

Prostitution has always had two sides. Its promoters, anxious to make it a paying proposition, strove to keep its happy face turned outward and to hide its vulgar, ruinous aspects. The World War II-era pinup (below) from Butte's Dumas Hotel projects the image of the one; the dragon and illustration at far right, taken from extensive illustrations accompanying a lengthy exposé of Butte's red-light district published in 1902, capture the nature of the flesh trade's nether side.

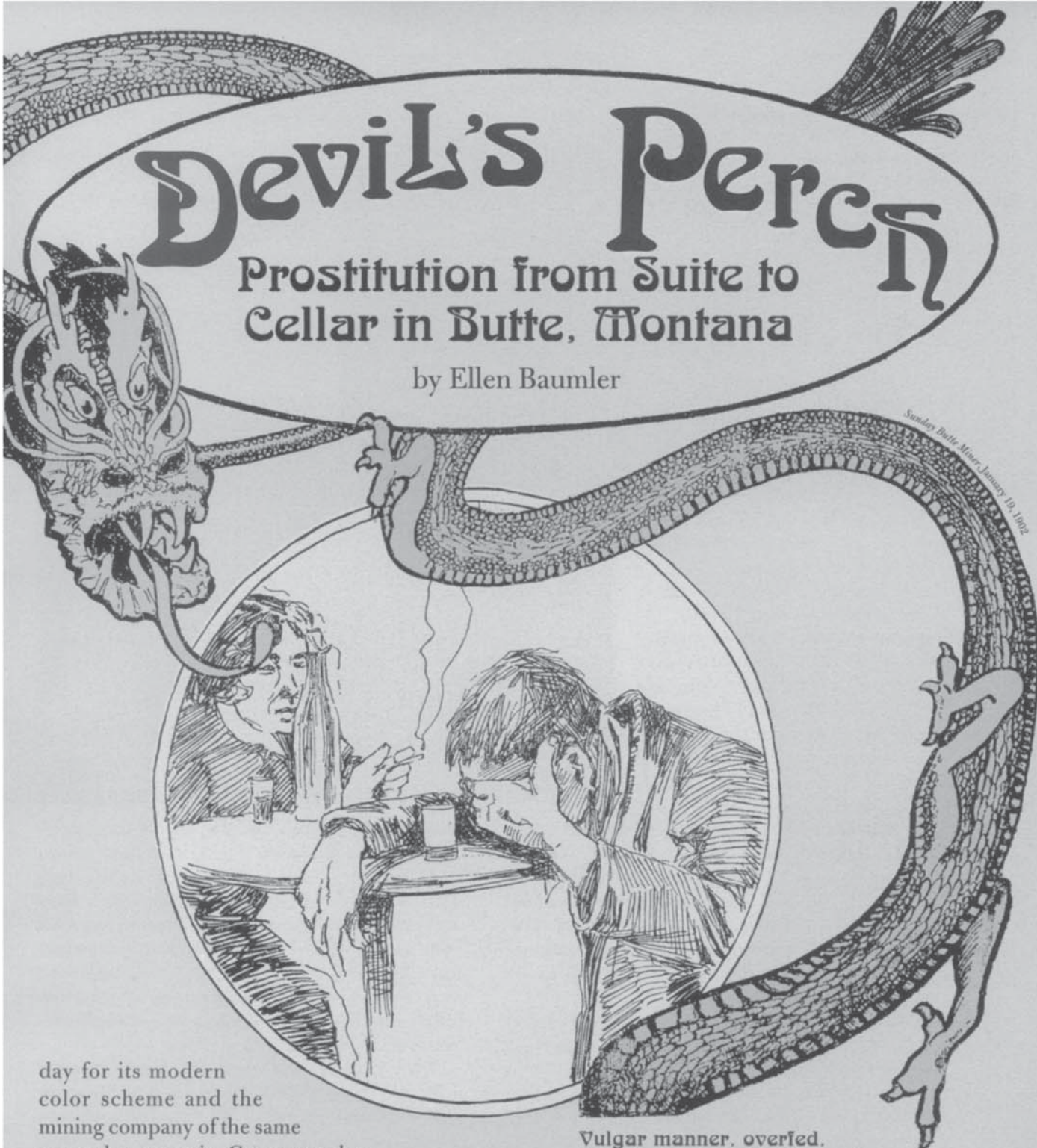


Courtesy Rudy Grech, Butte

A World War II pinup hangs in the upstairs hallway of the Dumas Hotel. The leggy subject, draped over a bed and showing plenty of cleavage, holds the model of a vintage airplane trailing the message, "Keep Em Flying." Outside the antiquated building, a sea of pavement surrounds this former parlor house in the heart of Butte, Montana. Here from the 1890s through much of the twentieth century, a thriving red-light district rivaled similar quarters in larger cities like San Francisco and New Orleans. The Dumas, built in 1890, was one of the first such houses to appear along this stretch of East Mercury Street. Today it is the centerpiece among a few other surviving structures that together provide a chronology for an important Butte business. In architectural form, they

document the changes wrought by reforms and economic influences. Architecture, written records, and a rare collection of artifacts present a picture of the economic and social milieu in which the district emerged and matured. Interpreting this part of Butte's history, entwined as it is with what preservationists call the built environment, yields a striking portrait of a business pursuit that was both flamboyant and foul.

Other important remnants of Butte's former red-light district include a brick-paved back street behind the Dumas. Originally known as Pleasant Alley, this thoroughfare became the main entrée to a network of tiny one-room cubicles, or "cribs," where public women transacted their business. Another is the Blue Range building, so-called to-



Devil's Perch

Prostitution from Suite to
Cellar in Butte, Montana

by Ellen Baumler



day for its modern color scheme and the mining company of the same name that owns it. Constructed as cribs at the turn of the century, its distinctive door and window arrangement was once a common sight along the streets of the district. The Blue Range reflects a time when women—scantily clad or cloaked in cold-weather wrappers called “shady-go-nakeds”—sat in the low windows and displayed their assets, tapping provocatively on the glass at passersby with thimbles, rings, or chopsticks.²

Vulgar manner, overfed.
Overdressed and underbred.
Heathen godless—hell's delight.
Rude by day and lewd by night.
Dwarfed the man, enlarged the brute.
Ruled by roué and prostitute.
Purple robed and pauper clad.
Raving, rotting, money-mad.
Squirring herd in Mammon's mesh.
Wilderness of human flesh.
Crazed by Avarice, Lust and Rum.
Butte, thy name is Delirium.

Butte and Montana Beneath the X-Ray, 1907-08¹



© Dave Matthews

Across the deserted street from the political advertisement stands the Dumas Hotel, circa 1990. Built in 1890, its architecture tells of the changing story of Butte's demimonde. Below, the Blue Range building, with its distinctive door and window arrangement, is one of the few remaining artifacts of what was once a thriving Butte enterprise.

Much has been

written about historic and contemporary Butte, a town long recognized for its significance as an urban mining center. The Department of the Interior designated the entire city a National Historic Landmark in 1962, and several thousand of its buildings and homes are contributing elements of a huge historic district listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Butte's red-light neighborhood has been amply discussed as well, from Charlie Chaplin's reminiscences of its beautiful women to Joseph Kinsey Howard's description of the sordid business in the 1940s.³ For all this attention, however, very little has been said about the built environment of the district, how it came to be so centrally located, why it remained viable for nearly a century, and of what intrinsic value are its physical remains.

The scale of Butte's demimonde can be linked to the pride the town had in its wide-open reputation, serving as self-expression in a place constricted by the omnipresent Anaconda Copper Mining Company (ACM), which held nearly everything under its thumb, including mines, newspapers, parks, and utilities.⁴ Nothing directly links the red-light district to ACM, but prostitution and other forms of vice, like everything



Paul Anderson, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

else, ultimately served the company. A thriving restricted district meant that thousands of single miners would spend their time and paychecks on entertainment rather than organizing against their bosses. Butte remained a rough mining camp well into the twentieth century, a "sinful city," as one writer described it, where debauchery and dissipation were considered a boon to the local economy.⁵ These idiosyncrasies, along with Butte's soot-filled air, earned the town a second name: "the perch of the devil."⁶

Before the Dumas and other parlor houses appeared on Mercury Street in the early 1890s, Galena Street one block north was the hub of Butte's red-light district. Prior to that, the "ladies of the line" who first drifted into Butte in the 1870s worked still another block north on Park Street, then the heart of the mining camp. Park Street was the city's geographic center and a logical

of having the prettiest women of any red-light district in the West, and it was true. If one saw a pretty girl smartly dressed, one could rest assured she was from the red-light quarter, doing her shopping." See also Joseph Kinsey Howard, *Montana: High, Wide, and Handsome* (1943; reprint, Lincoln, 1983), 94-95.

