986), 187; Patrick J. Blessing, "Paddy: The Image and Reality of Irish Immigrants in the American Community: A Review Essay," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 9 (Fall 1989), 117; 1895 Census (handwritten journal), City of Anaconda, AHS.

5. Ruth Meidl and George P. Wellcome, eds., *Anaconda, Montana: A Century of History, 1883-1983* (Anaconda: n. p., [1983]), 3; Thomas B. McCarthy, "From West Cork to Butte: The Irish Immigration to Montana, 1860-1900" (master's thesis, Washington State University, 1987), 93-96; Bureau of the Census, *Twelfth Census of the United States: Population* (1900) (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1901), vol. 1, part 1: table 34, p. 768; for other summaries see *Thirteenth Census* (1910) (Washington, D.C., 1913), vol. 2: table 3, p. 1159; *Fourteenth Census* (1920) (Washington, D.C., 1922), vol. 3: table 12, p. 586; *Fifteenth Census* (1930) (Washington, D.C., 1932), vol. 3, part 2: tables 18-19, pp. 32-33; *Sixteenth Census* (1940) (Washington, D.C., 1943), vol. 2, part 4: table 24, p. 524; *Seventeenth Census* (1950) (Washington, D.C., 1952), vol. 2, part 26: table 34a, pp. 26-40, table 42a, pp. 26-62.

washing, ironing, cleaning houses, or renting rooms. Virginia Cox Tracy remembered how her widowed Irish grandmother divided her house to rent two rooms. The company, meanwhile, provided only “a load of wood from the foundry every month” as compensation for her husband’s smelter-related death.¹⁵

Some Irish widows had special skills or enough money to open small stores or boardinghouses, but their work usually had to be home-based to care for children. Women worked long hours, sacrificing family and social life. Mary McNelis, who lost two husbands during the 1920s, was a midwife. She could not always care for her two sons and periodically placed them in St. Joseph’s Orphanage in Helena. Her son, Mike McNelis, said her job often kept her away from home for a week or more. “[She’d] cook and wash and take care of the woman who had the baby,” McNelis explained, “and no matter how big the family was, that was it. Sometimes she’d walk in where there’d be seven or eight kids, and she’d take care of them all and see some off to school and change the [diapers] on the babies.” When Mary Jane Walton’s father died, her Irish mother supported her children by washing smelter men’s clothes and raising chickens. Walton lost her own husband in the 1920s and cleaned for her family’s room and board until she used her husband’s \$2,000 life insurance payment to open a store. Women friends helped her clean and ready the store, and “she started up and she never looked back,” her daughter, Josephine Weiss Casey, recalled. “She knew all the old bachelors around here

and you know she was a young woman . . . and opened that store when the shift [street]car went down at 6:00 in the morning and closed it when the last one came up at 11:20 at night, that’s the kind of hours [she worked].”¹⁶

In addition to hardship, the makeup of the industrial community determined women’s economic roles before and after marriage. Generally, Irish immigrant women in the United States were less likely than other immigrant women to hold wage-earning jobs after marriage. But women of all ethnic backgrounds had limited opportunities in the single-industry economy.

Beginning in the 1920s, Anaconda stores and the Anaconda Company hired single female salesclerks and stenographers, but married women were denied such work. After graduating from high school, Delia Sweeney worked in the corset and shoe departments of the Copper City Commercial Company, and Margaret Laughlin Kelly obtained a job at Stagg’s Furniture Store. Margaret and Isabel Tracy worked at Woolworth’s during the 1930s until they each married. Despite such retail opportunities, more than one-third of Anaconda’s working women were still engaged in domestic service or hotel, restaurant, and laundry work in 1930. Not until the 1940s, when married women began to work outside their homes in war-related and other jobs, did the proportion of Anaconda women workers increase in clerical, sales, and professional jobs and decrease in traditional domestic and service roles.¹⁷



Courtesy Anaconda-Deer Lodge County Historical Society, Anaconda

Raising chickens and maintaining other livestock added to family incomes in Anaconda in the early twentieth century.

Although female Irish immigrants sought to improve their economic status by running boarding-houses, they encouraged their American daughters to pursue teaching as a way up the economic ladder. Delia Sweeney remembered that many women by “hook or by crook” saved money enough to send their daughters to teacher training college in Dillon. Virginia Cox Tracy, for instance, taught school in the early 1940s until she married. The district refused to employ married women, so Tracy worked at the J. C. Penney store until she was hired to work at the smelter during the war. By 1960 the school district had abolished its prohibition against married women, and Tracy was rehired to teach.¹⁸

