BAS 034 Hansen Packing

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

The iconic – and somewhat eerie – structure near Timber Butte off Rowe Road is all that’s left of a gigantic meat-packing enterprise, Hansen Packing.

Walter G. Hansen was born in Denmark on Christmas Eve, 1878, and came to America at age 11. He worked as a newsboy on the New York to Toledo railroad and found his way to Montana in 1901, getting his start in Helena as a butcher. But his real legacy is in Butte, where he opened the Hansen Packing Plant in the fall of 1912 with six employees. The plant soon became one of the largest meat processors in the northwest.

Hansen started his business in 1912 with $8,600 cash and a few decrepit buildings. In 1917-18, as the first operation between Minneapolis and Spokane with federal meat inspection, Hansen processed more than 13,000 cattle, 9400 sheep, and 10,500 hogs. Within three years those numbers would triple, quadruple, and in the case of hogs, increase by eight times to more than 80,000 a year. A small herd of buffalo on site even provided buffalo meat. Hansen was shipping meat across the United States in special refrigerated containers, and on to Europe. Hansen supplied the U.S. Army during both world wars and the British Army during World War I.

Some of the first canned dog food was produced by the Hansen plant starting in 1927, using a process patented by Hansen and marketed under the brand name Vitamont. In January 1929, William A. Clark, Jr., recognized the strength and viability of the company, purchasing all the stock in Hansen Packing other than Walter Hansen’s own interests. All of the W.A. Clark, Sr., properties had been divested by 1928, so Clark Junior probably had a good supply of cash to spend. At the time, Hansen employed 300 men and 50 women and boasted Butte’s second greatest freight volume after the mining industry.

Walter Hansen was severely injured in an auto crash in 1936, and his wife Minnie ran the company until Walter died in 1947 and for three years thereafter. Denny Driscoll, a former employee, bought the business in 1950, in an interesting deal—the price was $1.25 million, but he only put up $41,250 of his own money. The rest was financed over 20 years, and Driscoll operated it as Treasure State Packing until about 1954. The plant was idle for a few years until it was acquired by Denver-based Sigman Meat Company which ran it until 1968.

The Hansen mansion on Timber Butte became a Boys’ Home for a time starting in 1971, but the skeletal building on Hansen Road is the most visible legacy of one of Butte’s biggest businesses.

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.