BAS 236 Mark Twain Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

The reports of Mark Twain holding forth in the Silver Bow Club next to the Silver Bow County Court House are much exaggerated. It wasn’t even built when he visited Butte in 1895.

Twain’s western tour was the first part of a year-long excursion designed to raise money, since Twain was deeply in debt. Beginning in Cleveland, Ohio, the trip ultimately took Twain around the world, culminating in London.

When Mark Twain came to Butte in the summer of 1895, one of five cities in Montana he visited, his international fame came before him. His August 1 performance at Maguire’s Opera House on Broadway, where the Leggatt Hotel now stands, was to a receptive audience that more than filled the opera house’s 1,100 seats. Twain himself enjoyed the audience, surprised “to find this London-Parisian-New York audience out in the mines."

The Butte Miner newspaper reported that Twain “kept the crowd in continuous laughter,” and the Anaconda Standard reported that he included famous stories from Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry Finn, and the Jumping Frog of Calaveras County, as well as humorous ghost stories in his repertoire. Twain and his entourage, including his wife and daughter, spent the night at the Butte Hotel on Broadway. After the performance, Twain probably spent the rest of the evening at the Silver Bow Club, but it was then on the top floor of the Lewisohn Block at Granite and Hamilton Streets. The Club built the building that still stands at Granite and Alaska in 1906.

Anaconda was not on the itinerary, but a performance there was organized at the last minute. Twain and his manager almost missed the train from Butte because a power failure stranded the electric trolley cars uptown, but they boarded the train just as it was pulling out. The program in Anaconda was a financial failure, and when Twain heard the event promoters were out about $60 he ordered his manager to send money back, from his own account. According to Major Pond, his manager, Twain said “I'm not going around robbing poor men who are disappointed in their calculations as to my commercial value. I'm poor, and working to pay debts that I never contracted; but I don't want to get money in that way."

The speaking tour was a huge success – but not enough to pay Twain’s massive debts. His friend, Henry Rogers, an executive of Standard Oil, stepped in to manage his financial affairs, and eventually, at the insistence of Twain’s wife Olivia Clemens more than Rogers, Twain’s debts were repaid.

Mark Twain’s connection to Standard Oil through Rogers may have influenced Twain’s opinion of William Clark, the long-time competitor with the Anaconda Company, which by 1901 was controlled by the same businessmen as Standard Oil. Twain said of Clark, "He is as rotten a human being as can be found anywhere under the flag; he is a shame to the American nation, and no one has helped to send him to the Senate who did not know that his proper place was the penitentiary, with a ball and chain on his legs. To my mind he is the most disgusting creature that the republic has produced since Boss Tweed's time."

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.