BAS 044 The Meagher Guards

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

The Meagher Guards of Butte, “perhaps the most unique military organization of its kind in the country,” was formed in 1895. It was a completely independent military unit, not beholden to either the State of Montana or the United States government, formed by prominent Butte Irish-Americans including Captain William McGrath, W.E. Deeney, Steve Holland, and Michael Joy.

“The Irishman is by natural instinct a first-rate fighting man. Some of the best soldiers the world has ever seen have come from the little green isle across the sea,” according to the Butte Inter Mountain, January 25, 1902.

Sixty-two volunteers joined and named the group for Thomas Francis Meagher, the Civil War veteran who was Montana Territory’s Acting Governor in 1865-67. They were self-disciplined, under the captaincy of William McGrath. When the Spanish-American War began in 1898 they were mustered into the U.S. Army as Company B of the First Montana regiment. The Second Montana regiment drew heavily on Butte and the new Meagher Guards that succeeded those who had already headed to war. Company B fought with distinction in the Philippines during the war. “More than a few are now sleeping the honored sleep of the patriot dead over the sea in the far-away Philippines.”

When the war ended, the Meagher Guards ceased to exist, but some of its members joined the Butte company of the National Guard – Company B.

Following their service in the Meagher Guards, returning veterans took up various professions. Captain William McGrath, who lived at 744 South Main, became a sergeant in the Butte police force. William E. Deeney, who had been a major in the Second Montana regiment, returned to Butte to live at 1009 West Granite Street, and ran a saloon at 43 West Broadway (Williams & Deeney). Michael Joy, First Sergeant in the First Montana, was a miner after the war at the Diamond Mine and lived at 11 West Agate. Captain John Cleary, seen in the photo at top, worked in the Anaconda Mine and lived at 739 Maryland. S.G. Jeans became a clerk after the war, and roomed at 23 West Quartz.

Other names in the Meagher Guards read like a litany of Irish Butte: McMahon, Mahoney, Hayes, Conlin, Maher, Kelly, O’Malley, Crowley, Gallagher, McGarvey, Murphy, McManimon, McCartin, Burns, Donovan, McAuliffe, McCann, McBride, Byrne, Ryan, Shannon, Doyle.

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.