BAS 281 Influenza Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

I had a little bird, and its name was Enza.

I opened the window, and in-flew-Enza.

That was the new jumping rope song prevalent across the United States and in Butte in the fall of 1918. Although the erroneously named Spanish Flu had broken out in the spring of 1918, it initially spread slowly across the country, but by that fall, with more and more soldiers returning home from the war in France, the disease became pandemic.

Butte was near its peak of everything in 1918, near 100,000 population, mostly crowded into tight and often unsanitary conditions on the Hill above Front Street, and something like 14,000 men working underground in the mines. The five railroads that served Butte carried as many as 50 trains a day, counting both passengers and freight, and by September of 1918 many troop trains were passing through Butte and usually stopping, on their way to and from military centers on the West Coast.

The national flu situation was in the news routinely, but the first cases in Butte were not reported in the papers until the first week of October, with at least 8 deaths by October 8. By Halloween, which was cancelled, there were more than 150 new cases every day and more than 20 deaths each day was commonplace. The newspapers had no room for the obituaries, and carried columns of short death notices.

According to historian John Astle, by Christmas 1918 there were more than 12,000 cases in Butte and more than 1,000 dead, in less than three months. Butte’s death rate was similar to that of Philadelphia and San Francisco, two of the worst-hit cities, despite an order on October 10 closing schools, churches, theaters, store sales, and more. Significantly, saloons stayed open under the Board of Health rules, although crowds were forbidden under threat of arrest. Signs in saloons read “Please do not congregate in this place. Transact your business and keep moving,” and officially take out and package liquor was all that was available, but enforcement was lax.

Protests against the closing orders came from all quarters, from small groceries that wanted to stay open later than the mandated 6:00 p.m., to churches demanding saloons be closed as well, in the name of non-discrimination.

After the first of January 1919 the death rate did begin to decline, and the epidemic in Butte was largely over by May of 1919, with a total death toll of at least 1,200 in Butte and an uncounted number in the county outside the city. The case count and death toll in Butte amounted to about a third of all cases and deaths in the state of Montana.

There’s a new book covering this, titled Butte and the 1918 Influenza Pandemic, by Janelle M. Olberding. It was published by The History Press in 2019.

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.