BAS 234 Montana at Worlds Fair Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Freshly admitted to statehood in 1889, Montana was eager to participate in the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, the world’s fair commemorating the 400th anniversary of Columbus’s arrival in the New World in 1492.

The Montana legislature passed an enabling and funding act for the Montana exhibit in March 1891, with Missoula lawyer Walter Bickford appointed by the governor to serve as the State Board Chairman. Butte lawyer Stephen DeWolfe, who lived in the Hamilton Block, served as the Board President. The exhibit would cover all aspects of Montana, but Butte’s mines and minerals were the centerpiece of the most popular exhibit in the Mining Building.

The Mines and Mining Building at the Exposition in Chicago measured 700 by 350 feet and cost $265,000 to construct. Montana’s exhibit was just inside the south entrance, between Utah and Colorado and across the aisle from Mexico, but the showstopper was Montana’s nine-foot-high Statue of Justice, cast in solid sterling silver from Montana metal mined in Butte and the Philipsburg area. Justice stood atop a silver globe, which in turn was supported on the spread wings of a silver eagle. The entire piece was on a 2-foot-square pedestal of solid gold. Justice, “with her eyes wide open,” held a double-edged silver sword and a balance containing equal weights of gold and silver coins, a reflection of the Montana attitude on the “silver question,” equating the two metals in coinage volume.

Internationally known Irish-American actress Ada Rehan was chosen by Bickford to serve as the model for the Statue of Justice because "Out of the 68 measurements that mark the artistic standard of perfect womanhood, 62 of Miss Rehan's measurements conform in every way. And in none of the other 6 does she deviate one-quarter of an inch from the standard."

After the exposition, the statue traveled around the country, including a four-week display in New York City. The silver was owned by former Montana Territorial Governor Samuel T. Hauser and by W.A. Clark, taken from their mines and smelted and refined to .999 fine silver. The statue, valued at $75,000 in silver in the 1890s when the price was low, was melted down for bullion in 1903. The gold in the plinth, from the Spotted Horse Mine at Maiden, Montana, in Fergus County, suffered a similar fate. In 1895, 12-inch replicas of the statue were sold by Montgomery Ward for $2.95 each.

The exhibit included more than 50 tons of mineral specimens, including sapphires and a 48-ounce gold nugget. The entrance to the Montana exhibit held a four-foot specimen of crystallized silver, “undoubtedly the finest ever found,” from the Elkhorn Mine. Butte’s Alice and Moulton Mines, in addition to silver, provided a cluster of rhodochrosite crystals, “the largest ever found.” The Atlantic Cable mine in Deer Lodge County east of Georgetown Lake contributed a specimen in which “pieces of native gold as large as a man’s thumb stuck out from the quartz on all sides.”

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.