BAS 145 Baseball Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Minor league baseball in Butte began about 1892, when Butte was part of the Montana State League. In 1900, the team was called the Butte Smoke Eaters, and at least seven Smoke Eaters played in the major leagues at some point in their careers. Two of them, Jim Powell and Jim St. Vrain, are buried in Butte. St. Vrain, from Missouri, started his career in Butte at age 29 in 1900 and played for the 1902 Chicago Orphans in the National League. After he retired from baseball in 1905, he worked as a miner and electrician in Butte, and died here in 1937.

Jim Powell arrived in Butte from his native Virginia about 1892 and worked as the manager of Maguire’s Opera House on West Broadway (where the Leggatt Hotel stands today). He had played for the Philadelphia Athletics in the 1880s and was manager of the Smoke Eaters in 1900. He lived at the Southern Hotel, still standing at 41-43 East Broadway.

Perhaps because the smelters were moving away to Anaconda and the atmosphere in Butte was improving, by 1902 the team was playing as the Butte Miners, part of the Pacific Northwest League. The league the Butte Miners played in was variously the Pacific Northwest, Pacific National, Northwestern, or Inter-Mountain, and from 1911-1914 they were part of the Union Association.

In April 1914 the team that took the field was managed by James William “Ducky” Holmes, a 45-year-old pro with 10 years in the majors and 21 years in the minors including eight years as a manager. Most of his career was in Nebraska and Iowa (where he was born, January 28, 1869), with some years as far away as Detroit. 1914 was his only year in Butte. He was 5’6” tall, 170 pounds, and batted left and threw right. His career lasted until 1922, and he died in Iowa in 1932.

Butte led the league in 1913, but the 1914 Butte Miners finished second, after the Boise Irrigators and ahead of the Helena Senators, Murray (Utah) Infants, Ogden Canners, and Salt Lake City Skyscrapers. Butte's 1914 players who had some time with the majors included John Halla (Cleveland, 1905), Ed McCreery (three games for Detroit in late 1914), and Steve Melter (St. Louis in 1909).

After the 1917 season, Butte had no minor league team until 1978 when the Butte Copper Kings franchise began, playing in the Pioneer League. The team remained in Butte until 2000 when they moved to Casper, Wyoming, and today, as the Grand Junction Rockies, it is affiliated with the Colorado Rockies.

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.