

The End of the Line: Butte, Anaconda, and the Landscape of Prostitution

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First Came the Miners

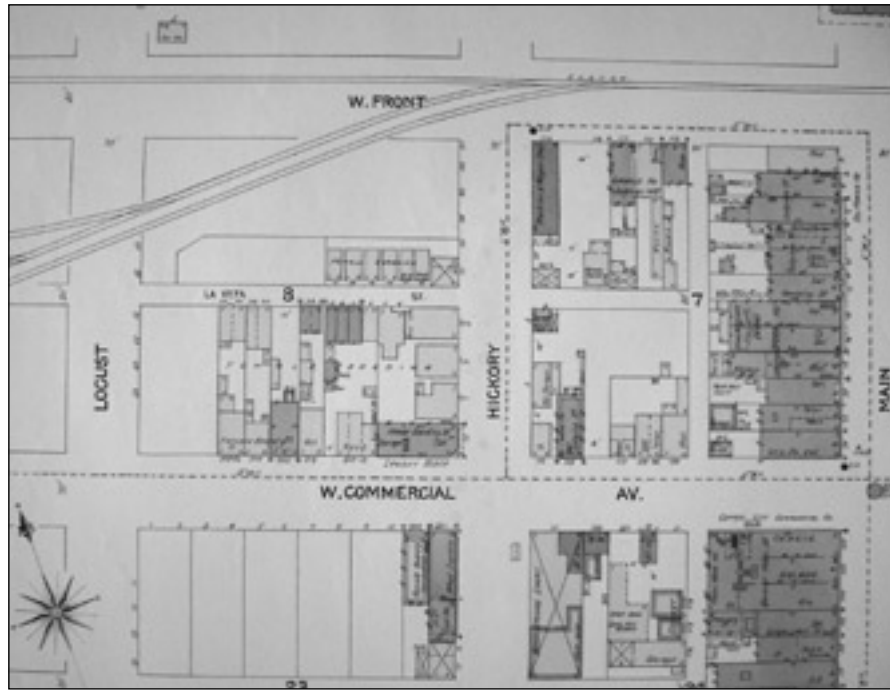
At the bottom of the dingy basement stairway, rooms open to either side of a tunnel-like corridor. At the far end, a door once gave access to a flight of stairs up to the street level. These are no ordinary rooms, but rooms simply partitioned. The cold stone foundation forms the back wall of each room, and they all share one peculiarity that reveals their purpose: each cubicle has its own door with a numbered transom and a tall, double-hung window. This door-window-door-window pattern, once common in towns across the West, is the architectural signature of prostitution. Cribs, or “offices,” like these in the basement of the Dumas Hotel were common in the red-light districts of Butte and Anaconda, Montana. Such areas, limited either by practice or by city ordinance to prostitution, are also commonly referred to as “restricted” districts. Today, there are no surviving remnants of this important business in Anaconda, but on the streets of Butte, surprising elements remain if you know where to look.

Like all western boomtowns, both Butte and Anaconda drew the ladies of the line at the first signs of settlement. A bawdy gold rush ballad recounts this phenomenon: “First came the miners to work in the



The Dumas Hotel is Butte's last standing parlor house, operated from 1890 to 1981. Photograph by Ellen Baumler.

mine, then came the ladies who lived on the line.” It applied to the silver mining camp of Butte in the 1870s and to the smelertown of Anaconda in the early 1880s, both of which had significant populations of single men. The first “ladies of the line” who drifted into Butte in the 1870s worked along Park Street, then the heart of the camp. Miners were not particular about the company they kept, and these women were simply part of the community. But when solid business blocks began to replace the unsightly temporary tents and shanties along Park Street, the city’s geographic center and logical place for legitimate businesses, the women moved one street south to Galena Street. In the mid-1880s, former “Park Street girls” relocated



Sanborn map of Anaconda, Montana.

there in one-room wooden cribs that lined both sides of the street. Dance halls, saloons, and gambling joints spilled over onto neighboring streets. By the late 1890s, Butte's restricted district had half a dozen luxurious parlor houses, numerous brothels, and hundreds of cribs, thereby earning its comparison with the much larger red-light districts of San Francisco and New Orleans.¹

In Anaconda, prostitution in the 1880s clustered

around First and Hickory streets in flimsy wooden shacks and cribs, centered around one parlor house known as the "Globe." The city jail, across the alley to the north, shared the block, a common juxtaposition in Montana towns. By 1891, a substantial, two-story brick brothel at 203 West First Street (later Commercial Street) catered to a slightly higher-class clientele than did the other, less permanent prostitution-related buildings. The house shared a party wall with a wholesale liquor store. A porch spanned the front, and windows—convenient for soliciting—lined the open side and back; a skylight in the roof lit the upper story. This and one other large, brick, single-story establishment at 222 West First Street bear the label "female boarding," the historic Sanborn-Perris Map Company's euphemism for prostitution. Another, more permanent establishment, the Landry Block, built between 1891 and 1896, featured a saloon on the ground floor and brothel rooms on the second floor accessed by an interior stairway at the back of the saloon. Other suspect buildings spread out across the north side of

