BAS 108 Smoke Wars

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

The Boston and Montana Mining Company was organized in 1887 by Albert Bigelow of Boston and the Lewisohn brothers of New York, early partners with Charles Meader for whom Meaderville was named. They grew to become one of the largest copper mining companies in the United States before being acquired by the Amalgamated in 1901, and the Amalgamated ultimately became the Anaconda Copper Mining Company. But in the early 1890s, the Boston and Montana was a major player in the Smoke Wars.

It was said in 1890 that Butte contained just four living trees—thanks to the need for timber in mine tunnels, wood to construct houses, fuel for smelters, and death of trees by toxic fumes. The problem of heap roasting was huge in the early 1890s because of the sulfurous and arsenical smoke that sometimes reduced visibility on Butte streets to a half block. That process was simple: dig a pit, put some fuel in it, pile sulfide ore on top, and set on fire. It reduced the ore somewhat, a crude (and cheap) means of concentrating ore prior to smelting in a real blast furnace. The Boston & Montana Company used it to improve efficiency (i.e., to reduce costs) in shipping of Butte ore to their new 1893 smelter in Great Falls, but the smoke and fumes it put into Butte’s air were killing people at an alarming rate—eleven deaths in nine days during one bad inversion. The rich went to California, while those who could afford it took rooms in Walkerville, above the smoke.

The city passed the first Smoke Ordinance on December 17, 1890, banning open-air roasting and mandating tall stacks to disperse the smoke. B&M’s superintendent, Captain Thomas Couch, with backing from officers in Boston, essentially ignored the law. Increasing rhetoric from Mayor Henry Mueller, the city council, and Anaconda Standard editorials had no effect. As the November 1891 smoke season began, the Standard labeled the conflict “the war of wealth against health.” Nothing changed.

Plans of various sorts were devised, which in all likelihood were little more than lip service to the demands of the people and the city government. In the face of a 60% increase in Butte copper production between 1890 and 1892, “wealth” basically won out. The smoke problem continued for another decade, until in the early 1900s heap roasting by the Boston & Montana and Butte & Boston Companies finally ended and ores were shipped directly to smelters in Anaconda and Great Falls. In 1906, only two smelters still operated in Butte, Clark’s Butte Reduction Works and the Pittsmont, and both dispersed their fumes with tall stacks.

In January 1892 plans were drawn to execute a grand idea to build nearly 12,000 feet of brick flues 8 to 12 feet across to transport smoke to stacks on two high points, Timber Butte for the Colorado Smelter and the tip of Rampart Mountain for the Boston and Montana Smelter in Meaderville. The flues would have cost $32 or $33 per foot, nearly $390,000 in dollars of the day, equivalent to more than $10 million today. Not a single foot was ever constructed.

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.