BAS 248 Black Patti Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Matilda Sissieretta Jones brought her international fame to Butte on May 23, 1909, together with her troupe of performers, the Black Patti Musical Comedy Company.

Born in Virginia in 1868 or 1869 to former slaves, Matilda Joyner moved with her family to Providence, Rhode Island when she was six years old. There she began singing in the Baptist church where her father was a minister, and she took operatic vocal training under both American and Italian directors. Before she was 20 years old she toured in Europe, the Caribbean, and South America, as well as across the United States. She became one of the most famous Black performers of her time.

She performed initially under her married name, Sissieretta Jones, but came to be called Black Patti in favorable comparison to prominent opera singer Adelina Patti, but Jones was uncomfortable and annoyed by the nickname because she did not consider herself the peer of Adelina Patti. Nonetheless the epithet remained with her.

She performed at the White House for four presidents, Harrison, Cleveland, McKinley, and Theodore Roosevelt, but only at the Roosevelt performance was she allowed to enter through the front entrance despite being the most highly paid and renowned Black singer of the day, receiving as much as $2,000 for a week-long series of performances.

Jones was distressed by the racism in America that prevented Blacks from accessing classical concert halls, and she had been rejected from a role with the New York Metropolitan Opera because of her race. In 1896 she established a traveling vaudeville tour company composed of Black performers, and it was this famous troupe that came to Montana by private train in 1909.

The group appeared at the Margaret Theater in Anaconda (which was on the site of the present Washoe Theater) and at the Broadway Theater, Butte’s largest, at the corner of Broadway and Montana Streets, where seats sold for $1.00, 75¢, and 50¢.

Their presentation of “The Blackville Strollers” was characterized by the Butte Miner as “a nonsensical creation in which there is some good singing.” The troupe was treated to an after party of dance and music in the hall adjoining the Empire Theater, which stood on Montana Street just south of the Stephens Block at the corner of Park. The party, “a most delightful event” according to the Anaconda Standard, was organized by the Copper City Social Club, a well-established Black organization in Butte.

Jones retired from performing in 1915 to care for her ailing mother in Providence, and she also took in homeless children. By the time of her death from cancer in 1933, she was in poverty, without enough money for a gravestone. In 2018, donors provided for a headstone on her grave in Providence.

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.