BAS 158 Election of 1896 Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

The presidential election of 1896 was among the most hard-fought and complex in U.S. history, and Butte had a vested interest in it.

The issue that mattered was gold vs. silver. Republicans, with William McKinley at the head of the ticket, strongly supported the gold standard, while William Jennings Bryan’s pro-silver platform attracted disgruntled western Republicans who had split to form the National Silver Party. In the run-up to the political conventions there were also “gold Democrats” but Bryan, thanks in part to his oratory and “Cross of Gold” speech, was nominated—but he was also on the Populist Party ticket with a different vice-presidential running mate.

Bryan advocated “free silver,” or bimetallism, and use of silver for coinage in the ratio of 16 to 1 (16 ounces of silver to one of gold), when the de facto ratio was about 32 to 1. This was just three years after the Panic of 1893 had resulted in a crash in the price of silver, decimating many mining communities including Philipsburg; it impacted Butte significantly.

A complication for Butte was that unions were leery of the inflationary silver policies embraced by Bryan, but on the whole miners favored his approach. Ultimately, Bryan carried most western mining states by large margins. In Montana, he gained nearly 80% of the vote. Bryan won 22 states, and margins in others were close enough that the decision was not clear until late Thursday following the Tuesday election, but William McKinley was the national winner, both in the Electoral College and in the popular vote. Bryan, in a successful attempt to woo farmers, alienated city residents with lines like "Burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up again; but destroy our farms, and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country." Most urban areas voted overwhelmingly for McKinley.

The Butte Miner repeatedly endorsed Bryan, and while the outcome was in doubt cheered his huge victory in Montana.

Some of the most interesting campaign pins in American history came from the 1896 presidential contest, and the World Museum of Mining has several in its collection. The lapel pins reflected both the “gold bugs” who supported McKinley and Bryan’s “silver bugs.” A silver bug pin bears Bryan’s image and the words “free silver” and “16 to 1,” while the gold bug contains McKinley’s photo and “sound money.” A pitchfork pin, with “Bryan and Sewall” on the haft, impales three gold bugs labeled “McK-R-H” for McKinley, Republicans, and Hobart, McKinley’s running mate.

Nearly identical pins were made for each party, gold for Republicans and silver for Democrats. A gold flag would have been worn by a McKinley supporter, while an articulated folding pair of silver flags in the World Museum of Mining collection contains images of Bryan and his running-mate Arthur Sewall.

Despite the political failure of the silver campaign, the metal remained useful and valuable. Butte’s total cumulative silver production of around 750,000,000 ounces probably ranks it as the third-largest silver producer in the world, after #1 Potosi, Bolivia, and the Kellogg-Coeur d’Alene district of Idaho. The Orphan Girl Mine, where the World Museum of Mining stands today, produced about 7,500,000 ounces of silver on its own before it closed in 1956.

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.