

# BUTTE, 1950-2009: DECLINE, LOSS, AND THE RISE OF HISTORIC PRESERVATION AND CULTURAL TOURISM

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The fates of Butte and the Anaconda Company were closely entwined throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and like all mining towns Butte's economy followed the rises and falls in demand for copper. As the Anaconda Company began to develop its reserves in Chile in the 1920s, and with the sharp decline in the price of copper following World War I, Butte's long sustained boom turned into a decline.

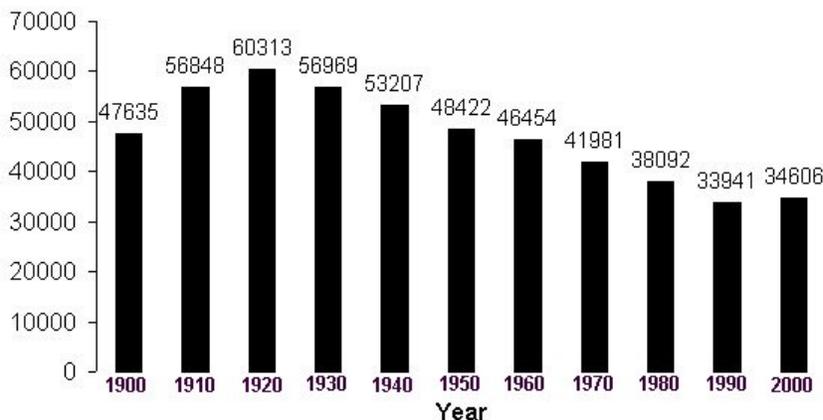
Official population figures (below) in the 1900s to 1930s probably underestimated the actual count, and the number of residents fluctuated rapidly especially in the 1910s. Esti-

mates of the peak population in 1917-1918 range from 85,000 to over 100,000.

Despite the decline, Butte remained an important mining center. Significant strikes, including a 1959 shut-down that lasted more than six months, reflected changes in economic conditions and resulted in mines closing and never re-opening—the Anselmo, for example, closed permanently in 1959. The Berkeley Pit, begun in 1955, was the focus of most operations by the late 1960s, and most underground operations had ended by 1975 or earlier.

The growth—and anticipated growth—of the Berkeley Pit was perhaps the most significant factor in the way Butte evolved after World War II. As it expanded in the 1960s and 1970s, the Pit gobbled up entire neighborhoods—Meaderville, McQueen, and much of East Butte—dislocating many residents and uprooting or burying treasured institutions such as churches and fraternal halls that had been centers of com-

**Silver Bow County Census**



# ANATOMY OF AN OPEN-PIT MINE

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**B**y 1955, when the Berkeley Pit began, costs of underground mining had begun to outweigh the value returned. Even excavating whole rooms underground meant that all that material had to come up through a series of bottlenecks—the shafts of the underground mine systems.

The Berkeley Pit began in July 1955 near the old Berkeley underground mine. The Berkeley and Rarus Mines exploited the Berkeley vein, an important northwest-southeast mineralized zone that cut across the rich Anaconda vein system. The economic advantage—in the face of low grades of ore—was that ore could be mined using power shovels and giant dump trucks, rather than the complex, dangerous, and localized operations underground.

Retired underground miners in Butte will tell you that the men and women who worked in the Berkeley Pit weren't miners—they were truck drivers and mechanical shovel operators. But they produced more copper, faster, than could have been hauled up the shafts.

By the time the Berkeley Pit ceased operations in 1982, something over 1 billion tons—two trillion pounds—of material had been removed. With ore averaging less than 15 pounds of copper per ton, that still means that around 15 billion pounds of copper came from the Berkeley Pit, more than half the 23 billion pounds produced to date from all Butte's mining operations.

