BAS 237 Lutey’s Market Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Grocery stores dotted uptown Butte until the collapse of the economy from the 1960s to 1980s, and long before the growth of big box stores. The city directory lists 201 grocers in 1918, 101 in 1960, 35 in 1979 and 5 in 2003. Most early groceries were tiny affairs, scattered throughout residential neighborhoods and the central business district. Arguably the most successful early store was Lutey’s, which grew to have eleven outlets in Butte, but its primary claim to fame is as the first self-service grocery in the United States.

The trademarked Lutey’s Marketeria opened on February 7, 1912, in the first floor of the Stephens Block still standing at Park and Montana. The self-serve approach was radical enough that Lutey’s maintained a traditional store next door, where clerks brought requested items to customers. Lutey’s wholesale warehouse at 41–55 West Galena Street (in the former Montana Steam Laundry building) marketed to other grocers and supplied Lutey’s own stores. It also ran its own bakery and blended and roasted coffee there. A forty-eight-pound bag of sugar cost $4.05 in 1912, and ninety-eight pounds of flour was ten cents less at $3.95.

Lutey’s stores were established initially in Granite (now a ghost town) in 1889. In the wake of the 1893 silver crisis that decimated Granite, Joseph Lutey moved the operation to Philipsburg in 1895. Philipsburg depended mightily on silver mining as well, so Lutey finally relocated into Butte in 1897, where he and his sons built it into one of the largest grocery chains in Montana.

Joseph Lutey was a Cornishman born on Christmas Day 1849 in Morvah, a village about eight miles from Land’s End at the far southwest tip of Great Britain. He came from a family of yeoman farmers and tinners, inasmuch as this part of Cornwall boasts both agricultural country and tin mines. Joseph’s own background was in mining; he came to the United States in 1868 at age nineteen and worked the mines of New York, New Jersey, Colorado and Nevada before landing in Montana at Granite in 1887.

The first Butte store was at 47 West Park in the Thomas Block that burned down in 1912. Joseph died in 1911, and the business continued under his sons until about 1924. At their peak, eleven Lutey’s stores served Butte, with 350 employees. But there were no Lutey’s in 1925. Irish fundraisers seeking money to help with Ireland’s civil war (in 1922 and 1923) approached Butte businesses for donations of $150 each. Cornishman William Lutey refused, and the ensuing boycott by Butte’s Irish put them out of business. Butte boasted no Lutey’s stores after 1924.

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.