BAS 102 President Taft visits

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

President William Howard Taft visited Butte twice during his single term as President, in September 1909 and October 1911. Neither of Taft’s western tours were campaign trips, but were mostly to drum up support for various policies ranging from tariff protection to arbitration treaties with England and France. Butte appears to have more or less ignored the dullness of those topics and welcomed him boisterously, simply because he was President.

His 1909 encounter with Butte lasted just over two hours, including the parade of nine automobiles from the train station up Utah and Arizona to Park, west to Excelsior to Granite, then along Granite Street to Montana where he spoke from a stand erected on the west side of the old county court house. 10,000 children (by the Anaconda Standard’s count; the Butte Miner estimated 12,000) lined the parade route through the West Side and thousands gathered at Granite and Montana to hear his short speech.

Despite photographs seeming to juxtapose Butte’s Fat Jack, the thin-as-a-rail hack driver, with Taft, at 300 pounds, the heaviest president in US history, reports of the day say that while Jack was present, all of Taft’s transport was by automobile.

Following his speech at Granite and Montana, Taft was taken to the Leonard mine shaft where he and a 30-man entourage descended to the 1200 level. Despite Taft’s famous girth, reports indicated that he was accompanied in the cage by several others.

The 1911 visit included a breakfast at the Silver Bow Club with Butte’s news writers, whose union sponsored the stop in Butte. It must have been a crowded breakfast even for the new (1906) Silver Bow Club, as the nearly 300 invited guests included a Who’s Who of Montana, from Senator Clark to Paris Gibson of Great Falls, Nelson Story of Bozeman, and dozens of Butte businessmen. Then, as in 1909, the President spoke from a stand on Montana Street west of the court house, this time the new one that still stands on that corner. His 1911 visit kept him in Butte for 3 hours, 28 minutes.

Some third-grade students saw Mr. Taft, and the news reported some of their comments: “Taft looked nice and neat and awful fat.” “Taft is very fat. He ate 200 fish for breakfast.” “Taft has a moustache and is fat.” To be fair, the 200 or more fish for breakfast fed the entire gathering. But his adult hosts honored him more elegantly, presenting him in 1909 with a solid copper golf club that had a 2-inch silver tip capped in gold, symbolizing Butte’s mineral riches.

Taft’s gift from Butte in 1911 was arguably more valuable: The Charles M. Russell painting, “Roping a Grizzly” (also known as “Roping a Rustler”). Russell painted it in 1903 and it hung in the Montana pavilion of the Louisiana Purchase Centennial Exposition (the St. Louis World’s Fair). It is not clear whether Butte’s newswriters purchased the painting or if Russell donated it, but when it was shipped to Taft in Washington, D.C., it was insured for $1,000. Today, it is owned by the Buffalo Bill Center of the West in Cody, Wyoming.

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.