BAS 284 First airplane landing Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

The first airplane to fly in Butte arrived in Montana by train from Salt Lake City, and was piloted by a Butte daredevil known only as Moroni in a 45-minute flight on July 4, 1910. The only problem with that statement is that almost all of it is untrue, even though you find those “facts” in many newspapers and books recalling the famous first flight in Butte.

A slightly better version of the story is that Thomas Maroney, a Great Falls carpenter, built his 75-horsepower Curtiss biplane in San Diego in the winter of 1911-12. “It was made of scraps,” he claimed. For the July 4 celebration in Butte in 1912, not 1910, Maroney was contracted by Butte’s Montana Aeroplane and Exhibition Company, led by druggist and entrepreneur Louis Dreibelbis. Maroney was the only licensed pilot in Montana at the time, but there were many aspiring pilots who made and flew their own planes.

That 1912 story is true, but Maroney’s flight was not the first in Butte. The REAL first flight (at least until further research shows otherwise) was in 1911, by an aviator named Eugene Ely. Thanks to a tip from Tony Baumgartner, we know Ely flew in several exhibition flights in Montana during the summer of 1911, including Kalispell, Great Falls, Lewistown, Missoula, and Butte.

Butte was apparently the first stop on the tour. The aircraft, a Curtiss, arrived by train from Portland, where Ely had been flying prior to coming to Montana. The plane was the same one Ely used to make history in January 1911 when he became the first flyer to land on a ship, the battleship Pennsylvania, and returned to a landing field in San Francisco.

“The birdman is here,” The Anaconda Standard announced, when Ely and his wife arrived in Butte on Friday June 9, 1911, with plans for two days of flying. Ely’s Curtiss D-60 had a wingspan of 26 feet and a top speed of 60 mph. A crowd estimated at more than 15,000 watched him disappear into the sky at about 7,800 feet above sea level – close to a half mile above the grandstands at the racetrack, located near where East Middle School stands today.

Ely’s 18-minute flight reached the top of the divide east of Butte on his June 11 exhibition, but on Miner’s Union Day, June 13, as he began his takeoff run, crowds of people swarmed the field and he had to take off sooner than planned. A wind gust caught him, and he landed – uninjured, but the aircraft was damaged beyond immediate repair. The second airplane flight in Butte was aborted.

Just over four months after his flights in Montana, Ely was killed in a plane crash in Macon, Georgia. He was 24 years old.

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.