BAS 259 The Sixth Floor Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

One of the most prestigious and important buildings in Butte history, the Hennessey, is clad in deep red brick, adding to its imposing nature at the corner of Main and Granite Streets. Erected in 1897–98 where the Centennial Hotel once stood, the Hennessey was occupied in 1901 by the Anaconda Copper Mining Company and served as its corporate headquarters for the next seventy-six years. “The Sixth Floor” became a pejorative term for corporate greed and control.

A reporter in the 1920s characterized it this way: “Like the Lord God Almighty in His universe, the Anaconda Copper Mining Company is everywhere. It is all, and in all. Its titular Mercy Seat is on the sixth floor of the Hennessey Building at the intersection of Main and Granite streets, but it is enthroned in the heart, brain, and wallet of every man and woman from Nine-Mile to Stringtown, from the Main Range to Whiskey Gulch.”

In reality, the Anaconda’s control went far beyond Butte’s bricks and mortar and mines, the only business powerful enough to be known simply as “the Company.” Anaconda Copper eventually came to have great influence in—if not outright control of—Montana’s legislature and courts, as well as over Montana’s Congressional representatives and most of its newspapers. Montana in the 1920s was called a “corporate colony” of Anaconda Copper. An IWW songwriter known only as “Scottie” vilified Anaconda’s president, Cornelius Kelly in this poem:

Of all the men in old Butte City That needs contempt or even pity

There’s one that rules on the Sixth Floor That’s got them all skinned, by the score.

This old gent’s name is Cornelius Kelly, Was meant to crawl upon his belly,

But listen, boys, he’s good and true The Company’s interests to pull through,

But when it comes to working men, He’d rather see them in the pen,

Or burning in eternal hell— His nostrils would enjoy the smell.

The Company’s fortunes and Butte’s prosperity were intimately tied together. Even though the end of World War I led to a copper price crash and closing mines in Butte in the early 1920s, Anaconda was expanding. Chuquicamata and other mines in Chile and in Mexico yielded cheap copper for the Company beginning in the 1920s and they remained vital operations until the 1970s. When the Anaconda Company was nationalized by Chile and Mexico in 1971, the company lost about two-thirds of its copper production and untold reserves. At the same time, the environmental movement in the United States was beginning to make freewheeling mining practices in Butte unacceptable. Strikes in the 1950s and 1960s, some lasting six months or more, also took their toll. By the late 1960s, Butte’s economy was in a severe downturn.

Through the Company’s ups and downs, its headquarters building stood firm. Minneapolis architect Frederick Kees designed the structure that housed the Anaconda Company. It also held Montana’s largest department store, Hennessey’s, on the first two levels and basement. The Hennessey Building was built to last. Even though it only stands six stories high, its internal frame is that of a skyscraper, supported by steel girders. Many other buildings in Butte were not so fortunate.

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.