West First Street between Hickory and Locust streets and the alley behind to the north, named La Vita (Veta) Street. The district included less than a square block. Size, however, was not the only difference between Anaconda's district and that of Butte.²

In most western towns, Chinese settlements and red-light districts adjoined. There were good reasons for this. Both prostitutes and the Chinese were outcast populations, in many places even confined by city ordinance to specific neighborhoods. In Butte, public women permanently located in an area roughly bounded by East Galena and East Mercury on the north and south and South Wyoming and Main streets on the east and west. Butte's Chinatown, eventually the largest in Montana, spread out on the opposite side of Main Street to the west along West Mercury. Prostitutes frequented the Chinese noodle parlors, where meals were cheap and hearty. They also relied on Chinese herbalists and physicians to supply them with birth control methods and cures for venereal diseases, neither of which were readily available from the mainstream medical community. Chinese physicians and pharmacists had opium at their disposal. Opium administered under supervision, to the point of overdose, induced spontaneous abortion. For these reasons, red-light districts typically adjoined Chinese neighborhoods.³

Anaconda's Chinatown, however, was an

exception. The Chinese were a vibrant element in Anaconda's early community, although they endured the same discrimination as they did in most Montana towns. Anti-Chinese legislation brought much suffering to this ethnic group in the nineteenth-century West.⁴ In Anaconda, the Chinese settled six blocks away from the red-light activity, to the east along Birch Street between First (Commercial) and Second (Park) streets. They set up laundries, opened enterprising businesses, and worked in private households as domestics and cooks. The Chinese commonly took the blame whenever there was no clear fault. On November 30, 1889, for example, the *Anaconda Standard* reported that madam Belle Riley's parlor house, between Front and First streets, caught fire and burned to the ground. Expensive parlor furniture and two trunks of belongings were all that survived. Because Belle employed a Chinese servant, officials assumed that the fire was his fault.

By 1902, Anaconda's Chinese population, which had once swelled to four hundred, had dwindled to a handful; most had moved on or settled in Butte's much larger district.⁵ This is partly because the Chinese competed with Anaconda's women in domestic and laundry services. Women in mining towns and elsewhere had few business opportunities. This was especially true of Anaconda, where women were even more limited to operating boardinghouses and providing laundry services. Because Anaconda was a



The Butte Miner featured the red-light district in the Sunday edition of January 19, 1902.

company town, other private enterprises, for women and particularly for the Chinese, were not easy to establish and maintain.

The appearance of Anaconda's brick brothels parallels the pattern in Butte, but Butte, with its larger population, offered more establishments from which to choose. Cries and brothels appeared along Galena Street, while one block to the south on East Mercury

Street, half a dozen high-class establishments were evenly spaced along the north side of the street. The fancier the house was, the less it resembled a house of prostitution. The Windsor and the Dumas, for example, had no telltale rows of doors and windows, since the women who worked there had no need to solicit; the madam did that kind of work for them. These high-class houses resembled the upscale rooming houses found all over Butte. From

the architecture alone, the building's function was indiscernible—only its location gave it away.⁶

From Brothels to Parlor Houses

Apartment living and lodging houses in urban areas during the second half of the nineteenth century were common, particularly in crowded areas like Butte. But many viewed communal living as detrimental to the family unit, and lodging houses in particular, whether respectable or not, were often viewed as places of prostitution.⁷ Lodging house architecture of the Victorian era dictated the separation of common and

private spaces. Fancy houses like the Windsor and the Dumas followed this model. Parlors and dining rooms where patrons could socialize were located downstairs, while private spaces—rooms and suites—were upstairs. This arrangement exactly mimicked the usual floorplans of lodging houses and the comfortable domestic spaces they provided.

The women in Butte's expensive parlor houses had gaudy tastes. By the end of the 1890s, at least three very high-class houses of prostitution in Butte could be found in the first block of East Mercury Street. High-rolling copper kings William A. Clark and F. Augustus Heinze and their wealthy business associates spent money lavishly in Butte. A "gentleman" could easily spend several thousand dollars for a night of partying in a luxurious parlor house. 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 be among the most beautiful women in the world. Ruth Clifford ran the Windsor Hotel at 9 East Mercury. At the turn of the twentieth century, tastefully engraved RSVP cards announced the Windsor's grand opening and uniformed butlers greeted guests at the door. Parlor houses and their orchestrated domesticity suggest further comparison to elegant men's clubs of the period, which offered a similar private environment without pressures, responsibilities, or family

distractions.⁸ Parlor houses offered like comfort with, of course, a further commodity.

