BAS 038 John Hammer Brickmaker Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

One of the most common questions visitors to Butte ask is “Why all the bricks? And where did they come from?”

The why is easy – fires. Specifically a fire in the late 1870s that destroyed much of Butte’s central business district. When the town was incorporated in 1879, one of the first ordinances passed by Mayor Henry Jacobs’ administration was the brick ordinance. By 1893, that law was a 29-page document specifying that “all buildings … within the fire limits of the City of Butte shall be built of stone, brick, or iron, or other incombustible materials.” Fines as high as $300 per day and up to 90 days imprisonment depended on the violation. Building with brick was serious business in the 1890s.

Bricks for many of Butte’s historic buildings were produced by the Butte Sewer-Pipe & Tile Company, established by German immigrant John G. Hammer in 1888. Hammer had come to America at age 18 in 1868, and made his way to booming Butte in 1879. While he was a bookkeeper for the John Caplice Company, about 1884, he built his single-story home at 314 West Granite. The house still stands, boasting a second story added by Hammer in 1899.

By 1901 his brick company was among the best equipped and most profitable in the northwest, with 60 employees. In 1907, Hammer’s brick plant south of Silver Bow Creek was producing 5,500,000 bricks per year. The clay was mined locally near the brick plant west of Montana Street, west of the cemeteries south of the creek. Fireclay was mined near Whitehall after 1902, probably from the Grayson Shale pit which is still the source of pottery for Cardwell’s Clays In Calico. The tile shop stood at Oregon and Second Avenue.

Hammer and his wife Julia moved to Portland in the early 1910s, but the business continued until 1929 when it was sold to Pioneer Fuel and Brick Company. They operated the facilities until 1941 when all manufacture ceased and the spur railroad to the plant was abandoned. Today, virtually nothing survives of the brick factory.

As the Great Depression began to take its toll, large houses like the Hammer home became boarding houses. Owner Mancel Larson began to take in boarders about 1935; in 1937, when he worked at the Emma Mine, his tenants were Maybelle Baird (widow of James), a stenographer for the Montana Service Corp., a dealer in dairy products; Katherine McDaniel (widow of John), a nurse, and her daughter Marie, who was a student at Butte Business College; Maud Maloney (widow of William); and Helen Curtis (widow of Charles), head of the County Child Welfare Department. By 1940 all but Baird were still living here, and Walter Thomas; Ray and Lumina Rowan (a salesman and cosmetics representative, respectively); Wendell and Ardell Peck (he was another salesman); and Violet Blecka all called this house their home as well at least 10 adults.

Even in 1948, at least nine people lived here, including an Anaconda Company mining engineer, a public school teacher, a cashier at the Finlen Hotel, a beauty parlor operator and barber, a clerk, and a nurse at St. James Hospital.

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.