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Butte Mining Disaster 1917 Part I

Lead: During World War I, copper deposits near Butte, 5700 feet above sea level in southwestern Montana made it the “richest hill on earth at the time.” Disaster struck in 1917.

Intro: A Moment in Time with Dan Roberts.

Content: Butte, Montana is situated on the western slope of the Rocky Mountains. Rich in mineral deposits, the Butte area filled mining camps for gold and silver during the 1860s and 1870s. With the advent of

electric power, the demand for copper (a metal used for conduction of electricity), mushroomed, and with the arrival of the railroad lines, Butte became very prosperous. By the turn of the century, Butte was the leading producer of copper in the United States.

During WWI, there was an unprecedented demand for copper (which was used in rifle bullets) and a flood of workers from all over the world flocked to the “richest hill on earth.” By the time the United States entered into WWI in 1917, there were 15,000 miners working in Butte in hundreds of miles of underground workings in over 150 mines. The miners worked in shifts 24 hours

around the clock. Some mine shafts extended over 4,000 feet below the surface of the earth.

Although miners' unions were strong in the late 1800s, Rockefeller's Standard Oil bought out numerous mines and formed a conglomerate, which eventually became the Anaconda Mining Company in 1915 - one of the largest trusts of the time. Consequently, the power of the unions declined. In spite of a booming copper industry, there was management-labor unrest, anti-immigration sentiment, pressure to produce from management – “get the rock in the box,” and even anti-war protests. All were a backdrop to the biggest hard rock mine disaster in

United States history.

Next Time: The Butte Mine Disaster of 1917

At the University of Richmond,
this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

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