

# *Letters from* **World's End**

A Young Couple's Portrait of Butte, 1936–1941



by Brenda Pentland

**YOU ROUND A CORNER** on a highway clinging to the Continental Divide and there, suddenly, is Butte. It is sprawling and slovenly, a bully of a city, stridently male, profane and blustering and boastful: "The biggest mining camp in the world!" "A mile high and a mile deep!" "The richest hill on earth!"

—*Joseph Kinsey Howard*

**DRIVING BACK** we got the same thrill we always do at seeing Butte at night. . . It is so fairylike with its twinkling lights and so startling in a black wilderness.

—*Linda Cannon Burgess*



Charles Harry Burgess, photographer, Private Collection

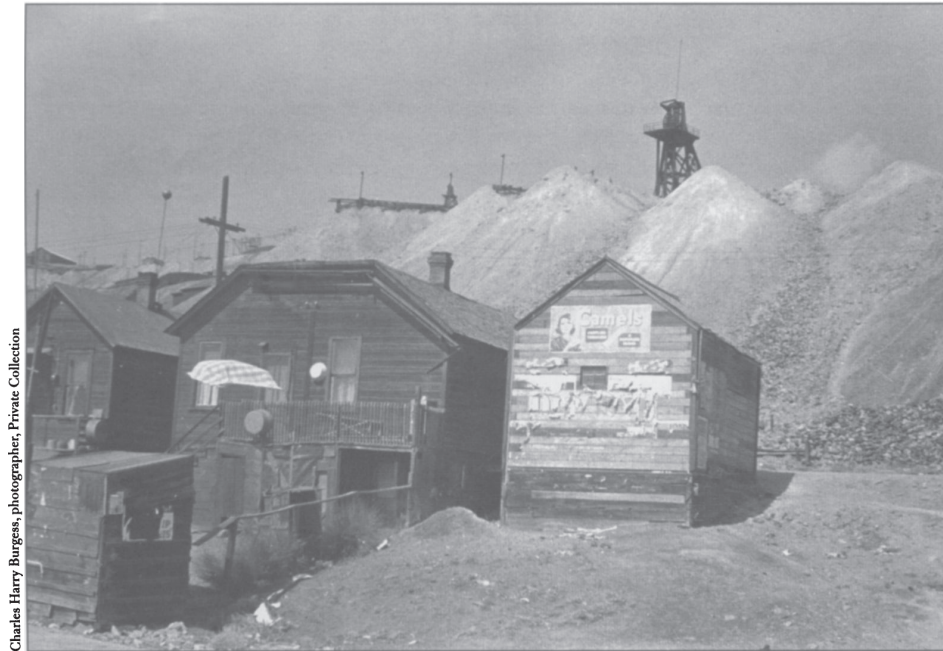


Charles Harry Burgess, photographer, Private Collection

**N**ineteen thirty-six was a time of new beginnings for Linda Cannon Burgess and Charles Harry Burgess. In January Linda gave birth to the couple's first child, and several months later Harry was awarded a doctorate in geology by Harvard University. That June the young couple packed up their Model A Ford and left Massachusetts for Butte, Montana. There Harry would begin his career as a geologist with the Anaconda Copper Mining Company (ACM), and Linda would manage their home and raise three children.

During their five years in Butte, the Burgesses maintained an extensive correspondence with her family in Massachusetts and his parents in Wyoming. Linda also painted and Harry photographed the western landscapes they explored individually and as a couple. Together they produced a collection of letters, paintings, and photographs that creates a vivid portrayal of life in the twentieth-century mining West.

In 1936 a job with the Anaconda Copper Mining Company brought geologist Charles Harry Burgess and his wife Linda Cannon Burgess to Butte, Montana. During their five years in the mile-high city, the Burgesses (pictured above on the Harvard campus in 1934) produced a collection of letters, paintings, and photographs that creates a vivid portrait of life in the twentieth-century mining West. Harry photographed this view of Butte looking east from Butte Hill across Meaderville to the east ridge of the Continental Divide in 1937 or 1938.



Charles Harry Burgess, photographer, Private Collection

Harry described his first impression of the Butte business district as “cluttered with meretricious signs” and noted that the buildings were “old, tawdry, poor.” He photographed the neighborhood backed up against tailings piles (left) circa 1937. The Pay’n Save (below, left) was photographed in 1946.



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

rough. Every day I go down the main street I see 2 or 3 drunks. The main street . . . is covered with sign boards, each store trying to have one bigger than the next fellow’s. It is horrid looking.” Harry’s initial impressions were of an urban mining camp “wide open with respect to the usual items. The buildings in the business district are cluttered with meretricious signs; the buildings themselves are old, tawdry, poor.” The Burgesses found an apartment on the outermost edge of the residential flats. Carved cement pillars at the entrance to the house announced the name of their new abode: World’s End.<sup>1</sup>

In spite of the unattractive surroundings, the Burgesses began their new life with enthusiastic industry. The effects of the Depression had been devastating to Butte, but Linda wrote soon after their arrival that “Everyone says things are picking up wonderfully [now] that the mine is working at  $\frac{2}{3}$  capacity. Harry went under[ground] yesterday and was much impressed by the immense network of tunnels, the tremendous heat, the magnificent physiques of the men working there and

**T**he city of Butte owed its existence to the mining on and around Butte Hill, a mineralogical treasure trove just west of the Continental Divide. Perched at an elevation of almost a mile, and riddled with shafts nearly that deep, the “Richest Hill on Earth” had been mined for silver, copper, and other metals for half a century. The gritty, industrialized city that grew up around the mines spilled down the Hill onto the flats below, denuding the immediate surroundings through its processes of extraction and production.

