Public Bath House

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

In 1884, the northwest corner of Arizona and Granite Streets was occupied by the channel of the stream that curved south out of Dublin Gulch, behind the Butte Brewery and on eventually to Silver Bow Creek. Arizona Street existed in concept, but north of Broadway it was undefined.

By 1888, the “stream” was little more than a ditch, labeled “open sewer,” and a berm along its eastern side held a dirt path that crossed the northwest corner of the Granite-Arizona intersection. The Public School (later Washington Jr. High) was a half-block to the east. In 1900, the ditch was gone, pretty much covered over, but there was nothing around that corner other than some small tenements on the east side of Arizona north of Granite.

About 1905-06, the first and probably only building to stand on the northwest corner was erected. It was built as a gymnasium and natatorium (swimming pool). The address was 125 E. Granite. The Butte Brewery was just off to the northwest; the Dorothy Apartments were down Granite at Wyoming. And new homes were popping up on Granite and Quartz east of Arizona.

I’m not certain who had the building built – was it truly “public baths,” as indicated in a 1906 photo caption? Or was it a place where the public could use the water supply? The “plunge,” which meant the swimming pool, was 20 feet by 50 feet. It’s not clear where in the building it was located, but by about 1910, the second floor held a gymnasium and the plunge was “not used.”

In October 1910 the gymnasium was taken over by Prof. Jerry McCarthy for the Olympic Athletic Club. The club had been meeting at 307 North Main, today the parking lot east of the Archives.

Jerry McCarthy, who lived at 614 West Park, made a living running the Athletic Club and teaching amateur sports like boxing. When the club moved into the new gym at Granite and Arizona in 1910, doubling the size of the space available, 400 club members turned out for the grand opening on October 18. McCarthy’s pupils Young Mooney and Kid Forbes were matched in a lightweight boxing exhibition, as were Tally Johns (a miner at the Minnie Healey) and Harry Graves. Both bouts ended in a draw. The headliners in the boxing show were Maurice Thompson vs. Jack Clark from Calgary, but that was yet another draw, as determined by referee McCarthy.

Butte’s champion wrestler Tim Harrington defeated challenger Davey two falls to one. McCarthy himself put on a show of bag-punching and displayed to the “audience what good rope skipping really is.”

By 1916, this building had been taken over by the Y.M.A. Club – the Young Men’s Association. The Y.M.A. started a successful lyceum course here. Lyceums were educational courses aimed mainly at adults, with programs of lectures, entertainments, debates, and classes.

The lyceum movement in America peaked in the late 19th century but was still active well into the 1920s. The Butte lyceum, led by one Tom Davis and the Y.M.A., became one of the most successful lyceum programs in America in 1916, even though they started in the building at 125 East Granite, “the most pathetic appeal for an association building I ever saw,” as reported by The Lyceum Magazine. The young men were joined by Guy Lewis, a Lutey’s Grocery Store manager, who helped with organization. They had their own Butte newspaper, the Association Herald, “A Community Builder, For a Better Butte.”

Y.M.A. members were paid a 10% commission on 25¢ ticket sales as an incentive – and it apparently worked. Even The Lyceum Magazine was surprised that they managed to pack the 1100-seat Broadway theater in Butte with an audience who paid to hear a lecture. Their entire program series in October 1917 had receipts of $3200. The first program brought the nationally-known Oxford Company to Butte. They put on a performance of light opera, drama, and singing.

In 1917, the Y.M.A. merged with the Y.M.C.A. The gymnasium building was lost by 1928. The corner has been a vacant lot or parking lot since then.

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.