

Butte's Red Light District: A Walking Tour

BY ELLEN BAUMLER

"I have something to say to you people of Butte which will not sound very nice, but it is the truth just the same. This city of Butte has the reputation of being the lowest sinkhole of vice in the west. I was told that Tacoma was a stench in the nostrils of all good people.... Since coming here I have received a letter from a man in Tacoma who said that if his city was the gateway to hell, then surely I went to hell itself when I came to Butte.... What I say is the truth as regards the reputation of Butte for being the widest open town in the wide open west.

— EVANGELIST WILLIAM BIEDERWOLF, 1906

"The red-light district of Butte, Montana, consisted of a long street and several side streets containing a hundred cribs, in which young girls were installed ranging in age from sixteen up— for one dollar. Butte boasted of having the prettiest women of any red-light district in the West, and it was true. If one saw a pretty girl smartly dressed, one could rest assured she was from the red-light quarter, doing her shopping. Off duty, they looked neither right nor left and were most respectable."

—Charlie Chaplin, *My Autobiography*

"...the 'girls,' who range in age from jail bait to battle-ax...sit and tap on the windows. They are ready for business around the clock."—"The Three Last Wide-Open Towns," *Esquire*, June 1953

Pleasant Alley and the Copper Block

"First came the miners to work in the mine, then came the ladies who lived on the line" sang early-day prospectors of wide-open mining camps like Butte. By the 1890s, glamorous parlor houses, moderately priced brothels, and hundreds of one-room "cribs" lined Mercury and Galena streets. While Charlie Chaplin raved about Butte's beautiful prostitutes, another noted that "there were some tough-lookin' blisters too." Pickpockets, thieves, and drug addicts made the district a dangerous place. The city partially gave in to reformers in 1903, forcing public women to move to less obvious places like Pleasant Alley, Fashion Terrace, and Model Terrace. At its peak, as many as a thousand women of all ages, races, and backgrounds vied to make a living in Butte's terraced alleys. On Saturday nights and paydays, thousands

of men strolled along its wooden sidewalks. The Copper Block (see 8) was home to many of the women; its back opened conveniently onto the multistoried cribs. Prohibition and World War I sent red light activities underground in 1917. The district, however, reopened in the 1930s as "Venus Alley" with a green board fence around it. The cribs closed in 1943, but several bordellos operated until the last one, the Dumas, closed in 1982.

Butte's red-light district was at its peak in 1916 when this Sanborn-

Perris fire insurance map of Butte was drawn. Cribs, tiny one-room "offices" where women of the district conducted business, crowded into nearly every available space. "Female Boarding" or "F.B.," the Sanborn label for prostitution, appears on almost all the buildings. Owners of property in the district, some of them prominent businessmen, collected two to five dollars a day in rent for each crib. Collection, of course, was done through an agent employed for that purpose.

A SHORT GUIDE TO BUTTE'S ONCE-FAMOUS TENDERLOIN

1 This central alleyway was first known as **Pleasant Alley**. Beginning in the mid-1880s, cribs lined both sides of Galena Street and by 1900 filled in the spaces on Mercury Street where the high class parlor houses did a lucrative business. Attempts at reform just after the turn of the century made open solicitation on Galena and Mercury streets illegal. This changed the district in a major way by shifting much of the women's blatant "advertising" to the alleyways. Women of the Mercury Street houses sat in their upstairs windows and tapped on the glass to attract attention because "public"

women were, at least for a time, not allowed on the ground floors.

2 **The Windsor**, first called the **Richelieu** and later the **Irish World**, was originally an exclusive parlor house with twenty-four beautifully furnished rooms. Satin-covered chairs, gilt-framed mirrors, expensive tapestries, and red draperies graced the two downstairs parlors. In 1900, madam Bertha Leslie employed eight young ladies, a Chinese cook, and two Chinese servants. In 1908, madam Ruth Clifford hosted an elaborate dinner party for her twelve young ladies. One guest commented that

the furnishings were so gaudy that “on clear nights they could be heard as far as Anaconda.” In 1910, a crusading Carrie Nation visited the establishment and lost her bonnet in a scuffle with madam May Maloy (see 7). During the 1950s and 1960s, the Windsor’s original furnishings were intact although shabby. The house was still operating in 1968 when madam Beverly Snodgrass reportedly refused to pay “protection money” and the house fell victim to arson.

