BAS 232 Jacob Riis Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

When Jacob Riis came to Butte December 10, 1906, it is a measure of Butte’s importance as a stopping place for celebrities that he was here as part of a simple high school lecture series.

Internationally known journalist, photographer, and social reformer Riis had emigrated to New York from his native Denmark in 1870 when he was 21 years old, part of one of many waves of immigration to the United States. He experienced first-hand the unemployment, hunger, and destitution of many immigrants. That experience led to his career as a social reformer, focusing on “How the Other Half Lives,” an early aspect of his photojournalism that pointed a damning finger at the slum conditions in New York.

By the time of Riis’s visit to Butte he was a well-known muckraker, one of a group of high-profile journalists noted for highlighting the ills of modern society with the goal of reforming them. New York Police Commissioner Theodore Roosevelt had coined the term muckraker, and he came to champion Riis as “a storm center for good.” Roosevelt’s patronage and friendship undoubtedly contributed to Riis’s prestige and popularity.

By 1906 Riis had branched into public speaking as a vehicle for his agenda, and in Butte his topic, “Tony’s Hardships,” told the tale of a “poor rough boy,” a street urchin who spent his time throwing mud and rocks wherever he could. Tony was ultimately rehabilitated through progressive values at home, on the farm, and in the schools, which according to Riis should not be “sausage-stuffing machines packing the little brains with irrelevant facts instead of teaching them to think.”

The Butte Miner newspaper called Riis “the greatest figure in the fight against wretched conditions in the great tenements of America’s metropolis,” and considered his Butte program “one of the most edifying lectures ever heard in a big auditorium in this city.”

The Mountain View Methodist Episcopal Church, at Montana and Quartz Streets, was filled for Riis’s talk, illustrated by projected stereopticon views of the slums of New York. He “delights his hearers,” according to the Miner reporter, even though the 50-cent admission was a bit on the steep side for a lecture in 1906. You could have saved money by subscribing to the entire 9-lecture series for $2.00.

Other prominent speakers in the Butte High School teachers’ lecture series for 1906-1907 included William Dawson, clergyman and evangelist from London, Benjamin Tillman, a white supremacist and former governor of South Carolina, Rabbi Emil Hirsch, a leader in the Jewish reform movement, and J.C. Monaghan, the Chief of the Bureau of Consular Reports in Washington, D.C.

Riis died eight years after his visit to Butte, in 1914 at age 65.

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.