BAS 211 Kwan Gong Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Kwan Gong, Guan Sheng, Guan Yu, Guan Gong, Guan Di, Kwan Dai, Kwan Tai, Kuan Ti, Kuan Kung, Wu Ti, Mo Dai, Guan Di, Kuan Yu, Yunchang – however you name him, the red-faced character with a black beard has a long connection with Chinese heritage. The carved wooden statue of him in the Mai Wah Mercantile Collection, part of the loan from the Montana Heritage Commission, was a centerpiece of Chinese culture in Butte for many years.

He was a real historical figure, a general in the civil war that led to the collapse of the Han Dynasty in 220 A.D. He supported his friend the warlord Liu Bei who ruled Shu Han state (around modern Chengdu) during the Three Kingdoms period (220-280 a.d.). Guan himself died in 219, executed following his capture in the aftermath of the Battle of Fancheng.

His family name was Guan (or Kwan) and the second word in his name is typically a title. Guan Gong means Lord Guan, while other titles include “saintly emperor,” “lord of the magnificent beard,” and “general who rocks the bandits.” Much of his life was romanticized in the 14th-century novel “Romance of the Three Kingdoms,” by Luo Guanzhong.

Guan Yu was deified as early as the Sui Dynasty (581–618 a.d.) and is still popularly worshipped today among the Chinese people. Although sometimes called a god of war, he is worshipped as an indigenous Chinese deity, a bodhisattva and heavenly protector in Buddhist tradition, and as a guardian deity in Taoism and other religious beliefs. He is also held in high esteem in Confucianism. His apotheosis grew over centuries. By 1614 the “saintly emperor” title was applied, although he had never been an emperor.

Police stations in Hong Kong today typically contain shrines to Guan, and for many émigrés to America from the Guangdong (Canton) region in the late 19th century, he was the most important community and household deity. The statue in the Mai Wah collection arrived in Butte from China about 1905 and resided in the community Joss House that stood on Galena Street north of the intersection with China Alley, at least until the middle 1910s.

A Smithers photo inside the Joss House shows the statue of Guan that is now at the Mai Wah Museum. It was published in the Montana Standard in 1954, but probably dates to about 1913, since the Joss House at 15-17 West Galena was gone by 1916. As Butte’s Chinatown declined, many buildings were razed, and the statue of Guan came to the Chinn family, the most prosperous and prominent family in the neighborhood in the late 1920s and onward, to be used as a household deity within the Mai Wah and Wah Chong Tai buildings where the family lived. It went to Nevada City, Montana, in the mid-1940s when Charles Bovey bought the contents of the Wah Chong Tai, and was part of that collection which returned to Butte in 2012.

Guan has appeared in or been referred to in modern films, both Chinese and Western (including the 1994 comedy, From Beijing with Love), and in TV shows, video games, and card games.

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.