Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the nation. Oral History is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is bound with photographs and illustrative materials and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

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It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

Eleanor Swent, November 2005
Eleanor Swent was the lead interviewer for ROHO’s Western Mining in the Twentieth Century Oral History Project. In this interview Eleanor reflects on the origins of the series, the importance of preserving mining history, and her life in various mining communities.
This interview was conducted on October 29, 2013 in order to provide a coda to all of the previous work on the *Western Mining in the Twentieth Century* project, and to orient new research and interviews in this ongoing project. Mrs. Swent organized the series together with Willa Baum, Langanan Swent, and Douglas Fuerstenau and many others in the mid-1980s. By 2013, over 106 interviews have been recorded and made available to the public through this project. Thanks in part to her efforts as well, the endowment for the project will ensure that the series will continue long into the future.
Interview # 1 October 29, 2013

Audio File 1

01-00:00:00
Burnett: This is interviewer Paul Burnett and I’m going to be interviewing Eleanor Swent today, October 29, 2013, and this is tape one. So, Eleanor, we have done an interview with you in volume two of the Langanan Swent interview and it is about your life history as a spouse of a mining expert. And you’ve been all over the world and spoken at length about your experiences. And I want to talk today with you about your role as an oral historian for the Regional Oral History Office and to give us some perspective on the series Western Mining in the Twentieth Century, which you developed and shepherded through the years. And so I’ll ask you some general questions about your life experience and then move to more targeted questions about the Western Mining in the Twentieth Century Project.

01-00:01:28
Swent: Okay.

01-00:01:32
Burnett: So when you began to think and reflect on your life in mining communities, obviously in your thinking about documenting it, there are many perspectives on mining that people have, that people have focused on in the past. What was the purpose of the mining history project that you had in mind?

01-00:02:09
Swent: Well, the first idea, of course, was to do the history of mining in California. That was the first impetus. And because of its historical importance in California. And then it grew because as we started interviewing, these mining people go all over the world, so you couldn’t just keep to California. People went through California and ended up in Chile or Africa or all sorts of places. And the time-frame, of course, expanded because some of them had memories from much earlier and some were contemporary. So the first idea was just to document current mining in California. And it really started, I think this is in the preface to the oral histories, it started when the McLaughlin Mine was inaugurated. And I don’t remember exactly the date but it’s in the record somewhere. The inauguration I think was in 1984. And we, my husband and I, went to a place called Spanish Flat, which is kind of an historic name. We met Douglas and Peggy Fuerstena there. They drove over from Berkeley and we drove up from the East Bay. And we drove them up to the mine in Lake County. And we had known the Fuerstenau boys [laughter] at the School of Mines in Rapid City.

So anyway, we were good friends and on the way up Doug said, “You know, this is a historic event, the opening of this mine, and something really should be done about it.” And so when we went back then to Berkeley, I don’t
remember who made the initial step, but we met with Willa Baum and presented the idea of doing an oral history project on mining. And I had been doing oral history on my own and had met Willa through another connection.

[Following paragraphs added after the interview:

I’d interviewed students in an ESL class I taught in Chinatown in Oakland, part of the Oakland Adult School, and I donated the tapes to the Bancroft Library. Willa had taught at the same school, and I used some of the materials she had developed. They were very good with vocabulary based on their life experience, and so on. And she was an advisor on an Oakland Neighborhood oral history project that I worked on. So then when Doug Fuerstenau had this idea, we found out that she had dreamed for years of doing an oral history series on Mining in California, so when I walked in and was doing oral history and knew something about mining, it all fell into shape.

We organized a dinner party at my home with Willa and Doug and Peggy Fuerstenau, Verda and Cliff Heimbucher, Phil & Kay Bradley, and Sylvia McLaughlin, and they all thought it was a good idea, and Doug agreed to head up the advisory committee. I think the official title for the University was “Principal Investigator”. That was in January of 1986. Doug had the contacts and the enthusiasm and he assembled a really wonderful group of advisors, from academia and the industry. One was Rodman Paul, who was really the only California mining historian, retired from Caltech. He was very supportive of this project, but unfortunately he died soon after we began. And Phil Bradley, his family had been in mining for years, in Alaska and California. And some outstanding Berkeley professors of course. Not just from geology and mining. Roger Hahn was from the history department, history of science. His wife Ellie was a friend of mine through the Wellesley club. He was very supportive. And my husband; he was very interested in mining history, and was working on his own history of the San Dimas district in Mexico. So it was a great committee, and they weren’t just advisors in name only. They were really interested, and came up with the names of people who should be interviewed. And they helped with getting validation from the AIME (American Institute of Mining, Metallurgical, and Petroleum Engineers) and the SME (Society of Mining Engineers) and MMSA (Mining & Metallurgical Society of America), the professional organizations. That helped a lot.

