BAS 231 Mollie Walsh and Laundries Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

As Butte grew from a mining camp to a huge industrial metropolitan city, amenities grew to accommodate the needs and wants of a population with money to spend. Laundries popped up all over town, mostly operated by Chinese, but with improved technologies, growing population, and prejudice against the Oriental community, both household laundries and large commercial operations thrived in Butte under white management.

In 1884 Butte had nine Chinese laundries. The first non-Chinese commercial laundry appears to have been the Butte Steam Laundry, in 1885 on West Granite across from the skating rink pavilion at Alaska Street. They competed with 21 Chinese laundries then, more than double the number from the previous year. Throughout the 1890s, the Chinese operated 18 to 31 laundries, with a low of 14 in 1896, the year white businessmen attempted a boycott of Chinese laundries. Chinese businessmen successfully sued the boycott instigators, though they never saw a dime of settlement money, and some Chinese operations were curtailed for that year.

The principal non-Chinese commercial laundries in the 1890s were the Troy Steam Laundry at 51 West Mercury (later at 232 South Main), Union Steam (replacing Troy on West Mercury), and the C.O.D. on East Park Street. Butte’s population went from 23,000 in 1890 to 48,000 in 1900 as miners, prostitutes, bankers, bakers, and laundry workers flocked to the thriving, growing city—to make their fortunes, or perhaps just to get a job.

Eighteen-year-old Mollie Walsh came to Butte from St. Paul, Minnesota, in November 1890. Her mother was a laundress in St. Paul, and Mollie had probably picked up laundry skills from her. Only the bare bones of her Butte life are known: possibly living in Anaconda initially, but doing well enough to pose for a professional photographer in Butte in 1894. She’d have been doing well to earn 75¢ a day working 12-hour shifts. She worked as a marker at Wason & Peet’s Laundry (part of the Troy establishment on West Mercury) by 1895, when she was boarding at 69 West Broadway—a small boarding house sandwiched between massive business blocks on one of Butte’s most prominent commercial streets. Mollie became a checker and went with Troy Laundry when it moved to South Main in 1896 and she began to room at 128 West Granite (then, on the corner of Montana Street). In 1897, she was rooming at the Troy Laundry itself, and at about that time the Salvation Army established itself next door to the Troy.

Mollie is lost to Butte after 1897, but not to history. She left Butte in June 1897 to join the Klondike Gold Rush, apparently traveling with a Presbyterian minister. Mollie became well known in Skagway as a waitress and was active in the early Union Church there. Alone, she established and ran a grub hut 30 miles up the White Pass Trail, likely saving the lives of hundreds if not thousands of prospectors heading for the Yukon. She married Mike Bartlett, but as the gold dwindled so did Mike’s luck. Mollie fled their home in Dawson for Seattle, where Mike found her and shot her in the back, in 1902. In 1930 another suitor, Jack Newman, dedicated a bust of Mollie in the Skagway park that bears her name, and today “The Angel of the White Pass Trail” is among the most treasured characters in Skagway’s history.

All the locations in Butte associated with Mollie are gone save one: the building that housed William Schultz’ Palais Studio, upstairs at 122 North Main, is vacant but still standing. All the early laundries, Chinese, white, and commercial, are gone, and most are vacant lots. The last Chinese laundry in Butte, Quong Sun’s shop at 329 S. Arizona, closed in 1968. Materials from the Quong Fong laundry, up the street at 110 South Arizona, are displayed at the World Museum of Mining.

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.