BAS 040 The first union. Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

In the summer of 1878, when Butte’s population was less than 4,000, the miner’s wage was $3.50 a day – decent in some places, but in inflationary Butte, many considered that to be barely a subsidence wage. The owners of the Lexington and Alice silver mines in Walkerville reduced pay by 50 cents a day, and miners were only working five days a week. The reduction led to a strike to reinstate the rate of $3.50 a day.

400 men marched from Walkerville down Main Street into Butte, led by a brass band, to meet at the Orphean Hall where the strike was called.

Butte’s first union, the Butte Workingmen's Union, was established to further the goals of the strike on June 13, 1878. The union had 300 members by the end of June, and 28-year-old miner Aaron Witter was president. The date, June 13, was Miners’ Union Day ever afterward.

By June 27, the newspapers were reporting that “the strike has already brought very dull times.” Merchants’ business had dropped off precipitously, but the merchants helped establish a fund for out-of-work miners and extended as much credit to them as they could.

Peaceful protests, supported by merchants and generally favorable public opinion, eventually resulted in a reinstatement of the $3.50 wage, and the strike was over by mid-August, 1878.

The Alice was managed by Marcus Daly for the Walker Brothers of Salt Lake City. He had come to Butte with extensive experience in the Comstock silver mines of Nevada, and had helped the Walkers decide to invest in the Alice. The zone along the Alice Vein had been known for a few years as Rainbow – for the Rainbow lode, from which the Alice Vein branched. Professor John E. Clayton, in company with one of the Walkers, recognized the Rainbow lode in 1876 as Butte’s silver rush was taking off, and chose the site for the Alice Mine shaft. The silver-bearing outcrop they found described a sweeping, rainbow-like curve across the brow of the hillside.

The other mine involved in the 1878 strike, the Lexington, was owned by Andrew Jackson Davis, who reportedly became Montana’s first millionaire – in part by selling the Lexington in 1881 for a million in cash and two million in stock in the French consortium that purchased the mine.

The Butte Workingmen’s Union was initially open to all workers. In 1885 the union was reorganized as the Butte Miners’ Union, and other trades began to form their own unions.

The Workingmens’ Union was reestablished in 1891, part of the Silver Bow Trades & Labor Assembly. It was essentially an umbrella organization, with spin-off unions forming from it as specific trades organized. The Workingmens’ Union provided general support to workers into the 20th century.

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.