I took a course at Merritt Community College, taught by Mark Greenside, and learned how to do oral history, and we were off and running.]

Originally we planned to do five interviews. Ended up with I think sixty-three volumes, a hundred some interviews.

01-00:05:12
Burnett: Right, right. And when Doug explained this as a historic event, what did he mean? What was historically significant?
Swent: Well, it was a new gold mine in California and it was new in that part of the state also. Well, we already knew at that time it was using revolutionary new technology for processing the ore. So it was of historical significance. And, of course, that was when the environmental movement was very strong. Still is. There had been a lot of environmental hurdles to go over before the opening of this mine. So it was significant in several respects.

Burnett: I think when you spoke with Willa (Baum), you said that when people talk about mining and the history of mining, technology is kind of there in the background. You kind of take it for granted. But what was really new about this story was the environmental movement and that was exciting or interesting to—

Swent: It was a challenge, a real challenge to open a mine.

Burnett: Yeah, yeah.

Swent: Yeah.

Burnett: And so when you began your interviews, is that something you had in mind to bring to the forefront in the project?

Swent: At that point I don’t think so. Doug gathered this advisory committee and I think this is all in the record somewhere. Our first thought, we had selected five interviewees.

[Following paragraph added after the interview:

A geologist, that was Gordon Oakeshott; and a metallurgist, that was Frank McQuiston; a miner, and that of course was Phil Bradley; someone from the US Bureau of Mines, that was Jim Boyd; and someone from the industry, that was Horace Albright. He was someone that Willa had been wanting to interview, and she heard that I was going to visit my daughter in Studio City, and she just jumped on it and said I had to interview him. He was ninety-seven, in a nursing home there, and sharp as a tack. He graduated from Cal in 1912 as a mining lawyer, went to Washington and helped set up the Park Service. He was the first superintendent of Yellowstone Park, and then he left that and was President of US Potash. That was my first interview in the series, and it was a wonderful one to start with. And it’s nice that in the list of interviewees, in alphabetical order, he’s always the first. So we wanted to give a broad view, look at mining as an important part of Western history.]
And I suppose, in my mind, at least, part of it was defensive. Mining had become such a dirty word at that time. People shuddered at the mention of the word mining. The term was it raped the environment and so on. Yet the people who condemn it very much like the products of the mines. So it was, in my mind, at least, partly a defensive thing. But the history, California and mining, are inextricably mixed. In fact, I found sometimes when I told people that I was interviewing people about mining, some people thought I was interviewing ‘49ers. I don’t know what they thought—

01-00:08:19
Burnett: Yeah, that’s very strange.

01-00:08:21
Swent: They think of mining as the ’49 gold rush. [laughter]

01-00:08:25
Burnett: That would be a ghost—I think it’d be—

01-00:08:28
Swent: Be a little hard.

01-00:08:28
Burnett: Yes.

01-00:08:29
Swent: But many people say, “Oh, are there still mines?” This was quite common.

01-00:08:36
Burnett: So that’s interesting to me that this is a fundamental aspect of our civilization. And yet it’s so invisible. It takes place in these remote areas. So is that part of your thinking? You were thinking that you want to make this visible to people and so they can hear these stories?

01-00:09:01
Swent: Yes, exactly. And positive.

01-00:09:04
Burnett: But you also interviewed an activist, isn’t that right, from—

01-00:09:06
Swent: Oh, yes. Yes.

01-00:09:07
Burnett: —from the University of California Davis. He was a professor of English.

01-00:09:10
Swent: In fact, it was fun to interview these people who were opposed to it. And one in particular was Ray Krauss, who ended up working for Homestake and he says in his interview the reason for doing it was to make sure that this would be done right from an environmentalist point of view.
Burnett: So there were accommodations as well as resistance? It wasn’t just a uniform objection?

Swent: There were a lot of accommodations made. Yes.

Burnett: And, of course, that’s documented in your late husband’s interviews, the work on health and safety but also remediation, creating tailings ponds and so forth.

Swent: Right. And I should just mention as an aside, going way back when my father was the chief metallurgist at the mine in Lead, the Homestake Mine, he was one of the pioneers, I guess you’d say, in the environmental movement. He was involved in testing the effluent and making sure that the tailings were properly stored and so on. That was a thing that people were concerned with even that long ago. Yeah. Homestake was involved in a suit, actually, at that time about its water discharge. So it goes way back. It’s not something that just came in the sixties.