Like many working-class women throughout the country, Irish and Irish-American women worked because they had to survive, but they also accepted the responsibility to contribute what they could to their community and to the well-being of their immediate and extended families. Sister Gilmory Vaughan recalled, for example, how women consistently provided the sustenance to carry people through hard times. If anybody was sick, she said, her mother “always sent over some kind of a dinner. If anyone died . . . dinner was prepared a day before the funeral, so that the family would be able to eat together. And this was a thing that many people did.” Margaret Laughlin Kelly’s mother regularly helped a young widow with her laundry business and refused payment for her services. Like many other Irishwomen, Ellen Mulkerin Tracy took in relatives as part of her obligations to her extended family. Isabel Tracy McCarthy said her mother “could never say no. . . . It seemed like we always had such a big family there.” Her sister, Margaret Tracy McLean, remembered their mother’s penchant for feeding the hungry. “If anybody came by she had to feed them. They used to mark [our house] I think . . . when the hoboes would come they knew where they could get something to eat.”¹⁹

Second-generation Anaconda Irish remembered that many of their parents, particularly mothers, clung to various traditions associated with “old Eire,” such as superstitions, fortune-telling, music, and witty toasts. Some Irishwomen, for example, feared black cats, insisted that guests leave by the door they entered, and never left a hat on a bed. To ward off evil spirits after a family member’s death, mothers might

pin a small bag of salt on children’s clothing. Isabel Tracy McCarthy and her friends visited Irish neighbor women who told fortunes from cards or tea leaves. Such reminders of and habits from the old world were rarely sustained by Anaconda’s second-generation Irish. Daughters seemed to view their mothers’ traditions as quaint superstitions bearing little relevance to their American lives.²⁰

Perhaps the most valued tradition immigrant women sought to preserve was “the Irish get-together.” Socializing among friends and family in homes or on picnics was a favorite pastime, and visits sometimes included singing Irish songs and dancing jigs. For the most part, conversations were in English, for few Irish immigrants preserved the Gaelic language in Anaconda. Sister Gilmory Vaughan recalled that her parents Delia and Martin Vaughan spoke Gaelic only when other Irish-speaking friends visited in their home. “So we never learned the language,” she said. “We knew some of it, we could understand it, and there was always kind of pride [when they spoke Gaelic]” but the children were not encouraged to learn it. Isabel Tracy McCarthy believed that few Irish customs were perpetuated by her family, except for social visits with other Anaconda Irish families where tea was served, Irish origins discussed, and toasts proposed.²¹

Much visiting took place within separate female and male spheres. Men met at bars, ethnic associations, and union halls, while women gathered at homes and churches. Virginia Cox Tracy remembered her mother’s visits with friends after mass when they served cake and played Irish songs on the piano. Margaret Laughlin Kelly recalled that her Irish mother and her friends called on one another during their husbands’ smelter shifts:

They visited with each other all the time. They took their children with them . . . in the afternoon if they had afternoon shift. As soon as the husband went to work they visited. And it seems that the [neighborhood Irish] men had the same shift, they all worked down in the converters together, this was the Walshes, the Laughlins, and the Meloys. . . . [The women] never played cards or anything like that like they do now, just visited, talked about the old country, and they always had to have their tea and soda bread.²²

7. Robert Kelly, interview by LKM, October 2, 1986, Anaconda, MHS; Madeline McKittrick Heaney, interview by Ada Ewan, May 22, 1989, Anaconda, AHS; Sister Gilmory Vaughan, interview by LKM, July 30, 1986, Anaconda, MHS.

8. Anaconda *Standard*, March 31, April 3, 1905, March 17, 1926; 1895 Census; Evans and McMurray, *Anaconda City Directory* (1896); Margaret Tracey Walsh, interview by Ada Ewan, May 19, 1989, Anaconda, AHS.

9. “Earnings of Company Boarding Houses” (1898-1900), folder 7, box 49, MC 169, ACM; *Anaconda City Directory* (1896); Delia Sweeney, interview by Alice Finnegan, September 30, 1987, Anaconda, AHS.

10. McKeon interview.

6. Of the 5,535 employees at the Anaconda smelter in 1894, 23 percent were Irish-born. Scandinavians comprised the next largest national group at 9 percent. Irish dominated certain parts of the smelter, such as the converters and reverberatories. See Anaconda Mining Company, “Statement of Wages Paid and Employees,” September 1894, Anaconda, Montana, folder 40, box 57, MC 169, Anaconda Copper Mining Company Records (hereafter ACM), Montana Historical Society (hereafter MHS); “1898 ACM Company Officials,” Anaconda Company vertical file, AHS; Luke McKeon, interview by Laurie K. Mercier (hereafter LKM), July 29, 1986, Joe Bolkovatz, interview by LKM, August 12, 1986, and John Philip, interview by LKM, November 24, 1981, Anaconda, Montana, MHS.

