BAS 098 1917

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

1917 represents the peak of many things for Butte: its population, its copper output, and probably its diversity. Here’s a look back at Butte in 1917.

Events of local, national, and international significance marked the year, including both the Granite Mountain – Speculator Mine Disaster and the murder of Frank Little. They occurred as the United States was entering World War I, complicated in Butte by the political and ethnic divisions rife in a city where close to a third of the residents were foreign born.

Those residents were served by at least 201 retail grocers, 76 meat markets, 23 bakers, and 23 dairies. Eighty-one physicians, including Montana’s first female doctor, Caroline McGill, and seven Chinese doctors, tended their hurts and ills, assisted by at least 69 independent nurses who worked outside the hospitals. There were also 34 dentists, who would install a gold crown for four dollars.

For entertainment, in addition to Columbia Gardens, there were 13 theaters. Most were live-action Vaudeville venues, but silent moving pictures were available with the score provided by a live orchestra. All those musicians were trained by no fewer than 29 music teachers in Butte who offered services outside the confines of schools and colleges.

Butte boasted 103 barbers in 1917, together with nine bootblacks who shined the products of 62 shoemakers. Eleven horseshoers tended to equine needs, but the Horseshoers’ Union, still independent in 1900, had been merged into a more general craft union.

There were 83 tailors, including seven Chinese, but only eight non-Chinese laundries compared to 21 Chinese. The four Chinese noodle parlors in 1917 likely made their own noodles, but there was also one noddle manufacturing company in Butte that supplied restaurants across the region.

The Anaconda Copper Mining Company was working aggressively on consolidating its control, but at least 59 other mining companies had offices and operations in and around Butte. The well-paid miner could spend his income at one of 23 different jewelers, not to mention a myriad of shops and stores selling clothing and furniture of all sorts. Hennessey’s was among the first stores in the country to offer time payments – buy an expensive phonograph for $200, and pay just $5 or $10 a month for the next four or five years. But remember, $10 was two or three days’ pay for a miner in 1917.

Or visit one of the 241 saloons and 29 billiard parlors in the city. If you got in trouble, Butte listed 122 lawyers in 1917, including Burton K. Wheeler, the US District Attorney with his independent office in the Hirbour Tower, and Cornelis Kelley, Anaconda attorney on the 6th floor of the Hennessey Building.

Butte in 1917 had to be a turbulent, dynamic, exciting place, full of remarkable sights, sounds, smells, and turmoil – the context for commemorating the Granite Mountain disaster and remembering the legacy of Frank Little.

 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.