Burnett: I think some of the stories that were a part of the oral histories in Douglas Fuerstenau’s interviews, and this was interesting to me, revealed that the Environmental Protection Agency came in with regulations that did not seem to reflect what was possible for the mining company to do. So they had to meet these requirements, but it had to be a negotiation. So there seemed to be a learning process on both sides, from the regulators and the miners and the mining community itself, to learn about this.

Swent: And, of course, the uranium mines were particularly targeted for radiation exposure.

Burnett: Yeah, absolutely. So the question of getting permits for new mines, this becomes more and more difficult for these folks. Did that push them into other countries with different regulations? Is there a move during this period out of the United States?

Swent: [Following paragraph added after the interview:

Well, it’s not sending business offshore in the pejorative sense that it’s used today, to save on labor costs or to avoid regulations. Miners go where the ore is, and most of the mining companies have been international companies for ages, in Latin America, the Philippines, Canada, Africa. The people I interviewed, almost all of them worked overseas at some point.]
And so you began with these five.

Yes.

As a kind of pilot?

We picked one from each sector.

Each major domain of mining activity. So how did the project grow over that time?

Well, from those five we selected others. But in time it got to the point where people were wanting to be interviewed and we really didn’t have any difficulty. We had our choice of interviewees. People really were eager to be interviewed in the series. They saw it as a plus and a chance to be important.

Yeah, yeah. And to preserve this knowledge for posterity.

And we were sponsored by the Mining and Metallurgical Society. And, of course, their members were eager to take part in it.

And you were also a member of the Mining History Association. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

Not at first. Let me think. There was a meeting of the Mining History Association, I think one of their very first meetings, conferences. They just have annual conferences. They don’t have monthly meetings or anything. They met in Lead in—it must have been June of ’92, maybe. I think so. And I was there visiting my mother. And I didn’t know of this association. But they were meeting there and I somehow met the people and found out about it and immediately got onboard. I was so interested in it. It was very new then.

So that’s after the beginning of the Western Mining Series, no?

Oh, yes. The series was born in 1986.

In the Willa Baum interview, I think you talked about it beginning, the conversations began in 1985. Does that make sense?
Swent: That’s when I was hired, in ’85.

Burnett: Okay. And then the conversations with Doug Fuerstenau and—

Swent: I think those probably were just before I was hired. Yeah.

Burnett: And so that was developing. And then you met folks in ’92 in the Mining History Association.

Swent: I think it was ’92, maybe ’93. Yeah. It was a very small group at that time.

[Added after the interview: The Mining History Association began as an offshoot of the Western History Association. They noticed that this group of people at that conference would go off by themselves and talk about mining history, not just explorers and fur traders, so they set up their own organization. MHA is different because it includes amateurs like me, and many people from the industry who want to preserve its history.]

Burnett: And you became involved in—what was your role in—

Swent: Just a member at that time.

Burnett: Just a member? Okay.

Swent: Eventually I became president.

Burnett: Okay, okay. When was that?

Swent: It was in 2007.

There had been a woman president before, Sally Zanjani, who’s a historian in Nevada and so I was president a couple of years after she was. Offhand I don’t remember the days but ten years or so ago.

Burnett: But you learned about other mining history initiatives?

Swent: Oh, yes.
How mining history was being done elsewhere. Was there something in your mind special about the ROHO project? Was it different? Doing things differently from these other projects or—

[Well, I think this was the only oral history project on mining at that time. Later, one was started in Colorado, but I believe ours was the first.] The Mining History Association, the MHA, doesn’t do interviews. It has an annual conference and people present papers. And I gave a number of papers and was able, because of that, to attend international mining history congresses, which was great fun.

So it’s secondary research? It’s historians writing, doing archival research, and presenting papers.

Mm-hmm.

Okay. And so if you had to explain the significance of this series to an outsider, somebody who doesn’t know anything about it, what would you tell them? What’s important about this series? Why does it need to continue, for example?

Well, I think partly just to present mining as something positive and necessary and favorable, important because it is so misunderstood and misrepresented sometimes. But really misunderstood. I have a vivid picture in my mind. It was after the mine was fully operating, that’s the McLaughlin Mine, when there was already a big pit in the ground, and some dignitaries were there visiting. And one lovely woman, beautifully dressed, with probably a thousand dollars worth of Navajo jewelry, and I remember a squash blossom necklace and a Concho belt with big silver things and she stood at the edge of this pit and said, “Oh, it’s so horrible.” I was tempted to say something—to my credit I didn’t say anything. But it was just so kind of typical that people who love the things that are mined but they despise mining. And I guess I feel defensive about it.

