Macaroni Factory

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

The southwest corner of Colorado and Porphyry Streets has been a vacant lot since the mid-1950s. What was there? Well, just the largest macaroni factory in the West.

Savin Lisa was born in Turin, Italy, July 7, 1858. He came to America at age 15 and worked in the mines of Michigan’s Copper Country for about 6 years, when he came to Butte in 1879. In Butte, he worked in the mines for a few years, but found his calling as a merchant. By the late 1880s he was running a successful grocery business with the main store at 63 East Park. He expanded into the macaroni manufacturing business with a small factory in Great Falls in 1898. It was so successful that he needed a larger facility and a better transportation system, so he established the Imperial Paste Manufacturing and Mercantile Company in Butte in 1901. Spelled “paste,” the Italian word was pronounced pasta.

With $50,000 in capital, Lisa built the 3-story Lisa Block at 401 S. Colorado in 1901. The first floor contained a corner store together with the macaroni factory. The upper levels held offices and lodgings, including Lisa’s own residence, together with other aspects of the factory such as the drying room, to which the pasta was taken by elevator. The building was directly west across Colorado Street from the Garfield School, at the corner of Colorado and Porphyry. In the early 1950s a coffee roasting business was in the building, and by 1957 the corner had become the vacant lot that it is today.

In 1902, the new factory was touted as “the largest and best-equipped macaroni factory in the West,” the closest to the sources of raw material (wheat from North Dakota) and with a large, ready market (Butte). The Great Falls facility produced 300 pounds of product a day, but the Butte operation was up to 2,500 pounds a day within a year of opening and reportedly had the capacity for considerable expansion. The Anaconda Standard reported that there was only one other macaroni manufacturer in the United States with the capacity of the Imperial Paste Company. The company had presses to make traditional macaroni, “fine threads (vermicelli),” lozenges, stars, disks, ellipses, and “other fanciful forms,” and also produced three kinds of spaghetti, ave maria pasta (small, short cylinders), and alphabet macaroni.

The factory did not use Butte city water, but rather relied on water from Oro Fino Springs, north of town.

Savin Lisa continued as the company treasurer, but by 1902 the president was Abraham Yoder and the Vice President was David Charles. Charles also had a gent’s furnishings store at 905 E. Front Street, and in 1907 he established and became president of the Miners Savings Bank and Trust, with offices on Park Street. Lisa was prominent in Butte’s business circles and active in men’s social clubs. He started Butte’s Christoforo Colombo Society, the Italian lodge comparable to the Irish Knights of Columbus. He was also a 32nd-degree Mason, an Elk, a Knight of Pythias, and a Shriner. If that wasn’t enough, he was an elected Silver Bow County Commissioner for three years, and served as the Italian consul for Montana, Wyoming and Idaho. Lisa was the Butte representative for several trans-Atlantic steamship lines. He was a busy man!

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.