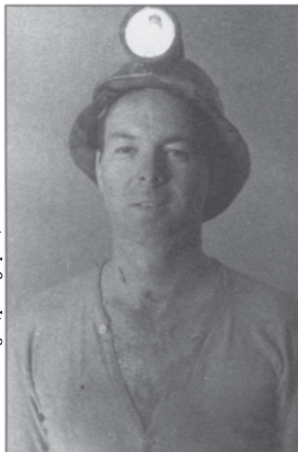
“After being off in such beautiful country, in which you could look in any direction and see snow covered mountains, Butte certainly seemed drab,” Linda wrote about her arrival in the city. “I guess like any mining town it is a bit

1. Linda Cannon Burgess to Family, June 16, 1936, Linda Cannon Burgess and Charles Harry Burgess Papers (hereafter Burgess Papers), private collection; Charles Harry Burgess to Family, June 12, 1936, *ibid.* According to Mary Murphy, in *Mining Cultures: Men, Women, and Leisure in Butte, 1914-1941* (Urbana, Ill., 1997), 44, “When people described Butte as a wide-open town, they meant that a man could buy a drink, place a bet, or visit a prostitute at any hour of the day without worrying about being arrested.”

the electric elevator which lets you down like a bullet for  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile." Three and a half months later, she wrote: "Harry and I don't need sympathy on the score of Butte's grimness. We [have] long since failed to see the barren aspect of the city layout, and feel it is a vital, active, functional city. You could hardly die of depression or boredom here as long as you kept your eyes and ears open."<sup>2</sup>

As a child growing up in Sheridan, Wyoming, Harry's imagination had been captured by stories of his "forty-niner" grandfather who had pursued his fortune in the goldfields of California and the silver mines of Nevada. Harry's education took him east, but the concrete world of mining geology called him back to the West. In March 1935, while still at Harvard, Harry wrote of his determination to "go into commercial work after finishing the work for my Ph.D. The staffs of mining companies do the most detailed + thorough field-work in geology that is done anywhere at present, and such experience could not help but be beneficial." The nineteenth-century prospector had been a rugged individual who explored wild mountains to plumb the mysteries hidden beneath. The twentieth-century geologist did the same, but in the service of international mining corporations.<sup>3</sup>

For an ambitious young geologist, Butte was a strategic place to begin a career. Butte was one of the world's great copper-producing districts, its major mines consolidated under the hegemonic ownership of the Anaconda Company. Thanks to the region's uniquely complex and metalliferous geology, and to the trail-blazing leadership of chief geologist Reno Sales, the ACM became known in the industry as "the best graduate school of mining geology in the country." As he



Linda Cannon Burgess, photographer, Private Collection

Butte was a strategic place for a young geologist to begin his career. After an early trip underground, Harry, pictured here in his "digging clothes," described the conditions in the mine as "so hot and humid that your colored pencils run on the paper."



Detail, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

The Anaconda Copper Mining Company became known as the "best graduate school of mining geology in the country" thanks to the region's unique geology and the leadership of chief geologist Reno Sales, seen here in a June 25, 1937, photograph.

gained familiarity with the area's geology, Harry marveled at Butte's "proximity of veins and faults, its enormous wealth. It is truly unique in the earth's crust so far as we know." "Within a block of ground two or three miles sq. [and] less than four thousand [feet] deep, there are over 3,500 miles of [underground] workings here; well over 2 billions [dollars] of metals have come from that block."<sup>4</sup>

Mining methods and geological observations developed in Butte set industry standards, and many leaders in the mining industry began their careers in Butte. "At present I am taking the best course in mining engineering in the world, I believe," Harry wrote of his work. Later, after leaving the ACM to work as a geological consultant, Harry praised the "technique devised originally in Butte" as "so sound, so practical, so apposite! And it becomes increasingly clear to me that the occurrences of ore at Butte are marvelously designed to teach one what causes ore deposits. Therefore a Butte geologist, in a new locality, looks for the same geologic elements that he saw in Butte so clearly controlling the deposition of the ore bodies. In numerous cases . . . Butte-trained men have demonstrated the fundamental soundness of this procedure."<sup>5</sup>

One of the ways in which the ACM influenced the international mining industry was in its early application of the science of geology to the processes of mining, processes that elsewhere were still largely planned and directed by engineers. "The geological department here has a very strong position in the company; it recommends and directs all development work which finds ore and prepares to excavate it. . . . [I]t is from the geological, not the mining engineering department, that plans for major operations emanate." In time, Harry became the geologist responsible for the development of the Belmont Mine, which at times constituted up to a quarter

2. Linda Cannon Burgess to Family, June 16, 1936; Linda Cannon Burgess to Family, September 28, 1936, Burgess Papers.

3. Charles Harry Burgess to his children, July 26, 1983, a handwritten note on copy of cover letter accompanying a collection of letters written by Harry's grandfather, James H. Burgess, which Harry donated to the University of California–Berkeley, Burgess Papers; Charles Harry Burgess to Wilma Cannon Fairbank, March 31, 1935, *ibid.*

4. Vincent D. Perry and Charles Meyer, "Reno H. Sales," in *Ore Deposits of the United States, 1933–1967: The Graton Sales Volume*, ed. John D. Ridge (New York, 1968), xxii; Charles Harry Burgess to Cornelia James Cannon and Walter Bradford Cannon, March 22, 1937, Burgess Papers; Charles Harry Burgess to Family, June 27, 1936, *ibid.*

