BAS 189 Butte and Zenith City Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

With a name like Butte & Zenith City Mining Company, you might expect it to be related to some lost mining town called Zenith City somewhere near Butte, but you’d be wrong. The Zenith City in this connection is nearly 1,100 miles from Butte. It’s Duluth, Minnesota.

Duluth received its nickname in 1868, when the editor of its first newspaper, Dr. Thomas Foster, proclaimed it the “Zenith city of the unsalted seas.” The name came to Butte by way of one of the numerous investors from Duluth attracted by the mining potential here.

Ignatz Freimuth, a Jewish Czech immigrant, established one of Duluth’s first department stores, I. Freimuth, in 1883. The business was touted as the oldest family-owned business in Duluth when it closed in 1961, and the prestigious Freimuth Building was demolished in 1968.

But Freimuth must have made a substantial fortune by 1907, when he spent $400,000 to acquire the Burke and Balaklava claims from the Catholic diocese of Montana, enabling them to build the first building that became Carroll College. Freimuth and other Minnesota and New York investors incorporated the Butte-Balaklava Mining Company that year, with Freimuth as president.

Under the initial management of experienced local Butte personnel, Freimuth and his associates found a tiny area of unclaimed granite west of Butte, just northwest of the present-day intersection of Interstates 90 and 15, north of Nissler Junction and the old Silver Bow Brewery, whose stone malt house still stands as a private residence. The claims there included the Zenith City and Unsalted – both recalling Duluth. The Butte and Zenith City Mining Company was incorporated in October 1912, again with I. Freimuth as president. Most of their claims were patented in 1915.

By late 1913, their shaft was down to 480 feet, but water flooded the mine completely. It cost $30,000 to dewater the mine in the winter of 1915-16, and after pumps were installed the shaft was taken down to 1500 feet. Crosscuts at 460 and 1000 feet led to more than a thousand feet of drifts by 1919, but by about 1920, both the Butte and Zenith City and Butte-Balaklava Companies were essentially out of business. The dumps of the Butte & Zenith City mine are still visible to the north across Interstate 90 from the Greenway trail, west of I-15.

The local Vice President of Butte & Zenith City was Goodwin Paul, a rancher in the Centennial Valley and the entrepreneur who established the Dillon Furniture Company in 1895. Butte & Zenith City’s secretary, Sol Genzberger, lived at 74 West Gold Street and was also involved with the New Southern Cross Gold Company which had operations near Georgetown. Genzberger also had a department store on Main Street in Helena. Butte & Zenith City’s Butte office was at 30 East Broadway, in the westernmost of the buildings that comprise the old NorthWestern Energy offices.

Ignatz Freimuth died in Duluth in 1930.

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.