BAS 279 Granite Mountain Disaster Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

The North Butte Mining Company was working to electrify its Granite Mountain and Speculator mines, to improve safety, on June 8, 1917, when the cable fell. Cables in those days were wrapped in oil-soaked cloth to reduce friction, and when foreman Ernest Sullau descended to the 2,400 level, the flame of his carbide lamp set the cable on fire. The smoke and flame ultimately killed 168 underground miners – the most deadly hard-rock mine disaster in United States history. It took three days to recover the bodies, and survivors were also rescued dozens of hours after the start of the conflagration. The heroism of young Manus Duggan, who saved more than 20 men but perished himself, is legendary in Butte.

Manus Duggan was a nipper, a boy or young man who delivered tools and equipment to wherever they were needed. He had just turned 30 a week before the Granite Mountain fire, and he lived with his wife Madge in a house at the west end of Zarelda Street, just below Big Butte. In the mine that night, encountering smoke and gas, Duggan led 28 men to a blind drift, a dead-end tunnel, where they constructed a bulkhead, a barrier against the fumes. The men survived, barely, for almost three days when they finally made it to a shaft in the Speculator mine, where they were hoisted to safety. But Duggan himself, the acknowledged savior of the men, for unknown reasons turned away from the shaft before rescue. His body was found four days after the men in his charge were saved.

The Granite Mountain-Speculator disaster touched off a strike. All of Butte’s strikes in the early 20th century were complicated – there were undoubtedly good reasons for strikes, including in this case, better working conditions and safety, since a good many deaths were the result of underground bulkheads blocking escape routes. The radical I.W.W. (Industrial Workers of the World) certainly used

strikes to promote its agenda as well.

The mine companies used the fact that there were many unions – as many as 34 separate unions, rather than the I.W.W.’s dream of “One Big Union” – to “divide and conquer” when strikes occurred. Eventually everyone caved in with few real concessions by the companies. That’s what was happening later in the summer of 1917 in the wake of the Granite Mountain disaster, and it was into that tinderbox that Frank Little came in mid-July 1917. Little’s murder two weeks later was never solved.

Michael Punke’s book, Fire and Brimstone, published in 2006, is the best resource for information about the Granite Mountain disaster as well as the incredibly complicated situation in Butte in the pivotal year 1917.

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.