BAS 071 Owsley Block Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

People who lived in Butte in 1973 will probably remember the huge fire that consumed the Medical Arts Building on July 23. That building had dominated the corner since it was finished in 1892. We also know it as the Owsley Block, for William Owsley who had it built, but technically it was Owsley Block #3. Owsley #2 is the building that housed Trimbo’s Pizza and Slainte recently, and Owsley #1 stands to the east of #2, originally the Hoffman Hotel.

Early occupants of Owsley Block #3 included Leys’ jewelry store on the ground floor, and the Butte Business College on the top (fifth) floor from the building’s earliest days until 1953; it survived in Butte until 1975. Owsley’s fortune – which also undoubtedly helped him win two elections as Butte’s Mayor, in 1882 and 1884 – was based on his livery business, started in 1874, when Butte was near its low point in terms of population and economy.

William Owsley was born in Independence, Missouri, in 1842, and joined the gold rush to Bannack in 1863, when he was 21 years old. He came to Butte just a year later, in the first wave of prospectors here, but he was a saloonkeeper more than a miner. His mayoral campaigns played on local prejudice with the slogan, “Down with cheap Chinese labor.” He defeated his 1884 opponent by just 19 votes of 1,051 cast.

Precisely when Owsley obtained the corner lot at Park and Main is not known, but by 1884 he had a massive building there, not brick as his later Owsley Block would be, but a two-story wood frame complex. This 140’x80’ conglomeration included an office, a grocery, a 2-story lodging house, a tiny cigar store precisely on the corner, and hay lofts above the stalls on the first floor and in the basement. The Owsley company probably also controlled the attached saloon and card room to the north. A brothel was conveniently located just to the east on Park Street.

The northeast corner of the complex, on the alley, held a carriage house and wash room and dressing rooms for drivers. In 1890, the city fire department’s hose cart and 450-foot hose were kept there—to be relocated soon to the new (1890) city hall and fire station a block north on Broadway. At 260 North Main, immediately north of the original Owsley complex, but taken up by the new Owsley Block in 1888-92, was another building called Owsley Hall that contained the Variety Theater, the Telephone Company, and a tin shop in 1884.

In 1882, customers of the Rocky Mountain Bell Telephone Company paid $24 per quarter (3 months) if they were within a mile of Central, with a surcharge of $3 per quarter mile beyond the first mile. Two miles beyond the exchange office cost you $36 a quarter, or $144 per year in 1882. That’s right, there was no discount. The phone company shared the second floor of that small building with Western Union Telegraph. The ground floor housed the Butte Hardware Company as well as the short-lived Variety Theater, which was out of business by 1888 and replaced by the Inter Mountain Printing Company. The tin shop was in the basement.

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.