BAS 247 Margaret Theater Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Opening night at the Margaret Theater in Anaconda, September 28, 1897, was the “Event of Events,” with all 1,246 seats filled by the glitterati of Butte and Anaconda. Senator Lee Mantle’s guests in his private box included Augustus Heinze and Charles S. Warren, prominent Butte pioneer and the town’s first chief of police.

Marcus Daly’s connections were all over the theater, which was named for his wife. J.H. Durston, Daly’s choice to inaugurate his newspaper, the Anaconda Standard, in 1889, was on the theater board of trustees together with James Maguire, who managed the Margaret along with his slightly smaller opera house in Butte.

The Copper City Commercial Company offered “Special hats, bonnets and wraps for the Opening Nights of the Margaret Opera House,” which stood at 305 Main Street in Anaconda. Reserved seat tickets, at 50 cents, one dollar, and $1.50, sold out in four hours at Smith’s Drug Store on Park Street in Anaconda.

Nationally known vaudeville entertainer Digby Bell, “America’s Favorite Comedian,” played in “The Hoosier Doctor” on the two opening nights. Special trains on Marcus Daly’s Butte, Anaconda, and Pacific Railroad brought patrons from Butte to “a theater as good as any in the land,” according to the perhaps biased Anaconda Standard.

Following almost three decades of service as a vaudeville venue and then as a movie theater complete with a Wicks organ installed in 1918 to accompany silent films, the Margaret was sold in 1926. After a $60,000 remodel, it reopened as the Sundial Theater, but the building was destroyed by fire in 1929, soon after the reopening.

Demand for a movie house in Anaconda was strong, and a citizens committee formed to begin construction of a new theater on the same site. Marie Paumie Rimbaud, proprietor of the Paumie Dye Works in Butte (in the building occupied by the Galena Street Post Office today) was a leader of that committee. The building was essentially complete by 1931, but setbacks due to the Depression meant that the new theater, named the Washoe, did not open until 1936.

The elaborate Art Deco style of the Washoe is a product of prominent theater architect Marcus Priteca (1890-1971), who designed the 1916 Coliseum of Seattle, often considered to be the first theater built expressly as a movie palace. Priteca designed all the theaters for the Pantages circuit, the largest privately-owned vaudeville circuit in the world, according to historian Dena Sanford. Priteca designed at least 150 theaters across the country.

Copper, gold, and silver leaf accents the décor of the Washoe, which includes many mining motifs. Interior murals were under the direction of Los Angeles artist Nat Smyth, with much of the execution by his son Colville Smythe, including the ceiling. The final cost of the Washoe was $200,000 in depression-era dollars.

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.