4. Mary Murphy, *Mining Cultures: Men, Women, and Leisure in Butte, 1914-41* (Urbana, 1997), 225.

1. Warren G. Davenport, *Butte and Montana Beneath the X-Ray: Being a Collection of Editorials from the Files of the Butte X-Ray during the Years 1907-08* (Butte, 1909), 154.

2. The *Butte Evening News*, May 10, 1905, defines the term "shady-go-naked" as underworld slang for an ulster, a long, loose overcoat.

3. The passage, frequently quoted from Charles Chaplin, *My Autobiography* (New York, 1964), 128, reads in part: "Butte boasted



Prostitution arrived in Butte with its earliest mineral strikes, but as a solid business district began to emerge the ladies of the line converged into one-room wooden cribs that lined Galena Street (right, looking west in 1901). It was the Theatre Comique (below), however, opened in the mid-1880s, that helped establish Butte's wide-open reputation.

place for legitimate enterprises, and when solid business blocks began to replace its unsightly tents and shanties the women moved south, but not far. By the mid-1880s, former "Park Street girls" had relocated in one-room wooden cribs that lined both sides of Galena Street. An array of dance halls, saloons, and gambling joints spilled into neighboring streets.⁷

While the district was in this transitional phase, the Theatre Comique opened in the mid-1880s at 13 South Main Street between the old red-light area on Park and the new district emerging on Galena. It was the Comique that in many ways helped establish Butte's early wide-open reputation. The working man's answer to the opera house, its garishly ornate facade mimicked elegant East Coast music halls.⁸ Refinement, however, was not one of its virtues. The entertainment, a blend of vaudeville and burlesque, catered to miners and laborers who came in through the front door, while respectable gentlemen could enter unseen through an alley. The back door led upstairs to a circle of private box seats with doors that could be bolted from the inside. The front of each box, enclosed by a fine mesh screen, looked out upon the main floor and stage. Scenes painted upon these screens allowed the patron to view the stage easily yet remain hidden from public view. Drinks were served through a slot in the door.



Sawdust covered the main floor where patrons sat at tables and waitresses doubled as entertainers between shows. A singing waitress could make several hundred dollars a week, minus a substantial percentage that went to her manager. Despite its bawdy-house reputation, the stage at the Comique hosted some of the great celebrities of the times, including Eddy Foy, Bobby Gaylord, Bill Mack, and Charles Murray.⁹ Location and competition caused business to dwindle in the late 1890s, however, and the Comique was demolished at the turn of the century to make way for the Metals Bank building. That structure, a more appropriate business for the half-block at the corner of West Park and South Main, still stands today.

By 1888, as Butte's business district grew to the north and west, nearly every building along East Galena Street between Main and Wyoming housed prostitution.¹⁰ The so-called "twilight zone" occupied the southeast corner of the commercial uptown blocks. Central to the Galena Street businesses was the Casino Theater at the west end of the block. A combination saloon, dance hall, prizefighting arena, theater, and brothel, the Casino's large-scale entertainments of "twilight legality" were available round the clock.

At the Casino Theater and other establishments like it, miners and millionaires rubbed elbows in alcohol-induced camaraderie. As the town became more permanent and differences between bosses and workers more pronounced, entertainments beyond the finan-

5. John K. Hutchens, *One Man's Montana: An Informal Portrait of a State* (New York, 1964), 172; Edwin Dobb, "Pennies from Hell," *Harper's*, 293 (October 1996), 39-54.

6. C. B. Glasscock, *War of the Copper Kings: Builders of Butte and Wolves of Wall Street* (New York, 1935), 87.

7. Sanborn-Perris Map Company, New York, Insurance Maps of Butte (hereafter Sanborn maps). The 1910, 1914, and 1916 maps are at the Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives, Butte, Montana (hereafter BSBA), and the maps for 1884, 1888, 1900, and 1931 are at the Montana Historical Society Library, Helena (hereafter MHS Library).

8. Writer's Program, Works Projects Administration (WPA), *Copper Camp: Stories of the World's Greatest Mining Town, Butte, Montana* (New York, 1943), 184. The WPA publication inaccurately claims that the Comique opened in 1893. The Comique appears on Sanborn map, 1888.

9. Glasscock, *War of the Copper Kings*, 94-95; *Butte Miner*, November 11, 1925.

10. Sanborn maps, 1884, 1888, 1890, 1891, 1900.

Butte prostitution was first and foremost a business, legitimized by ownership among some of Montana's most prominent citizens. Anton Holter (top right), pillar of the Helena community and for whom a lake near Helena is named today, built the Blue Range circa 1897. Butte newspaper tycoon Lee Mantle (lower right) purchased the Blue Range in 1900 on the heels of serving a term in the United States Senate.



Both photographs from *Progressive Men of the State of Montana* (New York [ca. 1902]), pp. 208, 216

cial means of the working class began to emerge. The district entered a new phase, expanding toward Arizona Street on the east and south onto East Mercury Street where in the 1890s, the Dumas and other parlor houses began to appear. These extravagant establishments underscored the wealth to be found in Butte, and a patron with empty pockets was unwelcome. By 1900, Mercury Street had a smattering of everything the district offered, boasting half a dozen parlor houses, several saloons, and numerous low-rent cribs where women of all ages and ethnic backgrounds plied their trade.¹¹

Investors and speculators, some of them prominent citizens, constructed and owned the buildings expressly designed to accommodate prostitution, a business viewed as a sound investment in a town dominated by single men. Cribs like those in Pleasant Alley and at the Blue Range could be rented by the night for two to five dollars. Such proceeds netted property owners a decent profit, but respectable businessmen did not collect them in person. Rather, they employed agents to collect their rents for them.¹²

One such landlord was Helena businessman Anton Holter, whose Montana Loan and Realty Company had a branch office in Butte. Holter was a wealthy pillar of the capital city at Helena. A Knight Templar Mason, devout Lutheran, and family man, he served as president of the Society of Montana Pioneers, in Montana's first House of Representatives in 1889, and as president of the Helena Board of Trade. Holter owned a diversity of Montana real estate, including the Blue Range cribs that his company built circa 1897. He also built and owned another series of cribs on Galena

Street, developed exclusively to house prostitution. Had they been located elsewhere, in his own town of Helena for example, Holter might have had to explain. But red-light rents were nothing more than good business investments in Butte. In fact,

some respectable women believed having the district available "protected good women" because it acted as a safeguard against Butte's rough and plentiful male population.¹³

Holter's cribs changed hands at least twenty times between 1896 and 1902, its owners including other prominent community leaders. One of these was Butte newspaper tycoon Lee Mantle, who acquired the brick building in 1900. Mantle, who had just completed a term as United States senator, owned other red-light property adjacent to the Blue Range. Born in England, Mantle came to Butte in 1877 as an agent for the Wells Fargo Express Company, established the Butte *Daily Intermountain* (later the *Daily Post*), served as Butte mayor, and was speaker of the Montana territorial house of representatives. Real estate was only one of his many business interests. If Mantle's affiliation with red-light property was public knowledge, it most assuredly did not affect his popularity, for Butte and Montana always held him in high regard.¹⁴

While most buildings housing cribs changed hands regularly, some owners kept their red-light real estate for many years. The three-story Silver Queen Block

11. Davenport, *Butte and Montana Beneath the X-Ray*, 154; Sanborn map, 1900.

12. *Butte Miner*, December 6, 1901. One of these agents was Harry Adams, who worked for the Nadeaus for at least twenty-five years. Traced through city directories and census records, Adams began his long career as a bartender at the Copper Block in 1897. He worked his way up to hotel proprietor by 1920, a position he shared with Joseph Nadeau's son, Ovila, and was considered the "czar" of the district. See also Mary Murphy, "Women on the Line: Prostitution in Butte, Montana, 1878-1917" (master's thesis, University of North Carolina, 1983), 45-46. This was a ground-breaking study and thus far the only thorough treatment of the subject specific to Butte.

