BAS 274 Mary MacLane Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, in 1881, Mary MacLane came to Butte with her mother, stepfather, and siblings about 1892, when Butte was an incredible booming, cosmopolitan city. The family lived in the duplex at 417 to 419 North Excelsior Street, a home that still stands and in 2020 is undergoing careful restoration.

MacLane began writing for her school paper in 1898, and in 1900 when she was 19 years old began a diary-like, autobiographical story that she called “I await the devil’s coming”. Her writing was exceptionally raw and sensual for the day. She wrote of her own bisexuality and a desire to literally marry the devil. When it was published in 1901, the publisher renamed it “The Story of Mary MacLane.” It sold 100,000 copies in its first month, a phenomenal output for the day, and despite fervent criticism from conservative, moralistic critics.

Her writing also recorded her thoughts about Butte, which she both vilified and loved. It was all “sand and barrenness,” “near the perfection of ugliness,” its inhabitants “uncouth and warped.” Her own life was a “pitiable, barren, contemptible, damnable, narrow nothingness.” Within two years, she had moved east to lead a traveling and reportedly decadent and bohemian life.

But by the time she penned her second book, “I Mary MacLane, a Diary of Human Days,” published in 1917, she also wrote, “There is love for me in this Butte. As much for the mountains in their mourning intimateness I feel love for all the outsides and surfaces of the town itself: The stone streets full of houses and shops and brick walls and laundry wagons and persons, the little mines in unexpected mid-town blocks with their engines and hoists and scaffolds and green coppery dumps, the surprising steep Idaho street hill, the North Excelsior street neighborhood where I wrote my Devil and gray-dawn book. All of it has a feel of something aloof and metallic and distinctive and gray purple and Butte Montana.”

A more lyrical description of Butte could hardly be written. But Mary MacLane continued: “This Butte is capriciously decorated with sweet brilliant metallic orgies of color at any time, all times, as if by whims of pagan gods lightly drunk and lightly mad. For mixture, for miscellany, variedness, Bohemianism, where is Butte’s rival?”

Mary MacLane died in 1929 in a hotel room in Chicago at age 48, in poverty and obscurity, of unknown causes.

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.