BAS 180 Dexter Mill Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

The Dexter Stamp Mill was Butte’s first silver-processing plant. Or was it?

On January 1, 1875, William Farlin famously filed a new claim on the Asteroid lode, based on assayed ore that showed rich silver values. He renamed the claim and his mine the Travona, touching off the rejuvenation of the nearly busted mining camp. Farlin borrowed $30,000 from Donnell, Clark, and Larabie Bank in Deer Lodge to develop the mine and to build his mill beginning in late 1875, but he defaulted on the loan less than three months later and the bank took ownership of the properties in February 1876. Ultimately William Clark became the sole owner.

The Dexter mill was completed under Clark and began to process ore in the summer of 1876. By October, twenty-eight men were employed, and it was “running along smoothly and continuously” processing nine tons of rock in 24 hours. One processing run of 105 tons yielded $40 in gold and $125 in silver per ton – more than $17,000 for about 12 days’ work.

The Dexter also provided contract processing, and in 1882 Marcus Daly leased it from Clark to mill and amalgamate silver from Anaconda Mine ores. By the end of that year, Daly’s work at the Dexter had yielded $200,000 in silver, turning a 33% profit.

The Dexter mill was probably located just to the southwest of the Travona Mine, between the present headframe and Excelsior Street. But just a short distance to the east, the Centennial Stamp Mill is in the running for the first silver-producing mill. It was located west of Washington Street near today’s Iron Street.

The Centennial opened that same summer of 1876, under the direction of William McDermott with financing by John Howe, mayor of St. Louis. Precisely which day the two mills began production is unclear, but claims to have yielded the first bar of silver were made by proponents of both. The Centennial was a smaller facility than the Dexter, and mostly processed ore from the Bell Mine, which McDermott later sold to Charles Meader for $100,000.

McDermott went on to become a Butte city alderman, state senator, and proprietor of the McDermott Hotel, a 3-story predecessor to the Finlen. Despite the foreclosure on the Travona and Dexter, William Farlin continued to operate various mines in Butte, and lived modestly in homes on the West Side near the Travona at 504 West Porphyry and 423 South Washington. He died December 14, 1901, at age 67 after an eight-day struggle with pneumonia.

The Dexter and Centennial mills were both probably defunct after the silver crisis of 1893, and the Travona Mine ultimately came into Anaconda Company ownership. The present headframe was moved to the Travona from the Pennsylvania Mine in 1940, when the southwestern part of the Butte district began to be actively exploited for manganese for the second time, after an initial manganese boom in the 1910s.

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.