BAS 073 Moving Pictures Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Butte was always at the forefront of entertainment — no surprise given its large population with, on the whole, a lot of money. The first recorded theatrical performance in Butte took place in 1875, the year the first two-story building in Butte, the Hotel de Mineral at Broadway and Main, was erected.

Although the first “moving picture” was created about 1878, it wasn’t until the invention of celluloid film and the moving picture camera in the late 1880s that moving pictures in the modern sense began. The first paid admission screening was in 1895 in Paris. By the early 1900s, moving pictures were becoming the rage across America and Europe.

In 1908, Butte had seven moving picture theaters, but even for Butte, that was overkill. Many were showing the same films as their competition, and patronage was too thinly spread for all to make profits. Two years later, four successful locations were exclusively screening motion pictures, while Butte still boasted six other theaters for live performances including Vaudeville shows.

By 1910, the movie business was organized into the dominant Patents Films and the smaller Independent Movie Producers (“IMP”). A good regional distribution system meant that Butte patrons had their choice of at least four different films on any given day. The American Theater, 41 North Main (there was an American Theater on Park west of Gamers, but it was a later incarnation that burned down in 1950), and the Park Theater on East Park ran Patents films, while the Alcazar and Orpheum, at 43 West Park and 77 West Park, respectively, showed IMP productions. In a typical week, 25 new Patents films were released along with 15 IMPs – and they were released on the same day in Butte as they were in New York.

Patrons paid a nickel or a dime to see a movie. Butte’s four motion picture houses each had six shows a day in 1910, and their cost to rent the films amounted to $30 a day. They needed at least 300 paying customers a day to break even, but apparently that was easy to accomplish. The American seated 200 people, and the other theaters were of similar size.

All the films shown in Butte in the 1910s were silent moving pictures, which meant that in each of the four theaters there was a live orchestra to play the musical score that accompanied the film. It wasn’t until the early 1920s that “talkies” came to Butte, with the first one broadcast at the Rialto Theater at Park and Main.

The Alcazar was one of three theaters in the west that had a frosted plate glass mirror screen, 10 by 14 feet in size. It cost $1,000 and “added greatly to the realism of the pictures.” Besides standard entertainment, from romances and comedies to westerns, educational films, what we would call documentaries, were also shown regularly. How to conduct a poultry farm, the scourge of the house fly, Norwegian ski jumping, a Yorkshire train journey, all contributed to what the Butte Miner called the “highest type of entertainment in the history of the world,” the salient feature of “living at a mile-a-second gait” in 1910.

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.