Immigrant groups have been most successful in preserving their foodways long after shedding other aspects of ethnic identity, such as language and even political loyalties to the old country. The Irish felt right at home in Montana, where cold climate and poor transportation limited most families to a bland cuisine of meat and potatoes. Some eating habits and favorite Irish dishes persisted, even in the most unlikely settings. Stews, for example, were popular picnic fare because the “old-time Irish” did not like cold lunches. Margaret Tracy McLean recalled her mother laboriously preparing a hot stew to deliver to family at the Washoe picnic grounds. Madeline Heaney remembered her mother making Irish soda bread and roasts, and Caithin “Kotch” Gallagher Francisco recalled traditional Christmas fare of fish, white sauce, and boiled potatoes. American-born daughters incorporated new foods into their culinary lexicon, including the popular pasty, the Cornish meat and potato pie relished by Butte miners and Anaconda smelter men, and many younger Irish switched from drinking tea, their parents’ favored refreshment, to coffee, the more ubiquitous western beverage.²³

Anaconda Irishwomen may have intentionally modified some traditions that interfered with their American routines. One such casualty was the Irish wake. Wakes usually were held in the homes of the deceased and often lasted several days and nights. Mourners presumably distracted the widow from grief by eating, drinking, and eulogizing in her home until the corpse was taken to the church for services and to the Mount Carmel Catholic cemetery for burial. Luke McKeon remembered the special characteristics of Anaconda Irish wakes:

The Irish funeral was a very long funeral. The body would be brought home and it would be waked in the family home for two or three days . . . and around the clock. The women would be in the . . . parlor or the living room with the wife and widow and the men would all be in the kitchen. The beer and the whiskey and the food would flow rather freely.²⁴

Although men recounted the sometimes-raucous tradition fondly, women were less enthusiastic about the vigils. The tradition placed a great deal of strain on women who, although stricken with grief, were

expected to greet visitors and serve food and drink to men toasting the beloved memory of their kinsman. Lucy McNelis recalled: “You’d have to set the table sometimes fifteen times. Even if it was a big dining room table, you’d set it and set it and set it. They’d be eating from one o’clock until four o’clock in the morning, just keep it up all night long. It was really wearing, too much.” One Anaconda writer commented that by the end of a three-day wake, “the immediate family was numb, not from grief alone, but from hard work.”²⁵

Women may have played a central role in the demise of the wake, preferring not to perpetuate a tradition that taxed their stamina. The Finnegan Funeral Home, which primarily served Catholic families after it opened for business in 1883, gradually expanded its facilities to accommodate wakes. “Tiny” Longfellow, a local undertaker, believed that moving the grieving formalities to funeral homes greatly relieved women of the emotional and physical burden of having rowdy visitors in their homes. By the mid-twentieth century, Anaconda wakes had been transformed into a ceremony where mourners visited the dead at the funeral home and then gathered at widows’ homes for a short meal.²⁶

Anaconda’s working-class women were less successful in modifying another Irish institution, the neighborhood pub. The custom of drinking certainly was not limited to the Irish, and Anaconda’s working men in general frequented bars lining the Third Street streetcar route to the smelter. Escaping the toil of the smelter and responsibilities at home, men found refuge in local bars. Howard Rosenleaf explained that Anaconda’s working-class “drank because they had to, not because they wanted to. . . . We lived under the fallacy that you work hard, you play hard, and you drink hard.” Mike McNelis contended that the Irish maintained the saloons’ prosperity: “If it weren’t for the Irish all them birds would have been ‘up spot’ a long time ago.”²⁷

Viewed as harmless socializing by many men, women generally equated after-shift stops at taverns as a perilous drain on family income, especially considering the expensive Anaconda custom of buying drinks for the house. Temperance movements were ineffective, and even during Prohibition, Anaconda’s bars were reportedly “wide-open” and

11. Virginia Cox Tracy, interview by Alice Finnegan, August 31, 1989, Anaconda, AHS.

12. Mike McNelis, interview by LKM, November 22, 1982, Anaconda, MHS; Walsh, Vaughan, and Heaney interviews.

13. Ibid.

14. Vaughan interview; Isabel Tracy McCarthy interview by LKM, October 2, 1986, Anaconda, MHS.

15. Tracy interview.

16. McNelis interview. St. Joseph’s Orphanage was a favorite charity of the Anaconda Irish. Minutes, October 25, 1933, November 14, 1934, Anaconda Ancient Order of Hibernians Records, Anaconda AOH (hereafter AOH); Josephine Weiss Casey, interview by Alice Finnegan, May 18, 1989, Anaconda, AHS.

17. Maxine S. Seller, “Beyond the Stereotype: A New Look at the Immigrant Woman, 1880-1924,” *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, 3 (Spring 1975), 62; Diner, *Erin’s Daughters*, 27; Sweeney, McLean, and McCarthy interviews; Margaret Laughlin Kelly, interview by Alice Finnegan, July 7, 1987, Anaconda, MHS; *Fifteenth Census* (1930), vol. 3, part 2: table 20, p. 34; *Sixteenth Census* (1940), vol. 2, part 4: table 33, p. 110; *Seventeenth Census* (1950), vol. 2, part 36: table 35, p. 264.

18. Diner, *Erin’s Daughters*, 96. Sweeney and Tracy interviews.

19. Vaughan, McCarthy, and McLean interviews.

20. James H. Dorman, “Ethnic Groups and ‘Ethnicity’: Some Theoretical Considerations,” *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, 7 (Winter 1980), 28; Nolan, *Ourselves Alone*, 3; McKeon and McCarthy interviews.



