BAS 171 Death by Lion Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

The gruesome news spread quickly around the world. Even the Taranaki (New Zealand) Herald carried the report of the lion that attacked trainer Walter Blanchard, better known as Zeke Walters, during the Lehman Brothers Circus parade in Butte Saturday October 1, 1898.

The trainer quote “was attacked in the lion cage by one of the lions, who felled him with a blow on the head with its paws and continued the attack as he lay prostrate. Walters grabbed one of the bars of the cage and drew himself to his feet at the same time attempting to fight off the brute. Almost blinded by blood from the wounds in his head, Walters dragged himself to the door at the rear of the cage and unfastening it he leaped to the street and fell unconscious to the ground. The door slammed shut after his exit, thus preventing the escape of the animal.”

A male lion, a female, and a “well-grown cub” were in the cage with 30-year-old Walters when the circus parade, including camels and elephants, made its way up Arizona Street. Just south of the Montana Central-Great Northern Railroad crossing (i.e., Iron Street) the male lion roared (to quote the newspaper, it “could be heard for blocks”) and set to the attack.

Walters was taken to Murray & Freund Hospital at Quartz and Alaska Streets where he remained in critical condition for more than a week before he died. The story was picked up and reported in newspapers in Middletown NY, Revelstoke BC, London England, Titusville Florida, and many more. By 1898, much of the world was interconnected by sub-oceanic telegraph cables, allowing the word to spread from Butte to New York to London and thence to Australia and New Zealand in a matter of hours.

Circuses were integral parts of Butte’s entertainment scene from the 1880s on. The first visit to Butte by the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus was in 1923, with regular visits over the following decades. Butte’s Frank “Paneek” Panisko joined Ringling Brothers about 1934 as a clown, and continued with them and their affiliates into at least the 1960s.

“Montana” Frank McCray, reportedly the second white child born in Butte (January 1864) was a performer with the Buffalo Bill shows in the 1890s, including a performance as a rider and roper at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893.

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.