

“THE LAST HOUSE ON THE BLOCK”:
PRESERVING THE DUMAS BROTHEL
IN BUTTE, MONTANA: 1890-2016

BY:
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For Mother, Daddy, and Jessica

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ABSTRACT

Prostitution became one of Butte's main industries after its establishment as a mining camp in the nineteenth century. The Dumas Brothel, a Victorian parlor-house brothel modeled after contemporary rooming houses, is one of the last examples of this once-thriving industry in Butte, and one of the least-altered and best-preserved examples in the country. It operated as a house of prostitution until 1982, making it one of the longest-operating brothels in the country. It operates now as a brothel museum—one of the few in the country. Since its closing, the Dumas has been preserved through the efforts of several individuals—mostly locals, who have recognized the Dumas's importance to local history and its architectural appeal. Moreover, as the site of over ninety years of women's labor, the Dumas is incredibly significant for its importance to an oft-neglected aspect of women's history, labor history, and frontier history.

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INTRODUCTION

“First came the miners to work in the mine,
Then came the ladies who lived on the line.”¹

Prostitution was once a major livelihood in Butte, Montana, dating to its earliest days as a mining camp in the mid-nineteenth century and continuing well into the twentieth century. Beginning approximately 1890, brothels were erected in a concentrated neighborhood in Uptown Butte, commonly known as the red-light district. The district encompassed Galena and East Mercury Streets and was roughly bounded by South Main to the west and South Wyoming to the east. The brothels that lined these streets were mostly parlor house brothels—elegant Victorian structures modeled after contemporary boarding houses. Between Galena and East Mercury was a long alley, called “Venus” or “Pleasant” Alley. Here were several “cribs”—small, single story rooms that prostitutes rented in shifts. In this so-called red-light district, hundreds of women lived and worked for half a century. Unfortunately, much of this once-vibrant neighborhood is no longer extant due to urban “renewal”. The last vestige of this period of Butte’s history stands alone at 45 East Mercury Street.

The Dumas operated as a house of prostitution until 1982—long after brothels were supposedly defunct—making it one of the longest-operating brothels in the country. The Dumas, built in 1890, is a three-story Victorian brick building with distinguishing

¹ Writer’s Program, Works Projects Administration (WPA), *Copper Camp: Stories of the World’s Greatest Mining Town, Butte, Montana* (New York: Hastings House, 1943), 175.

projecting bays and an elaborate metal cornice. This building is the last example of a parlor house brothel in Butte and one of the least-altered and best-preserved examples in the country.

The Dumas is certainly interesting from an architectural standpoint, but its significance goes far beyond its exterior. The Dumas was the site of 92 years of women's lives and labors in a city once known for its "wide-open" morals and rampant vice. The Dumas is worthy of continued preservation due to its architectural appeal, its embodiment of an oft-neglected sect of women's history, and its importance in the broader scheme of American frontier history.

The structure warrants a thorough examination through historical records and modern documentation. The history of the building certainly cannot be understood without an appreciation for the historiography of prostitution in the American West. Exploring this body of scholarly work brings to light many issues that undoubtedly touched the women at the Dumas, including the dangers of prostitution and the prostitute's place within the frontier landscape.

Finally, preservation efforts dating from roughly 1990 to 2016 are detailed here. This includes commentary on the people of Butte's perception of the Dumas over time and some of the problems that arise when interpreting a controversial history. Since its closing, the Dumas has been preserved through the efforts of several individuals—mostly locals, who have recognized the Dumas's importance to local history and its architectural appeal. Still, despite these efforts, the Dumas is derelict, and is in danger of being abandoned or condemned altogether.

Ruby Garrett, Butte's last madam, was passionate about the preservation of the Dumas after business closed. She once said, "I know the old madams would be happy up there in heaven if they knew it was preserved."² Before her death, she wanted to write a book about her life and the history of the Dumas, to be called "The Last House on the Block."³

² Karl Rohr, "Dumas Hotel doors to reopen, Owner gives building up for use by antique dealer Rudy Giecek," *Montana Standard* (Butte), February 22, 1991, Prostitution / The Dumas Brothel, vertical file 1857, Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives, Butte, Montana.

³ Karl Rohr, "Ruby: She took her love Uptown, Brothel's former 'landlady' wants to preserve Dumas Hotel for historical importance," *Montana Standard* (Butte), February 23, 1991, Prostitution / The Dumas Brothel, vertical file 1857, Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives, Butte, Montana.

CHAPTER ONE:

THE LAST HOUSE ON THE BLOCK: DESCRIPTION

Block 41, lot number 22 is on the edge of the Uptown Butte historic district in Butte, Montana. The lot has changed hands many times over the course of nearly thirteen decades. Delia Nadeau, wife of Joseph A. Nadeau, purchased the land at auction in 1888 from Sheriff John E. Lloyd.¹ Ellen Baumler asserts that it was common at this time for wives to be listed as property owners, and “red-light property was no exception.”² Thus Delia Nadeau’s ownership of the lot cannot be interpreted as evidence of her involvement with the business that became centered in the building on the lot.

The Nadeaus were a prominent family in Butte for many years. Joseph and Arthur Nadeau were French Canadian brothers who “eventually acquired more red-light real estate than any other Butte property owners.”³ They later formed the Nadeau Investment Company and owned property in Montana, Kansas, California, and Canada.⁴

¹ Deed of Sale from John E. Lloyd, Sheriff to Delia E. Nadeau, May 9, 1888, Silver Bow County, Montana, Deed Book L, page 693. Butte-Silver Bow Land Records Office, Butte, Montana.

² Ellen Baumler, “Devil’s Perch: Prostitution from Suite to Cellar in Butte, Montana,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 48, no. 3 (Autumn 1998): 9, accessed July 20, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4520070>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

Butte was the family business's headquarters. According to the 1900 census, Joseph (listed as a "capitalist") and Delia had been married for 28 years.⁵ They lived on West Granite Street with three of their children—son Ovila, 24; daughter Phedora, 23; and son Albert, 18. Delia indicated that she had birthed five children, but only four were living. Joseph's passport application (dated 1908) confirms that he emigrated from Canada in 1868.⁶ He claims to have lived in Butte uninterruptedly for forty years, though this contradicts with the 1875 Rhode Island State Census, which puts Joseph, Delia, and their three young children in Lincoln, Rhode Island.⁷ Nevertheless, the family of Joseph Nadeau (including his single brother, Arthur) was in Butte by at least 1880.⁸

Members of the Nadeau family transferred the lot and building among themselves several times. In 1900, Delia and Joseph sold it (and other lots) to their son Ovila.⁹ He then quickly sold it back to his father.¹⁰ According to the deed index, Silver Bow County seized the property at some point—most likely for unpaid taxes. The Nadeau Investment

⁵ 1900 United States Federal Census, Butte Ward 4, Silver Bow, MT; Roll 914, Page 6A, Enumeration District 0111.

⁶ Passport Applications, January 2, 1906 – March 31, 1925; Roll 73; National Archives and Records Administration; Ancestry.com.

⁷ 1875 Rhode Island State Census, Lincoln, Providence, RI.

⁸ 1880 United States Federal Census, Butte City, Deer Lodge, MT; Roll 742, Page 110A, Enumeration District 010.

⁹ Deed of Sale from Delia Nadeau and her husband Joseph A. Nadeau to Ovila Nadeau, January 6, 1900, Silver Bow County, Montana, Deed Book 36, page 451. Butte-Silver Bow Land Records Office, Butte, Montana.

¹⁰ Deed of Sale from Ovila Nadeau to Joseph Nadeau, January 8, 1900, Silver Bow County, Montana, Deed Book 38, page 149. Butte-Silver Bow Land Records Office, Butte, Montana.

Company regained ownership. The Nadeaus controlled the lot and building until 1946, though the family was not responsible for managing the operations of the brothel.

The 1900 Census reveal that a woman named Grace McGinnis was the head (or madam) of the household.¹¹ McGinnis was born in Germany in April of 1863, making her 37 at the time of the Census. Despite the size of the Dumas, McGinnis only had three full-time boarders in 1900: Babe Brooks, 25, of Alabama; Anna King, 25, of Louisiana; and Frankie Patterson, 21, of Michigan. All four women were identified as “prostitutes” in this Census—as were most of their neighbors. It is likely that many of the rooms were occupied in shifts in order to maximize the house’s profit. Two men (both born in China) also worked at the Dumas in 1900: Foo Lee, 45, was a cook, and Yee Chung, 46, was a servant.

In 1910, only two women lived at 45 East Mercury.¹² The head of the house was Willie Crawford, 30, from Washington, D.C. The lone roomer was May Morris, 31, from Arkansas. From about 1925 to 1929, a woman named Anna Vallet managed the Dumas.¹³ In 1930, Rose Davis took over as madam, and held this position until about 1939.¹⁴ In 1942, a woman named Gabrielle Walden was the manager.¹⁵

¹¹ 1900 United States Federal Census, Butte Ward 5, Silver Bow, MT; Roll 914, Page 2B, Enumeration District 0114.

¹² 1910 United States Federal Census, Butte Ward 5, Silver Bow, MT; Roll T624_836, Page 1B, Enumeration District 0103.

¹³ Butte, Montana, City Directory, 1925, *U.S. City Directories, 1822-1995* [database online], Provo, UT: Ancestry.com, 335; 1926, 457; 1927, 477; 1928, 663; 1929, 445.

¹⁴ Butte, Montana, City Directory, 1930, 626; 1931, 121; 1934, 489; 1939, 87.

The Nadeau Investment Company sold the Dumas to Gabrielle “Lillian” Walden (née Latouche) on December 7, 1946.¹⁶ Gabrielle’s petition for naturalization reveals that she was born in Quebec on November 18, 1904, and had emigrated from Montreal to Detroit in 1927.¹⁷ In the 1930 Census, she was a dressmaker—a profession frequently claimed by prostitutes in the Census—in San Francisco.¹⁸ Gabrielle and her husband, Richard Cowie Walden, married in 1931 in Reno, Nevada, and were living in Venice, California at the time of her petition on September 28, 1939.¹⁹ Her occupation was “housewife & apt house mgr”—quite possibly a cover for madam of a brothel.²⁰ By 1942, she and her husband Richard were living at the Dumas.²¹

Her profession certainly impacted her path to citizenship. Correspondence in her case file (dated August 22, 1942) advised against granting citizenship to Gabrielle “on grounds of Immoral Character,” as she “practiced and operated a house of prostitution.”²²

¹⁵ Butte, Montana, City Directory, 1942, 324.

¹⁶ Deed of Sale from Nadeau Investment Company to Gabrielle Walden, December 7, 1946, Silver Bow County, Montana, Deed Book 202, page 105. Butte-Silver Bow Land Records Office, Butte, Montana.

¹⁷ Petition for Naturalization, Naturalization Records of the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of California, Central Division (Los Angeles), 1887-1940, Roll 239. U.S. Naturalization Records – Original Documents, 1795-1972, Ancestry.com

¹⁸ 1930 United States Federal Census, San Francisco, San Francisco, California; Roll 209, Page 17A, Enumeration District 0394.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Butte, Montana, City Directory, 1942, 324.

Richard died two months later, and Gabrielle married at least two more times in her life. She acquired the Dumas in 1946 for the sum of one dollar.

Under Walden's ownership Elinore Knott briefly managed the brothel.²³ The legend is that Elinore, jilted by her lover, committed suicide with a fatal dose of alcohol and drugs in 1955.²⁴ Knott's ghost supposedly haunts the building. Many visitors come to the Dumas in hopes of experiencing this "supernatural" activity. A brochure available at the museum entrance even features a portrait of Elinore Knott and encourages visitors to have their cameras ready should they meet her.

Gabrielle Walden (then Gabrielle Spangler) sold the building to Bonita L. Farren in July 1963—also for one dollar.²⁵ Little about Bonita's life is discernible from public records. She had been living at 45 E Mercury Street since at least 1955, as evidenced by city directories.²⁶ She owned the building for about just over three years.

Bonita Farren sold the building to Dolora Moriena on November 18, 1966 for one dollar.²⁷ Born in Canada as Dolora Drisdale in 1905, she came to the United States in

²² Subject Index to Correspondence and Case Files of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1903-1952, Roll 5. Ancestry.com

²³ Butte, Montana, City Directory, 1954, 238.

²⁴ Ellen Baumler, "Elinor Knott," Montana Moments: A blog of funny, bizarre, and interesting episodes from Montana's history, entry posted October 3, 2012, <http://ellenbaumler.blogspot.com/2012/10/elinor-knott.html> (accessed September 14, 2016).

²⁵ Deed of Sale from Gabrielle Walden to Bonita L. Farren, July 31, 1963, Silver Bow County, Montana, Deed Book 315, page 567. Butte-Silver Bow Land Records Office, Butte, Montana.

²⁶ Butte, Montana, City Directory, 1955, 173.

May 1926 and married Harold Cook less than a year later.²⁸ They divorced and Dolora married Antoine Moriena in Florida in 1946.²⁹ They moved to Los Angeles, where they lived at 5406 Lexington Avenue in Los Angeles, California—the address given on Antoine’s Petition for Naturalization (November 1971) and on the deed for the Dumas (November 1966).³⁰ Dolora’s connection to Butte—and how she came to own the Dumas—is unclear.

Dolora Moriena sold to Ruby Garrett on November 21, 1971 for one dollar.³¹ Ruby was born Ruby Lee Schmaus in 1917. She married Frank Garrett on August 17, 1944 in Spokane, Washington.³² By 1954, Ruby and Frank were living in Butte but divorced shortly thereafter. They had one son together, Victor Franklin Garrett. Ruby met Andrew Arrigoni in 1956 and they lived together as common law husband and wife.³³

²⁷ Deed of Sale from Bonita L. Farren to Dolora Moriena, November 18, 1966, Silver Bow County, Montana, Deed Book 346, page 167. Butte-Silver Bow Land Records Office, Butte, Montana.

²⁸ Petition for Naturalization, Petitions for Naturalizations from the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York, 1897-1944, Roll 1280. U.S. Naturalization Records – Original Documents, 1795-1972, Ancestry.com

²⁹ Dolores Drisdale Cook and Antoine Moriena, *Florida Marriage Indexes, 1822-1875 and 1927-2001*, Ancestry.com.

³⁰ Petition for Naturalization, *Records of District Courts of the United States, 1685-2009*, Record Group Number 21 ; Deed of Sale from Bonita L. Farren to Dolora Moriena, November 18, 1966.

³¹ Deed of Sale from Dolora Moriena to Mrs. Ruby Garrett, May 21, 1971, Silver Bow County, Montana, Deed Book 363, page 29. Butte-Silver Bow Land Records Office, Butte, Montana.

³² Ruby Schmaus and Frank Garrett, *Washington, Marriage Records, 1854-2013*, Ancestry.com.

After a particularly brutal beating from Andy, Ruby walked into The Board of Trade (a Butte bar) and shot him five times.³⁴ Ruby was in the press quite a bit after the incident, and information began to emerge about her troubled childhood and introduction to prostitution at an early age. She was charged with manslaughter, but only served 270 days of her four-year sentence at Montana State Prison³⁵

Ruby Garrett purchased the Dumas in November 1971. She sold the Dumas to her son, Victor Franklin Garrett, on October 24, 1977 for ten dollars.³⁶ This was most likely a formality, as Ruby continued to manage the Dumas until it closed in 1982. She lived a long life after the Dumas closed. She died in 2012 at a Butte nursing home at the age of 94.³⁷

At some point—likely around 1987, five years after the brothel closed—the Dumas became the property of Silver Bow County. A Tax Deed was later granted to Gloria Jean Brugger when she purchased the building on May 31, 1991, for a total of

³³ Lewis T. Poole, “Butte Defendant Tells of Slaying, Murder Trial Jury Hears Arrigoni Story,” *Montana Standard* (Butte), January 22, 1960. Ancestry.com.

³⁴ “Ruby L. Arrigoni Paroled From Montana Prison,” *Montana Standard* (Butte), October 26, 1960. Ancestry.com

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Deed of Sale from Ruby Garrett to Victor Franklin Garrett, October 24, 1977, Silver Bow County, Montana, Roll 53, Card 618. Butte-Silver Bow Land Records Office, Butte, Montana.

³⁷ Nick Gevock, “Ruby Garrett, owner of Butte’s Dumas Brothel, died at 94,” *Missoulian*, March 20, 2012, accessed October 18, 2015, http://missoulian.com/news/state-and-regional/ruby-garrett-owner-of-butte-s-dumas-brothel-dies-at/article_13ef83f0-729c-11e1-99cb-001871e3ce6c.html.

\$4,070.15, which included delinquent taxes and interest.³⁸ Gloria Jean Brugger then sold the Dumas to Rudy Giecek on May 26, 1992 for ten dollars.³⁹ Giecek owned the building for roughly thirty years, until he sold to Michael Piche and Travis Eskelsen in 2012.⁴⁰

Architectural Description

Exterior

South Elevation

The south elevation is undoubtedly the most elaborate. This façade faces East Mercury Street, and was designed to convey elegance. This façade is remarkable for its double projecting bays and elaborate metal cornice, inscribed with the year 1890 and “No. 2.”

