BAS 131 The first big fire Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

June 9, 1881, was a Thursday. At 1:15 in the morning, a fire of unknown origin (but assumed at the time to be the “result of carelessness”) broke out in the rear of Pettit’s Furniture Store on West Broadway. It was Butte’s first major fire, and within an hour five buildings were gone.

Besides Pettit’s store, Hendrickson & Holmes’ Workingmen’s Hospital was lost, along with three homes. Pretty much no one had insurance, and the estimated minimum value of lost buildings and contents was more than $12,000, a huge sum in 1881, when a simple house might cost $500 or so.

Henry McMurphy, D. G. Allen, and Mrs. Landers, who had recently moved to Butte from Deer Lodge, were homeless, along with Herman Graff and several lodgers, but no injuries were reported.

Pettit’s Furniture Store was at about 115 West Broadway, and the site of the fire on the alley was later occupied by City Cleaning & Dye Works. Today, this is a small parking area across the alley from the rear of the Carpenter’s Union Hall. City Cleaning was established by Canadian Arthur Sylvain, who got his start in the business at the Paumie Dye House which is today’s uptown post office.

The Central School, Butte’s second, was directly across Broadway from the fire, and high winds spread embers there and elsewhere. But the fire was prevented from taking out much more of the uptown by the efforts of a man-to-man bucket brigade.

Although Butte did have a steam engine for pumping water, there was an insufficient water supply to really address big fires like this one, and the equipment was inadequate. Reports of the day included the hope that the work needed to bring the “badly needed” water and firefighting into Butte would result, and indeed that happened, eventually.

Within two years, on April 15, 1883, the Butte Volunteer Fire Department was organized, with J.H. McCarthy chief. By 1889, the first paid firemen – six of them – were employed by the city to serve nearly 23,000 residents.

I and others have often said that a big fire in 1879 was the impetus behind Butte’s first city law, the brick ordinance that mandated business block construction of stone and brick. But that’s not true – the ordinance pre-dated this first big fire in 1881, although few buildings had yet been built of stone and brick, and even those that were had interior wooden frame construction. The Deer Lodge newspaper, the New North-West, in fact reported it as “Butte’s First Fire,” almost certainly an exaggeration. But it was the first really significant fire, big enough to result in the formation of the Fire Department.

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.