

# *LABOR OF LOVE*

Prostitutes and Civic Engagement in Leadville, Colorado, 1870 - 1915

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## Introduction

"It was very easy to overlook graft and extravagance when the money to pay the bills came from saloons, gambling halls and houses of prostitution. All these things were dreadful evils to be shunned and avoided, but when the future historian of Leadville goes deeply into the figures and shows how much these triple forms of iniquity as they are termed, have paid into the coffers of Leadville, and maintained its light, water, police and fire system, its streets, practically all its expenses the totals will be interesting and instructive."<sup>1</sup>

This excerpt from the October 23, 1915 issue of the Leadville *Herald Democrat* refers to the 1915 statewide law making houses of prostitution illegal, which was followed shortly by the imminent passing of the 1916 Colorado alcohol prohibition law.<sup>2</sup> As the author of this excerpt suggests, the "triple forms of iniquity" were key to creating and sustaining many of the vital organs of Leadville's civic life since its incorporation as a town in 1878.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, this revelation, which is presented here as common understanding, has rarely appeared in the pages of the many works since written on Leadville's history. In fact, it is rare to see any of these institutions presented as active members of the community. Why was this so?

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<sup>1</sup> *Herald Democrat*, October 23, 1915.

<sup>2</sup> General Assembly of the State of Colorado, *Nuisances Houses of Prostitution: An Act Concerning Nuisances, and Providing Penalties and Procedure with relation Thereto*, April 12, 1915, Senate Bill 88, Ch.123, 360-363.

<sup>3</sup> *Herald Democrat*, October 23, 1915.

In January of 1848 gold dust was discovered on the American River in California, and with the cry of "Gold! Gold! Gold from the American River!" a national phenomenon was sparked. What began as a rush towards the Sutter Mill area in Coloma by local Californians in 1848 quickly escalated into a mass movement of young men from the east coast to the plains and mountains of the western territories in 1849.<sup>4</sup> In 1858, almost a decade after the initial gold boom in California, gold was discovered in the Pikes Peak region of Colorado, inciting a second flood westward.<sup>5</sup> The earliest to come were primarily young, unmarried men who left their occupations and homes seeking to strike it rich mining at one of the newly discovered lodes. Following quickly behind them were those who mined the miners. This group included lawyers, bondsmen, shopkeepers, smiths and grocers, all of whom sought to exploit the needs of the camps and their male populations which seemed to have sprung up overnight.<sup>6</sup> They could not however, fill one of the town's most pressing needs, the company of women.

As the West was seen as a hostile world with no place for the sphere of women, most respectable women stayed at home in the East, either of their own volition, or at their families' and husbands' request, thus making early mining towns almost entirely male populated. In 1860 the ratio of men to women in Colorado was sixteen to one, and in the California Gulch near Leadville there were only 36 women living in the midst of 2000 men.<sup>7</sup> It is unsurprising that prostitutes saw mining towns as perfect places to ply their trade. Given the vast disparity in the

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<sup>4</sup> Susan Lee Johnson, *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush* (WW Norton & Company, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Don L. Griswold and Jean Harvey Griswold. *The Carbonate Camp Called Leadville* (Denver: University of Denver Press, 1951), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Duane A. Smith, *Rocky Mountain Mining Camps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), 6-7.

<sup>7</sup> Jan MacKell, *Brothels, Bordellos and Bad Girls: Prostitution in Colorado 1860-1930* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 52.

number of men and women, the steady flow of gold dust and cash, and the lack of laws restricting or inhibiting the practice of prostitution in the boom towns, ladies of the night flocked to Colorado in large numbers. Coming from Ohio, Virginia, Missouri, New York, California, and elsewhere in the U.S., prostitutes took to steamships, overland wagons and trains to head west across the U.S. and try their luck in the burgeoning, overwhelmingly male communities which sprouted up around the mines. The prospects that the mining towns presented also proved enticing enough to draw in women from various regions around the globe, and Irish, French, Mexican, Chinese, German and Japanese women frequently joined their American sisters in the practice of gold rush prostitution.<sup>8</sup> Many of the women who struck out westward were already established prostitutes who recognized the favorable potential of the Western mining towns and sought to take advantage of the unique political, economic and social conditions to promote their own financial success and upward social mobility. Some women, however, turned to prostitution only after arriving in the territory.<sup>9</sup> While Colorado was an obvious draw for established prostitutes, the attraction to prostitution itself is somewhat more complicated.

