Every creek and gulch in the upper Clark Fork River was prospected for gold as part of the Montana placer mining boom in the 1860s and 1870s. By 1870, more than 500 placer gold mining camps dotted Montana Territory. At this time, “Butte City” was just a loose collection of mining camps on Silver Bow Creek, and there was little to set it apart from Montana’s many other placer developments. By 1870, the gold rush in Butte was declining, and only about 240 people remained.

In the 1870s, however, miners began exploiting “hard rock” for silver ore. The Butte hill’s rich veins of silver ore supported the development of a larger and somewhat more permanent settlement. By the late 1870s, Butte’s population of about 3,000 put it on a par with other prosperous silver mining towns such as Helena, Glendale, and Phillipsburg.

Several federal laws and policies, including the Hard Rock Mining Act of 1872 and the Sherman Silver Purchase Act of 1890, promoted silver mining. The Hard Rock Act, sometimes called the General Mining Law, created a “right to mine” on public land. If exploration led to the discovery of a valuable mineral, then the miner was rewarded with a property right. Though policies such as the Sherman Act periodically boosted silver prices to high levels, silver mining was especially prone to large boom-and-bust cycles. When the Sherman Act was repealed in 1893, silver mining declined and never recovered.

In 1876, the Irish immigrant Marcus Daly (1841 – 1900) visited the Butte area and bought the Alice Mine for the Walker Brothers syndicate of Salt Lake City. The Alice (like the Lexington) was primarily a silver mine, and large amounts of mercury were used to recover the silver. Much of this mercury was lost. Mercury is a serious human health hazard, and this chemical has contributed to pollution concerns on the Butte hill, especially when mercury is present in attic dust or residential yards. The mine tailings buried under the Alice Dump (now the “Knob Hill” park) also are high in mercury.

After 1880, the demand for copper increased greatly because of new technologies such as the telephone and electric lighting. Marcus Daly seems to have anticipated this demand, and he sold his interest in the Alice and bought the copper-rich Anaconda Mine in 1880. With this beginning, Daly built up the Anaconda Mining Company (ACM). Another investor, William Clark (1839 – 1925), also took an interest in copper and built the Colorado Smelter – the town’s first copper smelter – in 1879. As copper mining rapidly increased, investors built additional smelters such as the Parrott Smelter (1881) and the Butte Reduction Works (1885). The Utah & Northern railroad line to Butte (1881) augmented this growth of the mining and smelting industry.
Copper smelting produced terrible pollution in the form of toxic arsenic fumes and acidic sulfur fumes. In Butte, “Many people experienced bleeding from their noses and some vomited in the streets” (MacMillan, p. 31). The fumes killed all vegetation in the town and on the surrounding hillsides. By 1890, the pollution was so bad that the city published the monthly death rate and citizens began campaigning for legal restrictions on smelting.

There was little excuse for the smelting pollution. Cities such as Manchester, in Great Britain, had experienced similar problems in the 1830s and developed strict legal controls on smoke pollution. Industry responded by developing increasingly sophisticated scrubbers and other technologies for pollution abatement. Clearly, mine owners such as Marcus Daly – who lived primarily at his retreat in pollution-free Hamilton, Montana – realized the human-health threat.

Because of legal and health issues, the ACM began moving its smelting operations to the newly established town of Anaconda in 1884. By 1906, virtually all smelting of Butte ores was done in Anaconda or in Great Falls. Though Deer Lodge farmers brought a series of smoke pollution lawsuits against the ACM, the smelter continued to belch out up to 60,000 pounds of arsenic trioxide per day and 1,700 tons of sulfur per day. Only in the 1920s, when the demand for arsenic insecticides and industrial sulfuric acid made pollution abatement profitable, did ACM reduce its pollution.

In addition to smoke pollution, copper mining and smelting produced vast amounts of tailings—much of it high in arsenic and heavy metals. In 1890, Butte’s mills and smelters discharged more than 800 tons per day of tailings into Silver Bow Creek. In 1900, Anaconda operations dumped about 2,000 tons per day into the Clark Fork River.

From 1882 to 1890, Butte’s copper production increased from about 9 million to 130 million pounds per year. The 1890 production was worth more than $17 million at a time when the population of Butte was about 11,000 (with about 24,000 in all of Silver Bow County). With millions of dollars at stake, three dominant personalities – Daly, Heinze, and Clark – competed in the so-called “war of the copper kings.” Fritz Augustus Heinze (1864 – 1919) was born into wealth and graduated as a mining engineer from the Columbia School of Mines. He came to Butte in 1889 and immediately set about building a copper empire. Capitalists and speculators such as George Hearst (1820 - 1891) backed Daly. Clark was a relatively self-made man, whose wealth came from banking and land speculation.

