BAS 206 The Dump Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

As Butte grew, so did its volume of trash. By the late 1880s, when Butte was approaching a population of 23,000, a larger facility was established just south of the cemeteries on Montana Street, intended to replace the random dumping in any convenient gulch around town.

The site, today’s Copper Mountain Recreation Complex, was originally a farm. Combustible material was burned, and the continual smoke reportedly rivaled that from the nearby Colorado Smelter at times. The fires also fed a crematory, where deceased animals from Butte and beyond were cremated.

In 1906, Native American Cree still camped nearby, often picking through the dump for re-usable or recyclable materials such as glass bottles and tin cans. Dairy cows and young boys also haunted the 40-acre site. In 1905, one boy reportedly found a savings bank that proved to contain $100 in coins, and in 1916, two city garbage workers discovered $750 in a sack. The bag of money reached the dump from Emil Gromberg’s grocery at 600 South Montana. Apparently, Mr. Gromberg was somewhat paranoid about thieves attacking his safes, so he hid the stash in a bag in the wastebasket, which was dumped into the garbage. He was identified as the owner, and offered the finders new suits of clothes as reward. Emil’s Market building is still there at the corner of Montana and Platinum, recently the home of the Mining City Dance Company.

By 1905 or so, streets in Butte’s business district were beginning to be paved with granite blocks quarried from the Welch Quarry east of Homestake. And every night during summer and fall, the streets were swept, first with a sprinkler and a mechanical sweeping device, then by individual hand sweepers. The material was separated to the extent possible into combustibles versus dirt and rock, and shoveled into city wagons with two destinations: combustibles to the dump for burning, and the dirt and rock to Missoula Gulch.

In 1906, Missoula Gulch was still a “blot upon nature” from the placer mining of 40 years earlier, and the scars and most of the gulch itself were being covered. Missoula Gulch was approximately where Clark Street is today, and trestles spanned the gulch on main streets including Granite, Broadway, and Park. Although it is still a low point on those east-west streets, the cliff-like edges of the gulch were softened by infill and the trestles were gone by about 1910.

The filling of Missoula Gulch was spearheaded by Commissioner Robert Farmer, an ore hauler who lived at 679 South Alabama, on the flank of the gulch. He was assisted by Maurice Fitzharris, a miner who lived at 803 Placer Street.

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.