5. Charles Harry Burgess to Walter Bradford Cannon, November 3, 1936, Burgess Papers; Charles Harry Burgess to Walter Bradford Cannon and Cornelia James Cannon, July 19, 1939, *ibid.*

of all development work in Butte.<sup>6</sup>

An outdoorsman by nature and experience, Harry quickly became known in the Geology Department for his ability to conduct fieldwork under challenging conditions created by Montana's mountains and weather. "This morning I went to a 'hotbox' on the 3,000 level [underground] to 'shoot some trouble,' hastened to the office and worked up some suggestions for the foreman, left Butte at 12:45, drove 40 miles, climbed 2,000 feet in zero weather with a wind whipping around me, mapped a prospect tunnel, and started down from it at 6pm in semi-darkness, wallowing around in the snow with great insecurity," he wrote on December 28, 1937.<sup>7</sup>

To Harry, the landscape of Montana was spectacular not only for its openly revealed beauty. As a geologist, he saw through the mountains and down into the earth's crust. Montana was a vast three-dimensional world, rich with complex geological strata, alive with the movement of minerals through once-molten rock, shaped and fissured by eons of pressure and time. For the company, Harry carried surveying equipment and rendered this world in precise geological maps and notes that would inform future mining development. For himself, he carried his camera and developed the photographs in the basement of his home. He later recorded shooting and developing eighty-one rolls of film between 1936 and 1940.<sup>8</sup>

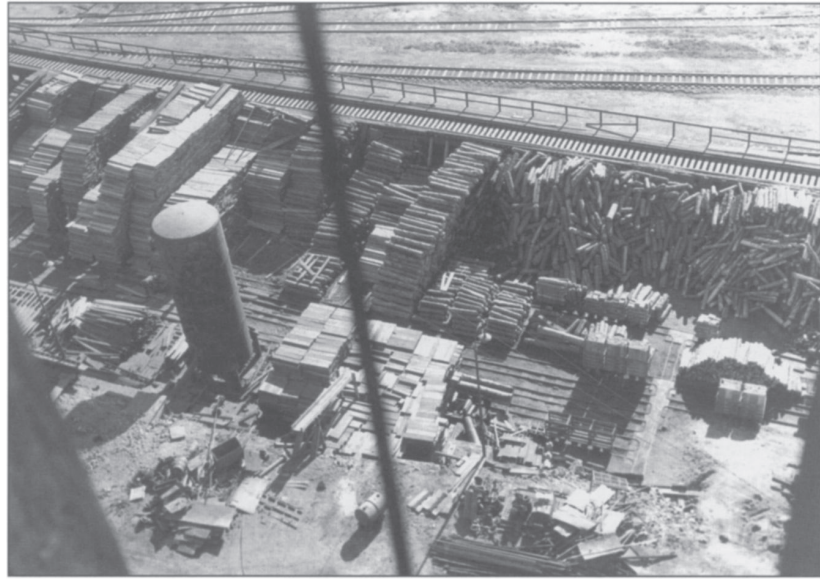
While he could capture the mountains and cityscapes with his camera, it was with his pen that Harry opened up for his family the world hidden beneath. In his letters he depicted for them the titanic mining works of Butte—a massive underground landscape alive with human action and rich with challenge, color, heat, and noise. In one letter he described the sweltering trek to map a newly exposed rock-face deep in one of the mines:

[T]he mode of locomotion is one of slopping along in the ubiquitous mud, head humped down to avoid

6. Charles Harry Burgess to Walter Bradford Cannon, November 3, 1936; Charles Harry Burgess to Family, November 7, 1937, Burgess Papers.

7. Linda Cannon Burgess to Cornelia James Cannon, June 9, 1937, Burgess Papers; Charles Harry Burgess to Ida Cannon, December 28, 1936, *ibid.*

8. Charles Harry Burgess, catalog to canisters of film, May 27, 1955, Burgess Papers.



Charles Harry Burgess, photographer, Private Collection

Harry photographed the yard of the Belmont Mine, where he was the geologist responsible for development, from the top of the mine's head frame. The hoist cable is silhouetted down the center of this picture taken in 1937 or 1938.

striking pipes and timbers, sweat streaming from every pore: first your underwear is drenched, then your pants and jumper. In some places it's so hot and humid that your colored pencils run on the paper. . . . When finally we reach the advancing tunnel, we find the miners working away at the refractory rock. You have seen and heard the air drills used on pavement; the ones used here are something like those, but larger. . . . I am terrified every time one starts up nearby; it sounds as if the devil himself were flaying the rocks about you with an inconceivably large hammer and unbelievable strokes; when I regain some of my senses I realize that isn't the case, for it's too hot here for the devil, he couldn't stand it.<sup>9</sup>

Harry's work took him all over (and under) Butte and the surrounding mountains. The diversity of his photographs reflects his mobility and a thorough knowledge of the mining industry. However, even when capturing bleak scenes of Butte's barren mine yards and ramshackle miners' homes, his photos often found or fashioned an aesthetic harmony between the man-made and natural elements in the environment. Piles of mine waste peak at uniform angles of repose. City streets and railroad tracks follow the curves of the land. Blankets of snow obscure distinctions between industry and nature.

9. Charles Harry Burgess to Family, June 27, 1936.

10. Charles Harry Burgess to Walter Bradford Cannon and Cornelia James Cannon, July 19, 1939.

11. Marian Cannon Schlesinger, *Snatched from Oblivion: A Cambridge Memoir* (Boston, 1984), 131–70, 184.

In addition to his devotion to geology, Harry had a passion for amateur photography, carrying his camera everywhere and developing his own photographs in his basement darkroom. Here he captured himself and Linda reflected in a mirror in 1934.



