BAS 242 1912 Jail Riot Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

The day after St. Patrick’s Day in 1912 in Butte was probably even more raucous than the holiday itself.

Walker’s Saloon, just east of the State Savings Bank at Park and Main (now the Metals Bank Building) was packed on Sunday night at about 6:45 when police officer Philip Prlja responded to a disturbance call. Alex McLean, a miner at the Berkeley Mine, was the alleged instigator of the disturbance, but when Prlja took him into custody, McLean’s friends rushed the officer and forced him out the door of the saloon. On the sidewalk, Prlja fired his .44 caliber Smith & Wesson gun into the air three times “to attract attention,” presumably to calm the crowd.

But the gunshots had the opposite effect. Men chased Prlja to the corner of Park and Main, crying “Lynch him! Lynch him!” The mob brought him down, and Prlja’s gun went off again, shooting Peter Lachner in the leg. McLean escaped during the melee, and while Lachner lay bleeding on the sidewalk Prlja fled a block east and up the alley to the basement-level side door of the jail in the City Hall, now the medical office building on Broadway Street.

“The rush assumed the proportions of a riot,” according to the Butte Miner, with hundreds of men chasing Prlja and eventually trying to force their way into the jail. The rioters were forced back by Police Chief Jere Murphy, Captain Yorath, and other officers, and nine drunken, abusive members of the mob were arrested immediately and two others were taken into custody later.

Lachner, the injured man, was a 30-year-old Bavarian immigrant who had been in Butte for eight years. He claimed to be an innocent bystander in the affair, neither talking loud nor even drinking in Walker’s. The Butte Miner attested his character, reporting him to be “possessed of much intelligence.” He was a contract miner at the High Ore Mine and had recently purchased a home at 219 North Henry, where he lived with his wife and two young sons. His wound was minor, and he was treated by Dr. Horst at the Murray Hospital (Quartz and Alaska Streets) and released that evening.

Justice was swift in those days. In court the next morning, two men, Patrick Crowley and Barney Guay were fined $25 each, more than a weeks’ pay for a miner. Their high-priced fines related to their roles in the riot plus interfering with the arrest of someone trying to cut the fire hose, which had been brought out when Mayor Louis Duncan called the fire department to help quell the riot. Eight other men were fined $5 each and the case against one was dismissed.

Dr. Carl Horst was busy that weekend. The day before he treated Peter Lachner’s wounds, he had amputated Thomas Ryan’s shattered left arm at the shoulder, the result of a rifle shooting by Patrick Lyden during a St. Patrick’s day quarrel when the two men, both in their 50s, were drinking in a cabin at 240 South Main Street.

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.