Each projecting bay runs the full height of the building. Each bay has eight windows: four on the ground level and four on the second story. There are a total of eight windows which face south; four windows face west; and four windows face east. These appear to be original (or near original), one-over-one, single hung wooden windows, with

³⁸ Deed of Sale from James C. Davis, Jr., County Treasurer to Gloria Jean Brugger, May 31, 1991, Silver Bow County, Montana, Roll 131, Card 853. Butte-Silver Bow Land Records Office, Butte, Montana.

³⁹ Deed of Sale from Gloria Jean Brugger to Rudy Giecek, May 26, 1992, Silver Bow County, Montana, Roll 156, Card 614. Butte-Silver Bow Land Records Office, Butte, Montana.

⁴⁰ Deed of Sale from Rudy Giecek to Michael P. Piche and Travis J. Eskelsen, June 18, 2012, Silver Bow County, Montana, Roll 373, Card 21. Butte-Silver Bow Land Records Office, Butte, Montana.

the painted trim worn off. Ground-level windows have fixed metal storm windows attached. Second story windows on the easternmost bay also appear to have storm windows. All but two sills are metal—those facing south on the easternmost bay are wood. Above each window is a jack arch, except on the ground level of the westernmost bay, where an oversized lintel was installed. Another metal lintel was installed on the eastern bay between the windows and the jack arch.

A two-over-two double-hung window is centered over the entrance. The entrance is recessed between the two bays. Modern concrete steps lead to a metal door with a small, covered viewing window cut at eye-level. “45 E. MERURY[sic]” is painted on the door in block letters. Above the door is a colorful stained glass transom, covered by a metal grate. A wood awning covers the entrance area.

Interestingly, there are three small sections of segmental arches visible—two beneath the westernmost bay windows and one along the concrete steps. These suggest that there were windows (or doors, perhaps) to some of the basement cribs. Blocks of concrete now cover these windows, and any trace of them on the easternmost bay appear to have been erased when the section of this wall was rebuilt some years ago. There are several patches of this elevation (all stretcher brick bond) that show repaired masonry.



Figure 1. South elevation, facing north.

East Elevation

The east elevation has been covered in stucco and has no noteworthy architectural features. This would have been a party wall for most of the Dumas's history, so any window openings on this elevation would have been covered as soon as the neighboring building was erected.



Figure 2. East elevation, looking northwest.

North Elevation

There are two distinct walls on the north elevation: the first is the northernmost wall of the addition; the second is the exposed second story wall of the original building. Both walls have been covered with stucco. The annex's north elevation has been painted black. A metal door is centered on this elevation, recessed under a large archway. Metal sheeting frames the doorway on either side and above. Directly above the door is an old

metal sign, which reads “DUMAS 45” in bold, green letters. There is no handle on the door, so a patron would have to be granted entry by someone on the inside. To the left of the door are a very basic doorbell and a small, square viewing window at eye-level, covered with a panel of wire mesh and a metal diamond-patterned grill. On either side of the doorway, metal sheeting covers what once were doors and tall windows where prostitutes would have leaned, advertising to potential customers. There are two doorways to the left of the central door, and two doorways to the right, for a total of four alley cribs.



Figure 3. Rear entry. North elevation, looking south.



Figure 4. Covered crib doors and windows. North elevation, looking south.

The second story, also covered in stucco, has only one opening—what appears to be a doorway on the northeastern portion of the wall, leading to the roof of the annex. The 1891 Sanborn Map shows two openings on this elevation (windows with iron shutters), long since covered over. Later Sanborn maps show three window openings on this elevation—two on the western half of the wall and one on the eastern half. Perhaps the extant opening (still visible on the 1957 Sanborn map) once housed a tall window and was made longer to accommodate the length of a door.



Figure 5. North elevation, looking south.

West Elevation

The west elevation is, like the north and east facades, covered in stucco. To the southwest, there is some sort of chute or chimney leading to the roof (also covered in stucco). Just left of center on this elevation is a set of small metal doors, painted white, with a wood lintel. There are three windows on the second story. These windows—one-over-one single-hung glass windows with unpainted wooden frames—are each slightly recessed into arched openings. Two of these windows feature a wooden storm window with wire mesh screens. All three have wide metal sills.



Figure 6. West elevation of original structure, looking east.



Figure 7. Looking northeast.

Interior

First Floor

The Dumas has two stories plus a basement. The ground level, where museum patrons enter, opens to a central hallway the length of the building. There are a total of 10 rooms on either side of the hallway. The Dumas was built in the style of traditional Victorian rooming houses as evidenced by the layout and pocket doors between rooms on this floor. The ground level would have originally been for entertaining and enticing patrons, who would then be escorted to the second floor.

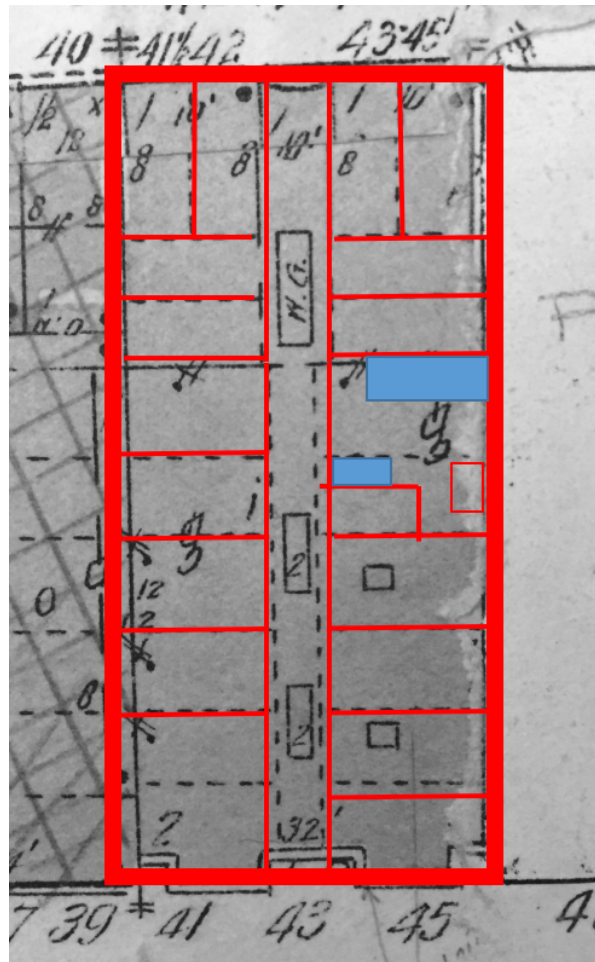


Figure 8. Current ground floor plan, superimposed by the author onto 1927 Sanborn Map. Blue squares represent stairways.



Figure 9. First floor interior, looking north.



Figure 10. First floor pocket doors.

As demand increased, many of the larger rooms on this level were divided by walls, thereby increasing the Dumas's capacity. Characteristic of this later transition from

elegant parlor house brothel, each room on this floor has a single-hung, one-over-one wood window next to the doorway, which allowed patrons to “shop.”



Figure 11. First floor interior hallway, looking southeast. Note windows, which allowed patrons to "shop."



Figure 12. First floor bedroom, looking east. One of the bedrooms formed by partitioning off the larger rooms. Note the sink in the left corner.



Figure 13. First floor interior hallway, looking southwest. Note patch of red paint, which might reveal where original staircase would have been.

Second Floor

A staircase in the northeastern-most corner of the building accesses the second floor. The stairs cross in front of a bricked-in doorway on the first floor. A patron would

have stepped through the bricked-in door, and down into the Dumas. The modern staircase must have been installed after the annex was built, as it crosses in front of the original door.



Figure 14. Stairs crossing in front of original rear entrance, looking northeast.

It is likely that the original staircase would have been more centralized. A patch of interior paint suggests this was the case. On the western wall of the central hallway, between the first and second stories, there is a section of wall that reveals where the original staircase might have been. On the wall is a diagonal line, formed by unpainted plaster on the bottom and a bright, fiery red paint on top. It is likely that the staircase was reconfigured when the annex was constructed.

At the top of the stairs is a small shower stall, a second room just large enough for a clawfoot tub, and another small room with a commode. Also visible is a boarded-over one-over-one, single-hung glass window directly behind the staircase facing north. Failing plaster exposes the original brickwork on this wall.



Figure 15. Shower stall at the top of the stairs, looking west.



Figure 16. Boarded window at the top of the stairs, looking northeast.

The staircase opens to an open balcony, illuminated by two wire glass skylights. There are ten rooms on this floor. Each door is topped with a decorative, numbered

transom. The two rooms on the east side of the building feature single-hung wood frame windows in the hallway, creating a “shopping” effect like on the first floor. These rooms also feature small skylights and no visible outside windows—indicating that at the time of construction, the Dumas adjoined a two-story building to the East. The three rooms to the west do not have hallway windows and single-hung one-over-one wood windows with storm windows illuminate the rooms. Many rooms on this story were under restoration in the summer of 2016, and therefore were not open to visitors. Most, if not all, of these rooms feature small porcelain sinks in the corner.



Figure 17. Second floor balcony, looking southwest. Note the embossed walls and wire glass skylights.



Figure 18. Second floor balcony, looking northeast. Note the windows to the right of the balcony and the new drywall on the far wall.



Figure 19. Second floor bedroom, west side of building, looking west.



Figure 20. Second floor bedroom, west side of building. Porcelain sinks are standard in bedrooms at the Dumas.



Figure 21. Second floor bedroom, looking west.

Basement

A small staircase near the northeast corner of the building accesses the basement. Cribs (small bedrooms where prostitutes worked, usually in shifts) flank a central hallway, illuminated only by three small bulbs. On either side of the hallway are small bedrooms, accessed by interior doors and visible thru tall one-over-one single-light wood windows. Above each door is a numbered transom, similar to those on the second floor. A metal door on the far south wall would have opened to the street under the main entrance of the Dumas, but this tunnel was filled at some point. On this south wall, the brick foundation is visible.



Figure 22. Basement hallway, looking south. Note the window-door pairing and the large door at the end of the hallway.



Figure 23. Detail of metal door at the end of the basement hallway, looking south. This would have opened to a tunnel, which was filled in decades ago. Note the transom window.



Figure 24. Basement crib, looking west.



Figure 25. Basement crib, looking east.



Figure 26. Another basement crib, looking east.

Annex

Before 1914, an annex was added to the rear of the building, extending the Dumas to the alley. This extension has a total of eight rooms; four facing the alley, and four facing an interior central hallway—each with a door and tall window. The annex is accessible from an interior door at the end of the central hallway. The annex would have rendered any original doorways effectively useless. One of these entrances has been bricked in, and is still visible behind the staircase. As of May 2016, the annex is closed to the public and is being used for storage.



Figure 27. Entrance to the annex, looking north.



Figure 28. Interior of annex showing covered wire glass skylight.

Sanborn Maps

The building was erected in 1890, as evidenced by the date on the ornamental metal cornice on the South façade. Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps provide many details of its early construction, and help form a timeline for alterations to the structure. The 1891 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map shows the original building's footprint, which has not changed much in 125 years. The “Female Boarding” house was of brick construction, had a tin or slate roof, and stood thirty-two feet tall. There is a note showing the building is two stories with a basement.

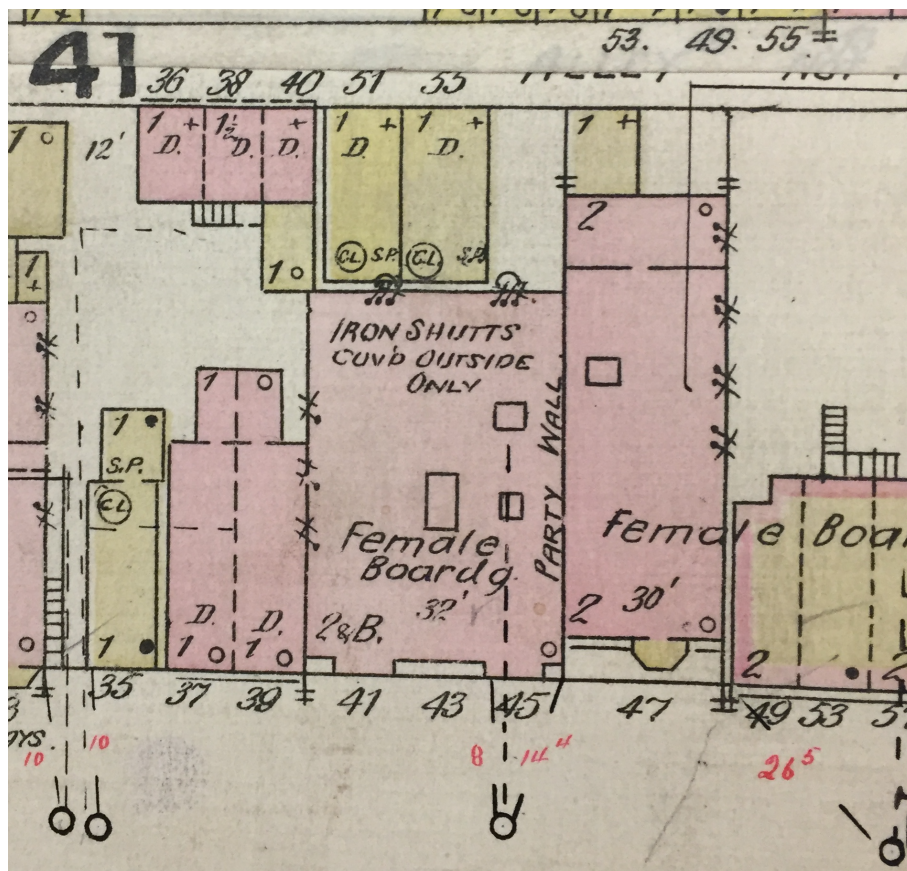


Figure 29. Sanborn Map, E. Mercury Street, 1891.

The Dumas shared a party wall with another two-story female boarding house to the east and had a one-story dwelling to the west. This early map reveals three second-story windows on the western elevation. There are three skylights denoted on this early map: one central, rectangular light, and two smaller lights to the east. Though room boundaries are not demarcated on this map, these are the same skylights that are still in place in two eastern-facing rooms. These lights serve a practical purpose: natural light was needed to illuminate rooms on the top floor, and rooms facing the east shared a party wall with the adjacent building, making it impossible to get natural light from traditional windows.

The rear of the building as it was in 1891 is particularly interesting, as it has undergone the most alterations over the years. The north elevation of the building appears to have had two openings—perhaps two windows with iron shutters, or two doors. A bricked-in doorway in the northernmost wall of the original structure, visible in 2016, suggests that this was the original entrance from the alley. Directly behind the Dumas were two one-story frame dwellings.

By the 1914 Sanborn Map, the owners had added a rear annex to the Dumas. The one-story brick addition effectively extended the Dumas to the alley. It had a composition roof, unlike the main building, which still had a slate or tin roof. The “F.B.”—female boarding—annex has a central hallway, which opened directly into the alley. It also has a centralized skylight, labeled “WG”—meaning it was a raised wire glass skylight.



Figure 30. Sanborn Map, E. Mercury Street, 1914.

Apart from the rear of the building, the rest of the original structure was largely unchanged in 1914. The structure to the west had been extended (or a new, longer building had been erected), and a covered passage had been constructed between the two buildings.

By 1916, Sanborn maps had become more detailed. For the first time, we see the configuration of the first-story rooms and the annex. The original building is shown to have a total of twelve rooms—six on either side of the central hallway—revealing that

the partitions that divided the large rooms had been erected by at least 1916. A second central skylight had been installed by 1916, bringing the second floor total to four.

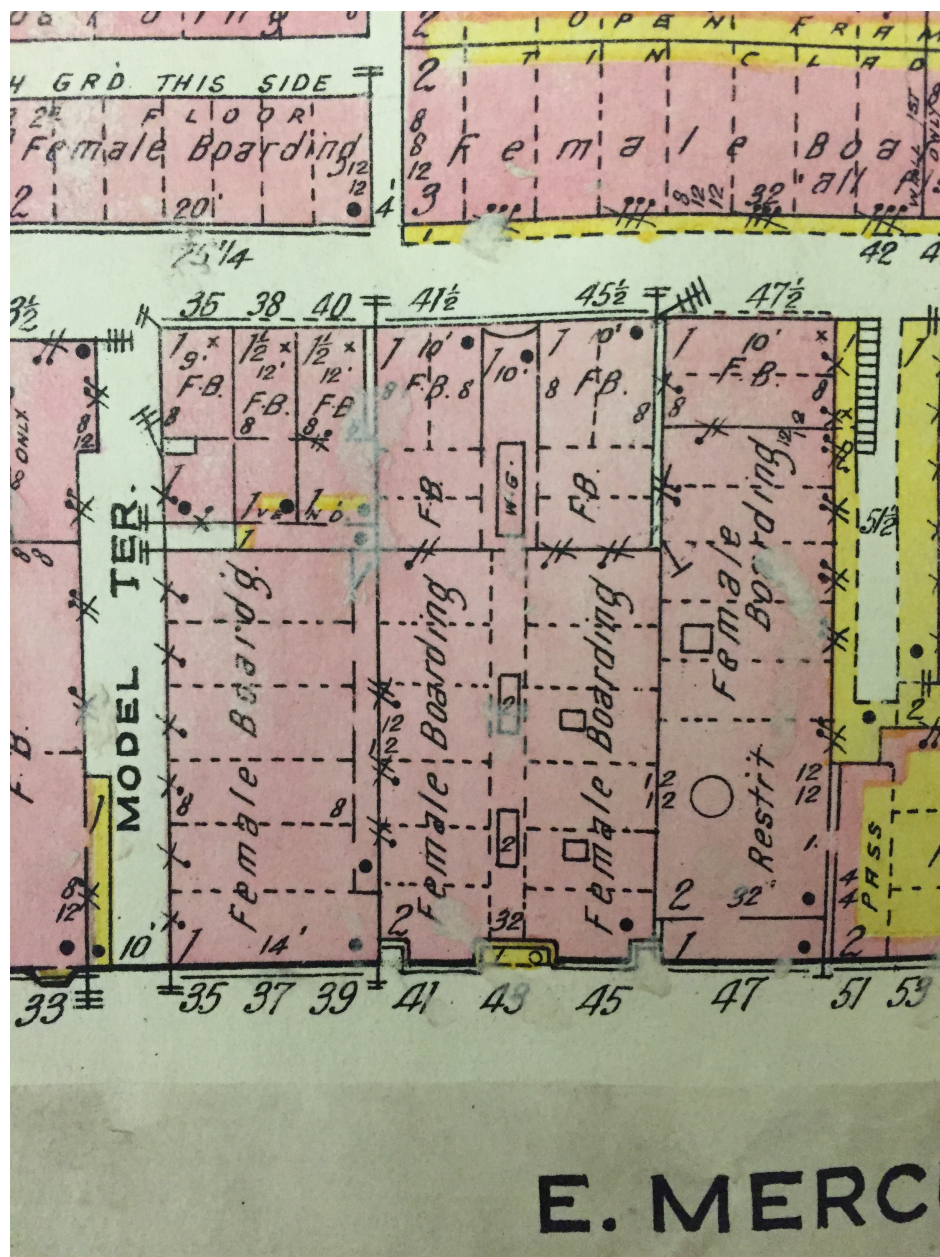


Figure 31. Sanborn Map, E. Mercury Street, 1916.

