BAS 050 Ziegenfuss. Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

C.O. Ziegenfuss is certainly not a well-known name in Butte history, but he was a renowned newspaperman of the last quarter of the 19th Century. He seemed to follow trouble, and he made the news several times while reporting it.

One of his early assignments, for the Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, Times, was to cover the June 21, 1877, hangings of activist Irish coal miners—the Molly Maguires. He made his way west within a few years of that event, and was in Butte by 1886, working as editor of the Butte Miner when it was located at 16 W. Broadway, an address that evolved to 27 W. Broadway, in the building that was remodeled in 1906 to house the Butte Floral Company.

During Zig’s short (8-month) tenure as the Miner’s editor, he was nearly murdered there in the newspaper office, on June 23, 1886.

A young couple from Anaconda had moved in together without being married, to the displeasure of the girl’s father, a carpenter named Miller. Miller found them in Butte and engineered a shotgun marriage, which was reported in the Miner – also, apparently to displeasure of Miller. He came to Ziegenfuss’s office to demand a retraction. We’ll never know whether Zig would have done so or not, because a drunken Miller pulled a gun to shoot at Ziegenfuss. The Miner reported “Mr. Ziegenfuss was not injured in the least by his rough experience, and numerous friends are congratulating him upon his narrow escape. Public feeling is strong against Miller.”

That same month, June 1886, Zig was appointed to lead the New York World’s expedition to Alaska to check out rumors of gold in the territory acquired by the U.S. 20 years earlier, but that expedition never happened. By 1890, Ziegenfuss was in California, where he soon became known as one of the preeminent newsmen of the West Coast. He served in various editorial and reporting positions at the San Francisco Chronicle, the Calaveras Citizen, San Francisco Post, Stockton Mail, Fresno Republican, Fresno Expositor, San Francisco Examiner, and the Republican of Phoenix.

He made the news in Fresno in 1897 and Calaveras in 1900, both times as the victim of attacks by citizens irate at the way they were treated in his newspapers—but he brushed both off as he had the skirmish in Butte.

By 1902 Zig was editor and proprietor of the Manila American, in the Philippines. He returned to San Francisco in late summer 1902 because he contracted malaria and dysentery in the Philippines; the Manila newspaper was for sale. He was found dead in his hotel room November 6, 1902, asphyxiated because a gas burner was turned full on. Suicide was suspected initially, but the death was ruled accidental. The San Francisco Press Club conducted a memorial in his honor. It was recalled that “he had an inexhaustible fund of good humor, and was at all times considered the best of companions.” In 1895, when he managed the California News Agency on Bush Street in San Francisco, he was quoted as saying "I admit that I have rather a hard name to spell or pronounce, and that is why I encourage my friends in their proclivity to call me 'Zig.' "

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.