BAS 277 Fred Gamer Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Although Gamer’s restaurant is a household name in Butte today, the Gamer family was historically more famous for their shoe stores.

Fred Gamer senior was born in Baden, Germany in 1844, and came to America when he was seventeen. He learned the shoemaking trade in Chicago, but after the great Chicago fire he relocated to St. Joseph, Missouri, where he worked for John Fink who had shoe stores throughout the west. Gamer became manager of the stores in Deer Lodge and Helena in 1868, and he bought the stores when his father-in-law, John Fink, died in 1874.

In the late 1870s, Gamer established a branch shoe store on North Main Street in Butte, the first shoe store in Butte. The first floor on the south side at 113 North Main was probably built about 1878 and definitely by 1884, when Gamer’s Shoe Store was there. With a short hiatus in 1908-1910 when the store was called Weggenman & Mund’s Shoes, Gamers was in this location until 1923. The building is still standing despite damage from an 1889 fire.

In the basement at 113 North Main the walls are covered by graffiti written in shoe polish, recording the names of Gamer’s clerks, messengers, helpers, cashiers, bookkeepers, and Fred Gamer himself. Most of the graffiti there date to the 19-teens, so Fred’s inscription is probably J. Fred Gamer, Fred Senior’s son, who took over the business when Fred senior died in an accident in 1911, hit by a streetcar in Anaconda.

The three Gamer sons, J. Fred, Charles, and Walter, all born in Montana, established a confectionary, a candy factory and store, on West Park Street in 1906. That building was constructed as the Curtis Music Hall in 1892 and holds Gamer’s restaurant today. J. Fred Gamer’s home was at 503 West Mercury Street, a craftsman-style house built for him and his wife in 1917 and also still standing.

The confectionary continued in business in the Gamer family until 1944, but the business continued for several decades, evolving into a bakery and eventually the restaurant that retains the Gamer’s name. The Butte shoe store was rejuvenated in 1947 by Fred’s grandson Bill Miles. It moved to various locations around the uptown and in the 1970s there were two Gamer’s stores in Butte, one on West Park and another in the Butte Plaza Mall. Miles also returned Gamer’s Shoes to Helena in 1952.

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.