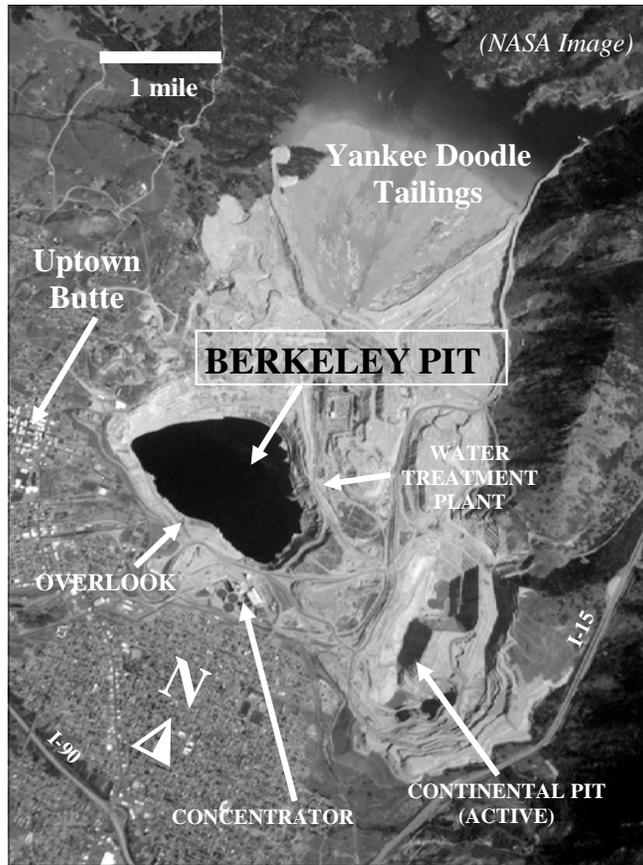
The pit is about 1½ miles wide (left to right as you look at it from the Viewing Stand) and a mile north-south. Nearly 1,800 feet deep at the high wall on the northwest face, more than half that depth is now filled with water.

When mining ended, pumps that kept the underground system, including the Berkeley Pit, dry, were turned off. The water here is natural ground water, and the pit is the lowest point in the water system—so everything underground drains to here, like a bathtub drain. And as in mines everywhere, when water contacts sulfide minerals in the rock it reacts to form sulfuric acid. The pH (acidity) of Berkeley Pit water is about 2.3, similar to stomach acid.

Water is currently entering the pit at about 1,800 gallons per minute, or 2½ million gallons per day, resulting in the lake's depth increasing

by about ½ foot per month. At that rate, a "critical water level"—where ground water could flow away from the pit in the subsurface—would be reached about the year 2020. Before that happens, water will be diverted and treated in the water treatment plant that went online in 2003.

As you look across the pit from the viewing stand on Continental Drive near the east end of Mercury Street, you see a large building with what look like two green smokestacks. Those green cylinders are actually silos full of antacid: limestone, the same ba-



sic ingredient in over-the-counter acid reducers. Water flowing into the pit is treated there and sent to the Weed concentrator to help process ore from the Continental Pit to the east. The concentrator facility is named for Clyde E. Weed (1890-1973), a mining engineer who was President and CEO of the Anaconda Company from 1956 to 1964.

The water treatment plant, built and operated by ARCO as part of its remediation work in the region, reduced the rate of increase in pit water by four to six inches per month, and pushed the time the critical water level is approached back by several years. Eventually, the water treatment plant will treat pit water itself, but there is no plan to empty the pit of its 37 billion gallons of water. Treatment will simply maintain a status quo—and the pit will likely remain the deepest body of water in Montana, and treatment will be needed in perpetuity.

The story of a flight of several hundred snow geese landing in the pit and dying is true. Also true is some exciting new research by Montana Tech chemists Don and Andrea Stierle, who have isolated microbes unique to the pit water that show promise as bioactive agents against several forms of cancer.

