

# M Montana Episodes

## The Butte Walkathon, 1931

### Introduction

by Fred and Mary Kay Voget

**O**n a visit to Anaconda, Montana, in summer 1970, we were introduced to Sue Martinson, a former Deer Lodge County county treasurer. We had heard of her participation in a walkathon held in Butte in 1931, and we asked her if she would share her recollections of the event. She readily agreed and on June 2, 1970, Mary Kay Voget recorded in shorthand an oral history of the event. The next day it was transcribed verbatim by Mary Kay and a copy was given to Sue.

Sue Chabala and Roy Martinson's story took place during the depths of the Great Depression, which began with the stock market crash of 1929 and proved to be the most severe economic disaster of the industrialized world. By 1931 stocks were worth only 20 percent of their 1929 value, industrial output in the United States fell to about 50 percent, and 25 to 30 percent of the work force was unemployed. By 1935, 11,000 of the 25,000 banks in the United States had failed, and drought devastated parts of the Midwest. Ford Motor Company closed down. Copper prices fell to five cents a pound. The Anaconda Copper Mining Company, which owned or controlled most of the industry in Montana, was slow to close its operations. At first workers in Anaconda and Butte were put on part-time status, then two weeks out of six, then no work at all, except what was needed for maintenance.<sup>1</sup>



Courtesy Mary Kay Voget

In the depths of the Great Depression, with ballroom dancing a widespread activity in Montana and across the nation, promoters saw opportunity in marathon dance contests called walkathons. As the scene depicted in this unidentified magazine photograph attests, contestants were pushed to the limits of endurance. Such was the case for Sue Chabala and Roy Martinson when they entered just such a marathon in Butte in 1931.



Butte and Anaconda were a microcosm of the hard times in the rest of the country. The immigrant workers who had been recruited by Marcus Daly, known as the Copper King, were confused and dismayed that there was no longer any work for them. As the depression deepened, President Herbert Hoover periodically tried to reassure the people that the hard times were temporary and that if people worked harder and helped each other, things would improve. By 1931, however, unemployment reached 12 million and hard work, thrift, and honest effort no longer seemed the way to get ahead. Hope and confidence gave way to worry and despair. Workers were alarmed to read and hear on the radio that hundreds of thousands of idled workers throughout the country were on the move looking for any kind of work. The unemployed, mostly young men but including some women, drifted across the country, panhandling for pennies and nickels, stealing chickens, and begging for leftovers at back doors. Able-bodied men left home to “go on the bum” wherever there was work. The Northern Pacific Railway estimated it had thrown 683,000 “bums” from its boxcars in a single year. In contrast, the president of Baltimore and Ohio Railroad stated publicly that there was something wrong when able-bodied, willing men were unable to find work, and that he personally would steal before he would go hungry.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the hard times, 1931 was a time of widespread ballroom dancing. In Montana, dance contests were held regularly in Butte, Anaconda, and Helena. Fox-

trot exhibitions were held at the Columbia Gardens in Butte and the Montana Hotel in Anaconda. There were free dances every Friday and Saturday night in Anaconda and Butte, and every Wednesday night there were free socials and dances at the Catholic halls. Sue Chabala and Roy Martinson and other young people like them, who had no prospects for a job and little money, had to postpone any hope for marriage and owning a place of their own.

**S**ue Chabala’s parents, Michael and Mary Chabala, were immigrants from Czechoslovakia and Hungary, respectively, and they had ten children all living at home. Michael and his four sons all worked as laborers at the smelter in Anaconda, and the brothers earned a little money with cleaning jobs, hauling, fixing cars, selling magazines, and migrating to nearby farms for seasonal work. Sue, the third youngest in the family, and her sisters helped with many tasks around the house and also worked at cleaning jobs. Once in a while Sue got a day’s work at the dime store. When the boys were working they pooled their money, bought a washing machine and had a telephone installed to make things easier for their mother. When George, one of the brothers, bought an old hearse, he and his brothers learned how to fix it. After that, they were much in demand to fix other cars.

