BAS 244 Simon Jacobs Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Simon Jacobs, born in Mississippi in 1862 a year before his father Henry fought for the Confederacy at the Siege of Vicksburg, came north with his parents to Montana’s gold fields by 1868. When he committed suicide May 6, 1895, Butte was plunged into mourning for its young city Treasurer.

Simon was the eldest child of Jewish German immigrant Henry Jacobs and his Alsatian-born wife Adele. Henry was elected Butte’s first mayor in 1879, and Simon grew up in the family home at 201 West Granite which still stands. In 1889 Simon was elected Butte city treasurer, a post that paid the handsome sum of $6,000 a year.

Simon was also in partnership with his widowed mother in a mercantile, S. Jacobs & Co., at 3 North Main in the Lizzie Block. His investments and connections were wide-ranging, including a partnership with Leonard Lewisohn, principal in the Boston & Montana Mining Company, to develop real estate in the Waukesha Addition on the upper West Side in 1891. His finances were bonded by such Butte luminaries as W.A. Clark and John Caplice.

But despite being a “truly noble man,” according to the Butte Miner newspaper, Simon’s mismanagement, if not outright embezzlement, from the Butte city government during his terms as Treasurer resulted in a $51,000 shortfall by the end of his tenure. Some said his gambling habit was a factor, others that his generosity to friends in need was a problem, but the bottom line was that on May 7, 1895, when a new city Treasurer took office, the shortages would become apparent. As they in fact did.

Thirty-three-year-old Simon’s suicide was generally attributed to his “great financial distress,” both within the city coffers and in his own business. The assets and merchandise of S. Jacobs & Co. were liquidated the following summer, and lawsuits against Jacobs’ bondsmen, who had effectively guaranteed his honesty, continued for more than a year after his death.

Jacobs shot himself at 7:30 in the morning in the abandoned blacksmith shop at the Anselmo mine, just a few blocks from his home at 201 West Granite. Mrs. A.A. Forbis heard two shots at her home at the corner of Granite and Excelsior. The inquest concluded that he fired a test shot before turning the gun on himself. Ironically, Jacobs had admitted the shortages to Mrs. Forbis’s son, attorney John F. Forbis, the evening before, and consequently, there was never any significant doubt about the financial problems.

Simon Jacobs’ funeral was among the largest funerals for an individual seen in Butte to that point. The Masons were in charge of the proceedings, but the B’nai B’rith, Odd Fellows, and Knights of Pythias also honored their fellow member. A large procession went down Montana Street, and extra street cars were added to accommodate the crowds traveling to B’nai Israel cemetery. The “scene was one of unspeakable sadness,” according to the Anaconda Standard.

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.