BAS 115 Butte in 1878 Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

What was Butte like in, say, 1878? We were three years into the silver boom, but things hadn’t really taken off. The United States was still suffering from the effects of the Panic of 1873, a financial crisis and depression caused in part by post-Civil War inflation, unwarranted speculation in the markets, depressed silver prices, and bank losses due to major fires in Chicago and Boston.

But even with depressed prices, silver was a valuable commodity, and Butte had it in plenty. In 1878, 15 new brick business blocks were constructed, and the Walker Brothers’ Alice mine complex had production valued at $45,000 a month, with close to a third of that value going to payroll for 80 or so men. Andrew Jackson Davis’ Lexington mine had six shafts as deep as 150 feet, and a new $40,000 mill that paid for itself within a year. By any account, Butte was booming.

Clark’s Original mine turned a profit of $30,000 in 1878 from ore that ran as much as 190 ounces of silver per ton, and 10% to 20% copper. For comparison, today’s Montana Resources is profitable with less than a tenth of an ounce of silver per ton, and about three-tenths of an ounce of copper.

For the year, the Butte district produced $899,000 in silver bullion, $85,000 in gold, and $190,000 in unprocessed ore shipped, for a total value of $1,174,000.

The population that supported this exceptionally rich production was something less than the 1879 estimate of 2,911, with another 363 in Walkerville. In 1880, all of Montana counted just over 39,000 people. There was no railroad, no electricity, no telephone, no paved streets.

There was a school, given that there were around 500 or so children in Butte in 1878, as well as at least two churches, St Patrick’s and Mountain View. Other congregations likely met in homes or business spaces or in the two existing church buildings. The Episcopalians, for example, held services only once a month, when the Pastor from Deer Lodge came to Butte. They met at Loeber’s Hall on Broadway, probably the largest gathering place in Butte. In addition to church services, wrestling matches and business meetings of the Fire Department were held at Loeber’s, which was also a brewery and saloon. It was a popular enough venue that Fred Loeber expanded the building by 10 feet during 1878, just in time for a “grand masquerade ball” given by the German Singing Society.

One Mrs. Mitchell of Salt Lake City arrived in Butte in 1878 to open The Butte Institute, a dance hall. She was promptly arrested for opening a “hurdy gurdy house or dancing saloon,” illegal under territorial law. The complainant in the case was Justice Robert Wiles, who not only was to be the trial judge, but also enlisted the signature of one Jacobs to formalize the complaint. Jacobs, on learning he would need to testify, sought to withdraw, but was not allowed to. The case was transferred to Judge Foster, who advised Jacobs to be in Walkerville when the case came up. In Jacobs’ absence, the case against Mrs. Mitchell was dismissed for lack of witnesses.

Two dentists, two physicians, two assayers, and one lawyer advertised in the February, 1898 Butte Miner. The post office and multiple banks rounded out what was surely becoming a thriving community, albeit still a muddy one during the wet season.

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.