BAS 062 Butte Curling Club

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

December 3, 1905 saw Montana’s first recorded curling match, among members of the newly established Butte Curling Club. Scotsmen led by Donald McMillan, a cashier at W.A. Clark’s Western Lumber Company, organized the club August 31, 1905, with 41 charter members. By the following spring 111 men and 22 women had joined, paying the annual dues of $10 for men and $5 for ladies.

Curling in Scotland dates to at least the early 16th century, and came to Canada in 1807. Curling stones weigh between 38 and 44 pounds and are made from granite – a very close-packed granite that won’t absorb water that could pluck out mineral grains and affect the smoothness of the stone. The most popular curling stones have come from just one location, Ailsa Craig in the strait between Scotland and Ireland, which has provided granite for curling stones since 1851.

The Butte club and the one in Anaconda begun in 1907 were initially formed by Scottish enthusiasts, but by 1923, “nearly every nationality in Butte” was represented among the 125 members. The club had built its own indoor rinks in 1905 just east of the outdoor Holland Ice Rink at Montana Street south of Front, where state competitions called bonspiels pitted Butte against Anaconda.

The Butte players also traveled to Winnipeg for Canadian bonspiels, as the Butte organization was affiliated with the Manitoba branch of the Canadian Caledonian Club. When the Scottish Caledonian Club invited their Canadian counterparts to Scotland for an international competition in Glasgow in 1909, the Canadians included three Americans – one from Duluth, one from Milwaukee, and Don McMillan from Butte. The Canadian-American team won 23 of 26 matches, and were guests of King Edward at Balmoral Castle.

Dr. Donald Campbell of 307 West Broadway Street was the club’s first president, but founder McMillan, like Campbell born in Nova Scotia, was an active player and served as secretary-treasurer at least until 1930, when he was 69 years old. He and his wife Charlotte lived at 1055 West Diamond Street for many years. Augustus Heinze, probably best known as one of Butte’s copper kings, was a club member in 1906, the same year he financed the construction of the Metals Bank Building.

The club’s 1908 newsletter touted curling as “one of the cleanest and most exhilarating of games,” suitable for old and young, male and female.

The most recent incarnation of curling in Butte began in 2011 when the Copper City Curling Club was established. Twelve to 16 teams a year compete at the Butte Community Ice Center (Clark Park) and in the Big Sky Bonspiel, a regional gathering of curlers from Montana, Idaho, Washington, Alberta, and British Columbia held in Missoula in April.

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.