BAS 120 Boston & Montana band Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Butte had musicians and bands almost from day one, and Butte’s first organized band celebrated the nation’s centennial in 1876. But the longest-lived band began in Meaderville on December 22, 1887.

Why Meaderville? Because it was the home of the Boston & Montana mining company, established by Boston investors Adolph and Leonard Lewisohn and miner Charles X. Larrabee. They owned the Mountain View, Colusa, Badger State, Pennsylvania, and Leonard mines, mostly on the east side of the hill near Meaderville, and promoted hydroelectric power generation in Great Falls where they built their smelter. And Sam Treolar worked for the Boston & Montana company, the third largest copper producer in the United States.

Cornishman Sam Treolar came to Butte by way of various mining towns, including Leadville, Colorado, where he had organized a band. At age 21 he lost his first Butte job at the Alice in 1887 and went to work for the Boston & Montana. He worked as a timberman at the Colusa among other jobs, but clearly music was his passion. B&M managers asked him to organize a company band, which began with 16 musicians. Their first regular gigs were at the California Brewery on Broadway just east of Main Street, where they played Friday evenings. By 1890 the band boasted 28 members, and it kept growing.

With William A. Clark’s patronage (he likely supported the B&M simply because they were an effective opponent of Daly’s Anaconda), the B&M Band played at the 1896 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. By the 1900 convention in Kansas City, the band fell victim to local Butte politics. The B&M Company was on the block for acquisition by the Amalgamated (Anaconda), and band members were threatened with firing if they played anywhere at Clark’s behest. Leader Treolar and the members said they would represent Butte and the state of Montana, not any company, and played anyway. The bluff was called, and no band member lost his job when they returned.

The acquisition of the Boston & Montana Company by the Amalgamated did result in a change in the band’s name. It was the ACM Band until 1919, when it became the Butte Mines Band, still under Treolar’s leadership. They won three national band competitions, in Salt Lake City (1902), Denver (1906), and Los Angeles (1909).

Among the band’s many claims to fame was the boast that they had both the shortest and tallest drum majors. Marysville native Frank “Brownie” Burke stood about 4 feet 7 inches tall, and the band’s other drum major, James Shoemaker, towered over him at 6 feet 8. Burke reportedly became the shortest man to serve in the U.S. Army during World War I and was Montana’s first man to work in major-league baseball, a mascot for the Cincinnati Reds.

Burke died in 1931 at age 38. Sam Treolar was connected with the Butte Mines Band for 60 years, and died in 1951 at age 84, the same year the band itself was disbanded.

Thanks to Pete Knudsen for some of the information used in this episode.

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.