The layout of the annex (which stood ten feet tall) is also detailed in this map, and shows that the configuration has not changed since 1916. On each side of the central hallway (still marked by a wire glass skylight), were four rooms: two facing the central hallway, and two facing the alley. The four rooms which faced the street each had a long window for soliciting customers and a door for private access. Along the central hallway of the annex, the arrangement was the same: a door and a tall window for each room.

While the building itself does not seem to have changed from 1916 to 1927, it is important to notice how the buildings around the Dumas were changing. The block had been full of buildings—mostly female boarding houses. But by at least 1927, the landscape was changing. The building to the east of the Dumas had been levelled by 1927—labelled then as “Parking lot.” Several other buildings to the west had been crossed out with pencil, suggesting they had been demolished by the time someone was updating the maps later. Indeed, by 1957, the Dumas was one of only four buildings on the south side of the 41 block of East Mercury. Pleasant Alley, once lined with houses of prostitution, had been similarly levelled.

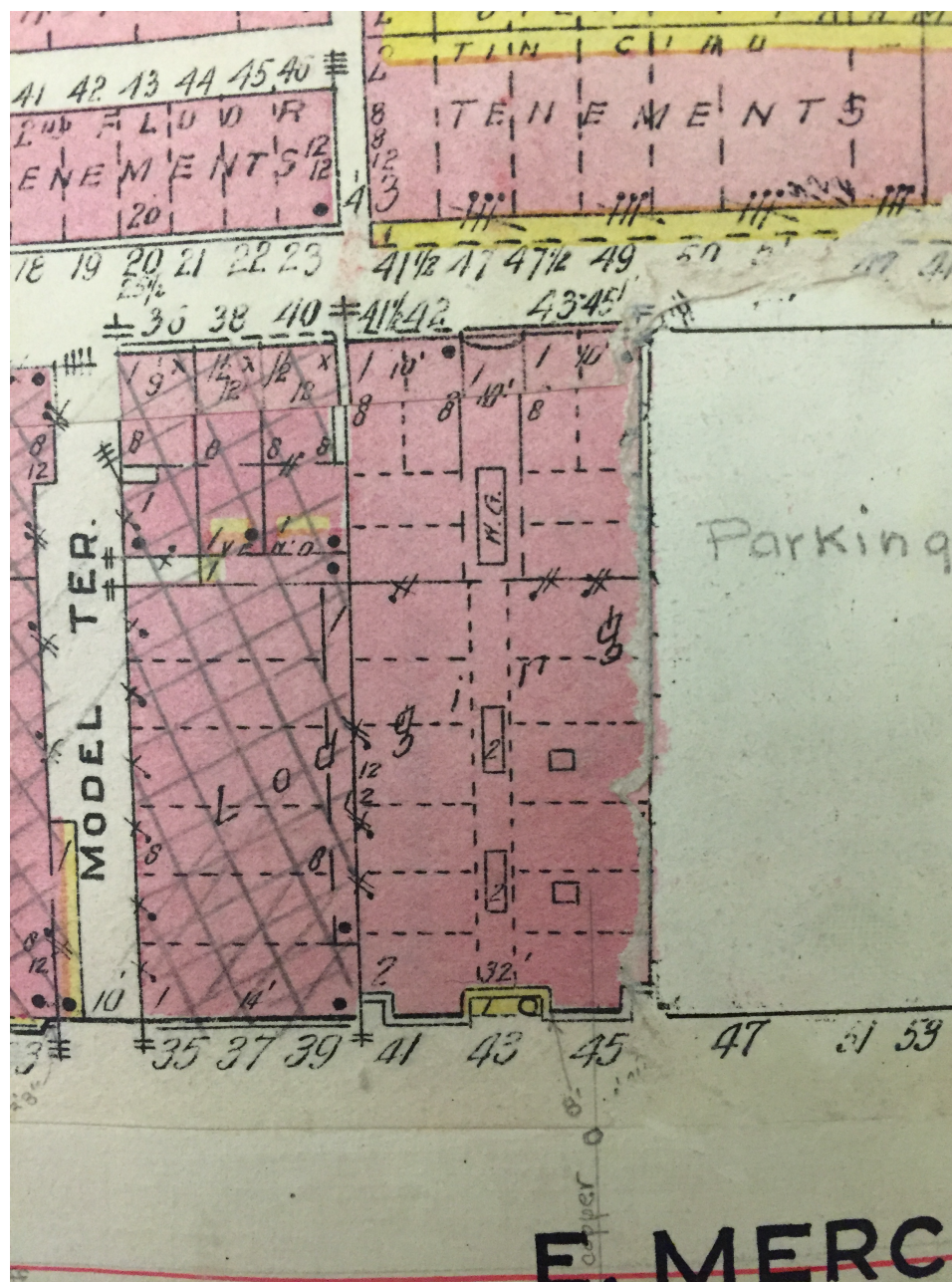


Figure 32. Sanborn Map, E. Mercury Street, 1927.

The Dumas withstood these changes. The only noticeable difference in the building between the 1927 and 1957 maps was that the front two rooms, which flanked the central hallway, had been opened up to make the large entryway visible today. At some point after this map was drawn, two of the three window openings on the second

story of the original building's façade were covered over, leaving only the door that is visible today.

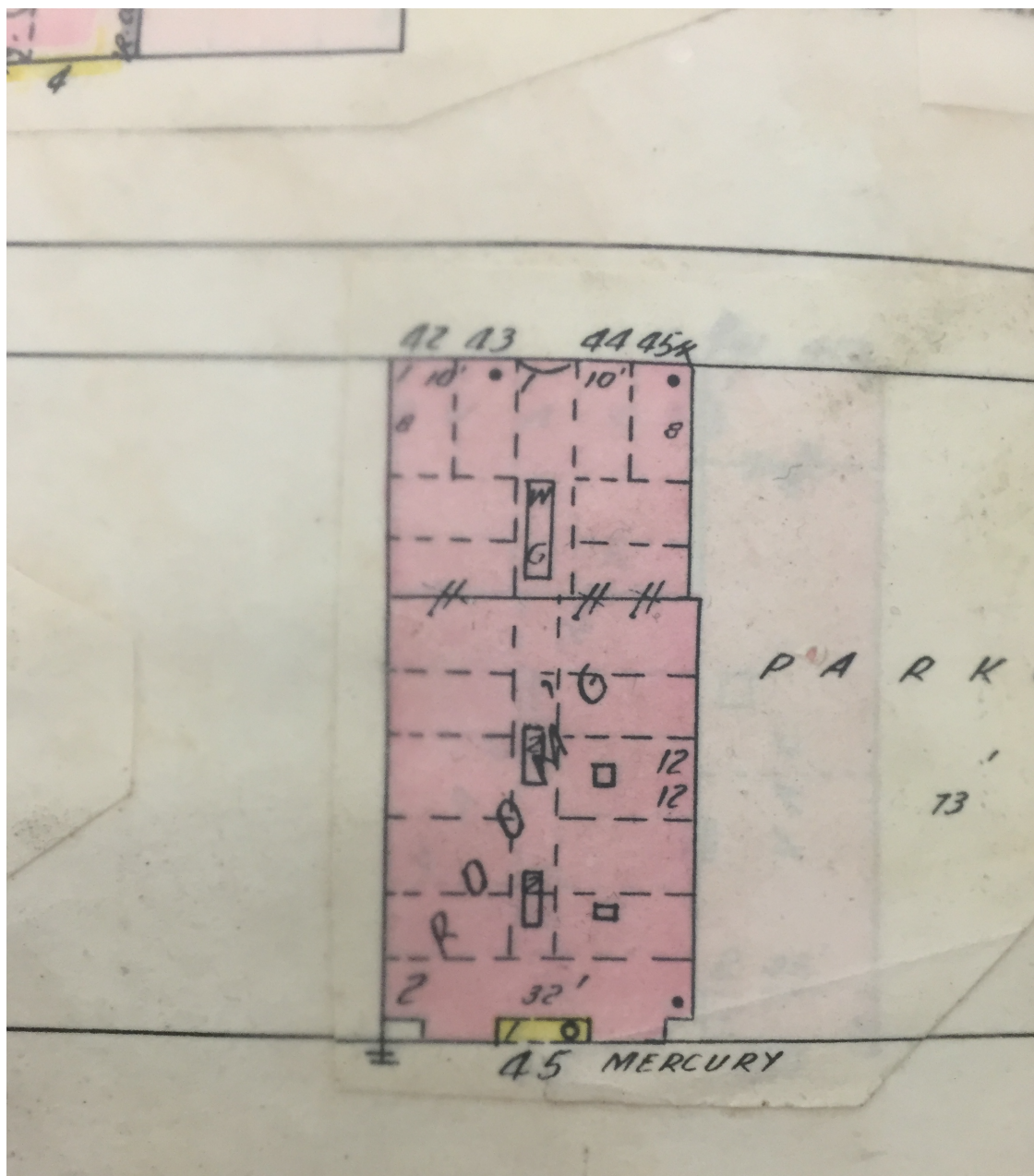


Figure 33. Sanborn Map, E. Mercury Street, 1957.

Statement of Integrity

Considering the demolitions that have occurred in Butte's red-light district, it is a wonder that the Dumas is still standing. Not only is it Butte's last extant parlor house brothel, but it has been altered very little over the last century. The Dumas undoubtedly meets six of the seven National Park Service requirements for integrity (location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, and association), though the feeling of the Dumas has certainly been impacted by the vacant lots on this block. Much of the original feeling of an established red-light district has been lost because of this urban "renewal." The Dumas thus becomes that much more important. As historian Mary Murphy wrote on a 1985 National Register inventory form, "...as the only remaining structure of its kind it also is the only one left to evoke the association of past history in the red light district."⁴¹ The Dumas was even a contributing building when part of Butte was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1961. Yet despite the building's documented significance to Butte history, it is constantly under threat of condemnation or demolition.

The Dumas was designed to be nondescript. It is a handsome building, to be sure, but its function was always supposed to be unclear to passersby. The front of the building has no architectural features that suggest it operated as a brothel. There are no windows for "shopping" on the building's front, for instance. This ambiguity of function protected the business and people inside the building. Even now, passersby might assume that the building at 45 East Mercury Street is just another neglected boarding house-turned-commercial building in the historic district. In reality, the Dumas has a far more

⁴¹ Mary Murphy, "Montana Historical and Architectural Inventory," 1985.

compelling story to offer visitors. Long after the other brothels in Butte's red-light district had closed, the Dumas remained active. For nine decades—through the mining industry's boom and bust, and through times of war and peace—women of varying backgrounds sold sex from within the unassuming walls of the Dumas.

CHAPTER TWO:

DESENSATIONALIZING BUTTE'S SOILED DOVES:

A HISTORIOGRAPHY OF PROSTITUTION IN THE AMERICAN WEST

Prostitutes' labor is best understood within the context in which it was performed. For ninety years, the Dumas was the setting for countless women's lives and labors. It—almost paradoxically—represents both the upper echelon of parlor house brothels and the grim lowliness of cribs, illustrating the diversity of women's lived experience under a single roof. For too long, though, prostitutes' lives were reduced to clichés.

One of the most enduring legacies of the Old West is the myth of the frontier prostitute—the rambunctious dance hall girl, the sensationalized soiled dove. This stereotype was promulgated in writings about the Old West, and such romanticization diminished women's lived experience. In an effort to correct this stereotype and humanize prostitution in the West, many scholars have written about the dangers of prostitution, the women who were performing this work, and their place within the frontier landscape.

Writing about prostitution in a balanced, nuanced manner is no easy task, especially when writing about a place like Butte, Montana—once a major mining town that boasted one of the most famous red-light districts in America. A body of scholarship has developed around prostitution in Butte in the last decade or so, though its roots reach back to the late 1970s, when social historians first turned to the study of prostitution in the American West and laid the foundation for localized studies.

Among the first academic works to deal with prostitution in the American West is *Prostitution: An Illustrated Social History* (1978) by Vern Bullough and Bonnie Bullough. The book is a broad social history of prostitution on a global scale, culminating with sex work in modern America. The frontier West is given a portion of a chapter on the American system. Bullough and Bullough relate that information—and stereotypes—about prostitutes in the mining camps of the Old West were passed down through folk tales and camp stories.¹ The authors are relatively vague in their characterization of prostitutes in the West: “Most of the women on the frontier who served as prostitutes were young, most were white, and most were unmarried, although there was a sprinkling of Negroes, Indians, Chinese, and others. The only real criterion was being female; everything else was incidental.”² This characterization essentially negates the roles of gender, sexuality, and ethnic identity in a prostitute’s life—all that mattered was her biological sex.

As this is meant to be a broad overview of prostitution for “scholars and [social] scientists” alike, the authors are similarly vague about *what part* of the West they were discussing and *when*—though Bullough and Bullough do mention that Butte was one of ten cities surveyed by Howard Woolston (author of the *Prostitution in the United States: Volume One, Prior to the Entrance of the United States into the World War*, a study sponsored by the Bureau of Social Hygiene) in 1917 that still had a formal red-light

¹ Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Prostitution: An Illustrated Social History* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1978), 203.

² *Ibid.*, 204.

district.³ These districts, the authors argue, were a result of failed “reglementation” efforts, and were designed to “confine” prostitutes into designated areas where officials could “keep track of dissolute persons and control organized vice” and “protect the community against immoral influence.”⁴ The authors highlight well-known prostitutes, but note that the average frontier prostitute was “somewhere below twenty” years old, and after she retired, she would probably get married, if she didn’t fall ill or commit suicide first.⁵ The authors raise an important point about physical and mental health among prostitutes by mentioning illness and suicide, though unfortunately they do not expound on this.

Bullough and Bullough were contributing to a small—but growing—body of scholarship on prostitution. Judging by the authors’ bibliography, it seems that there was a surge in writing on this topic beginning in the 1940s and ending in the early 1960s. In an endnote, the authors included over a dozen books on prostitution in the West, representing some of historians’ earliest writings on the topic. Most of these works were published in the 1950s, and the majority were written by men. Titles featured include *Shady Ladies of the West*, *Painted Ladies of the Cowtown Frontier*, *Calamity Jane and the Lady Wildcats*, *Desperate Women*, and *Westward the Women*.⁶ The purpose of *Prostitution: An Illustrated Social History*, according to the authors, was to correct the

³ Ibid., vii, 209.

⁴ Ibid., 208.

⁵ Ibid., 204.

⁶ Ibid., 322.

narrative about prostitution that had “historically been looked at from a male point of view,” which treated “the prostitute herself often as a base person with perverted sexual instincts.”⁷ The developing field of social history, then, provided the context for a more balanced study of prostitution.

If the authors were calling for a more nuanced analysis of prostitution, Ruth Rosen certainly delivered with her 1982 book, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918*. Though Rosen doesn’t look at the frontier West specifically in this work, her arguments regarding the Progressive Era-mindset of the fear of industrialization and modernization and the “growth of urban prostitution” are certainly relevant for scholars of the American West, as moral reformers were galvanized in the East and then swept through the towns of the frontier West.⁸ Though Rosen’s focus is on prostitution in urban America, her eighth chapter, called “The Lost Sisterhood: The Causes of Prostitution”—which includes an adaptation of turn-of-the-century surveys on motivating factors—has been cited quite regularly in scholarly and popular works alike. She specifically looks at prostitution through the lenses of gender and class, citing the “new social history” as the “context” in which examining the changing meanings of sex work is most informative, much like Bullough and Bullough.⁹

Inspired by the progress in the field made by the new social historians, Anne M. Butler published *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery: Prostitution in the American West*,

⁷ Ibid., 241.

