BAS 223 Al Capone Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

When Al Capone came to Butte to check it out as a western distribution center for the prohibition-era booze being smuggled into the States from Canada and seaports like Seattle, he was told by Butte Police Chief Jere Murphy that he could proceed to Meaderville to have dinner in one of the famous eateries there, but he was not to get off the train in Butte. This was Murphy’s town.

It’s a great story. The only problem is, there isn’t a shred of actual evidence that Capone ever came to Montana, much less Butte. Butte loves to claim visits by nefarious bad guys of all stripes, visits during which the bad guys usually got the short end of the stick from Butte. The Capone story seems to come from a friend of a friend’s grandfather’s barber who supposedly cut Capone’s hair while he was here.

Historians have to be skeptical of anecdotal tales about famous people; they are the sorts of tales that make for great family “history” but may be storytelling far more than real history. In this case, someone as notorious as Capone visiting Butte ought to have made the papers, even if he tried to travel incognito – which he rarely did. He was famous for his entourage buying up entire Pullman railroad cars when he did travel to Florida and elsewhere.

Police Chief Jere “The Wise” Murphy had a reputation for knowing when undesirables came to town, and for giving them the chance to leave town on the next train or be arrested. There’s little doubt that through a network of informants, he was usually on top of what went on in Butte, enough so that it seemed mysterious when he or his agents appeared at the hotel door of some small-time criminal. If he had actually interacted with Al Capone, the likelihood is high that it would have been a well-known and well-reported event.

The story hangs together reasonably because Butte, with its diverse railroad network, huge population including a wild variety of classes of people from rich supporters of Capone-style booze management to underground thugs who would carry out the dirty work, and plenty of loose money, probably would have been a logical choice for a man like Capone to pick for a western center of operations. But because it could have been doesn’t mean it was.

Did Al Capone come to Butte? It’s impossible to prove that he did or didn’t. Maybe he did have close friends at Meaderville’s Rocky Mountain Café, and maybe he did personally provide them with illegal whiskey. It’s just very unlikely that he did, and four-generations-removed tales and cherished myths really aren’t “evidence.” But it does make for a good story.

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.