BAS 219 Water Company Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Although various entrepreneurs had dug ditches to bring water to Butte’s placer operations in the 1860s and 1870s, it wasn’t until the population really began to grow and the town was incorporated in 1879 that anyone began to focus on providing a true domestic water supply.

By August 1879, a consortium led by W.A. Clark, John Noyes, and Robert McMinn owned the water rights at the head of Bull Run Gulch, an east-west drainage in the hills about two miles north of Walkerville. The spring that fed the gulch provided about 340 gallons per minute of “pure, soft water,” and the group intended to bring that water in pipes to both Walkerville and on into Butte.

The Water Company signed a contract on September 19, 1879, for the five-mile-long ditch in which the pipeline would be laid. The work was done by a Philipsburg company employing 15 men, and the cost was fifty cents a rod (a rod is 16.5 feet), ten cents more expensive than an offer from quote “a boss Chinaman,” whose offer was declined, certainly out of prejudice more than anything.

By October, the pipe was laid down Main Street and was supplying water to businesses there, and a branch ditch was being excavated along Park Street to Valiton’s stable, which stood at the west end of the Park Street bridge over Missoula Gulch, about where Clark Street intersects Park today.

In the autumn of 1881, the company finished construction of a 100,000-gallon reservoir just west of Main Street a block north of Woolman, where the historic parking lot for the Steward Mine sits today. It was just south of the Acquisition mine shaft. From that tank a five-inch pipe carried water down Main Street, and within a few years multiple branching two-inch pipes served buildings on the cross streets of the business district. At about the same time, the city water company began to also use excess water from the Moulton Company, whose water was in reservoirs near Yankee Doodle Creek.

At the end of November 1881, the Butte Miner felt that the water system was advanced enough that “Butte may now reasonably congratulate herself on having made another long stride forward in the march of civilization.” That’s how the paper celebrated the installation of the first four fire plugs, which were at the corners of Main and Quartz, Granite, Broadway, and Park Streets, and they were tested and in service on December 13, 1881.

The initial rates for water, assuming customers would install their own service connections and pipes, were $30 per month for livery stables, $20 per month for hotels, $6 to $12 per month for saloons, and $1 to $1.50 per week for other businesses, except barber shops, which had rates pro-rated by the number of chairs and the number of baths provided.

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.