BAS 053 Hancocks of Caledonia Street

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

The 900 block of Caledonia was home to four related families for much of the early 20th Century. Their diverse occupations connect us to much of Butte’s history.

The three similar homes at 943, 947, and 951 Caledonia were all built about 1898, probably by the same builder. They were the first homes on the block (and pretty much the only ones in the area), and were the only three houses here in 1900, but by 1916 twenty homes stood on the Caledonia-Excel-Woolman-Henry block.

In 1900, John Nance, a miner, lived in the new house at 943 Caledonia. Family history says that Native Americans were still living on Big Butte at that time, and would often knock on the door to beg for a bicky (a biscuit). The family maintained a cow, a horse, and chickens. When John worked the night shift, he would take his wife, Mary, to her parents’ home on East Park, picking her up on his return in the morning.

Mary was the daughter of John and Ellen Hancock. By 1900, the Caledonia neighborhood was growing fast, and by the early 1900s homes were built east of the Nance home at 943. The west half of the big duplex at 939-935 became the home of Mary’s parents. John, a miner, and Ellen Hancock had three daughters – Mary (Nance), Clara (Rowe), and Ethel (Downing) – who after their marriages lived at 943, 931, and 935 Caledonia, respectively. The also had another daughter, Adeline, and a son, Joseph. Joseph lived at 939 with his parents in 1910 when he was a clerk at Hennessy’s.

Robert Downing, a collector for the Butte Miner Publishing Co. in 1900, had lived at 513 N. Montana before marrying Ethel Hancock and moving to 935 Caledonia Street. By 1910, he was the Advertising Manager for the Butte Miner newspaper, and in 1928 he worked at the City Corral. Their daughter Rosalind, living with them in 1928, was a clerk at the Paxson and Rockefeller Co., a drug store at 24 West Park.

John Nance advanced from miner to ropeman helper in the Silver Bow Mine (1910) to pumpman (1928). In 1928, John and Mary Nance’s children were living with them at 943. Harold was a chauffeur with the Canary Cab Co.; John was a miner for the Northern Development Co.; and Percy worked as a clerk at the Western Hardware Co.

Fred and Clara Rowe bought the house at 931 Caledonia in 1905, just five years after it was built in 1900, and they added the second story in 1909. Fred worked as a storekeeper at the Butte & Boston Smelter and in 1910 was a precipitator at the precipitation plant. By 1928 he was Assistant Foreman at the precipitation plant for the Anaconda Company, and his and Clara’s children were living at 931 with them. Margaret was a student; Theo was a laborer for the ACM company; and Wilbur was a teller at the Metals Bank. The Rowes lived at 931 into the 1950s, and their descendents live in Butte today.

947 Caledonia was also connected to the family. It was owned by Richard J. Oates, a partner with Samuel M. Roberts, and nephew of John Hancock. Oates & Roberts, Inc. was established in 1893. They were the printers and publishers of books and The Tribune Review newspaper, a weekly published from 1898 to 1920, which in 1900 was the official organ of the Republican Party in Silver Bow County.

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.