BAS 096 first elevator

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

“By means of the elevator one can take a short cut to the top of a sky scraper and come down again without putting forth a greater effort than tossing a “jolly” to the elevator boy, who designates the up and down trips as the “rise and fall of man.” “—That’s how the Anaconda Standard described it on December 21, 1902.

The first elevator in Butte was installed in Connell’s store on the northwest corner of Granite and Main. The building there was erected about 1884 as a two-story building. The first elevator was installed in 1887, serving just the two stories from a location near the northeastern corner of the building. By 1891, the owners had added a third floor and a 5-story turret facing the corner of Granite and Main, and the elevator was moved to the western end of the building where it served the three main floors and probably the basement as well.

The elevator project was announced March 24, 1886, when the store was still Bonner & Co., owned by Edwin Bonner (of Bonner’s Ferry fame). M.J. Connell was already a principal in the organization and had already started his mansion at the corner of Granite and Idaho Streets. S.W. Smith, a mining engineer, installed the first elevator. He was the Butte agent for Parke, Lacey & Co., a machinery firm with offices in San Francisco, Portland, and Salt Lake City. The new elevator was a huge tourist attraction, with people coming from miles around to ride on it. “It was the wonder of the century,” the Anaconda Standard reported, and “everybody in town rode on it” in its first year.

Over the next 15 years, 14 more elevators were installed in Butte. By 1902, the elevator in the 5-story (plus basement) Owsley Block (later the Medical Arts Center) was making “1,000 trips a day,” every day except Sunday. Elevators also serviced the Thornton Hotel (built 1901), the original 3-story Finlen Hotel, the Butte Hotel, Miner Newspaper Building, and Symons Store (in buildings that burned in 1905, where the present Phoenix Building was built in 1906 – a building that saw Butte’s first escalator, in 1946). The 1890-91 Silver Bow and Lewisohn Blocks (the parking lot on West Granite across from the Montana Standard today) each had its own elevator, and the Hennessy Building had two, with the largest elevator cars in town.

The elevator in the Hirbour Tower, serving eight stories and basement, was the highest elevator in a Butte building in 1902. Refurbished, that elevator serves the condos on the upper floors of the Hirbour Tower today.

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.