While they had work the family did fine, and they even managed to save some of their earnings. Mary

Chabala was frugal and did her own sewing and canning, and somehow she managed to feed her large family on very little. It helped that one hundred pounds of potatoes cost only eighty-five cents; Carnation milk, ten cans for seventy-nine cents; flour, three cents a pound; and a two-pound can of cocoa, twenty-nine cents. Michael and his four sons regularly brought home fresh trout and game, which were plentiful. But as they continued to be out of regular employment they used up their savings until even that was gone. Then they charged everything at Bolkovatz’s Store—coal, wood, food, shoes, clothing.<sup>3</sup>

Sue Chabala’s high school sweetheart was Roy Martinson. Roy had lost his father when he was four and his mother when he was twelve. Altogether there were five boys who were raised by his stepfather. They worked at whatever they could find and learned to do everything for themselves. Roy and Sue liked to dance, and in 1930 and 1931 they won the state fox-trot competition and received engraved silver loving cups. George Chabala would cram as many as twenty-five young people into his hearse—named the “Black Maria” by the family—and they would all go to the dances. In this bleak time the dances were a diversion for the young people, something to look forward to, something to do.

When promoters from Los Angeles and Chicago introduced walkathons to the West Coast they had learned they were good money-makers. Butte was selected because at the time it was a thriving town with great civic pride. So, in 1931, a walkathon was advertised in the

1. Isaac F. Marcossou, *Anaconda* (Kingsport, Tenn., 1957), 221-22; K. Ross Toole, *Montana: An Uncommon Land* (Norman, 1995), 166, 244.

2. T. H. Watkins, *The Great Depression: America in the Thirties* (New York, 1995), 55-56, 66. See also Studs Terkel,

*Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York, 1970).

3. Bolkovatz’s and Kelly’s were two general stores in Anaconda where workers could make purchases on credit. On commodity prices, see Scott Derks, *Value of the Dollar: Prices and Incomes in the United*

*States, 1860-1989* (Detroit, Mich., 1994). Suggested readings for this time period include the *Montana Standard* and *Anaconda Standard*, April 16-June 2, 1931, and H. Minar Shoebottom, *Anaconda: Life of Marcus Daly the Copper King* (Harrisburg, Pa., 1956).



Butte *Montana Standard*, in flyers distributed in Butte and Anaconda, and on the radio. Twenty couples were chosen from many applicants, a few of whom were leftovers from other walkathons and who followed from place to place because food and shelter were provided. Each candidate was required to have a good appearance, a nice personality, and a willingness to perform. It was imperative that they must be good dancers. They were required to undergo physical examinations by a doctor, and they had to have written parental permission.

The Butte Walkathon was held continuously at the Masonic Temple from April 16, 1931, to

June 2, 1931, day and night. When Sue and Roy were accepted, their family and friends advised them to go ahead. If they did not like it they could drop out. Walkathons were something new, and it did not seem any more outlandish than other things people were doing to earn money—flagpole-sitting, goldfish-swallowing, and talkathon contests.<sup>4</sup> Sue and Roy were sponsored by the Anaconda Service Station, which furnished them with everything they needed. They were sure they could win, and the \$1,000 prize money would make it possible for them to realize some of their dreams. The money would go a long way toward buying a modest

house of their own. Or, if they had a car in mind, the very popular Model-A Ford was \$430, and the four-cylinder Plymouth Roadster was \$670.<sup>5</sup>

The following account by Sue Martinson details the forty-eight days and nights she and Roy walked, danced, or just kept moving, as well as their wedding, which took place on the dance floor on May 21, the thirty-fifth day of the walkathon.

4. Charles Panati, *Panati's Parade of Fads, Follies, and Manias: The Origins of Our Most Cherished Obsessions* (New York, 1991).

