BAS 107 Garden Spot

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

In the 1890s and early 1900s, Butte was notorious for the smoke and fumes emanating from its mills and smelters. It was said – and likely true, at least on occasion – that on a clear day the smoke was sometimes so bad you needed a lantern to see the street signs.

But according to the Anaconda Standard on July 5, 1903, “Where is the man who first set in circulation the wicked and slanderous story that the city of Butte is treeless and devoid of verdure? Whoever he is the man who started this false testimony either was blind or else he never saw the portion of the city known as South Butte.”

South Butte was organized as a city separate from Butte itself, and it had its own street system and population counts until about 1895. This is why the address numbers between First and Second and Third Streets are the 1000 and 900 blocks. They used to be the 100 and 200 blocks, but the scheme changed once South Butte became part of Butte and the basis for street addresses became Park Street.

The Standard claimed that there was never as much smoke in South Butte as in the rest of the city, and that grass, flowers, and trees thrived there. This thriving was certainly with some encouragement from homeowners who cultivated a wide variety of plantings that made the streetscapes beautiful.

Alderman John McQueeney’s house at Wyoming and Second Streets was one beauty spot. “If every yard in Butte were like McQueeney’s yard, Spokane would have to move back towards the tall timber, and Salt Lake City would cease to attract Butteites as it does now,” according to the Standard reporter. Another home on Wyoming, that of Mrs. L. T. Wadsworth, had verandas “arbored with tea rose and hop vines” – hops do continue to do well in Butte – and her yard also had “quaking asp trees,” Balm of Gilead, sweet peas, pansies, asparagus vine, box elder, lilacs, woodvine, night shades, potatoes, clover, and lettuce. That small yard must have been quite a sight.

Carl Elvers’ home at 1118 Utah had crab apple trees in its yard, called “one of the pretty attractions in South Butte.” William Schmid, a policeman whose home was at 928 Utah, had a “veritable conservatory” with geraniums, fuschias, Martha Washingtons (showy geranium-like flowers), and palms. Mrs. Schmid gave all credit to her husband, for whom plants were his hobby. He reportedly had the “finest collection of house plants in Butte.”

1118 Utah is still standing, but house additions have removed much of the back yard where Elvers’ greenery must have grown. Schmid’s house at 928 Utah is one of only two survivors on the east side of Utah in that block. The McQueeney and Wadsworth houses are both gone.

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.