BAS 207 Silver Bow City Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

The first discoveries of gold in both placers and lodes in Butte were made in May and June, 1864, but it wasn’t until October, when fairly rich placers were discovered in Silver Bow Creek downstream that the first influx of prospectors really began.

Charles S. Warren recalled that Frank Ruff, Bud Baker, and Peter Slater were among the first successful placer miners in the area that’s now a mile or so west of the Interstate 90-15 interchange. The town of Silver Bow City was made the county seat of Deer Lodge County, one of the nine original counties defined when Montana Territory was created from Idaho Territory on May 26, 1864.

Silver Bow’s population the winter of 1864-65 was probably at least 150, and by the spring of 1865 after the placers of German Gulch were discovered, more than 1000 lived along this stretch of Silver Bow Creek and tributary gulches. There might have been 200 in Butte at that time.

The first Deer Lodge County officials, holding forth in Silver Bow City, included G.O. Humphreys of Butte, County Recorder, and Fred Burr, Sheriff. The first court convened in the county was held at Silver Bow City on July 10, 1865 with the Honorable L.P. Williston sitting as judge. The first U.S. District Grand Jury, with Dr. Anson Ford the foreman returned 34 indictments for violating revenue laws and “for selling whiskey to the Indians.”

The first election in the county was conducted at Silver Bow City on September 1, 1865. The most important ballot issue was one in which the voters decided to move the county seat from Silver Bow City to Deer Lodge City. The first board of county commissioners elected was Joseph Clark, George Searle, and Dr. Burnside, who, contrary to the vote to move the county seat, began to establish contracts and began the construction of a county courthouse and jail at Silver Bow, moves that cost about $6,000 and according to Charles Warren, “laid the foundation for the present county debt,” still carried in 1876. Warren was also “pleased to inform you that none of these commissioners are now residents of this Territory.”

After the initial boom, Silver Bow declined, but rejuvenated briefly in 1868-69, returning to a population of about 1,000. That boom was also short-lived, and by 1870, both Butte and Silver Bow were on the way to becoming ghost towns. The easy gold had played out, and it was the discovery of silver in Butte in 1875 that began Butte’s long sustained period of growth, pretty much constant until the end of World War I.

Silver Bow is still a transfer point for railroads as well as a station on the Greenway bike trail.

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.