5. Joseph N. Kane, *Famous First Facts: A Record of First Happenings, Discoveries, and Inventions in the United States*, 3d ed. (New York, 1964); Richard M. Langworth, *The Encyclopedia of American Cars, 1930-1980: Fifty Years of Automobile History* (New York, 1984), 318, 561, 568.



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

Hoping to collect the \$1,000 prize money, Sue and Roy were the Butte Walkathon's "Sweetheart Couple." With twenty other pairs they danced at Butte's Masonic Temple at 314 West Park Street (above), probably in the building's large basement.

Publicity and additional events such as talkathons were part of the show, as were sponsors, as this May 15, 1931, Anaconda *Standard* advertisement (right) attests.



## ANACONDA NIGHT At the Montana WALKATHON Butte Temple Ballroom TONITE!

Special Stunts  
Acts and  
Entertainment  
For  
Anaconda  
Day

Program Starts  
AT  
9 P. M.



DICK BUCKLEY  
Master of Ceremonies

TONITE!

Feature  
Attraction

The  
Talkathon  
Starts  
Tonight

See and Hear  
Montana's  
Talking  
Champions

**BOOST FOR ROY AND SUE**  
The Walkathon Sweetheart Couple—Sponsored by the  
**ANACONDA SERVICE STATION**



## Account by Sue Chabala Martinson

I graduated from [Anaconda High School] in 1928. My mother was sick a lot and I stayed home and helped take care of her. I also worked at the dime store once in a while. There were ten children in the family and I was the seventh, and with all of us living at home there was a lot to do. My father and my brothers worked as laborers at the smelter. When we all worked we did all right and even saved money, but when the Hill shut down and our money ran out we charged everything at Bolkovatz's—our coal and wood, our food, shoes and clothes. Once we had a bill of about five thousand dollars before the Hill started up again, but when we were all working again we gradually paid it off.

The walkathon was advertised in the papers and on the radio, and entrants were solicited for the Montana Walkathon. It was brought in by an outside outfit with promoters from Chicago and Los Angeles who brought with them a group of kids from all over the country. Some of the kids who followed along were leftovers from other walkathons and they competed with the new contestants which we did not think was fair. The walkathon started on April 16, 1931, and lasted until June 2, 1931, night and day. These marathon events had already been tried on the West Coast and had been money-makers.

The prize was \$1,000. It was held in Butte at the Masonic Temple. Roy and I decided to enter. We had to take a physical and the company paid for this. We also needed written parental permis-

sion. We talked it over with my parents and Roy's family. They said they didn't mind and that we could always drop out if we decided we had enough.

I brought a couple of changes of clothes and we went over to Butte. Gert and Walter Martin of the Anaconda Service Station sponsored us and they bought us a wardrobe of sweaters, skirts, pants, etc., with "Anaconda Service Station" printed on them. They said it was good advertising for them. The merchants in Anaconda helped Roy and me with things we needed, and later Mrs. Van Ostrum gave me my wedding dress. Wahlstedt Jewelers gave us the wedding ring.

**There were girls'** quarters on the one side and men's quarters on the other. Cots were set up and there was a nurse in attendance and two doctors. If you had a toothache, a dentist came in and pulled your tooth right on the floor. Beauty operators came in and fixed the girls' hair while we walked. Showers were provided, but you had to take a shower during your break. At first we were allowed a ten-minute break every two hours. The walkathon was open to the public every evening beginning at 6 P.M. Crowds came every night and the place was always packed.

We ate eight times a day while we were walking. I remember one meal. Celery sticks and orange sticks were served as one meal every day and we were all required to eat that. It was supposed to be good for our nerves. Butte restau-

rants donated our big meal, good advertising they said. Tables were wheeled out onto the floor and you ate while you kept moving. We usually went to the restroom during our ten-minute break and also showered and dressed.

There were trainers and when we had muscle cramps they would massage your legs or put you in ice water. If you were hard to awaken after your ten-minute break, they would stand you up in ice water to bring you around.