The numerous bars in Anaconda—like the P & P Saloon, 622 East Third Street—reflected the strong drinking culture of the industrial town.

flourishing. Men stubbornly resisted efforts to restrict their revered drinking culture. To them, bars represented one of the few arenas in which they could release frustrations and relax with compatible company, but many Irishwomen resented their inability to regulate this aspect of family life. Women countered by trying to control their husbands' paychecks and by sending their children to bars to fetch fathers after shifts ended. Women failed to curb drinking, but they did change the nature of the all-male preserve during the 1940s, when more women began frequenting Anaconda taverns.²⁸

Anaconda's Irish community undoubtedly found its greatest ethnic cohesion in local chapters of the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH) and the AOH Ladies' Auxiliary. Within these groups, men and women worked together to support projects of mutual concern and separately pursued issues of interest to each. In 1885, one year after the opening of the Anaconda Reduction Works, Irish men formed a chapter of the Hibernians. The Daughters of Erin formally established its Anaconda association the following year, just two years after the national AOH Ladies' Auxiliary organized. The Anaconda *Stan-*

dard reported that the women's society probably would become the largest in the state with forty-five "enthusiastic" charter members. Women joined the AOH Ladies' Auxiliary for the same reasons men joined the AOH: to promote their Irish heritage and a free Ireland, to "bind closer together Irishmen and Irishwomen," to provide sick and funeral benefits to members, to support the Catholic Church, and to afford a social outlet. The social dimension may have been the most attractive to Anaconda women, who had few formal opportunities to socialize.²⁹

The men's and women's groups often had contrasting agendas. Male Hibernians expressed much more concern about political struggles in Ireland than their female counterparts, but they also attended to community needs. For example, the Anaconda AOH frequently pledged financial support to widows and orphans, whether they were survivors of executed rebels in the Emerald Isle or of deceased smelter workers in Anaconda.³⁰ Apparently less fervent nationalists, Anaconda Irishwomen were beset with their own struggles and appeared more interested in visiting and planning fund-raisers for their association, church, and members in need than in pursuing a liberated Ireland. The AOH Auxiliary's almost

21. Vaughan and McCarthy interviews. On Butte's Irish abandoning Gaelic see McCarthy, "From West Cork to Butte," 103-4.

22. Tracy and Kelly interviews.

23. Heaney and McLean interviews; Caithin "Kotch" Gallagher Francisco interview by LKM, March 20, 1991, Anaconda, notes in author's possession.

24. McKeon interview.

25. Lucy McNelis quoted in McNelis interview; Bob Vine, *Anaconda Memories, 1883-1983* (Butte, Mont.: Artcraft Printers, 1983), 23.

26. Arthur A. "Tiny" Longfellow, interview by LKM, October 2, 1986, Anaconda, MHS.

27. Howard Rosenleaf, interview by LKM, July 29, 1986, MHS; Mike McNelis, interview transcript, (n.d.), p. 2, courtesy of interviewer Alice Finnegan, Anaconda.

28. See also Meagher, *From Paddy to Studs*, 10.

29. *Anaconda Standard*, May 17, 1896, March 18, 1899. The AOH was founded as a fraternal organization of Catholics of Irish birth in 1836 in New York City, but its roots began in Ireland in the seventeenth century. Michael F. Funchion, ed., *Irish American Voluntary Organizations* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983), 50, 57.

30. AOH Minutes, May 10, 1916, AOH.

single-minded devotion to local concerns reflected its community-building motives and its determination to look forward. The Irishwomen were more eager immigrants and, unlike many of their male comrades, did not view their stay as temporary exile.³¹

The Ladies' Auxiliary and the AOH frequently collaborated on projects, such as sponsoring the annual St. Patrick's Day festivities, installing officers, and attending state conventions together. Even though men often heaped patronizing praise on their female compatriots, evidence suggests that male Hibernians understood that Irishwomen's cooperation and contributions were essential to their community. Joint ventures between the two groups indicate that Irish women were not content to create a separate sphere for addressing women's concerns but worked with men to stimulate a vital ethnic community.³²

Finances were a persistent problem for female Hibernians who depended on dues and fund-raisers to pay for members' insurance, masses and funerals, AOH Hall rental, and gifts to local nuns and community members in need. The AOH Ladies' Auxiliary often had to depend on the largesse of its male counterpart, an indication of women's economic dependence in public as well as private life. The AOH in 1920 received one dollar from the women's group for fuel used in the AOH Hall for a card party, and the men decided to return the dollar to the Auxiliary. Later that year, the AOH bought fifty tickets for an AOH Auxiliary card party then returned the tickets, a generous offer that gave the Daughters of Erin a chance to profit twice from the same tickets, but also symbolized the women's dependence on the men. The auxiliary, of course, repaid AOH generosity manyfold through its assistance with organizing and preparing AOH/Ladies' Auxiliary functions.³³