Well, when I was reading, this is a kind of response that comes out from the interviewees, so that narrators are offering a corrective, what they see as a corrective version of the past and of the present. And so that there’s this sense that mining has been maligned.

Oh, yes.
Burnett: And it made me think of another activity such as farming. So in my family—
[bell ringing]

Swent: That’s a ship’s clock.

Burnett: That’s a ship’s—well, we’re on time.

Swent: [laughter] Sorry.

Burnett: And it made me think about what they valued about it. Are there any parallels,
do you think, with other walks of life?

Swent: I would think definitely with agriculture. They’re both fundamental activities
of man from the very beginning of time.

[Following paragraph added after the interview:

I think that one of the special things about mining, and it’s probably true of
farming, too, is that most people who are miners are from a family of miners.
Like the Cornish, who have been miners since before the time of the Romans.
The Romans went to England for the tin in Cornwall, and wherever you go to
a mining place, there are Cornishmen. And another thing is that I think almost
all of the people in the top positions in mining companies have started out
actually working in mines. They don’t usually just come into it from another
business or just from studying in college. They can really identify with the
workers. Even if they have a degree in geology or materials science, they’ve
spent a good deal of time underground or out in the field or in a processing
plant.]

Burnett: So they’re essential to civilization but they are often apart from civilization.
They’re often made invisible because they’re these primary products that are
pulled from the land.

Swent: One of the interesting interviews that opened whole new vistas for me was
with Jim Curry, who had worked in Grass Valley mines and then ran a cement
plant up in Redding. And before I interviewed him I read about cement,
learned the difference between concrete and cement. But at any rate, no, I just
had never thought about how fundamental to our society, how fundamental it
is. Until the Eddystone light was built and they discovered how to do
waterproof cement, buildings were made of hewn stone. And they couldn’t be
very tall. And you look around and our whole society depends on, well,
concrete, which makes possible those great big buildings and those highways and all those other things. And yet people don’t think of it as so fundamental.

Yeah, yeah. So you’re making the invisible visible in this project. And that’s often said of oral history, that you’re giving voices to the people who have been silent. Traditionally it’s seen as the excluded or an underclass or the working class and you get an interview—because the folks who run things have the documents, right, the politicians and the professionals and so on. But your story is about professionals largely. There are mineworkers in the story. So what you’re saying is kind of profound. That these are powerful people that you have talked to. These are the executives of mines. They’re mining scientists and engineers and researchers. But because they’re powerful does not necessarily mean that a story has been told, right, and that these people have said things fully in the documents, whatever those documents might be. And so taken as a whole in these interviews, when you talked about your husband you said he often didn’t talk about work. He left work at work, to his credit. As a family man he’d come home. And there was lots of stuff going on at the mine but the home sphere was the home front. But you learned an awful lot about what he did, right—

—by those interviews, right, and many of these other people, as well. Did anything surprise you in some of the things that were said in these interviews? Was there something that you didn’t know before? Or were you quite aware that growing up in the mining communities, it was something that was in your blood?

Well, of course, I mentioned the example of cement. That was new to me really. I hadn’t understood how profoundly important that was. Well, in background preparation, of course I had to learn an awful lot about terms and so on that I hadn’t realized before.

And the stories of exploration, too, in parts of the world that you are not as familiar with as well.

[I was sort of fascinated even as a child by just the sound of some words I heard my parents saying when we were out—this was when families went out for a Sunday drive, and I heard words like “micaceous schist” and “Pahasapa limestone”] and “counter current decantation.” Wonderful terms!

Beautiful language.
Yeah. There are very interesting special terminology. It’s a special set of languages. In a sense it’s invisible in that it’s remote. These are remote locations typically far from centers of population. But it’s also specialized knowledge. It’s kind of esoteric knowledge, I suppose, or knowledge that’s specific to a particular practice. So getting into more of the biography, kind of going backwards a little bit here. If mining is all about expertise and machines and science and work in the mines. You are also telling other stories, as well, that that’s not the whole story. So something that is very much a part of it is community.

Could you tell me a little bit about mining community in general and then maybe we can go into some specifics.

Well, I think it’s true that almost always the company is running the town in these places. There’s usually not a competitive industry. Just think of Butte, Montana, and Lead, South Dakota, and Chuquicamata, Chile, those places where the mine was the community and the manager had to be the equivalent of a mayor. All sorts of social decisions that were made as well as technical ones. Usually the company hospital, sometimes a company store, which were amenities for the community.

