BAS 186 Butte Reduction works Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

The Butte Reduction Works was built in 1883 as a custom smelter processing ore for the Lewisohn Brothers’ Butte & Boston and Boston & Montana companies and others, but it failed and was purchased in 1885 by employees of the Parrott Smelter. In 1887, W.A. Clark’s growing operations led him to acquire the plant and expand it in 1888 to process 300 tons each day, including ore from his mines as well as material from as far away as Philipsburg. Among the later improvements were the 353-foot concrete stack, tallest in the world when it was completed in 1906.

Ore was hauled to the plant just west of Montana Street along Silver Bow Creek through town from Clark’s mines, including the Original, in cars attached to the street railway (trolley) system.

By the early 1890s, smoke pollution in Butte was so intense that attempts were made to ban open heap roasting of ores, and the Butte Reduction Works figured in a “renewed spasm of indignation throughout the town” in December 1891 when heaps were created, but, under orders from the Mayor, were prevented from being lit. At least one death, a six-year-old girl living on East Mercury Street, was attributed to the smoke.

Even as late as 1898, smoke from Clark’s Butte Reduction Works was targeted by the anti-Clark Anaconda Standard under the heading “The Company is building fresh roasting kilns and as soon as all are in operation the population will keel over dead.” At that time, only the Butte Reduction Works and Parrott Smelter were doing open roasting in Butte, and the situation was intense enough that the Mayor was threatening to have the BRW manager arrested.

The Centennial Brewing Company had its own solution to the smoke problem: drink Centennial Beer. “It will, in a measure, counteract the smoke and strengthen your lungs,” according to an 1898 advertisement.

The plant had changed to other, less polluting types of processing by 1906, when a huge fire on January 31 destroyed the concentrator, with a loss estimated at $500,000 in dollars of the day. The facility was rebuilt and continued under Clark’s ownership until 1910.

In May 1910, William Clark sold most of his Butte properties to the Amalgamated (Anaconda) Company, effectively ending the War of the Copper Kings. The $5-million price tag included the Butte Reduction Works, Colusa-Parrott and Original Mines, and the Montana Realty Company. Clark held onto the Elm Orlu Mine, the Timber Butte Mill, and the Butte Miner Newspaper, all of which went to the Anaconda in 1928, three years after Clark’s death.

Soon after the Anaconda Company acquired the property the Butte Reduction Works was closed because the Anaconda had much larger and more modern facilities at the Washoe smelter in Anaconda, and much of the surviving plant was destroyed in a fire in 1911. The most visible heritage of the Butte Reduction Works is the extensive slag wall system west of Montana Street and along Centennial Drive. The material was dumped to constrain Silver Bow Creek in an attempt to reduce tailings erosion, but contaminated material beneath the slag continues to impact groundwater.

Under the March 1928 headline, “New Butte industry is auspiciously launched,” Domestic Manganese and Development Company (an Anaconda subsidiary) announced the refurbishment of the Reduction Works. They produced manganese nodules in the only pelletizing plant in the United States, continuing into the 1950s. Phosphorous was processed there for a time in the 1960s the early 1970s. The site is occupied by the Butte-Silver Bow asphalt processing plant today.

Thanks to Pat Cunneen for several resources used for this article.

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.