BAS 294 Frank Stephens Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Frank Stephens was a native of Ireland, born there in 1835 or 1836. He emigrated to the United States in 1847, most likely one of the many consequences of the Irish potato famine. Both his parents died that year when he was 11 years old, so he traveled with an older brother, first to Indiana. He joined the gold rush to Alder and Virginia City Montana in 1864, but really made his living as a rancher, first near Sheridan and then in the Deer Lodge Valley.

The story goes that on a trip into Butte in 1890 he could find no lodging place, but he saw an abandoned hole perhaps with a partial foundation at the southeastern corner of Park and Montana Streets. He acquired the lot for $499 and promptly erected a nice three-story hotel with a tall turret facing the intersection. Whether the back story is true or not, Stephens certainly did build the Stephens Block in 1890 and although he continued to own the Deer Lodge Valley ranch, he lived in Butte for the rest of his life. That was just 8 more years.

In December 1898 he fell ill to either appendicitis or a bladder problem and died. He lay in state in the hallway of the second floor of the Hotel where he and his family lived. Conveniently, there was a mortician’s office in the building on the ground floor.

Willie Lindell, whose real name was Jennie Roth, also lived in the Stephens Hotel. She was a waitress at the Theatre Comique, the dance hall just south of Park and Main. Based on artifacts and papers related to her, we know Willie Lindell was quite well-to-do. She had her clothes laundered at the Paumie Dye House, and she attended performances at the Maguire Opera House. It’s likely that her job as “waitress” entailed additional services, although the Theater Comique was certainly not really a brothel. The archive of Willie’s papers suggests that she had a relationship with the owner of a brothel at 27 East Mercury street, and probably married him about 1899, but for most of the 1890s Willie lived in Room 7 on the second floor of the Stephens Block.

Frank Stephens’ son Thomas managed the hotel for decades. It closed to residents in 1955, but the upper floors remained a snapshot of Butte history where tours were given for about 10 years until the building was sold about 2016.

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.