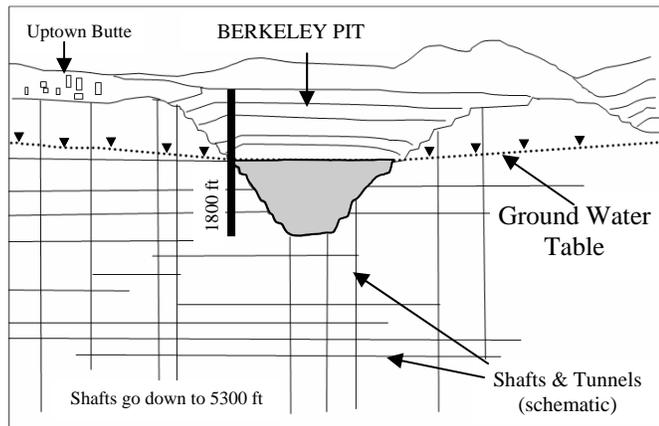
After the Berkeley Pit shut down in 1982, Butte's economy continued a downward spiral and many jobs disappeared. Mining returned, however, in 1986, when Montana Resources bought from ARCO some of the mineral properties formerly owned by Anaconda. They opened a smaller pit to the east, the Continental Pit.

Montana Resources' Continental Pit employs about 350 workers and moves about 55,000 tons of material per day—some of their haul trucks can carry 240 tons. The ore is low-grade, only about 0.3% copper, or six pounds per ton. The mine also produces molybdenum, an important alloying agent for steel, at not quite one pound of moly per ton.

The ore removed from the Continental Pit goes to the concentrator, where crushing and chemical flotation processes yield fine concentrates of molybdenum and copper. The concentrates are sold to metal traders and shipped to smelters and refineries in Belgium, Japan, China, and the United States for final production of pure metals. Some copper is also produced by precipitating it from Berkeley Pit water.

The Continental Pit shut down in 2000 because of low copper prices (around 60¢ per pound) and expensive electricity, but reopened in 2003 with a much more rosy economic outlook. Sustained surges in the price of copper (peaking at over \$4.00 per pound in 2006) and molybdenum (\$25-\$35 per pound in 2005-2006, up from \$2.60 per pound in 1999) are driven by third-world industrialization, especially in China and India.

Although in the early 1900s one-third of all the copper produced in the world came from Butte, vast reserves in Chile make that nation the world's copper leader today—Chile produces more than one-third of all the world's copper. For the entire 20th century, the United States was the leading consumer of copper, but in 2002 China took over that role. And for much of the 20th century, the US was self-sufficient in copper, but in 2007, the US was dependent on imports for 40% of the copper it consumed. Most of the copper imported into the US comes from Chile, Canada, Peru, and Mexico.



Berkeley Pit water system.  
Modified from Pitwatch.org by Richard Gibson.

**Berkeley Pit (1955-1982)**  
1½ miles wide • 1 mile across  
1800 feet deep  
900+ feet of water (2007) • pH ~2.3  
Getting deeper at ½ foot per month

munities for generations. While many people remain bitter about the forced relocation, some appreciated the opportunity to move to neighborhoods on the Flats or on the West Side that were cleaner and away from the industrial aspects of the Hill, where in some cases mines and mine dumps were literally in many back yards.

Anticipation that the Pit would eventually expand to take out the entire uptown district led to serious neglect. It was difficult for building owners to care about upkeep or renovations when it was assumed that within a few years they would be forced to sell out at pennies on the dollar. This fear, combined with the ongoing economic decline, probably contributed to the many fires in Uptown Butte from the late 1960s to the 1980s. Several dozen fires claimed landmarks large and small. Of the fires, 14 were known to be arson, but no one was ever charged for any of the crimes. There was widespread presumption that they were insurance-fraud fires, a claim that was never proven and was vigorously denied. Other conflagrations likely came from the ongoing neglect—unused upper stories became store-rooms for flammable materials in buildings whose electrical systems were perhaps 80 years old, or older.

