BAS 245 Cabbage Patch Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Baboon Gulch, where miners William Allison and G. A. Humphreys settled in 1864, lay between what is now Mercury and Silver Streets just east of Wyoming Street. By 1891, the gulch had been leveled and filled in and was beginning to develop into a shanty town.

The Cabbage Patch, as it came to be called, was home to the dregs of society as well as honest citizens down on their luck. Alcoholics, bootleggers, and criminals shared more than 200 shanties with down-trodden minorities, widows with children, and new immigrants come to Butte with no connections. Three miners might share a 12x12-foot cabin, alternating use of the bed according to the shift changes. The sheds had no electricity, no running water, no sewer system save for the open sewer that ran through the heart of the neighborhood. Poverty combined with a wild diversity of ethnicities made for a rough and tough area, avoided by most genteel citizens in prosperous Butte just a few blocks away.

The Cabbage Patch became an easy target for squatters because ownership of its mine claims was unclear. Multiple landlords sometimes dunned residents for rent, with the result that tenants paid no one. Building neglect and stripping vacant cabins for wood to burn or anything else valuable created a zone several blocks wide and long filled by dilapidated buildings, Butte’s biggest eyesore. By the late 1930s it had expanded by several blocks beyond the original Baboon Gulch area.

Crime and disaster provide the only reliable reports about the Cabbage Patch. Mike Mahoney, who fancied himself the Beau Brummell of the Patch, had his one good shirt at Hong Huie’s laundry on East Mercury Street, anticipating wearing it to the St. Patrick’s Day celebration in 1909. Mahoney came off shift, got drunk, and went to pick up his shirt—which wasn’t ready. He flew into a rage, becoming “a one-man wrecking crew,” and attacked laundryman Huie with a three-pound flatiron. It took the other laundry workers and some bystanders to save Huie, and Mahoney sat out that St. Patrick’s Day in the City Jail.

In the 1920s “King of the Cabbage Patch” McNamara reportedly blew himself up with his own still, but bootlegging and making moonshine was by no means limited to the Cabbage Patch. Home-based stills sprang up all over Butte during Prohibition, and women were arrested nearly as often as men.

The Federal Housing Act, part of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, provided Butte with $1 million to demolish the Patch and erect low-income housing in Silver Bow Homes. At least 225 buildings came down in the spring of 1940, and Silver Bow Homes opened May 9, 1941. The Public Housing Authority manages more than 200 two-story apartments there today; about $1.2 million in Federal grants funded their 1979-80 renovation. Four pre-1890 shacks near the northern edge of the old Cabbage Patch survive and are operated today as small museums.

Little one-story rows of attached apartments similar to Silver Bow Homes, each measuring about 20 feet by 20 feet, replaced the Florence Hotel on East Broadway with 20 units and the Mullins House in Centerville with 22 units in the late 1940s and early 1950s, but those two complexes are gone today.

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.