BAS 139 Chimney Sweep Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

The beginning of the Christmas season in Butte in 1902 was also chimney-cleaning season. “It has been noticeable that there is a great rush to have the chimneys of the houses swept and thoroughly cleansed for the accommodation and comfort of the ever-welcome Santa,” according to the Anaconda Standard on December 21, 1902.

One of Santa’s “best and most faithful allies” in Butte was Elias Simington, the “colored chimney sweep who has served Santa well for many Christmases.” Simington grew up in Kansas and arrived in Butte about 1882. For more than 20 years, he made a point of sweeping chimneys of “good little girls and boys” in the season approaching Christmas.

In 1902, Simington’s promotion of Santa, assuring the children of Santa’s impending safe arrival, indicated that since the previous year, Santa had taken to “new fandangled ideas,” and had gotten himself a peach of an automobile. The reindeer, getting a bit old and slow, were to be given a break for Christmas 1902 as Santa tested the new contraption.

In Simington’s view, Santa liked Butte almost well enough to live here permanently, but the smoke was what kept him from doing it. And Santa’s aversion to smoke was Simington’s incentive to keep the chimneys clean. In the performance of his job, he was sometimes mistaken for Santa himself. A little girl was certain Santa had arrived, but her brother, who Simington said was “pretty well posted on everything,” told her, “Naw, that ain’t Santa Claus. Santa Claus has got white whiskers, and that man ain’t.”

Elias Simington lived at 203 South Ohio Street just south of the intersection of Ohio and Mercury, in the Cabbage Patch. His tenement was a 10-by-20-foot brick veneered room, one of a short row of such homes on the west side of Ohio Street. He died before 1910, when his widow, Babe Elizabeth, was working as a janitor at Symons Department Store on Park Street and living at 1037 Iowa Avenue. She was still in that job and home in 1918. The little one-story house on Iowa Street is gone today, but the lot is a nicely landscaped yard.

On the same 1902 newspaper page as the article about Elias Simington, another story reported on one Charles Whalen, immigrant to Butte from Baltimore. He came to Butte on the advice of his physician, to get over consumption. He claimed that Butte’s sulphur smoke contained a germicide that killed the consumption germ. “Arsenic in the smoke builds up the system,” Whalen said, “and there you are.” He said he was thinking about building a sanitarium in Butte for the curing of consumption through the breathing of its smoky atmosphere, but apparently that never came to pass.

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.