BAS 257 The Front Street Hub Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Front Street in 1884 had to be a busy hub where visitors coming in by train got their first glimpse of the Richest Hill on Earth. It was somewhat isolated from the rest of Butte, which was about a mile or so up the hill, and until the middle 1890s it was technically in a separate community, South Butte. Because Main and Montana streets didn’t reach Front Street at that time, access to the Uptown and Butte proper was primarily via the branching extensions of Arizona and Utah, which then, as now, came down to the railroad terminal, which served the Utah & Northern in 1884.

Both sides of the railway were dominated by the Montana Lumber & Produce Company with its mill. The three-story structure included the sawmill on the first level, a sash and door factory on the second, and a planing mill on the third floor. The mill even ran on Sundays and “frequently at night,” with lighting provided by kerosene lanterns -- but no smoking was allowed. Small buildings west of huge lumber piles included the boiler, a shed where shavings were collected by blowers, the iron-clad drying room, a 12,000-gallon water tank, an 18-foot-high 30,000-gallon oil tank, paint and varnish storage, and offices.

Montana Lumber’s freight offices across the tracks stored sashes, doors, wagons, paints, and oils in one building and hay, grain, and produce in another. To the east, Kirkendall & Brown’s warehouse held buggies, and continuing west on what would become Front Street was Northwestern Forwarding Company’s warehouse with hay and grain bins, across from a saloon and billiard hall on the northeastern corner of Utah and Front Streets.

A 2-story boarding house, near the same corner, was north of the Caplice, McCune & Co. station where they received and sent grain and produce to their stores in Walkerville, Butte, and elsewhere in southwest Montana. Caplice & McCune’s was across from the railroad freight depot along with J.E. Richards’ 2-story oil warehouse and Dolman’s hay and grain warehouse.

The passenger depot was conveniently located just a few steps from the Northwestern Hotel. A long low building along the tracks held coal and salt bins. A service building was on a rail spur south of the main line. The spur passed the main water tank, near the small open-air circle where engines were rotated—the predecessor to the roundhouse that eventually was built near there.

By 1888 the Utah & Northern had become the Montana Union Railroad, a joint venture between the Union Pacific and Northern Pacific. Montana Union operated but did not own the Utah & Northern Railroad, which was technically owned solely by the Union Pacific. Montana Union built a proper roundhouse near the Front Street station, with five tracks from the turntable together with a sixth track into a machine shop.

The Montana Lumber Company yard had come under the ownership of Lavell Brothers by 1888, and they had expanded the operation substantially. Front Street and the adjacent rail lines exemplified Butte’s meteoric growth in the late 1880s and early 1890s.

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.