BAS 220 Deaconess Hospital Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Butte’s exploding population in 1917 had many needs, and one was extra hospital space. In May 1917, promoting “Butte’s Greatest Need,” a campaign to raise $100,000 for the new Deaconess Hospital began.

Planning for the hospital had started the previous February, under the auspices of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Montana, which already had a Deaconess Hospital in Great Falls. Reverend George Wolfe, pastor at Mountain View Methodist Episcopal, was on the Butte Deaconess Board which planned to acquire five acres on the old Race Track between Grand and Argyle and Stewart and Thornton Streets.

By the time of the fundraising campaign kick-off banquet May 21, almost $25,000 had been raised in pre-campaign subscriptions, mostly from individuals who gave $200 to $2000. Wilson Park led the donors with $2,850, followed by Joseph Oppenheimer at $2,000. The first construction, to architect Floyd Hamill’s plans, began the following summer.

The early donations allowed for the purchase of land and erection of the building, which was largely complete by December 1917, but they still needed about $15,000 to equip the operating room. The formal opening of the hospital on August 1, 1918, announced a 10-bed facility together with maternity ward and an X-ray room, with the x-ray machine on order. Their short-term goal was to make it a 40-bed hospital.

Deaconess Hospital was available the following October when the influenza pandemic hit Butte. By Halloween – with all activities cancelled – the newspapers reported 136 new cases on October 30, 1918, but only 70 on October 31, with 23 deaths on October 30 and 15 on October 31. The Anaconda Standard called that “encouraging.”

Two nurses, trained at Great Falls Deaconess, oversaw an initial class of five trainee nurses in Butte, Margaret Huber, Ruby Connor, Elvera Swanson, Myrtle Childerhose, and Astrid Iverson, who all survived the influenza pandemic and graduated as professional nurses in May 1921.

The Deaconess Hospital served Butte until 1933, when declining population and the financial constraints of the Depression forced them to close. Beginning in November 1945, the building was occupied by a private non-profit, the Summit Valley Sanitarium, which specialized in non-surgical cases. Their focus was on what we’d probably call “holistic medicine” today, including physiotherapy, steam baths or hydrotherapy, massage, diet, and exercise.

By the 1960s the building at 1635 Stewart was a private home, west of East Middle School. Today it is vacant.

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.