



World Museum of Mining, Butte

Founded originally in 1864, Butte soon became Montana's most urban place. By about 1915, when this photograph was taken, Butte Electric Railway street cars transported denizens to one of the city's great attractions, Columbia Gardens.

by Mary Murphy

In 1931 *Baltimore Sun* journalist Margery Bedinger observed, "Good times or bad, prosperity or depression, Butte remains irrepressible."<sup>1</sup> Irrepressible, irreverent, devil-may-care, boisterous, and brash—writers have used dozens of such terms to describe the Northern Rockies mining city whose copper heart fired the economic and political pulse of Montana for decades.

Coming of age in the flush of late-nineteenth-century industrialization, Butte exemplified the no-holds-barred capitalism of the Gilded Age. Thousands of miners toiled beneath the Butte Hill, extracting its metallic wealth, while the infamous Copper Kings battled above ground for its control. Immigrants, who made Butte the most ethnically diverse city in the intermountain West between 1890 and 1930, settled into neighborhoods organized around the nearby mines, parish churches, and local saloons. Their wages helped support a central business district fueled by the freight and passenger traffic of more than fifty daily trains. Butte was birthplace of both the Anaconda Copper

Mining Company and the Western Federation of Miners. It inspired the careers of Marcus Daly, William Clark, John D. Ryan, Burton K. Wheeler, Mike Mansfield, Dashiell Hammett, Mary MacLane, Myron Brinig, and Evel Knievel. Its copper constituted the circuitry that electrified a growing nation, and the detritus of that production now anchors the nation's largest Superfund site. Butte's mark upon the history and economy of Montana and the American West is indelible.

Since its origins in the 1860s, Butte has undergone many cycles of good and bad, of boom and bust. When Bedinger wrote her comments in 1931, she was once again referring to Butte's famed identity as the wide-open town of the Rockies. She alluded to its nightlife, its characters, its streets filled with miners, both those

1. Margery Bedinger, "The Irrepressible Butte, Citadel of Copper," *Baltimore Sun*, magazine section, November 15, 1931, p. 12.  
 2. *Ibid.*  
 3. Burton K. Wheeler with Paul F. Healy, *Yankee from the West* (Garden City, NY, 1962), 64.

working and those unemployed, who spent so many hours lounging against the storefronts uptown that one business had to post a sign, "These windows are for display purposes, do not obscure the view!"<sup>22</sup> Butte's population peaked at about 90,000 during World War I, and for much of the twentieth century the city has struggled to regenerate itself in the face of a declining populace. It clung to its reputation as the Richest Hill on Earth and the Gibraltar of Unionism long after mining districts in Utah, Africa, and Chile eclipsed its copper output. Shrinking jobs and nonunion companies eroded its union base. Arson, neglect, and economic stagnation ravaged the uptown. And the maw of the Berkeley Pit consumed East Side neighborhoods. Yet Butte has persisted. If any one adjective accurately describes twentieth-century Butte, it is resilient.

The following essays explore Butte during the twentieth century, its efforts to fend off the death that was the fate of so many western mining towns, and to continue into the twenty-first century as a community that builds upon its past to attract new residents and new businesses. Butte has never been an easy place to live or to make a living, as these essays demonstrate. Whether you were a prostitute in the early twentieth century, a young couple seeking a grubstake in a Great Depression-era walkathon, a miner working during World War I when three devastating fires killed scores of men, or in 1983 when the unthinkable happened and hard-rock mining came to what seemed to be its final end, Butte taxed its residents in blood and sweat. Boisterous Butte has always had a dark side and in many ways that is what makes it so fascinating.

Nearly everyone who comes to Montana is entranced by the Big Sky Country, by the mesmerizing bands of blue and green at a forested mountain lake on a clear summer day, by the golden light of the eastern grasslands. It's harder to explain the attraction of Butte. Apart from hard-core mining aficionados, the wasteland piles, sunken sidewalks, and toxic water-filled pits hold little allure. Butte is not a place of wide-open spaces and beautiful vistas. It's a place of tight neighborhoods, raw industry, naked commerce. It's a city, and while most westerners may not like to admit it, cities are where most westerners live. Butte doesn't have stories of bronc-riding and encounters with bears, of summits conquered and blizzards survived. Butte has stories of urban people's interaction and interdependence: the rivalry of neighborhood baseball teams, the willingness of the city council to buck the Anaconda Company and

"Butte . . . 'the greatest mining camp on earth' . . . has a most cosmopolitan population derived from the four corners of the world. She was a bold, unashamed, rootin', tootin', hell-roarin' camp in days gone by and still drinks her liquor straight." So reads in part the Montana historical highway marker that overlooks Butte.

save the uptown, the pooling of resources by striking miners, the quiet heroism that takes place when a job is lost and a family has to survive. Butte has been known most often for its colorful characters, its violent clashes between capital and labor, its notorious social life. But Butte is also a place where the most challenging task has sometimes been simply to endure.

With Butte's boom days long in the past, it may seem a site relegated to history. But Butte is a living city. In 1986 mining returned in a scaled-down operation that employed some three hundred workers who have resumed sculpting the landscape in pursuit of copper and molybdenum. Butte continues to reinvent itself and to pose hard questions for modern western Americans. What is the price—social, economic, environmental—of unbridled capitalism? What happens to a work force that is organized locally but employed by a corporation organized globally? What parts of the past do we choose to carry into the future?

Butte has always prided itself on being a tough town, and its toughness has paid off. It has survived. In the early twentieth century Butte was the epitome of a western industrial metropolis. At the end of the century we look to see how it deals with the environmental legacy of that industry and the conversion to a post-industrial economy and society. These are issues that confront people across the region. Butte, Montana, tough and resilient, will continue to be the place that prompted Burton K. Wheeler to remark: "It is safe to say that no one who has ever been there has forgotten it."<sup>23</sup> M

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(detail) C. Owen Smithers, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena