BAS 200 Playgrounds Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Although land was always at a premium in industrial, booming Butte, whether for mine activities or businesses and homes, as early as 1906 Butte had two public playgrounds.

One was fairly new at that time, on Park Street east of Arizona, at the site of the Saucer Bicycle Race Track, which had been built in 1901 but was abandoned and demolished within a few years. That site included swings and “teeter boards” as well as a baseball field.

The second public playground was in residential South Butte, between First and Second Streets east of Utah, across from the Monroe School. The baseball field there was laid out so that it could be easily converted into a football gridiron. Both city-sponsored playgrounds had been established through the efforts of Mayor John MacGinniss to serve more than 18,000 children reported in the 1906 school census.

MacGinniss served one term as Mayor, in 1905-07. He had been vice-president of Augustus Heinze’s mining business before Heinze sold out in 1906, and MacGinniss also was President of the Silver Bow National Bank, which was acquired by the Metals Bank in 1922. He lived at 827 West Granite, a home that is still standing.

The Anaconda Standard bemoaned the “so-called playgrounds” of other cities, with their artificial lakes, well-swept walks, and “keep off the grass” signs, celebrating Butte’s hard-packed dirt lots, where “there is no grass, or flowers, or trees,” where there were no restrictions as to the children’s activities.

If two fairly small public playgrounds seem inadequate for 18,000 kids, they probably were. The Standard in 1906 reported on numerous pick-up playgrounds, essentially any and every vacant lot or accessible mine yard, but the reporter noted that as Butte grew, such places were becoming fewer and fewer. One long-time favorite uptown baseball field had been located on West Granite at Washington, the edge of the built-up town until the mid-1880s. Even in 1906 an unusually prominent rock outcropping was still present in the wooden sidewalk of the 300 block, a rock that was fondly recalled as the “third-base rock.” It was used as a hitching post in 1906.

By 1916 both of Mayor MacGinniss’s public playgrounds were gone, replaced by homes, businesses, and on East Park Street, part of the Colorado Mine yard. Vacant lots were rare in Butte’s heyday of the 1910s, and even as the population declined through the 1920s and 1930s, few places were available for “official” playgrounds. Today, most of Uptown Butte’s parks are sites of long-abandoned 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.