⁸ Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), xiii.

⁹ Ibid., xv.

1865-90 in 1985. Butler was among the first historians to contribute monographs on prostitution in the West. She cites Marion Goldman's *Gold Diggers and Silver Miners* (1981) as the first "major work" on the topic—an apt assessment.¹⁰ Butler built upon the groundwork established by Goldman, who was looking specifically at the Comstock Lode boom in the 1860s and 1870s, expanding her scope to prostitution between 1865 and 1890. Butler's purpose in *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery* "is to describe the quality of life for prostitutes who lived in various locations on the post-Civil War frontier," and to dispel the stereotype of the "dance hall girl."¹¹ Butler argues that, in historical works, prostitutes have "been but slightly recognized," and are usually "disregarded as social, economic, or political entities...[and] included only for a dash of spice in frontier accounts."¹² While Butler does recognize the West as a separate entity, she argues that "frontier history must move beyond the invented, anecdotal tales that celebrate the West as an epic of romantic conquest."¹³

Chief among Butler's many arguments is the notion that violence and addiction "dominated" workers' lives (including their marriages), and that women in the profession were more hostile to one another than previous studies suggested.¹⁴ Butler's attitude of moral superiority (for instance, she argues that prostitutes had "neither the energy nor

¹⁰ Anne M. Butler, *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery: Prostitution in the American West, 1865-90* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), xi.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, xviii, xvi.

¹² *Ibid.*, xviii-xix.

¹³ *Ibid.*, x.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 154.

skills” to be good mothers to their children) threatens to overwhelm her arguments at time.¹⁵ She redeems herself, though, by saying that “the lives and experiences of these women meshed with the emergence of frontier institutions....[T]hat their contributions appear less ‘good’ or ‘noble’ does not make them less important.”¹⁶ She resents that the lived experience of a prostitute in the frontier West has been so neglected and ends her book with a lamentation: “Unfortunately, as the West passed from its nineteenth-century formative days, the prostitutes faded into the American memory as only the tarnished decorations of the frontier world.”¹⁷ Surely scholars who read these words felt a call to resurrect the image of the frontier prostitute, and do justice to her memory and historical significance.

One group in particular has certainly answered that call. A remarkable trend in the study of prostitution in the West is that a number of popular history writers have made significant contributions to the literature in recent years, often citing an emotional pull as the impetus for their research. Among these writers are Jan MacKell, whose 2004 book, *Brothels, Bordellos, and Bad Girls* sought to dispel stereotypes about the prostitute of the Old West (Colorado, specifically). She writes that her purpose is “to right the wrongs and, if possible, vindicate the thousands whose lives have been forgotten written off, laughed at, and so poorly represented.”¹⁸ Whereas Butler was somewhat patronizing in

¹⁵ Ibid., 41.

¹⁶ Ibid., 155.

¹⁷ Ibid., 155.

¹⁸ Jan MacKell, *Brothels, Bordellos, & Bad Girls: Prostitution in Colorado, 1860-1930* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), xiii.

her characterization of the same women, MacKell feels that sex workers, for the most part, “sold their own bodies and risked their lives simply in order to survive.”¹⁹ Not only did she perceive that an entire population of women had been slighted in the larger body of scholarship, but she felt a responsibility to recast the typical Western prostitute as a human being first and foremost.

MacKell expanded her research to include more Western states, including Montana, in her book *Red Light Women of the Rocky Mountains*, published in 2009. In it, she casts a wide net, and details daily lives in the red-light district, demographics of working girls, and the many hazards of the profession. While she does agree that prostitutes were “victims,” she argues that some women chose that path for many reasons—and some women had no choice at all.²⁰ Citing Rosen, MacKell explains that some women turned to prostitution because of “bad home conditions.”²¹ Others had been deserted by their husbands or boyfriends in a strange town and had no money of their own.²² While some women might have had a “desire for pleasure,” economic necessity usually drove women to prostitution.²³ Many women fell victim to false advertising

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, xiii.

²⁰ Jan MacKell, *Red Light Women of the Rocky Mountains* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2009), 28.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

promising them respectable employment out West, but instead found themselves trapped in a cycle of debt and forced prostitution.²⁴

In *Brothels, Bordellos, & Bad Girls*, MacKell had focused on women's perception of prostitution as an exciting alternative to a bad marriage, an opportunity to be economically independent, or even as an outlet for their inherent wildness.²⁵ In *Red Light Women of the Rocky Mountains*, however, MacKell is looking at prostitution through the lens of women's greater subjugation, and conveys to her audience the importance of context when looking at the history of prostitution. She writes that prostitutes:

were victimized by the double standards of a government that punished them and fined them for their deeds while at the same time realizing healthy profit from their work. Their clients were mostly users who satisfied their own needs in a time when women were chastised for feeling any form of passion....A prostitute could hope to make herself less of a victim only by working her way up in the profession or leaving it altogether, but even madams and former working girls were forever slaves to a society that bound them to a certain realm.²⁶

Somewhat troubling is the foreword by historian Tom Noel, who wrote that the “book is a popular, narrative history that will not bore readers with politically correct academic sermonizing and gender studies strutting. You will have to look elsewhere for those things.”²⁷ This disclaimer does a disservice to academic historians, and MacKell herself, who has given readers a thoroughly researched, thoughtful monograph—and is purposefully and unfairly critical of gender studies scholars. Nevertheless, while MacKell

²⁴ Ibid., 5.

²⁵ MacKell, *Brothels, Bordellos, & Bad Girls*, 19-21.

²⁶ MacKell, *Red Light Women*, 5.

²⁷ Ibid., xiv.

seems to be dancing around terms like “politics of respectability” and “sexual double standard”—perhaps to make her writing more appealing to popular audiences—her intentions are clear, and she has made an important contribution with *Red Light Women of the Rocky Mountains*.

In the same vein of popular writers tackling the history of prostitution in Montana is Lael Morgan’s *Wanton West: Madams, Money, Murder, and the Wild Women of Montana’s Frontier* (2011). Unlike MacKell’s works, however, Morgan’s book is much more of a narrative than a scholarly assessment of sex work. She recognizes that the West was its own entity, and argues that the “Montana story” is especially unique in that “nowhere else in America was open prostitution a given for so long”—an indirect reference to the Dumas brothel, which operated into the early 1980s.²⁸ Morgan admires Montana’s working girls for their “extraordinary independence.” These women, in Morgan’s estimation, did not want “redemption” from their livelihoods.²⁹

Morgan contradicts one of Butler’s main points in *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery*—“that frontier prostitutes were poor, wretched, with no chance to escape the life once they were in it”—by arguing that “there are no figures to bear this out.”³⁰ She suggests that historians do not actually have the primary sources to substantiate claims of “appalling suicide rates and short life spans.”³¹ Morgan prefers instead to believe that

²⁸ Lael Morgan, *Wanton West: Madams, Money, Murder, and the Wild Women of Montana’s Frontier* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2011), xiii.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 181.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 182.

³¹ *Ibid.*

most women left sex work in order to get married, and were able to “vanish” by retiring their nicknames (called *noms de crib* in other writings) and adopting their birth names.³² While this is most likely an overly-idealistic notion, Morgan is reaffirming the necessity of primary source material in creating a more balanced history of prostitution—one that does not simply regurgitate unsupported stereotypes.

While historians and popular writers have been writing about sex work in the West since the late 1970s, a balanced perspective has taken much longer to manifest in works devoted to Butte, specifically. The male-centered prostitution narrative endured until the 1990s, even in the most well-received Butte histories. For instance, in Michael P. Malone’s book *The Battle for Butte: Mining and Politics on the Northern Frontier, 1864-1906* (1981), there is much discussion of mining politics and the forces behind boom and bust, and three pages given to Butte’s bustling red-light district.

Malone talks about prostitution in (mostly) economic terms—as he rightly considers it “one of Butte’s major livelihoods.”³³ He emphasizes the distinction between the “seedy red-light district” called Venus Alley—which he argues “in its prime rivaled the Barbary Coast of San Francisco and the Corduroy Road of New Orleans”—and the Mercury Street parlor houses, “with their refined and wealthy madams and lovely girls for wealthier clients.”³⁴

³² Ibid., 183.

³³ Michael P. Malone, *The Battle for Butte: Mining and Politics on the Northern Frontier, 1864-1906* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981), 74.

³⁴ Ibid.

Malone addresses the ethnic diversity of prostitutes—though in a vague, superficial manner—by writing that “prostitutes of all shapes, sizes, and nationalities” could be found by “the discriminating customer.”³⁵ He explains that women worked under *noms de crib* (blatant racial slurs, in reality) such as “Nigger Liz,” “Jew Jess,” or “Mexican Maria.”³⁶ Perhaps this is in an effort to reinforce his previous argument that nicknames—which were abundantly popular in Butte—“made all men [and women, perhaps] equal.”³⁷ It is much more likely, however, that these *noms de crib* were simple aliases the women used to maintain some modicum of privacy and to advertise themselves to potential customers.

Malone notes that prostitutes worked for “elegant pimps,” whom “everyone loved to hate.”³⁸ In this way, it seems that women had little or no control over their business transactions. He comments that in the “heyday” of the red-light district (1903-17, approximately), some “4,000 men and women could be found milling the area,” further emphasizing the size and viability of the red-light district, though without commentary on the women’s labor who, in large part, made it possible.³⁹

Malone relays a popular quote by Charlie Chaplin, who praised Butte for “having the prettiest women of any red-light district in the West,” housed in “a hundred cribs” and

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 72.

³⁸ Ibid., 74.

³⁹ Ibid., 74-75.

“ranging in age from sixteen up.”⁴⁰ Chaplin continued, “If one saw a pretty girl smartly dressed, one could rest assured she was from the red-light quarter, doing her shopping. Off duty, they looked neither right nor left and were most acceptable.”⁴¹ Thus prostitutes were *acceptable* to men only if they could wear nice clothes and pass for non-sex workers.

Malone argues that “Butte seemed not to take itself, or anything else, very seriously”—including criticism from the likes of Billy Sunday or Carrie Nation.⁴² Thus Malone ends his commentary on sex work in Butte, considering it to be a part of the city’s seemingly “turbulent” nature.⁴³ He muses, “Butte was tough, yet Butte was tender. Stark and ugly, warm and unpretentious, fatalistic yet fun-loving and convivial, the city left visitors aghast, but it struck an enduring affection and loyalty in the hearts of its people,” though it is unclear what place in “tough” and “tender” Butte was reserved for working women, besides in the male gaze.⁴⁴

Published sixteen years after Malone’s book, Mary Murphy’s *Mining Cultures: Men, Women, and Leisure in Butte, 1914-41* is a fantastic example of scholarly writing that seamlessly blends gender studies and local history. The book is meant to be a study of the ways in which women altered the male-dominated landscape of Butte through

⁴⁰ Ibid., 75.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

leisure, but Murphy's analysis of prostitution in the town—the topic of her 1983 Master's thesis and a 1984 article published in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*—is inspired.

Murphy argues that men and women in Butte considered prostitution to be “necessary in a town full of single miners” as “the presence of the [red-light] district protected good women”—good women who were forbidden to express “any hint of public sexuality.”⁴⁵ Thus sex workers, who were “defined exclusively by their sexual activity,” played a vital role in maintaining social balance in Butte.⁴⁶ There was a great deal of tension between sex workers and the rest of the community, though. Murphy argues that parents of young women were afraid that their daughters would be tempted to enter into the profession when they saw that prostitutes participated in a “burgeoning consumer society” and its trappings—“clothes, movies, dance halls,” and the like, though Murphy doubts that this was a popular trend among Butte girls.⁴⁷ She does note, however, that many young, fashionable women who exhibited “unladylike conduct, such as smoking, dancing, and wearing short skirts and short hair,” were “inevitably” compared to sex workers.⁴⁸

As to not characterize prostitution as fashionable or glamorous, Murphy emphasizes that there was a hierarchy among Butte's red-light women—most prostitutes

⁴⁵ Mary Murphy, *Mining Cultures: Men, Women, and Leisure in Butte, 1914-41* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 78.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 79.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 81.

“sold their bodies for a dollar in dark, narrow cribs and made most of their income selling dollar-a-bottle beer. Transient, worn, often addicted to alcohol and drugs, they were tragic, exploited women.”⁴⁹ There was another side to the red-light district, of course, where parlor house “beauties” “charged higher prices and often served as companions as well as bed partners”—though these women cannot represent the entire red-light district.⁵⁰ In this way, Murphy strikes a balance between Butler’s dismal characterization and the somewhat idealized portrayal of prostitutes in both Morgan’s *Wanton West* and MacKell’s *Brothels, Bordellos, & Bad Girls*.

An important contribution of Murphy’s is her assessment of reform in Butte during this period. Murphy argues that attempts were made at reform, but Butte as a whole tended to resist such campaigns, due to the nature of the town. She writes:

Butte was wedded to the rough pleasures of a wide-open town, and the [Anaconda] company did little to alter that. Unlike many American cities, Butte lacked an effective progressive movement that worked to eradicate vice and impose middle-class standards of behavior. . . . Butte ignored laws regulating vice and ridiculed or shunned the few reformers who came to town.⁵¹

It was in the best interest of city officials and the Anaconda Company for Butte to remain “wide-open” as it was “presumably a cheap way of keeping workers happy.”⁵² This is an effective argument, as Murphy proves that Butte was a “city designed for adult men,” where miners faced death or illness every day and played as hard as they worked.⁵³

⁴⁹ Ibid., 79.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., xvi.

⁵² Ibid., 234.

Perhaps following Murphy's lead, Ellen Baumler, a historian with the Montana Historical Society, has done extensive research on Butte's red-light district. She has a particular interest in the Dumas—the last extant parlor house brothel in what used to be a thriving district—and has published two articles on the topic. In her 1998 article entitled “Devil's Perch: Prostitution from Suite to Cellar in Butte, Montana,” Baumler looks at the built environment of the district. She says that plenty of research has been done on Butte *and* its red-light district, but that “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.”⁵⁴ Baumler ably guides her reader through these questions.

Baumler first argues that the men who invested in red-light real estate were prominent, respected members of Butte society who gained and maintained wealth through their holdings, as prostitution was “a business viewed as a sound investment in a town dominated by single men.”⁵⁵ Thus men profited by exploiting women's labor, as MacKell had argued in *Red Light Women*. Much like Murphy did in *Mining Cultures*, Baumler is arguing that prostitution was intrinsic to Butte both culturally and economically—more so than in other Montana towns. She writes, “in Butte, prostitution was intertwined with other downtown businesses and was as much a part of the scenery

⁵³ Ibid., 233.

⁵⁴ Ellen Baumler, “Devil's Perch: Prostitution from Suite to Cellar in Butte, Montana,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 48, no. 3 (Autumn 1998): 5, accessed July 20, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4520070>.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 8.

as the steel headframes that loomed over the landscape.”⁵⁶ This is the reason why 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,” but never met with much success in Butte.⁵⁷

Like Murphy, Baumler argues that prostitution “ultimately served the [Anaconda] company,” as men “would spend their time and paychecks on entertainment rather than organizing against their bosses.”⁵⁸ Not only that—but sex workers in Butte actively resisted local reform when they felt mandates had crossed a line. For instance, Baumler recounts how local officials had instituted a more modest dress code for prostitutes—longer skirts and higher-necked blouses—which the women reluctantly followed.⁵⁹ But when they were next ordered to “lower their blinds” in order to further “discourage solicitation” in the district, Baumler writes that they were “outraged,” and complied “only after cutting holes in the blinds for their faces.”⁶⁰ Baumler cites a newspaper article that quoted a resident of the alley as having said that “the moralists of the city were getting too fresh” by interfering in such intimate business transactions.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Ibid., 12.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 6.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 13.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

Baumler notes that the Dumas Brothel (though she prefers the term “hotel”) reflects the “two extremes” of prostitution—beautiful, refined women worked out of spacious upstairs bedrooms, while less ‘desirable’ women worked out of small, dark cribs in the basement and in Pleasant Alley to the rear of the building.⁶² She has found that “women of nearly every culture, race, and age” worked out of Pleasant Alley cribs, including French women, Japanese women, and “most of Butte’s few African American” women.⁶³

Women in this district were actually quite vital to the local economy, according to Baumler. Many businesses, especially those in Butte’s Chinatown, depended on the prostitutes’ business. These businesses included dry cleaners, “noodle parlors” and clothing stores, as well as herbalists who “provided birth control and venereal disease remedies,” as well as abortions.⁶⁴ Baumler suggests that some sex workers in Butte were business savvy, and knew that they had an impact on the economy—contradicting accounts like Malone’s, which argued that women were subject to the whims of their pimps and johns. During one of many attempts at reform in the red-light district, when citizens were protesting that the district be moved further from the center of town, its residents “packed up their little lapdogs and other belongings and temporarily closed the district themselves” and waited for “the emotional furor to die down and good business sense to prevail,” which it did several weeks later.⁶⁵ They realized, Baumler argues, “that

⁶² Ibid., 12.

