BAS 217 Bill Dunne Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Bill Dunne was an early leader of the American Communist Party and one of the original editors of the predecessor to the Daily Worker, the party newspaper. But he cut his political teeth in Butte.

William F. Dunne was born in Missouri in 1887 and he grew up in Minnesota. He began union activism when he was an electrician with the Northern Pacific Railroad, living in Vancouver, British Columbia, and joining the Socialist Party.

He came to Butte about 1917 and was elected vice president of the Montana Federation of Labor, but his real notoriety came as the editor of the Butte Bulletin, pretty much the only newspaper in the state to speak against the Anaconda Company.

The Butte Bulletin was printed in the former Methodist Church at the corner of Idaho and Galena Streets, later known as Duggan’s Mortuary and Beverly’s Bridal Shop. The building was privately owned by Larry Duggan in 1918 when the Bulletin changed from a weekly to a daily in flagrant violation of the wartime Montana Council of Defense’s Edict restricting the press. Combined with Dunne’s radical, inflammatory editorials, that change led to a raid on September 13, 1918, by the Butte police and the U.S. army under Captain Omar Bradly. The newspaper workers, including Dunne, were arrested under Montana’s repressive sedition law. Dunne lived at 711 Colorado Street in 1918, in a four-plex that’s been replaced by a more modern home today.

Dunne may be one of only a few people to be elected to a state legislature while in jail or under indictment, but Butte did send him to the Montana statehouse for one term in the election of November 1918. Dunne, running on the Socialist ticket, came in fifth in a field of 26 candidates with 6,935 votes. In those days the top 12 vote-getters were elected, and Silver Bow voters sent nine Democrats, two Republicans, and Dunne the Socialist to Helena.

The defense team in his 1919 sedition trial was led by Burton K. Wheeler, who would later become one of Dunne’s political enemies. Dunne was convicted, but the verdict was overturned by the Montana Supreme Court in 1920.

After a failed run for mayor of Butte in 1920, his activities became increasingly international in scope. Dunne attended the Fifth World Congress of the Communist International in Moscow in 1924 just months after Lenin’s death.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Dunne traveled back and forth to the Soviet Union repeatedly, settling in New York long enough to lose his runs for the U.S. Senate and Governor of New York on the Worker’s Party ticket in 1926 and 1928.

Dunne maintained an office and traveling residence in Room 307 at the Tait Hotel on Broadway in Butte at least during the late 1930s, and was active in the 1938 Montana congressional election that pitted Democrat Jerry O’Connell, a strong supporter of communism and Franklin Roosevelt’s policies, against Jacob Thorkelson, who was “rabidly pro-fascist.”

In a letter typed in the Tait Hotel on July 27, 1938, Dunne called the Democratic primary that year “the toughest and dirtiest primary election in this state in 20 years.” Dunne and his comrades managed to see their man O’Connell as the nominee despite the efforts of “[Senator Burton K.] Wheeler, Governor Ayers, the Anaconda Company, Montana Power, Standard Oil, and the Catholic hierarchy.” Dunne and O’Connell had strong union support, which helped them distribute “a minimum of 500,000 pieces of literature” to promote their campaign.

The American Communist Party became highly fractured during World War II, and in 1946 Dunne was expelled from it for having “promoted a leftist faction” within the party. He died in 1953 at age 65, about six months after Josef Stalin died.

Thanks to Robert Renouard, owner of the Tait Hotel, for copies of Dunne’s 1938 letters.

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.