For the first fifty hours, neither Roy nor I slept at all. They kept telling us we had to sleep, but we were too excited I guess. Besides we were used to getting along without much sleep as we had been going to dances almost every night and were in good training for this. We had danced the hours away every night for years with very little sleep. We had won two silver loving cups in dance contests, and we were the Fox-trot Champions of Montana. We were often featured soloists around the state. Remember, this was a time when people did a great deal of dancing, and the big bands played all around the country.

They had a chair propped at the foot of our mattresses so we slept with our feet at a slant so we wouldn't get swollen feet. Including the ones who had come along from California, there were twenty couples. But several of them dropped out after the first two days.

There were about eight couples from Butte and Anaconda. This walkathon company had probably started in California, then had gone to



Arizona. Some of the original contestants who did not win elected to follow along and try again. Before we decided to enter, we had listened to them talk about it on the radio and decided it was worth a try. However, we felt it was unfair to bring in leftover contestants from other walkathons because they had picked up the experience and had the advantage of knowing what to expect.

The rules were strict and the Butte officials saw to it that the thing was run straight. Butte was very sensitive about its reputation and image and didn't want to have anything that wasn't open and above board.

**Our quarters were** kept spotless. Crowds of people came to the walkathon like they do to football games. People would pick a favorite and then they would come and cheer for that one. They often brought food and flowers or little gifts. Sometimes people would collect money and when they got \$5 they would give it to Roy and me to put on an exhibition fox-trot for them. Sometimes we would sing over the radio their favorite songs. "Smile, Darn Ya, Smile" became my theme song, and "Just a Gigolo" was Roy's. Everybody got quite a kick out of this because Roy was very shy and sweet and the audience went wild when he sang this song. The town of Anaconda really backed us—everybody pooled their money to get enough gas to get to Butte. They would pack their cars and come jam-packed, and then they would sit in the bleachers all around us and cheer us on.

We had a lot of pictures which

were taken, but everything had to be locked up or it was stolen. However, it helped that everyone was required to take a break at the same time. The trainers would come to your cot and shake you to wake you up, stand you up, and if necessary put you in cold water. If nothing worked and they couldn't get you awake again, then you were disqualified.

People would come, bring their whole family and their lunch, and spend the whole evening until after midnight and sometimes later. Sometimes for variety and to help eliminate some of the contestants, they would schedule derbies. You would have to walk over obstacles, sometimes you would have to run for a ways, then walk, then hop. Another time you had to run around and around the floor. This was very effective in eliminating the couples who were just too tired to keep up.

The big bands would come through Butte and come to play at the walkathon. This was also part of the entertainment attraction. One night they scheduled a talkathon. That was worse than anything. They would have these women talk continuously all night, all at the same time. It drove us crazy listening to the incessant talking that went on hour after hour all night while we had to keep moving. It was just another gimmick and they had a prize for the woman who was able to talk the longest.

Roy's family and mine came up almost every night, or at least some of them. One time Roy got an infection on his toe. The doctor lanced his toe on the floor and he started walking again. We wore sandals and huaraches, some of which were donated by the stores. If your feet got swollen, the trainers

taped yours legs and feet. But we had to keep moving. When they lanced Roy's toe they put a bandage on it and cut a piece out of his shoe so he could keep going. Couples would hang onto each other, one dozing or asleep and the other one awake, one pushing the other around the dance floor.

After we had walked one hundred hours, they cut our rest period to ten minutes every three hours, and then kept adding obstacles for us to walk over. About two or three in the morning most of the crowd had gone home and there might be only fifty or sixty people left. Then they would bring in coffee to the sleepwalkers. Towards the end there were only three couples.

One time for publicity, they held Anaconda Day and the whole walkathon group came down to Anaconda on the back of panel trucks. We had to keep walking around while the truck traveled and there were officials behind to see that nobody stopped walking. When we got to Anaconda, we had to walk all over town. Good publicity they said. And for variety. We also walked around Butte from time to time in order to get some fresh air.

