BAS 298 Columbia Gardens Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

In 1876, the nation’s centennial, William Adams established a mining claim in Horse Canyon, a pleasant wooded valley near the base of the East Ridge, about three and a half miles east of the uptown business district. He called it Columbia in honor of the centennial. Adams didn’t pursue the mining claim, but he did build a beer hall, and the spot became a small recreational venue.

In 1899 William Clark purchased the 21-acre claim and hired Jesse Wharton, manager of Clark’s Butte Street Railway Company, the trolley system, to develop an amusement park. Extending the trolley line to Columbia Gardens was a critical promotional element in a city where public transportation dominated.

Was Clark ingratiating himself with the people of Butte in a year in which he was actively seeking election to the US Senate? Maybe, but the bribery of state legislators, who actually elected Clark, probably had little to do with the general population. It seems that Clark actually wanted to create something memorable and good for the city that made his fortune.

Whatever the motive, the place was an immediate success. Manager Wharton began Arbor Day in the woodland oasis in 1901, a day that gave free trolley rides to children along with a free lunch, free amusement rides, and a tree to plant. This evolved into Children’s Day, and eventually, every Thursday was a free day for Butte kids.

The Columbia Gardens became the primary site for recreation not just in Butte but across the Northwest. In addition to the rides and beautiful floral designs in the landscaping, enhancing picnic areas, there was a zoo, museum, football and baseball fields, and a lake for boating. In 1906 a roller coaster, reportedly the largest in the Northwest, was constructed at the Gardens at a cost of $20,000, using imported southeast Asian ironwood.

Columbia Gardens was among the assets that William Clark retained until his death in 1925. In 1928, all remaining Clark property, including the Butte Miner Newspaper, the trolley system, the Elm Orlu Mine, the Timber Butte Mill, and Columbia Gardens were sold by Clark’s heirs to the Anaconda Company. According to historian John Astle, the Company ran the park first at a loss of around $6000 a year and later through a non-profit foundation. By the 1970s, Butte’s declining population had decreased revenue, and expenses had increased to almost $170,000 a year, at a time when the Anaconda Company was nationalized in Chile and lost about three-quarters of its copper production.

The roller coaster and all of Columbia Gardens continued to entertain until Labor Day 1973. Despite efforts by a local Save the Gardens committee and the Sierra Club, the Anaconda Company closed the park for good after that Labor Day. There was an abortive attempt to move the venue to Beef Trail, south of Butte, but although the entry arch was moved and still stands alone out there, nothing else happened.

The arcade building, carousel horses, the bi-plane ride and more were destroyed in a fire two months after the last day of operation in 1973. Although officially that fire was reported to be caused by a faulty electrical system, many Butte residents believe the fire was arson, likely set by the Company to eliminate the Columbia Gardens from the list of things they had to concern themselves with. The loss of the Columbia Gardens was arguably the greatest psychological blow to Butte at a time when the very existence of the city was threatened.

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.