We’re often taught in school about “the company town,” right?

Speaking of the much-maligned mining history.

Exactly.

What’s wrong with that perspective? The mine has a monopoly on power in the community, it seems. But your story’s a bit different. Your story about your own life in these communities is textured a bit more. So in other words it could be a story of a class conflict for workers—

Or exploitation.
Burnett: Or exploitation or absolute power without some other balance of other kinds of enterprises or competition. It’s kind of the opposite of a free capitalist society in some ways, right? But your focus on community—you told stories that are a bit different from that, right? What was it like growing up in Lead, South Dakota? Did you feel the octopus of the mine on you?

Swent: Not at all. No, no. I may have been naïve. But no. It was a very comfortable community. Very cosmopolitan. We had a lot of people speaking different languages at home than they spoke in school. But we had what we called Slavonians. There was a Slavonian alley. Lot of Finlanders, Cornish, Italians, people from all over. Everybody seemed to get along just fine. My high school class has had reunions and we all feel very close. In fact we attended the nation’s first kindergarten, which was established by Phoebe Hearst. As I understand it, she went to Germany in the 1800s and saw the kindergarten in Germany and tried to start one in San Francisco and it wasn’t successful because she was perceived to be snatching children from their mother’s bosoms and so on. So she had the power to just establish one in Butte and in Lead. The one in Butte didn’t last but the one in Lead survived for decades and was finally taken into the public school system. But my friends and I all started at age three in the kindergarten in the basement of the Episcopal church and it didn’t do us any harm.

Burnett: So one consequence of this power imbalance is that there’s room for experimentation to break from previous cultural patterns and start something new?

Swent: That was an example. Phoebe Hearst could do a kindergarten. And, of course, we had a wonderful library, the Hearst Library. And we had a recreation building with a bowling alley and a swimming pool and a lot of good things that the company supplied.

Burnett: Right, right. And so sometimes that’s regarded as kind of paternalistic, right, that it’s used to sort of keep people in line.

Swent: Possibly.

Burnett: It’s possible but from your experience it was something different?

Swent: I would say benevolent.
Benevolent. But it’s not something you just received in your story. It’s something you actively worked on, it seems, when you went to different places. So community is not dictated by the company.

That’s why Grants, New Mexico was pretty special, because there was a thriving community there to begin with, lumbering, ranching, and an important railroad stop. And then mining came in on top of that. So that was different from a lot of places. That was uranium mining.

Right, right. There’s a certain amount of work that goes into community and that it means something in particular because of the remoteness, right. So I think you talked about opera in Lead, right. There was an opera house there and there were operas performed.

Oh, movies, I think, although it was called the opera. I’m not sure they ever did opera there. Maybe in the early days.

But let’s say that if you’re in a big city, culture’s there. You can go and it’s something you can consume, right? But when you were in these different places you can’t just go down the street—

No.

— to see a movie necessarily. So how did people build community? How did people build culture? For something that’s so fundamental to civilization, what is civilization in a mining community?

Well, I think churches played an important part. Going back to opera, in my high school class we had some good singers and this was, of course, during the Depression when Lead boomed and we had exceptionally good teachers and an especially good music teacher. And when I was a senior the Eleanor club produced *Il Trovatore*, which I’m sure was a condensed version. But anyway, it was opera.

I knew there was an opera in there somewhere.

But to go back to your question, I think churches always played an important part in all these communities. And, of course, there were ladies organizations of the kind that really don’t exist anymore because women are doing other things. But there were, well, women’s clubs and the woman’s auxiliary of the
mining, the AIME, WAAIME. We called it “Way-mee.” [Woman’s Auxiliary of the American Institute of Metallurgists and Mining Engineers]. And for reason, it’s “woman’s,” not “women’s,” as you’d expect.

Burnett: WAAIME.

Swent: Right. The various women’s counterparts of men’s organizations. So women were … decades earlier they were the genteel part of the society.

Burnett: Genteel, yes. But also if you had to be a kind of sociologist or something, what is—I can’t show quotation marks on the tape but what is “women’s work” in the mines for this period when you were growing up and when you were the wife of a miner? Your mother was a geology teacher. But—

Swent: Of course, women were not working in the mines at that time. They were secretaries and that was about it. And nurses in the hospital.

Burnett: Okay. So you could be an administrator and or you could be in the secretarial pool of the company or you could be in health care. So it was those roles—

Swent: I don’t think there were any administrators. Secretaries to the manager would be the highest.

Burnett: Clerical. Clerical staff.

