BAS 027 Emma Goldman comes to Butte

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

Most students of Butte history know of one notorious woman’s visit to Butte in 1910: Carrie Nation brought her hatchet but had little impact locally, beyond entertainment. Another woman, prominent in her day, also visited Butte in 1910—Emma Goldman.

She’s not a household name today, but Emma Goldman was indeed well known nationally in 1910, as an anarchist, anti-religion zealot, advocate for birth control and homosexual rights, and more. Butte culminated her five-month 1910 tour, which her manager boasted “had not a single encounter with the police.” Among her previous run-ins with the police was an arrest in 1901, following the assassination of William McKinley by anarchist Leon Czolgosz. Goldman admitted meeting Czolgosz, but disavowed any connection with his act; she was released two weeks later after “third degree” interrogation.

In Butte at the Carpenter’s Union Hall on Granite Street Goldman spoke in June 1910 on “Francisco Ferrer and the Modern School.” Ferrer was a fellow anarchist and educator, executed in Spain in 1909 because the church feared his teachings, according to Goldman. Her second speech focused on “The White Slave Trade,” by which she mostly referred to prostitution. Butte had quite a reputation in that area, of course, but it was a nationwide issue. It’s unlikely that Goldman had any more effect in Butte on that topic than Carrie Nation did.

Goldman came to Butte three more times, in 1912, 1913, and 1914. Her 1912 visit included three indoor speeches and another outdoors, to accommodate the crowds. In 1913, her Butte presentation at the library auditorium on Broadway was titled The Growing Danger of the Power of the Church. That year, she stayed with a friend, Mr. Adelstadt, who lived at 215 South Washington Street. In her speech, she also indicated that Butte was a city where she was always treated nicely.

By 1914, she had teamed up with Margaret Sanger to focus on birth control. Challenging topics in strongly Catholic Butte, but there were no reports of trouble at her talks.

According to Goldman, “The political arena leaves one no alternative: One must either be a dunce, or a rogue.” Although she was an American citizen by virtue of marriage, her husband’s citizenship was revoked and courts held that had invalidated Emma’s as well. She was deported to Russia (her 1869 birthplace was in Lithuania, at the time a part of the Russian Empire) in 1920. She had become known as “the most dangerous woman in America.” Disillusioned with the Soviet communist experiment, she left in 1921 after just a year and spent the rest of her life—not quietly—in Europe and Canada. She died in 1940.

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.