The fashionable three-story Windsor featured rounded, two-story oriel bay windows at the front corners, a central Palladian window, elegant stone trim, and twenty-four beautifully appointed rooms. Its two parlors featured expensive, satin-covered sofas and chairs, gilt-framed mirrors, tapestries, red draperies, and plants in brass jardinières. The elaborate dining room could accommodate a substantial number of dinner guests. The Chinese cook in charge of the kitchen and the two domestic servants occupied rooms at the back of the first floor. Oak and mahogany graced the bedrooms on the two upper floors. Madam Ruth was the epitome of the "purchased" high society Butte's instant millionaires had at their disposal. Newspaperman Warren Davenport recorded one observer's description in his scandalous book *Butte beneath the X-Ray*. Miss Ruth received her guests "in the ivory and gold room," he wrote, "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."⁹

Anaconda's several higher-end brothels and houses never equaled the prestige or luxury of Butte's parlor houses, but that of Florence Clark, one longtime madam, came close. The Monogram, at 101 North Hickory, appeared when the district relocated to

Mainville around 1900. Florence operated the house for more than a decade. She owned an expensive, rubber-tired buggy and several blooded horses. One of these horses, Silk Stocking, held a record and raced the circuits in Salt Lake City, Oakland, and Spokane. Florence survived a near-fatal, self-inflicted overdose of laudanum in 1905.

Although Florence Clark generously patronized the local merchants, she was not benevolent toward her employees. She operated her house in a kind of partnership with saloon keeper William L. McLaughlin, who owned the Monogram's bar. McLaughlin occasionally helped Florence handle her legal issues, of which she had a few. In 1908, a police officer heard that one of the Monogram's women inmates wished to leave but was being held against her will. The officer found a seventeen-year-old at the house and attempted to escort her out. Florence grabbed the girl to prevent her leaving, whereupon the officer punched the irate madam and knocked her unconscious.¹⁰

While merchants may have appreciated Florence Clark's patronage, the way she ran her business underscores the lack of economic opportunity women often experienced working for a madam. Two women who escaped from the Monogram in 1911 told authorities that Florence kept them captive in the establishment, took their street clothes, charged exorbitant prices for their needs, and quickly made the

women indebted to management. The two had worked for two years, their debts mounting every month. When the officer went to the Monogram to retrieve the women's trunks, he found the windows barred with steel like a jail. As reported in a news story at the time: "It was nothing more than a life of bondage."¹¹

A Shift in Clientele

Times changed with the onset of the twentieth century. Butte's most glamorous houses began to change in character and clientele. William A. Clark, elected to the U.S. Senate through political machinations, moved to Washington, D.C.; Marcus Daly died; and the days of the copper kings were over. Outside investors and absentee landlords controlled mining interests. Friends and associates of the copper kings no longer came to Butte or Anaconda, and the parlor houses had few wealthy patrons. Cribs began to infill the spaces between Butte's grand houses. Prominent Helena businessman Anton Holter erected a series of brick cribs on Mercury Street, opposite the parlor houses. U.S. senator Lee Mantle was a later owner of this building, emphasizing the point that red-light real estate was a sound business investment. Owners protected their identities, hiring managers to collect the rents—usually between \$2 and \$5 per shift. The architecture of the Blue Range—as it is known today for the company that owns it—displays its original door-window-door-window

arrangement. This well-preserved example of brick cribs recalls the era when scantily clad women, cloaked in cold-weather wrappers called “shady-go-naked,” sat in the low windows, displaying their assets. They tapped provocatively on the glass at passersby with thimbles, rings, and chopsticks. The women showed no trace of modesty, leaning out of their windows and calling out “the vilest kind of language imaginable to people passing on the street.”¹²

Behind Butte’s Mercury Street houses, Pleasant Alley ran from South Wyoming to Main Street through the center of the block, where the least-favored women of the tenderloin lived and worked in ramshackle cabins and cribs. Butte’s few African American and Japanese prostitutes, aging castoffs, and drug addicts frequented Pleasant Alley in 1900. Thieves and pickpockets lurked in darkened doorways a few steps from the back door of every parlor house. Butte’s public women called this neighborhood the “burnt district” because they knew it as a dangerous place unfit for other purposes. The *Butte Miner* relished the shootings and stabbings that played out there, covering these events in minute detail. Such press bolstered the unsavory elements of the Mining City’s reputation and served as a calculated invitation, challenging the toughest men to come to Butte and work in the mines.¹³

