BAS 056 Sarah Bernhardt Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

When Sarah Bernhardt came to Butte in September 1891, the Daily Inter Mountain newspaper called it “the principal topic of the town,” the dramatic event of the decade for Montana. At age 46 and on her first world tour, Bernhardt was indeed probably the most famous actress of the late 19th century.

Bernhardt had visited the United States twice before, in 1880 and 1886, but it was not until her two-year world tour of 1891-93 that Butte’s John Maguire, proprietor of the 1,100-seat opera house on Broadway Street (where the Leggatt Hotel now stands) was able to bring her to the Mining City.

Her private 12-car train brought her to Butte following a lackluster – or at least unappreciated – appearance in Spokane. Despite single ticket prices for her shows in New York in 1880 of $40 per seat, Butte preferred seating at the opera house sold at auction for around $8 per seat. A few rows in the balcony and gallery were reserved for sale to the general public at $3 and $2 per seat – expensive, but affordable to many in Butte.

Two special box seats were auctioned at $75 each, sold to W.A. Clark and James McCaig, the general agent for the Northern Pacific Railroad who lived at 410 West Granite, a house that still stands despite a damaging fire in 2015.

Preferred seat revenue totaled $1,800, and the first day’s general admission ticket sales added up to $1,500. Ultimately Maguire took in just over $5,000 and paid $3,000 to Bernhardt for the two-and-a-half-hour performance of the melodrama Fédora, in French.

The battle for the capital city of Montana was already shaping up in 1891, and the Inter Mountain newspaper opined that “One reason Bernhardt would not give Helena a night’s performance was that she would not consent to play Fédora in the Missouri language in honor of Governor Toole and his political followers.” Helena, on the other hand, to try to make Butte look bad, reported that Maguire’s receipts of $5,027 left him a profit of $27, claiming Bernhardt’s fee was $5,000 rather than the actual $3,000.

When Bernhardt arrived in Butte about 3:00 p.m. on the day of the performance, she and two companions took a cable car to Walkerville for a tour of a mine. After a short walk about the uptown business district, she visited Charles Joyce’s barber shop at 47 North Main for a bath while waiting for her dinner at the Metropolitan Café at 25 West Park. Newspaper reports indicate she was well received in Butte both on and off the stage. She didn’t spend the night because she typically embarked by train for her next destination immediately after a performance.

In addition to a dozen or so additional performers, managers, and servants, Bernhardt’s special train carried her 45 crates of costumes, 75 crates of off-stage clothing, and 250 pairs of shoes. There is no indication that her pet lion accompanied her on the American leg of her world tour.

Sarah Bernhardt died in 1923.

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.