BAS 185 Milwaukee Road grading camp Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

In 1905, the board of the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railway, the “Milwaukee Road,” approved a $45-million extension of their track into the Pacific Northwest. At a cost equivalent of more than $1.3 billion today, it would in many places run parallel with the track of their competitor, the Northern Pacific.

To bring the Milwaukee Road into Butte entailed onerous work to cross the “Main Range” of the Rockies – what we call the East Ridge and its continuation south to Pipestone Pass and beyond. The work effort gave its name to at least three of the hiking-biking trails in Thompson Park: Grading Camp, Orman Camp, and Crook Camp.

Orman and Crook was a Pueblo, Colorado, construction company that had executed many contracts for railroad grade preparation. The 1906-07 Montana project required leveling rough terrain, and making tunnels and trestles where they couldn’t do that. Orman & Crook’s work crews, with numbers in the thousands, were housed in “grading camps” scattered along the length of the project.

By September 1906, five camps had been established between Butte and the Jefferson River. The company’s headquarters camp was on one of the headwaters of Pipestone Creek, probably the branch known as Little Pipestone Creek today, just east of the Continental Divide at Pipestone Pass. There was an old wagon road nearby that the railroad followed to the extent possible, as does Highway 2 today. The Eighteen Mile house was present along that wagon road a few miles further east of Orman’s headquarters grading camp.

The commissary at the headquarters camp provided tobacco, pipes, shoes, socks, underclothes, and other supplies, as well as abundant food and even a gallon of “white pine syrup,” a cold remedy. Wages ranged from $2.75 a day for “rock men” – those who could drill and blast, to $2.25 a day for muckers to shovel out the blasted rock. The Anaconda Standard newspaper opined that once the work started on the tunnel, “better pay will be given to skilled men,” meaning experienced underground miners who were being paid $3.50 a day in Butte at that time. Open cuts were specified to be 24 feet wide.

The tunnel beneath Pipestone Pass was probably the greatest challenge to the work, at 2,290 feet, just under a half-mile. But one gulch could not be filled in to grade, and was bridged by a 600-foot trestle. The tunnel is off limits today, but the trestle is part of the Milwaukee Road trail in Thompson Park. Grading Camp and Orman and Crook Trails extend west of the old railroad bed in the park.

Partly because of the ready source of copper in Butte and partly because of the abundant hydroelectric power that was being generated in Great Falls, and because the grades crossing the mountains were challenging for some steam engines, the Milwaukee electrified 438 miles of their road in 1914-1916, from Harlowtown, Montana, to Avery, Idaho. The Milwaukee depot on Montana Street in Butte, today’s KXLF TV station, was constructed in 1916 as well. The line was abandoned in 1980.

U.S. Highway 10, now Montana 2, was completed across Pipestone Pass in the late 1920s. Financial problems on a non-railroad project, the Bell Fourche Dam in South Dakota, at the time the largest earth-fill dam in the world, drove the Orman and Crook Company into bankruptcy a few years after their work in southwest Montana.

 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.