BAS 221 Kay Chinn Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

When Chin Sue Kee came to the United States and to Butte in 1912, the mere fact of her entry was just the first remarkable thing about her. In 1912 it was difficult for any Chinese citizen to immigrate to the U.S., but thanks to his family, business, and non-Chinese connections in Butte, Chin Yee Fong was able to bring his wife and daughter here from China via the steamship Luceric.

Seven-year-old Chin Sue Kee answered questions through a translator during the Seattle immigration hearing March 23, 1912. Among other things, she reported that her mother was a bound foot woman, a painful practice but one whose goal was to confer elevated status.

The Chin parents ultimately Americanized their names as Albert and Lou Chinn, and Chin Sue Kee became Kay (Katherine) Chinn. The family became the owners and proprietors of the Wah Chong Tai Company in Butte, where Kay grew up as the older sister to 11 more siblings all born in Butte.

Like all of the Chinn children, Kay probably attended the Butte Public Schools, most likely Garfield, which was two blocks due south of the Mai Wah buildings where the Chinn family lived.

Sometime after 1926 when Kay was 20 years old, she returned to China. This phase of her life is poorly known, but by the late 1930s she was working as an investigative reporter for the South China Morning Post, the Hong Kong-based English language newspaper founded in 1903 and still in business today.

The Japanese occupied Hong Kong on Christmas day, 1941, and five months later Australian Colonel Lindsay Ride established the British Army Aid Group, a clandestine South China espionage and intelligence unit within the British MI9 organization. One of its main goals was to help prisoners of war held by the Japanese in south China to escape, but any espionage was valuable. Kay, with her newspaper contacts, became part of the group where she reported to Major Colin McEwan. He considered her to be one of his best independent agents.

She earned her code name Castra (Latin for a fortification) by disguising herself as a coolie work woman and infiltrating islands offshore Canton (Guangzhou) where the Japanese were constructing fortified gun emplacements. She was arrested and beaten by the Japanese during an operation to seek information on British Dr. Percy Selwyn-Clark, Hong Kong Director of Medical Services, held by the Japanese in solitary confinement for 19 months and tortured repeatedly. She later recalled that she “gave no information to the Japanese and I believe I was released so I could be followed.” She also created a survey of coastal Chinese shipping and posed as a smuggler to purchase some small boats, as well as trying to organize a clandestine Hong Kong ferry service.

After the war she stayed in Hong Kong until she relocated to Hawaii in 1967 and became an American citizen in 1982. Kay Chinn Mah died in 1997 at the age of 91 in Radford, Virginia. Her children and grandchildren knew almost nothing of her espionage exploits until archives of Colonel Ride and Major McEwan were released. Her grandsons George and Albert Mah visited Butte in 2014 as part of a Chinn family reunion that coincided with the opening of the Chinn Family Exhibit at the Mai Wah Museum.

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.