BAS 136 Bidwell Brothers Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Butte likes to say that every bad guy (and gal) that ever existed came to Butte and did something here. Billy the Kid, Bonnie and Clyde, Al Capone, Doc Holliday (he really was here), Attila the Hun. But in 1899, two of the most notorious international criminals of the 1870s did come to Butte. And they died.

In January and February, 1873, the Bank of England was bilked out of at least £500,000, and possibly as much as five million pounds. Brothers George and Austin Bidwell, together with two other Americans, Edwin Noyes and forger George McDonnell, posed as wealthy investors and successfully passed check after forged check, until a simple error—lack of a date on the check—resulted in the scam’s unraveling.

The men fled, but were all captured with the help of Pinkerton detectives: Austin in Havana, Cuba; George in Scotland; McDonnell in New York; and Noyes in London. All were extradited, and security at the ensuing trial in London was extreme; the judge wore a gun, almost unprecedented at the time, fearing the possibility of a rescue attempt. The jury took but 15 minutes to convict after eight days of testimony from 90 witnesses in August 1873. A life sentence was handed to each member of the gang.

Fast forward 15 years. Pleading health problems, Austin and George were released in 1892 and 1887, respectively, and returned to America. They wrote books and made livings by touring the country giving lectures on the evils of crime. Thus, as promoters and book-sellers, the Bidwell brothers came to Butte in the late winter of 1899.

“From Wall Street to Newgate” was the title of the semi-autobiographical novel, a reference to London’s Newgate Prison (although George was in the infamous Dartmoor, in Devonshire). The Anaconda Standard reported that Austin intended to make his home in Montana, but within three weeks of their arrival, on March 8, 1899, Austin was suffering from pneumonia and died in his hotel room in the Mantle Block (upstairs at today’s Piccadilly Transportation Museum, although some reports indicate that the brothers were staying at the Butte Hotel). Austin Bidwell was 52.

George, age 69, died three weeks later on March 26, reportedly in the same bed as his brother, of “a broken heart,” dispirited by his brother’s death, “friendless, alone and as is supposed, well nigh penniless,” according to the Anaconda Standard.

In a fine coincidence, the Bidwells’ book had recounted a fictional character associated with the Boss Tweed gang in New York. That character went to Butte, Montana, where he died in “poverty and want.”

As a further fascinating footnote, George and Austin’s older brother, Benson (1835-1911) claimed to have invented the electrical trolley. He wrote two 1907 books, including his remarkably titled autobiography “Benson Bidwell: Inventor of the Trolley Car, Electric Fan and Cold Motor: History of Early Struggles and Later Successes: With Personal Reminiscences, Lectures, Essays and Letter,” as well as a story approaching science fiction, “The Flying Cows of Biloxi.” Both books have minor cult followings to this day. Whether Benson actually legally patented the electric trolley or not seems to be in dispute, and quite unlikely. Promotional scams do seem to have run in the Bidwell family.

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.