BAS 168 Dance Marathon Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

The Renshaw Hall – today’s Terminal Meat Market at Park and Dakota – is among the older buildings in Butte, constructed about 1882. The upper floor served as a dance hall, theater, meeting room for unions and city government committees (the first City Hall was next door), and it was also a venue for prize fights, but it’s probably most famous for hosting one of the first marathon dance contests in the United States.

Over 15 hours on December 7 and 8, 1909, at least 70 couples had dwindled to three when Mayor Nevin, County Attorney Walker, Sheriff O’Rourke, and Police Chief Quinn all stopped the dance, citing “grave effects” and physical harm that would ensue if it continued. Around 500 people were in the street in front of the Hall awaiting news of the contest when it was stopped, and because of the money wagered on potential winners, “a riot almost broke out.”

Management charged fifty cents a person for people to enter the hall to watch, and an estimated 2,000 saw some part of the contest over the 15 hours. According to newspaper reports, “During the long night many of the women who were watching the dancers fainted from sheer exhaustion,” and by 5:00 a.m. only 22 couples remained.

The three finalist couples were James Greenough and May Coyle, Thomas Furey and Julia Driscoll, and Jack McCormick and his sister Minnie. McCormick went on to acclaim as a record-setting driller in a mining contest in Michigan. A photo in the McCormick file at the Butte Archives indicates that he won a gold watch, a diamond ring, and a pair of patent leather shoes for his endurance.

The marathon dance craze was rejuvenated briefly in the late 1920s and 1930s but the 1909 contest in Butte was one of the earliest.

The Renshaw Hall held a grocery store and saloon on its ground floor when it was built in the 1880s, and various restaurants and stores in the 1910s. In 1901, Professor J.C. Coombs, age about 30, conducted ballroom dance instruction upstairs. The Intermountain Bus Terminal came in by 1928, giving its name to the Terminal Drug Store and Terminal Café, recalled in the Terminal Meat & Grocery that occupies it today.

Dakota Street, then called Academy, wasn’t pushed through from Park to Galena until about 1895. Prior to then, there were buildings on the east side of the Renshaw Hall where the street is today, including two one-story meat markets and a bakery in 1891.

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.