The Rothschild Connection 4:30

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

Archibald Primrose, Fifth Earl of Rosebery and Prime Minister of Great Britain from 1894-95 married Hanna de Rothschild in 1878, at a time when she was the richest woman in Britain. Rosebery was a celebrated Scottish imperialist, anti-Socialist and philanthropist, first president of the London Scottish Rugby Football Club, so well known that his image adorned cigar boxes. The combined Rosebery-Rothschild fortunes allowed them to invest widely, even as far afield as Butte, Montana Territory.

Rosebery’s American business interests were developed by a dashing young New Yorker, Ferdinand Van Zandt. The growing silver mines at Burlington, a few miles west of Butte, led him to encourage Rosebery to invest in the Bluebird Mine in 1885, and November 22, 1886, Van Zandt’s 90-stamp mill opened there, helping yield the remarkable output of 1.4 million ounces of silver in 1888 alone.

But success was short lived. Litigation contending claim encroachment in 1889 tied things up for several years. George Tyng, Rosebery’s manager at the White Deer Cattle Ranch in the Texas Panhandle, settled most of the law suits by 1891, but another that same year, a $2-million case, resulted in the authorities seizing the mine anticipating the need for payment, effectively shutting down production indefinitely. When the news reached London, Van Zandt shot himself in his room at the Brown Hotel in upscale Mayfair (some sources say he jumped to his death from a hotel window). The mine began to fill with water and was ultimately sold off piecemeal. The crash in the price of silver in 1893 was the final nail in the coffin: the Bluebird hoist went to the Diamond and the headframe was transported to the Blue Jay Mine (the Blue Jay was due east of the Steward, about half way between the Kelley and Parrot Mines). Ruins of the mill (closed permanently March 1, 1892) can still be found out west of Butte, east of Rocker.

Burlington itself suffered because the Bluebird Mine and mill were the town’s primary employers, even though a number of smaller mines were in the vicinity including the Great Republic, Champion, and Moody & Sankey. All were primarily silver producers and all suffered mightily in the collapse of 1893.

Burlington had begun in a big way in 1885 when the post office was established. Within a few years some 2,000 residents called the place home, making for a flourishing community supporting at least seven saloons, two groceries, several hotels, a church, a community library, and a school. In 1887 the Bluebird was the only non-union operation in the Butte District; on June 13 that year (Miner’s Union Day) union leaders from Butte hiked out the Bluebird Trail (the westward extension of Park Street) and intimidated workers at the Bluebird Mine, bringing them back to Butte where they were initiated into the union, making Butte a closed shop, with all mines unionized.

Following the crash of 1893, at least 60 houses were loaded onto wagons and relocated into Butte. The town died a decade-long death. The post office closed in 1901 and the last business, a saloon and road house, shut down in 1905. Twelve families were still hanging on in 1906. For a time early in the 20th Century, Burlington’s dairy cows reportedly provided as much as 25 wagons of milk to Butte daily.

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Thanks for listening, and we hope you’ll join us next time for more of America’s Story as it played out in Butte.