BAS 047 Robert Burns Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

In “Sweet Thunder,” Ivan Doig describes a celebration of poet Robert Burns’s birthday, held at the Butte Public Library. Although that account was fiction, Scots and their friends in Butte did celebrate the birthday of one of Scotland’s favorite sons.

Bobby Burns was born January 25, 1759, near Ayr in southwest Scotland. Although he died at age 37, probably from a heart condition complicated by dental surgery, he left a legacy of well-loved songs and poems. Scotland voted him the Greatest Scot of all time in 2009.

Butte’s Scottish community was small. In 1901, Burns’s birthday wasn’t a particularly grand event. The Royal Highlanders was an insurance organization of businessmen of many nationalities, but they sponsored a dance and show at the Auditorium in the Public Library at Broadway and Dakota Streets that included an opening bagpipe performance and dance exhibitions focused on Scottish traditions including music, dance, drama, and readings.

Charles Brebner performed the caber feigh on the bagpipes, a traditional tune in which the dancers raise their arms in imitation of deer’s antlers. Christine Brebner, Lillie Skillicorn, and Tena McDonald all demonstrated the Highland Fling. Charles Brebner was an engineer on the Northern Pacific Railway and his daughter Christine taught at the Butte Conservatory of Music, and they lived at 1033 Iowa Street. Lillie and Robert Skillicorn lived at 308 East Quartz.

By 1902, the birthday party was a big event. “A night wi’ Burns” was organized by Butte Scotsmen with the intent to create a fraternal organization, the Sons of Scotland. Alex McDonnell, Alex McLean, Dan and Jack McDonald, Malcolm McPhail, D.C. Mather, and Duncan McGregor all donned traditional Scottish garb for the event. Their lives were as diverse as Butte – a saloon keeper at 124 S. Montana, a miner at the Little Minah, a carrier for the Inter Mountain newspaper, a miner from Norris.

In 1904 the celebration moved to the Finlen Hotel (that was the old three-story Finlen) where 115 guests gathered for a banquet at 10:00 p.m. Alexander Macaulay (a harness maker at 526 Nevada Avenue) chaired the proceedings, which included piping and a sword dance by D.C. Mather. Mather’s pipes led the haggis in a parade around the room together with a barrel of Scotch whiskey.

Here’s the menu: A Little Barley Bree, a whskey; Scotch Broth, Finnan Haddies or smoked haddock in Patties, Olive, Sweet Pickles, A Wee Donald, Scotch Haggis, Scones, Short Bread, Bannocks (barley flatbread), Sandwiches, Ice Cream, Assorted Cakes, Fruits, Nuts, Coffee.

Haggis is sheep's organs mixed with vegetables encased in the sheep's stomach — the national dish of Scotland.

The meal was followed by an extensive program of literary and musical entertainments, ranging from bagpipes and violins to vocal performances. To start the festivities in a traditional manner, David Leys (clerk at Leys Jewelry in the Owsley Block) recited Burns’s “Address to a Haggis.” The guest list was noteworthy, including ex-Senator Lee Mantle, ex-Senator William Fisk Sanders, retired Judge John Lindsay, Postmaster George Irvin, Augustus Heinze, R.D. Leggatt, Andrew Jackson Davis, and enough “Mac’s” and “Mc’s” and others to fill the hall. 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.