13. For a biographical sketch of Anton Holter see *Progressive Men of the State of Montana* (New York [ca. 1902]), 216-18. See also the Montana Historical and Architectural Inventory (hereafter MHAI) for 32-34 East Galena and the Blue Range at 28-46 East Mercury. The MHAI is an unpublished document prepared as part of the nomination of the Butte Historic District to the National Register of Historic Places and is housed in the National Register files at the State Historic Preservation Office, Helena, Montana (hereafter SHPO), the BSBA, and at the National Register of Historic Places, National Park Service, Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C. Murphy, *Mining Cultures*, 78.



was a Galena Street rooming house with first- and second-floor cribs built in 1896 by prominent Butte investor and businessman Frank Stephens. Unlike Holter, Stephens lived in Butte at the commercial/residential block he owned on the corner of Montana and Park streets. When Stephens suddenly died of appendicitis in 1898, his son, Thomas, assumed management of his father's considerable Butte properties. In 1901, Thomas and his siblings transferred ownership of the Silver Queen Block to the Stephens Investment Company, which owned the properties until at least 1906. The company also owned cribs in Little Terrace—brick cribs that lined both sides of what was a blind alley. Little Terrace was populated by a ragtag assortment of women who, according to the Butte *Miner*, were at the bottom of the red-light hierarchy.¹⁴

The French Canadian brothers Joseph and Arthur Nadeau eventually acquired more red-light real estate than any other Butte property owners. The brothers built the Dumas at 45 East Mercury as a parlor house in 1890 and listed original ownership of the building under the name of Delia Nadeau, Joseph's wife. What Delia may have thought of this arrangement and whether she had a part in running the establishment is unknown, but at the time wives were commonly named

14. Butte City Plat Book, block 54, lots 9–16, and Deed Book 40, p.183, on file at the Butte-Silver Bow County Courthouse, Butte, Montana (hereafter BSCC); MHAI, 56 East Mercury; Butte *Evening News*, November 24, 1934. Lee Mantle, who died at age eighty-three, was lovingly eulogized and buried in the mining city.

15. Butte *Montana Standard* (hereafter *Montana Standard*), December 2, 1979, sketches a charming portrait of Frank Stephens, described by his granddaughter, Geneva Vincent Lindgren, as “the most darling man on the face of this earth.” See also *Progressive Men of Montana* on Frank and Thomas Stephens, pp. 1,232-34; MHAI, 44 East Galena; *Montana Standard*, December 2, 1979; Butte *Miner*, December 6, 1901.

16. MHAI, 45 East Mercury; Butte City Plat Book, block 41, lot 2, BSCC. Mary Vollenweider, for example, owned the Hudson Block's cribs, brothel, and rooming house at 22–30 East Galena and her



Among other businessmen with interests in the Butte tenderloin were investor Frank Stephens (top left) and Joseph Nadeau (bottom left). Stephens, who owned the Silver Queen Block, died in 1898, but his family continued ownership after his death. Nadeau, a French Canadian, with his brother, Arthur, acquired more red-light real estate, including the Dumas Hotel, than any other Butte property owner.

as property owners, either alone or jointly with their husbands. Red-light property was no exception.¹⁶

The Nadeau family arrived in Butte in 1878. During the following decade, Joseph successfully operated a restaurant and a hotel at 13 West Broadway. There were few families in Butte during the early years, and the Nadeaus seemed to have had close associations with the unsavory characters who made up much of the population. Census records for 1880 show that the Nadeau household included the couple's three children, along with gamblers and saloon-keepers who boarded with the family.¹⁷

Joseph eventually sold his businesses to engage in buying and selling real estate, listing his profession in the city directory in 1895 as “capitalist.” The lucrative Nadeau Investment Company, incorporated in 1906, owned myriad properties in Montana, Kansas, and California as well as Canada. Arthur eventually ran his end of the business in Montreal, but Joseph remained in Butte to manage concerns there. Joseph was said to have made a great deal of money from mining investments and “other lines of real estate,” as Sanders's subscription biography discreetly described his Butte properties.¹⁸ The Nadeau family made a trip around the world in 1908, and one son, Albert, graduated from Harvard with a law degree in 1911. Daughters Phedora and Rosalba married the St. Jean brothers, prominent doctors in nearby Anaconda and Wallace, Idaho. When Joseph died in 1925, another son, Ovila, was secretary/treasurer of the family company, and he long remained

husband, Henry, was the proprietor. See MHAI and Butte City Plat Book, block 41, lots 7–9, BSCC. Joseph and Margaret Williams owned the “house” at 15 East Mercury. See MHAI and Deed Book 154, p. 509, BSCC.

17. Bureau of the Census, *United States Census 1880: Territory of Montana*, Deer Lodge County, microfilm 34, p. 13, enumeration district 10 (hereafter e.d.), sheet 110A, MHS Library.

18. See the biographical sketch of Joseph A. Nadeau in Helen Fitzgerald Sanders, *A History of Montana*, 3 vols. (Chicago, 1913), 2:1,080-81.

19. On “codfish aristocracy” see Davenport, *Butte and Montana Beneath the X-Ray*, 154; Murphy, *Mining Cultures*, 142. There were two men by the name of Joseph A. Nadeau, both in real estate in Butte. The obituary for the subject of this article appeared in the *Anaconda Standard*, April 3, 1925, and the other Joseph A. Nadeau's obituary is in the *Butte Miner*, October 30, 1926.



involved in the business. That the family enjoyed a measure of prominence is evidence of Butte's lack of high society.¹⁹

The Nadeau Investment Company owned at least five lucrative properties in Butte's tenderloin, including the Copper Block, which the family built in 1892 on the corner of Galena and Wyoming. It housed many of the working women in the district and was a kind of headquarters for prostitutes who worked in nearby cribs. Local sources insist that the three-story Copper Block did not house prostitution, but the notion is suspect at best. Sanborn maps show the function of the building as "female boarding," the standard euphemism for prostitution, on "all floors."²⁰ Had the Nadeaus been concerned with appearances, they would not have kept their investment office there.

By 1900, there were at least three notable, high-class houses of prostitution in the first block of East Mercury Street and a few other lodging houses that contained ground-floor cribs and second-floor rooms. Lou Harpell's exclusive suites at 11 East Mercury, later known as the Hotel Victoria, had only a few select employees (four in 1900), but they were said to have been among the most beautiful women in the world.²¹ Another house was the Windsor Hotel at 9 East Mercury, later called the Irish World.²² At the turn of the century, this house was run by well-known madam Ruth Clifford and later, May Maloy. The Windsor's grand

20. Sanborn map, 1900.

21. Bureau of the Census, *Twelfth Census of Population 1900, Montana*, Silver Bow County, microfilm 251, roll 914 (hereafter *Census 1900*), MHS Library. Residents of 11 East Mercury appear in Silver Bow County, Butte City, c.d. 114, ward 5, sheet 3B. WPA, *Copper Camp*, 183. Lou Harpell's house was so exclusive that during a crackdown and roundup of district prostitutes, Harpell's employees did not have to appear in person and were allowed to post bail at the house. *Butte Miner*, December 31, 1903.

22. *Polk City Directories*, 1890-1929. The house seems to have first been known as the Richelieu where Lillie Reid was likely the first madam; it became the Windsor again in the 1920s. The address appears variously throughout the decades as both 7 and 9 East Mercury.

The Copper Block (left, circa 1975), demolished in the early 1990s, was owned in its heyday by the Nadeau Investment Company. Serving as a kind of headquarters for women who worked in nearby cribs, it probably housed prostitution itself. Among Butte's high-class parlor houses was the Windsor (below, no date), known for its elegance and fine appointments. The building burned in 1968.



opening was announced with tastefully engraved RSVP cards. Uniformed butlers greeted guests at the door.

