BAS 099 first teacher

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

Born in London, England, Thomas C. Porter came to America when he was eight years old in 1843. He was among the early prospectors at Alder Gulch in 1864, but he left for Butte in October of that year. Together with Dennis O’Leary, Joseph Ramsdell, and William Parks, he developed Butte’s first smelter on the lower reaches of Town Gulch (Dublin Gulch), probably just east of the intersection of Wyoming, Copper, and the Anaconda Road today. But Porter was also Butte’s first school teacher.

Porter conducted a school for seven students for three or four months during the winter of 1865-66. The school building was a log cabin on Broadway where the Butte Hotel was later built, the parking structure across from the old City Hall today. Grandly, and likely jokingly styled “Oatman Hall,” the log cabin was replaced in 1879 by the St. Nicholas Hotel, the largest in Butte, with a dining room that could accommodate 100 patrons.

The log cabin school was reportedly constructed by David Meiklejohn so his children could have an education, but it was maintained and paid for “by subscription,” which meant voluntary contributions by residents. Even when enrollments were low and supporting families few, “bachelors subscribed liberally to maintain the school,” according to reports of the day. Meiklejohn went on to become Butte’s Police Chief in 1887-88, when he lived in a home at the corner of Mercury and Dakota Streets.

Porter was unpaid as a teacher. Presumably he had time on his hands during the winter, and sustained himself with his mining ventures, although the Ramsdell Smelter he partnered in was considered by many to be a failure, a waste of a $7,000 investment. After that first winter, Porter passed the teaching responsibilities on to Colonel Wood, the first salaried teacher in Butte, a man who was also “a fine fiddler” and taught dance along with traditional subjects. Porter continued his mining ventures and in 1882 was elected Public Administrator of Silver Bow County, which had been carved out of Deer Lodge County the previous year.

One of the first seven students, W.L. Robbins, was still living in Butte in 1937, at 3043 Phillips Avenue, when he recalled living in Mr. Porter’s cabin on Quartz Street and attending the school on Broadway. By 1879, Butte’s exploding population, given as 2,911 excluding 363 more in Walkerville, included 189 children age 10 to 21, 257 age 5 to 10, and 215 under age 5. There were 255 students attending seven or eight schools scattered across the district from Walkerville to Meaderville, and from the East Side to the Travona in 1879.

By 1888, one- to three-room schools in the neighborhoods were overshadowed by the new High School at East Granite and Arizona and the older Central School at Broadway and Academy (Dakota), later the site of the Butte Public Library. The Central School building had 11 rooms on two stories and evolved over time to serve as the High School, while the old High School became Washington School which served as a Junior High and Elementary School in later years. It was replaced by a new school on the same site in 1915, the Washington School most people recall.

 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.