BAS 078 Knights of Pythias castle Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

As Butte grew, its people banded together in clubs and organizations reflecting their common interests, from cricket playing to ethnic and religious groups like the Knights of Columbus and Masons. Among the non-sectarian societies established in Butte before 1884, the Knights of Pythias was one of the longest-lived.

The Knights of Pythias was organized in Washington, D.C., in 1864, with the motto “Friendship, Charity, Benevolence.” The first lodge was formed in Butte about 1879, and by the late 1880s, Butte had three lodges that met at the Castle Hall on North Main, about where the NorthWestern Energy parking lot is today, plus the Calanthe Lodge in Walkerville which met at the Schiffmann Hall and later at the Sons of St. George Hall in Centerville.

The Butte lodges (Damon, Oswego, and Ivanhoe) shared meeting space with the Odd Fellows, Good Templars, and others in the 1890s, but the Damon Lodge #1 was most prominent. Lee Mantle, later mayor of Butte and U.S. Senator from Montana, was one of the early presidents of the Damon Lodge, and helped them grow their membership so that in 1900 they constructed a four-story Pythian Castle on South Main Street.

The $75,000 building, among the tallest buildings in Butte when it was built, was touted as the most gorgeously furnished lodge rooms in the West, “possibly excepting the Elks Lodge in Seattle.” The lodge rooms had golden oak trim and furniture with green silk upholstery, and an eight-foot-high seat for the lodge leader. Maroon walls rose to a paneled ceiling covered in Fabrikona canvas, a fancy textured textile significantly more costly than wallpaper.

All of Butte’s meeting halls were shared by multiple organizations, and the Pythian Castle was home to the B’nai B’rith and the Butte Clerks’ Union, among others. A kosher butcher occupied part of the ground floor retail space. The building was seriously damaged by fire in November 1955, but was not demolished until September 1970 when it fell to the Model Cities urban renewal program.

Today, the site of the Pythian Castle is a vacant lot north of the Silver Dollar Saloon, with huge I-beams to brace the adjacent buildings that the Castle once supported. The cornerstone, inscribed “September 20, 1900,” sits in a yard at Broadway and Idaho Streets. The building there, now apartments, served the Knights of Pythias and its sister organizations, including the Pythian Sisters, the Nomads of Aurudaka (the women’s auxiliary of the Hoosayn Temple, a branch of the Pythians), and others until 1989. The Knights of Pythias finally disbanded in Butte in 1999. Nationally, the organization has around 50,000 members, down from a peak of over a million in the 1920s.

Many of the artifacts from the Butte Knights of Pythias are on display at the World Museum of Mining.

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.