St. Patrick's Day festivities marked an important annual observance for Anaconda's Irish community. Beginning in the 1880s and continuing to the present, the unbroken ritual that linked ethnic and religious heritage featured the AOH and auxiliary procession to St. Paul's or St. Peter's Church, early morning mass, a parade, evening entertainment, and dance. Although the AOH typically financed, publicized, and took credit for the affair, women organized and performed at the events. One woman remembered that early St. Patrick's Days in Anaconda had more of a family, historical, and religious focus than later commemo-

rations. As late as the 1940s children wore St. Patrick's medals instead of green and accompanied parents to church and AOH festivities.³⁴

Irish immigration declined after 1920 when economic conditions improved in Ireland, and the United States lost its appeal because of restrictive immigration legislation and increased competition for jobs.³⁵ As Anaconda's Irish-born population declined to just 3 percent of the town's population (one-quarter of the total foreign-born) by 1950, St. Patrick's Day lost much of its nationalistic, emotional, and even spiritual content. But the persistence of March 17 observances underscored Anaconda's significant Irish-Catholic heritage. By the 1960s, when Anaconda boasted Montana's only AOH chapter, even the more numerous Butte Irish traveled to the smelter town for St. Patrick's Day activities. No longer a celebration solely for the town's Irish, commemorations in Anaconda became community-wide events, signifying among Irish Americans a greater sense of security and an eagerness to display ethnic pride.³⁶

While middle-class women dominated most Anaconda women's groups, the AOH Auxiliary attracted working-class women. In the early 1920s, most of the organization's 230 members lived east of Main Street in the working-class district frequently referred to as "Goosetown." Although initiation fees (one dollar until 1990) and dues (fifty cents a month) made it possible for many working-class women to join, many Irishwomen had neither the money nor the time to participate.

Virginia Cox Tracy's grandmother struggled to make a living selling produce, eggs, and butter after her husband died from consumption in 1915. "She wasn't really reclusive," Tracy said, "but she was too busy just surviving." Mike McNelis recalled the hardships faced by the town's many boardinghouse operators, who regularly worked sixteen- or eighteen-hour days: "By the time you fix seven or eight lunch buckets and you fix breakfast for seven or eight guys, and you cook supper for them guys coming in with an appetite like a horse for supper, why, you didn't have much time for socializing."³⁷ Maggie Morris McGeever saved every penny to pay for interest and fuel for her boardinghouse, and "didn't have money for social things." Margaret Laughlin Kelly believed that most Irishwomen were "at-home people" instead of "joiners," and she believed that

31. Catherine Dowling, "Irish-American Nationalism in Butte, 1900-1916," *Montana The Magazine of Western History*, 39 (Spring 1989), 59.

32. Anaconda *Standard*, May 27, 1896; AOH Minutes, January 12, 1916, AOH; AOH Division Number One, Anaconda-Deer Lodge County, calendars 1982-1988, vertical files, AHS.

33. Account register of the AOH Ladies' Auxiliary, n.d. (c. 1900), AOH Ladies Auxiliary Records, 1900-1908, SC 1528, MHS; AOH Minutes, March 10, August 25, 1920, AOH.

34. Anaconda *Standard*, March 17, 1902, March 17, 1903, March 18, 1932; Francisco interview.

35. By 1920 Americans born of Irish parents outnumbered the Irish-born by more than three to one. Thernstrom, ed., *Harvard Encyclopedia*, 540. With fewer Irish-born, Anaconda Hibernians extended membership to Irish Americans in the 1950s.

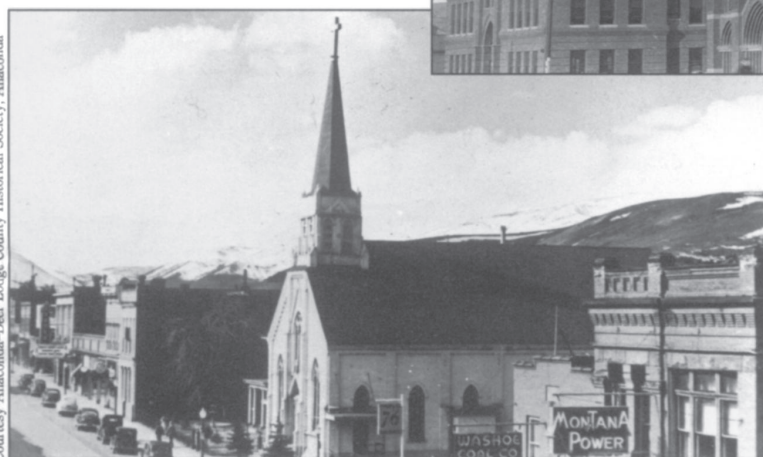
36. *Seventeenth Census* (1950), vol. 2, part 26; table 34a, pp. 26-40; Anaconda *Leader*, September 11, 1985; (Butte) *Montana Standard*, March 15, 1964; Francisco interview.

37. Account book, 1922-1924, AOH Ladies' Auxiliary records, 1912-1928, courtesy of Caithin "Kotch" Gallagher Francisco, Anaconda; Tracy and McNelis (MHS) interviews.