The districts in both Butte and Anaconda underwent dramatic physical changes as citizens



The Blue Range cribs are a rare surviving example of the door-window-door-window arrangement that is the architectural signature of prostitution. Paul Anderson, photographer. Courtesy Montana Historical Society Research Center Photograph Archives, Helena (PAC 97-63A).

clamored to tone down the blatant soliciting and clean up unsightly slums. The Butte, Anaconda and Pacific Railroad (BA&P) began service in 1893, linking the two industrial centers; the tracks cut through the undeveloped north portion of Anaconda’s tenderloin. The jail moved to city hall, and cribs quickly sprang up next to the vacant building, facing the tracks. This caused the city fathers embarrassment, and a high board fence in front of the cribs quickly cut off the passengers’ views of the seedy area. By 1900, however, a city

alderman had successfully lobbied to move Anaconda's district north across the railroad tracks to the Northern Addition, created specifically for this purpose. Locals knew the area as Mainville, after saloon keeper Bruno Mainville, who owned a bar and maintained red-light properties there.¹⁴

Not all red-light businesses moved across the tracks. Sam Landry continued to operate his saloon and upstairs brothel at the corner of Hickory and Commercial (formerly West First Street). In 1902, grafting among police officers and city officials came to the forefront when a city alderman accused the police chief of allowing Landry to operate his business.¹⁵ Landry, however, continued to run his enterprise until his death in 1911.

Prostitution in Anaconda, Butte, and elsewhere in Montana was never legal, but loopholes in the system allowed the women to work. Cities, including Butte and Anaconda, collected \$5 or \$10 monthly fines that allowed prostitutes to "legally" conduct business. Graft was common among elected officials and police officers. The red-light districts were thus sometimes called "the twilight zone," because they were places of twilight legality. Monthly fines collected in Butte were especially lucrative for city hall because of the numbers of women working there. Many estimate that between 1910 and 1916, there were as many as a thousand women working in the district at any given time.¹⁶

Although Anaconda's restricted district had moved its location, officials realized that this was not possible in Butte. In 1902, the *Butte Miner* issued a special Sunday section on its red-light district, addressing the problems of solicitation, unhealthy conditions, urban blight, alcoholism, and the graft city officials openly accepted from public women. Much debate had centered on this question in the early 1900s, but officials also realized that the district could never serve any other purpose; rather, it would have to be razed and rebuilt. No one favored such a huge undertaking, so city ordinances attempted to control the most blatant problem—that of open solicitation on public thoroughfares. To quell the women's enthusiastic, brazen advertising on Galena and Mercury streets, the city ordered them to wear high-necked blouses, lengthen their skirts, and draw their blinds.¹⁷

The women defied the ordinance first by drawing their blinds and cutting holes in them. Finally, however, they adapted by cutting doors and windows into the backs of their cribs, thus reversing the orientation from the public streets to the back alleys. Pleasant Alley, once home to the castoffs of the business, now became the heart of the district. Two- and three-story frame and brick cribs created a labyrinth of narrow walkways. On any Saturday night, as many as four thousand miners strolled the alley, looking to spend their paychecks. This concentrated activity helped the mining industry

because it kept the men too busy to organize against management. Butte businesses depended on the women's patronage, and as long as they had customers, public women adapted to the changes imposed and their lives remained thus intertwined with the Butte community.¹⁸

In January 1916, copper rose to a high of twenty cents a pound and more than fourteen thousand miners received a raise of twenty-five cents per day. Butte's district exploded with building activity, and cribs appeared in every possible location. The activity was short-lived, however. The nation embarked on World War I in 1917, and federal law closed red-light districts across the nation to prevent the spread of venereal disease among the troops. Prostitution—like alcohol during this same period of Prohibition—did not go away; it simply went undercover, operating in many Montana towns in hotels and furnished rooms.¹⁹

Last Madams

Ann Harding ran the New York Rooms, Anaconda's last brothel, from 1944 to the mid-1950s. Located first at 15 ½ Main and then in 1944 at 313 ½ East Park, near city hall, the business closed in the mid-1950s after a patron fell or was pushed out of a second-story window and later died, causing publicity and legal problems for the madam.²⁰ The house opened again briefly in the mid-1960s and then closed for good,

ending prostitution's run in Anaconda. All vestiges of the business in Anaconda have been obliterated. Mt. Haggin Homes, a housing project, now covers the older red-light area where the Landry Block once stood, and nothing remains of the cribs and buildings across the tracks, where the establishments of Mainville entertained the men of Anaconda. Even Ann Harding's furnished rooms eventually met the wrecking ball.