A Great Falls *Tribune* photograph from the 1960s shows that the Windsor's architecture rivaled that of Butte's most prestigious homes. The fashionable three-story brick building featured rounded two-story oriel bay windows at the front corners, a central Palladian window, and elegant stone trim. The Windsor's twenty-four rooms were beautifully and expensively appointed. Satin-covered sofas and chairs, gilt-framed mirrors, tapestries, red draperies, and plants in brass jardinières furnished the two first-floor parlors. An elaborate dining room could accommodate a substantial number of dinner guests. At the back of the first floor were a kitchen and rooms occupied by a Chinese cook and two servants. Oak and mahogany graced the bedrooms on the two upper floors which, in 1900, housed eight

23. Great Falls *Tribune*, October 13, 1968; Murphy, "Women on the Line," 62; *Census 1900*, MHS Library.

24. Davenport, *Butte and Montana Beneath the X-Ray*, 39-40.

25. The Royal Rooms is the only other surviving "house" on East Mercury, now converted to a garage and electronic shop. The Royal was built circa 1900 as a saloon and dwelling for proprietor Joseph Williams. By 1910, it was rented as a brothel. See MHA1, 15 East Mercury, and Sanborn map, 1910.

26. Sanborn map, 1900; *Census 1900*, c.d. 114, ward 5, sheet 2B, MHS Library, shows that McGinnis employed prostitutes Babe Brooks, Anna King, Annie Hazelton, and Frankie Patterson, all Caucasian and in their twenties. They lived at the house.

27. *Census 1900*, c.d. 114, ward 5, sheet 3B, MHS Library.

28. *Butte Miner*, December 6, 1901.

women and thirty-nine-year-old madam Bertha Leslie.²³ About 1908, madam Ruth Clifford hosted an elaborate dinner party for the twelve young ladies who lived with her. “Miss Ruth,” the epitome of “purchased” high society, received her guests, as one observer described it:

in the ivory and gold room, which has a rich carpet of bottle green moquet with yellow flowers and Japanese silk portieres in parti-colors producing an effect which on clear nights can be heard as far as Anaconda.²⁴

The Dumas is Butte’s only surviving 1890s parlor house.²⁵ Although its architecture is more subtle than the Windsor’s, the Dumas nonetheless once had all the accoutrements of an exclusive maison de joie and was comparable in size to the other houses. Like the Windsor and the Victoria, the Dumas was constructed around a central skylight and hall following the usual plan of a respectable 1890s rooming house.

Today the two floors and cellar include forty-three rooms, but at least half of them are later partitions. The east wall of the building was shared with the “house” next door, and thus disallowed exterior windows on that side. The second-floor rooms are still in their original configuration and not further partitioned as are those on the other two floors. The rooms upstairs follow the four sides of the building and open inward to the balconied hallway, which looks down upon the first floor. A stairway at the back of the building, added later, cuts through one of the original corner rooms. Each bedroom, amply sized, is equipped with an ancient corner sink. A numbered transom appears above each door. A communal bathroom serves the second floor. Several rooms across the front, once occupied by a long succession of madams, have the benefit of glorious light from tall bay windows.

The original ground floor configuration of the Dumas, still intact in 1900 when Grace McGinnis was madam, was also probably much like that of the Windsor. Several formal parlors and a dining room likely opened onto either side of the central hallway.

The Dumas, whose architecture is more subtle than that of the Windsor, was constructed around a central skylight and hall (right), an architectural plan typical of 1890s rooming houses. Served by a communal bathroom, each second-floor Dumas room, in original configuration, offers a corner sink (upper right) and opens onto a balconied hallway that overlooks the first floor.

Heavy pocket doors, long since walled over and paneled, once separated the main rooms on the building’s west side. They could be adjusted according to the size of the party. When all the doors were opened at once, the huge space functioned as a formal ballroom. Quarters for the live-in Chinese cook and the servant McGinnis employed were at the back where the kitchen was located. Ornate embossing adorns the plaster walls on both floors. A floor plan similar to the Victoria and the Windsor, ample space, live-in servants, and the fact that McGinnis, like Lou Harpell, employed only four women, indicate that the Dumas entertained a wealthy, select clientele.²⁶

All this refinement and elegance put a pleasant facade on a sordid business. Immediately behind the Dumas and the other Mercury Street houses was a dark reality. In Pleasant Alley, which ran from South Wyoming through most of the block, the least-favored women of the tenderloin lived and worked out of small cabins and cribs. Several French prostitutes in their sixties and most of Butte’s few African American and Japanese prostitutes were residents of Pleasant Alley in 1900.²⁷ The Butte *Miner* described how thieves and pickpockets lurked in darkened doorways just a few steps away from the glamorous sporting houses:

It is a disreputable place during both day and night and sightseers from other cities marvel that such a place is allowed to exist at all, to say nothing of its close proximity to the business houses. Many robberies and stabbing affrays have taken place in the alley and at one time the police were instructed to run out every woman in it. For some reason, this was never carried out.²⁸



Both photographs courtesy the author



**Last Season's
Frock
This Season's
Success**

Color being the big thing in fashion this year, it is a simple thing to turn last year's dress into this year's style. Just send it to us . . . we are up on all the new shades, and can dye your last season's frock so it will become this season's success.

PAUMIE'S
Dyeing and Cleaning
House
Dakota at Galena Ph. 3535

Montana Standard, April 12, 1931

Butte's red-light district supported numerous other businesses, from noodle parlors, clothiers, and Chinese herbalists to dry cleaners, such as Paumie's Parisian Dye House and Cleaners, whose advertisement (above) appeared regularly in the local newspaper.

them by the hand and tell them I was one of them, but I could not touch them. I could barely touch my lips to the glasses of beer which they served.²⁹

During the 1890s and beyond the turn of the century, women openly solicited from cribs like those at the Blue Range along the major thoroughfares of Mercury and Galena streets. The *Miner* reported how the women sat in their windows or leaned out in various

Alley cribs and parlor houses represented the two extremes of the business, but there were numerous brothels and scores of street-facing cribs along Galena and Mercury streets openly visible to passing traffic. These housed women of nearly every culture, race, and age. "It was a tough hole if there ever was one," an old-timer said of Galena Street.

'Twas sin and virtue crawling through the stinking street. . . . There were some sprightly lookin' lasses down there, too. A lot of them prettier by far than the theater and society ladies with their pictures in the paper. But there was some tough lookin' blisters too. A man could have got hydrophobia from even lookin' at them.²⁹

Madeleine, self-described as a "sheltered prostitute," had five years' experience in high-class parlor houses in the East by the age of twenty-two. Yet, before coming to Butte, she had never encountered the "seamy side of the underworld." Here, Madeleine found it "under-foot at every step and there was no avoiding it." She vividly described her reaction when confronted with this iniquity in a Butte saloon along the crib-lined streets:

Despite my shuddering horror, the sight fascinated even while it repelled me. It gripped me by the throat . . . and filled me with many sad forebodings. I drew my skirts back from contact with the poor creatures. . . . I wanted to take

stages of undress, vying to see who could be the most outrageous:

With an abandon that has no trace of modesty in it, these women lean out of their windows and address the vilest kind of language imaginable to people passing on the street, or else boldly make their appearance on the thoroughfare and visit from one crib to another.³¹

The seven original sets of ground-floor doors and adjacent windows at the Blue Range make it easy to imagine the scene at the turn of the century. In addition to its own transomed street entrance and low window, each ground-floor crib at the Blue Range was less than twelve feet in width, yet came equipped with its own tiny bathroom and closet. A central corridor upstairs accessed less-expensive rooms. These were served by a common bathroom at the end of the hall. Pressed metal ceilings were the only decoration. On Galena Street other original buildings remain, like the second group of cribs built by Anton Holter, but they bear no resemblance to their original purpose. All traces of the old Galena Street, described by Butte journalist George Wesley Davis as "a street leading into hell," have been demolished or erased through remodeling. Those at the Blue Range are Butte's only remaining street-facing cribs.³²

Reformers, inspired in part by visiting evangelists who brought their crusades to Montana at the turn of the century, clamored to put an end to the embarrassing spectacle of open prostitution. They did not succeed completely, but they did effect changes in the district itself and in the ways the business was conducted. There was always much talk of relocating the women away from their central location, although no neighborhood really wanted the town's sporting women working next door. Municipal and law enforcement officials also sought to segregate prostitution and other forms of vice to better control them. It was a common dilemma and an uphill battle among Montana cities and towns, fought not just in the larger places like Butte but in such smaller communities as Kalispell, Hamilton, and Miles City where liquor flowed freely and gambling and prostitution flourished.³³ The difference was that in Butte, prostitution was intertwined with other downtown businesses and was as much a part of the scenery as the steel headframes that loomed over the landscape.

