BAS 074 Marcus Daly’s race track Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

To look at the regular arrangement of streets around East Middle School today, you wouldn’t know that for decades, that neighborhood was occupied by not one, but two oval race tracks. Or maybe you would know – the track is recalled in the name of the Racetrack Volunteer Fire Department, but that department wasn’t organized until 1939, more than 20 years after the track disappeared.

Horse races took place in Butte as early as 1879, when a $2,500 purse was advertised, but the sport really took off when the West Side Racing Association began about 1881, led by such Butte luminaries as Lee Mantle, Henry Valiton, William Owsley, and Patrick Largey. It’s not clear why it was the “west side,” since the track where they held the races appears to have always been southeast of the townsite. Prize purses totaling $1,000 or more were common in the 1880s and 1890s, and while entertainment and wagering were available to all, it was clearly a rich-man’s sport: entry fees were 10% of the purse for any race, or $25 to $50 for each entrant.

Marcus Daly’s love of race horses led him to construct a race track in Anaconda in 1888 south of Washoe Park, and about 1896 he acquired and re-built the track in Butte. The grandstand seating capacity was expanded from about 1,800 to a three-story structure that could hold several thousand, and thousands more could stand along the barricades. Horses were accommodated in 32 stables, each close to 100 feet long, and seven cook houses provided refreshments to patrons. Two bars, a restaurant, hay barn, paddock, shoeing shack, and a building housing the betting pool operation completed the race track complex. Rye or oats were planted in the infield, and the judges’ stand was on the inner side of the track.

At least two American records were set at the Butte Race Track, including the quarter mile, run by four-year-old Bob Wade in 1890 in 21.25 seconds. The present-day record, set in 2008, is 20.57 seconds. Bob Wade was owned by a horseman from Walla Walla, Washington.

A separate greyhound race track was built east of the horse track in 1898. Racing greyhounds, known affectionately in Butte as “Cousin Jack race horses” for the sport’s origin in Cornwall, was nearly as popular as horse racing. One Chicago competitor who frequently brought his dogs to Butte, Owen Smith, invented the mechanical rabbit in 1920.

In 1914, the Montana legislature made gambling on dog and horse races illegal. Combined with the increasing demand for land for homes in Butte, that spelled the end of the race track. It was acquired by a real estate development company for $75,000, and by 1916 the land was platted and subdivided into lots that soon boasted homes. The streets south of Grand, east of Howard to East Middle School, and north of Marcia form the core of the 1916 development.

Racing returned to Butte in the late 1920s, when Owen Smith’s company built a dog track and a new horse race track was constructed. The greyhound track was east of the northeast corner of Harrison and Elizabeth Warren, and Butte’s McGurk, owned by Assistant Police Chief Jim Larkin, was the champion greyhound racer of the world in 1928. The Mile High Kennel Club sponsored races in the late 1940s, and Copper Hill Kennel Club rejuvenated dog racing at a track beyond the Five Mile in 1957-58.

In 1929, Winnipeg sportsman R. James Speers built a new oval at Marcus Daly Race Park, south of the airport. There was much hoopla about the return of horse racing to Butte, but the Great Depression pretty much ended the activity within a year, except for a brief renewal in 1936.

All the tracks and grandstands associated with Butte horse and greyhound racing are gone today except for the 1958 dog track.

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.