Anaconda's two parishes, represented by St. Peter's Church and school (right) and St. Paul's Church (below), split the community's Irish along economic and neighborhood lines.



Courtesy: Anaconda-Deer Lodge County Historical Society, Anaconda



Courtesy: Anaconda-Deer Lodge County Historical Society, Anaconda

Patrick's on early town maps—already boasted one thousand communicants. Like larger eastern cities, Anaconda soon supported distinct ethnic parishes. Responding to the Irish domination of St. Paul's Church, Slavic immigrants constructed St. Peter's "Austrian" Catholic Church in 1897 on the town's east side. Croatian residents were St. Peter's first trustees, and two Slavic priests, Fathers Solnce and Pirnat, ministered to the parish-

most who were active in the AOH Auxiliary participated before they bore children or after their children were grown.³⁸

Although the Catholic Church was the most important cultural institution for Anaconda's Irish-women, it diluted Irish bonds. Just as the smelter and its neighborhoods were sites of interethnic mingling, so too did different Catholic ethnic groups meet at church and parochial school. Despite the Catholic hierarchy's support of ethnic parishes and Irish domination of the national and Montana clergy, religion and class intersected in Anaconda, and its two parishes split Irish along economic and neighborhood lines.³⁹

Because Irish Americans controlled the American Catholic Church, their kin in Anaconda profoundly influenced the smelter community's parishes. At its inauguration in 1888, St. Paul's Catholic Church—St.

ioners for many decades. But Anaconda was too small and its working-class housing too limited to segregate ethnic groups for long, and many Irish claimed St. Peter's as theirs, too. While St. Peter's in the Goosetown neighborhood drew from the poorer laboring families, St. Paul's catered to the more upwardly mobile "two-bathroom" Irish living west of Main Street.⁴⁰ Anaconda's Irish leaders tried to blunt class and neighborhood differences among their ethnic community by rotating St. Patrick's Day services between St. Paul's and St. Peter's.

Female parishioners volunteered for their churches because they thought them essential to community life. As early as 1888, the Ladies of the Catholic Church were raising money for a new church by selling raffle tickets for a gold watch. That same year organizers and "an enthusiastic corps of lady assistants" planned

38. Sweeney and Kelly interviews.

39. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 526, 532; Meagher, *From Paddy to Studs*, 187; Thernstrom, ed., *Harvard Encyclopedia*, 535.

40. St. Paul's Catholic Church, "Nearly a Century of Service . . . St. Paul's Church, Anaconda, Montana, 1888-1980," p. 2, pamphlet, Churches vertical file, AHS; Raymond A. Mohl, "The Immigrant Church in Gary, Indiana: Religious Adjustment and Cultural Defense," *Ethnicity*, 8 (March 1981), 1-17.

41. *Anaconda Weekly Review*, March 22, 1888; *Anaconda Standard*, May 3, 1888, October 4, 1906.

42. Meidl and Wellcome, *Anaconda, Montana*, 45.

43. *Anaconda City Directory*, 1909, 1912, 1918, 1925.

44. See, for example, reports on Catholic sermons in *Anaconda Standard*, March 18, 1902, and March 18, 1915.

45. On the influence of Irish-American mothers, see Andrew M. Greeley, *The Irish Americans: The Rise to Money and Power* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 125; Marjorie R. Fallows, *Irish Americans: Identity and Assimilation* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1979), 108. On family life see Donna Gabaccia, "Immigrant Women: Nowhere at Home?" *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 10 (Summer 1991), 68-71.

the Catholic Church Fair. Women served meals from noon to midnight for four days. By 1906 the event had grown to a ten-day affair, and women were clearly in charge. Parish women planned to use the proceeds to pay off the debt on the priest's residence, pay for church repairs, and add an iron fence and cement walk.⁴¹ Irish church women continued to volunteer well into the twentieth century. They sponsored innumerable fundraising events such as the popular weekly St. Paul's and St. Peter's "aids," or card parties and dances, which often attracted over eight hundred people. Money raised supported projects such as the Maple Street school and convent constructed in 1923.⁴²

Just as Irish working-class men found refuge in the town's bars, women found spiritual solace at mass and camaraderie at meetings with other Catholic women. Even though the church's patriarchal structure excluded them from many significant church roles, Irish Catholic women participated in a variety of church groups, including the Women's Catholic Order of Foresters, Ladies of Maccabees, Sodalties, St. Paul Council of Catholic Women, and Daughters of Isabella. Dominated by Irishwomen at first, the organizations included other ethnic women by the 1920s, indicating the growing cooperation among a variety of Catholics. The Ladies' Catholic Benevolent Association, for example, had Irish or Irish-American officers until 1925 when Fredricka Barich, a Slav, became financial secretary.⁴³

The Catholic Church attempted to inculcate narrow gender roles. It affirmed women's authoritative position in the home and celebrated motherhood by sanctioning large families and honoring women's loyalty and faith.⁴⁴ Catholic teachings, however, often contradicted the realities of life in a smelter town.

