BAS 112 Alma Higgins Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Nicholas Bielenberg was born June 8, 1847, in Wewelsfleth along the Elbe River near its mouth in Holstein, then part of Denmark and today in Germany downstream from Hamburg. The family emigrated to Davenport, Iowa, when Nick was 7; he left home at age 16 to apprentice as a butcher in Chicago. Two years later, 1865, he took a steamboat up the Missouri to join his brother John and half-brother Conrad Kohrs in Montana. Nick operated butcher shops at Blackfoot City and Helena for several years, but by 1873 his focus was changing to stockgrowing. He continued various businesses, including the Butte Butchering Company, ultimately one of the largest meat-packing operations in the northwest and reputedly one of the first to employ large-scale cold storage.

Bielenberg lived most of his life in Deer Lodge, where the family home at 801 Milwaukee saw guests ranging from Jeanette Rankin to Gary Cooper. Nick was one of the first to bring cattle into the Deer Lodge Valley, and was one of the first members of the Montana Stockgrowers Association in 1879. He is generally credited with starting the sheep-raising industry in western Montana, eventually running some 130,000 head on ranches across the state.

Nicholas Bielenberg’s daughter, Alma Bielenberg Higgins, became prominent in Butte garden circles, but she got her start in Deer Lodge. At her request Nick acquired the mortgage on the Deer Lodge Women’s League Chapter House, donating it to the organization. This gave Alma a platform for her early civic works that culminated in Butte’s garden clubs and National Garden Week.

Alma Higgins came to Butte from her native Deer Lodge in 1920, when she was 46 years old. She was an active member of various clubs and organizations, and founded the Civic Improvement League of Deer Lodge in 1902; she and Montana Womens’ Clubs generally were leading forces behind the creation of the State Forester position in 1909, a precursor to the University of Montana’s School of Forestry.

Butte was ugly in the 1920s (called “the ugliest town in the world” by Time magazine in 1928), but Higgins worked through photography exhibits and letter-writing campaigns, as well as in eventually 18 Butte garden clubs to beautify Butte. Her “Garden Week” in Butte in 1922 became a national event (still celebrated) thanks to her lobbying and the designation by President Harding in 1923. Higgins may have met the president on his visit to Butte that same year, just weeks before he died in office.

Alma Higgins became known as the nation’s Christmas Tree Lady after promoting living Christmas trees, one of which became the first National Christmas Tree. She died in 1962, with a remarkable legacy of conservation and leadership—largely forgotten today. Norm DeNeal and his colleagues carry on her tradition, developing and caring for the Lexington Gardens, the flowers at the Berkeley Pit visitor center, and all over Butte.

There is a small memorial to Alma Higgins in Butte. The garden has been there since 1931; it sits against the retaining wall at the northwestern corner of the parking lot between First Baptist Church and the Covellite Theater (old First Presbyterian Church). The location is essentially the back yard of the old Montana Hotel that stood here until it burned down in 1988, and where Alma lived when she died March 16, 1962. Alma's friend, Ann Cote Smith, had the plaque made.

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.