3 Lou Harpell’s, later the **Victoria**, was said to have the most beautiful women in the world. Lou reputedly advertised on theater and racetrack programs. It was not unusual for a gentleman to spend a thousand dollars in an evening at Lou’s, the Dumas (see 5), or one of Butte’s other high-class houses. Women who worked in establishments like these were expected to be beautifully coifed and expensively dressed at their own expense. Many were deeply in debt. Nearby businesses depended upon the patronage of sporting women and this is one reason the district never relocated to a less central location.

4 The Royal was one of the few red-light businesses not originally built for prostitution. Saloonkeeper Joseph Williams constructed it as a saloon and residence for himself circa 1900. But long before 1910, the building was rented as a brothel. While not as fancy as its neighbors, the Royal was still at the high-to-middle end of the scale. The building stands today,

but nothing remains to indicate its former use.

5 The Dumas Hotel was the first of Butte’s glamorous parlor houses to appear on Mercury Street in 1890. Built by Joseph and Arthur Nadeau, the same brothers who built the Copper Block, the house operated until 1982 when its last madam, Ruby Garrett, suffered a brutal robbery that led to its closure. The Dumas uniquely illustrates the hierarchy of prostitution in Butte from the highest to the lowest levels and is a rich archive of social history. A visit to the 1890s parlor house rooms and turn-of-the-twentieth-century basement cribs (in use until 1943) is essential to understanding the longevity and scale of this significant business in both Butte and elsewhere across the West.

6 The turn-of-the-twentieth-century Blue Range is the district’s only remaining example of street-facing cribs. Built by wealthy Anton Holter of Helena and soon owned by state senator Lee Mantle, the architecture peculiar to the profession is pristinely preserved. The door and window arrangement make it easy to imagine public women in various stages of immodesty beckoning to passersby and tapping on their windows with thimbles, rings, and chopsticks.

7 In 1910 when Carrie Nation visited Butte’s restricted district,

she began her “tour” at the **ABC Saloon**, which stood on this corner at 128 S. Wyoming. There she confronted the handsome young bartender: “Young man,” said she, “Does your mother know you are here?” He cringed at her words, but went right back to work. Legend has it that Mrs. Nation set foot in no more bars after her trip to the Mining City. While that fact is debatable, it is true that she found no converts in Butte.

8 The Copper Block, built by the Nadeau brothers in 1892, was home to many of the district’s women. While some deny that the Copper Block housed prostitution, the map clearly shows “female boarding on all floors.” For nearly a quarter of a century, Harry Adams worked for the Nadeau Investment Company, whose offices were in the building. Adams was considered a kind of “czar” of the red-light district and likely acted as the Nadeaus’ agent, collecting rents from the women who worked out of

9 Copper King Terrace in the building’s courtyard and in other Nadeau properties. The corner of the block housed an infamous saloon, in recent times called the Stockman Bar. “Dirty Mouth” Jean Sorenson, who lived up to her name, was the bar’s longtime owner. Mrs. Sorenson died in 1986, and the Copper Block was demolished in the early

1990s. Today, Copper Block Park commemorates the controversial history of this area, where “vice and crime held high carnival” in glamorous parlor houses, cheap brothels, narrow cribs, and dark alleyways.

10 In 1917, World War I and Prohibition ostensibly brought about closure of red-light districts across the country. In Butte, prostitution simply went underground in ready-made basements. Parlor houses took in boarders to appear legitimate. After Prohibition, Pleasant Alley reopened on a smaller scale, this time called Venus Alley. A green board fence surrounded the block to confine the activities and shield curious youngsters from the goings-on. **Ground floor cribs**, which opened onto the original Pleasant Alley and later, Venus Alley, can still be seen at the back of the Dumas. In 1943, federal law closed all cribs to check the spread of venereal disease among World War II troops. Steel plates were installed at the rear of the Dumas to cover the doors and windows of the two cribs facing the alley. These are Pleasant Alley’s only surviving cribs. Perhaps if you carefully search the alley-facing walls of the oldest buildings, you might find telltale door-and-window outlines. With the final closure of Venus Alley cribs, the area became so dilapidated and unappealing that it earned a final name, **Piss Alley**.

