BAS 243 Inez Milholland Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Inez Milholland Boissevain was a “spitfire,” a lawyer, a suffragist, and activist who came to Butte October 16, 1916.

Montana women had had the vote since the election of 1914. But Milholland was on an ambitious 12,000-mile tour of the west, especially in the states that had already enfranchised women, to campaign against Woodrow Wilson in his bid for re-election because he did not support the nationwide effort for women to gain the vote.

Milholland’s travels took her to 30 cities in just three weeks, where she gave more than 50 speeches. Butte was near the mid-point of her grueling journey. She told a luncheon audience of about 100 in the Silver Bow Club that she believed “women are as worthy of the honor and responsibility of enfranchisement at the hands of the federal government as white men, negroes, Indians, Filipinos, and aliens.” She was a member of the National Woman’s Party, which advocated for women’s suffrage.

Her Butte speech followed an underground tour of the Leonard Mine. It was unusual but not unheard of in 1916 for a prominent woman to receive such a tour. Milholland had woken that morning in the Thornton Hotel at Broadway and Wyoming Streets “unable to stand,” probably a result of her chronic anemia, but the tour and her speech in Butte went on as planned.

Although Milholland had been a practicing lawyer in New York beginning in 1912, she married a Dutch citizen which, by the laws of the day, prevented her from continuing her profession since she was no longer an American citizen. She was the daughter of a prominent New York family and grew up with a life of privilege, but during her college days at Vassar College she began her activism for women’s rights. She said, “I am prepared to sacrifice every so-called privilege I possess in order to have a few rights,” of which the right to vote was paramount.

She led suffrage parades in 1911, 1912, and 1913, becoming the face of the suffrage movement. The sign she carried in 1911 read "Forward, out of error, Leave behind the night, Forward through the darkness, Forward into light!"

From Butte Milholland traveled to Salt Lake City, then spoke in Winnemucca and Reno, Nevada (which had enfranchised women in 1914 as had Montana). Then she headed to Sacramento, California, and points south. In Los Angeles just six days after her speech in Butte, she collapsed during her presentation and died a month later. Inez Milholland was 30 years old.

Her last public words were, "Mr. President, how long must women wait for liberty?”

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.