Charles Harry Burgess, photographer, Private Collection

This theme in his photography may reflect Harry's own relationship with the mining industry. For him, the world of mining was the place of confluence between his love for the Mountain West and the productive application of his chosen science. His letters never suggest any sense of conflict between these two interests, nor do they acknowledge the environmental devastation that would in later years leave Butte part of the largest Superfund site in the nation. Neither did Harry explicitly question the human cost of mining in these letters. Rather he seemed to take for granted the beneficial and essential nature of the extraction of metals. "[D]uring my days in the graduate school I was perturbed

by the feeling that much of what I was doing was not worthwhile . . . [but] I gain peace of mind in the fact that geological work in mining is of great value," he wrote in 1939.<sup>10</sup>

While Harry surveyed and mapped Butte's underground and mountainous surroundings, Linda was exploring the city itself. The daughter of a Harvard physiology professor and a social-activist author, Linda was born and raised in Cambridge, Massachusetts. By the time she married Harry at age twenty-three, she had traveled and studied in Europe and the Middle East. Before their move to Butte, she was employed as a social worker for the Children's Aid Society in Boston.<sup>11</sup> The American West, however, was foreign to Linda, and she engaged this new world with keen interest. She

looked at Butte through the eyes of a social worker and outsider, reporting on what she saw in letters to her family.

As the daughter of a medical researcher and a birth control activist, Linda wrote frequently and openly to her



Charles Harry Burgess, photographer, Private Collection

The diversity of Harry's photographs reflects his mobility in and around Butte and his thorough knowledge of the mining industry.

family about health-care issues in the city, including the availability of contraceptives. She described family physician Dr. Caroline McGill as “ardent for babies and against the small families so common around here. . . . On the other hand, [neighbor] Edith says she is the only Dr. she knows of in Butte who gives Birth Control Information. Dr. McGill talks at the High School on Social Hygiene and is in general very civic minded.” In another letter to her mother, Linda noted, “Butte is certainly wide open as far as contraceptives are concerned. They appear in drug store window displays and even at the 10¢ 25¢ + 1.00 store.”<sup>12</sup>

When relating to her parents an encounter with Butte’s prostitution industry, Linda seemed more concerned with questions of public health than with passing moral judgments:

On both sides of the alley . . . were doors, in each excessively painted women clothed and partially clothed and looking defiantly cheap. . . . There were several men wandering down the alley looking them over quite impersonally, while the girls smiled and were most cordial

to them. Really I was most impressed by the frankness of it and the bald way in which the district was set up for the sole purpose of prostitution. . . . [T]hese girls are examined weekly at the clinic and treated if necessary. I wonder if it isn’t a better way of controlling disease than not to have a regular district.<sup>13</sup>

Decades of catering to a population of male miners had earned Butte the reputation of being “wide open,” that is, a place where prostitution, gambling, and drinking were allowed to flourish. Linda wrote frankly, and often humorously, about this aspect of the city. “I must tell you some of Butte’s more seamy side as learned and observed in the last few weeks,” she wrote to her parents soon after her arrival. “We went to a carnival here which was advertised as the ‘cleanest’ carnival Butte has ever seen, and we saw a burlesk [*sic*] which was the worst I’ve ever seen, but then I’m no authority.” In March 1938 she quipped, “At present Butte’s slot machines and roulette [*sic*] tables are quieted. The sheriff announced in the paper that he was not to be blamed for it.”<sup>14</sup>

Butte—Silver Bow Public Archives, Photograph Collections, Butte, Montana



Linda commented after three and a half months in Montana that she and Harry had “long since failed to see the barren aspect” of Butte and appreciated it as a “vital, active, functional city,” attributes reflected in this 1930s parade.

Linda's letters described a culture of drinking and gambling that permeated Butte society, cutting across class lines. "Mr. Rogers . . . told us about how Prohibition effected [*sic*] Butte which was practically nil since there wasn't the public opinion to enforce the law," Linda wrote in 1936. "There were as many saloons open then as now, which is about three to a block." The renowned nightclubs of Meaderville turned gambling into mainstream, co-ed entertainment. The Burgesses visited them occasionally with their friends or took out-of-town guests for a taste of Butte's nightlife. After one such occasion, Linda wrote, "We ate enormously, and danced and had an awfully good time. I won 75 cents at the crap table and felt quite set up, for somehow when one wins at gambling it doesn't seem to be the same vice that losing makes it."<sup>15</sup>

Linda found the consumption of alcohol even more pervasive than gambling, and not as amusing. "Eventually all the men but Harry got drunk, and so the evening from then on for those who weren't drunk was less interesting," she wrote after a night with his colleagues. "I find I don't mind the drunkenness but I do mind the conversation becoming solely one of highball recipes. . . . Just like a lot of house wives talking about refrigerator ice cream and how to get the best results." Still, Linda reflected, "It seems to me so silly to think places like Meaderville 'wicked.' It is not the places but the people that are wicked in them. It reminds me of . . . [a person's] feeling that all people that live in the slums must be hijackers."<sup>16</sup>

In fact, Linda seemed to enjoy the more "colorful" aspects of Butte society. In 1937 she wrote wryly of Harry's attempts to secure a lease on a private mine:

They have had a hard time locating the owner . . . as he is wanted by the police. . . . But they finally found him here in a saloon. It seems he owns the two biggest saloons and gambling joints in town, and that it nets him a pile more than he ever made in mining. . . . He

12. Linda Cannon Burgess to Family, n.d. (follows September 13, 1936), Burgess Papers; Linda Cannon Burgess to Cornelia James Cannon, n.d. (follows October 28, 1936), *ibid.*

13. Linda Cannon Burgess to Family, August 3, 1936, Burgess Papers. At the close of this letter, Linda wrote, "Harry thinks I ought not to write you about the sordid side of Butte because he doesn't want to hurt your feelings, but it isn't Butte without the Seamy side so, I guess you'll just have to be exposed."

