BAS 299 Bert Mooney Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

The first scheduled commercial airline flight in the United States was a 23-minute trip across Tampa Bay, from St. Petersburg to Tampa, Florida, in 1914. That was three years after the first airplane flight in Butte in 1911, a daredevil display that attracted thousands of people.

By 1919 Butte had an airfield, a dirt track called Marr Field near Lake Avoca and the Butte Country Club. Exhibition flights and flying instruction used it, and in 1920 the Anaconda Standard newspaper was flown from Anaconda to Marr Field. Eight years later, in 1928, commercial air travel came to Butte.

The Butte National Airport was built in 1927 at the same location as the present airport. Later that year, Charles Lindberg flew the Spirit of St. Louis into Butte as part of a national celebration of his trans-Atlantic flight. The hangar where his plane was parked has been preserved and restored.

National Parks Airways had been established in 1927, but its first role was to deliver air mail on its only route, from Salt Lake City to Ogden, Pocatello, Butte, Helena, and Great Falls and return. Butte businessman Louis Dreibelbis, who had a prominent drugstore operation, flew with the first demonstration flight in early July 1928. Regular service along the route began in August, with several thousand spectators on hand at the Butte airport for the first official air mail delivery. This air mail route coincided with a reduction in the cost of an air mail letter from 10 cents to 5 cents an ounce, a decrease designed to increase use of the service. Passenger service was added to National Parks Airways routes a few years later.

Bert Mooney learned to fly in California at age 19, but graduated from Butte Central High School in 1920, when he was 20 years old. In Butte he also took flying lessons from Jack Lynch, the instructor who taught Charles Lindberg, and Mooney soon had a pilot’s license and qualified as a commercial pilot. He was hired by National Parks Airways for the Salt Lake-Butte-Great Falls run, and he was the first pilot to deliver air mail to West Yellowstone when the airline expanded its routes. After Western Airlines acquired National Parks in 1937, Mooney continued with Western, where he retired as a pilot in 1960 after a 34-year career. Western was merged with Delta Air Lines in 1987, and Delta continues to serve Butte through its Skywest subsidiary.

The Butte airport was renamed Silver Bow County Airport in 1956 and a new chalet-style terminal building was constructed in 1962. Bert Mooney died in 1972 and the airport was named for him at that time. The 1962 structure was demolished in 2018 when a new terminal was built.

Mooney’s wife Hanna was also a trained pilot, and their four sons, Jay, Brien, Bill, and Albert, all born in Butte, all become commercial airline pilots. Bert Mooney famously said, “If you can fly out of, around, and back into Butte, you can fly just about anywhere.”

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.