

"I REMEMBER"

An Autobiography of John H. Bucho Sr.

as told to Brenda Shepard,

1983

I was born in Beau-claire-etau, Austrio-Hungaria on July 4, 1900. My birth was attended by a midwife. I was the tenth child of eleven children. I had five brothers and five sisters.

Our family lived in extreme poverty in the old country, not even owning the piece of land we lived on. If we got meat in our diet once a week, we were very lucky.

In 1905, we left our homeland and came to the United States. My father was a coal miner, so we began to follow the mining towns. In 1909, we landed in Rock Springs. There was a horse-driven stagecoach that ran from Rock Springs to Superior. When we missed that, we had to ride in the train caboose up to Superior. We didn't even own a horse or buggy.

The town of Superior was spread out for two or three miles. There were clusters of houses around each mine, but the miners still had to walk several miles to work. The Union Pacific owned all the homes. The commercial area was separate from the residential and was called 'White City'. This was a collection of privately-owned stores and saloons.

The beer for the saloons was shipped packed with straw in barrels. There was also whiskey available.

There were butcher shops and clothing stores. There was a branch of the Union Mercantile, and a store called 'The Working Man's Commercial' which was run by a family of Finns.

When we arrived in Superior, we had to wait for a home to be finished for us. We stayed in a small red building beside the railroad tracks. There was no indoor plumbing at all, not even a water pump.

The water for Superior was hauled from Rock Springs by train. There was a big tank set up for the entire town. Needless to say, we only got a bath on Saturday.

We had three or four schools in Superior, the largest of which housed the high school. The smaller buildings were about the size of a three bedroom house, and each had two or three grades in together. The discipline in school was quite strict, for girls as well as for boys. Sometimes we were set on a stool with a dunce cap, and other times we were rapped on the bottom with a ruler. I was a recipient of both of these at one time or another.

There were very few organized sports in school, however, I do recall that we played baseball, and also football. Football in those days was played by kicking the ball, not throwing it.

There was no sex education in our schools. Even our parents never talked about sex. Anything we learned, we did so by experience.

We had a History book and a dictionary available. Any other books we had, we had to buy, and they were not always easy to come by.

As a child, I remember playing 'Kick the Can', 'Run, Sheepie, Run', and 'Post Office'. 'Kick the Can' was a type of "Hide and Seek". One person was 'it' and had to guard the can. If everyone came in and kicked the can, the same person was 'it' again.

We had very few toys, if any at all. We made do with what we could find to play with, and all the children had alot of fun. All the different ethnic groups played together.

The spoken language in our home was Hungarian, but I started learning English very soon, and I've always been very careful to hide my accent. My mother and Father never could speak much English, and neither ever learned to read or write.

All of us helped with the chores around the house. We had to bring in water, help cook and clean, and take care of the livestock. We had chickens, ducks, and rabbits, but we never had a cow. We had to buy milk from the neighbors.

We were still very poor, but we always had fairly good meals. My mother used to make some dishes from the old country such as cabbage rolls and Hungarian goulash. Fruit was always a real treat.

My mother took in boarders, so we never had any vacations or many family activities.

We never had birthday parties in our home, but I used to go to my friend's parties.

We celebrated Christmas and Easter more as religious holidays. We did have a Christmas tree, which we decorated with popcorn balls, apples, and cranberry chains, but we had very few presents. Easter meant more spices in the cakes and baked hams. Having ducks and chickens, we always had plenty of eggs, but oh how I hated duck eggs---and still do!

Discipline at home was very strict. I even remember getting spankings after I went to work in the mines! I remember the curfew whistle used to blow at 9:00, and my father and mother enforced it.

The curfew whistle was also used to give people notice as to whether they were to go to work the next day. If it blew at certain times, you knew to go to work in the morning.

I've always been very healthy. As a child, I had only the common diseases such as measles, mumps, and chicken pox. I did have small pox, too.

We always had fairly good medical care. We had a company doctor and he was paid by the 'Check-off System'. Each family was assessed so much a month from their wages. These monies went into a general fund from which the doctor was paid. These doctors had yearly renewable contracts. In those days, doctors would even make house calls. Our doctor in Superior was Dr. Harrison. Each doctor was also expected to be dentists and optometrists, too. They gave very little medicine. I remember hearing of a flu epidemic in Rock Springs in 1918, but I don't recall any flu in Superior.

Other doctors in the area were Dr. Goodneau in Reliance, Dr. Rowe, Dr. Lauder, and Dr. Chambers in Rock Springs.

When we finally built a church in Superior, I remember serving as altar boy. I was Catholic by birth.

At age fourteen, I quit school and went to work in the mines with my father. The age limit was sixteen, but I lied in order to get the job and help contribute to the family income. My father and I loaded coal and we made 34¢ a ton. We didn't get paid for the 'dead work' that we did such as laying track. We averaged about \$45.00 each every two weeks. Out of this came \$12.00 a month for the rent on your house, and any groceries that you had charged at the Union Pacific store. At that time, pork chops were 8¢ or 9¢ a pound. You received a statement as to how much you made before deductions.