By the end of the 1930s, Butte's red-light district had survived reforms, crusading evangelists, World War I, and Prohibition. As the decade of the Great Depression neared an end, young Ray Wainwright came to Butte as an electrical engineer for the Montana Power Company's Gas Division. Wainwright became familiar with the district through his work on the gas lines that ran through it. He and his colleague often walked home through Pleasant Alley, known by this time as Venus Alley or Mercury Alley. Wainwright recalled:

This block off Mercury . . . was lined with "cribs" on either side, and the women lived in old houses which faced the street itself. I would judge that there were several hundred women in Mercury Alley in those years. There was even a mezzanine balcony at that time. . . .

We would walk through and kid the girls. But, you know, we never did go in. A good friend who was the lab technician at

the hospital convinced us that there was too much disease. Stay away, and we did! But that did not stop us from walking through. . . . The Dumas Hotel . . . was the luxury end of it. It charged more money. Once I got up enough courage to enter the Dumas. But a person showed up that was not good-looking at all, and informed me the charge would be \$1 per minute. I took one more look at her and fled!²¹

Historian Joseph Kinsey Howard described the cribs in Venus Alley in the early 1940s as “dingy, crude offices” for what had become a revolting, furtive business. The shabby cribs and their several hundred women were a far cry from the district at its prime. After Prohibition, the women moved in again, closing off Venus Alley with a board fence. Signs warned, “Men Under 21 Keep Out”—a grim reminder that boys working in the mines became men before they reached legal age. Public women stayed behind their blinds until after five o’clock, since the new high school was only several blocks away. But Anaconda’s high school basketball teams eagerly anticipated the yearly games at Butte. Bus drivers dropped the boys off in the district to gawk, giving them ten minutes to get to the gym.

Despite periodic closures, a dozen fading parlor houses and brothels in Butte survived well into the mid-twentieth century. In January 1943, World War II brought



Iron plates and then a coat of stucco covered the outside of this crib’s door and window at the back of the Dumas Hotel. Owner Rudy Giecek recently discovered this and several other cribs, closed since 1943. Photograph by Ellen Baumler.

another closure to Venus Alley and the women dispersed, leaving the rickety multistoried labyrinth of shabby, one-room “offices” abandoned. Cribs at the Dumas Hotel, including those at the back opening onto Venus Alley and those in the basement, closed as well. But along Mercury Street, the Dumas, the Windsor (later the Missoula), the Victoria, and the Royal—as well as an infamous house at 14 South Wyoming and others—continued to operate as they had during Prohibition, now under the flimsy guise of hotel or “furnished rooms.” Such places never specified exactly what they furnished.

By the 1950s, Butte’s former district was once more operating on a significant scale. Women again occupied some of the alley cribs, working independently, while madams employed women in the houses.²² The Montana attorney general’s office conducted surveys of prostitution in all counties in the 1950s. In March 1952, the survey found nine brothels open for business in Butte. Some of the working women, said one person interviewed, “are really old hags.” Cab drivers received a commission for bringing business to the district, and women sat in the windows, tapping with rings, knitting needles, and other items at passersby. When asked why they did this, one Mercury Alley prostitute replied: “Guys like to be roped in. Some just get a bang from walking through here and getting called in. Maybe we don’t get ‘em on the first visit, but they sure come back. Besides, some guys . . . don’t want to go into a joint until they see the girl they like. . . .

It’s just like window shopping.”²³

In February 1953, the report concluded that Butte, Montana, was still one of the nation’s “most wide open towns,” attracting many patrons, including servicemen as well as civilians. Prices were \$3 and \$5. One cab driver offered this observation: “With all the miners here in Butte and the soldiers we get from other towns, the guys have to have some way to blow off steam, so the cops let the line run. . . . The girls don’t bother anybody. The line is in an alley and nobody has any business going in there unless he wants a girl.”²⁴

Another explained that Butte had always been wide open, and always would be: “This is one town the blue noses can’t crack. . . . Go over on East Mercury Street. You get anything you want. . . . If the front doors are closed, try the rear.” Mercury Alley, or Venus Alley, received its final nickname at about this time. Butte’s last madams knew the dark slum behind the Dumas as “Piss Alley.”²⁵

Monroe Frye, of *Esquire*, wrote of Butte prostitutes in 1953: “The girls range in age from jail bait to battle ax. . . . [They] sit and tap on the windows. They are ready for business around the clock.” Frye named Butte one of the three “most wide-open towns” in the United States.²⁶ The *Esquire* article brought what many saw as unwanted and offensive national attention to Butte. City officials determined to clean up the district and did so in 1954, removing the unsightly alley

structures. The days of “the line” had passed into legend, but the mines continued to operate in Butte and the women persisted, working out of the several remaining antique-filled, dilapidated houses. At the back of the Dumas, a heavy steel door with a small sliding window afforded a secret entrance, and steel plates covered the doors and windows of the alley-facing cribs as if they had never existed.

