BAS 066 Colusite

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

For all its mineral wealth, Butte is home to just one type locality for a mineral, the place where that mineral was first found and described. Colusite is a rare copper-vanadium-arsenic sulfide named for the Colusa Claim on the east side of the Butte Hill, where Meaderville developed.

Colusite was actually first found on the 1200 level of the Leonard Mine, which was named for Leonard Lewisohn, one of the founders of the company that would become the Boston and Montana Mining Co. In 1915, geologist Reno Sales chose to name the mineral for the older, nearby Colusa Claim and East Colusa Mine, since the Leonard Mine was originally begun to exploit the Colusa ore body. Sales’ preliminary description was based mostly on consistent analyses that showed anomalous amounts of tin in the mineral, and tin is perhaps surprisingly quite rare in Butte. Colusite wasn’t formally described until 1933, and today the official chemical formula does not include tin.

The Colusa was one of the first four claims W.A. Clark purchased in 1872. Ultimately, at least five mines bore the Colusa name: Colusa, Clark’s Colusa, Colusa-Parrot, East Colusa, and West Colusa. All of them are in the Berkeley Pit today, but the East Colusa was probably the best producer of the five. The Lewisohn brothers of New York acquired it from Charles Meader in 1878-79, and the Colusa vein system, mined from the Colusa, Leonard, and other shafts, yielded ore to enrich the Lewisohns and their Montana Copper Company. That name changed to Boston and Montana in 1887, and in Butte it was second in production only to the Anaconda Company.

In 1883, the East Colusa produced $1,784,720 in copper and $318,700 worth of silver. Had the Lewisohns lived in Butte, they would certainly have been among the Copper Kings, but the German-born brothers operated from New York. The Boston and Montana became part of the Amalgamated (Anaconda) Copper empire about 1901, when the Lewisohns’ company employed about 900 men in five major mines. That purchase was engineered by Henry Rogers, an officer of the Standard Oil Company. But it was the Boston and Montana Company, not the Anaconda or its predecessors, that pushed the development of the dam at Great Falls which ultimately provided hydroelectric power to Butte’s mines. Boston and Montana built a smelter and concentrator at Great Falls that cost over $2 million in 1890-91.

So the mineral colusite was named for the mining claim in Butte. But where did that name come from? It’s really challenging to uncover the origin of some mine names. I reviewed several hundred newspaper references to Colusa, back to 1880, and found nothing about the name. Could it be COLorado USA? Not likely, as “USA” wasn’t a common reference to the nation in those days. Maybe the original prospector who established the claim came from Colusa, California, one of that state’s original counties, created in 1850. There, the name origin is obscure, but it may be a corruption of the name of the Coru Indians who early French explorers reportedly called the “Colu’s.” Since many mining claim names were based on others elsewhere, this is a reasonable, but unproven supposition for the origin of the name Colusa.

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.