BAS 104 Sewell’s

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

Walter J. Sewell was born in 1876 in New Brunswick, of Welsh ancestry. At age 12, he was rafting logs on the St. John River to Fredericton, but he was soon heading west, following his grandfather, Thomas.

Thomas Sewell (1841-1913) worked on the Canadian Pacific Railroad in the early 1880s, a carpenter on bridge construction gangs in British Columbia, but he was drawn to Anaconda to work at Marcus Daly’s smelter in 1885. Apart from a short unsuccessful touch of gold fever and an expedition to the Klondike, he worked as a smelterman and carpenter in Anaconda until 1913 when he went to Hurley, New Mexico, to build a smelter for the Chino Copper Company. During that trip, he became ill and soon died.

Despite his Welsh heritage, Thomas was a member of the Catholic church, Knights of Columbus, Ancient Order of Hibernians, Friends of Irish Freedom, and the Robert Emmet Literary Association. Grandson Walter had begun a career in Butte as a carpenter in 1898, and was involved in the construction of both the St. Mary’s school and the Holy Savior school in McQueen.

By 1911 Walter had started a Butte hardware business that would last for 60 years. His one-story store at 221 East Park Street was built in 1916 at a cost of $5,000. By 1919, the business included paints and auto accessories, and from the fact that Sewell’s advertised regularly in the Butte Daily Bulletin – the radical labor newspaper – we might infer that Walter was a strong supporter of the labor movement.

The Sewell family home was at 524 Caledonia, gone today. Walter died in 1952 and is buried in Holy Cross Cemetery, and his son Walter J. Sewell Jr. managed the hardware store until he retired and closed the business in 1971. It’s likely that about that time the Anaconda Company bought the property, anticipating the expansion of the Berkeley Pit, but of course that expansion never happened. In 1985 the Company offered the entire block for sale and today the four buildings there hold various businesses, but Sewell’s has been more or less vacant, or used as a warehouse, since the business closed in 1971.

The name “Sewell’s” in red stained glass still graces the façade of the old hardware store. It is set into failing purple glass tiles in the transom level of the storefront – Luxfer glass tiles that were designed to focus light into the interior of the building. They are similar to the glass bricks that once occupied most of the sidewalks in Butte, providing light to the sidewalk vaults beneath.

In 2019, Butte-Silver Bow county’s Historic Preservation office received a grant from the Montana History Foundation to refurbish the deteriorating stained glass. Great Falls artist Mike Winters did the work with additional support from Butte Citizens for Preservation and Revitalization and building owner Joe Floreen.

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.