BAS 142 creamery café Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

The Creamery Café, commemorated in the prominent ghost sign on the east face of the Mantle & Bielenberg building on Broadway (and a less prominent one on the west face), occupied part of the ground floor there from 1913 until 1957. The Café had moved to the M&B block on Broadway following a devastating fire on North Main, its original location.

Theo McCabe and Roy McClelland both came to Butte in 1903, and in July 1903 partnered to establish a restaurant in the basement at 36 North Main Street. Four years later, the Creamery Cafe subscribed to the Independent Telephone Company’s network (phone no. 5058), and the partners each had home phones as well, at 502 South Washington and 662 Colorado, respectively.

In 1911, the Creamery was at 24 North Main, but it hadn’t moved—the address scheme changed. It was still in the basement of the same building, known as the O’Rourke Estate Building. The building at Granite and Main, formerly Curley’s, is the one we think of as the O’Rourke Estate, but the Estate likely owned many properties around Butte.

On July 30, 1912, a fire and explosion at about 4:00 a.m. resulted from a worker rendering lard in the café oven and placing the burning container on the stove, where the flaming grease spattered everywhere spreading the fire very quickly. Although “all the fire equipment in the city” responded, ultimately three buildings were lost.

The fire burned out several businesses, wiping out almost the entire inventory of the McDonald Shoe Company, a $22,000 loss. Residents in Mrs. Josephine Bietz’ rooming house on the upper floors barely escaped with their scant night clothes; several ailing residents had to be carried out as the flames reached their apartment doors. Mrs. Bietz had been burned out once before when her lodging house was in the Harvard Block on West Park, destroyed in the huge conflagration that wiped out the Symons Stores and more in 1905 (where the Phoenix Block stands today). Several pets were killed in the Creamery Café fire, but no humans were injured seriously.

The building south of the O’Rourke Estate/Creamery, 20 N. Main (32 N. Main before 1911) that was also destroyed in the fire was erected before 1891 and for many years housed D’Acheul’s drug store. At the time of the fire that destroyed it, Ley’s Jewelry was on the ground floor there, and the second level held offices and meeting halls; ironically, the Cooks and Waiters Unions met there. The total value of losses was estimated at more than $70,000 at the time, with about $52,000 covered by insurance. Later estimates pegged the total loss at about $49,000.

The three destroyed buildings were replaced in short order by three more, including two that survive today: the Rookwood Hotel/Speakeasy and vacant cafe at 24-26 N. Main, and the three-story building next door which holds a Ley’s Jewelry ghost sign. All the buildings in the rest of the block adjacent to these buildings, all of which survived the 1912 fire, were lost in fires in 1969 (buildings to the north to Broadway) and 1973 (Medical Arts Center fire south to Park, occupied by the new Northwestern Energy headquarters building today).

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.