Carrie Nation comes to Butte

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

Carrie Nation’s January 1910 visit to Butte is surrounded by myths – most of them untrue.

Did she die just after leaving Butte? No, she lived for 18 months more, dying at age 64. Did her Butte experience so demoralize her that she gave up the hatchet? No, she preached almost to her dying day, and even returned to Montana in April 1910, to Kalispell and Whitefish, where she received a warm welcome.

Did Butte run her out of town? No, she spent her planned three days here, left on her own schedule, and gave speeches to hundreds of supporters in Butte churches. She did a “land-office business” selling her temperance books and souvenir hatchet pins. Butte was no more unified on the question of alcohol than it was on any issue.

Was she physically thrown out of the Windsor Brothel on Mercury Street? That one’s true. According to newspaper reports, the Windsor’s madam, May Malloy, ejected her and “for good measure in parting administered a kick.” For that matter, at least some of the ladies of the evening opposed her ideas, and did not consider themselves victims of the “white slave trade” as prostitution was known in those days.

In 1910, Butte boasted 266 named saloons, 13 of them run by different men named Sullivan. When Carrie Nation marched up Arizona Street to Mercury at 10:00 on that cold January night, she had hundreds in the crowd with her, but it would be a mistake to think they followed her cause. The “jeering crowd of rowdies and curiosity seekers,” as the Butte Miner characterized them, were probably looking for free entertainment on a cold winter night, and they got it.

Although she was able to give an anti-drinking speech at the ABC Saloon, corner of Wyoming and Mercury, the orchestra there sent her on her way with a rendition of “What the Hell do We Care.” Even though she was met with little but ridicule, she spat her share of invective in return. At the California Saloon, just east of the corner of Broadway and Main, the bartender threatened her with arrest. She referred to herself as a “defenseless gray-haired old woman.” She told the bartender, “Your mother was a woman; would you call an officer to arrest her?” He was reduced to pleading, “For God’s sake, get out of here!” But Carrie Nation responded, “I won’t. It’s for God’s sake that I came here,” and she left on her own timetable after delivering a temperance lecture.

Most of the saloons she visited carried prominent signs saying “All Nations Welcome Except Carrie Nation” – typical of saloons across the country. She called out Mayor Nevin, a saloonkeeper, as a wolf in charge of a flock of chickens, but very little if anything changed in Butte as a result of her campaign. It’s certainly true that Mrs. Nation, as the Butte newspapers respectfully referred to her, made little headway for her cause in Butte.

Only two buildings that saw Carrie Nation remain in Butte today. The Grace Methodist Episcopal and Mountain View Methodist Churches are both still standing, though not used as churches today. The Shortridge Christian Church across from St. Patrick’s on Mercury burned in 1968. And every saloon she was reported to visit in 1910 is gone.

As writer Edwin Dobb has said, "Like Concord, Gettysburg, and Wounded Knee, Butte is one of the places America came from." Join us next time for more of Butte, America’s Story.