BAS 175 WCTU Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Butte may seem an unlikely place for the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, anti-alcohol in a town with hundreds of saloons. But the Montana chapter of the WCTU was organized in Butte in 1883.

The national WCTU had been established in Ohio nine years earlier, and the second national President, Frances Willard, was in Butte August 1, 1883, to form the Montana union. Existing local groups from Missoula, Helena, Dillon, White Sulphur Springs, and Butte came together at the Presbyterian Church at Broadway and Idaho Streets, in the original building that preceded the present structure housing the Covellite Theater. Sixty-four women signed the organizational documents.

The WCTU lost steam within about three years, but according to historian Ellen Baumler, the group was reinvigorated by an event in Helena in 1886. A lavish wedding, with a bar bill of $30,000, produced so much public drunkenness that the Montana WCTU became a going concern again. By 1888, there were 190 members, and in 1910, more than 1,000.

The 1911 state WCTU Convention, in Butte for the fourth time, attracted about 100 delegates to the meeting at the Baptist Church. Among other things, the delegates decided to send President William Taft a telegram, to protest the official government presence at the second International Congress of Brewers in Chicago, in the person of Secretary of Agriculture James Wilson, honorary president.

Committees or Departments of the WCTU reporting at the Butte convention in 1911 included narcotics, with the group opposing the drinking of Coca-Cola, which was made with cocaine at that time. There was also a committee for good literature.

Frances Atkins, the national WCTU representative at the Butte convention, was called the “Tennessee whirlwind,” and the Anaconda Standard reported that “a veritable cyclone she seemed” as she gave a rousing keynote address focusing on her efforts in her native Tennessee to stamp out alcohol. There, in 1908, prohibition and anti-prohibition factions had come to armed battles, resulting in effective state-wide prohibition in 1909.

In 1916, with the strong help of the Montana WCTU’s 4,000 members, both women’s suffrage and state prohibition were approved by the electorate. Prohibition in Montana went into effect in 1919, a year before national prohibition, but the state revoked its law in 1926, seven years before prohibition was ended nationally.

Despite the strength of the WCTU across Montana, Butte had its share of female bootleggers during prohibition. The Montana Historical Society’s Women’s History Matters project reported the Butte arrest of eighty-year-old Lavinia Gilman, who was caught with a 300-gallon still.

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.