14. Linda Cannon Burgess to Family, August 3, 1936; Linda Cannon Burgess to Family, March 18, 1938, Burgess Papers.



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

Butte was known as a wide-open town, and Linda described in her letters the culture of drinking and gambling that permeated the city. The Rocky Mountain Cafe located in Meaderville was a popular local establishment.

*"When one  
wins at  
gambling  
it doesn't  
seem to be  
the same vice  
that losing  
makes it."*



says he thinks there is going to be and [*sic*] investigation of gambling in Butte soon and he may go to California for the winter. And besides all this, he has T. B. and if he doesn't live the winter out, they will have to see his wife about it. She is a graduate of a house of prostitution in Anaconda. So you see we are moving in a colorful circle. That is the unique part of Butte. There are few divisions by class and occupation with those one associates with.<sup>17</sup>

Despite these vivid accounts of other elements of society, however, the Burgess letters chronicle life in a distinct and largely separate professional class within Butte and the ACM. While other sources describe Butte as an urban kaleidoscope of ethnic communities, Harry's letters portray a city polarized into just two camps: company versus union.<sup>18</sup>

As one of the great mining centers of the world, Butte had been a locus of intense labor organizing, activity, conflict, and suppression for half a century. This conflict had been punctuated by strikes, had at times erupted in violence, and on more than one occasion the city had been placed under martial law. In 1914, after decades of union presence in the Butte mines, the Anaconda Company

15. Linda Cannon Burgess to Family, August 3, 1936; Linda Cannon Burgess to Family, April 21, 1938, Burgess Papers. In hundreds of pages of letters, Harry refers to the prostitution and gambling that were so prevalent in Butte only once, and then in distancing language, when he described the city as "wide open with respect to the usual items."

16. Linda Cannon Burgess to Family, February 2, 1937, Burgess Papers.  
17. Linda Cannon Burgess to Family, November 18, 1937, Burgess Papers.

18. Murphy, *Mining Cultures*, 4, 22, 142, 235.



IS Photograph Archives, Helena

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declared its operations "open shops." In 1917 a fire in Butte's Granite Mountain and Speculator Mines killed more than 160 men in the deadliest metal-mining disaster in U.S. history. In the resurgence of labor organization and conflict that followed the tragedy, Frank Little, an organizer for the Industrial Workers of the World, was lynched and federal troops occupied Butte to "maintain order." In 1920 Anaconda Company security forces opened fire on picketing miners, wounding sixteen and killing one man, finally quieting union activity for the next decade. In the 1930s, with New Deal reformers advocating new labor legislation, Butte's mines once again became the site of labor conflict, this time with a strike lasting from May to September 1934. The strike of 1934 ended with concessions to workers and the recognition of the union by the company. The ACM in Butte was again a closed shop.<sup>19</sup>

The impact of the prolonged strike was still being felt in the city when the Burgesses arrived. During their first weeks in Butte, Linda and Harry watched as "the members of all 48 [unions] paraded for 1 hour & 1/2 past our hotel." Two weeks later Harry wrote, "Various bits of information

concerning the recent strike have fallen into my ear, and so far as my meager information goes, I think there's no sharply marked right or wrong on either side." After several months of observing conditions, he reflected: "The true source of the union hatred of the company I have not found. . . . Bad working conditions come to one's mind as the reason, but they are not, and have not, been particular to this [mining] camp. Whatever its source, that animosity is so strong that I don't believe the two factions will ever harmonize, for it's in the air, it's part of the town." At times defensive of the company and at times critical, Harry resented the engenderment of tension between the management to which he belonged and the miners, with whom he felt a natural affinity.<sup>20</sup>

Harry's letters also convey a fear of the repercussions to white-collar employees who broke ranks by showing any sympathy for union causes. In one letter he wrote about the stalled careers of two ore samplers who had supported the 1934 strike, observing that they "would have been promoted by now had they remained loyal to the company." He briefly considered a "project of writing an objective

19. Robert E. Jenkins and Jerry A. Lorengo, "Butte, Montana: Minerals, Mines and History," *Mineralogical Record*, 33 (January-February 2002), 19; Janet Finn, *Tracing the Veins: Of Copper, Culture, and Community from Butte to Chuquicamata* (Berkeley, Calif., 1998), 31-33, 37-42.

20. Linda Cannon Burgess to Family, June 16, 1936; Charles Harry Burgess to Families, July 1, 1936, Burgess Papers; Charles Harry Burgess, addendum to letter, Linda Cannon Burgess to Family, n.d. (follows September 13, 1936).

history of the unions at Butte” but decided “It might be unwise for me to tackle such a thing. . . . [A]ny sort of interest in the unions might be frowned upon by the company.”<sup>21</sup>

If Harry’s letters were written under the shadow of the company, in Linda’s writing the union presence seemed as ubiquitous and beyond individual control as the Montana weather. While she was painting their first apartment,

[a] man in overalls came in . . . and asked for my “painters card.” . . . I told him I was not a union member but would like to be. He smiled and left. I think he was joking, since it is practically a stock joke to ask for your union card whenever you are doing any work. . . . A non-union member cannot work and if a member of one union is found painting his house, he can be fined for not having it done by the painters. Not being a union member, I guess I will escape censure for doing the apartment, though they may clamp down on the landlord.<sup>22</sup>