I gained ten pounds at the walkathon. I went from eighty-five to ninety-five pounds. I guess all the dancing we had done all our young lives had been good training. And more food than we were used to. Actually, the whole atmosphere of the walkathon was quite glamorous. We were kind of celebrities. People came from all over the state to see us. I remember once a group of people from California were going through Butte and came to see us. When they got back to California, they



sent us a crate of oranges. The walkathon was broadcast on the radio.

After a while some of the participants went a little rumb from no sleep. Then they did all sorts of crazy things. Girls got crying jags and wailed that their feet were hurting. Then toward the end you had to go six hours before you got a ten-minute rest. Some had hallucinations and would start slugging at imaginary foes. One of the girls lay down and cried and refused to get up off the floor so they had to eliminate her. I got the idea at one point that everyone was mad at me, and I cried and sobbed as I walked for the best part of the evening. Roy once wandered off through the bleachers looking for his lost clothes. Someone else ran through the crowd chasing an imaginary dog. Someone else thought he was a dog and went around barking. It is amazing what lack of sleep can do.

We were required to watch our language and were to act like ladies and gentlemen. When one guy got very tired and out of it from fatigue, he started to get foulmouthed. He was immediately told by the officials to clean up his language or he would be disqualified. We were constantly being reminded that families were there with their children, that they had paid to get in and they didn't want any complaints.

The contestants who had come along from California told us that the one they had been in before had no

### CONTESTANTS MARRIED



YOUNG ANACONDA COUPLE  
 Mr. Sue Chabala, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. M. Chabala, 905 East Fifth street, became the bride of Roy T. Martinson, 1220 East Sixth street, at a ceremony performed on the floor of the "walkathon" in Butte last night—Mr. and Mrs. Martinson are sponsored by the Anaconda Service Station in the "walkathon."

After the walkathon's "Sweetheart Couple" married on May 21, 1931, they posed for this photograph, which appeared in the Anaconda *Standard* on May 22. They were disqualified from the walkathon ten days later when they went by car to Anaconda because Sue's mother had died.

nurses and no doctor and that it was not run nearly as well as the one in Butte. They also said the care they received in Butte was better.

Roy and I were called the Sweetheart Couple because we had been going together since we were in high school and we had been planning to be married as soon as we had enough money. In fact, our hope of winning the \$1,000 so we could get married was our big reason for entering the contest.

One day the people in charge of the walkathon came and talked to us and asked us to get married as part of the publicity. We thought about it and decided to go ahead since we were confident we were going to win the prize and they offered us an additional \$50. When we agreed, stores from Butte and Anaconda brought in wedding dresses and veils and I tried them on while we walked around. Two women held up a sheet in front of me while I tried them on. The suits for the fellows were rented, and the bridesmaids' dresses were on loan from the stores. The bride's outfit was donated to me as part of the remuneration. Most of the rented suits for the fellows were too long and swirled around their feet, but there was no time to shorten them. Besides, they had to be returned to the store to be sold later, so it was decided to leave them as they were. When it was all over we came out of it with about \$1,000, if you counted all the wedding gifts we

received. Sometimes people would send us a dollar in an envelope, and occasionally even as much as \$5 or \$10, with their good wishes. They raised the admission price for the day of the wedding and they played up the romantic angle of the thing.

The day of the wedding there was a mob, and people were turned away by the hundreds. It was called the "Wedding of the Dolls." Everyone in



the walkathon was part of the wedding party. We were married on the 21st of May. There was a huge wedding cake and everyone who came was given a small sample of cake. There were at least 1,500 people packed into the hall. We were married by a justice of the peace, with the promise that later we would be married by a priest. When we were married, they had calling cards printed for us which read:

Mr. and Mrs. Roy Martinson  
will be At Home after May  
21st at the Walkathon,  
Butte, Montana

Dick Buckley was the MC. He used to sing "Ding Dong Daddy from Dumas," and he also used to ride a bicycle backwards for laughs. Maurice Schiffman was the head trainer.

