BAS 058 Babcock’s Hats and Furs

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

The T-shaped alley west of North Main between Broadway and Granite has been there with that geometry since before 1884. The three-story alley building at the corner of the T is connected by an overpass to 117 N. Main Street, part of the Dellinger Block at 117 N. Main. The first floor of the Dellinger, the overpass, and the connected alley building all were built before 1884 as well.

Various stores have occupied 117 N. Main Street, including a grocer, a hardware store, and men’s clothing stores. One of the first clothiers was Babcock’s, but the name was superseded by his successors, Babcock’s managers Smith and Mattingly in 1900, and by Ignatius Mattingly alone from 1904 until 1925. The “Babcock’s Hats & Furs” ghost sign on the alley building is pre-1900, while the barely visible “Mattingly’s” over the garage door dates to the 1904-25 period. The overpass led to the second floor of the alley building, which early maps always label as storage.

The ground floor of the 3-story alley building was always essentially a garage, and the third floor, above the storage level, shows on old maps as “sleeping rooms.” The access to the top level was by a stair on the outside (east face) of the building, marked by a white stripe on the side of the building today. The door to that stairway was in the south side of the overpass, which was variously tin-clad or iron-clad over time.

This building survived two fires, in 1889 and 1978, that destroyed buildings in what is now the parking lot to the north.

The outside stair was removed years ago, leaving the third level inaccessible until 2011 when a new inside stair was constructed to provide access for tours by Old Butte Historical Adventures. The alley building never had electricity, but both the second and third levels still hold the brass fittings for multiple gas lights, and both floors, small though they were at 15 x 30 feet, each had two stoves.

The top level is papered in fancy wallpaper made by the Allen-Higgins Company, a high-end wallpaper manufacturer in Worcester, Massachusetts. The Allen-Higgins Company started in about 1898, and there are two layers of older paper beneath their product.

This third-floor space was a rather nice, double room, with two large closets which are also fully papered. While it is impossible to prove, it seems likely that the legend of this being a high-end two-crib brothel may be true. The wallpaper seems to be fancier than one might expect for a man’s sleeping room. But Babcock and his successors were certainly well-to-do, so maybe this is in keeping with the style of the times. It’s unlikely that we’ll even know for sure if this was a small brothel or not.

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.