BAS 109 Butte’s First band

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

The first organized band in Butte debuted on July 4, 1876, for the U.S. centennial. There were neither 76 trombones, nor 110 cornets, but the five musicians included Band Leader George Fitschen on B flat cornet, Simon Hausworth on E flat alto, Charles Basuman on bass, John Hausworth on alto, and Peter Sherrer on bass drum.

“I think that was the first band in the state aside from the military bands at the army posts,” George Fitschen recalled years later.

Fitschen had come to Montana in 1868, from Hanover, Germany, emigrating alone at the age of 14 in 1858. He tried his hand at gold mining in California, but “fortune did not come his way as rapidly as he thought it might.” In Montana first at German Gulch and then in 1875 in Butte, he dabbled in both mining and the mercantile business, and eventually real estate.

Fitschen became the manager of one of Butte’s first general stores – Weibold’s, on Main halfway between Park and Broadway. After a year or so again in California, Fitschen settled in Butte for good. With his brother George he operated a saloon in the Fitschen Block at 17 S. Main, where he lived upstairs. It was a three-story double-bay-front building built in May 1890 just south of the Theatre Comique, a well-known dance hall. The upper floors were rented out as furnished rooms catering especially to “transients,” which meant travelers rather than long-term residents. After the State Savings Bank (now the Metals Bank) was erected in 1906, the Fitschen Block was on its south side. In 1928 the Fitschen Hotel was managed by Mrs. Mary Ferrari. The façade has been modified, but the building is still there, serving as law offices today.

Fitschen’s local success allowed him to revisit Germany, sailing from New York for Hanover on May 22, 1902, for an excursion of 6 months or more.

He died in October 1908. His son George H. Fitschen became the chief electrician at the Elm Orlu mine; he lived with his wife Charlotte at 1108 West Platinum in 1928, a house that still stands today.

Fitschen’s bandmates, Simon and John Hausworth, were Swiss emigrants who built the first two-story building in Butte, the Hotel de Mineral at Main and Broadway, reportedly using lumber provided by Thomas Lavell’s sawmill. Simon’s son Charles was elected Mayor of Butte four times, serving from 1935 to 1941.

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.