BAS 176 Silver King Lode Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

I’ve known that my 1898 house is set into mine waste since nearly the day I moved in, when I saw mica and pyrite on the basement floor. It was sloughing off the exposed wall beneath the stairs, where angular pyrite-bearing granite chunks and loose fine material were clearly visible. It wasn’t long before I learned that Uptown Butte’s parks mark old mine sites, and the park just north of my house, Cherokee Park, is the site of the Silver King Mine.

In 2012 a hole opened up in the street maybe 40 feet from the northwest corner of my garage. It was only about a foot across, but the open drop into it was close to six feet deep. After numerous people came to look into it and paint variously colored marks on the pavement, a Butte-Silver Bow Public Works Department crew arrived to excavate the hole.

Soon the one-foot hole was 15 feet long and nearly as deep. Environmental Manager Tom Malloy pointed out the layers of fill – possibly some asphalt in the shallower zones, but mostly obvious mine waste like that in my basement, plus mixed coarse soil and rocks. We speculated that one black zone in the excavation wall, maybe three feet down, was coal or slag or charcoal. Eventually the excavator revealed a small hole at the bottom, presumably the sump taking water through the material, ultimately allowing for the collapse that made the original hole in the pavement up top.

The Silver King Claim angles from about the north side of Quartz Street to Copper street in the west, and to the alley between Quartz and Copper on the east (it narrows eastward). On the west its boundary is about half way between Crystal and Clark, and on the east its limit lies between Idaho and Montana. My house on Crystal, north of the jog in Quartz, sits on the intersection of the Silver King, Plymouth, and Morning Sun claims. That jog in Quartz Street and the angling front yards of homes in the 600 block reflect the northern boundary of the Plymouth claim.

There were two Silver King mines and hoist works. The western shafts where Cherokee Park is today were in operation from about 1895 until about 1908. The eastern mine was located at 210 West Quartz, between two houses (one still standing, at 208), directly north across the alley from the Copper King Mansion. That operation began after 1900 and worked until about 1915. There was probably another hoist and definitely a shaft in the vacant lot at 521-527 West Quartz.

At Cherokee Park the operation had a main shaft in the southwestern part of what is now the park in 1900, with two boilers for generating steam and a 25-foot iron chimney. There was a secondary gallows frame and shaft along the south edge of the park or under the street there today. The secondary headframe was connected to the main mine operation by two tramways, one on the northwest (about where the present-day street sits) running to the western dump, and another to the north to dumps near the northern edge of the park along Copper Street. The relatively steep berm west of Cherokee Park is basically the Silver King mine dump.

The mine complex was going strong in 1905 when Walter Harvey Weed, author of the 1912 U.S. Geological Survey Professional Paper on Butte, visited. He apparently saw the 250-foot level, where he examined the Silver King vein, “remarkable for its richness and for the amount of gold which it carries.” He reported ore as high as 333 ounces of silver per ton and $294 in gold, also remarkable in that the metals were highly disseminated in what looked like ordinary decomposed granite, rather than concentrated in the quartz vein. Weed also noted a subsidiary vein branching to the west, a “very zincky vein.” The Anselmo, not far west of here, produced a lot of zinc. Weed reported that “the yield of the Silver King vein has been rather phenomenal; and there was probably something like $150,000 in ore in sight at the time of my visit (1905).”

The BSB crew filled the hole near my house with concrete and topped it with asphalt. Just to look at it, you’d never know the history that patch covers. 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.