⁶³ Ibid., 12, 11.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 13.

the municipal revenues from the district were substantial”—a \$10 fine collected from each prostitute totaled about \$2,000 a month for the city.⁶⁶

Importantly, Baumler traces the history of prostitution in Butte into the 1990s, over a decade after the last brothel closed its doors permanently. Baumler eloquently summarizes the rise and fall of the red-light district and its women through the lens of the built environment:

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.⁶⁷

Eleven years after “Devil’s Perch,” Baumler published another article on prostitution, expanding her scope to include Anaconda as well. While there is a good bit of overlap with her first article, she incorporated more content about the women themselves in “End of the Line: Butte, Anaconda, and the Landscape of Prostitution.” She argues, for instance, that women were present in the earliest mining camps to ply their trade. “Miners were not particular about the company they kept,” Baumler writes, “and these women were simply part of the community.”⁶⁸ When camps evolved into towns, and women began working out of proper parlor house brothels, there was a shift in

⁶⁵ Ibid., 15.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 21.

⁶⁸ Ellen Baumler, “The End of the Line: Butte, Anaconda, and the Landscape of Prostitution,” in *Drumlummon Views*, ed. Patty Dean (Helena: Drumlummon Institute and Montana Preservation Alliance, 2009), 283.

the dynamics of the profession, and women were subject to the demands of the house madam. Baumler relates the testimony of two former employees of Florence Clark (madam of The Monogram). The young women claimed they had been held against their will at the brothel, and that Clark “took their street clothes, charged exorbitant prices for their needs, and quickly made the women indebted to management.”⁶⁹ This is likely one of many examples of mistreatment and psychological abuse of women by other women in the profession. Furthermore, Baumler argues that this incident “underscores the lack of economic opportunity women often experienced working for a madam.”⁷⁰ She cites a contemporary newspaper article that lamented prostitution ““was nothing more than a life of bondage.””⁷¹ Her fellow scholars may or may not agree with this assessment.

Clearly, scholars of prostitution in the frontier West have not reached a consensus about what it means to have been a sex worker during this time. Scholars disagree about the role of gender and the degree to which it impacted a woman’s livelihood, and the agency of women in choosing this profession. They all seem to agree, though, that the West was its own entity, and that sex work was crucial to the sustenance of the frontier landscape. As Anne M. Butler mused in 1985, there was a “quality of evaporation” in the frontier West, “wherein it perpetually evolved away from its own essence until its former definition became lost.”⁷² The same can be said of the history of prostitution in the West.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 288.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Butler, xi.

Folk stories and media portrayals have promulgated harmful stereotypes of prostitutes, romanticized these women's harsh realities, and distorted an important facet of women's history. As evidenced by the scholars and popular writers discussed here, historical research and a better understanding of context can correct this misrepresentation of the prostitute of the Old West, thereby cementing her place in the history of the American West based on her actuality—which is ultimately far more compelling than her myth.

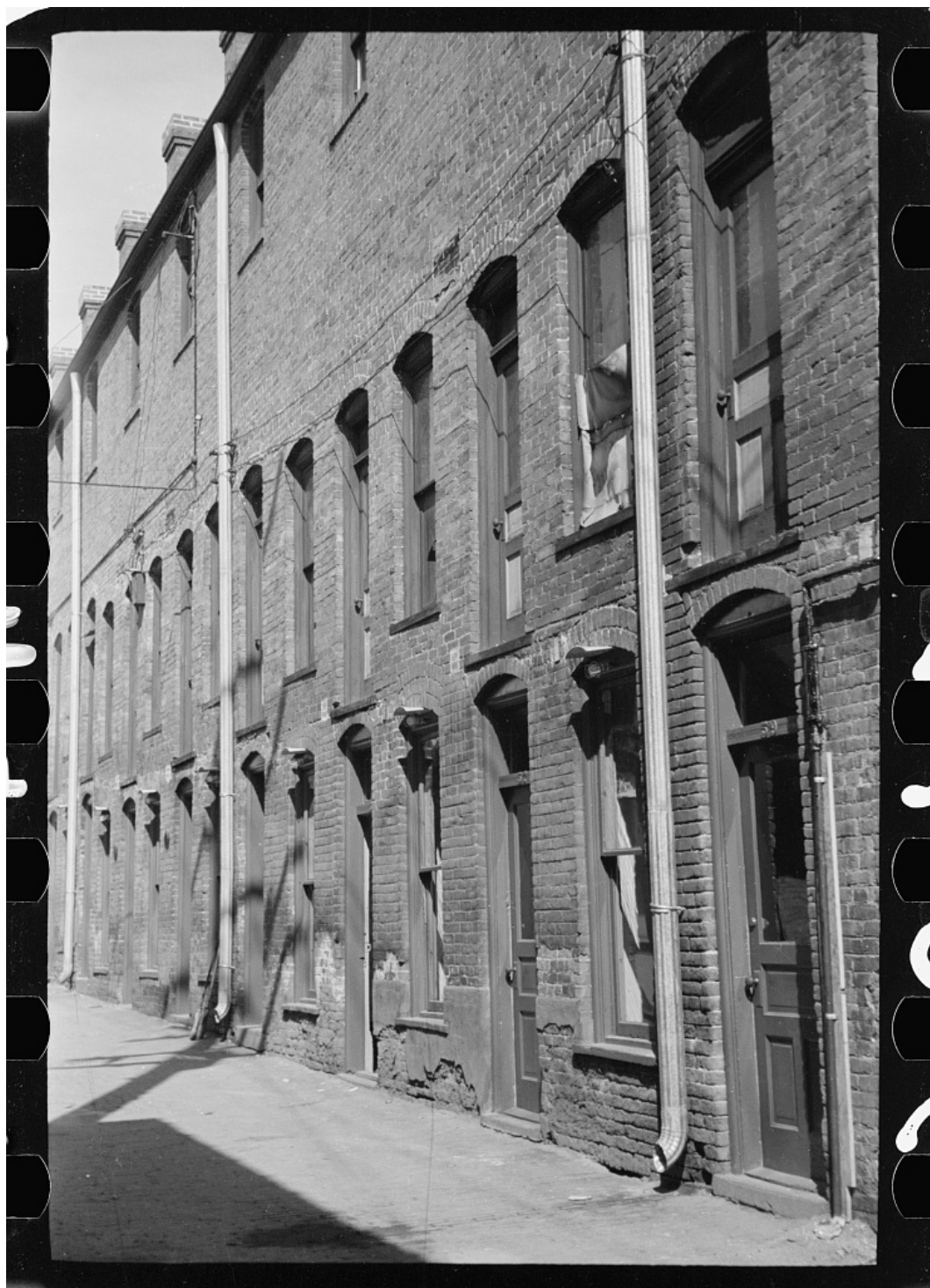
Considering then the importance of context in the narrative of the Western prostitute, the Dumas's significance is brought into sharp relief as the setting of over ninety years of women's lives and labors. The Dumas is a tangible piece of Butte's "wide-open" history, and thus remains a controversial historic site nearly thirty-five years after it ceased to be an operating brothel.

CHAPTER THREE:

HISTORIC PRESERVATION AND PUBLIC INTERPRETATION

The Dumas Brothel has stood at 45 East Mercury Street since 1890 in Butte, Montana—a city known as much for its rampant vice and wide-open reputation as it is for its legacy as a boom-and-bust mining company town. The Dumas Hotel, as it was politely called by contemporaries, was once a part of Butte’s expansive red-light district, which was a hub for prostitution, drinking, and gambling—and an integral component of the town’s economy. When it closed in 1982, the Dumas was Butte’s longest-running brothel. It is also one of the last standing examples of brothel architecture in Butte. Nearly 35 years of preservation efforts have kept it standing, and it exists today as one of the only brothel museums in the country.

The building is a remarkable example of the parlor-house style of brothel architecture that once dominated this part of town. Business was conducted on all three levels of the house. Gentlemen were granted access by the madam or a servant through the front door; or, for the more affluent clients, a tunnel once connected the basement level to a more discreet entrance from the business district at the front of the house. Clients also gained access from Venus Alley—the seediest part of town—through the back door.



*Figure 34. Arthur Rothstein, "Venus Alley, Butte, Montana," Summer 1939, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington DC.
<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print>.*



Figure 35. Arthur Rothstein, "Entrance to Venus Alley, Butte, Montana," Summer 1939, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington DC. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print>.



Figure 36. Arthur Rothstein, "Sign in Window, Venus Alley, Butte, Montana," Summer 1939, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington DC. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print>.

The ground floor was a space for entertaining customers with drinks and dancing before they made their selection and went upstairs. Pocket doors on this floor reveal that these rooms could be expanded to entertain more comfortably. The women lived, worked,

and slept on the second floor. A series of private rooms surround a central gallery, well-lit by original skylights. Each room has a corner sink, but the women shared a communal claw-foot tub and, in later years, a small shower. Underneath the parlor rooms of the first floor is a hallway flanked on either side by cribs, or small, dark, dismal rooms with just enough room for a bed and a dresser or chair. The cribs were supposedly for “less attractive,” “less talented” women to ply their trade, while the upstairs rooms were for the more beautiful, more refined prostitutes.¹

Ruby Garrett and the Preservation of the Dumas Brothel

Though often owned by men, women (called madams) usually ran brothels. The last madam of the Dumas, Ruby Garrett, operated the brothel from 1971 until the Dumas closed in 1982.² Garrett was 73 when she was interviewed for a two-part feature in the *Montana Standard* in February of 1991, written by Karl Rohr. Rohr wrote that Garrett was an unassuming woman at the age of 73—looking “every bit the sweet, kindly grandmother”—as she met him to give him a tour of the Dumas Brothel.³ Garrett had had a long career as a

¹ Lael Morgan, *Wanton West: Madams, Money, Murder, and the Wild Women of Montana's Frontier* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2011), xii.

² Karl Rohr, “Dumas Hotel doors to reopen, Owner gives building up for use by antique dealer Rudy Giecek,” *Montana Standard* (Butte), February 22, 1991, Prostitution / The Dumas Brothel, vertical file 1857, Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives, Butte, Montana.

³ Karl Rohr, “Ruby: She took her love Uptown, Brothel’s former ‘landlady’ wants to preserve Dumas Hotel for historical importance,” *Montana Standard* (Butte), February 23, 1991, Prostitution / The Dumas Brothel, vertical file 1857, Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives, Butte, Montana.

madam at multiple brothels in Butte. She had also been convicted of murder for having shot her abusive common-law husband to death in a Butte bar in 1959, when she was the pregnant madam of a brothel on South Wyoming Street.⁴ After a nine month stint in prison, Garrett went back to work, and bought the Dumas in 1971.⁵

Garrett was proud of her profession, even in her later years. In 1991, Garrett said, “If prostitution was legalized in Montana, I’d be the first one in line applying for a license.”⁶ Though Ruby Garrett refused to give an oral history to Ellen Crain, director of the Butte-Silver Bow Archives, and was selective when it came to divulging details of her own past, she sometimes shared her memories of the Dumas with the press.⁷ Many of these stories were of happy times, as Garrett thought “If you don’t think [prostitution] is morally wrong, then it’s kind of fun.”⁸

Though it would be easy to romanticize the brothel because of its frontier history, Ruby Garrett could speak to the not-so-glamorous recent past. She spoke fondly of her time at the Dumas, but she was also quick to admit that hers was a nerve-wracking and dangerous business.⁹ In an interview some ten years after the fact, Garrett recalled a particularly violent

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Nick Gevock, “Ruby Garrett, owner of Butte’s Dumas Brothel, died at 94,” *Missoulian*, March 20, 2012, accessed October 18, 2015, http://missoulian.com/news/state-and-regional/ruby-garrett-owner-of-butte-s-dumas-brothel-dies-at/article_13ef83f0-729c-11e1-99cb-001871e3ce6c.html.

⁸ Rohr, “Ruby.”

altercation at the Dumas in which two men forced their way into the brothel and bound, beat, and robbed her and three employees of \$4,500.¹⁰ Though Garrett had been burglarized twice before, this incident was particularly troubling for her, and she claimed in 1991 that she “still [had] headaches as a result of being pistol whipped.”¹¹ It also signified the beginning of the end for the Dumas Brothel.

Bob Butorovich, Butte-Silver Bow sheriff at the time, called the incident “the final straw.”¹² There was a long tradition in Butte of madams paying police officers in exchange for their cooperation, or the police pressuring the madams into paying for protection.¹³ No longer willing to turn a blind eye to the Dumas’s extralegal business practices, Butorovich acquiesced to public concerns “about the clientele the Dumas was attracting and the complaints from parents of Butte High School students who had to walk past the Dumas to and from school.”¹⁴ He closed the Dumas in 1982, ninety-two years after it was built. There were no hard feelings between the sheriff and the landlady, though. “I have the greatest

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

respect for Ruby Garrett,” Butorovich told the *Montana Standard*.¹⁵ “She really is a colorful person.”¹⁶

Had the sheriff not intervened, the future of the Dumas as a working brothel would probably still have been short-lived. The people of Butte were no longer tolerant of houses of ill-repute, and had for some time been putting pressure on city and county officials to come down harder on prostitution. Garrett was always quick to defend her profession and her employees against prejudice, though. She was outspoken about her belief that prostitution was not “morally wrong,” and said prostitution “should be considered a commodity.”¹⁷ Garrett thought it unfair that prostitutes were condemned for their actions when they were often much like the so-called “respectable girls.”¹⁸ Ruby told the reporter, “These little chippies who will do it for a burger and a beer, I say they might as well sell it.”¹⁹

Besides public criticism and acts of violence, there were practical matters stacked against Ruby Garrett and the Dumas. By the late 1970s, Garrett was deeply in debt. In 1982, she was ordered to serve a six-month sentence in a federal penitentiary for income tax evasion and had to pay nearly \$22,000 in back taxes.²⁰ She said, “Everybody thought I made

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

a million in this business. I didn't make a dime. I paid \$10,000 when I went to prison and that broke me."²¹

Though not as lucrative as it had been in previous decades, the Dumas represented more than sex for sale to Ruby Garrett. Rohr understood why Garrett took pride in the Dumas—he said it was because she considered it “a throwback to the times when the brothels were kept clean and proper behavior was expected.”²² Unlike the girls “out there with those G-strings,” her employees wore attire befitting a parlor house, like dresses and nightgowns.²³ Garrett defended the integrity of her business, but admitted to the reporter that most of the women who worked for her were uneducated.²⁴ Still, she insisted, “they weren't all bums that worked in there, I tell 'ya.”²⁵

In Garrett's eleven years as landlady—the title she and her contemporaries preferred over “madam”—of the Dumas, Garrett had grown quite fond of the place.²⁶ So, when the time came for Ruby to make decisions about the future of the building, she was cautious. The building sat dormant until late 1990, when Ruby met Rudy Giecek at a yard sale.

Karl Rohr also interviewed Giecek, who recalled driving past the Dumas when he saw Ruby Garrett's “alley sale”—furniture, beds, and other antiques for sale in front of the

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

building.²⁷ Giecek, an antique dealer raised in Butte, stopped to buy a few antique beds from Garrett and asked about the building.²⁸ Garrett told him that she was “‘going to let the house go to taxes’ because she thought no one was interested in saving it.”²⁹ Giecek was interested, but Garrett would not trust the building to just *anyone*. She had stipulations.

For Garrett, the preservation of the Dumas was deeply personal. She was understandably protective of the Dumas. She did not want the Dumas to go the way of so many historic brothels in the West and be converted into a restaurant, casino, or bar. Garrett said, “If it was going to be a casino or something like that, I’d just as soon see it torn down. When I used to think about it being torn down, I’d cry.”³⁰ And, unlike many of the other brothels in Montana, this particular house had closed very recently. Perhaps Garrett found the thought of drastically changing a place so near and dear to her heart too sad to entertain.

Thus, Garrett wanted the building to be restored to look as it had a century before.³¹ She wanted to honor the women who had inhabited the house before her. She felt that “the old madams would be happy up there in heaven if they knew it was preserved.”³²

²⁷ Karl Rohr, “Dumas Hotel doors to reopen, Owner gives building up for use by antique dealer Rudy Giecek,” *Montana Standard* (Butte), February 22, 1991, Prostitution / The Dumas Brothel, vertical file 1857, Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives, Butte, Montana.

²⁸ Rohr, “Ruby.”

²⁹ Rohr, “Doors to reopen.”

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

Karl Rohr understood Garrett's vision for the Dumas—and the historical significance of the building that went beyond the individual women who had lived there. He wrote that the Dumas could be “a reminder of the glory days of Butte mining and a restored memory of the profession that was an integral part of wide-open, brawling mining towns of the West, particularly Butte,” if Ruby Garrett's dream of restoration were to be realized.³³ Only the restoration of the Dumas would pay homage to the former madams and prostitutes *and* celebrate Butte's glory days.

Garrett trusted Giecek, and told Rohr that she “could see that he could do what I wanted done there.”³⁴ Giecek agreed to fulfill Ruby Garrett's vision, and the building was transferred to him in early 1991. The subsequent articles make no mention of an amount paid for the building, but in 2005, Giecek told the *New York Times* that he bought it for a few thousand dollars.³⁵ In reality, Giecek had bought the Dumas in 1992 for ten dollars not from Ruby Garrett, but from a Gloria Jean Brugger, who had purchased the building from the county. Garrett hadn't owned the building outright since she sold it to her son Victor in 1977. It is evident, though, that Ruby Garrett was still calling the shots when it came to the Dumas.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Kirk Johnson, “Dark Days for a Reminder of the Wild, Wild West in Montana,” *New York Times*, May 30, 2005, accessed October 18, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/30/us/dark-days-for-a-reminder-of-the-wild-wild-west-in-montana.html?_r=0.

