BAS 229 Chinese Baptist Mission Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Butte’s Chinese Baptist Mission was established in 1896 at 44 West Galena Street, and Mrs. Whitmore was the superintendent there in 1898. By 1900, the mission moved to a new single-story frame building at 24 West Mercury Street, across from the prosperous Wah Chong Tai Co.

This block on the south side of Mercury in the heart of Chinatown developed quickly in the late 1890s and early 1900s. In 1891, a couple log cabins, a corral and small stables, one house, and a tin shop occupied the north half of the block from China Alley to Colorado Street, facing Mercury. In 1916 sixteen buildings were there; today there are no historic buildings. The last City Directory listing for the Mission is 1940, and the building at 24 West Mercury was vacant in 1942 and 1945; in 1948, all the buildings along that stretch were gone and the entire block was a car dealer’s lot in 1951.

Chinese children attended Butte public schools in the 1910s and 1920s and received religious and other teaching at the Mission. In 1918, it offered Sunday services from 8-10 and English classes every evening except Saturday and Sunday under the tutelage of Superintendent Earl Bracken, whose regular job was as chief clerk for the Great Northern Railroad Freight Depot. The President of the Mission was Chinese, Mr. Ah Fong.

Dr. Wah J. Lamb, one of seven Chinese physicians practicing in Butte in 1918, was among the first Chinese graduates from the University of Southern California Medical School, about 1896. Lamb’s office in 1918 was at 116 E. Mercury, and he and his family lived at 1107 S. Wyoming, well outside the heart of Chinatown, but he sent his children, including Faith, Esther, and Ruth to the Baptist Mission.

Staff and parents who were associated with the Mission include Mrs. Wong Cue, a tailor whose shop was at 103 S. Main. Her husband, also a tailor, was arrested in 1929 by the Helena sheriff for possessing $30,000 worth of cocaine and morphine. Mrs. Bracken, wife of the superintendent, assisted with programs at the Mission. Hum Wing, and adult student, was proprietor of a laundry at 207 West Broadway, where he also lived. This was a small house between the Baptist and Presbyterian Churches that still stand on the corners of that block. The dwellings there were replaced by 1916 by the Montana Hotel, which burned down in 1988, and the space is a parking lot today.

Chinatown evolved and migrated from its core on Galena Street in the 1880s to the early 1900s. Construction of the brick Wah Chong Tai building (1899) and adjoining Mai Wah (1909) anchored a relocation (encouraged by city fathers) to Mercury Street. Chinatown declined along with Butte, and with World War II many Chinese left Butte for San Francisco and other coastal cities where they could find work in shipbuilding factories and other war-related jobs.

By the 1940s when the Chinese Baptist Mission was demolished, Butte’s Chinese population was double digits, perhaps 70 or 80, down from a peak in 1910-1920 of 2,500, as estimated by Rose Hum Lee, a Butte native and expert on America’s Chinatowns.

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.