BAS 292 Mules Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

My sweetheart’s a mule in the mine, I drive her with only one line

On the dashboard I sit, and tobacco I spit All over my sweetheart’s behind.

The well-known miner’s tribute to the mules underground finally came to an end in Butte in 1934, when, as ropeman Ray Barrott recalled, the last eight mules came up from the Emma Mine for the last time. According to historian Mike Byrnes, as many as a thousand mules pulled ore cars through the mine drifts beneath Butte in the early 1900s, but by the early 1910s electrification had begun in earnest and mules were being replaced by electric engines and drivers all over the mine system.

Like the men, ore, and equipment, mules went up and down the mineshafts in cages barely bigger than 3 feet by 3 feet in cross section and about 8 feet high. Mules were trussed up in complicated rope harnesses, hung from canvas slings, or bound in leather mule straitjackets – a sometimes challenging procedure. Consequently, often enough mules lived underground for months or years, and it was said that you could expect a strike to be a long one if they pulled all the mules out. Ray Barrott recalled one mule, Emily, who spent 18 years underground at the Emma Mine.

Nonetheless, according to Mike Byrnes, the mules were reportedly treated better than the men, working 8-hour shifts to the mens’ 12, and their underground stables were considered to be some of the cleanest spots in the mines. A mule’s typical working life was around five years, and then they were turned out to pasture on the mule ranch in the hills along Mill Creek south of Anaconda.

Many mules were acclimated to the underground in an initial home in the Diamond Mine, where 46 mules were quartered at one time around 1905. Each mine had its own horseshoer, and they had their own union. Local number 83 met on Thursday evenings in 1910 in the Carpenters’ Union Hall that still stands on Granite Street.

Dr. John D. McGregor came to Butte as a private veterinarian in 1889, but he was soon hired by Marcus Daly to tend to the horses and mules that worked in the mines. Although he traveled all over the hill in his work, McGregor maintained an office at 106 South Main Street, in the Star Livery at the southwest corner of Galena and Main. He lived in Room 7 in the Lizzie Block, the three-story office-lodging house at Park and Main, where the Party Palace stands 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.