BAS 165 Boarding Houses Rule – The Florence. Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

The great-grandmother of all the boardinghouses was the Florence Hotel. Built in 1898 at the behest of and with financing by Amalgamated (Anaconda) Company officers, it replaced the Hale House, which burned down on March 21, 1898. It stood on East Broadway, at the southwest corner with Thornton Avenue—the street that today seems like an alley on the west side of the Broadway Café.

The huge new edifice was constructed in three sections, totaling 110 feet of exposure on Broadway and extending 140 feet to the south. With three stories and a basement on the north side and four stories and a basement on the south, it had two 12- by 80-foot light wells, even though it also had electric lights. To guard against continual fire hazards, each floor had a 200-foot-long, one-and-a-half-inch-wide hose, and the double boiler and the bake house were both enclosed in brick, with brick ceilings and an iron-clad door connecting with the hotel. The boilers supplied steam heat to the rooms; the bake house and a separate 12-foot-wide oven operated throughout the day and night to serve as many as four hundred diners at each sitting—three hundred hotel residents and another one hundred from elsewhere. The dining hall took up almost the entire eastern third of the building on the first floor (the bar occupied that section at the Broadway Street front, and a small barbershop also served customers there). In the washroom, 130 men at a time could clean up. The Florence was big.

In its early years, the Florence had problems with management and inefficient operations. John Ryan, Anaconda Copper Mining Company president, asked saloonkeeper Hugh O’Daly to take over. O’Daly owned Daly’s Place, a bar at 106 North Main Street where his innovations, including replacing the original twenty-five-foot bar with a seventy-five-foot one, had turned his establishment into the “most popular bar in Montana” by 1905. With that success under his belt, O’Daly bought the Florence in 1906. The previous operators, Mr. and Mrs. Chad Flood, had only 150 guests in three hundred rooms when O’Daly took over; he paid $3,500, down from the Floods’ asking price of $5,000. Strictly speaking, the Anaconda Company owned the property, and O’Daly owned the business, but for practical purposes, the place was O’Daly’s.

O’Daly immediately employed the principle of spending money to make money. He bought six hundred new mattresses, putting two single beds in each room, installed a new bar, and bought new dishes for the dining room. His most controversial move may have been increasing wages: chambermaids and waitresses made $30/month for a twelve-hour shift, but O’Daly upped it to $35 a month for eight hours a day. The cook went from $125/month to $150, and there were raises for other employees, including butchers, bakers, bartenders and clerks. Within one week, he was at 100% occupancy. Other hoteliers and lodging businesses grumbled, but his success was inarguable. The unions’ ascendancy at the same time—miners got the eight-hour day in Butte in 1900–1906 as well—likely enhanced his favor with his guests, virtually all of whom were miners.

The Florence sat squarely within Finntown, which centered on East Granite, Broadway and Park and extended several blocks east from the Florence. But the Florence was almost entirely Irish, from O’Daly down to Donegal-born maid Annie O’Byrne, who worked there for thirteen years; 85 percent of the guests were Irish.

O’Daly’s refurbishing of the Florence cost him $11,748, a princely sum in 1906, but in the first year, he turned a $23,000 profit. The Florence quickly became known as the “Big Ship,” not for the size of the place, huge though it was, but because it was said that on a weekend, enough liquor was consumed there to float “a mighty big ship.”

Guests at the Florence paid $8.00 to $12.00 per week for their bed and board—not counting what they spent in the Big Ship’s saloon.

Hugh O’Daly died in about 1946, and the Florence was torn down about the same time. The lot was filled by tiny little row houses about 1951, but they are gone now, too, and the site at 246–250 East Broadway is a vacant lot.

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.