In the hospital after the birth of a daughter in 1937, Linda wrote about a clerk’s strike that closed down commerce for three weeks. “[T]hough all store[s] are closed . . . there is no demonstration, and practically no discussion of it. Butte takes strikes in their stride. It is convenient to let the hospital worry about my food.”<sup>23</sup>

Linda was critical of both sides of labor issues but sympathetic to the union cause. “I know that all this [labor activity] resulted from terrible abuses such as having no ventilation in the mines at which time men would be carried out in a stupor. . . . Well all this makes me feel that human nature is so made that unless there is complete cooperation and understanding between groups of people dependent upon each other, the one who has the upper hand will abuse the other because that’s human nature. . . . Neither side is all virtue or all vice.”<sup>24</sup>

Linda’s closest contact with the Butte working class was through the series of women who came through her home as domestic workers. Even while subsisting on a budget of one hundred seventy dollars a month and renting a small two-bedroom apartment for fifty-five dollars, the Burgesses consistently hired domestic help. Linda felt that the changing availability of such help reflected larger social and economic issues in Butte. In April 1937 she wrote, “[T]here is a great scarcity here [of domestic help] as there



Harry and three Anaconda Copper Mining Company colleagues visited the Baltimore Mine circa 1936. Harry is seated in the doorway.

are many provisions for women with the WPA [Works Progress Administration] etc, and naturally they prefer that with higher pay, better companionship and regular hours of work.” By November, however, she believed that mine closures had driven more women into the workforce. “It isn’t so hard to get help now because of the closing of the mines which means many wives and daughters are earning the family income.”<sup>25</sup>

The stories of those who came through the Burgess home reflected some of the hardships faced by women in the community. One woman left complaining of bad health; “I very much suspect that last summer. . . she had an induced abortion, and hasn’t felt well since,” Linda speculated. She wrote to her family of another woman whose “Father and Mother had six children. . . . The father then took to drink . . . so the mother divorced him and married again. . . . [T]he second husband died of Delirium Tremens . . . so she married a third time and this husband is in the TB sanatorium with Miner’s Con and suffering from internal injuries gotten in the mine.”<sup>26</sup>

As separated as she was from working-class women socially, Linda felt more consciously alienated from the other wives of Butte’s professional class, among whom she spent much of her time. She was often frustrated by what she perceived as the preoccupation with gossip and domesticity and a lack of political and intellectual engagement among her peers. “I always return from a party of females completely fed up with the servant problem, the cute things

25. Charles Harry Burgess, addendum to letter, Linda Cannon Burgess to Family, n.d. (follows September 13, 1936); Linda Cannon Burgess to Florence Pierce, April 27, 1937, Burgess Papers; Linda Cannon Burgess to Cornelia James Cannon, November 30, 1937, *ibid.*

26. Linda Cannon Burgess to Cornelia James Cannon, n.d. (follows March 30, 1937), Burgess Papers; Linda Cannon Burgess to Family, January 18, 1938, *ibid.* Miner’s consumption, or “miner’s con,” was the common name for silicosis of the lungs.

21. Charles Harry Burgess to Families, July 1, 1936.

22. Linda Cannon Burgess to Family, June 16, 1936.

23. Linda Cannon Burgess to Cornelia James Cannon, n.d. (follows May 28, 1937), Burgess Papers.

24. Linda Cannon Burgess to Family, August 3, 1936.

In the late 1930s Butte mines began shutting down in response to the weak copper market, and by 1941 Harry and Linda had left Butte for Washington, D.C. Writing about his experience in Butte, Harry recalled, "I have a tool useful in mining which is of inestimable value—my training in Butte."

the children do etc. . . . If it isn't this it is usually bridge." On another occasion she remarked, "If I propose the Supreme Court issue, the younger ones look at me as if to say 'what's that' and the older ones aren't interested particularly."<sup>27</sup>

Having domestic help enabled Linda to maintain habits of daily reading and writing, but she complained of limited access to national and international news in Butte. "The paper here is rotten. . . . Multiple thrills, murders, and crime . . . leaving little room for other world events." She did, however, enjoy *The Eye Opener*, "the Butte communist paper which has more pep and expresses one side of Butte sentiment very well." When this upset her conservative in-laws, she quipped, "It does not do any good to explain [that] Republican papers are just as prejudiced as communist papers only in the opposite direction."<sup>28</sup>

Linda did not seem to mind rocking the boat of polite female society. In 1937 she wrote that an acquaintance, Mrs. Katherine Oak, "has been trying to start a political reform organization here."

The inspiration for . . . the group came from a so-called "Pro-America" club in Billings which made me suspicious to begin with. They finally could get no one to take the chairmanship, as they were afraid of what the unions might do to their husbands' businesses if they took a non-union stand. . . . I told them I could see no evidence of non-partisanship among them. . . . Well, nothing has come of the organization which I regret in a way though I doubt whether I could have stood to fight communism with such fervor.<sup>29</sup>

The one activity that Linda gladly shared with other "Geology Wives" was painting. Unlike her peers, however, Linda often chose local industrial landscapes as her subject. "This sort of town depresses Edith very much, because she likes to see mansions and lawns and no mess of old machinery left around. But I think you really don't see those things after a while and develop [*sic*] a new standard in this country."<sup>30</sup>

For Linda, in spite of its rough and gritty surface, Butte was a place where the possibility and imagination of pure

