BAS 204 Communist vs Fascist Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

The Montana congressional election in 1938 was possibly the most overt clash of ideologies in state history, pitting two Butte men against each other. The Democrat, Butte native Jerry J. O’Connell, was a communist sympathizer who traveled to Spain to support the Abraham Lincoln Brigade organized by communists in the Spanish Civil War to oppose Franco’s fascists. Norwegian-born Butte physician Jacob Thorkelson, running as a Republican, was branded "rabidly pro-fascist and anti-semitic" and in June 1940 was invited to an audience with Adolf Hitler, but Thorkelson declined.

Thorkelson had emigrated to America when he was 16 years old, in 1892, and after training as a physician in Baltimore, moved to Montana in 1913 where he worked as a doctor in Dillon, Warm Springs, and Butte.

In Butte in the early 1930s, in addition to his medical practice located variously in the old Silver Bow Block on Granite and the Mayer Block at Park and Montana, Thorkelson partnered with Fred Ackerman in the Butte Neon Advertising Company with offices at 925 East Front Street. And Thorkelson and Ackerman also established a nudist colony on the Flats, on Holmes Road just off Rowe Road.

The nudist camp apparently derived from Thorkelson’s fascination with Germany, where the “naked club” fad was taking off. The Thorkelson-Ackerman facility burned down in 1935 “under mysterious circumstances,” according to historian Jon Axline, but came back to haunt Thorky in the 1938 congressional race when 29-year-old Democrat O’Connell began to characterize the election as a choice between Roosevelt’s New Deal and Thorkelson’s “NUDE deal.”

Thorkelson had lived at the Leonard Hotel in the early 1930s, but his longer-term residence with his wife Charlotte was at 703 Utah, above a restaurant near the corner of Aluminum, a vacant lot today.

Democratic incumbent O’Connell lost the 1938 election to Thorkelson, by a margin of 54% to 46% with about 90,000 votes cast. It was part of a Republican wave and the Democrats’ loss of 72 seats in the House. Nonetheless, Montana’s other representative (when the state had two), incumbent Democrat James O’Connor, was re-elected by a margin similar to O’Connell’s loss. Thorkelson’s victory was due in part to support for him by powerful Democratic Senator Burton K. Wheeler, who seems to have opposed O’Connell at almost any cost because of differences over Roosevelt’s plan to pack the Supreme Court with New Deal supporters, a plan that Wheeler fought strongly.

Thorkelson inserted radically anti-Semitic literature into the Congressional Record during his single term, leading commentator Walter Winchell to call him "the mouthpiece of the Nazi movement in congress." Not surprisingly, he lost his 1940 re-election bid to Jeanette Rankin, and he died in Butte in 1945. O’Connell served no more national elective offices, but continued as an attorney and political organizer in Montana, Washington State, and Washington D.C., where Joseph McCarthy’s House Un-American Activities Committee singled him out as a communist sympathizer, accusations he ably countered. O’Connell died in 1956.

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.