Preservation Challenges

Giecek knew he had a challenge ahead of him when he agreed to Garrett's terms. His plan for the building was to move his antique business into the space, though he had a long list of repairs to make first. The building, having sat dormant for nearly ten years, was certainly "eerie."³⁶ First, Giecek had to get the heat and electricity working in the building before he could start work on the list of other necessary renovations.³⁷

It was fortunate that Giecek came along when he did, because the building was in real danger. When the Nadeaus built it in 1890, the Dumas was "one of the first two-story brick structures on Mercury Street."³⁸ Mark Reavis, the Butte-Silver Bow historic preservation officer in the early 1990s, championed the Dumas as an example of adaptive reuse for the few other remaining Uptown buildings.³⁹ "I mean, you obviously can't use it for a brothel again," he told the *Montana Standard* in February of 1991.⁴⁰ The only legitimate option for the Dumas, and the few buildings left in Uptown Butte, was to find a use that was "compatible with [both] the buildings and the new businesses" that were popping up in the early 1990s.⁴¹

³⁶ Rohr, "Doors to reopen."

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Reavis was decidedly optimistic about the future of the Dumas as a commercial space. Even Sheriff Butorovich, who was responsible for the closing of the Dumas in 1982, believed it was worth saving. He told the *Montana Standard* that “It’s part of Butte’s past, it’s part of Butte’s heritage.”⁴² Reavis, speaking as the city’s preservation officer, echoed the sheriff’s sentiment when he said, “I think it (the Dumas) is really the last intact example of the brothels that were up and down the entire length of Mercury Street.”⁴³ Indeed, by the early 1990s, the Dumas stood in isolation as the last unaltered parlor house—and one of only four historic structures—on the block. That the building could be saved from the wrecking ball—and in a way that still maintained its historical value—was a real feat at this time. Reavis lamented, “People are saying, ‘Well, we’ll save this one later and that one later.’ Well, we’re getting to the point where we’re not even saving.”⁴⁴ Giecek had bought some time for the Dumas, and had to commit to its preservation.

Rudy Giecek operated his antiques business out of the building for a few years, occasionally making repairs when funds allowed. In a newspaper article published four months into Giecek’s restoration, he was still trying to transfer the Dumas to his name.⁴⁵ In the meantime, he had moved his antique shop into a couple of rooms on the bottom floor and was renting other rooms out to local business owners.⁴⁶ Giecek charged his tenants—mostly

⁴² Rohr, “Ruby.”

⁴³ Rohr, “Doors to reopen.”

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Karl Rohr, “Red Light Antique Mall opens,” *Montana Standard* (Butte), Vertical File 1857.

other antique dealers and an artist or two—just sixty dollars in rent a month to “attract businesses so the customer flow can begin.”⁴⁷ Giecek told the *Montana Standard* that he was pleased with the attention the Dumas had been getting. Though advertising was limited, the Dumas (then called The Red Light Antique Mall) was included in the Montana Scenic Loop Directory of antique dealers, and “out-of-state customers still manage[d] to find the Dumas.”⁴⁸ Giecek told the *Standard* reporter that the three thousand dollars’ worth of back taxes owed on the Dumas, plus the four thousand dollars he had spent on renovations, had “just about drained him.”⁴⁹ In the same article, it was reported that the Dumas needed a new heating system, and an engineer “must check the building for structural weaknesses that need repairing.”⁵⁰ Still, Giecek was adamant about keeping the promise he made to Ruby Garrett and was committed to making the necessary repairs.

A Historic Site and Public Interpretation

In 1998, Giecek ended his initial attempt at an adaptive reuse of the building. He leased the Dumas to Norma Jean Almodovar, the executive director of the International Sex Worker Foundation for Art, Culture and Education (ISWFACE). Almodovar, a traffic cop

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

turned prostitute turned sex rights activist, had attained notoriety when she was arrested and convicted in 1983 for pandering. Her subsequent tell-all book, *Cop to Call Girl*, was released in 1993. Five years later, she arrived in Butte to partner with Rudy Geicek to make the Dumas a “museum where the lives of prostitutes can be presented through artwork, writings and other cultural endeavors.”⁵¹ It was also supposed to serve as the Los Angeles-based organization’s new headquarters.⁵²

Reporter John Stucke with the *Montana Standard* called Norma Jean Almodovar the “closest thing to a madam in Butte since the days Ruby Garrett ran the Dumas Brothel at 45 E. Mercury St.”⁵³ This comparison probably made Almodovar proud. She was—and still is—unashamed of the profession she so enjoyed, and she wanted the Dumas to be a commemoration of sex workers and their contributions to society. She and her organization were willing to pay handsomely to accomplish that goal. ISWFACE had put up \$5,000 for the Dumas at first, and Almodovar committed to raise the remaining \$90,000 of the purchase price. In August of 1998, ISWFACE launched a fundraising campaign that kicked off with a formal dedication to the Copper Block Park in Uptown Butte.⁵⁴ The park—in reality, a parking lot with metal cutouts of prostitutes and their customers erected at the entrance to Venus Alley—was a tribute to the working women of Butte’s history, and Almodovar

⁵¹ John Stucke, “County skipping brothel activities,” *Montana Standard* (Butte), August 18, 1998. Vertical File 1857.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

viewed the park as a sign of goodwill and acceptance from the people of Butte to modern day sex workers.⁵⁵



Figure 37. Interpretive plaque at Copper Block Park.

⁵⁵ Norma Jean Almodovar, "My Biography," personal website, accessed November 8, 2015, <http://www.normajeanalmodovar.com/mybio.html>.

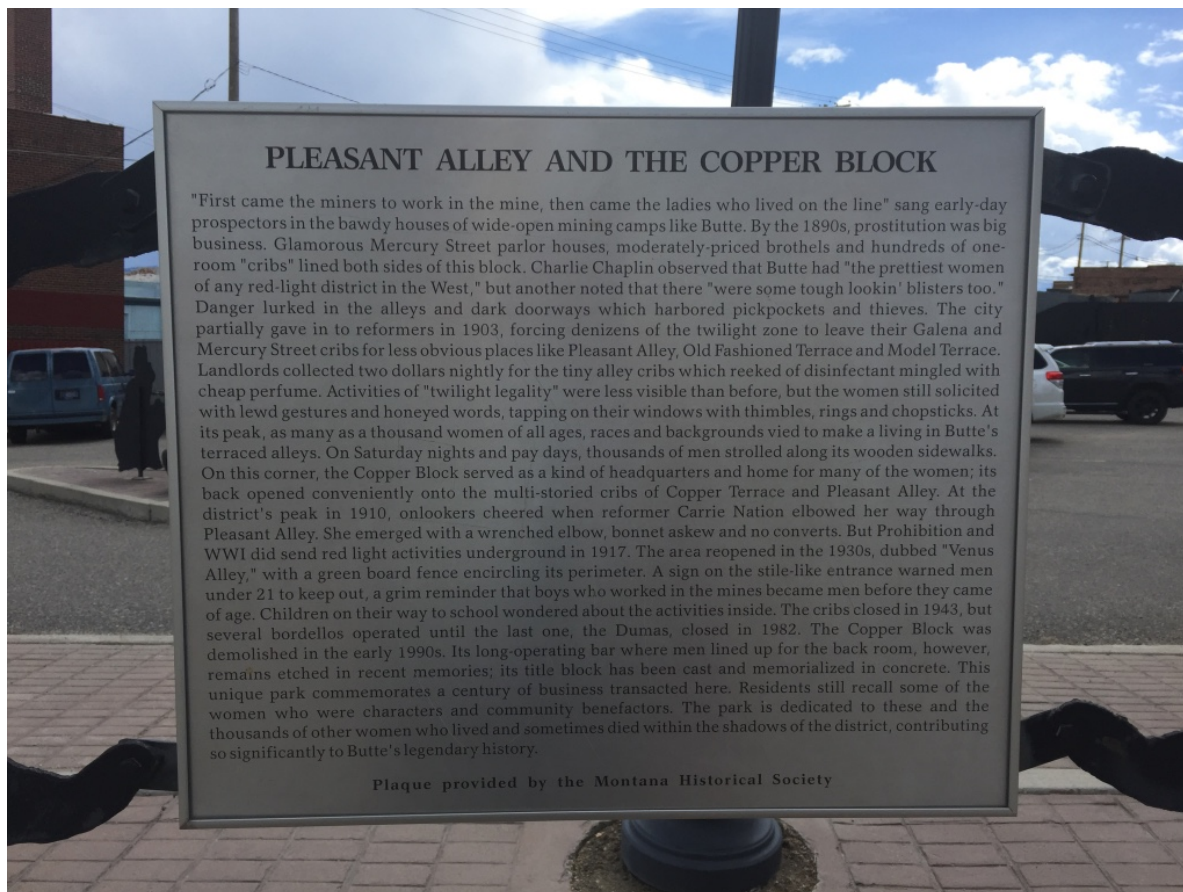


Figure 38. Detail of interpretive plaque at Copper Block Park.



Figure 39. Copper Block Park, looking west.



Figure 40. Copper Block Park, looking south towards the rear of the Dumas.

There was a great deal of media coverage of the dedication event. Almodovar and Geicek both told newspapers they expected press from around the world to cover the dedication.⁵⁶ Ellen Baumler of the Montana Historical Society was slated to speak, as was State Representative Dan Harrington. Norma Jean Almodovar planned to read a letter about

⁵⁶ “Officials eschew Copper Block dedication.” *Butte Weekly*, August 19, 1998, Prostitution / The Dumas Brothel, vertical file 1857, Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives, Butte, Montana; Stucke, “County skipping.”

the park from former United States surgeon general Dr. Jocelyn Elders.⁵⁷ The high school students who designed and fabricated the metal cutouts were expected as well.

Given these esteemed guests, it is remarkable that county officials opted out of the festivities.⁵⁸ The *Montana Standard* reported before the event, “suspiciously missing from the party is one of the biggest backers of preserving and exploiting the past—Butte-Silver Bow County government.”⁵⁹ With the dedication just weeks away, the county had apparently reneged on its support of the Copper Block Park dedication festivities. Colleen Fine, the county’s community development director at the time, told the *Standard* that, “We just found out about this. We’re not doing the dedication.”⁶⁰

Fine gave an official reason—a “contract snafu with the construction company working on the Copper Block Park,” which she claimed prevented county officials from attending the dedication and thereby acknowledging that the park was complete.⁶¹ It was more than a technicality that kept county officials away, though. Fine elaborated, saying, “To be honest, I’m a little torqued I didn’t find out about this until last Monday. If she [Almodovar] expected us to pick up the ball and run with it, I don’t know why I...didn’t find out earlier.”⁶²

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Stucke, “County skipping.”

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

Almodovar refuted Fine's excuse, saying, "Word from the official office is that the park isn't finished, but when we asked for this months ago, the press release was approved and OK'd. Some may think that this makes (the county) look like they condone prostitution. I hear rumors by someone that this was the scuttlebutt."⁶³ Almodovar continued, "We're not looking for that. What matters is that they are not ignoring and overlooking the women...who contributed to Butte."⁶⁴ Similarly, Giecek—the "curator" of the Dumas at this time—told the *Butte Weekly* that Jack Lynch, a chief executive in county government, had prohibited other county officials from participating.⁶⁵

Mark Reavis, the preservation officer who had championed the Dumas just a few years earlier, "seemed to support the effort and even participated in preparation of a press release about the dedication earlier this year."⁶⁶ But when the time came to make concrete plans for the dedication, Reavis reneged, Almodovar told the paper. "There was a definite reluctance and some vague statements about the site not being completed," she said.⁶⁷

Despite the conflict, Almodovar and Giecek moved ahead with the dedication because they thought it was "attracting the kind of media interest needed for successful exposure and fundraising."⁶⁸ The event was a success, though the exchange documented in

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ "Officials eschew."

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Stucke, "County skipping."

the media certainly strained the relationship between Almodovar and county officials. The formal dedication was followed by \$10 guided tours of the Dumas.⁶⁹ This is the first record of paid tours being given at the Dumas, so perhaps Giecek and Almodovar had curated the museum together, or Giecek had arranged extant antiques into exhibits before bringing Almodovar on board.

Later that same year, Almodovar announced her plans for a sex workers' exchange program in Butte that was to take place in the summer of 1999. Ice Camp '99 was supposed to bring together prostitutes from all over the world to do restoration work (mostly cosmetic renovations) on the Dumas, while hosting community programs like art exhibits and poetry readings.⁷⁰ Almodovar also wanted the women to visit nearby tourist attractions and host "international food and craft festivals."⁷¹ The goal of the summer's festivities was for the international prostitutes to "interact" with the people of Butte, and to "show the world that prostitutes have their own triumphs, tragedies and talents," while also getting some much-needed work done in the Dumas.⁷² For this event, Almodovar needed the cooperation of county officials.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ John Stucke, "Brothel spruce up planned, Uptown girls set summer camp work, festivities for Dumas," *Montana Standard* (Butte), December 9, 1998, Prostitution / The Dumas Brothel, vertical file 1857, Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives, Butte, Montana.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

In an attempt to heal a damaged relationship and get county officials on board with her summer project, Almodovar met with officials in December of 1998.⁷³ Present were Chief Executive Jack Lynch and Colleen Fine, the Community Development Director with whom Almodovar had clashed in the newspapers the summer before. Fine said the meeting was “a chance to lay concerns on the table and ask for straight answers.”⁷⁴ One of the most pressing questions the county had for Almodovar was whether or not Almodovar or her visitors were planning on selling sex—a rumor that had circulated for some time.⁷⁵ Almodovar was adamant that the prostitutes were not going to be practicing their profession because her organization “could be charged with international trafficking because someone is turning a trick.”⁷⁶ She promised to “do everything in a glass bowl so people can see everything we’re doing.”⁷⁷ Comfortable enough with Almodovar’s promise of transparency, Chamber of Commerce executive director Connie Kenney said, “I think if it’s done correctly, it will be alright and won’t tarnish the image (of Butte). I’m really hoping it can attract tourists.”⁷⁸

Still, county officials were wary of the plan. Fine said, “We’re the ones raising our children here and if their efforts fail, we’ll have to be the ones with the leftover image...to

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

deal with.”⁷⁹ She added, “You have to realize that the Dumas has always been an attraction...our biggest concern is the stigma that may be attached to what they’re doing there. As a community, we just have to be very careful and cautious.”⁸⁰

The reluctant support from the county in December gave way to public outcry over the festival in January. Almodovar believed that townspeople “misread” her proposal, and assumed that ISWFACE “was planning a summer-long *sex festival* rather than the *sex worker festival* that was being organized.”⁸¹ A “Concerned Citizens” group formed in opposition to Almodovar and ISWFACE, and in January a town meeting was held for the Concerned Citizens to lobby their concerns and for Almodovar to defend her organization.⁸²

The citizens group argued that the presence of sex workers would tarnish Butte’s reputation and lead the city’s youth to engage in prostitution. Local newspaper accounts tended to focus on this opposition to ISWFACE and the morality of present day sex work—while downplaying the outpouring of support from members of the community like Zena Beth McGlashan, who spoke on the importance of the Dumas and donated \$1,000 to its restoration.⁸³

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Almodovar, “My biography.”

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Christina E. Dando, “‘Whore-friendly people’: heritage tourism, the media and the place of sex work in Butte, Montana,” *Gender, Place & Culture* 16, no. 5 (2009). <http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/geoggeolfacpub/20> (accessed October 15, 2016).

In a 2009 article, Christine E. Dando analyzed how media coverage of the Dumas during the ISWFACE era portrayed sex work “and its place in the heritage tourism landscape of the American West.”⁸⁴ She argues that national coverage of the happenings at the Dumas tended to sensationalize sex work and focus on the sexuality of the Dumas’s past and present. Dando argues that if one were to “strip away the sensational aspects, we are simply discussing the purchase of an old building in an economically struggling town by a businesswoman from out of town.”⁸⁵ She continues, “At this level, there is no story and essentially no media interest, outside perhaps the local business news. It is the sex permeating every element of this story that takes it from local business news to something that might catch the eye of a reader in Omaha or New York.”⁸⁶ Indeed, stories about the Dumas were published across the country—even internationally.

In newspaper articles and public forums, Almodovar’s impassioned rhetoric supporting sex workers seemed to be in direct contrast with the image that Butte wished to convey to outsiders. Still, she was adamant about the summer program, telling those at the forum that even “if 100 percent of the people in Butte were against what we were doing, we would still do it because it’s history... Not all the money in Butte or anywhere else can rewrite history, and I won’t let them erase it. We will be coming. That’s not a threat, that’s just a statement.”⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

Dando argues that Almodovar, an outsider, “disrupted the landscape of Butte by her desire to draw attention to a site with a long history in the community but the biggest threat is what *she* embodies – sex.”⁸⁸ The people of Butte—at least some of them—were offended by Almodovar’s brazen sexuality and were frightened of the ramifications of whatever influence she might have had. Dando argues that while Almodovar was “trying to reassure Butte” about the legitimacy of her summer program, “her self-professed whore [kept] slipping out” when she spoke to the media.⁸⁹ She cites a September 2001 *Financial Times* (London) article in which Almodovar was quoted as saying, “We aren’t having a sex festival. That would be fun, but that’s not what we’re about.”⁹⁰ This type of message would surely have distressed the Concerned Citizens group, who were reluctant to trust Almodovar in the first place.

