BAS 287 Trolley System Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Public transit in Butte started with horse-drawn railroad cars, but by 1888 steam-driven locomotives traveled around Butte and a cable car went up the hill on Main Street to Walkerville. William Clark and his Deer Lodge banking partner Samuel Larabie were the forces behind the street railway company.

From 1889 to 1891, a competing company, the Metropolitan Railway, ran a line down Granite Street to Wyoming then south and east to South Butte and Meaderville, but that company was merged into the Butte Consolidated Street Railway Company in 1891, and all the lines were electrified about that time except the cable car to Walkerville. That last line was electrified in 1894.

The company spent $75,000 on improvements in 1895 alone, including making the line down Park Street a double track to accommodate the dramatic increase in demand with Butte’s surging population. The system was extended across Silver Bow Creek to the cemeteries on South Montana Street and on to Williamsburg, and the same year the operation expanded to include towing ore cars behind the passenger cars, especially to haul the ore from uptown mines like the West Gagnon, at Jackson and Woolman Streets, to the Colorado Smelter near Williamsburg.

Initial fares were 10 cents, but by 1896 the rates were five cents for travel all over the Uptown and to Walkerville and South Butte. A ticket to Meaderville or Williamsburg ran 7 and a half cents, but school kids and mail carriers on duty could ride the trains for 2 and a half cents to any point in the system. The lines covered almost 23 miles in 1896, and ten more miles were added by 1910 when the Butte Electric Railway had 49 passenger cars.

The street rail system remained in William Clark’s ownership until he died in 1925. In 1928, together with all his remaining property including the Butte Miner newspaper and several mines and mills, his heirs sold it all to the Anaconda Company. Despite the Great Depression, the Anaconda continued to expand the lines, so that in 1933 there were 57 passenger cars running on almost 40 miles of track.

The electric trolley system came to an end in 1937. Like many such operations across the country, they were abandoned in favor of bus lines, and the new owner, National City Lines, brought 24 modern buses to Butte from the East Coast. Many of the original tracks for the old street rail system still lie beneath uptown’s paved streets 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.