BAS 203 Luxfer glass Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Our history's in our trash. In Butte, some of that historic trash is right there on the surface. If you walk around the surviving mine dumps of Germania, south of the World Museum of Mining, you might see human stories in the broken glass and metal.

As a geologist I'm usually looking at the ground for interesting rocks, arrowheads, whatever. Out there in Germania a flashy spot of purple glass caught my eye. It was a buried chunk of thick, clear purple glass 4 inches by 5 inches. And embossed with a bunch of patent dates from 1897, and the name "Luxfer."

Applying modern technology to this broken piece of history, I went home and Googled Luxfer, expecting nothing. But the Luxfer Prism Co. survived for decades following its founding in 1896 as the Radiating Light Company. Luxfer was bought in 1920 by American 3-Way Prism Company, their main competitor, forming the American 3-Way Luxfer Prism Company. Competition from electric lights put most or all prism glass makers out of business by the late 1930s.

"Luxfer" is from the Latin words lux (light) and ferre (to carry), and the angled prisms on the inside of the glass blocks were designed to refract light into otherwise dark spaces. In the 1890s, electric lighting was expanding but still limited, and many business blocks brought light into their rooms using window wells, open spaces between two otherwise adjacent buildings. Many window wells can be seen in historic Butte buildings today.

The Luxfer operation took off in 1897 after it bought a series of more than 40 patents for prisms, invented by a 30-year-old architect named Frank Lloyd Wright. Wright even designed a building whose façade was entirely made of Luxfer prisms, but it was never constructed. Royalties from Luxfer prism glass contributed significantly to Wright’s income in the 1890s and 1900s.

Because of its size, the prism I found was probably used in the skylight or upper course of windows of a big mine building such as a hoist engine room, to bring more light into a huge volume.

Luxfer's smaller 4x4-inch square purple glass panes still decorate a few Butte storefronts at the transom level, including the Hennessy Building at Granite and Main, and the Leggat Hotel on Broadway. It's likely that our few surviving vaulted sidewalk glass prisms were also made by Luxfer. Sidewalk vault glass was thicker and stronger, and often didn’t have the saw-tooth edges transom glass used to refract light into the distant reaches of non-electrified buildings.

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.