BAS 134 Polygamy Alley Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

In early Butte—and into modern times in some places—the alleys were typically lined by businesses or homes with no other address than the alley. Many such alleys were simply referred to by the name of an adjacent street, such as South Main Alley (which evolved to China Alley) or East Granite Alley. Often enough, they were just called “the alley between Granite and Quartz Streets” or something similar. But from about 1884-1887, Butte boasted a uniquely named alley: Polygamy Alley.

It ran perhaps appropriately from Utah Street (which is today’s Hamilton) to Montana, between Granite and Broadway, just south of today’s Julian’s Piano Bar. Like many alleys, it was marked by a mixture of structures, including stables, sheds, outhouses, and the rears of a few large buildings including the Mt. Vernon Hotel, on Broadway. But most buildings were too small to reach all the way to the alley behind them, so other buildings appeared.

N.H. Ambrose ran a small boarding house in Polygamy Alley, probably about where the rear of the Water Company building is today. J.R. Anderson operated a canvas-covered carpenter’s shop near the modern back of the Carpenter’s Union Hall. That shop, where Anderson also lived, had become a more substantial frame structure with a basement by 1888, though it was still tiny, about 20 by 30 feet in size.

In 1885, two compositors, C.J. Lyons and J.F. Kline, probably typesetters for a printing company or newspaper, lived at the corner of Polygamy Alley and Utah (Hamilton), probably in a two-story rooming house that was the predecessor to Julian’s and Venus Rising coffee shop (which is in the more recent Maley Block).

By 1888 buildings on Polygamy Alley were beginning to have addresses related to the streets to north or south. The carpenter’s shop became 120½ West Granite; a house on the south side of the alley became 69½ West Broadway, but there were still a handful of dwellings with alley-based numbers, at 109, 121, and 123, but by 1889 the name Polygamy Alley was no longer used. In the late 1880s and early 1890s the Butte fire department’s hose cart and 450-foot, 2½-inch hose were stored in the eastern part of this alley.

A handful of alley-facing businesses survived here in 1916, including an iron-clad carpenter’s shop (not the same one as Anderson had; this was a former stable, and stood just to the east of the new (1906) Carpenter’s Union Hall), a Chinese laundry, and a three-story lodging house due west of the Maley Block. That lodging house was still standing as recently as 1957, but is represented by a vacant lot today.

Polygamy Alley was commemorated in a song of the same name published a few years ago by Butte’s Red Mountain Band.

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.