BAS 296 Jeanette Rankin Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Jeanette Rankin boasts several firsts. She was elected to the US House of Representatives in 1916, the first woman in the nation to be elected to Congress. She was a life-long pacifist, and was the only person to vote against the United States’ entry into both World War I and World War II. In April 1917, casting her first vote in the House, she said “I want to stand by my country, but I cannot vote for war.” She was joined by 49 other representatives in opposing the declaration. On December 8, 1941, Rankin cast the only vote against war after Pearl Harbor.

Rankin made her name as part of the campaign to give women the vote in Montana. Rankin organized an open-air demonstration at the corner of Broadway and Main in Butte in mid-July 1914, when the Montana Equal Suffrage Central Committee was also headquartered in Butte and managed by Rankin. Rankin introduced General Rosalie Jones, the national leader of the suffrage movement, who gave a rousing speech just weeks after the Miners Union Hall had been destroyed by union dissidents and weeks before Archduke Ferdinand was assassinated plunging the world into war.

Rankin’s efforts led to Montana becoming the 11th state to give women the vote in the election that November of 1914, and two years later Rankin was elected to Congress following a campaign that she kicked off in Butte. In 1916 Montana had two at-large representatives in the House, not broken into specific districts. The two top vote-getters were elected, and Rankin handily beat two other contenders to come in second. She was 35 years old.

Not surprisingly, there was some initial controversy over seating a woman in Congress. Those who opposed her focused on the word “he” in a phrase in the constitution that says no person shall be a representative “who shall not, when elected, be an inhabitant of that state in which he shall be chosen.” But the Anaconda Standard said, “It is dollars to doughnuts that the house in not going to hold Miss Rankin ineligible because of sex.” And indeed, nothing serious came from that non-issue.

Following the Granite Mountain-Speculator Mine disaster in June 1917, a far-reaching strike enveloped Butte. Representative Rankin tried to mediate between the unions and the mining companies, but the companies refused to even meet with her. She proposed legislation in the House to end the strike, but it was unsuccessful. But she did earn the wrath of the Amalgamated Anaconda Company. In August 1917 she said, “I think I know perfectly well what the Amalgamated will try to do to me. Years ago they used to put people out of the way that tried to organize the miners. Now, as you read in the daily press, they simply deport them. The result is the same. They’ll do everything to discredit me, both here in Washington and in my own state.” For various reasons including active opposition by the Anaconda Company, Rankin was not re-elected in 1918.

She continued work as a peace activist throughout her life, speaking against the Viet Nam War in 1967 when she was 86 years old. She called for abolition of the Electoral College and other pollical reforms, such that Ralph Nader characterized her this way: “Her stamina behind these ideas and ideals is absolutely staggering.” Jeanette Rankin died in May 1973 a month before her 93rd birthday. Her statue continues to represent Montana, part of the National Statuary Hall collection standing in the US Capitol Visitor Center.

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.