Swent: Right.

Burnett: Yeah, yeah. But in terms of unpaid work. What kinds of unpaid work did women do in the mines? Or not in the mines but around the mines?

Swent: Well, these societies that I’m talking about. Sewing clubs and reading clubs, parts of national groups like the women’s—there’s a national—at that time was a national women’s club organization. American University, AAUW University Women. [American Association of University Women]

Burnett: Association of University—

Swent: And lodges, fraternal lodges were kind of big at that time. And men belonged to—and there were women’s affiliates of those.
And what did you do in a women’s club? It was a sewing club and you would sew. I imagine that’s not the only purpose of the sewing club.

A lot of chatter, gossiping, joking.

[The following added after interview:]

There was some competition between the clubs. The sewing club I belonged to collected money for an orphanage in Sioux Falls. I was invited to join the Friday Club, and before I joined I was told that it had “lunch and high-level conversation and no gossiping.”]

But this builds community.

Yes, it does. Well, and good works, too. There was always some sort of charitable branch that helped widows. The widow of a miner, if she was left, this was a matter of great concern. She had to be cared for.

Absolutely.

And that was a big part of it.

So it’s almost like a kind of mutual aid society to some degree.

Right, exactly. Yeah. If there was a mine accident in any of these places it affected everybody terribly. Yeah.

Absolutely. Everybody. How many people lived in Lead in, say, 1950? Not terribly too many—

Probably seven thousand then. At the peak I think it was 11,000 during the Depression.

Yeah. So you’d get an opportunity to know people if you lived there for forty, fifty years.

Right.
Burnett: Right, yeah, yeah. That’s unlike a lot of mine communities that have a short life.

Swent: No

Burnett: Homestake was going from 1877 until just recently.

Swent: Right.

Burnett: How does that work? Is it just within Lead? If someone is widowed in the case of a mining accident or tragedy? There’s obviously some kind of pension or something from the mining company. But where did the women’s groups step in and how did they step in?

Swent: Well, there’s something called the Homestake Aid Society, I think. Actually, I don’t remember what they did but I know it was important. By the time I moved away and didn’t have a part in that. But I know that they were very supportive and helped. I can’t say in what specific way.

Burnett: Right, right. But emotional support as well as—

Swent: Oh, yes, definitely.

Burnett: The churches would do that presumably as well. And you spoke in one of the interviews about the dinner parties and that this was—

Swent: That’s gentility. [laughter]

Burnett: That’s gentility. But also, putting your sociologist hat on, that serves a purpose or has a function, right, that is somehow connected to the larger project of mining. That this is social work that needs to be—

Swent: Right. Elevation.

Burnett: Elevation, yes. Yes. So was it something I think you wrote about when you went to—can’t remember which place. But the rules were a bit different or customs were a bit different. Certainly when you went to Mexico you encountered a different world.
And so that was a question of adjustment. So what were some of the things that you had to adjust to? And you said at some point, “Nobody came and told me this is what you do and this is what you don’t do.” Oh, and you had to do it several times. You went to Mexico, you were in Grants, and you were in Lead, as well. So how did you adjust to new situations?

I guess the biggest challenge was in Tayoltita in Mexico. I was newly out of college, couple of years out of college, had just finished my graduate work at Denver University and I was feeling very intellectual and loved to read and that sort of thing. People weren’t readers in that—well, you could get books. Actually Mexico had an embargo at that time so we couldn’t import foreign goods that they had before, like Danish butter and things like that. But you could import books and records. And I was a reader so I did a lot of reading. And I didn’t realize that this was sort of taken as snobbery. I probably was kind of snobbish about it. And I definitely did not drink. My husband and I discussed this. Growing up in Lead I had known of women who had been, particularly in Peru, whose husbands had worked there who had worked there for La Oroya Mine, and they came back to Lead and drink had ravaged them. And my parents were teetotalers. That was easy enough in Lead. But my husband and I made a conscious decision that we were not going to drink. And it was either don’t drink at all or get drunk Saturday night. There didn’t seem to be any in between. Well, I’m exaggerating, of course. But anyway, that was a stance that was sort of—it wasn’t the political thing to do. But I just didn’t want to fall into that trap of women sitting around in the morning and sitting around the pool drinking beer and continuing through the day. So it really harmed some people. Not all of them but there were a few cases where it really was harmful. But that was one thing that was out of step.

So there’s some loneliness, I’m assuming.

Oh, definitely.

Boredom, loneliness.

Not too much boredom. There was stuff going on. Well, house management.