In 1972, a detailed urban planning study was commissioned that accommodated the expected removal of the entire uptown district by relocating it to various “New Town” locations on the Flats or several miles west of town along Interstate 90. The plan accepted the idea that all of what is now historic Uptown Butte would have been lost.

The 1970s brought news with mixed blessings and blows for Butte. The Anaconda Company was nationalized in Chile. Over the course of 1969-1971, the Company lost about two-thirds of its copper production. Initially some felt



SAVED: The O'Rourke (Quartz at Alaska Street; see also page 124) was saved by volunteers who paid back taxes and commissioned a structural analysis of the building. Photo courtesy Butte CPR.

that this could be good news for mining in Butte, refocusing the Company's efforts locally, although that would have likely meant the end of Uptown Butte (see above). Nationalization in Chile and Mexico, combined with strong international competition and generally low copper prices proved to be too much for the Anaconda Company, and in 1977 the Company was acquired by the oil company, Atlantic Richfield (ARCO). The 1970s also brought the rise of environmental consciousness in the United States, and a century of bad mining practices in western Montana were seen in a new light—an unfavorable one. Within five years of ARCO's purchase of Anaconda, all mining operations ended; about 3400 miners lost their jobs when the Berkeley Pit closed for good in 1982-83. The high-priority Superfund site, extending from Butte 120 miles down the Clark Fork River, was established in 1983. During some of the darkest economic days in Butte, 1979 to 1985, a 90-foot statue was erected on the East Ridge: Our Lady of the Rockies was built entirely through volunteer contributions of materials and labor, at least partly as a symbol of hope.

The losses of the 1970s and 1980s were not without value. In a 1981 report to a Washing-

ton, D.C., conservancy group concerned about the destruction of resources of significant historical importance, Janet Cornish, Director of the Urban Revitalization Agency, wrote that “the problems of arson and vandalism have surfaced as a unifying force,” in part as the community began to recognize the value of historic structures to economic development. Combined with ARCO’s announcement in 1978 that any expansion would not “take out the uptown,” a signal seemed to be sent that uptown Butte’s historic buildings were worth saving.

Expansion of the East Berkeley Pit by Montana Resources Co. returned mining to Butte in 1986, but never on the scale of earlier years, and the population continued to decline until the 2000 census indicated an increase of 665 over ten years earlier. Tiny, but the first population increase in a census since 1920.

In 1961, soon after the National Park Service began the National Historic Landmark program, Butte was designated a NHL, and it was expanded in 1972 so that it included some 4,000 contributing properties. A comprehensive inventory of historic properties was con-



LOST: The demolition of the miner’s cottage at 516 West Granite Street in 2005 created a hole in an otherwise mostly intact streetscape. More than 300 historic properties were lost between 1961 and 2006. Photo by Richard Gibson.

ducted in the 1980s, sponsored by the Montana Historical Society and the Butte Historical Society. A 14-year effort to expand the landmark to include Walkerville and Anaconda, under the theme of American Labor, was led by Ellen Crain (Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives), Chere Jiusto (Montana Preservation Alliance), and many others, culminating in the March 2006 announcement of the Butte-Anaconda National Historic Landmark. The 174-page text of the NHL expansion nomination, written mostly by historian Derek Strahn, is available at [www.nps.gov/history/nhl/designations/samples/mt/Butte-Anaconda.pdf](http://www.nps.gov/history/nhl/designations/samples/mt/Butte-Anaconda.pdf).

The establishment of the World Museum of Mining in 1963 by Butte’s Exchange Club announced a deep appreciation for Butte’s heritage – both the physical artifacts, ranging from drill bits to entire buildings, and its wildly diverse culture.