Mining was always a dangerous occupation, but the amount of injuries incurred depended on the carelessness of the miners. My father would always 'sound the roof' with his pick handle to make sure it was safe. My father was very careful.

I recall one time when I was kicked in the knee cap by a horse down in the mine. I was on crutches for two weeks and off work for three weeks. I received compensation, but the company tried to get me back to work as soon as possible.

We worked eight hour a day, three days a week. Holidays off were very few and there were never any vacations.

We would walk to our working place and start through the 'manway'. The 'manway' was always very dusty, and the hooves of the animals could create quite a cloud. It was supposed to be sprinkled with water, but this was seldom done.

We started at 7:00 and checked in with the foreman. Two men each had two rooms to work in. The foremen and supervisors drove you pretty hard. I recall one day that my father and I loaded ten cars in one day. That's about four tons. There was some mistreatment of the men, and not much could be done. By the time you found anyone in authority to complain to, they always said it was too late to take any action.

The miners originally used coal lamps, then they switched to carbide. Carbide is a crushed material that was put in the lamp. There was a small water reservoir with an adjustment to regulate the amount of water that dripped on the carbide.

The more water, the more gas was created, and the more light you got. These were mounted on brown canvas caps.

We also used what they called a 'punching machine'. It was air-driven, and was mounted on a platform that was four feet wide. There was a saw-horse in back, and the platform was slanted to help keep the machine moving forward. This whole apparatus was mounted on two wheels. A man sat in back with blocks strapped to his feet. He would press these against the wheels to keep the machine from moving backwards as it 'punched' out the coal.

Sometimes we would even use dynamite to get to the coal.

All miners had to belong to the Union. Our Union Hall in Superior was located in White City, and was privately owned. The one in Reliance was owned by the company, and was later torn down to build a doctor's office, theater, and a dance hall.

I didn't always agree with the Union and the things they did. I think that there could be many changes made to improve the Union. However, I think if it hadn't been for the Union, people would still be working for starvation wages today.

In 1921 or 1922, we had a major strike over wages and working conditions. It lasted for six or eight months. I was working in Rock Springs at the time, and Mr. Bunning was the mayor. I worked at many odd jobs, mostly labor. I even worked for the city for a while. I wouldn't take charity food. I wanted to work for a living, even though there was a strike fund available. The Company was very co-operative. They didn't hire any scab labor and they still let us live in the company houses. The strike was settled with us receiving higher wages and better working conditions.

The First of April was always a big holiday for us. We celebrated the start of the 8-hour working day every year. We had rodeos, races, carnivals, dancing, and partying. The funds were raised by assessment from our wages. There was a fairgrounds type atmosphere and the merchants in the town contributed and were quite generous. In 1932 or 1933, I was chairman of the celebration.

Everyone had to belong to the Union, as I said before. The Union dues were uniform with other prices at the time. The Union leaders worked alongside the men, but many could be bought. The companies that didn't want the Union would pay them to be on their side and not organize.

There were several Chinese, as well as blacks that belonged to the Union. The whites began to resent the Chinese because they would work for less money. This led to quite a riot. I have a dagger that one Chinaman had made during this time.

The blacks worked mostly as track layers. There were certain areas in town where the blacks and Chinese lived. I guess you call that segregation.

We saw some Indians pass through town. Quite a few of them worked as section hands on the railroad. They were awful hard to handle after they got drunk. They seemed to just go crazy. They always had their hair done in those two long braids.

I left home in 1918, and moved to Rock Springs. I met Rena Bertagnoli when she was managing a confectionary store on Elk Street. Rena was a Tyrol. They were people that came from a small part of Italy. Hungaria had seized control of this area during a war between the two countries. This area was called Tyrolia.

Rena and I often went to dances, doing such dances as the Waltz, the Polka, and the Schottise. There was always lots of partying and drinking at these functions.

We had traveling medicine shows, and one year I remember that a man brought six or seven live reindeer to Rock Springs during the Christmas season.

The theater in town was used for lots of purposes, such as town meetings, dances, and so forth. When we had movies there, we always had to use an interpreter to translate the movies for us. The words were always written on the bottom of the screen.

Rena and I were married in 1922, in the Northside Catholic Church. We were married by Father Welch. It was a very small wedding.

We first lived on J Street and then on Gobel. After a few years, we moved over to what they called #1 Hill. That was a sort of Snob Hill over by the High School.

We had six boys and three girls. Our first, a daughter, died at birth. I still have one son and one daughter living in Rock Springs.

We had no advice on family planning or on birth control. Everything just happened. Our first daughter and first son were eleven months apart, but the rest came about two years apart. I really didn't want that many, but what do you do, you can't kill them!