During the 1960s, Beverly Snodgrass bought the antique-filled, rundown Windsor Hotel at 9 East Mercury, a remnant, along with the Dumas, of the high-rolling 1890s. After a suspicious fire closed it down in 1968, Snodgrass went to the IRS and to the Washington offices of Montana senators Mike Mansfield and Lee Metcalf, claiming that local officials burned her out of her business for nonpayment of “protection” money. She claimed that she had been paying \$700 a month to Butte police since 1963 and that uniformed policemen periodically demanded the services of her girls. Snodgrass paid her employees from her own pocket for these interludes. A local detective compiled a report for Snodgrass theorizing 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.”²⁷

Butte’s mayor Tom Powers responded to the scandal, telling John Kuglin of the *Great Falls Tribune*, “The people of Butte want prostitution,” and that “at

least we’re honest in Butte and admit we’ve got houses of prostitution.”²⁸ Butte’s respectable citizens cringed. In the course of Kuglin’s seven-part series, the *Tribune* reported that several police officers took it upon themselves to close down Butte’s three operating houses. Only the Dumas reopened.

Ruby Garrett bought the Dumas in 1971. As Snodgrass had previously maintained, Ruby also claimed that she bought silence from Butte police officers, costing her \$200 to \$300 a month. At that time, customers paid about \$20 for the services of one of her several employees. A brutal assault and holdup in 1981 left Ruby pistol-whipped and traumatized. Publicity about the crime, an inside job set up by an employee, led federal officials to investigate Ruby’s business. The IRS claimed she owed \$83,000 in unpaid income taxes. Convicted, Ruby struck a plea bargain. She received a six-month sentence at a minimum-security facility in California, paid \$10,000 in back taxes, and promised not to reopen. Friends gave her a going-away party and sent her off to do her time. Butte’s long-lived red-light district came to an end. Coincidentally (or was it?), the mines in Butte closed for good that same year.²⁹

Red-light Remnants

The Dumas Hotel, built in 1890, is Butte’s only surviving parlor house. Unlike any other historic resource in the West, its artifacts and building

sequences offer unprecedented interpretive opportunities spanning the period from 1890 to 1981. Antique dealer Rudy Giecek unwittingly stumbled on the Dumas in 1992. He happened by Ruby Garrett's "alley sale" and stopped to inquire about a pile of beds. They struck up a conversation. "I can't sell the Dumas for anything but a brothel," she said. "I'll burn it down before I let the IRS have it." So she gave it to Giecek, the only person who seemed interested in its history.³⁰ Giecek explored the basement and back rooms, which had been closed for forty years. He discovered the basement cribs as well as additional cribs, sealed like time capsules, at the back of the building.

Exploring the basement, Giecek found dozens of empty Butte Beer and grape brandy bottles, cigarette butts, matchbooks, old jars of petroleum jelly, dingy bedding, World War II-era calendars, vintage posters, a miner's carbide lamp, and petrified chewing gum painted over in the doorjambs and window frames. Unlike the classier upstairs rooms, which were equipped with corner sinks, the basement amenities included call buttons used to order drinks or summon help, a washbasin, and an occasional chamber pot.

Behind one side of the Dumas's basement cribs



Among the hundreds of artifacts found in the Dumas Hotel are these articles of the trade including a ten-minute timer, scrip the women used instead of cash, cigarettes, and alcohol. Photograph by Ellen Baumler.

and beyond the original boiler, Giecek found an isolated crib tucked under the stairway. It provided a tiny, dirt-floored "office" where someone eked out a living. Like the miners who worked underground, many public women did likewise. In 1990, when workers demolished the Copper Block at the corner of Wyoming and Galena streets, home base to the district's women for a century, they uncovered row after row of similar tiny subterranean cubicles.³¹

The original second-floor suites, with their



Elegant upstairs suites, where wealthy copper kings spent a fortune, featured a corner sink and numbered transoms. Photograph by Ellen Baumler.

numbered transoms and corner sinks, and the later basement cribs illustrate the two extremes of the business. A close look at the first floor shows the transition from elegant parlor house to public door-window-door-window cribs. Heavy pocket doors, discovered hidden beneath 1950s paneling, once opened to grand spaces where staged soirees were preliminary to upstairs entertainment. The Dumas's architectural style is sometimes referred to as "Victorian Brothel," an inappropriate term. Although built expressly for prostitution, there is nothing in the building's original



The second floor retains its original configuration, arranged around an open balcony. Photograph by Ellen Baumler.

architecture to suggest this use. Patterned after standard rooming houses, like those elsewhere in Butte, it featured a central skylight, downstairs communal parlors, a dining room for entertaining, and private upstairs suites. The Dumas and other houses like it were designed to put the patron at ease in comfortable domestic spaces.