Oh, so the drinking was also happy drinking.
Swent: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. It was social. It was the thing to do. The New Year’s Eve party went all night, literally all night. I was a wet blanket because I got tired at 2:00 in the morning and went home to bed. But I wasn’t supposed to do that.

Burnett: Well, presumably you hosted some of these parties. So—

Swent: Yeah. We served beer. That was the main thing. Oh, and rum. We could get rum and beer. And we weren’t averse to serving it. But we didn’t drink ourselves.

Burnett: Right, right. Just combing through the autobiography, autobiographical interview, you talk at some points the importance of being a role model, that you had a kind of responsibility. Could you talk a little bit about responsibility of being who you were in these communities?

Swent: Well, I guess I sort of felt that everywhere. In Lead I was a member of the upper class, I guess you’d call it. I wasn’t aware of being a role model but, yes, I felt I had to be careful what I did, just because. And in Tayoltita, of course, I was representing American women. And in Grants not so much because it was a going community already. But yeah. I always felt that I had to present a good image.

Burnett: For example, when you were in Tayoltita, did you ever get any frank conversation with them about their perception of you? Did they sort of say things about, “You American women are X?” What would they say?

Swent: Not till later but I stayed very close to the Cordova family. I think I told you this friendship goes back a hundred years. My father-in-law went there in 1913 and his colleague was Marino Cordova. And when I went to Tayoltita, Carlotta Cordova was my protectress. She sort of took me under her wing and we’ve kept in touch. She’s deceased now. But years later when I visited her, she’d moved to Mexico City with her daughter, and she told me then how people had looked at me and been nervous because my husband had grown up there and came in with this strange wife from this—and that people had really liked me and that I was kind of different. Well, for one thing I learned Spanish. I worked hard at it and learned. I don’t know how good it is but at least I learned Spanish more than just telling the maid to wash the clothes and make the bed.

Burnett: But that was a difference right there.
Yes, it was a big difference. I guess nobody else had bothered to do that. I mean I studied books and didn’t just pick it up. And she said that people really appreciated that. And they were aware of kind of the stress that I was under.

So your attitude towards community was a little bit unusual in the sense that wherever you go you have to be integrated to some degree. You have to be a member and that’s important to you.

Yes.

So a lot of wives of miners, as part of the ex-pat mining community, might be around the pool drinking [laughter] in the morning or just kind of isolated—

That’s right.

— and separated from —

Well, and often they go for a three or a five year contract and then move on, whereas we were rooted there. I mean my husband had long-time roots there. So that was a different situation for me.

A difference. Yeah, yeah.

I wasn’t a stranger, so to speak.

But you took that approach to Grants, New Mexico, because you weren’t—

No, no.

—in Grants and you weren’t rooted in Piedmont?

No.

But you took the same attitude of integration and openness when you were—

I did belong to a couple of women’s organizations. AAUW, the university women’s association, was in Grants and that was a community thing. And I
belonged to a women’s organization, long, old-time women’s organization that my mother was active in called PEO. That’s the Philanthropic and Educational Organization of Iowa.

Burnett: A very literal title.

Swent: Right. It started in Iowa over a century ago.

Burnett: Wow.

Swent: Anyway, that’s been a link in Lead and Grants and Piedmont, not in Mexico, of course. But those kinds of things translate from one place to another. And of course, WAAIME even here in the Bay Area.

Burnett: And I think this is possibly related, but what is the role of faith in getting through what I think might be difficult circumstances, I imagine?

Swent: Well, I think it’s been important to me. Of course, in Mexico, as a Protestant, we were a separate community. The Mexicans were obviously Roman Catholic. But we were still friends. And in Grants, church was an important part of our life and in Lead a very important part. So, yeah, it’s been a big part of my life. I’ve been active in a church wherever I’ve lived.

Burnett: And that again speaks to the community building that’s important for—

Swent: And I got an awfully good education at Wellesley, too. That has stood me in very good stead.

Burnett: Do you have or did you have a Wellesley community that followed you when you left?

Swent: No, no. No.

Burnett: I guess it was much more regional.

Swent: Yeah.

Burnett: You had to stay in the East if you were to take advantage of that.
Well, there’s a Wellesley club here. In the Bay area there are Wellesley clubs but certainly not in New Mexico or Mexico.

No, nor in South Dakota.

No, no.

Do you go to a Wellesley club here?

Some, yes.

Yeah?

Not as much now as I used to, but yes. I was president of the East Bay Wellesley Club and I’ve stayed in close touch with several of my classmates.

