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Dublin Gulch's "Tap 'er Light" Reveals Butte Soul

A Newspaper Column by Evan Barrett

August 27, 2016

Noted Montana historian K. Ross Toole always said the history of Montana really started with the industrialization of Butte. Understanding Montana, even today, requires one to understand Butte. You can get a sense of Butte's history in many ways, most recently in the compelling music and powerful lyrics of Dublin Gulch's new CD: "Tap 'er light."

The opening song about a watering hole that never locked its door for over 100 years, the venerable M&M, begins to tell the tale of Butte distinctiveness:

*This old bar, it never closes. There's no lock upon its door
No latch to rap or rattle. No patron is ignored.
For there's coffee on the counter to fill your cup with cheer
No matter where you hail from, you're always welcome here*

*So raise your glass to the M & M,
We'll never see its likes again
The door is always open day or night
And when you go be sure and tap 'er light*

"Tap 'er light" is a musical excursion into the heart and soul of Butte. Butte's Irish minstrels, Dublin Gulch, have been at it for 25 years. Here Butte's Tom Powers, Walkerville's Mick Cavanaugh, Helena's Jim Schultz and Missoula's John Joyner are augmented by world class talent that finds its way to Butte's annual Irish festival

Jim Shultz's music, when combined with his lyrics, reveals Butte and the Butte experience so well that the Mining City's Chief Executive Matt Vincent recently recognized Dublin Gulch and made Shultz and Joyner Honorary Butte Citizens.

This is Butte soul music, full of intensity, emotion, sentiment and strain, but brimming with hope that the hard work and struggles of underground miners will somehow be balanced out by the joy of family and fight.

Butte pride, that "us against the world" mentality, carries those in Butte from their youth to their old age. In "Ballad of the Button Box," Dublin Gulch pays tribute to John "The Yank" Harrington, a Butte icon who played the accordion with them until he was nearly 101 years old. In it, the aging Yank proudly proclaims his Butte heritage:

*Music is my calling card wherever I may go
I'm John "the Yank" Harrington from County Silver Bow*

But in old Butte, few miners reached a ripe old age. Whether from the suddenness of a mining accident or the slow strangling from silicosis (the "Miners' Con"), farewells came

early among those who toiled in the company's underground shafts and tunnels. "Farewell Johnny Miner" speaks out to the departed:

*They promised you the earth sometimes, For to dig the copper from their mines
Now, the justice for their crimes' Is, farewell, Johnny Miner*

*And farewell Butte, Finn Town, too. Dublin Gulch, the same to you.
Walkerville, we'll bid adieu. And farewell, Johnny Miner*

"The Copper Road" articulates the seeming futility of living and working in a one-company town. It played out in thousands upon thousands of Butte lives as they tried through their unions to match the strength of the company:

*On your knees ten hours a day, muckin' out the copper clay
Just three dollars is your pay on the Copper Road.*

*Everyday plays out the same, Just a pawn in a rich man's game
Still you remain To carry the load On the Copper Road*

Underground mining was perilous. "The Orphan Girl," named after a Butte mine, reflects the balance of fear and hope that each miner took with him as he dropped daily into the mine shaft mouth of the industrial behemoth for a shift that he hoped to survive:

*If there's a mine for us, it's the Orphan Girl
Where the rattle and the fuss of the steam drill's skirl
Takes us deeper down the hole, closer to the Devil's dust
For the bounty we'll be bringing from the Orphan Girl*

And the tragedy of company greed stealing even from the miners' children is displayed in "The Ballad of Willie and Millie" when the company's drive for an extra buck leads to the destruction of their prized Columbia Gardens:

*Well, the kids, they moved away and it happened one day,
the mine said they'd found a new load
And the whole city cried when the company decided
that Columbia Gardens must go.*

But family did hold the social fabric together. Behind most every miner was a miner's wife, fearful each day as her husband went underground. She was there because of the love that sparked between the two, a love remembered in a haunting ballad "The River and the Road:"

*I sit beside my own hearth's fire And gaze into the flame
The embers fall and I recall When first you spoke my name
When first you spoke my name*

Whether you still live in Butte or are a Butte survivor elsewhere awaiting the opportunity to return; whether you'd secretly like to experience Butte or you are a little afraid of the overpowering myth of Butte; as a Montanan you need to know the depth of Butte to

know your state. You will know Butte better after spending an hour with Dublin Gulch and “Tap ‘er light.”

“Tap ‘er light” can be found in Butte at Cavanaugh’s County Celtic and online on Amazon.com.

Evan Barrett of Butte, recently retired from 47 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He currently writes columns and commentaries, is an award-winning producer of Montana history films and occasionally teaches.

(848 words in the body)