BAS 183 Betty’s Nightmare Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Sometimes discoveries in Butte take us well beyond the local story. In 2011 when Chuck Schnabel was renovating the Grand Hotel on Broadway Street to relocate Quarry Brewing there, he found a movie poster inside the wall for “Betty’s Nightmare.”

That was a silent film released October 11, 1912 by the Victor Film Company, produced for the Independent Moving Pictures Company (IMP). The short film starred Florence Lawrence, the IMP Girl, the first actress to perform under her own name or to make a public appearance promoting a film. She earned enough wealth that she owned her own motor car and is credited with inventing the first automobile turn and brake signals, but she committed suicide in 1938 after a series of comeback attempts to the screen failed.

The male lead in Betty’s Nightmare, Owen Moore, was married to Mary Pickford, one of the most famous actresses of the silent film era. The film focused on Betty’s complex dream, but despite horrors and death in the dream, she awakens to her love, and the newspaper Motion Picture World called it “a good offering, light and breezy” when it opened.

Although Betty’s Nightmare was released in 1912, the Grand Hotel building wasn’t constructed until 1915-1917, so the poster was several years old when it was boarded up in the wall of the hotel basement. It’s likely that the film was shown in Butte at the American Theater on Park Street in 1912 soon after its release, and the poster may have been there as well.

There were two American Theaters in Butte. The older one, at 41 North Main, operated from about 1908 until 1912. It’s not clear if the owners built a new one or it was simply a second theater of the same name, but in early 1912 construction began on the American Theater on West Park Street, just west of Gamer’s. The Montana Amusement Company boasted their new facility would be open within 90 days of the start of construction, and 85 days later, on April 6, 1912, the first film was shown.

With a seating capacity of 998, when the American was sold out for performances at ten cents per person per show they grossed $100, and they usually ran 6 shows a day. That easily paid the $30 a day cost of film rental and a few dollars for employees and electricity. The initial outlay for the American Theater included an $8,000 pipe organ to accompany the silent films as well as vaudeville and other live performances.

The American on Park advertised “all fire-proof construction” of steel and brick, and it survived the devastating Thomas Block fire immediately to the west later in 1912 so well that it ran films the next day. But it did succumb to a fire on February 1, 1950.

 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.