Other developments focusing on historic preservation and interpretation of the rich cultural heritage of Butte included the establishment in 1994 of a grass-roots group, Butte Citizens for Preservation and Revitalization (Butte CPR). That group has granted over \$23,000 in assistance for facade improvements that honor the historic character of Butte’s buildings, and has conducted educational tours, repair workshops, and written informative newspaper articles. Butte CPR (especially member Mitzi Rossillon) was also instrumental in the creation of a developer’s packet procedure for finding owners for properties the county had obtained through tax delinquencies; some properties have sold for as little as \$500 and have been rehabilitated and returned to the tax base. Developer’s packet sales have ranged from simple miner’s cottages to the four-story circa-1910 Sears Building (32-40 East Granite Street), acquired for \$10,000 and now (2009) undergoing a multi-million-dollar refurbishment by a private developer. Actions by Butte



LOST: The 1917 Longfellow School, on the Flats west of Harrison Avenue in Butte, was demolished in 2007-2008 despite the new historic preservation ordinance. The building was one of only 16 individually listed National Register properties in Silver Bow County. Photo by Richard Gibson.

CPR have also saved—at least temporarily—a number of historic buildings in Uptown Butte, including the Acoma (Broadway at Wyoming Street), the O'Rourke (Quartz at Alaska Street), and the business block at Park and Wyoming Streets. Butte CPR volunteers also started and continue to develop an on-line collection of photographs and written histories of local buildings, Virtual Historic Butte ([wiki.butenhld.org](http://wiki.butenhld.org)).

The Mai Wah Society was established in 1992 and acquired two important buildings in Chinatown. It promotes and interprets Asian cultural heritage in the Intermountain West. The Butte-Silver Bow Urban Revitalization Agency sponsored an archaeological dig in Chinatown during the summer of 2007; some of the more than 60,000 artifacts uncovered will ultimately be displayed and interpreted at the Mai Wah Museum. The Montana Gaelic Cultural Society sponsors the annual An Ri Ra Irish Festival, as well as popular immersion programs in Gaelic language and culture. The presence of the National Folk Festival in Butte (2008-2010), the first time in 40 years the festival has been west of the Mississippi, has pro-

vided impetus for promotion and preservation of history – the main stage is beneath the Original Mine Headframe.

In 2004, the historic speakeasy beneath the sidewalk at the Rookwood Hotel was rediscovered. Historians were aware of the presence of this space, but it had been neglected for decades. Appreciation for Butte's historic past was reviving, and within weeks the speakeasy was opened as a museum. The tour company that was spawned from this rediscovery now organizes excursions throughout Butte, with emphasis on historical accuracy, including guided tours of seven privately restored historic spaces.

Although Butte had a historic preservation ordinance, it had no significant teeth until a new comprehensive ordinance went into effect in March 2007. The new ordinance established a Local Register for historic properties with clear and specific guidelines for adherence to design codes, and also empowered the 7-member Butte-Silver Bow Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) to review all demolition requests on historic properties every-



STABILIZED: The Dumas Brothel (45 East Mercury Street; see also page 107) got a new roof and critical interior masonry restoration in 2007-2008—a \$37,000 project funded mostly by private donations. Photo by Richard Gibson.

where in the County except Walkerville. The HPC also applies its design review to historic properties that receive financing through local government organizations such as the Urban Revitalization Agency.

In 2006 and later, final settlements of lawsuits for environmental damage brought under the Superfund law decades earlier began to provide significant monies for Butte to restore and remediate some of its environmental problems. A citizen panel established in 2006, the Butte Restoration Alliance, studies problems and advises the city-county and other groups on recommended priorities on issues broadly related to restoration, including historic preservation, recreation, neighborhood enhancement, and environment.

Despite some hard-fought losses and incomplete streetscapes, Butte retains a remarkable number of its historic homes and commercial buildings. The biggest battle locally is probably in convincing residents of the value of the whole, and how it far exceeds that of an individual house which most might perceive as “common,” even worthless. Conferences like

the Vernacular Architecture Forum provide evidence of the appreciation for and lend credibility to the study of simple miner’s homes and other vernacular landscapes.

