BAS 172 BSB consolidation Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Everyone in Butte knows we have a unified city-county government, established when the two jurisdictions combined in 1977. But that wasn’t the first time a merger was attempted.

Three previous pushes to combine the city and county, in 1924, 1931, and 1963, all failed.

The basis for consolidation was mostly financial. Proponents argued that it would be a money-saver, avoiding the duplication of effort in the two government administrations, and would thereby reduce taxes. Opponents, largely members of the well-established political machine in Butte, argued that the effort was a ploy to spread Butte’s significant debts onto people outside the city limits.

The 1924 and 1931 contests were both marked by personal attacks on both sides and loud allegations of voter fraud, but the fear of dramatic increases in taxes outside the city resulted in the consolidation plan’s defeat. In 1924, a 70% voter turnout of more than 14,000 defeated the proposal by only 660 votes. The city-county divide was evident in the vote in one Butte precinct, with 374 votes for consolidation and only 87 against, but in Dublin Gulch, outside the city limits, the anti-consolidation vote was 503 against to 65 for the plan.

A handful of challenges to potential voters led the losing consolidationists to claim widespread suppression of votes that would have been cast by their supporters, but the loss was ultimately certified.

The very concept of consolidation had gone to the Montana Supreme Court, which ruled the idea constitutional on April 26, 1924, allowing barely more than two weeks until the election that defeated the plan.

The Anaconda and Clark mining companies, together with most Butte merchants, supported consolidation in 1924 and expressed that loudly in both the Standard and the Miner newspapers. By 1931 there was support from at least some labor organizations as well, notably the Clerks’ Union.

The 1931 contest was even more acrimonious than the 1924 battle. “FIGHT FOR HONEST ELECTION,” proclaimed the Montana Standard, with an editorial sidebar titled “Will Truth Triumph or Bunk Prevail?” “What a sordid story of deceit and imposition, of knavery and heartlessness,” the Standard alleged of the anti-consolidationists’ claim that passing the measure would eliminate widows’ pension funds and assistance for the poor – a captivating argument as the Great Depression took hold in Butte.

The 1931 proposal was soundly defeated. It passed in the city by a vote of 5543 to 5090, but the county, including areas such as Meaderville and McQueen, voted it down by 4144 to just 848 votes.

Little had changed in 1963, when a new consolidation plan suffered the worst defeat yet, with 10,359 votes against to only 6633 for. So why did Butte and Silver Bow County finally merge in 1977?

Most analysts point to the ongoing decline in Butte’s economy and the plummeting tax base as reasons that finally led to consolidation. Suzanne Leland in her overview also suggests that a strong perception of corrupt government in the late 1960s and early 1970s led to an attitude of “throw the bums out.” And an additional factor may have been the fact that for the first time, the Government Study Commission that proposed the change excluded elected officials.

In any case, the combined city and county of Butte-Silver Bow was established in 1977, with one hold-out: Walkerville voted to remain independent, its own incorporated town, not part of Butte-Silver Bow.

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.