

## *In Memoriam Willie Walker (1949–2004)*

Brian Shovers

**B**ill (also known as Willie) Walker was born on February 11, 1949, in Fort Worth, Texas, but in 1967 his family moved to Three Forks, Montana, and Bill graduated from the high school there in 1968. After working for a time for the alternative newspaper, *The Borrowed Times*, Walker attended Montana State University, graduating from the nursing program there in the 1970s. After completing his practicum at St. James Hospital in Butte, Walker began his career as a registered nurse in Butte.

Walker became interested in the city's records during 1978 when the city moved its offices from City Hall to the Silver Bow County Courthouse, and he rescued boxes of early city records destined for the dump. Walker lobbied Butte's Chief Executive, Don Peoples, for a home to deposit the town's earliest records. When Walker wasn't nursing, he was collecting material to establish a Butte archives and refurbishing the Quartz Street Fire Station for use as a city-county archives. When the Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives opened in the fall of 1980, Walker became its first director, answering questions and arranging materials Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday afternoons. As the new director of the Butte Public Archives, Walker combed the community for important manuscripts, photographs, and records, to build the collection.

When Walker left Butte for San Francisco a year later, the collections included the records of a number of Butte labor unions, a wide assortment of city records, 1879–1920, and bound volumes of the many Butte newspapers. After leaving Butte, Walker's interest



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in the archives profession blossomed. He helped establish the San Francisco History Project and was one of the founding members of the Gay and Lesbian Historical Society (GLBT) in 1985. For the first five years, Walker housed the growing archives in his apartment. In the late 1980s, Walker attended the University of California–Berkeley, earning a masters degree in library science.

The contribution made by Willie Walker to the Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives cannot be measured solely by the number of years of service. Walker, with professional training in health care and a love for history, had the vision to realize the importance of Butte's past to its future, and acted to inspire others in the significance of what the city was poised to lose. Although Walker's involvement with the Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives only spanned two years, he did galvanize the Butte community and local government around the preservation of its primary records. Walker successfully garnered \$12,500 in federal revenue sharing funds from the local government to pay for insulation, new wiring, and smoke-burglar alarms to the refurbished fire station, as well as a \$9,700 grant from the Montana Committee for Humanities to gather and catalog archival documents. Walker's intercession on behalf of Butte's documents came at a crucial time in the city's modern history: in 1976 the Butte City Council voted against relocating

the town to the I-90 corridor to make way for open-pit mining by the Anaconda Company in the historic commercial district uptown, recognizing the significance of those structures to Butte's self-preservation.

When the Butte Public Archives opened its door to the public on September 20, 1980, Bill Walker and a small group of volunteers from the Butte Historical Society, the World Museum of Mining, and a group of historians and architects from the Historic American Engineering Record survey team had spent the last year negotiating with the local government to rescue the turn-of-the-century Quartz Street Fire Station from the wrecking ball and applying a federal grant and local government appropriations to the retrofitting of an important historic Butte building and creating a vital public institution. Over the past twenty-five years, the annual Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives budget has grown from less than \$10,000 a year to over \$100,000 annually.

Since 1980, dozens of important articles, books, and films have been produced, relying at least in part on the vast collections of the Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives. A diverse group of scholars have relied heavily on sources at the Butte Archives to produce the following works: *The Gibraltar: Socialism and Labor in Butte, Montana, 1895–1920*, by Jerry Calvert; *The Butte Irish: Class and Ethnicity in an American Mining Town, 1875–1925*, by David Emmons; *Mining Cultures: Men, Women, and Leisure in Butte, 1914–1941*, by Mary Murphy; and *Tracing the Veins of Copper, Culture, and Community from Butte to Chuquicamata*, by Janet Finn. During the last fifteen years, materials found at the Butte Archives proved crucial to the creation of films for public broadcasting on the Butte Irish, Columbia Gardens, and Frank Little, and a forthcoming PBS

documentary by Pam Roberts and Ed Dobb entitled “From Their Labors”; plus films by British Broadcasting on World War I; Arts and Entertainment on Evel Kneivel and Martha Raye; and a Irish National Television program entitled, “From Beara to Butte.” The records and maps of the Anaconda Company have been used in a number of Superfund court cases by both the U.S. Department of Justice and ARCO. The archives collections have proved invaluable to environmental engineers and construction crews in their rehabilitation of the landscape throughout the mining district in the past twenty years. A good number of graduate students from Yale, University of Pennsylvania, and colleges throughout the West have used the collections to write their theses and dissertations. The voluminous Butte, Anaconda, and Pacific Railway Collection at the Archives provided the basis for Charles Mutschler's *Wired for Success: A History of the Butte, Anaconda, & Pacific Railway, 1892–1985*.

Willie Walker continued to support the activities of the Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives, returning to Butte on several occasions during the 1990s and donating his time to catalog and process new collections. On September 29, 2004, Walker died in Spokane, while visiting his sister, after a several-year struggle with cancer. The city of Butte and the people of Montana have benefited greatly from Walker's passion for history.

For more about Bill Walker's life and works, visit [www.historians.org/Perspectives/Issues/2005/0505/0505mem9.cfm](http://www.historians.org/Perspectives/Issues/2005/0505/0505mem9.cfm)