BAS 261 Gertie the Babyseller Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Gertrude Pitanken, whose maiden name is not known, was born in Lincoln, Nebraska, in 1887, and came to Butte by 1907. Trained as a chiropractor, she worked as a nurse at the old St. James Hospital where she may have met her husband, Dr. Gustav Pitanken. Gustav died July 22, 1930, at age 66, and Gertie assumed his practice, which included abortions.

When Gustav died in 1930, he and his wife had an office at 511 Metals Bank and they lived at 663 Colorado Street with one Henry Davis. The following year, Gertie moved her office to 616 Metals Bank and married William Van Orden, who had retired from the Butte Police Department in 1929. She presumably moved to his residence at 119½ Hamilton Street, in the basement of the Casey Block at the corner of Hamilton and Granite. She was definitely living there by 1934.

Gertie maintained her office on the sixth floor of the Metals Bank until 1940, when the office was relocated to the top floor, #85, in the Hirbour Tower at Broadway and Main. The 1940 directory is confusing in listing her residence as Columbia Gardens -- there was a small neighborhood of that name near the amusement park -- but it seems that she was also maintaining the residence with Van Orden on Hamilton Street. She’s back there by 1942, when her office relocated again, to 115 Hamilton, the Maley Block just south of the Casey Block. It was from this location that she sold babies into adoption in the 1940s and 1950s.

The website Gertiesbabies.com indicates that Pitanken sold at least 14 and perhaps as many as 28 babies into adoption. A few of them have found their birth families through genealogical research and DNA analysis.

By 1952 Pitanken was living in the same apartment as her office at 115 Hamilton. Van Orden had disappeared from Butte records by about 1950. Gertie died April 19, 1960, and is buried in Mt. Moriah Cemetery. Her baby-selling office at 115 Hamilton was vacant in 1960.

Criminal charges were brought against Gertrude Pitanken three times: first, in 1929, for botched abortions and making a falsified death certificate. Those charges were reported as “not proved.” In 1936 a charge was dismissed for insanity, though a later sanity commission declared her sane. And in 1939 she was arrested at home in the Columbia Gardens neighborhood, but those charges were dropped. Gertie allegedly had incriminating information about city officials including judges, which resulted in her cases being dismissed. Whether that’s true or not is unknown.

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.