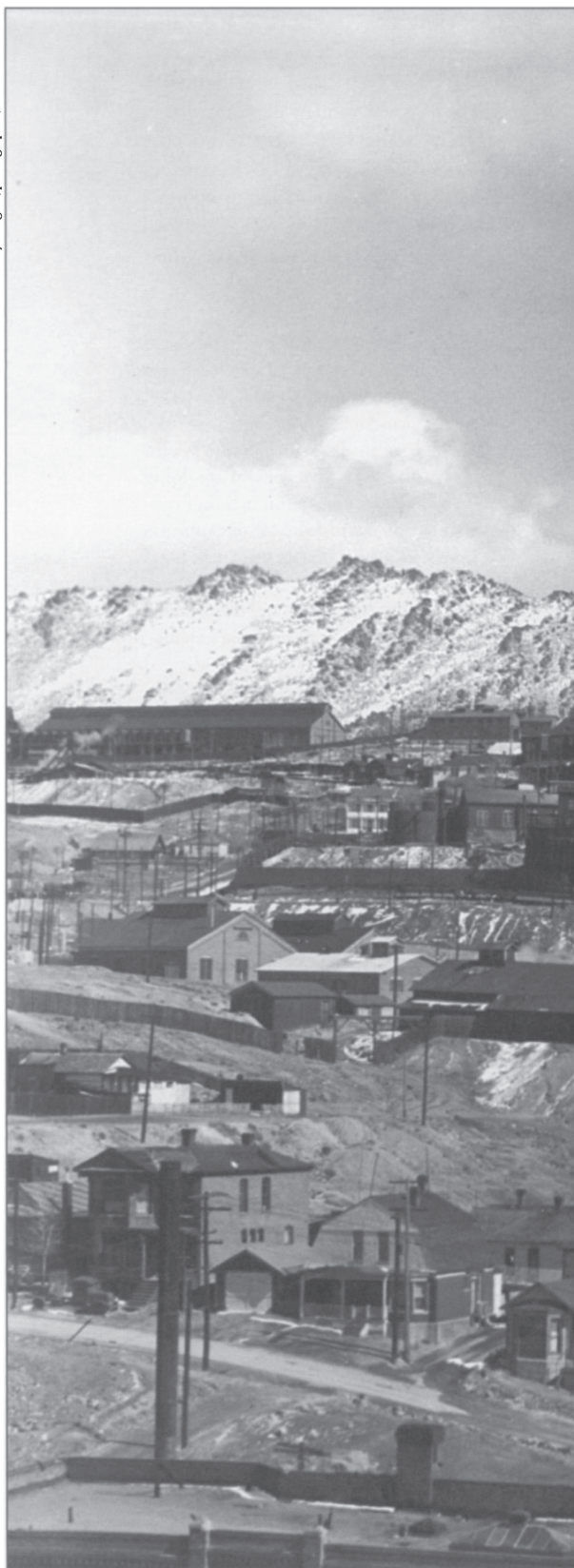
27. Linda Cannon Burgess to Family, January 18, 1938; Linda Cannon Burgess to Cornelia James Cannon, n.d. (follows March 30, 1937).

28. Linda Cannon Burgess to Family, May 11, 1937; Linda Cannon Burgess to Family, October 22, 1936, Burgess Papers.

29. Linda Cannon Burgess to Family, February 9, 1937, Burgess Papers.

30. *Ibid.*

Charles Harry Burgess, photographer, Private Collection





science met with the pragmatism of the no-nonsense West against the dramatic beauty of the surrounding mountains. Linda's paintings of Butte Hill bathe the mining industry in romantic hues of green and gold. In her stylized close-up of a head frame, black steel beams rise with force and clarity against a sunset of violet and pink. In 1938 three of her paintings were selected for the opening exhibit of the new WPA art center in Butte. "Most of them go in for Indians, and except for one other picture mine are the only ones of Butte," Linda wrote.<sup>31</sup>

As much as possible Linda tried to participate in activity and discussion related to Butte Hill and Harry's work. The couple had spent their two-month honeymoon in Montana's Highwood Mountains collecting data for his doctoral dissertation, and her interest and involvement in his work carried through their time in Butte. She accompanied him on weekend excursions to private mines and prospects, and, to the astonishment of their peers, he even took her down one of the ACM's mines. "Harry took

me underground at the Belmont and I didn't miss a thing. We went under on night shift as there are fewer men working then and we would be less in the way. . . . We went everywhere, into 'hot-boxes,' unventilated drifts, down a 200 ft. raise on narrow ladders, rode several floors on top of the skip (the bucket that hauls up the ore), watched the drilling, mucking, tramping, sorting, dumping, and raising in the skips."<sup>32</sup>

The degree to which Harry invited Linda's participation does not seem to have been the norm either in their social group or in Butte's mining culture. The world of mining was a man's world. Regardless of Harry's attitudes, a woman underground was seen as a source of bad luck, in a place where bad luck got men killed. Even geologists repeated

the maxim, "Every time a woman goes underground, a man dies."<sup>33</sup>

"My trip in the Belmont caused consternation . . . [among] many who heard about it," Linda wrote to her mother. I don't know why, but I think that probably men in general like to consider women incapable of doing things that they do. . . . I certainly am fortunate in having a husband who doesn't compensate for any lack in himself by taking it out on me." However egalitarian he may have been, when they went down the Belmont "Harry insisted that I wear a dress, so that their [*sic*] would be no mistaking my sex. He was afraid it might embarrass the miners if they said something they would not want a lady to hear, though he did not seem so concerned by what I might hear."<sup>34</sup>

Another issue that set the Burgesses apart from their peers was their rapidly growing family. In spite of her advocacy for access to birth control, over the course of these letters Linda bore three children in three and a half years. This stood out among Harry's colleagues, many of whom had only one "pre-depression child." "Most people think we are crazy to have another so soon," Linda reflected, "but they are all burdened with the thought of economic insecurity, which is so prominent in a one industry city, and especially an industry so easily affected by depression."<sup>35</sup>