“In the end,” Almodovar wrote on her website some years later, “the ‘Concerned Citizens’ were not able to stop the summer project...although there were enough editorials both for and against ISWFACE printed in the *Montana Standard* to fill up the infamous Berkeley Pit...”⁹¹ Almodovar has not commented on the success of the summer program, or what the sex workers accomplished in their time in Butte.

In 2002, the business partnership between Giecek and Almodovar ended. In a 2005 *New York Times* article, Giecek told a reporter that partnering with Almodovar had been a

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Almodovar, “My biography.”

mistake, and that the two had fallen out over finances.⁹² Almodovar was more vocal about the end of the “Dumas Project,” writing about the ways in which ISWFACE had been deceived by Giecek:

After spending over \$150,000, ISWFACE learned too late that the individual from whom they were buying the building had conned them into believing the prized ‘artifacts’ which had so impressed them when they first came to Butte were nothing but worthless junk that had been found in dumpsters, purchased at flea markets and garage sales. Litigation ensued, but ISWFACE, being the outsider-and a group of retired prostitutes-did not prevail.⁹³

Giecek answered Almodovar’s allegations that he was “a fraud” in the *New York Times* article, insisting that the artifacts were original to the Dumas. “If I was going to salt it with fake antiques,” he told the reporter, “I could sure have done better than some old bottles and cans.”⁹⁴ He continued, “I think Norma Jean’s star has faded and she’s using this to stay in the news.”⁹⁵

Historic Site Abandoned

Just three years after the Almodovar controversy ended, thieves stole some of the Dumas’s most meaningful antiques in an overnight burglary. In 2005, Giecek—accompanied by a *New York Times* reporter—unlocked the door to the Dumas and found that he had been

⁹² Johnson, “Dark Days.”

⁹³ Almodovar, “My biography.”

⁹⁴ Johnson, “Dark Days.”

⁹⁵ Ibid.

robbed. Though he admitted at the time that the burglary “could have been worse,” he was still devastated.⁹⁶ Among the items that were taken was a canary—many of the girls kept canaries as pets—that had been wrapped in newspaper, placed in a tin can, tucked away in a purse, and hidden behind some loose bricks many decades ago to be found by Giecek in the 1990s.⁹⁷ The canary and many other items on display at the Dumas were apparently stolen the night before the *New York Times* interview. Giecek told the reporter he believed the thieves had been “startled by something and fled, leaving light fixtures, doorknobs and other objects on the floor in boxes.”⁹⁸ The items that were stolen were not insured, and were not necessarily worth much money. Giecek told the reporter, “A lot of it only had meaning here, in this place. They’re going to look at that bird and, and say, ‘What the heck is this?’ and throw it away.”⁹⁹

According to Giecek, all of the artifacts on display at the Dumas were original to the site. Most of them came from somewhere in the building, or were found by Giecek and his son in one of the basement cribs that had been sealed up by a false wall in the 1940s during a crackdown on vice—supposedly left just as they were when they had been abandoned by

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

Dumas prostitutes.¹⁰⁰ These small, dark rooms flanked a center hallway, once accessible from East Mercury Street by a stairway and tunnel system.¹⁰¹

The cribs had made Ruby Garrett uneasy, and she told Rohr, “I never went in those darn rooms even when I bought the place.”¹⁰² The cribs were supposedly left undisturbed, then, until the 1990s, when Giecek bought the building and started renovations. When he opened the cribs, he found many artifacts, such as an old “miner’s carbide headlamp, hung from the top of a doorframe,” “a toilet consisting of a toilet seat mounted on a chair with the seat cut out, and small bottles with Chinese lettering that...could be old spice or opium bottles.”¹⁰³ Pinups were still hanging in the cribs and in some of the rooms upstairs.¹⁰⁴ Iron beds and other furniture are ostensibly mostly (if not all) original. One of the most important artifacts original to the Dumas is the special refrigerator with breathing holes, an interior lock, and the shelves removed—which, as Garrett told Rohr in 1991, was perfectly suited to be a hiding place for one particularly nervous prostitute named Sandra “when the heat was on.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Rohr, “Doors to reopen.”

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.



Figure 41. "Sandra's Fridge."

While the Dumas has plenty of artifacts and antiques on display, the loss of any artifact authentic to the building is certainly a loss. With every artifact sold or stolen, the

interpretation at the Dumas is moved further away from authenticity. Many “artifacts” on display at the Dumas are merely decorative, and offer little in the way of educational value. While the hodgepodge of vintage bric-a-brac helps fill the space, it is sometimes hard to see past. The first floor is purposefully gaudy—painted with shades of red, with lingerie and evening gowns draped on the ornate bedclothes. Antique sex toys, vintage pinups, and an old piano decorate the central hallway.



Figure 42. Antique sex toy on display in the gift shop.



Figure 43. First floor interior, looking north.



Figure 44. First floor bedroom.



Figure 45. Another first floor bedroom.

The second floor is less cluttered. The few bedrooms open for exhibit are rather modestly decorated. The largest room is dedicated to informational printouts about the history of the Dumas and prostitution in Butte, with text taken from history books.



Figure 46. Exhibit space on the second floor.



Figure 47. Another view of exhibit space on the second floor.

Artifacts are perhaps best used in the basement cribs. Visitors are not permitted to enter these rooms, but some are visible through uncovered interior windows and gated doorways. If we are to believe Rudy Giecek and others, the artifacts seen in the basement are original to the Dumas and date to at least the early 1940s. These rooms are decorated much more modestly than those on the other floors. Dusty quilts are neatly tucked into twin-sized beds. Old, water-damaged wallpaper crumbles from the walls. Antique bottles and half-smoked cigarettes sit on a small table under one of the interior windows. Photographs and makeup lay atop a dresser in a larger crib. These items are much more personal than those aboveground. If these artifacts are indeed authentic, they represent the women who lived and worked in these rooms. Even if they are staged, these items help visitors imagine what it could have been like for women to work in these bleak spaces in the not too distant past.

Rudy Giecek took writer Toby Thompson into the basement cribs for Thompson's 2010 piece on Uptown Butte's historic alleys. Thompson writes,

The narrow room held a small gas stove, a simple chair, a white porcelain sink, a bureau and the head and foot railings of an [sic] gold-painted bed. A window and door faced the alley. 'See that path worn in the linoleum?' Giecek said. 'It leads from the alley to the window, where the girl stood, to the door where she greeted her customer, to the stove where they negotiated services, to the low sink where she washed him, to the bed, where you can see wear marks where its feet moved.' The room was a time capsule; it belonged in the Smithsonian. I could almost smell its cheap perfume.¹⁰⁶

Thompson's words speak to the power of artifacts in telling the story of the Dumas, but more importantly, the power of the space itself. Thompson felt transported by the small basement

¹⁰⁶ Toby Thompson, "Ghost Alleys of Butte: Walking the backways and byways of Montana's historic Uptown," *Big Sky Journal* Winter 2010/December 2010, <http://bigskyjournal.com/Features/Story/ghost-alleys-of-butte> (accessed October 15, 2016).

cribs. The building itself is a powerful artifact. As historian Carroll Van West wrote, “Artifacts, be they objects, sites, or buildings, contain evidence not found in any written account. It is the physical nature of the resource that makes it a powerful source of information about the patterns of western history.”¹⁰⁷ The Dumas, then, has the innate power to educate visitors about a time in Butte’s history when prostitution was rampant and women labored in elegant parlor houses and dreary cribs.



Figure 48. Artifacts in a basement crib.

¹⁰⁷ Carroll Van West, “History of Interpretation at The Western History Museum,” *The Journal of American Culture* 12, no. 2 (Summer 1989): 11.



Figure 49. Detail of artifacts in a basement crib.



Figure 50. Artifacts and mannequin legs in a basement crib.

The theft of some of the Dumas's most important artifacts was hard enough to bear for Rudy Giecek. At the time of the theft, though, Giecek was also in poor health. In 2005, he was 62 and had had three strokes.¹⁰⁸ The Dumas was structurally unsound, and he had decided just prior to the burglary that the building was unsafe to open for tourists that year.¹⁰⁹ He had intended to sell artifacts on eBay to fund the repair of a sagging rear wall, but the thieves pre-empted that effort.¹¹⁰ The timing of the robbery, and the fact that Giecek was planning to sell Dumas antiques, plus the carefully packed boxes of antiques abandoned by alleged thieves the night before a *New York Times* reporter was coming to tour the Dumas, raised questions in the community. Giecek told the *New York Times* that he had been trying to sell the museum.¹¹¹

The same year, Rudy Giecek published a novel entitled *Venus Alley: The Story of Two Women of the Dumas Brothel*, which he dedicated to the spirit of Elinore Knott, who he believed guided him in writing the book. Giecek was inspired to write the novel after he found a partial diary at the Dumas. The novel tells the story of Elinore Knott, her friend and fellow prostitute Elizabeth Meyers, and happenings in and around Venus Alley. Giecek believed that Elinore Knott's death was not a suicide, but rather a homicide committed by Bonita Farren, a subsequent madam of the Dumas.

¹⁰⁸ Johnson, "Dark Days."

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

Giecek ends the book with a question-and-answer style “interview” between himself and a fictional journalism student, which perhaps raises more questions than it gives answers. In this chapter, Giecek tells the student how he had acquired the Dumas from Ruby Garrett in 1990, but would not disclose how much he paid for the building. He then jumps ahead a couple of years, to an unfortunate partnership. He wrote:

After I bought the Dumas, I still owed \$3,200 in building taxes. A lady that was renting one of the rooms (I had turned it into an antique mall) asked me if I would be interested in a partnership. I agreed to do it, and part of the partnership agreement was for her to pay the back taxes. I had trusted her and let her go to the courthouse by herself to pay the taxes. Boy, was that a mistake!....I found out from the insurance company a few days later that my name was not on the Deed!¹¹²

We know from the deeds that Rudy didn’t officially purchase the Dumas until 1992, when he bought it from Gloria Jean Brugger—not Ruby Garrett. Perhaps this is the mysterious business partner from the book.

He also relays how he discovered the basement cribs with objects dating from 1943 (when the cribs were sealed off). He confesses that he had sold some of the artifacts to pay for the Dumas, but is adamant that thieves indeed managed to steal several others before being scared from the site by a ghost—probably that of Elinore Knott, who introduces herself to Rudy in this final chapter. Giecek also elaborates on the drama between himself and Norma Jean Almodovar, whom he does not speak fondly of. Of the controversial ISWFACE sex worker summer program, he says, “I think it was just a pipe dream on Norma Jean’s side of it. Only a few showed up and I think Norma Jean had to pay their way. It was a total bust! I wouldn’t have felt so bad about the whole thing if only they had fixed up at least one room

¹¹² Rudy Giecek, *Venus Alley: The Story of Two Women of the Dumas Brothel* (Butte: Red Light Publishing, 2005): 99.

with the donated money.”¹¹³ He ends the book by musing about the uncertain future of the Dumas and asking for donations for the building’s preservation.

Preservation Rekindled

Preservationists have recognized the Dumas’s significance since it was a contributing building to the National Historic Landmark District in 1961. In 2005, there began a new conversation amongst preservationists which focused on “rescuing” the Dumas. That year, the Montana Preservation Alliance (the only statewide non-profit preservation organization in Montana) listed it on their “Most Endangered Places” list, explaining in their newsletter how Rudy Giecek had “saved” the Dumas from demolition in 1990 and had been working to restore it, but “structural damage has made it unsafe, and the museum is now closed and for sale.”¹¹⁴ “Unfortunately,” the newsletter reads, “the costs to repair and reopen the building have made it difficult to sell, and local government may condemn the building. The loss of the Dumas would represent a significant loss to Montana history.”¹¹⁵

In late 2006, the Butte Citizens for Preservation and Revitalization (CPR), a local preservation group, took a real interest in the preservation of the Dumas. Butte CPR is a non-profit group dedicated to promoting the value of historic preservation within the community,

¹¹³ Ibid., 108.

¹¹⁴ Montana Preservation Alliance, “Preservation Montana: The Newsletter of the Montana Preservation Alliance,” Fall 2015, <http://www.swanlakers.org/Documents/MPA%20Fall%20Newsletter%20KLpt.pdf> (accessed October 16, 2016.)

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

providing financial aid for preservation projects, and working with local government and property owners to preserve Butte's historic resources.¹¹⁶ The Dumas has intermittently been a line item on CPR's agenda since 2006, revealing a timeline for some recent repairs. In early 2007, Butte CPR received a generous donation of \$20,000 from Curt Buttons, a Butte native and former patron of the Dumas, for the preservation of the building. Meeting minutes reveal that CPR had been soliciting bids from local contractors, of whom many were not interested in bidding as they deemed the project "too small."¹¹⁷

CPR received one bid from an unnamed contractor for the roof work at \$22,500.¹¹⁸ By the November 2007 meeting, the roof work was complete, and the contractor recommended a new drain. In February of 2008, Curt Buttons donated another \$10,000 to "further support" the preservation effort at the Dumas, but in June, CPR still needed another \$600 for the drain.¹¹⁹

Rudy Giecek was present at the June 9, 2009 CPR meeting to relay that the roof was "leaking badly" due to the "ongoing need for a roof drain," and CPR pledged the funds necessary to replace it.¹²⁰ At this meeting, Curt Buttons tried to pledge funds for the repair or the interior ceiling, but CPR indicated that interiors were beyond the organization's scope (as

¹¹⁶ Butte CPR website, accessed July 5, 2016. www.buttecpr.org

¹¹⁷ Butte CPR, "Minutes of CPR Meetings," August 14, 2007.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., February 2008, June 2008.

¹²⁰ Ibid., June 9, 2009.

they focus mainly on architecture).¹²¹ No further information about the roof drain is referenced in the group's minutes.

Other preservation efforts at the Dumas are noted in the group's minutes as well. For instance, masonry work was also badly needed at the Dumas, as reported on the June 12, 2007. This work was completed about a year later. A \$200 donation from Butte schools was "earmarked for painting the cornice" of the Dumas in June of 2009, but this task was never confirmed in the minutes.¹²² In June of 2012, Larry Smith reported that he had repaired the skylight, which had been leaking since at least April of that year.

Exhibits on the second floor of the Dumas also highlight some of the most recent repair work done on the Dumas. One text panel praises DJ Newgard and his crew at Broken Stone Masonry for their "beautiful work" of "shoring up the foundation" in May of 2014. "Their working conditions in the basement were unpleasant and unhealthy, but they forged ahead and did beautiful work," the panel reads. Ronnie Lake was recognized for donating "countless hours" of masonry work to the Dumas's interior and exterior. John "Curt" Button also has a place on the wall, with a print-out of his January 26, 2010 obituary from the *Montana Standard* and a text panel highlighting his nearly \$30,000 donation to the CPR for the new roof. "Button was a patron and supporter of the Dumas," according to the panel. Another panel praises "project manager" Larry Smith of Butte CPR for working to replace the roof and rebuilding "a crumbling interior wall, removing a great deal of debris which had

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

entered the basement in the process.” The panel credits Smith’s efforts with “stabilizing the Dumas and preventing the building from further, irreparable loss.”

New Owners, Same Issues

Michael Piche and Travis Eskelsen bought the Dumas from Giecek in the summer of 2013. Tim Trainor of the *Missoulian* reported at the time that the building “had been slipping into disrepair and now suffers from significant structural deficiencies.”¹²³ There was no heat or running water, and “an interior wall is crumbling, a chimney has collapsed onto the second floor and large swaths of the building show water damage from years of operating without a solid roof.”¹²⁴

Not only did the men inherit a dilapidated building, but they also inherited Giecek’s debt. Giecek was three years behind on taxes—like Ruby Garrett before him—and “the property was in danger of reverting to the county or another buyer who could have decided to tear it down.”¹²⁵ Just a few weeks after purchasing the building, the new owners had already paid two years of back taxes.¹²⁶ Piche and Eskelson promised to keep the building standing, and have been making progress towards stabilizing the building and making cosmetic

¹²³ Tim Trainor, “Butte men buy historic Dumas Brothel,” *Missoulian*, July 8, 2012, accessed October 18, 2015, http://missoulian.com/news/state-and-regional/butte-men-buy-historic-dumas-brothel/article_c36b1f18-c915-11e1-a341-0019bb2963f4.html.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

improvements since acquiring the building.¹²⁷ The total cost of the restoration was estimated at \$127,000 in December of 2013, when Piche and Eskelsen were applying for a \$92,000 Urban Revitalization Agency loan and a grant totaling \$8,750.¹²⁸ “We don’t have a lot of money,” Piche said after buying the Dumas, “but we’re going to do what it takes. This is a place that deserves respect and appreciation.”¹²⁹

Butte’s Urban Revitalization Agency awarded a smaller loan of \$67,000 to Michael Piche and Travis Eskelsen in March 2015.¹³⁰ Piche and Eskelsen had made 12 monthly payments but were three months behind as of April 2016.¹³¹ Karen Byrnes told the board in June 2016 that she had faith the owners would catch up on their payments. She explained that power bills at the Dumas had “spiked unexpectedly in the middle of this past winter and that was one reason for their financial difficulties.”¹³² Limited tourism in the winter months is almost certainly to blame, as well.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Mike Smith, “Historic Dumas Brothel wants URA loan,” *Montana Standard* (Butte), December 25, 2013, accessed October 18, 2015, http://mtstandard.com/news/local/historic-dumas-brothel-wants-ura-loan/article_2b0a48ca-6d06-11e3-9663-001a4bcf887a.html.