The post-Victorian era cribs of the 1910s are what make the building's use obvious and illustrate the change from high-end clients and a domestic environment to working-class customers in a public,



Conversion of grand first floor spaces to common cribs in the Dumas occurred circa 1916. Photograph by Ellen Bauml.



The wear pattern on the floor of this crib at the back of the Dumas Hotel illustrates how the business was conducted: soliciting at the window, left; negotiations at the door; then straight to the cot. Photograph by Ellen Bauml.

even marketlike, setting where customers could “window shop.” Inspection of the first-floor woodwork reveals telltale differences in moldings, supporting the idea that conversion of this space to cribs for “window shopping” did not occur until early in the twentieth century, circa 1916. Orange shag carpeting, a pay phone, and red-orange paint on the trim are 1960s attempts at modernization. When Ruby Garrett was madam in the 1970s, latticework stretched across the open second-floor balcony to protect residents from the beer bottles and trash unruly patrons sometimes tossed upstairs. The

back stairway, added so that madams could keep better track of patrons, long ago had replaced a grand central staircase. These richly historic layers are what make the Dumas unique.

Reminders of the past dot the former district, but few observers recognize or appreciate these remnants. Except for the Blue Range and the Dumas, other district buildings once housing brothels or cribs have long been converted to other uses and contain no trace of their lurid histories. Lest the town forget its past, in 1998 Butte artist Gloria Clark painted a mural on buildings at the west end of the block, depicting the district in the 1930s when the board fence enclosed it. Butte's Urban Revitalization Agency created a parking lot where Pleasant Alley and the Copper Block used to be, incorporating the building's wooden nameplate into the corner space and preserving the last remaining bricks of Venus Alley. Timeless metal figures, made by local high school shop students (to the consternation of some officials), walk the alley as men and women did for a century.

Clark's mural and the park proved prophetic, as the legacy of its famous tenderloin, unwanted by some, continued to haunt Butte. On the heels of the park's creation, Norma Jean Almodovar swept into town. The former Los Angeles cop and Beverly Hills call girl bought the Dumas as headquarters for her organization, the International Sex Workers Foundation for Art,

Culture, and Education (ISWFACE). She planned to restore the building as a museum of prostitution and sex workers' art. Giecek stayed on as manager and curator. The project brought Butte international press touting the Mining City's bawdy history. Almodovar, a retired prostitute, and Bob Butorovich, the former sheriff who had closed the Dumas in 1981, posed together amicably. It was a historic moment, and Almodovar pronounced Butte "whore friendly."³²

Many residents were horrified. Mike Bowler, of the *Baltimore Sun*, covered the story on October 19, 1999, observing that some in Butte did not want to pay historical homage to prostitution. Retired insurance agent and civic activist Donald Ulrich summed it up: "We worked so hard to restore Butte's image, and then [Almodovar] plops down here without an invitation and says she wants to make Butte the sex capital of the world. It breaks my heart." In the end, Almodovar could not raise the necessary funding. A legal battle with Giecek over back wages ended in 2002, with Almodovar returning to California, no longer owner of the Dumas. This put Giecek back where he began, trying to save his building.³³

Today, the Dumas is in a precarious state of deterioration. The basement has flooded, the leaking roof has caused structural damage, the stairway has collapsed, and the upper floor is inaccessible. However, the building has a new roof in progress thanks to a



A false floor with an entry in the wall, hidden behind a dresser, offered a hiding place during raids. Photograph by Ellen Baumler.

generous donor, and there is hope for its future.

While some would prefer to forget the tawdry side of Montana's colorful past, red-light districts were an integral part of Butte, Anaconda, and most other towns across the West. Anaconda has none of these remnant elements, making those that survive in Butte that much more significant. The bricks of Pleasant Alley, the Blue Range and its door-window-door-window facade, and the rare architectural layers of the Dumas Hotel are teaching tools that help interpret an important, often misunderstood chapter in the history of the American West.