Economic insecurity was an ever-present reality in Butte. Decisions made in the ACM's New York offices could be carried out in Butte within hours, at times leaving hundreds, even thousands, unemployed without warning and with nowhere else to go for work. In November 1937 Harry wrote:

31. Linda Cannon Burgess to Family, April 6, 1938.

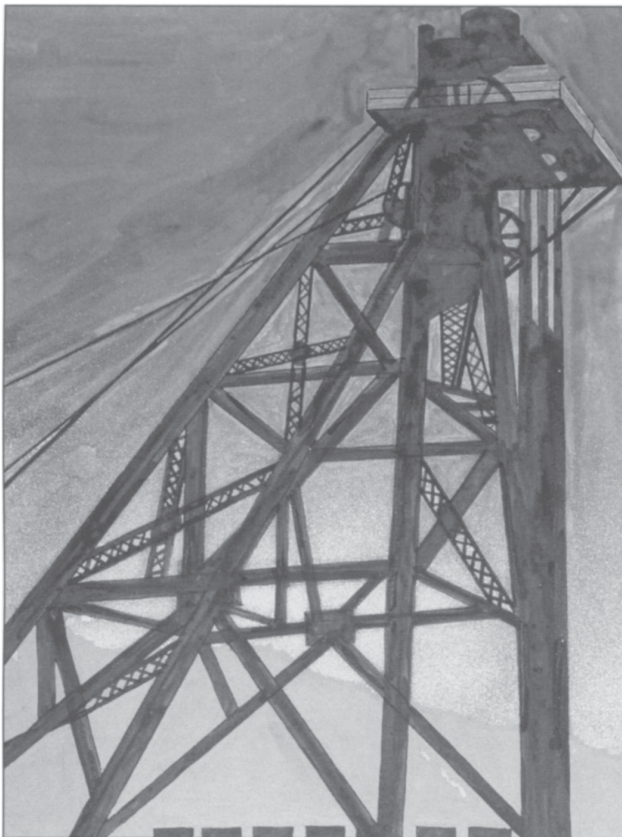
32. Linda Cannon Burgess to Family, April 21, 1938.

33. John M. Guilbert, interview by Brenda Pentland, Tucson, Arizona, March 17, 2001.

34. Linda Cannon Burgess to Family, April 21, 1938.

35. Linda Cannon Burgess to Family, August 25, 1936, Burgess Papers; Linda Cannon Burgess to Helen James Sommers, January 13, 1937, *ibid*.

*A woman  
underground  
was seen as a  
source of bad  
luck, in a place  
where bad luck  
got men killed.*



Private Collection

Unlike many of her peers, Linda found beauty in local industrial landscapes. Her untitled 1937 watercolor depicts the Bell Diamond Mine head frame at sunset.



On a brief visit back to Butte in 1945, Linda wrote home: "Butte is still the most paintable place I know."  
The Bell Diamond Mine is the subject of this untitled watercolor she painted in 1937.

The camp has curtailed 20% as a result of the recent [copper] market crash. Two large mines have shut down, causing the unemployment of 1,500 or 2,000 men, and there is very little opportunity of their absorption at other mines. There have been 500 rustling [seeking work] at one time at the Belmont recently. The poor fellows are desperate, and pull the coats off other men in their attempts to get nearer the window where the foreman is interviewing them, and when the surging mob threatens to force them farther from that window, they cling to the heavy woven wire which surrounds the mine yard. . . . So far no one has been discharged from our department, but I think there will be if the copper market doesn't pick up.<sup>36</sup>

Despite the Burgesses' initial optimism about Butte's economic recovery, during Harry's employment with the ACM the company closed down mine after mine. In May 1938 Linda wrote that "The Belmont closed down yesterday [and] Harry worked until 2 last night on night shift getting notes caught up before the air in the mine was shut

off. There is only 1 mine working now and we wonder what our future is."<sup>37</sup>

On September 1, 1938, Harry resigned from the company to pursue a career as an independent consultant and mining entrepreneur. "Emancipation from the 'Copper Collar' will make me happy, I'm sure," he told their families. Over the next two years he worked as a geological consultant based in Butte, traveling in ever-widening circles in search of work. "[M]iner-like, I hope, and even half believe, that I will find something in the future." In a letter written from San Francisco in 1939, he noted, "I feel that many 'mining engineers and geologists' don't know so much as they ought to. I am one of them; I need to see many great deposits that I haven't seen . . . but I do think that I have a tool useful in mining which is of inestimable value—my training in Butte. The Belmont mine has been my best teacher of geology."<sup>38</sup>

Finally, in 1941 Harry accepted a job with the federal Office of Price Administration, and the family moved to Washington, D.C. On New Year's Day 1945 the Burgesses returned to Butte for a brief visit. After reacquainting themselves with the city, Linda wrote home to her mother: "Butte is still the most paintable place I know."<sup>39</sup>

36. Charles Harry Burgess to Family, November 7, 1937.

37. Linda Cannon Burgess to Family, May 29, 1938, Burgess Papers.

38. Charles Harry Burgess to Family, September 2, 1938, Burgess Papers; Charles Harry Burgess to Walter Bradford Cannon and Cornelia James Cannon, April 1, 1939, *ibid.*; Charles Harry Burgess to Walter Bradford Cannon and Cornelia James Cannon, July 19, 1939.

39. Linda Cannon Burgess to Cornelia James Cannon, January 1, 1945, *ibid.*

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