Many Anaconda Irish and Irish-American women were primary decision-makers on family matters, especially children's work, education, and religious training. With fathers away working at the smelter, attending union or AOH meetings, or socializing at neighborhood taverns, Irish families relied on mothers for care, fiscal management, guidance, and collective decisions. Because women took their family obligations seriously, they often asserted leadership, authority, and autonomy, hardly the passive figures church imagery projected.⁴⁵

The efforts of their mothers are reflected in the attitudes of their daughters. Despite strict religious training, many young Irish-American women rejected rigid roles and built on their mothers' efforts to link domestic duties to broader public purposes. One 1902 graduate of Anaconda's Ursuline Convent delivered a commencement address titled, "Woman's Influence," in which she embraced female essentialism to justify women's reform work. Anna Sullivan assured her audience that "woman's dearest, purest and holiest rights" remained in the domestic sphere, but her subtext outlined women's civic accomplishments. She concluded by instructing her fellow graduates to become active and help make "the world a brighter, happier home, for if [it] is ever to be reclaimed from frivolity, indifference and infidelity . . . that happy reform must be brought about by the gentle hand of a woman."⁴⁶

Many working-class Irish women tried, despite hardships, to send their children to parochial schools to receive what they considered a necessary religious education. Margaret Laughlin Kelly, who grew up with great respect for nuns and priests, sent her children to Catholic schools so that they would have a similar positive experience. Many Irish mothers did



Courtesy Anaconda-Deer Lodge County Historical Society, Anaconda



Courtesy Anaconda-Deer Lodge County Historical Society, Anaconda

The Daughters of Isabella, circa 1927, were one among several Irish Catholic church groups for women in Anaconda.

not want their children to end up at the smelter. Education offered an alternative, and women sacrificed to send their children to school. Josephine Casey recalled that her mother worked fifteen-hour days at her small grocery store like many others who “went without a lot of things to see that their kids got an education.” Delia Sweeney recalled her mother saying, “The poor Irish would go without if they thought their son or daughter could amount to something.” Isabel Tracy McCarthy sent her twelve children to private schools by encouraging them to deliver papers, babysit, and work as school janitors to help pay for tuition and school clothes. Anacondans financed parochial elementary schools and a high school until 1973, when the city’s three parish councils decided to close them.⁴⁷

Children of Anaconda’s Irish and other ethnic Catholic families intermingled in the parochial

schools. By the 1940s religious education had transformed a unique Irish identity into a special sense of what it meant to be Catholic. In supporting a traditional Irish institution that was also important to the city’s Italian and Croatian Catholic communities, Anaconda’s Irish, in effect, helped erase ethnic differences.⁴⁸

Although parochial schools eventually diminished Irish distinctiveness, for many years Anaconda Irish urged educators to include Irish history in the curriculum. As late as the 1930s, the AOH persuaded the Ursuline sisters to teach Irish history in exchange for needed school books. The AOH Irish History Committee offered awards to outstanding Irish scholars, with Irish-American girls often the recipients of the prizes, indicating the ethnic community’s pride in its daughters’ as well as its sons’ educational achievements.⁴⁹

Father Pirnat of St. Peter’s Church sits proudly with a First Communion class in the 1940s.

46. Anaconda Standard, June 22, 1902.

47. Kelly, Casey, Sweeney, and McCarthy interviews; St. Paul’s Catholic Church, “Nearly a Century of Service,” 10.

48. Fallows, *Irish Americans*, 135; Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 533.

49. AOH Minutes, February 1, June 27, 1934, AOH.

50. Anaconda Standard, March 18, 1926; Vaughan interview.

Irish and Irish-American Ursulines, Sisters of Charity, Benedictines, and Dominican Sisters were prominent figures in Anaconda life and operated schools, the hospital, and other social services. As educated, independent, and devoted women, nuns were influential role models to many Anaconda girls. Continuing a practice of their Irish forebears, many Anaconda mothers encouraged at least one of their children to enter church service. Sister Gilmery Vaughan received her first communion in Anaconda at age five, admired the white habits of the nuns and “just knew from the time I started school, that’s where I was going to go.”⁵⁰

Anaconda’s small size and domination by a single industry presented special challenges to Irish and other immigrants anxious to preserve old country ways. Residents were more likely to be segregated by class, religion, and occasionally race than ethnicity. Irish, Italian, Swedish, Croatian, and Native American working-class people lived side by side in the densely populated smelter neighborhood. The more fortunate skilled workers, merchants, and professionals, including many Irish, lived farther west and upwind of the smelter. Especially after the 1940s, ethnicity no longer played a central role in Anaconda community life. Irish Americans more frequently married outside their ethnic group, and one’s ethnic heritage no longer helped nor hindered one’s occupational or class position. Union contracts also supplanted the need for kinship social services. Until the smelter shutdown in 1980, when the entire fabric of Anaconda society seemed to unravel, class and religious identity often overshadowed one’s Irish heritage.