29. WPA, *Copper Camp*, 181.

30. [Madeleine], *Madeleine: An Autobiography* (1919; reprint, New York, 1986), 212.

31. Butte *Miner*, December 6, 1901.

32. Mary Murphy, "The Making of a Red Light District," unpublished overview, 1985, p. 22, National Register files, SHPO. The overview appears in Murphy, "Women on the Line"; George Wesley Davis, *Sketches of Butte: From Vigilante Days to Prohibition* (Boston, 1921), 33.

Merchants, clothiers, service providers, and other businesses depended on the women of the tenderloin, especially those employed in the “houses,” who were expected to buy their own clothing and dress impeccably. The Paumie Parisian Dye House and Cleaners relied almost exclusively upon customers from the demimonde. Established in 1887 as one of the first local dry-cleaning facilities, Paumie’s relocated from Broadway to West Galena nearer the tenderloin in 1891. Parlor-house finery such as draperies and furnishings as well as women’s apparel provided a great deal of business.³⁴ The district’s women also depended on and helped support businesses in adjacent Chinatown, where herbalists provided birth control and venereal disease remedies, and the many noodle parlors delivered inexpensive but nutritious meals to the cribs.

A mutually beneficial, symbiotic relationship between red-light women and neighboring businesses notwithstanding, controversy raged in 1901 over where to put the “badlands.” In December, the *Miner* published photographs of some of Butte’s most wretched uptown cribs. Accompanying them was a feature story that explained graphically how the district had been “a most serious obstacle in the improvement of . . . two of the main arteries of the city.” Unable or unwilling to fathom either relocating or closing the district, Butte’s mayor and police chief instead issued orders for the women of Galena and Mercury streets to lengthen their skirts, don high-necked blouses, and “refrain from any indecent exposures,” or risk being arrested. The morning after taking these steps, the *Miner* reported, “nothing was seen in the district excepting long dresses and long faces. What the women say about the matter is not fit for publication.”³⁵

A few weeks later, in an effort to discourage solicitation on Galena and Mercury streets further, Chief of Police James M. Reynolds ordered women in the cribs to lower their blinds. The dress code and even the fines had caused little outcry, but this outraged the district’s women. They complied, but only after cutting holes in the blinds for their faces. To demonstrate their anger, the women transformed Galena Street into what sounded like a telegraph office. According to the *Miner*, “There was a constant ticking. . . . They tapped on the

windows with thimbles and rings . . . attracting the attention of passersby, and after doing so said soft things to them.” Residents of one alley, irate over reformers’ efforts to dictate the women’s most intimate behavior, angrily told the *Miner*: “the moralists of the city were getting too fresh.”³⁶

Fines were an ongoing source of antagonism. It was well known that money collected from the district’s women fattened the purses of police and other city officials. Such fines constituted a common practice, and in Butte, city officials had it down to a science. Each month the city clerk issued receipts to the police chief, who then collected five dollars from every woman working in the district. The revenue, minus 10 percent for the chief, went to the police court and then through the system as forfeited bonds. Some of the revenue, the *Miner* reported, ended up in the pockets of city councilmen who, according to those who were against the system, “were just as bad as the girls, for they lived partially off the earnings of these women.” Although Mayor William Davey said the fines were “not good money,” many crib tenants on Galena and Mercury streets said they were willing to pay their five dollars as long as the district remained where it was. It did.³⁷

In January of 1903, the city administration took action to enforce a previous resolution consigning red-light activities to the alleys between Mercury and Galena streets. Only parlor houses or two-story buildings on those streets were permitted to house tenderloin denizens, and these women could not occupy the street floors. Such restrictions had a profound effect on the district’s appearance and makeup. In many cases, windows and doors were simply cut into the backs of existing street-front cribs. The older and more unattractive women, hitherto banished to obscure alleyways, found themselves in search of other quarters as the Mercury and Galena Street regulars usurped these back streets.³⁸

It was this move into the alleys that led to the creation of a backyard maze of twists, turns, and dead ends that became central to the business of prostitution in Butte after the turn of the century. Between 1903 and 1916 the alleys were transformed into a labyrinth of terraced cribs, some two and three stories high. A series of three-sided, multistoried cribs with an open second-story walkway, euphemistically known as Copper King Terrace, was added at the rear of the Copper Block. Besides Pleasant Alley and Copper King Terrace,

33. Butte *Miner*, January 16, 1902; Robert A. Harvie and Larry V. Bishop, “Police Reform in Montana, 1890-1918,” *Montana The Magazine of Western History*, 43 (Spring 1983), 47.

34. *Madeleine*, 215. See also Murphy, *Mining Cultures*, 111, wherein the story of how one prostitute stepped out of her dress to give it to Paumie’s delivery boy, putting on the clean one he had just

brought her, is described. Chaplin, *My Autobiography*, 128; MHAJ, 54-60 West Galena.

35. Butte *Miner*, December 6, 7, 1901.

36. *Ibid.*, January 20, 1902.

37. *Ibid.*, January 16, 1902.

38. *Ibid.*, January 3, 1903.

there were other alleys like Model Terrace, New Terrace, and Old-Fashioned Terrace. Women by the hundreds worked within this "terrace" system, and along the narrow passageways, cribs on either side reeked of hair oil, cheap perfume, and disinfectant.³⁹

All this activity in the backyards of the Mercury Street parlor houses naturally affected established businesses, too, especially the Dumas, because its back door opened into the busiest section of Pleasant Alley. The two exclusive houses at the west end of the block, the former Lou Harpell's and the Windsor (by this time called the Irish World), were less affected because they were located at the district's quieter end. In 1910, madam Ruth Clifford at the Irish World listed seven resident prostitutes and employed male live-in Chinese domestics. The other Mercury Street houses also listed between five and ten resident prostitutes, but the spacious Dumas recorded only two. Clearly, Dumas business practices had changed drastically. Women no doubt continued to work out of the rooms but did not reside there. Likely, they were employed in endless shifts coinciding with those of the mines. Soirees were no longer staged in the elegant Dumas parlors, and the luxurious upstairs suites were no longer a playground for the wealthy, most of whom by this time had returned East. For those who remained, elaborate social pretense was no longer a marketable commodity.⁴⁰

Butte's restricted district began to lose its glamour and wealthy clientele, and as it did, the stark contrasts and flamboyance that had made the demimonde so compelling to early journalists began to disappear. With an increasingly seedy reputation, the district began attracting famed evangelists like a magnet. In 1905, the Reverend William Biederwolf proclaimed Butte the "lowest sinkhole of vice in the west." Biederwolf said he found "enough legitimate vice in Butte to damn the souls of every young man and young woman in it." Revival services, held at the Casino by special arrangement with the management, brought nearly a thousand

curious men and women to hear the reverend's sermon, which he preached before the footlights. "The pit was jammed with . . . rounders, gamblers and habitués of the red-light district," the *Miner* reported. "The boxes were filled with women of the lower world attired in their gaudy dresses of flimsy materials, accompanied . . . by their secretaries and paramours."⁴¹

Despite the reformers' best efforts, Butte's demimonde was larger and seedier than ever by 1910. That year the federal census recorded Butte's highly transient population at more than 39,000 and enumerated more than 250 prostitutes.⁴² In 1910 when temperance crusader Carrie Nation came to Butte, "booze joints" in nearby Anaconda sported signs that read: "All Nations Are Welcome Except Carrie." Butte's morally upright citizens, who had invited Nation, welcomed her with open arms, yet her performance failed to match their expectations.⁴³ With a flourish and a crowd in tow, the stout sixty-three-year-old Nation charged down the length of Pleasant Alley. Once back on Mercury Street, she stormed into the Irish World, where she met her match in madam May Maloy. The two women joined in a scuffle, and Nation emerged the obvious loser. It was a moment savored by May's patrons and celebrated with drinks all around.⁴⁴

Moralists counted one definitive victory in 1910, however. A few months after Carrie Nation elbowed her way through the district, the Casino was demolished to make way for a parking garage, the "largest and most complete west of Chicago." The Casino, a "distinguished ill-looking landmark," quipped the *Miner*, was a reminder of the dim past when "high living was a feature of nights in the greatest mining camp on earth." Souvenirs of the building were advertised as free for the taking: "What stories the old bricks in the walls and the old boards in the wine stalls could tell."⁴⁵

In January 1911, one hundred businessmen petitioned Mayor Charles P. Nevin to move the district.



