BAS 198 Edgar Paxson Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Edgar S. Paxson was born in 1852 near Buffalo, New York, and spent his teen years there working in his father’s carriage-making business. He also got his start as an artist painting signs.

After Paxson arrived in Montana in 1877 he held various jobs including stagecoach guard, but he settled in Deer Lodge with his wife Laura and found work painting scenery and backdrops for theatrical productions. He became part of Butte’s first boom when he moved here in April 1880, building a small home at 30 East Woolman Street. At that time, the Steward Mine was barely more than a claim and trees covered that part of the Butte Hill, which the local children called “Hickory Nut Hill.” East Woolman ended at a stream that was still flowing in Dublin Gulch, where the Anaconda Road would develop.

In Butte, Paxson worked for ten years as the artist for the Maguire Opera House on West Broadway (where the Leggat Hotel stands today). In 1889 or 1890 he established his own studio in a log cabin at 17 East Broadway, a building that was demolished within a year to make way for the new City Hall that was built there. Soon after, Paxson began to use his Woolman Street home as a studio.

Paxson’s iconic work includes many portraits of Native Americans, who he considered friends, but his definitive piece is probably “Custer’s Last Stand,” produced in the Woolman Street studio between 1895 and 1899. Paxson had become fascinated by the battle that took place just a year before he arrived in Montana, and interviewed both Native Americans and U.S. soldiers who had been involved in the campaign as part of his research for the painting. Completion was delayed by Paxson’s service in the Philippines during the Spanish-American War, but once finished he sent the painting on an American tour, where people paid 25 cents to see it. This six-by-nine-foot masterpiece hangs today at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West in Cody, Wyoming.

He’s best known as a painter and illustrator, but he also created the monumental archway that stood in the intersection of Granite and Main Streets in Butte to welcome the veterans of the Spanish-American War home in 1899.

Edgar Paxon was known in Butte as “a modest, gentlemanly man.” He had some health problems that led him and his wife to move to Missoula in 1906, but he continued to work prolifically, producing eight murals for the Missoula County Courthouse and six large paintings of Montana history for the state capitol in Helena.

When Paxson died in 1919, his friend the artist Charles M. Russell celebrated him by saying, "Paxson has gone, but his pictures will not allow us to forget him.” The Paxson home and studio on Woolman Street were gone by 1951.

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.