BAS 156 Mantle & Bielenberg Block Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

The Mantle & Bielenberg Block on West Broadway, home to Sassy’s Consignments shop today, was one of the primary labor temples of Butte. In 1897, 17 different unions met in one of the many halls upstairs. The 1891 building was an investment by businessmen Lee Mantle and Nick Bielenberg.

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 (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.

In Butte, the butchering company was his primary venture, together with the Mantle & Bielenberg Block as an investment in an office building. Both Lee Mantle and Nick Bielenberg were prominent Republicans; Nick left the party to follow Teddy Roosevelt in 1912, when Bielenberg was a delegate to the Chicago convention that nominated Roosevelt on the Bull Moose ticket. By most accounts, Nick Bielenberg was a close friend and confidant of Teddy Roosevelt.

Bielenberg was a partner in the Pilot Butte Mining Company, which in 1912 had a three-compartment shaft 2,400 feet deep. In that year, Pilot Butte employed 31 underground miners and 12 on the surface, resulting in an annual payroll of $60,000 (compare the Anaconda company’s annual payroll of more than $14,000,000 the same year). The Pilot Butte was connected underground to the Elm Orlu and Black Rock mines, both owned by W.A. Clark.

Nick Bielenberg died in Deer Lodge July 6, 1927.

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.