Working-class Irish were conscious of income differences that separated families regardless of heritage and frequently joined with non-Irish groups to support the union auxiliary and local political activities. Delia Sweeney, for example, was active in the local Democratic party, where she felt her time was better spent working for the interests of smelter families than in the Daughters of Erin or other specifically Irish associations. Other women championed the work of unions to improve wages and family livelihoods.

Strikes took a heavy toll on women, who were more directly involved in caring for families and witnessed the immediate effects of reduced income. Still, they usually supported strikers. Women joined picket lines, managed tight budgets, and stretched meager food supplies. Many Irishwomen believed that greater economic security ultimately depended on alliances with their class instead of or in addition to their ethnic community.

51. Alice Finnegan, “History of the Anaconda AOH Auxiliary,” in Meidl and Wellcome, *Anaconda, Montana*, 27.

52. Mary Murphy, “A Place of Greater Opportunity: Irish Women Search for Home, Family, and Leisure in Butte, Montana,” *Journal of the West*, 31 (April 1992), 73-78.

Yet Irish ethnic identity persisted in Anaconda long after most Irish in the American West had assimilated into mainstream culture. When many other Hibernian and other ethnic associations in the nation folded in the 1940s, the Anaconda AOH and AOH Auxiliary survived. In fact, as late as the 1980s the Anaconda and San Francisco Irish had the distinction of having the only two orders west of the Mississippi.⁵¹ Perhaps the community’s isolation and reliance on a single industry contributed to the enduring bonds of kinship and friendship. For those who remained in Anaconda, there were few opportunities for dramatic economic and social mobility, and ethnic ties offered a sense of belonging that softened economic stagnation. Many Anacondans hung on to what Irish identity served them, even if only on a periodic basis. Since the smelter shutdown in 1980, interest in Hibernianism has revived. A resurgence in AOH membership and activities may indicate that Anacondans have reclaimed a comforting ethnicity amid economic uncertainties when identity no longer relies on work or the Anaconda Company.

Although enthusiasm for an Irish past has ebbed and flowed through Anaconda’s century-long history, it represents something more durable. The national reawakening of the values of ethnic pluralism in the 1970s and Anaconda’s bleak economic picture in the 1980s are not the only keys to understanding its distinct Irish heritage. Anaconda’s unique history, with its early domination by the Irish-born and their institutions, its special patterns of life that developed in response to Anaconda Company dictates, and its creative economic, cultural, and community networking among Anaconda’s working-class Irishwomen, nurtured this persistent ethnic identity. Many Irish immigrant women came to Anaconda individually, but as part of their “New Ireland,” they cooperated in family and neighborhood and in religious, class, and ethnic associations.⁵² These relationships gave Anacondans strength in the face of sometimes unexpected and uncontrollable economic forces, such as the 1980 plant shutdown.


Many Anaconda Irish Americans credit their mothers and grandmothers for instilling in them a sense of being “Irish.” Margaret Laughlin Kelly claimed, “I’m proud to be Irish,” although she could not say why. She thought it was the many talents of the Irish, including her mother’s constant singing and positive disposition, despite adversity, which she was so pleased to inherit. Thelma Doran, the Irish consul general who visited Anaconda in 1990,

53. (Butte) *Montana Standard*, n.d., vertical files, AHS; Kelly interview; Alice Finnegan, interview by LKM, March 21, 1991, Anaconda, notes in author’s possession.

54. Ladies Ancient Order of Hibernians in America, *Official Constitution*, October 19, 1985, in possession of Caithin “Kotch” Gallagher Francisco.

agreed that it was “probably the Irish mothers” who communicated Irish pride to their American-born offspring. Alice Clark Finnegan recalled the respect people had for their Irish roots during the 1950s, a decade generally perceived to emphasize acculturation. As a youngster then, she remembers feeling “left out” because her grandmothers did not speak with an Irish brogue, unlike the grandmothers of many of her friends.⁵³

Irish-American daughters preserved some of their mothers’ and grandmothers’ memories, traditions, and activities, and they also pioneered new directions for their families and community. Reflecting a move among other women’s “auxiliaries” across the nation, which were becoming more autonomous organizations in the 1970s and 1980s as a result of the women’s movement, the AOH Auxiliary revised its constitution in 1984 and changed its name. The new “Ladies’ AOH” maintained its original purpose to promote Christian charity, encourage civic partici-

pation, support Irish independence, and perpetuate Irish culture, but it declared that the women’s group was now self-governing and no longer subordinate to AOH supervision. Anaconda’s AOH Ladies president Caithin “Kotch” Gallagher Francisco defended the group’s independent course, explaining “we’re not just helping men; we are women Irish.”⁵⁴ For over one hundred years, Anaconda’s Irishwomen have fused their ethnic, religious, gender, and class identities to shape new lives, adapt their cultural roots, and leave a distinctive mark on one of the American West’s most enduring ethnic communities. 

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Courtesy Anaconda-Deer Lodge County Historical Society, Anaconda

The Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH) Ladies’ Auxiliary—which became the Ladies’ AOH in 1984—is shown at a St. Patrick’s Day breakfast in the early 1950s.