BAS 043 Butte’s first motorized postal service

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

Butte wasn’t always first in the nation or the world at everything, much as we’d like to think so. But as one of the largest and richest cities in the west, Butte was usually pretty close to the cutting edge.

Test operations had been run in Detroit, Cleveland, Washington D.C., and Elizabethport, New Jersey in 1899-1900, but the first motorized delivery of the U.S. mail on a regular contracted run was an electric car in Buffalo, New York, in the summer of 1901 for the temporary post office at the Pan-American Exhibition. In October 1901 in Minneapolis, the Postal Service let the first contract for five electric vehicles and operators to handle the mail.

Butte was ready to help lead the way. In January 1902 the announcement came that Butte would have two vehicles for rural mail delivery beginning the following summer. The car was a Winton Electric Car. In 1900, automobiles were rare, with about a third of all that were produced electric, another third steam powered, and the rest gasoline powered. It wasn’t until 1912-13 that the demand for gasoline reached the point where it surpassed kerosene as a petroleum product.

Winton actually pioneered gasoline engines and was among the first regular producers of cars in the United States. They sold 22 cars in 1898, and more than 100 in 1899. In 1901 they began producing high-end touring cars and the 1-cylinder, 9-horsepower mail delivery vans. A Winton was the first car to make a drive from coast to coast across the U.S., in 1903 (it took 64 days). They were out of business as car makers in 1924, but their engine branch continued, ultimately becoming part of General Motors in 1930.

“The automobile will revolutionize mail-delivery,” Butte Postmaster Irvin was reported as saying in January 1902.

Postmaster Irvin expected two vehicles to arrive in Butte by July 1902 for use mostly on rural routes across the state, not just in the Butte area. The speed of the mail cars was to be 10 miles per hour, and the cars weighed 2,330 pounds and could travel 40 miles on one electric charge. The Post Office Department had awarded Butte a “liberal appropriation” for the rural delivery service - $6,000,000 for fiscal year 1903 vs. $2,000,000 for the previous year, meaning that “in all postoffices of the first, second, third, and fourth-class, automobiles will be used where the service warrants it and the nature of the country will permit.”

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.