BAS 218 Max Hebgen Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

When Hebgen Dam was completed in 1915, the reservoir it created on the Madison River just west of Yellowstone Park was the seventh largest in the world. The dam, the lake, and the 1959 earthquake that the dam survived all recall Max Hebgen of Butte.

Maximillian Hebgen was born in Wisconsin in 1869 and came to Butte in 1889. Electricity seems to have always been in his blood, and he rose from a lineman to become the General Manager and Vice President of the Montana Power Company, a post he held when he died of pneumonia and heart disease in 1915 at age 45. He didn’t live to see the completion of the Hebgen Dam.

Even as a teenager in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Hebgen had worked for Westinghouse Electric. In Butte, 22-year-old Hebgen worked for and partnered with W.A. Clark, Patrick Largey, and Harry D’Acheul in the Butte Electric Light & Power Company in 1891, when he lived at the Lizzie Block at the northwest corner of Park and Main Streets. That company evolved into the Butte General Electric Company. In 1898 Hebgen was involved in the construction of the power plant and pump house on the Big Hole River that supplied Butte with both electricity and water. All told, Hebgen was instrumental in the development of at least 15 hydroelectric projects in western Montana from 1898 to 1915, including those at Canyon Ferry and Hauser Lakes.

By 1910, Hebgen was General Superintendent of both the Butte Electric & Power Company and the Great Falls Power Company when he designed the electric transmission line from the Rainbow Falls Dam at Great Falls to Butte.

The towers and insulators of the 1910 Rainbow Transmission Line, which crosses part of the Helena Valley and Elk Park, are still in use 119 years after their installation. Historian Jon Axline thinks this may be the oldest transmission line still in use in the United States. The electricity generated in Great Falls powered not only the smelters and mining operations in Great Falls, Butte, and Anaconda, it also provided the power for the Milwaukee Road, BA&P railroad, and the electric trolleys of Butte.

The transmission line, the second of its type in the United States (the first carried power from Niagara Falls), cost about $270,000 in dollars of the day, which Jon Axline calculates is more than $7,000,000 today. Electricity on the Rainbow Transmission Line first came into Butte and Anaconda in the summer of 1910.

Butte Electric & Power Co. combined in 1912 with three other regional electric companies to form the Montana Power Company. Hebgen was with Montana Power until he died in Wisconsin, where he was seeking treatment in 1915. In Butte he lived in various boarding houses, at 209 North Idaho, 14 West Quartz, and 304 North Main, but after he married Carabel Lucas in 1902 and they had a son in 1904, they lived in a large flat at 500 West Broadway, a house that is still standing.

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.