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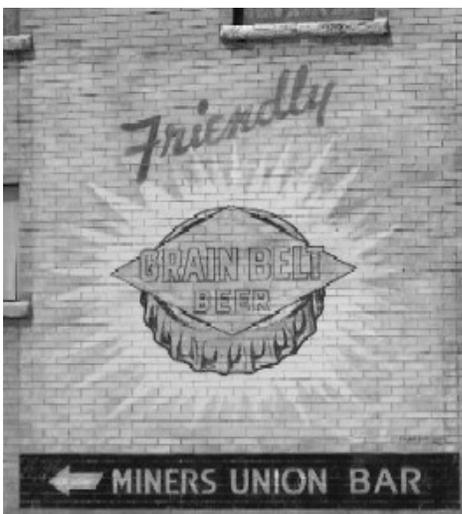
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*See also* Quivik, this volume, p. 11.



IN PROGRESS, 2009: The historic business block at the southwest corner of Park and Wyoming Streets has lost its roof, but aggressive efforts to save it and return it to use are in the works. Left photo shows detail of ghost sign—the Miners Union Bar was in business from 1942 to 1954. Photos by Richard Gibson.

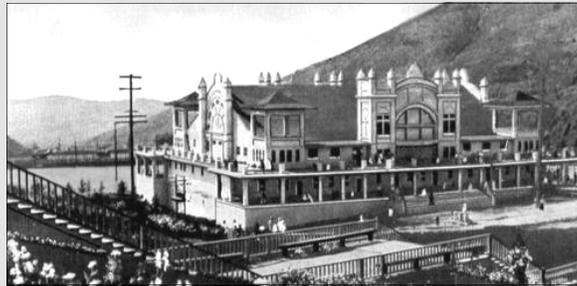
## COLUMBIA GARDENS

Of all Butte's losses to whatever cause, the greatest loss to the community, most sorely missed, was the Columbia Gardens. Built in 1899, this amusement park at the base of the East Ridge provided respite to the trials of mining. Thursday was children's day, but the park was used at all times. Its dance pavilion and roller coaster were important landmarks. The park closed in the fall of 1973 in the wake of anticipated mine expansion. Most of the structures burned later that fall, even before mining could remove them.

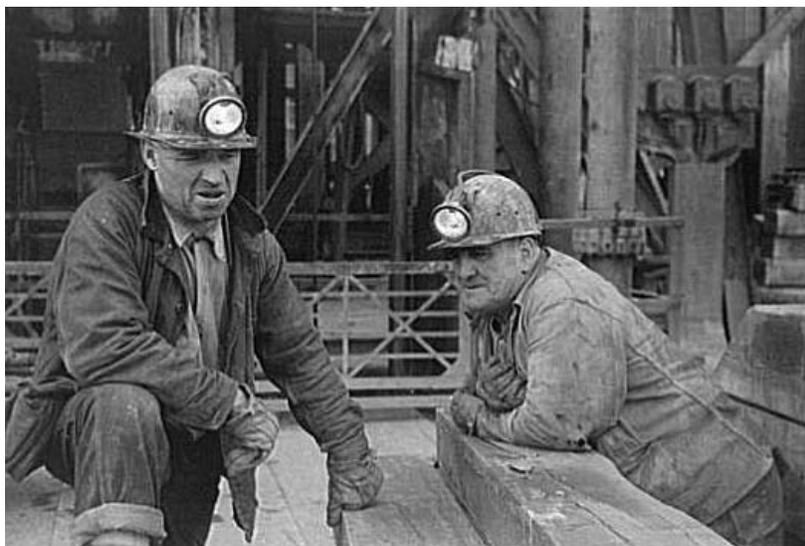
### Reference

*Butte's pride, the Columbia Gardens*, by Pat Kearney (1994)

—Richard Gibson



Columbia Gardens pavilion, from an old post card.



Copper miners in Butte. Photo by Arthur Rothstein, summer 1939. Farm Security Administration, LC-USF33-003110-M5.