BAS 070 1916 Boom Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Butte’s prodigious growth from perhaps 100 people in 1874 to more than 90,000 in 1917 wasn’t a continuous boom. The biggest spurts were probably the late 1880s, 1906-08, and the final explosion of construction in 1916-17. The plunge in demand for copper with the end of World War I, together with competition in copper production from Chile and elsewhere, started Butte’s long population decline.

But in 1916, things looked incredibly rosy for Butte. New business blocks and homes were popping up everywhere. That spring condemned shacks were removed to make way for the $50,000 Park Theater on Park Street east of Main, where the US Bank drive-through is today. The need for lodging meant new rooming houses were under construction at Park and Jackson and at Main and Galena, while the Silver Bow garage was converted from a repair shop to a 60-room lodging house. Most of the old Chinatown, on Galena Street west of Main, was demolished at this time as well.

The building permit list for May 1916 showed pending construction for at least 47 new homes ranging in cost from $900 to $10,800 for the Scovil house at Granite and Excelsior. $1,500 to $2,000 was a typical cost, including the $1,900 five-room bungalow M.J. Sheehan was constructing at 931 West Quartz. Apartment buildings from $4,000 to $20,000 were in the works. Property values were soaring, with two lots in the Ancient Addition appreciating from $600 in 1914 to $1,500 in April 1916.

Development was intense in Uptown Butte (especially on the west side), but the Flats were also expanding. Half of the 700 residences constructed in 1916-18 were built on the Flats. The Hamilton Addition, along Princeton, Yale, and Harvard Streets, had lots you could acquire for $10 – with the balance, $600 or so, to be paid in monthly installments. The growth of the Flats led to expansion of the trolley system there, and to the construction of three schools, Longfellow, Hawthorne, and Madison. Those schools were examples of the popular collegiate architectural style, and the Longfellow School was one of only 16 independently listed National Register properties in Silver Bow County when it was demolished in 2007.

“No shacks allowed” in the Corona Addition, where a 45-by-100-foot lot ran $900. “Streets are all graded and sidewalks and sewer in,” according to advertisements. Just a year earlier, the Corona area was known only as the “Old Winters & Parsons barn and corral.” Today, this is the area bounded by Platinum, Western, Aluminum, and Ophir Streets. A glowing report in the Butte Miner in May 1916 reported that “five years ago the most enthusiastic real estate developer in Butte never thought this section would grow as it has.”

Developers estimated that 20,000 homes were built in Butte from 1911 to 1916. Business blocks completed during the 1916-17 boom included the new Grand Hotel (Wheeler Block) on Broadway, the massive YMCA and Knights of Columbus Hall on Park, Mueller Apartments on Granite, the Chester Block (Whitehead’s) on East Park, the Socialist Hall (Fran Johnson’s) and Harrison Avenue Theater and Englewood Theater (on Harrison between Argyle and Marcia).

Important buildings went up in Butte after 1918, including the Finlen Hotel and Mother Lode Theater, but the last great construction boom was over.

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.