BAS 067 The Giant Elk

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

If anything symbolized Butte’s over-the-top eclectic affluence, it might be the giant elk of 1916. Butte was near its peak population, and the Fourth of July holiday that year coincided with the statewide Elks convention, which drew 30,000 members to Butte from across the state and beyond, including a man from Colorado Springs, Colorado, who billed himself as the world’s smallest elk — he was less than four feet tall.

The Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks was organized in New York in 1868, and the Butte Lodge, #240, was established in 1892. They initially met at the Good Templars Hall on West Broadway, but in 1916 the Elks Hall was at 19 East Quartz Street, above the ground-floor undertaker’s warehouse. The building is gone today.

With copper at a record high of 28¢ a pound in 1916 and miners enjoying pay of $4.50 a day, Butte was ripe for the Elks’ celebration. Five-cent beer fueled the revelry, which reportedly included a “snake dance of 200 men” circulating through various hotel lobbies. The parade that year was three miles long, and it took three hours for it to pass beneath the 62-foot-tall elk that straddled the intersection of Broadway and Main Streets.

Edmund Carns was a set designer for the Broadway Theater. His design credits included floats for the Carnival in Rio de Janeiro, the roller coaster at Coney Island, and an elephant made of apples erected for an agricultural show. His design plans, at seven times the size of the model, a stuffed elk at the organization’s hall, were spread across the Broadway Theater stage.

Construction began on June 25. The structure was a wooden frame, covered with wire mesh and fabric soaked in glue and coated with plaster mixed with copper ore. The pedestals supporting the elk’s hooves were coated with peacock ore (bornite), and the five-ton elk was electrified. Purple and white lights were strung through its antlers, and the 10-inch red bulbs that served as his eyeballs were set to blink every five seconds. The Elks Club’s traditional greeting, “Hello Bill,” was laid out in lights on the creature’s flanks.

After the convention’s “five days of ebullient joy” were over, the question arose of what to do with the giant $4000 elk. The proposal to move it to the peak of Big Butte was quickly dismissed out of concerns about the wind and weather there, but the idea of moving it to Columbia Gardens got more serious consideration. They needed $2000 to move it, but funding could not be found. The elk was dismantled on July 28, and his coat, containing $1200 in copper, went to the smelter. The largest elk in the world was history.

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.