BAS 191 MT Copper Co Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

“Montana Copper Company” has a nice, simple ring to it. But it was based in New York, owned by the immigrant Jewish German Lewisohn Brothers, and it forms the corporate basis for some of Butte’s and Montana’s most important industrial developments.

The Lewisohns initially were horsehair processors, producing things like mattress stuffing and brushes. By the middle 1870s they had branched out into metals trading, and in 1878 or 1879 they acquired the East and West Colusa claims in Butte, creating a partnership with local miner Charles Meader that was incorporated as the Montana Copper Company. The company was capitalized with $75,000, equivalent to around $1.5 million today. They soon began to develop the Leonard mine (named for Leonard Lewisohn), and in 1880 built the Colusa Smelter in Meaderville to process their ores.

Charles Meader left the company to work his own mine, the Bell, and in 1887 the Lewisohns merged the Montana Copper Company and the Mountain View Mining Company (owned by Deer Lodge banker Charles X. Larrabee) to create the Boston and Montana Consolidated Copper and Silver Mining Company, which would grow to become second only to the Anaconda in terms of Montana metal production. On December 31, 1887, at a cost of $150,000, the Boston & Montana acquired several of William Clark’s properties, including Clark’s Colusa mine and smelter, distinct from the Colusa properties they already owned.

The Lewisohns convinced J.J. Hill of the Great Northern Railroad to bring track into Butte in competition with the Northern Pacific. Their not-so-ulterior motive was to drive transportation costs down, but it benefitted both sides. Because of the Great Northern connection, Boston & Montana was able to build its smelter in Great Falls, where they also constructed one of the nation’s first hydroelectric plants to power their electrolytic smelter, which succeeded their Colusa and Clark’s Colusa smelters in Butte in 1893.

Boston and Montana became the largest exporter of U.S. copper to European markets, through the exploitation of cheap shipping that they could control because of the volume of their product. Their electrolytic smelter at Great Falls could economically process ore that was lower than 1% copper, among the most efficient processors of the day. By 1895, Boston and Montana and its smaller sister company, Butte and Boston, reportedly produced 23% of all the refined copper in the United States.

Despite their success, or perhaps because of it, the growing tendency toward corporate conglomeration ultimately led the Lewisohns to merge the Boston companies into the new Amalgamated (Anaconda) Company in 1901. That combination was a huge coup for Amalgamated, ultimately paving the way for the Anaconda’s dominance in Montana and the world.

Leonard Lewisohn died in 1902. Some speculate that the debacle with Amalgamated that ended the Boston & Montana Company contributed to his death, since he was only 55 years old. His brother Adolph had roles with Amalgamated subsidiaries for 15 or so more years, and died in 1938.

Besides the memory of the Leonard mine, the Lewisohns are commemorated in Butte with a street name on the upper west side. The Leonard Hotel was probably named for William Leonard Renick, one of the physicians who probably financed its construction, and has no connection to the Lewisohns.

As was usual, the money the investors made in Butte left Montana. The Lewisohns were noted philanthropists in New York, where among many other things Adolph’s $300,000 donation to Columbia University in 1904 (worth more than $7 million today) financed the housing and development of the prestigious Columbia School of Mines.

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.