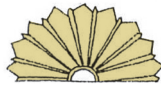


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Big Sky. Big Land. Big History.
Montana
Historical Society

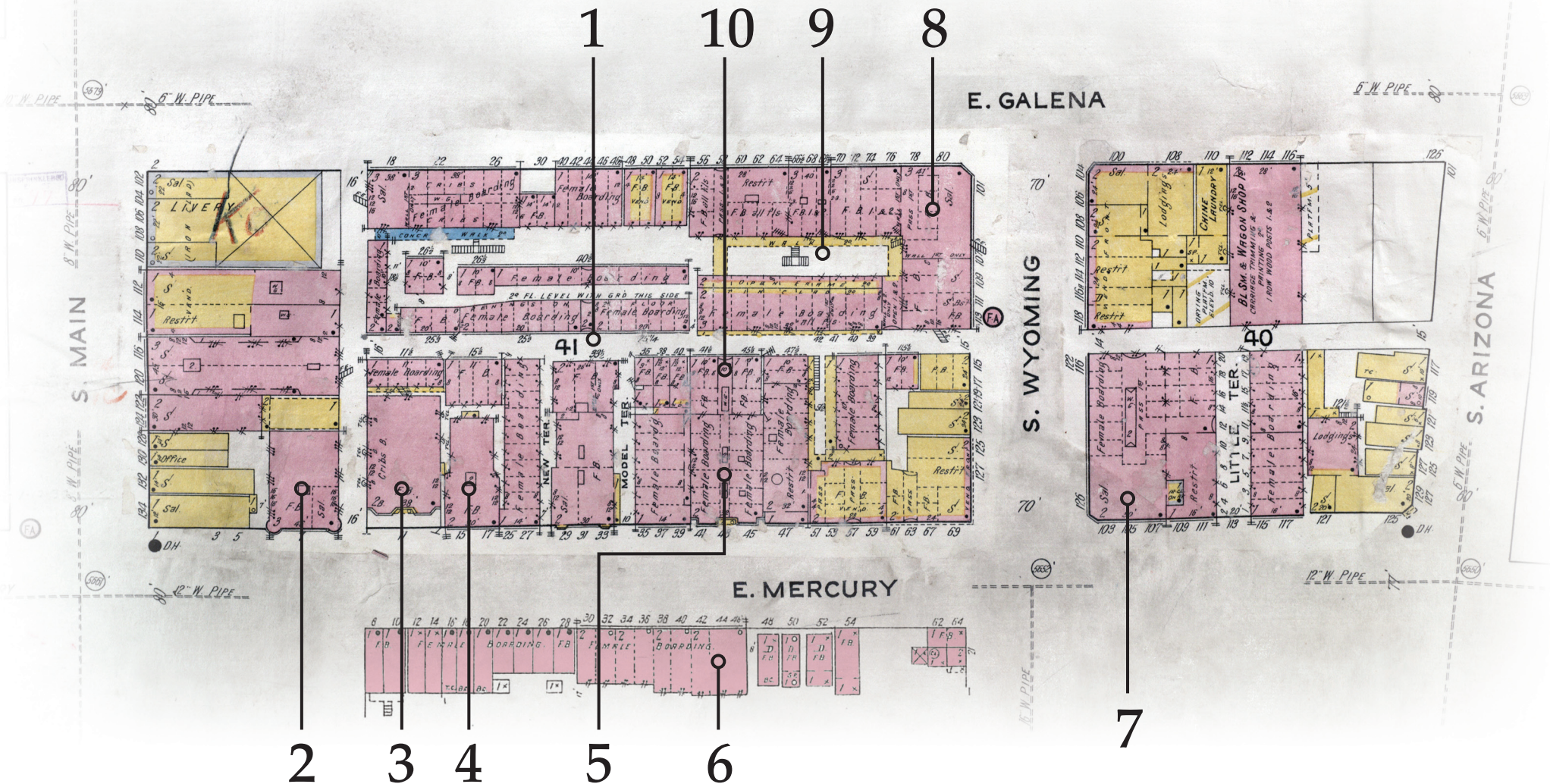


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MONTANA SUFFRAGE
1914 - 2014

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1916 Sanborn Map Key

Pink: brick
Yellow: Wood
Blue: Stone

FB./Female Boarding: Prostitution
Sal: Saloon

For a full legend, visit <http://sanborn.umi.com/HelpFiles/bwkey.pdf>