When we were married, Father Pirnat of our parish was supposed to come over and marry us, but Father Leithiam (St. Paul's Parish) wouldn't let him because he had heard the boys and girls were sleeping together, which wasn't true at all. In fact, our quarters were far apart and we were under constant supervision. Aside from that, there was no time and we were too tired to do any smooching. The walkathon people kept assuring us they would let us go to Anaconda to get our marriage blessed.

One of my brothers had a Black Mariah, an old one, and he piled as many of his friends as would fit and would bring

them over to Butte. They also ran special buses from Anaconda. My mother had high blood pressure, but she came every chance she got. When she came she would always bring something good to eat that she had made for us, like chocolate cake.

On the second of June, one of the officials came and told us he was going to take us over to Anaconda. We had been to Anaconda once or twice before to walk or dance for publicity purposes, always in panel trucks with police

escorts. So we assumed they were keeping their promise to take us all over to have our marriage blessed in Anaconda. However, when we got outside, the doctor told me my mother was sick and they were going to let me go home to visit her. There was an automobile waiting and we wondered about this, as we had to sit down in the back seat. On the way home the doctor broke the news that my mother had died earlier that day of a cerebral hemorrhage. She had baked a chocolate sheet cake to

take over that evening when she planned to come. Anyway, we were automatically disqualified when we rode home in the car and for us that was the end of the walkathon and a lot of happy dreams.

The rest of the week was like a bad dream but somehow we got through it. After we were home again, we were allowed only to sleep for a short time and then we were awakened. We had constant supervision while we slept and were awakened and made to stand up every hour, then every two hours, and gradually longer. Our sponsors hired a nurse for about two weeks to see that we got back to normal gradually. There were reports of previous walkathon contestants who had gone to sleep utterly exhausted and had lapsed into unconsciousness and had never awakened. After we dropped out there were two couples left and they split the money.

## SUE and ROY MARTINSON

Invite you to attend a reception and dance  
to be given in their honor at the

### A. O. H. BALLROOM SATURDAY, MAY 30

Every stunt of the Walkathon shown—  
beds on the floor, stunts, singing, dancing,  
entertainment galore.

### ADMISSION ENTIRE SHOW AND DANCE

Gentlemen 75c, Ladies 50c

Sue Will Display Her Wedding Trousseau  
Presented to Her by Mrs. Van Ostrum.

When Sue and Roy decided to marry on the dance floor, the wedding became a sensation. Ads like this one from the May 29, 1931, Anaconda *Standard* declared a dance and reception in their honor. The wedding May 21 was mobbed and hundreds of people had to be turned away.



# Conclusion

**Sue Chabala and Roy** Martinson were confident that if it had not been for the sudden death of Sue's mother, they would have continued until they had won the walkathon. The newly married couple returned to the family home and Sue, at age twenty-one, assumed the role of mother in comforting the grief-stricken family and keeping it together.

Later in June Sue and Roy had their marriage blessed by Father John Pirnat in a simple ceremony at St. Peter's Church in

Anaconda, followed by a small reception at home. They continued to dance. Much in demand for public exhibitions in Anaconda, Butte, and Helena, they were able to earn a little extra money.

When Sue became pregnant they managed an apartment house in return for an apartment of their own. Their only son, Tearle, died in 1944 of polio when he was nine years old, and Roy died in 1956. After this, Sue was elected treasurer of Deer Lodge County, a job she held for thirteen years.

Sue is now eighty-eight years old and lives in Anaconda, as does her sister Margaret. Another sister lives in Pocatello, Idaho. *M*

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Despite their disqualification from the 1931 walkathon, Sue and Roy continued to dance for exhibitions in Helena, Anaconda, and Butte, the latter of which is pictured below circa 1935 with its bustling downtown in the foreground and Butte Hill at upper left.

MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