The birth process was very long and difficult. With our first daughter, Rena was in labor for a very long time. Dr. Chambers believed in letting nature take its course, and I really blame him for our first baby's death.

Rena and I always had a very co-operative marriage. We both always agreed on the finances, and no one was the 'boss'. I always left the discipline up to Rena, though. Since she only worked for one year of our marriage, she was there with the kids more often.

We washed clothes with a tub and washboard. We had flat irons that were heated on the stove. We had a coal cook stove, with a warming oven on top and a water tank on the side. This was used to heat water as you cooked.

We didn't have a radio or T.V. for a long time. There were times that work wasn't available for six months. We didn't have any special programs that we listened to after we got a radio. We just enjoyed the stories as they came. It was a lot better than that awful music they play today.

We got our first car in 1927 or 1928. It was an open body Ford Model T. I needed it to get to work.

In 1919, I started carpentry. I had always enjoyed woodworking. The only real drawback was that it was very difficult to work in the winter. We didn't have the facilities that they have today. I am now the only man in the area that has a 55-year button for membership in the Carpenter's Union, and I am still a member. I have a \$2000 death benefit, and \$1000 for Rena, but my pension has run out. I do get Black Lung benefits, however.

My wife, Rena, is now in a home in Pinedale. She is crippled and can no longer walk. She has had surgery several times for varicose veins. I wasn't able to lift the dead weight any more, so I had to put her in a home where she could get proper care. I visit her as often as possible, because I still drive.

I also belong to the Eagles and to some hunting and fishing clubs. The purpose of these clubs is to help create better relations between sportsmen and other people, and to create better hunting and fishing areas.

I never did declare any affiliation with any political party. I always tried to vote for the best man or best lady.

I didn't get to vote until 1927, because I had to be naturalized first. You had a five year waiting period after you declared that you wanted to be naturalized. You had to keep track of all your movements and activities. They were watching you and if you lied, the judge would catch you right there. I went to night school to study for the test, and on March 27, 1927, I became an American.

The first Presidential candidate I ever voted for was Mr. Hoover, and I've regretted it ever since. Hoover did not cater to the working class of people. I once heard that he had a sign at his ranch that said 'No white help wanted'. He seemed to cater to colored people and cheap labor.

I knew several of the local politicians personally. I knew Teno Roncalio when he was a shoeshine boy. He worked his own way to get his degree. He didn't have a 'golden spoon' in his mouth. He went on to become a State Senator. He was honest, and the working man's friend.

Ed Herschler is all right, but I don't think the man should die in office. As long as he's doing something for our community, it would be all right to keep him for another term.

I don't think Nick Wataha wants any more to do with politics. I didn't love him, but at least he worked to make Rock Springs more livable while he was mayor.

In general, I think our elected officials did work hard for the common people, but I'd rather not comment on their honesty. I don't want to get into trouble.

I do know that there were some members of the IWW in this area, but I didn't know any personally. They had 'red cards'.

I don't think women voted regularly, either. I don't ever remember my wife voting in any election.

As far as President Reagan is concerned, I think there is some good and some bad. That's all I have to say.

During prohibition, booze was still readily available, if you had the money to buy it. A lot of people made 'moonshine' and sold it.

I remember hearing something about a bunch of Rock Springs officials being arrested in 1930, but it was hushed up, and I don't know what it was all about.

The Depression wasn't too bad in this area. There were jobs and food available, but I remember the bread lines.

During World War II, jobs were plentiful. They rationed coffee and gasoline. They were very understanding, though, and allowed me extra gas for several trips to Salt Lake City for medical reasons. I don't remember any 'black markets' in this area.

I know that I don't ever want to see another 'Boom' hit this area. People lived in tents and campers in the desert without any facilities at all. I think there was a lot of truth to the '60 Minutes' report on Rock Springs. There was a lot of corruption in our city. Prostitution did exist on K Street. The girls were out on the sidewalks. There used to be homes like Dotsey's for those girls to work in, and I think there should be again. That is human nature, and we need prostitution to help protect our wives, sisters, and daughters from rape. Brothels also help keep a cleaner town.

I think the best thing that has happened since the 'Boom' is beautifying the cemetery. I don't know who deserves the credit, but I'd like to give it to them.

One of the best things ever done in Rock Springs was the building of the bridge over the railroad tracks on A Street. There were a lot of people killed or hurt there before it was done.

The quality of education ranks first in my mind as the biggest improvement in the United States since I was young. America has the best schools, the best education, and the best teachers in the world. Everyone should take advantage of these things.

In my opinion, the future of the United States lies with coal. I told my friends along time ago that someday coal would be 'Black Diamonds'.

A couple of years ago, I was invited to the Rock Springs High School to give a lecture on the early days. I remember thinking that I had finally been in a high school after quitting school in the sixth grade many years before. I can't encourage people enough to get a good education. Also, to never abuse yourselves. I never did, and I think that is why I look and feel so young today.

To my family, I'd like to say, "I love you all very much".