From Tom Stout, *Montana* (Chicago, 1921), v. 2, opp. p. 386

By 1910, Butte's demimonde had grown seedier but larger than ever.

Striving to shut it down in 1911, reformers petitioned Mayor Charles Nevin (above) to close the district.

The tenderloin was too great a contributor to city coffers, however, providing some \$2,000 a month, and the effort fizzled.

39. Some alley addresses are enumerated in *Census 1900*, but many more are found in *Thirteenth Census, Montana, 1910*, Silver Bow County, microfilm 377, roll 836, e.d. 103, ward 5, sheet 2 (hereafter *Census 1910*), MHS Library.

40. *Census 1910*, ward 5, sheet 1B, line 48, MHS Library; Murphy, *Mining Cultures*, 142.

41. Butte *Miner*, May 5, 10, 1905. "Secretary" in this context is a term used only for males and seems to be peculiar to Butte's demimonde.

42. Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States* (1911; reprint, Washington, D.C., 1995), 1,143. The census lists the total Butte population for 1910 at 39,165; *Census 1910*, e.d. 103, ward 5, MHS Library.

Brightened only by a bare light bulb and the photographer's flash, this inside view (right) of a first-floor Dumas crib offers stark reminders of a bygone era. The room once opened onto Pleasant Alley and shows worn flooring under the window where women waited to attract business. On the wall at upper left is a copy of the "Keep Em Flying" poster. Trapdoors like the one behind a dresser (lower right) led to hiding spaces under the floor used during raids.



Both photographs courtesy the author

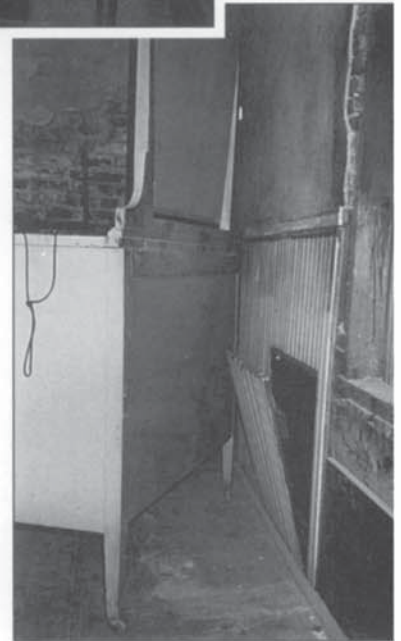
Mayor Nevin and city officials prepared to comply with the demand by assembling a "blue army" to invade and close the tenderloin at midnight on January 31. Before anything happened, however, a counterpetition, signed by some of the original complainants, asked the mayor to reconsider. Savvy as they were, the businessmen concluded that the cribs could be put to no other use, and that many nearby businesses would lose significant clientele if the district moved. In the end, the district's women packed up their little lapdogs and other belongings and temporarily closed the district themselves. Expecting the emotional furor to die down and good business sense to prevail in time, they vacated the premises for several weeks. When it did, they quietly returned. The women realized that the municipal revenues from the district were substantial: based on a \$10 fine collected from every woman working the district, the city took in an average of \$2,000 per month.⁴⁶

As the district compacted visibly into the alleys after 1903, basement expansion created another network of hidden cribs. Like Butte's male population that worked underground in the mines, many of its red-light women followed suit, moving to underground cellar cribs. Evidence of this subterranean system is apparent at the Dumas in several places. At the end of the basement hallway is a door bulging with the weight of sand on its opposite side. Only recently, the city filled the passageway behind the door when an accident caused part of the tunnel to collapse. Such tunnels were part of the city's early steam heating system and once ran under the entire downtown area. Such a subterranean labyrinth provided easy access to cellar cribs like

those at the Dumas. Local legend has it that a man could enter from a business block, visit the tenderloin, and return unseen.⁴⁷

Behind one side of the Dumas's basement cribs is an ancient boiler, and beyond that, by climbing over broken crockery and other debris, one can find an isolated crib under the stairway where someone eked out a living in deplorable conditions. Small on any scale, this room is less than half the size of other Dumas basement cribs. Workers found numerous squalid, tiny cells like it in the basement of the Copper Block before its demolition. Today the city has filled in most of these areas with sand.⁴⁸

The district's basements and tunnels protected it from reformers' ongoing efforts to make prostitution less profitable. After the brief closing in 1911, city offi-



43. Butte *Miner*, January 28, 29, 1910.

44. Dave Walter, "How Butte Beat Carrie Nation's Temperance Crusade," *Montana Magazine*, 59 (May-June 1983), 9-12; *Anaconda Standard*, January 27, 1910.

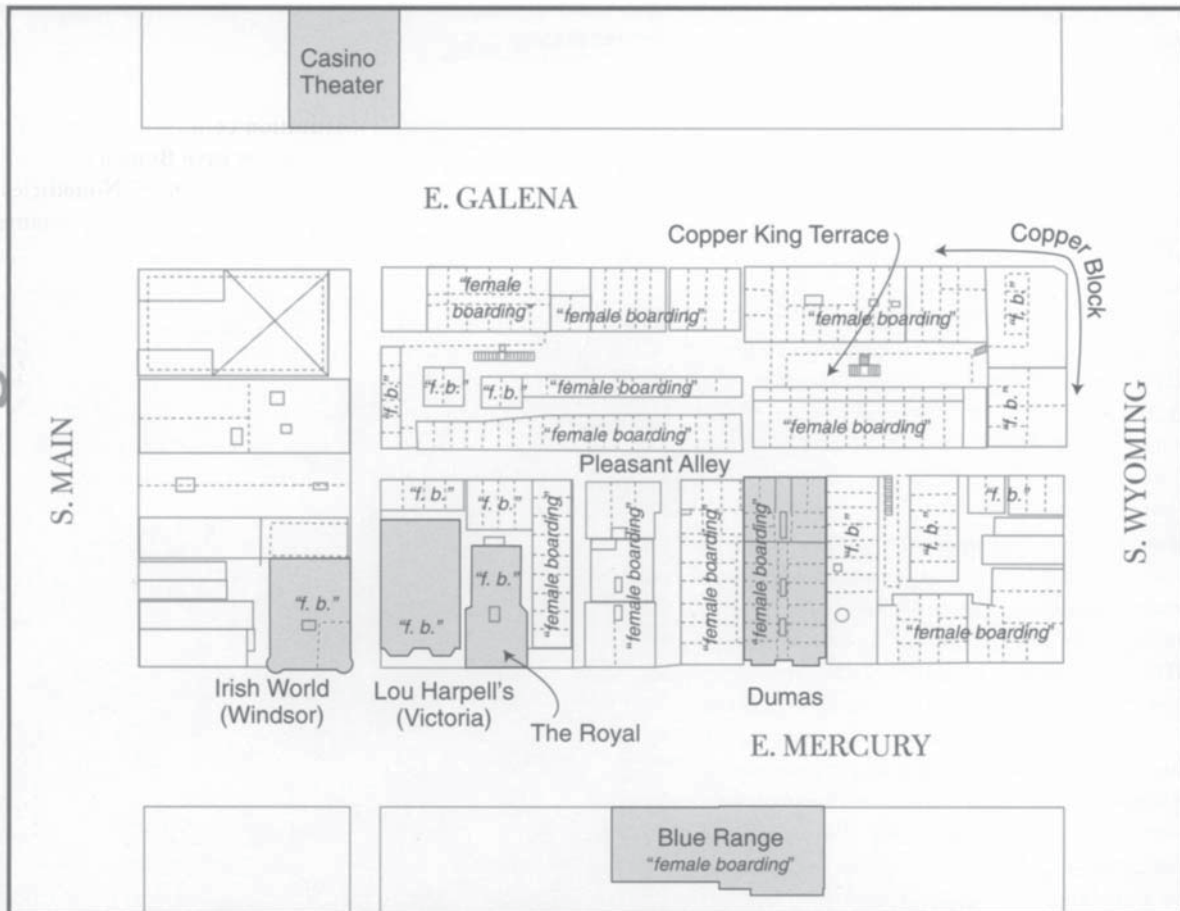
45. *Anaconda Standard*, May 21, 1910.

