BAS 177 1908 train wreck Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Just before midnight on Friday, May 1, 1908, the eastbound Burlington #6 train exploded and partially derailed about two miles west of the Northern Pacific depot on Front Street, a bit west of Williamsburg, on the south side of Silver Bow Creek across from the Tivoli Brewery.

Amazingly, only three people were killed. The crew in the lead engine survived, but Engineer C. A. Bussey and Fireman George Ehle, both of Missoula and in the second engine, died, together with a stowaway, Carl Ming of Iowa, who was “stealing a ride” on the bumper between the second engine and the mail car. Although the mail car was damaged, the clerks there survived.

The refrigerated “fish” car was reduced to kindling, strewing halibut and heads of cabbage along the roadbed for 100 feet or more. Passenger cars, with as many as 200 people, didn’t leave the rails, but everyone was thrown from their seats and there were minor injuries.

The immediate supposition was that the disaster was the result of dynamite on the tracks, and the coroner’s jury concluded exactly that the next day. But gossip around town, reported by the press, suggested that there were plenty of reasons to suspect dynamite and malicious intent were not the cause.

The Northern Pacific railroad company, operating the Burlington train, offered a $5,000 reward for the conviction of the perpetrator. It was immediately pointed out that in such a case, the railroad would not be liable, as they would be if, as some alleged, the tracks had been damaged or if the boiler exploded. In those cases, negligence on the part of the company might be suggested.

On the following Monday, police arrested 23-year-old Louis Ferris, a well-known small-time thief, “a weak-minded boy,” who was caught trying to sell stolen goods at a pawn shop. Ferris confessed to blowing up the train with 45 sticks of stolen dynamite, his motive to get goods he could sell. Ferris was indicted and brought to speedy trial within a few weeks.

Ferris’s defense centered on expert testimony that the derailment scene showed none of the hallmarks of a dynamite explosion, and his lawyers called witnesses who testified that the Northern Pacific tracks had borne “rotten rails” for years. Before the trial began, Ferris had recanted his confession and claimed it was forced out of him by former Butte Chief of Police James Reynolds, who was working for the NP as a detective. Defense lawyers alleged a conspiracy among various NP agents to save the company from millions in lawsuits and to gain the $5,000 reward.

After a 20-day trial, the jury deliberated for barely one hour before finding Louis Ferris not guilty. If there were further arrests or additional litigation in this case, I haven’t discovered information about them.

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.