Yeah. Wow, that’s fantastic. So I guess I see this pattern in the interview and in your interviews of others, this importance of community, in maintaining community. What was the risk of not having community? What were some of the dangers? Did you see that there was another side, that things could be not so—

Well, as I say, people moving every few years, moving on. It can be a transient population, which is exciting for some but can be a hardship on others. I was fortunate that we didn’t move very often. We moved from house to house quite often but relative to most mining people I didn’t move very much because—

So people would move every few years to take advantage—

I think most of the South American contracts were for three years, so a lot of people would only serve the three years.

And why was that? Do you know? Is it something that was dictated by the—it’s the nature of the contracts? Could you renew, for example?

Oh, yes, of course.
Burnett: Oh, people did.

Swent: But a lot of people would move to another place then. So we stayed what was considered a long time at these places.

Burnett: Okay. So you were long-time residents, even though you had moved from place to place?

Swent: Right. [laughter]

Burnett: And so when you moved to Piedmont I think you maintained—I thought it was a tribute to the strength of these bonds, is that in Piedmont you weren’t mining—well, I guess Langan was. But you maintained community with these people, with friends.

Swent: Well, of course, we lived very close to my father-in-law. He was widowed by then but he was a mining engineer. We kept up with the mining groups, with WAAINE, and AINE and those things. And I mentioned my high school class. We still have an email group which is pretty amazing that we’ve kept going all these years.

Burnett: Right, okay. That’s a long—

Swent: It gets smaller and smaller.

Burnett: That’s true.

Swent: But I have two, and actually, interestingly enough, they’re men. The women seem to have not lasted as long. But two of my classmates I’ve known form infancy and we’re still emailing each other. That’s pretty amazing.

Burnett: It is, it is. Did you pull on that network when you were doing the western mining in the twentieth century?

Swent: Not really. No.

Burnett: Okay. So it’s mostly Berkeley? It’s mostly Berkeley geologists and metallurgists?
Swent: Right.

Burnett: And I think you said there was an administrative assistant who was from the mining program at Berkeley who had brought this to your attention. That’s what is in the Willa Baum interview.

Swent: Okay, yes. Well, as I say, we had a big advisory committee and they suggested interviewees. As I said, after a little while people came to us and wanted to be interviewed.

Burnett: So there’s—

Swent: I just wanted to say that two of our advisers, Mike Bickers and Bill Humphrey, were very keen about doing fundraising when they retired. In fact, they were responsible for getting that brochure done. And they went to the Hearsts. They had connections with mining companies. They were keen about going out to Phelps Dodge and various companies to get funding for this project. They went to the Hearsts and got a hundred-thousand-dollar endowment And I do want that to get on record.

Burnett: Yeah, yeah. And this was when? When was that endowment made?

Swent: I don’t remember. You’d have to look it up. It was probably about 2000.

Burnett: And so when do you feel like the momentum began to wind down on the— you said people were coming for interviews. It sounds like it was an extremely active program.

Swent: Yeah. Well, the local mining association is not as active. I don’t know if it even exists anymore. The WAAIME’s folded up I think. So there’s just not the cohesion of the mining community here that there used to be.

Burnett: So going forward for the future of the series, what would you think should be pursued in terms of continued support for the mining program?

Swent: Well, I think the only future in mining these days in California is aggregate, which has to be mined, and sand and gravel that you just scoop up. And, of course, salt used to be a major mineral product but that’s pretty much gone now. But that’s a story worth telling, that the salt beds have been taken over for housing developments. And that was from the time of the Gold Rush, that
they needed the salt. That’s a good story that hasn’t been told. And sand and gravel is just not appreciated. And the communities don’t want a gravel pit in their neighborhood. Yet, again, they like the houses that need the gravel. It’s a matter of education often.

01-00:57:00
Burnett: And so in some small way that was what you saw as your role, to provide the foundations at least for education about what mining really is.

01-00:57:11
Swent: Hope that these will be used for research by people. The ones I interviewed already know how important it is but I hope that they’ll be used by a wider audience who might appreciate these people.

01-00:57:27
Burnett: Well, that sounds like a good place to stop because I think we’re going to end the tape.

[End of Interview]

[Added by Mrs. Swent during editing: Fortunately, I could take advantage of my husband Langan’s business trips, International Mining History Conferences, and vacation trips, in order to interview people in faraway places, like Simon Strauss in Massachusetts, Robert Haldeman in Chile, Roy Woodall in Australia, and others in Salt Lake City, Los Angeles, Tucson, and Lead, South Dakota. I charged to the project the time I spent in research, interviewing, and editing, but never any travel expenses, foreign or local.]