BAS 118 Ice Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

While it’s likely that there was at least casual harvesting and storage of ice from lakes around town for use during the summer in Butte’s earliest days, it seems that Butte’s first commercial dealer in ice was W.H. Patterson.

Born in St. Louis in 1839, Patterson joined the gold rush to Alder Gulch in 1864, where his success was moderate, giving him and his partners $700 to invest in a failed venture at Diamond City in the Big Belt Mountains near present-day Townsend, Montana. He spent the next decade back east, but in 1878 he returned to establish his ice supply company in Butte at a time when the city’s population was around 2500 but growing with the booming silver mining operations.

Ice was most important in the late 19th century for refrigerated cars on railroads, which transported perishable goods across the country. The Great Northern harvested ice from ponds near Ft. Assiniboine and Great Falls, while the Northern Pacific’s sources were near Forsyth and along the Bitterroot River. Cities typically had their own local supplies.

Ice harvest season was obviously the dead of winter, when natural ice was cut from ponds and stored in warehouses, often with subterranean levels to keep it cool. By the 1890s, Patterson’s competition included Columbia Gardens Ice, harvesting above the neighborhood at the base of the East Ridge and delivering from their office at 130 East Park Street, and the Basin Creek Ice Company. Besides the Basin Creek Company, Peoples Ice and Crystal Ice both obtained ice from the creek south of Butte, as well as along the upper reaches of Blacktail Creek. Crystal Ice also leased a pond north of Butte from Oro Fino Ice Company, and Yankee Doodle Ice had a pond and storage not far from the Moulton Mill in Walkerville.

In 1907, the going rate for ice in Butte was $2.50 a ton, and companies like Crystal Ice delivered hundreds of tons per year.

The Butte Ice Company was established about 1888, with its headquarters at 600 South Main (where Town Pump’s corporate offices stand today), and went on to become the premier natural ice producer in the Intermountain Northwest. Wallace White, president of Butte Ice, dammed Blacktail Creek in 1895 to create Lake Avoca as a winter source of ice and summer recreational area, and he went on to develop the Atherton neighborhood around the Butte Country Club.

In 1928, Butte Ice was still harvesting natural ice, but that year they merged with Henningsen Produce (established in 1890), the largest maker of artificial ice in Butte at one of the “most up-to-date freezing plants” in the nation. Henningsen’s creamery and cold storage facility was at Wyoming and Iron Streets. In 1916 they could produce 40 tons of ice daily.

Although a practical electric refrigerator was available for domestic use as early as 1922, it cost $714 at a time when a Model-T Ford cost about $450. It wasn’t until General Electric introduced a cheap model in 1927 that the days of the iceman coming were numbered. Henningsen continued to produce ice for industrial and non-domestic uses for years, but it was their diversity, including cheese making, poultry, ice cream, and other produce that kept them in business.

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.