BAS 110 Mary Fifer Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

The Independent Order of Odd Fellows (IOOF) has its roots in England and Scotland as long ago as the 1500s. The name’s origin is obscure, but most histories indicate that it came from their practice of admitting working-class members – making the organization “odd,” compared to most such groups that focused on the elite. Alternatively, it may have been that the early Odd Fellows were formed by tradesmen in small trades, not large enough to come together in their own syndicates or unions. The “Odd Fellows” were those left out of the bigger guilds.

The IOOF was established in America in Baltimore in 1819, with a credo based on benevolent fraternity, and the goal of personal betterment for members. They were the first American fraternal organization to admit women beginning in 1851 – the women’s branch was called the Daughters of Rebekah. They were also the first to establish homes for their elderly members and orphanages for children of deceased members.

Montana’s first IOOF lodge formed in Helena in 1874. The first Butte lodge, Fidelity, was created May 25, 1876, and the second one, Ridgley Lodge, in 1882. The IOOF was not as religious as some such groups – while they adhered to Biblical concepts, Jews such as Butte’s first mayor, Henry Jacobs, were IOOF members (he was treasurer for the group in 1883). The IOOF hall on Broadway Street was built in 1884.

Mary Fifer led the creation of the first Daughters of Rebekah lodge in Butte in 1877. The Home Circle Lodge met in a building on Upper Main Street (that would most likely be the 100-300 blocks of North Main today), but “there was not the harmony in the circle which should have been there.” The group disbanded, but Mrs. Fifer again led the way to establish the Miriam Lodge in 1882, this time successfully.

According to Mary, “The life of a Rebekah who lives up to the principles of our order must be as nearly perfect as it is possible to be.”

Mary Dean was born in Virginia February 5, 1843, into a prominent old Virginia family. She married Meredith S. Fifer, son of Missouri farmers of German heritage, two weeks after her 21st birthday, in 1864. Within a year, the newlyweds were heading to Montana with Meredith’s family. Their first daughter was born on the plains of Nebraska in the middle of a 5-month trip that saw many encounters with Indians.

Meredith’s father established a ranch in the Deer Lodge Valley near present-day Warm Springs, with his sons on adjoining lands. Mary reportedly gave birth to the first white child born in Deer Lodge County. Meredith and Mary moved to a ranch near Anaconda in 1870, then in 1876 they relocated to Butte where Meredith began mining work. His Old Glory shaft in Centerville was just east of Main Street, between Mullins (Mullen) and Pacific Streets. Meredith sold his interest in the Old Glory for $1,150 about 1882 and focused his mining efforts on Bear Gulch (Deer Lodge County) where he had a 5-ton-capacity stamp mill. In 1897 the Old Glory, owned by J. Benton Leggatt, was at a depth of about 500 feet, and employed 20 men mining copper and silver. It was eventually (1910) acquired by the Anaconda Company.

Mary’s main focus in Butte was with the Rebekahs. She was the first “noble grand” of the lodge, and represented Butte Rebekahs at national conventions in Columbus, Ohio, and Topeka, Kansas.

The Fifer home at 207 South Dakota Street was built in 1887. Mary died there October 13, 1912, and is buried in Mt. Moriah Cemetery. The house was still standing as recently as 1957, but that corner is a vacant lot today.

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.