BAS 086 1894 Election Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

“It’s a free for all”

“The senatorial fight begins to grow warm”

Those headlines focused Anaconda Standard readers on December 31, 1894 on the ongoing U.S. Senate contest. Wait a minute – the Senate race was still in progress December 31? Wasn’t the election November 6? Well, yes. But remember that state legislators elected U.S. Senators then, and they did not meet until January to do that deed.

The 1894 election in Montana was overshadowed by the state capital fight, won by Helena over Anaconda (by the narrow majority of 51.8%), but the vagaries of politics in Montana were well in evidence in other races as well.

Montana only had one senator in 1894, because one seat was vacant. The legislature in 1893 had failed to choose a senator in one of W.A. Clark’s first hard-fought campaigns. Various machinations led to the Governor appointing Butte’s Lee Mantle to the post, but the U.S. Senate did not seat him, in part because of opposition to cases where gubernatorial appointments came about due to legislative inaction, and perhaps in part through Clark’s lobbying. In any case, the newly elected 1894 state legislature would meet in January 1895 to elect two senators instead of the usual one: first, a short-termer, to fill out the vacant slot, and the other to the regular six-year term.

With a Republican majority in the state legislature, the contests were basically among republicans (leaving Clark in the cold until 1899). Which of the two winners would serve the 4- and 6-year terms? That was not decided until the legislature conducted the election itself, in January. Ultimately, Lee Mantle, Butte Mayor in 1892, founder of the Inter Mountain newspaper, brothel owner, and player in the Destroying Angel case, filled the short term and served from 1895 to 1899, while Thomas Carter, a Helena lawyer, was chosen for the regular term and served from 1895 to 1901 (and a later Senate term as well, 1905-11).

Governor John Rickards, who had appointed Lee Mantle to fill the vacancy in 1893 which he ultimately did not fill, was also a candidate. Although Rickards was a Butte real estate and insurance businessman, apparently some of Mantle’s supporters rejected the governor as an outsider. For his part, as reported in the Anaconda Standard, Rickards said “I am ready to shake hands with Mr. Mantle at any time as a friend and as a stalwart, faithful, hard-working republican.”

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.