Floods of 1908

Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m Dick Gibson.

Butte was booming in 1908. For all practical purposes, the War of the Copper Kings was over, and money that had been tied up in litigation freed investors to build, build, build. The building boom of 1906-1907 saw some of the grandest construction effort ever undertaken in Butte’s business district.

The county’s population – mostly within the built-up area of Butte – was nearly 57,000 in the 1910 census, a gain of more than 20% since 1900.

And in 1908, the city directory listed 324 named mines.

Street paving was just beginning, and there were still plenty of dirt roads and streets.

Unpaved roads and walkways and extensive mine operations all over the Hill – just imagine 324 mine dumps, some huge, some small – meant that storm water would likely have not just run off, it would have run off carrying plenty of dirt and debris with it.

Both in the city and nearby, pretty much all the trees were gone for fuel, timbers, and building construction. The land was bare. Mine tailings and sewage alike were discharged into Silver Bow Creek.

The stream was already nothing like the original creek that the first prospectors in 1864 likened to a silver bow glistening in the sun. There was little to prevent mass runoff and flooding.

Late May and early June 1908 were some of the wettest days in Montana history. Rain, wet snow, and snowmelt combined to produce one of the most devastating floods to ever hit the region. On May 31 in Butte there was “too much snow” for Memorial Day services, and the parade was cancelled. On June 2, Butte received 0.9” of rain, part of a storm system that affected most of western Montana and disrupted train travel. By that day, there had been no through train into Butte for 48 hours on the Northern Pacific, whose trains were stalled in Billings and at Drummond. And it continued to rain and snow. At Elk Park on June 2, the Butte Miner reported that “the flat resembled a huge lake, and the Boulder River is a raging torrent.”

June 4, 1908, was a Thursday, and the devastation really began to impact Butte. The dam at White’s Ice Pond (Avoca Reservoir, where the Butte Country Club is today) failed. Water rushed down to Silver Bow Creek, already swollen, inundating the Montana Power Company substation at Oxford and Montana Streets, where the water was four feet deep. Silver Bow Creek was reported to be a mile wide. And on that night, the rain changed to snow. Nine inches fell, dropping power lines all over the city. Any power that remained to transmit was cut off to avoid electric shocks from downed lines – a team of horses from the Lavelle Livery was electrocuted at Park and Washington, and several residents narrowly escaped the same fate. “Plague of Darkness Reigns,” the red-ink headline in the Butte Miner proclaimed. No street lights, no electric trolleys, no other power – except for the central business district which was served by the Phoenix Power plant in the alley south of the City Hall.

By June 5, the situation with railroads was called the “worst in history” in the state.

On Saturday, June 6, “Entire Montana Now Paralyzed by Destructive Floods,” according to the Anaconda Standard. The Miner reported that William Clark’s Milltown dam at Bonner was safe, although at one point 15 feet of water was going over the spillway, and part of the structure of this brand-new dam was dynamited to allow more water to flow through.

By June 7, the rains had slacked off, and the Miner reported that “a strange object appeared over the western part of the city, resembling a ball of fire. Later it was identified as the sun, which disappeared several weeks since.”

The long-term legacy of the 1908 flood was toxic mine tailings washed down Silver Bow Creek and the Clark Fork River. Vast quantities, enough to cover more than 1,000 acres, spread throughout the watershed and piled up behind the Milltown Dam, ultimately killing life along huge reaches of the river. Today’s environmental cleanup, costing tens of millions of dollars, is necessary not just because the mine operations were cavalier in their concern for the environment, but because one of the most intense periods of mine and smelter activity coincided with a remarkable period of rain and snow falling on a landscape that had been modified so it could not cope with the precipitation.

As writer Edwin Dobb has said, "Like Concord, Gettysburg, and Wounded Knee, Butte is one of the places America came from." Join us next time for more of Butte, America’s Story.