In 1899, control of Daly’s Anaconda Copper Mining Company passed to William Rockefeller (1841 – 1922; brother of John D. Rockefeller) and other principals of the Standard Oil Company. The ACM bought out Heinze’s interests in 1906 and Clark’s in 1910. Daly, Clark, and Heinze invested little in the culture of Butte or Anaconda, even though Butte was a city of more than 30,000 in 1900 and nearly 40,000 in 1910.
With the exception of a few structures such as the Daly statue and Clark’s “copper king mansion,” little physical evidence of a cultural nature remains of their existence in Butte. Similarly, during its heyday, Butte was a mining community where people lived for today. There was little investment in public recreational facilities such as parks or playgrounds. Instead, children played on mine dumps and took their recreation in the form of street life and gang activity. For adults, there were bars, gambling joints, and dance halls. For men, especially, there were brothels. The emphasis on drinking, gambling, and whoring supported Butte’s reputation as a “wide open town.”

The population of Butte grew and declined along with its prominence as a copper mining center. There is no published documentation to support anecdotes that Butte’s population approached 100,000, and the population of Butte and its environs probably peaked with the peak in copper production c. 1916. By 1920, the population of the city stood at about 40,000 and the county about 60,000. The county population continued to decline until the mid-1980s when it stabilized at about 35,000.

Similarly, copper production peaked at about 150,000 tons in 1916, and lent credence to Butte’s nickname “the richest hill on earth.” Production sharply declined after 1916, though it again approached that level in 1929, 1937, and 1941. From 1941 on, Butte’s copper production was dwarfed by production at ACM’s “other” richest hill on earth in Chuquicamata, Chile. As “intimate strangers” (Finn, p. 6), the labor and social history of Butte and Chuquicamata closely parallel one another.

Several factors combined to help Butte earn its reputation as “the Gibraltar of unionism.” Underground mining was dangerous, and frequent deaths and tragedies (the Granite Mountain disaster of 1917 was the worst of these) made miners keenly aware of the need for safer working conditions. Companies were interested in profit, making mining unsafe and economically unrewarding. Though unionism had made some gains in Butte during the 1890s, by the early 1900s, miners were divided into ethnic and political factions, and their unions were manipulated by the ACM.

Organizing efforts by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) led to the destruction of the Miner’s Union Hall in 1913, occupation by the National Guard in 1914 and 1917-21, and the lynching of Frank Little in 1917. In 1920, ACM goons shot down more than a dozen striking IWW miners along the Anaconda Road. Company tactics such as these marked a temporary end to union activism in Butte.

Though IWW influence ended, the Roosevelt administrations greatly facilitated the revival of union representation in the 1930s. Miners were deeply suspicious of the ACM and its ability to play Butte’s workforce off against Chuquicamata. The ACM was confident of its ability to manipulate the Chilean government and to influence American foreign policy. During periods of contract negotiations, Butte’s Miner’s Union resorted to its most powerful tool—the general strike. However, as many older Butte miners claimed, “the company never got a strike it didn’t want.”
Despite efforts of the ACM to exploit zinc and other metals associated with copper, production and profits from the Butte mines declined steadily. As depths reached 4,000 feet and lower, ore quality decreased. The solution lay with a more technologically efficient – albeit more environmentally destructive – method: open-pit mining.

The Berkeley Pit opened in 1955. Though far more material had to be removed for every pound of copper ore extracted, the work was much cheaper and safer than underground mining. The low-grade ore was processed using better milling processes, chemical concentration, and dump leaching. The process also required a far smaller labor force – and hence lower labor costs – than underground mining.

Despite (and perhaps because of) the ACM’s manipulation of the Chilean government, in 1971 President Salvadore Allende led his government to nationalize the ACM and other mining properties in Chile. Though Allende was toppled by a military coup a few years later and the ACM received some compensation for its lost holdings, the company was in shambles. The ACM merged with the Atlantic Richfield Company (ARCO) in 1977, with Arco promising to continue business as usual in Butte. Layoffs increased, however, and in 1980 smelting and underground mining ended. The Berkeley Pit closed in 1983.

Dennis Washington, a Missoula-based contractor, purchased some of the former ACM holdings from Arco and began mining the East Berkeley Pit (aka Continental Pit) in 1986. The establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970 made the federal government a major player in addressing the environmental and human health problems caused by a century of mining and smelting. ARCO retained the environmental liability for the operations of the former ACM, and today ARCO (now owned by British Petroleum) is the primary party responsible for remediation of the upper Clark Fork River Superfund Area.
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