BAS 094 Topography of Butte

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

Butte’s topography has certainly changed over the years, and we’re not just talking about the Berkeley and Continental Pits and the mine dumps. As the city grew, gulches and streams were eliminated or modified to accommodate the needs of housing and business.

Most people probably know of Missoula Gulch, on the west side. It’s most visible today near its head, the houseless area between Walkerville and Centerville, but its extent to the south is largely obscured. It came down through what is now the Anselmo Mine yard, and the big curve to the north in the BA&P railroad walking trail reflects the former topography, with the railroad following the contour around the gulch. Scown Field lies on the gulch too.

Today, there’s a fairly subtle low on the east-west streets where they cross Columbia Street – now named Clark. That’s all that remains of Missoula Gulch. But as recently as 1905 or so, even the main streets like Park and Granite crossed bridges and trestles where the gulch was marked by a 15-foot bluff on each side, and a gentler rise to the general height of the adjacent land. Most of the homes along Clark Street are somewhat younger than most of the west side because the gulch wasn’t developed until around 1906-1910. Further west, about where Henry and Girard Streets are today, a western branch of Missoula Gulch was bridged as well, on Park just west of McKinley School. The branches came together to reach Silver Bow Creek near the Centennial Brewery, about a half-mile west of Montana Street.

Dublin Gulch contained a flowing stream until about 1887, providing water for the Butte Brewery on its western flank at Quartz and Wyoming. It continued south through the East Side, east of Arizona Street, and met Silver Bow Creek at Harrison near the Civic Center today. By 1888, the stream was becoming more and more restricted – and was mapped as an “open sewer.” By 1900, all of Dublin Gulch below the Anaconda Road was completely filled in.

The other primary drainage through the heart of town is actually still there. The stream that came south from what is now the eastern part of the Original Mine yard carried “a large amount of water in spring and winter.” It was still open in 1884 where it flowed from Copper to Quartz just east of Alaska Street, which wasn’t a street but was a cow corral and vegetable gardens at that time.

The stream passed through a stone arch to enter the Pavilion Skating Rink on the northeast corner of Alaska and Granite, but as early as 1884 this stream had been covered from Granite Street south. It was called a culvert or underground ditch as it continued to Galena between Colorado and Dakota. From Galena, it was a surface stream again, until about 1890 when the growth of the south side eliminated it. But that “underground ditch” is still one of the most important stormwater drainages for the city, and traffic on Quartz, Granite, Broadway, Park, and Galena was disrupted as recently as 2012 by work on the old 10-foot-high brick-lined underground culvert.

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.