

Helena's Helena '45

For those who have read Helena '45 by Gerald D. Sullivan I do not have to describe Helena, MT to them. He describes our hometown so beautifully that I could not improve on it. When I read this book (a gift from my daughter, Maureen) I had to remember that I was also in Helena in '45 and if Jerry could write a book about his adventures as a teenager there, then I a (supposedly) mature woman 10 years older could certainly write a book about that year.



I was raised in Helena – I was the youngest – the only girl with four big brothers. Actually our house was very close to Jerry's house – we lived on First Street – the last street before Dry Gulch at the foot of the mountains. My father was a laborer and my mother was a homemaker. They were both of German descent – my father was 12 years old when he came to America and my mother was 21 years old when she came over. My mother was a perfect homemaker in every sense of the word. Although we didn't have much money she managed to make our home bright and cheerful, she was a marvelous cook and sat up late at night sewing dresses for me. My father was deaf and just worked hard all his life. They did not have hearing aids in those days so we didn't converse much.

I went to St. Helena grade school which was quite a journey from First St. to the school which was next to the cathedral. I started high school at St. Vincent's Academy for girls – but the school was damaged beyond repair by the earthquakes of '35 – so my junior and senior years were spent at the newly formed Cathedral

High – in the same building as the grade school. It was crowded, to say the least – our classes were all on one side of the building. There were 20 girls and 6 boys in our graduating class – but since we had this shortage of boys, we got to go to Carroll College dances since they didn't have girls! Of course, we invited them to our proms and they were kind enough to come.

My brothers all managed to go to college but nobody seemed to care what I would do – I guess since I was only a girl! I was pretty good at typing and shorthand so I went to Helena Business College for a few months and landed my first steady job as receptionist for Dr. Fligman, a diagnostician. My beginning salary was \$40 a month with a \$1 raise every month. However, the doctor had a ruptured appendix and died when I was only making \$45! I did work there 2 more weeks so someone would be there when patients paid their bills. For that I got an extra \$5 and my meals sent up at noon in case somebody might show up. Needless to say, I was pretty bored – Helena was having their centennial celebration at the time – so I would hang out the window watching them dancing in the streets. But I wasn't bored when I could get away! We girls wore old-fashioned dresses with hoops during the celebration – it was a great time to be young.

Somewhere around this time I went to Anaconda for my brother Joe's wedding – he married a nice Irish girl named Margaret Connelly. She had a nice brother name Hughie Connelly, who had some very nice friends, one of whom was a certain Thomas Francis Jeremiah Donovan, who was the handsomest fellow I had ever laid eyes upon! He came to the wedding reception mostly for a free drink and I was smitten from that time on! So here was I with all these cute fellows who took me downtown dancing (except Tommy didn't know how to dance so he would shoo the other guys away and talk to me). He and his gang came over to Helena several times and then in 1940 he was in the first bunch of fellows to be conscripted into the Army. He was already in the Army when WWII broke out. We corresponded off and on during the war which had a lot to do with my coming home in December '44 – the war was winding down by then and the boys would be coming home. I wanted to be home where he could find me in case he came looking! During the war I worked for the War Dept. – first in Ft. Peck, then to Edmonton, then to Seattle when I decided it was time to go home. So, Christmas of '44 was spent at home in Helena.

Well, it didn't take long to get a new job – about a week! So I went to work in Jan. '45 for the Internal Revenue Service. My first assignment was down in the basement of the old Federal Bldg. – checking income tax returns (I can't remember what for!) – a very boring job. Had to walk down through the furnace room, a long dismal corridor before getting to the office where about 30 people were employed. About this time Helena started having mild earthquakes – just enough to make you nervous. So, my fellow employees would start fantasizing what would happen if we had a big one – the pipes on the ceiling would probably burst, there were bars at the windows, the elevator would shut down and the furnace would probably blow up. I decided this was not the place for me and somehow, I'm not sure how I managed this, I got myself assigned to the main floor as Asst. Personnel Clerk. There were

two of us and we were directly under Lewis Penwell, the Collector. I'm not sure how old he was – somewhere in his late 80's. He came to work about 11:00 a.m. until noon several days a week – his main purpose was to sign all correspondence addressed to Washington so that they would think he was right on the job! Penwell owned an island on Flathead Lake called Wild Horse Island. During the hour that he was in his office he would dictate long letters to Sen. B.K. Wheeler (retired) about the island. I can't remember the details of the letters. I even had to go to his home (one of the finer old homes on the West Side) and take dictation there when he was too weak to come to the office. Once he sent me downtown to the photographers to get pictures of the island. He had a grudge against the Asst. Collector of Internal Revenue, Thomas Robinson – he was always trying to get him fired which was also the subject of these long letters.

My other duties consisted of personnel work, receptionist, and sometimes helping with tax returns. One time I was helping out with checking W-2's (for what I can't remember) and I left a pile of them in folders sitting on top of my wastebasket. When I came to work in the morning they were gone! In those days there was no record kept as they came in so I was in deep trouble. I spent most of the day tracking down the janitor and then going down into the basement and pawing through piles of papers meant for the incinerators! Believe it or not, I found them about an hour before they would have been burned. What a job!

We were allowed a half-hour break for coffee and we would leave the Federal Bldg. and walk a block down 6th Ave. for our break. Sometimes the break lasted a little longer than a half-hour, needless to say. I really didn't abuse it that much but it wasn't too strange when a little shopping was done along the way. The girl I worked with was a character – very smart, but shall we say liked to walk on the wild side. She would sometimes go to the bars in the daytime and call me to report her sick. Then she would call me drunk in the afternoon singing songs, etc. and telling me of her latest conquests.

So, that was my government job in 1945 – I don't think a person could find that kind of job today without probably going to jail.