46. Butte *Miner*, January 31, February 1, 1911.

47. Rudy Giecek, interview with author, September 17, 1996, Butte, Montana; Mark Reavis, Butte-Silver Bow County Historic Preservation Officer, conversation with author, October 16, 1996.

48. Mark Reavis conversation, October 16, 1996.

Butte's Red-Light District



Adapted from Sanborn-Perris Insurance Map, 1916

Booming demand for copper during World War I translated into structural change for Butte's tenderloin as proprietors sought to cash in on higher wages for an increasing number of young, single miners. The map above indicates the proliferation of cribs and proximity of the Dumas, Copper Block, Windsor, Victoria, Blue Range, and other buildings.

cial next prohibited saloons and liquor within the district's confines. By then, most houses, even the elegant Irish World, had added saloons. Red-light businesses relied upon liquor not only to induce patrons but for income as well. Basement cribs like those at the Dumas, interconnected by the tunnels, provided a ready-made and hidden delivery system, as at least one police officer working the red light in 1913 reported to the *Miner*. Houses above the tunnels were often equipped with trapdoors for clandestine deliveries.⁴⁹

Building records show that the Nadeaus expanded the Dumas in 1913 by adding the cribs at the back of the building. The Sanborn map of 1914 includes this addition, while the original ground floor still retained

its parlor house configuration with no partitions. In January 1916, when copper prices rose to 20 cents a pound and more than 14,000 miners received a 25-cents-a-day pay raise, an extra \$6,000 a day went into the local economy. In response, the red-light district literally exploded with building activity. The 1916 Sanborn map shows nearly every district space and building was further divided into cribs. The Dumas followed suit, adding five partitions and a stairway. Physical evidence suggests the back stairway replaced the original grand staircase, making it easier to keep customers confined to the lower floors. The map also indicates that for the first time, the Dumas's ground floor was partitioned into cribs.⁵⁰

Such remodeling mirrors the basement arrangement except that the added first-floor woodwork is more

49. Butte *Miner*, October 23, 1913.

50. Butte *Daily Post*, January 14, 1916; MHA1, 45 East Mercury; Sanborn maps, 1914, 1916. Also, compare Sanborn maps 1900 to 1914 and 1916.

51. Murphy, "Women on the Line," 99; Bascom Johnson and Paul M. Kinsie, "Prostitution in the United States," *Journal of Social Hygiene*, 19 (December 1933), 469; Howard B. Woolston, *Prostitution in the United States: Prior to the Entrance of the United States into the World War*, Publications of the Bureau of Social Hygiene (New York, 1921), 157-58; Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of Population 1920*, microfilm 432, roll 976, e.d. 207, ward 3A, sheet 4B, line 34, MHS Library.

52. "Bad" in this context described the numbers of prostitutes and the perceived negative impact prostitution had on communities. See Johnson and Kinsie, "Prostitution in the United States," 474. Other cities that shared "bad" ratings were Kansas City, Missouri; Memphis, Tennessee; Raleigh, North Carolina; Norfolk, Virginia; Syracuse, New York; Reno, Nevada; New Orleans, Louisiana; and Pocatello, Idaho. Surprisingly, San Francisco rated "poor" and "bad"; Chicago rated "poor" and "poor"; New York City rated "good" and "good."

ornate than that in the cellar. The moldings of 1916 are also stylistically different from the original interior finishing. The central ground-floor hallway, lit by the skylight above, is much like an outdoor courtyard or street with doors and windows on either side. Maps and records show clearly that the cribs were a product of the transition from parlor house to simple rooms.

World War I and Prohibition pressured city officials further. Caught up in a national reform movement, Butte, along with two hundred other American cities, ostensibly closed its red-light district in January 1917. The Blue Range became a true boardinghouse, and the four thousand men who previously strolled the Pleasant Alley "boardwalk" every Saturday night had to look elsewhere to spend their paychecks. By the end of the year, prostitutes who had solicited openly in houses, rooms, hotels, restaurants, dance halls, and on the streets worked only behind the doors of rooming houses. By the time of the 1920 census, prostitution as a declared profession had disappeared entirely from the record. Proprietors of the now-transformed parlor houses simply added single male boarders to their lists of lodgers. At the Dumas, for example, thirty-five-year-old "landlady" Martha Belmont and her single "housekeeper" had twelve such miners as lodgers. But certainly not all forty-three rooms accommodated boarders. Inside cribs were still open for business, and known prostitutes declared other professions. Madam Marie Demonstrand, owner of the Windsor during the 1920s, for example, claimed to be a manicurist in a barbershop. During Prohibition, prostitution, like alcohol, simply went undercover.⁵¹

A decade later, Butte's red-light business was booming again, if on a smaller



MHS Museum, Helena

scale. A study of prostitution conditions in fifty-eight cities across the United States gave Butte a bad rating in 1927-1928 and again in 1932-1933.⁵² Nonetheless, Butte's restricted district had been further contained and by the 1930s consisted of only a few houses and the alleyways between Mercury and Galena streets, notably Pleasant Alley, which had a new name: Venus Alley. The alley ends had been closed off and a board fence, painted green, blocked its ends. Signs saying, "Men Under 21 Keep Out" were a grim reminder that underage males did men's work in the mines before they came of legal age. Because a new high school was only several blocks away, women of the tenderloin were not allowed to appear before 5:00 P.M. Joseph Kinsey Howard described the cribs of Venus Alley as "dingy, crude offices for a revolting 'business'" that even in Butte was "a little furtive."⁵³

Still, a few of Butte's fading parlor houses remained in continuous operation well into the twentieth century. Anna Vallet ran the Dumas for the Nadeaus during the late 1920s, and Lillian Walden was madam there in the 1930s and 1940s. Most of the Dumas's forty-three rooms were in use until 1943, when the federal government ordered all houses of prostitution closed to check the spread of venereal diseases among the troops during World War II.⁵⁴ As a result, the Dumas cribs, including those at the back opening onto Venus Alley and those in the basement, were closed abruptly.

Courtesy the author





By the 1930s, Butte's red-light district had been substantially confined. Pleasant Alley (lower right with its window and door arrangement clearly visible) had been renamed Venus Alley, and a board fence blocked its ends with signs posted for those under twenty-one to keep out. Women could not appear before 5:00 P.M.

