BAS 054 union hall destroyed

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

The Butte Miners Union Day Parade on June 13, 1914, turned into a riot pitting union factions against each other. The ten days following were tense, but little if any violence took place in Butte.  The press accused the IWW of precipitating the Miners Union Day riot, and while IWW members were certainly involved, many leaders of the secessionist faction of the union were not IWW members, and no IWW men were among the eight indicted for crimes on June 13.

The grievances held against the Western Federation of Miners (WFM) centered on union mismanagement of funds, including especially the fees Butte Miners Union members had to pay to aid Michigan strikers. Many resented the fees, and others believed that the union wasn’t appropriating the fees as intended. The union also had accepted the companies’ rustling card system and oversaw its implementation by checking union cards every day when miners appeared to work. Rejection of that process led to the walkouts on June 12 that probably heightened tensions and helped produce the June 13 riot.

WFM President Charles Moyer arrived in Butte June 17 to try to patch up the Butte local. He did get the resignations of the most discredited conservative officers of the union, and he promised new elections—but only current WFM members would be allowed to vote. In the words of Jerry Calvert (in his book *The Gibraltar*), he “offered too little and too late.”

On the same day Moyer arrived the rebellious miners held a vote at the Auditorium, in the old Butte Public Library at Broadway and Dakota. The question was whether they would stay part of the WFM. The reported vote, 6,348 to 243, was dramatically in favor of separation—a mandate that encouraged the secessionists to hold a mass meeting on June 22 at which they formed an independent union, the Butte Mine Workers’ Union, not affiliated with the WFM. They met at the Holland Arena, a skating rink on South Montana a block below Front Street, where Les Schwab’s tire store is located today, just south of the Safeway store. Muckie McDonald was elected President of the new union.

Moyer planned a meeting of Butte Miners Union supporters – the conservative faction of the union that still supported the WFM – and went ahead with it over the objections of Mayor Duncan, who wanted a delay until things had settled down. Only a handful of men showed up at Moyer’s meeting on the evening of June 23, probably no more than 50 or 60. Perhaps 2,000 men gathered on Main Street outside the Union Hall, and things were peaceful apart from some jeering until about 8:00 that evening. But the men inside must have been nervous.

Someone mistook Pete Bruno, a WFM miner entering the union hall, for an intruder and shot him; more shots went from the hall into the crowd outside where Ernest Noy, basically an innocent bystander, was killed. At least four others were wounded or hurt by flying debris. Moyer and the others who were in the Union Hall fled before men brought dynamite from the Steward Mine and began to blow up the building. It took some 20 charges and several hours through the night before the building was finally destroyed. Six years of labor unrest in Butte would follow.

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.