¹²⁹ Trainor, “Butte men.”

¹³⁰ Mike Smith, “Dumas loan payback expected; four-plex redo plan given money,” *Montana Standard* (Butte), June 29, 2016, accessed August 30, 2016, http://mtstandard.com/politics/dumas-loan-payback-expected-four-plex-redo-plan-given-money/article_82137c9d-2ee6-5707-b50b-5b314232ab0b.html.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

The Dumas relies mostly on word of mouth and tourism materials for publicity. Internet searches yield many hits on the Dumas, focusing mostly on the supposed hauntings at the site. The Dumas has a limited social media presence—just a Facebook page that is not updated regularly. The new owners have recently launched a new website for the Dumas, as the old domain had expired, which made it hard for potential visitors to connect with the museum. Interestingly, popular Travel Channel television show *The Dead Files* dedicated an episode to the Dumas, which aired April 2, 2016. The episode, called “Toys for the Dead,” focuses on investigating the “violent” paranormal activity reported at the Dumas. The investigators find that the “greedy” and malevolent spirit of Joseph Nadeau is one of a few spirits that haunt the Dumas. Another spirit is an unidentified woman—a “nymphomaniac.” The episode features the two current owners, Michael Piche and Travis Eskelsen, their friend Jenny, and a few notable Montanans, including historian Ellen Baumler (an expert on the Dumas), Butte Sheriff Ed Lester, Dumas mason Ronnie Lake, and Butte High School history teacher Chris Fisk (also the star of the YouTube video “Topsy History with Fisk – the Dumas Brothel,” which had nearly 1,750 views as of this writing).

The “haunted house” angle certainly pervades the narrative around the Dumas. An internet search yields dozens of articles and several videos focusing on paranormal activity at the Dumas. In one video (as he did in his book), Rudy Giecek explains his theory that Elinore Knott, the former madam of the Dumas who “haunts” the Dumas, did not actually commit suicide when she was jilted by her lover. Giecek believes that Bonita Farren, a subsequent owner and madam of the Dumas, actually played a part in Knott’s death, and that Knott is

trying to tell her story to Giecek and others.¹³³ This theory is discussed in the *The Dead Files* episode.

Visitors' reviews of the Dumas highlight this aspect of the site's interpretation.¹³⁴ One reviewer wrote in part, "The Brothel itself was stunning...The paranormal aspect was definitely my favorite part. Without a doubt, I will be coming back." Another visitor finished her glowing review by writing, "The basement is kind of sad – don't know if children would really enjoy this, or understand it. I am willing to believe it is haunted..." An excerpt from a June 2016 review shows that visitors actively participate in the paranormal narrative at the Dumas:

[The mother's owner] shared tons of historical info, and stories before we started that really brought the visit to life. There was even a presence in the lobby area while she was talking.... Super cool ![sic] We weren't 2 minutes into the tour, in the first room on the main floor when the unexplained touches started. I got some great orbs in my photos.

While other reviewers make no mention of hauntings at the Dumas, it is noteworthy that many do. As the owners try to grow their online presence in order to raise money for much-needed repairs, they rely on visitor feedback to represent the Dumas to potential patrons. These reviews almost certainly impact the way visitors interpret the building.

¹³³ Mike Mestas interview with Rudy Giecek, published on YouTube June 24, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eo8XU1uuvk0> (accessed October 23, 2016).

¹³⁴ Excerpts were taken from 2016 TripAdvisor reviews, https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g45106-d481535-Reviews-Dumas_Brothel_Museum-Butte_Montana.html#REVIEWS (accessed October 23, 2016).

Venus Alley Incident

It is not just the building that's in danger, but the alley as well. In May of 2014, the *Montana Standard* reported that construction had been halted on a NorthWestern utility project in Venus Alley. The crews had been pulling up historic red brick pavers that line the alley to complete a gas line project—which they had a permit to do. The owners of the Dumas had anticipated the project, and there was an understanding between them and county preservation officials that the bricks would be put back in place after the gas lines were replaced. After construction started, however, it became clear that the crews were not taking necessary precautions to preserve the pavers, and Jim Jarvis, the Historic Preservation Officer at the time, asked that work on the project be stopped until a restoration agreement could be reached. The miscommunication, it seems, occurred when the “excavation permit was issued without the restoration desires being understood.”¹³⁵

A spokesman for NorthWestern issued a statement saying that the incident was a “miscommunication,” and that “we [NorthWestern] certainly have a lot of respect for the history of Butte, and we feel that our company has been a big part of that history.”¹³⁶ The statement also said that the company was “working with local officials to make it right...to put the bricks back when we're done with the project.”¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Mike Smith, “Alley Oops’: Digging bricks raises flap in historic red-light district,” *Montana Standard* (Butte), May 8, 2014, accessed September 12, 2016, http://mtstandard.com/news/local/alley-oops-digging-bricks-raises-flap-in-historic-red-light/article_043fdf58-d66e-11e3-9661-001a4bcf887a.html.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

Jarvis spoke about the importance of the alley, saying “This alley is special and it was kind of a breakdown of communications. Things like this crop up from time to time and we try to respond quickly.”¹³⁸ While certainly unfortunate and preventable, the incident seems to have been a misunderstanding between different interested parties, and not a blatant disregard for Butte history. Mark Reavis, former county preservation officer who has spoken on the Dumas’s importance in the past, expressed his disappointment over what transpired: “This is a really good example of not protecting resources and not understanding that it’s everything from buildings to little sheds.”¹³⁹

The next month, Reavis had more to say about the damage done. He told the *Standard* that the incident in Venus Alley had hurt his local heritage tourism business, called Butte Urban Safari Tours. The Alley is “one of his most requested tour sites and damages to it have hurt Butte and his business,” according to the article.¹⁴⁰ He said, “Everyone is pointing fingers. I don’t care who is responsible. I just want a nice alley that is going to last so we can tell the story about it.”¹⁴¹ The county had hauled the bricks to a “secure site” and NorthWestern had agreed to reinstall the bricks, but Reavis was not satisfied.¹⁴²

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Mike Smith, “Historic district woes: Brick-alley fix not good enough, former director says,” *Montana Standard* (Butte), June 17, 2014, accessed September 12, 2016, http://mtstandard.com/news/local/historic-district-woes-brick-alley-fix-not-good-enough-former/article_07657170-f5e5-11e3-b2ed-001a4bcf887a.html.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

He and his wife, Nicole von Gaza Reavis, lamented in a letter to the Council of Commissioners that the reinstallation of the pavers fails to “mitigate for the permanent loss of broken and damaged or saw-cut bricks,” *nor* did it “cover the fact that many bricks will no longer be in their originally placed location and will only be a re-creation of their placement where footsteps originally walked.”¹⁴³ Reavis’ concerns are certainly valid, since the article reports that the alley is “one of the few brick streets in Butte that has not been covered.”¹⁴⁴

NorthWestern hired a company to do the restoration, but Reavis wanted more. “I think the power company and their subcontractor should step up and do something really nice,” like installing interpretive signs, he told the *Standard*. As of May 2016, there are no interpretive panels in the alley—just one at Copper Block Park.

Venus Alley (also known as “Pleasant Alley” or “Piss Alley”) is certainly an important resource for Butte’s heritage tourism. It features heavily in Mark Reavis’s tourism business, which offers ninety minute tours of historic Uptown Butte catered to the visitor’s interests. The alley is also an important stop on Ellen Baumler’s excellent Red Light District Walking Tour.¹⁴⁵ The tour begins at Pleasant Alley and loops back after stops at the sites of the Windsor and the Victoria (both high-class parlor house brothels), the Copper Block, Copper King Terrance, and several other sites that are no longer extant. Only a few buildings

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ A digital copy of the walking tour is available at http://montanawomenshistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/ButteWalkingTour12_2013_Rev.pdf.

from the Red Light era exist today, including the Dumas, the Blue Range cribs across the street, and the Royal saloon and brothel down the street.

The Dumas as a Museum, Again

Piche and Eskelsen’s plan is to turn the brothel into a hotel—an endeavor that will certainly be time-consuming and costly.¹⁴⁶ For the time being, it operates as a museum, and a tour can be purchased for \$8. That Piche and Eskelsen want to convert the museum into a hotel is interesting. The museum, while somewhat successful, is probably not attracting the kind of revenue flow necessary to restore the Dumas. While once touted as a must-see attraction in Butte, Yelp and TripAdvisor reviews from 2015 and 2016 are mixed—and some reflect quite negatively on management. Most visitors enjoy the antiques, ghost stories, and mining history associated with the Dumas, and are concerned about the building’s state of disrepair.

Since the 1990s, when the Dumas museum was established for the public, it has operated on a superficial presentation of prostitution. In many ways, it has to. In October 1999, a *Baltimore Sun* article described what a visit to the Dumas entailed:

Visitors can be guided through the building for \$3. They can dress up in Victorian costumes and have their pictures taken on one of the brass beds, admire the art and artifacts of sex workers, and perhaps chat with the 48-year-old former Los Angeles police officer and Beverly Hills call girl who’s restoring the Dumas as a museum of prostitution.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ Smith, “Brothel wants URA loan.”

¹⁴⁷ Dando, “‘Whore-friendly people’.”

Things have changed at the Dumas since 1990—Almodovar no longer has any affiliation with the museum, and Victorian costumes are no longer offered to visitors for photographs on the brass beds. The spirit of the Dumas, however, is much the same. Tourists visit the Dumas to indulge their curiosity about illegal sex work in the Wild West. Some come for a chance to interact with the ghost of Elinor Knott.¹⁴⁸ References have been made to Ms. Knott in several newspaper articles about the Dumas, and the brothel is included in a handful of ghost-tour pamphlets and guidebooks. The thrill of a potential “ghost sighting,” or the cheap titillation of mannequins dressed in negligees and feather boas, will attract a certain kind of tourist. This quality of the museum’s interpretation is neither inherently good nor bad. It brings in necessary funds for restoration to the building. And, as Almodovar herself said in an interview from 1999, “Sex does sell.”¹⁴⁹

As Dando wrote in 2009, the decades’ old question in Butte has been, “how does a community acknowledge/preserve history while not condoning past/present practices that are contrary to their current moral order?”¹⁵⁰ The resistance that Almodovar encountered, then, was not so much about the preservation of the building itself, but about the image that some in Butte wished to project to the rest of the world.¹⁵¹ Dando argues that the people of Butte

¹⁴⁸ Rohr, “Doors to reopen.”

¹⁴⁹ Kate Kompas, “Court TV films former prostitute, Norma Jean Almodovar’s ‘colorful past’ subject of ‘Sex for Sale’ feature,” *Montana Standard* (Butte), July 21, 1999, Prostitution / The Dumas Brothel, vertical file 1857, Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives, Butte, Montana.

¹⁵⁰ Dando, “‘Whore-friendly people’.”

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

were operating under the assumption that Butte had been “cleaned up”—that all forms of vice were eradicated when the red-light district shut down.¹⁵² The “cleansed” Butte resisted Almodovar because they were petrified that sex workers would contaminate their idyllic city. Dando argues, however, that “Butte’s clean-up is only superficial. How many prostitutes (current and former), pimps and their customers still live in Butte? What of the wealthy Butte citizens whose fortunes were built on the proceeds from renting the cribs and owning the brothels? Where did they all go?”¹⁵³ Perhaps Dando is exaggerating, but her argument is an important one: Butte’s wealth was built as much on the backs of prostitutes as of miners. As one of the only brothels left in Butte, the Dumas can speak to that history. Perhaps this is why it is such a controversial site. As Dando argues, “With the disappearance of the tenderloin’s structures, the questions seem to evaporate, its social history purified along with its landscape.”¹⁵⁴ As long as the Dumas is standing, then it is a physical reminder of a past that Butte is still grappling with. This is wherein the power of the Dumas as an artifact lies.

In the case of the Dumas, preservation is directly tied to public memory and heritage tourism. Fortunately, the Dumas is featured on the state’s “Visit MT” tourism website and on a regional tourism site called “SouthWest Montana.”¹⁵⁵ The owners of the Dumas need the revenue generated by museum tours to repay the URA loan and make necessary repairs for

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ See www.visitmt.com/places-to-go/cities-and-towns/butte.html and www.southwestmt.com/listings/12912.htm

the longevity of the building. It is important to note that the Dumas has never had a museum professional or educator on staff. All interpretive efforts have been done by the owners, past and present. The Dumas would certainly benefit from a professional exhibit, developed using interpretive panels which outline women's lives and labors within the space and explore women's importance to Butte's history and that of the mining West more generally. This type of exhibit would certainly help to balance the "haunted" narrative, which helps to get visitors in the door but ultimately does a disservice to the legacy of the Dumas's women.

CONCLUSION

Sex may have built the building, but it cannot keep it standing. Ruby Garrett, Rudy Giecek, and the current owners have all recognized the historical value of the Dumas and have worked to preserve it—sometimes meeting incredible resistance from the outside. Local newspaper reporters have consistently reported on the preservation of the Dumas and have had an active voice in how it is portrayed to the public. Historians have contributed to the literature on prostitution in mining towns. All of these stakeholders recognize that the Dumas is historically significant based on its role in the economy of Butte. Furthermore, they know that prostitution is an aspect of women’s history that is too often neglected, and that the women who worked as prostitutes led individual lives outside of their profession.

The revenue generated by brothels in mining towns was integral to the towns’ economies. Butte in particular had an expansive red-light district that catered to wealthy businessmen and working-class miners alike. As Ellen Baumler wrote in her article “Devil’s Perch: Prostitution from Suite to Cellar in Butte, Montana,” Butte had such a large red-light district because of “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.”¹ In a town of mostly single men, buying the company of prostitutes was surely high on the list of pastimes. In fact, houses of prostitution once dominated blocks in Butte’s uptown neighborhoods, most specifically Galena and Mercury Streets.² Other businesses supported

¹ Ellen Baumler, “Devil’s Perch: Prostitution from Suite to Cellar in Butte, Montana,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 48, no. 3 (Autumn 1998): 6, accessed July 20, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4520070>.

² *Ibid.*, 12.

by Butte's red-light district were clothiers, dry cleaners, and Chinese herbalists.³ Not only were men spending money on prostitutes, gambling, and alcohol, but the prostitutes themselves were spending money on clothes, dry cleaning services, and herbal birth control and venereal disease remedies.⁴

Despite being one of the oldest professions in the world, prostitution is not given enough attention by scholars of American history. There are a handful of scholarly works on the history of prostitution in the American frontier.⁵ There are even fewer public history sites dedicated to prostitution—one of which is the Dumas Brothel Museum.⁶ Brothels like the Dumas give insight into a women's history topic that is not well documented in the literature.

Lastly, the preservation of the Dumas acknowledges that the lives of the women who worked here—in the second-floor suites and in the dismal basement cribs—should be commemorated. While many of the prostitutes who worked at the Dumas assumed false names, thereby making their personal histories difficult to trace, they were still individual women who lived and worked within this space. They had pasts—and many of them, futures—outside of the Dumas, and this building was an important landmark in their

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 13.

⁵ See *The Fair but Frail: Prostitution in San Francisco 1849-1900* by Jacqueline Baker Barnhart, 1986; *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery: Prostitutes in the American West 1865-90* by Anne M. Butler, 1987; *Soiled Doves: Prostitution in the Early West* by Anne Seagraves, 1994; and *Upstairs Girls: Prostitution in the American West* by Michael Rutter, 2005.

⁶ Other brothel museums in the United States are The Red Onion Saloon in Skagway, Alaska and The Oasis Bordello Museum in Wallace, Idaho.

struggles. Ruby Garrett knew the importance of preserving the Dumas, as it would pay homage to the women who came before her. By giving voice to Ruby Garrett and promoting the preservation efforts of the Dumas, *Montana Standard* reporter Karl Rohr gave voice to countless women who have worked at the Dumas.

Despite the fact that brothels were such an integral part of mining town economies, and played such a pivotal role in women's history, the people of Butte have resisted the celebration of prostitution in their city. In 2005, Rudy Giecek told the *New York Times* that he thought "many people in town would just as soon forget that places like the Dumas ever existed."⁷ State Senator Steve Gallus, an advocate for the preservation of the Dumas, said the same year that "There's a conservative discomfort with the idea of what that building represents....If it were anything else, the community would be more apt to band together."⁸ For the Butte community, the Dumas represents a space of contested identity.

Perhaps community members are afraid that if they were to celebrate the restoration of the Dumas, then outsiders would perceive Butte as an immoral community that condones modern-day prostitution. That was never the intention of Ruby Garrett or Rudy Giecek, or of the current owners, Michael Piche and Travis Eskelsen. On the contrary, the preservation of the Dumas would celebrate Butte's long history as a mining town and the role of women in frontier America. Surely the community of Butte would be remiss to neglect the last example

⁷ Kirk Johnson, "Dark Days for a Reminder of the Wild, Wild West in Montana," *New York Times*, May 30, 2005, accessed October 18, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/30/us/dark-days-for-a-reminder-of-the-wild-wild-west-in-montana.html?_r=0.

⁸ Ibid.

of parlor house architecture in their city for fear of being misunderstood, when what they really have at their fingertips is an extraordinary piece of history.

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