BAS 235 A bridge to Nowhere Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Out in the middle of the Warm Springs Ponds is a bridge completely surrounded by water, even on both ends. When the Morel Rainbow Arch Bridge was completed in 1914, it spanned Silver Bow Creek, connecting Anaconda to the Morel Station on the Milwaukee Railroad for automobile traffic.

Morel was a substation for the electrified Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad, with an installed capacity of 4,000 kilowatts. In 1920, it was one of 22 substations on the railroad between Harlowton, Montana, and Tacoma, Washington, and it drew its power from the hydroelectric generating facilities at Great Falls. The alternating current received at the Morel substation was transformed into direct current for train operations.

The bridge was constructed by inmates from the state prison in Deer Lodge as part of the Good Roads Movement, a nationwide effort that started in 1880 to promote road improvement for bicycle riders. By the early 1900s as automobiles became more numerous, car organizations came to lead the Good Roads Movement.

The Montana Good Roads Congress held its first meeting in 1910. At the 1911 congress in Missoula, the focus was strongly on better roads for cars, to bring tourists to the state. Engineering and financing were important topics at the congress, and when the group met in Anaconda the following year, E.P. Mathewson of Anaconda was its president and Malcolm Gillis of Butte was secretary of the Executive Committee. Malcolm Gillis was also the Postmaster of Butte, and he lived at 823 West Quartz Street, a house that still stands.

In 1913 Deer Lodge County allocated $2,067.88 for bridge construction materials, together with $265 for architect H. B. Grant to design the specifics of the bridge. Grant was based in Deer Lodge where he also designed the Mitchell Block on Main Street and served in 1912 as secretary for the Deer Lodge Chamber of Commerce.

While the bridge was hardly ambitious, at a single lane wide and about 25 feet long, its poured concrete arches follow the patented design of Iowa-based J.B. Marsh’s Rainbow Arch Bridges, named for their obvious rainbow-like geometry. Hundreds of Marsh Rainbow bridges were constructed especially in Iowa and Kansas, but the bridge across Silver Bow Creek is the only one in Montana.

The 1916 Morel Rainbow Arch Bridge became irrelevant less than three years after it opened, because the Anaconda Company began to expand the settling ponds downstream from the smelter in Anaconda. Pond 2 drowned the creek bed, leaving the bridge isolated in the shallow water.

The bridge was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2000, one of 34 independently listed properties in Deer Lodge County. Many more historic properties in Anaconda are automatically listed on the National Register by virtue of their role as contributing properties to the Butte-Anaconda National Historic Landmark. Today the bridge can be viewed up close from the dikes that crisscross the Warm Springs Ponds and wildlife refuge.

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.