Even after its cribs closed, the Dumas continued to operate under the guise of "rooming house" or "hotel." Women still sat in the front windows in 1953, attempting to attract customers by tapping the glass with rings, knitting needles, and other items. Customers rang a bell for admittance, and a heavy steel door at the back, equipped with a small sliding window, afforded a more secretive entrance. One of the first-floor rooms, remodeled as a break room with a pay phone on one wall, attested to progress. Behind the building, Venus Alley had lost its dubious attraction entirely and earned a third, less captivating name: Piss Alley.⁵⁵

In the 1960s, madam Beverly Snodgrass bought the antique-filled, dilapidated but still-operating Windsor. After a suspicious fire closed the building in 1968, Snodgrass went to the Internal Revenue Service and to the Washington offices of Montana state senators Mike Mansfield and Lee Metcalf, claiming that local officials burned her out for nonpayment of "protection" money. She said she had been paying \$700 a month to Butte police since 1963, and that uniformed policemen

were in the habit of demanding the services of her girls. Snodgrass said she paid her employees for these interludes from her own pocket. Further, Snodgrass hired a local detective who theorized in his report that although "many believe prostitution in Butte is controlled by some national syndicate, the syndicate is made up purely of local individuals, most of them so-called officials." Senator Mansfield confirmed that he and Snodgrass had met and indicated in a telegram to the Great Falls *Tribune* that he had called for an investigation into her charges, but he concluded the matter was not within federal jurisdiction.⁵⁶

The scandal received little attention in the local paper (the *Montana Standard*), but Butte's Mayor Tom Powers told a Great Falls *Tribune* reporter: "The people of Butte want prostitution." He added: "At least we're honest in Butte and admit we've got houses of prostitution." In an eight-part series on Butte's vice that detailed finger-pointing and buck-passing among city, county, and state officials, the *Tribune* reported

53. Howard, *Montana: High, Wide, and Handsome*, 94-95.

54. "Tales of the Dumas Parlor House: The Mining City's Last Brothel, 1890-1982," promotional pamphlet, 1995, p. 3, Butte, Montana, available at the Dumas.

55. Monroe Frye, "The Three Last Wide-Open Towns," *Esquire*, 47 (June 1953), 49, 122; Giecek interview, September 17, 1996. According to Giecek, this was the name known to Ruby Garrett.

56. Great Falls *Tribune*, October 13, 15, 1968. Snodgrass ran for constable in the local primary election of June 1968 and received 463 votes.



When Rudy Giecek bought the Dumas from Ruby Garrett in the 1990s, little did he realize how undisturbed the hotel premises still were. Back rooms and downstairs cribs like the one above had remained nearly untouched since the early 1940s. Giecek obtained return of some fixtures, such as the ceiling light he holds (above right), and sought to maintain others such as ten-minute timers and scrip, used instead of cash (right), and Butte Beer bottles (below center). Other items—vintage clothing, old photographs, and cigarette butts—survived as they had been left, as did call buttons (below right) still mounted to the wall.



All photographs courtesy the author



Much that was Butte's demimonde has disappeared, but where vestiges remain the Butte-Silver Bow Urban Revitalization Agency seeks to recognize and preserve. Metal figures (left) seem to walk beside the site of the former Copper Block, while Copper Block Park (below) commemorates the tenderloin's admittedly illicit but undeniably significant role in Butte history.



Both photographs courtesy the author

that several police officers took it upon themselves to close Butte's three operating houses personally. The closure didn't last long, and the Dumas continued under Bonita Farren and then under Ruby Garrett who, as Mercury Street's and Butte's last known madam, operated the place until 1982.⁵⁷

Reports of Garrett's life read like a movie script.⁵⁸ Convicted of murdering her abusive husband in a Butte bar in 1959, Garrett served nine months at the state prison at Deer Lodge. In 1971, she returned to Butte and bought the Dumas, buying silence, she says, from Butte police officers for \$200 to \$300 a month. At that time customers paid about \$20 for the services of one of her employees. After a brutal assault and holdup in 1981 drew attention to her business, Garrett was charged with federal income tax evasion, convicted, and sentenced to six months at a minimum security facility in California. She agreed to close the Dumas and paid \$10,000 in back taxes. Prior to her going to jail, Garrett's friends and neighbors gave her a going-away party at a local bar. With this, prostitution, as Butte had known it, came to an end.⁵⁹

Rudy Giecek bought the Dumas from Garrett in the early 1990s with the promise that he would keep it intact. When he investigated the Dumas's basement and back rooms, he was amazed to find the cribs nearly as they had been left in 1943. Midway down the dingy basement stairway, Giecek could see where customers had waited their turns and employees took breaks. A wall with decades of match strikes shows how they passed the time smoking. In the dimly lit basement

hallway, the door and window arrangement mirrors that of the Blue Range.

In the basement cribs, Giecek found the tools of the trade and long forgotten personal effects: scores of grape brandy and Butte Beer bottles; cigarette butts; jars of Vaseline; medicine bottles; dingy bedding and once-colorful quilts; vintage clothing and shoes; old photographs; ten-minute timers; war-effort calendars from the 1940s; a miner's carbide lamp; and posters like "Keep Em Flying" tacked to the walls. A glass globe fire extinguisher, its carbon tetrachloride contents still sloshing, hangs outside one door.⁶⁰ Discarded chewing gum remains stuck behind the bedframes or is painted over in the doorjamb. A penciled list of incorrectly tallied figures decorates one crib's faded wallpaper. Each small room on either side of the corridor still has its call button, used in code to request drinks, food, or assistance. Unlike the classier upstairs rooms equipped with sinks, these basement cribs have only an old-fashioned washbasin and an occasional chamber pot.

Ruby Garrett herself has expressed a keen awareness of the historical significance of the Dumas and understands that her own experiences in the profession have a place in Butte's history. "I know the old madams would be happy up there in heaven if they knew it was preserved," she says. Today the Dumas is open to the public despite its sad condition and Giecek does

57. Ibid., October 17, 18, 1968; *Montana Standard*, February 22, 1991; *Polk City Directories*, 1920-1982. The directories show the Dumas vacant during Ruby Garrett's stint as manager.

58. *Montana Standard*, June 9-11, 18, 22, 1959, June 23, 1982.

59. Ibid., June 23, 1982.

60. Theoretically, the heat would cause the glass to burst, spilling the chemical. If the fire were electrical, the chemical became extremely hazardous.

61. *Montana Standard*, February 23, 1991. Tax-free donations can be earmarked for the Dumas. For more information write the National Historic Landmarks Assistance Fund and the National Historic Landmarks Survey Fund, National Park Foundation, Ste. 1102, 1101 17th St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

62. On the demolition of the Copper Block see *Montana Standard*, January 25, 1990.

his best to share what he knows about the building's history. Amidst efforts to save the Dumas, Giecek and the new owners continue to battle financial and structural problems.⁶¹

It should not be surprising to learn that Butte's red-light district was never static. Rather, it was a changing entity within the confines of its singular purpose. Most businesses go through transformations necessary to keep their services viable; so, too, did prostitution in Butte. The building sequences reflect the changing social patterns and attitudes that witnessed the district's rough and wide-open origins along Galena Street, its blossoming into the glamorous golden age of the Mercury Street parlor houses, and its ultimate retreat to the shadows of the alleys. Conversions of cribs and brothels to different uses and demolition of other red-light landmarks signal the decline of prostitution in the mining city.

Butte's red-light district has a complicated past in which the tangible, preserved buildings are of tantamount importance. In the attempt to understand the social history of illegal activities, the built environment of these institutions is often neglected. The Butte-Silver Bow Urban Revitalization Agency has taken an unprecedented first step to reverse the oversight by

recognizing the importance of this part of the city's heritage, an aspect that some frankly find disconcerting. A new parking lot now covers the corner where the Copper Block once stood, but along its edges the agency has created Copper Block Park to commemorate the women who once made their livings in the district.⁶² The next step is to encourage visitors to an area where, in recent decades, few cared to venture. Third, and most important, will be the ongoing preservation of the few structures and artifacts that remain. The Dumas and its artifacts, the bricks of Pleasant Alley, the marvelous facade of the Blue Range, and other district elements visually interpret the long and complex history of prostitution in Butte. They are a prototype for further study of the oldest profession at all its levels, from high-class suite to cellar crib. *M*

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Pleasant Alley, by then called Venus Alley, as it appeared in the 1930s, with a smattering of denizens and a board fence blocking its far end. Story has it that when anyone appeared with a camera all the women vanished, so Butte photographer C. Owen Smithers snapped this rare, daylight image with a concealed "buttonhole" camera.



World Museum of Mining, Butte