BAS 154 Anti-spitting law Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

One of the hot topics before the Butte city commission in the summer of 1901 was the anti-expectoration ordinance.

No-spitting laws had been proposed for many years but never enacted, in part because of the belief that prejudice on the part of policemen would be a problem. “He could arrest an enemy almost any time,” according to Dr. Abram Leggatt, who was nonetheless a proponent of the new law. He also claimed in his presentations to local women’s clubs that the lack of support by women had contributed to the law’s failure.

In 1901, however, Butte women put their efforts into passing the anti-spitting law. The Art Club, Homer Club, and West Side Shakespeare Club all came out in favor of it, along with the umbrella organization, the Butte City Federation of Women’s Clubs. On first reading in Council, the law “went through like a shot,” and was soon enacted.

Since Walkerville then, as now, was a separate city, the Federation of Women’s Clubs took their campaign to the Hill City as well, particularly in connection with spitting on and from the street cars that passed the boundaries of Butte so the anti-spitting law could not be enforced. Following a visit by a quote “attacking party” of women’s club members, Walkerville did pass a similar law.

The rule against spitting on sidewalks carried a fine of $1 for a first offence “if not malicious,” but could reach as much as $100 for repeat offenders. The police were encouraged to enforce the law, which included the possibility of arrest as well as the fine. Editorials admonished that the policeman would escort offenders “to the place where freedom is restricted if you don’t quit spitting where decent people walk.”

The anti-spitting zone encompassed the central business district, from Copper to Mercury and Idaho to Arizona, together with public conveyances such as the street cars, and public buildings including the City Hall.

Dr. Leggatt pushed for the law used the argument that spitting promoted tuberculosis and other diseases – with at least some justification. Tuberculosis was widespread in Butte, probably because of general unsanitary and crowded living conditions, but spitting may have contributed to it somewhat. Leggatt’s offices were on the fourth floor of the Hennessey Building, and he lived with his wife Hattie and their daughter at 205 North Washington Street (a house that’s still standing) until they moved to St. Louis in 1902. Another doctor, John McIntyre, lived in the Washington Street home from 1910-1917.

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.