- ¹ Sanborn-Perris Fire Insurance Maps of Butte for 1884, 1888, and 1890 (New York: Sanborn-Perris Map Publishing Company).
- ² Sanborn-Perris Fire Insurance Maps of Butte for 1884, 1888, and 1890; Sanborn-Perris Fire Insurance Maps of Anaconda for 1884, 1888, 1890, 1891, and 1896 (New York: Sanborn-Perris Map Publishing Company).
- ³ Compare, for example, the locations of Chinatowns in Butte, Helena, and Big Timber. In Helena in 1891, the Sanborn maps show a Chinese pharmacy and a Chinese physician located between cribs along Clore (now Park) Street. See also Ellen Baumler, “Devil’s Perch: Prostitution from Suite to Cellar in Butte, Montana,” *Montana The Magazine of Western History* 43 (Spring 1998): 4–21.
- ⁴ Robert R. Swartout, “From Kwangtung to the Big Sky: The Chinese Experience in Frontier Montana,” in *The Montana Heritage: An Anthology of Historical Essays*, ed. Robert R. Swartout and Harry W. Fritz (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 1992), 61–79.
- ⁵ Patrick F. Morris, *Anaconda, Montana: Copper Smelting Boom Town on the Western Frontier* (Bethesda, MD: Swann: 1997), 113–24.
- ⁶ Compare the footprints in the Sanborn maps of Butte’s parlor houses along Mercury Street with Butte’s many boardinghouses.
- ⁷ Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 95. This may partly explain why, even today, some of Butte’s historic lodging houses—even respectable ones—have been unfairly labeled as brothels.
- ⁸ For a description of the public and private spaces in Helena’s famed Montana Club, see Patty Dean, “Unique and Handsome: Cass Gilbert’s Designs for the Montana Club,” *Drumlummon Views* 1 (June 2006): 1–2, http://www.drumlummon.org/images/PDF-Spr-Sum06/DV_1-2_Dean.pdf (accessed October 31, 2008).
- ⁹ Mary Murphy, *Women on the Line: Prostitution in Butte, Montana, 1878–1917* (master’s thesis, University of North Carolina, Raleigh, 1983), 62; 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), 39–40; Workers of the Writers’ Program of the WPA in the State of Montana, *Copper Camp: The Lusty Story of Butte, Montana, the Richest Hill on Earth* (1943; reprint, Helena, MT: Riverbend, 2002), 190.
- ¹⁰ Matt J. Kelly, *Anaconda: Montana’s Copper City* (Butte, MT: Soroptimist Club of Anaconda, 1983), 42; Morris, *Anaconda, Montana*, 198; *Anaconda Standard*, March 6, 1908.
- ¹¹ *Anaconda Standard*, November 3, 1911.
- ¹² *Butte Miner*, December 6, 1901. The *Butte Evening News*, May 10, 1905, defines the term *shady-go-naked* as underworld slang for an ulster, or long, loose overcoat.
- ¹³ See, for example, the dramatic story

- of the stabbing of Mollie Quinn in the *Butte Miner*, May 21, 1907, and the shooting of Big Eva in the *Butte Miner*, May 14, 16, and 21, 1901.
- ¹⁴ *Anaconda Standard*, September 24, 1894; *Butte Miner*, January 2, 1902.
- ¹⁵ *Anaconda Standard*, February 26, 1902.
- ¹⁶ *Butte Miner*, January 16, 1902; Morris, *Anaconda, Montana*, 198.
- ¹⁷ *Butte Miner*, January 16 and 20, 1901; December 6 and 7, 1901; January 19, 1902.
- ¹⁸ *Butte Miner*, January 20, 1902; *Butte Miner*, January 3, 1903.
- ¹⁹ *Butte Daily Post*, January 14, 1916; 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.
- ²⁰ Author interview with Jerry Hanson, curator at the Deer Lodge County Historical Society, July 15, 2008; Polk City Directories for Anaconda, 1944–1956.
- ²¹ Ray M. Wainwright, of Denver, Colorado, correspondence with the author, October 27, 1998.
- ²² Sanborn Maps of Butte, 1951.
- ²³ Montana Attorney General, Report on Prostitution, September 1952, series 76, box 46, Montana State Archives, MHS Research Center, Helena.
- ²⁴ Montana Attorney General, Report on Prostitution, February 1953.
- ²⁵ Montana Attorney General, Report on Prostitution; Rudy Giecek, interview with author, September 17, 1996. Ruby Garrett knew the alley by this name.
- ²⁶ Monroe Frye, "The Three Last Wide-Open Towns," *Esquire* 47 (June 1953).
- ²⁷ *Great Falls Tribune*, October 13–18, 1968.
- ²⁸ (Butte) *Montana Standard*, February 22, 1991.
- ²⁹ (Butte) *Montana Standard*, June 23, 1982.
- ³⁰ Zena Beth McGlashan, *Tales of the Dumas*, promotional pamphlet (Butte, MT: n.p., 1995).
- ³¹ Mark Reavis, Butte-Silver Bow Historic Preservation Officer, communication with the author, October 16, 1996.
- ³² (Butte) *Montana Standard*, August 27, 1998.
- ³³ John LaFave, letter to the editor, (Butte) *Montana Standard*, February 18, 1999; *Baltimore Sun*, October 17, 1999; the court case and decision may be found at http://dli.mt.gov/hearings/decisions/2002/whdec524_2001.htm (accessed July 31, 2008).