BAS 179 Bell Smelter Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Between 1880 and 1886, at least seven processing plants operated in Butte, including concentrators and smelters. One of the earlier smelters was the Bell.

Charles Meader, of Meaderville fame, left his job with the Montana Copper Company (a division of the Boston and Montana) in mid-1881 to establish the Bell Silver & Copper Mining Company which exploited the rich ores at the Bell Mine. The Bell, sometimes spelled Belle but not to be confused with the distinct Belle of Butte Mine, was in the northern part of the district, about a tenth of a mile east of the present-day Diamond Mine headframe. The Bell and the Diamond were interconnected underground.

In late 1881 Meader began construction of a smelter and roasting facility to process his ore. The Bell Smelter was on Blacktail Creek (then often known as Bell Creek) just west of where Harrison Avenue crosses the interstate today. Many sources suggest the smelter stood on the north side of the creek, but the 1884 Bird’s-Eye View of Butte, which is usually amazingly accurate, shows it south of the creek, probably just about within the confines of the interstate roadway today.

The Bell Smelter never operated very successfully. It only ran sporadically, for about half of 1882, then for perhaps eight months in 1883, most of 1884, and for six weeks in December 1885 to January 1886. That last operation was under the control of the liquidators who had taken over the property, which had been attached by the sheriff in July 1885 on behalf of creditors who were owed some $30,000. The smelter did not operate again after January 1886, and by 1887 was reported as “collapsing.”

Even in the smelter’s heyday, 1884, the Sanborn Fire Insurance maps described it as having “Buildings Old & Cheap; Premises Not Tidy.” Its two reverberatory furnaces were vented by one 60-foot chimney, and the two blast furnaces were served by two more chimneys. The property also held six beehive-shaped coke ovens.

The Bell Smelter does have the distinction of being the first Butte smelter to produce copper matte using blast-furnace technology, yielding matte that assayed 50% copper and $50 in silver per ton. The richness of the Bell Mine’s ore is evidenced by the fact that during one of the smelter’s down periods in 1883-84 Meader was able to ship his ore to Swansea, Wales, for smelting and still turn a profit. When the smelter was in operation in 1883, it had a capacity of 70 tons a day, and by 1884 that was up to 100 tons a day with an output of about 14 tons of copper matte.

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.