BAS 270 The Klan Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Butte may seem an unexpected place for activities by the Ku Klux Klan, but in its early days the Klan targeted Catholics, Jews, and foreign-born immigrants including Irish and Italians, as well as Blacks.

The Klan was reorganized in its second incarnation in Georgia in 1915. By 1921, organizers were in Butte passing out information, and a newspaper advertisement decorated with a cartoon of a hooded horseman called for “100 per cent Americans” – and no others-- to apply to a post office box in Butte. Little came from that initial incursion, and the Butte Bulletin reported that Sheriff Larry Duggan said that if they tried any of their “time honored activities” in this county, they would be quote “shot down like wolves” – an attitude that the Butte Bulletin heartily approved of.

Nonetheless, in 1923 the Butte chapter, the Kontinental Klan, was formed as one of about 40 chapters across Montana. John S. Kula was the first leader, the “Exalted Cyclops,” of the local group. Montana Grand Dragon Lewis Terwilliger, the mayor of Livingston, considered Butte to be “the worst place in Montana” for its infestation of Catholics and foreign-born.

Historian Christine Erickson found that 181 men joined the Butte Klan during the six years it existed, from 1923 to 1929. Montana’s peak Klan membership in the 1920s was estimated at about 5,000, but nationally, the Klan boasted something like 5 million members about 1925. The Klan found little support in Butte, and by 1926 its local membership was down to just 38.

Most of the reported incidents involving the Klan in Montana were in the eastern part of the State, including the burning of a barn owned by a Black man who had relocated from Butte to Crow Agency. But in 1923 the Anaconda Standard reported a letter to the Black wife of an Anaconda pastor, signed by the Klan, threatening her with tar and feathers if she did not leave town. Anacondans were reported to be “very much alarmed” by the situation, but it seems nothing more came of it.

In 1929, a year after the Butte Chamber of Commerce denied them a permit to march in the Fourth of July parade – a request that also asked for police protection – the Klan was gone from Butte, where anti-Klan sentiment ran so high that they rented meeting space under the alias “Butte Men’s Literary Society.” The Klan as an organization was defunct in Montana by 1931.

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.