BAS 167 Shabbishacks Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

In May 1928, the Butte Miner headlined “City Cleanup Stirs Demand for Removal of Eyesores—97 Buildings Condemned as Fire Hazards.” This was the start of the Shabbishacks campaign, probably Butte’s first concerted effort to remove urban blight.

More than half of the condemned structures were occupied, but that didn’t slow down the Better Butte Association of businessmen. For forty-five days, it ran photos in the paper of condemned buildings, together with owners’ names and the tagline, “What Price Civic Glory?” By mid-June, 120 addresses were on the list; the campaign was promoted by a “Beautify Butte” float in the Fourth of July parade.

The most valuable ground occupied by a decrepit building was the Windsor on East Broadway next to the Hirbour Tower and, as the Miner pointed out to city fathers, almost across the street from city hall. The Windsor, however, was one of the few to survive Shabbishacks, but it was destroyed in the Butte Hotel fire of 1954. The largest doomed property stood at Front and Arizona, a two-story duplex with stores on the first floor and lodgings on the second. The list included the Olympia Brewery buildings on Harrison Avenue, unused since 1911, as well as many houses throughout town.

By the time Better Butte’s “educational and pictorial publicity” campaign ended on July 14, most of the condemned places were gone, willingly torn down by their owners within days of the legal notice. Historic preservation was nonexistent in 1928, and if there was any nostalgia for any targeted locations, it is not evident in the newspapers of the day. Those who fought condemnation proceedings likely only saw the potential loss of rental income. While it is certainly true that all these properties would have been considered historic today, there is also no doubt that in 1928, few people saw their loss as anything other than the march of progress—and that was a good thing.

There is also little doubt that most of the buildings were decrepit, dangerous, unhealthy and even falling down. Silver Bow County’s population decreased from about ninety-three thousand in 1918 to fifty-seven thousand in 1930, leaving many vacant homes, and early 1920s mine closures meant hard times for many who remained. People could not spend money to keep their homes repaired, a situation that has played out time and time again in Butte’s boom-and-bust mining economy.

The Shabbishacks program spanned the town, from Walkerville and Centerville to Washoe Street across Silver Bow Creek. Homes were demolished at 315 North Idaho, 952 West Park, 515–517 West Broadway, 1038 West Mercury, 833 North Montana, 111–115 North Washington, 107 and 108 West Copper and at many other locations, most of which are still vacant lots today. As the campaign ended, W.A. Kemper, president of the Better Butte Association, wrote, “In our determination to help Beautify Butte, we shall continue to hew to the line, let the chips fall where they may!” Much of the debris from Shabbishacks demolitions was deposited at the southeast corner of Platinum and Excelsior Streets to build up the land there.

For the next twenty years, Butte and America had other things to think about than urban renewal; businesses and individuals alike fought the Great Depression and World War II. But the 1928 Shabbishacks effort would certainly not be the last in Butte.

 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.