BAS 039 Butte’s Chinatown : Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

By most accounts, Butte was home to some 30 different ethnic groups and nationalities. The Chinese population was typically undercounted in censuses, which show a maximum of about 400 Chinese in Butte. But Rose Hum Lee, a Butte native and expert on America’s Chinatowns, estimated close to 2,500 Chinese at Butte’s peak in the early 1900s, which would make Butte the largest Chinatown in the intermountain west – nothing like San Francisco, Seattle, or Vancouver, but the greatest concentration of Chinese people away from the coast.

After Butte’s first gold rush in the 1860s the population fell to a few hundred, and some historians say that perhaps half of the residents in the early 1870s were Chinese. As Butte grew again with the silver boom in the late 1870s, so did its Chinatown. Galena Street between Main and Colorado Street held the Joss House, a combination temple and social gathering place that was probably built in the late 1880s, as well as tiny shops and lodgings.

By the 1890s, metropolitan Butte sought to push undesirable neighborhoods such as Chinatown and the Red Light District to somewhere more than a block away from prosperous Park Street, but they both moved just one block south, to Mercury Street.

About 1893, Chin Chun Hock, the founder of Seattle’s earliest and most successful Chinese mercantile business, the Wa Chong Company, opened a branch store in Butte on West Galena Street. Chin visited Butte in October 1898, and announced plans to construct a new building for the company on Mercury at China Alley, the alley behind the buildings on Main Street.

By 1899, the company had moved into its new, two-story brick building at 15 West Mercury. Architecturally, the new Wah Chong Tai building, whose name means “beautiful old China,” was no different than the other business blocks being constructed in other parts of Butte City. The mercantile operated from a large room on the first floor, stocking items imported from China to sell to Asians and to others. Merchandise included fine Chinese and Japanese porcelain, bulk containers of dried herbs and tonics, and string-tied packages of Chinese-style clothing.

In 1909, the Wah Chong Tai Company retained George DeSnell, a Butte architect, to design a new building to adjoin the mercantile. The two-story brick structure has two storefronts at street level separated by an entrance to the second story Mai Wah (meaning “beautiful and luxurious”) Noodle Parlor. Both buildings actually have three levels, but at six feet high, the middle level was so short it was not counted as a separate floor for tax purposes – the “cheater story” that cheated the tax man.

Although Seattle’s Chin Chun Hock bought the land and paid for the first building, the Wah Chong Tai company in Butte was always a partnership of local Chinese businessmen, the most prominent of which was Chin Hin Doon. His son, who Americanized his name as Albert Chinn, became the patriarch of the Chinn family that owned and operated the mercantile and noodle parlor until World War II. After the war, the Chinn children scattered across the country, to Minneapolis, Cincinnati, New York, Georgia, Los Angeles, Seattle, and back to China. Bill Chinn was the only one to stay in Butte, and it was his daughters, Joyce and Yvonne, who transferred the two buildings to the Mai Wah Society in the early 1990s to establish the museum operating today.

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.