### **The Draw to Prostitution and its Unique Niche in Western Society**

The rise in prostitution as a commercial enterprise has long been associated by scholars with rapid industrialization and the rise of capitalism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As factory work and large scale farming operations replaced small household businesses and farms, women experienced a significant narrowing of their already limited

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<sup>8</sup> Jan MacKell. *Red Light Women of the Rocky Mountains*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2009), 7-16.

<sup>9</sup> Jan MacKell. *Brothels, Bordellos, & Bad Girls*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 19.

sphere. For poor women, surviving in the new economy meant seeking work outside of the home as domestic help or as low level workers in manufacturing centers in urban areas.<sup>10</sup> In these settings women often faced wage discrimination and sexual exploitation at the hands of their employers, earning subsistence wages at the cost of their dignity and respectability. In this situation, it is unsurprising that many women viewed prostitution as an attractive alternative - if they were to be exploited, why not let it be on their own terms? In such an exclusionary work setting, other women simply saw prostitution as the best economic opportunity they could pursue and joined the underworld willingly from a purely business standpoint.<sup>11</sup> Mattie Silks, a famous Madam of Denver once explained, "I went into the sporting life for business reasons and for no other, it was a way for a woman in those days to make money and I made it. I considered myself then and do now - a business woman."<sup>12</sup> This, however, was not the story of all who entered the profession.

It was not uncommon for sexually exploited women to find themselves pregnant out of wedlock and either abandoned by their lover or dismissed from their positions to cover up for the sexual transgressions of their employers or co-workers. In a society which placed respectability, reputation and the purity of womanhood on a pedestal, women thus soiled who returned home with no job prospects and no husband often found themselves rejected and shunned by their families. Left with few options to sustain themselves, these women were often forced to take up prostitution as a means of survival.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, some women went westward seeking better

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<sup>10</sup> Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900 - 1918*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press), 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Herald Democrat*, September 22, 1911.

<sup>12</sup> Clark Secrest, *Hell's Belles: Prostitution, Vice and Crime in Early Denver*, rev. ed. (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2002), 233.

<sup>13</sup> Jan MacKell. *Brothels, Bordellos, & Bad Girls*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 19.

opportunities but upon arrival simply found themselves out of money and work and turned to prostitution. In these cases, the women often joined the demimonde out of necessity, but stayed because it offered better pay and control or alternately because they faced a lack of other opportunity due to their perceived loss of respectability.<sup>14</sup>

The most unfortunate pathway into prostitution however, involved debt bondage or forced sex slavery. Frequently, poor prostitutes and hapless young women migrating to the American West in search of better pay found themselves trapped in debt bondage to their transporter. Under debt-bondage, girls were expected to work as prostitutes to pay off the cost of their transportation to the United States upon arrival. While this was common amongst poor women of various backgrounds, Chinese women were un-proportionately represented. One prostitute, nineteen-year-old Gon Sing testified that she had been transported to the United States under the auspices of an arranged marriage to a Chinese merchant as a "picture bride." However, upon arriving Sing was sold for \$1,680 worth of gold and forced into a house of prostitution. Her story is representative of many poor immigrant women, who found themselves virtually enslaved and placed under the control of a pimp who forced them to service a certain number of clients and punished them if the net pay for a period was under what they expected. While it was understood that the women would be released when their debt was paid, violence, coercion and

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\* An 1859 survey of 2,000 prostitutes asking why they took up the profession revealed that 525 were destitute; 258 were seduced or abandoned; 164 were treated badly by parents, relatives or husbands; and 71 were persuaded to come to work by other prostitutes. The rest simply succumbed to the various vices at hand.  
*Trails End Magazine*, December - January 1998, 21.

<sup>14</sup> Jacqueline Baker Barnhart. *The Fair but Frail: Prostitution in San Francisco, 1849-1900* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1986), 57.

wage withholding typically lead to a cycle of exploitation that trapped them indefinitely.<sup>15</sup> While prostitution experienced a period of initial acceptance in boom towns, it is these background stories, combined with perceptions of race and class, that profoundly impacted the professions' ultimate vilification in western society. Thus, coming from a myriad of locations and under vastly varying circumstances prostitutes came to populate Colorado mining towns.

It is important to note that during the late 19th and early 20th century gender was inextricably bound to class relationships and class identities, all of which worked together to establish rigid boundaries that dictated how people interacted and with whom.<sup>16</sup> Scholars of the American West, however, have long noted that the application of these social boundaries in early Western boom towns differed greatly from cities in the East. Social expectations, cultural prejudices, and the notion of respectability were transplanted to these Western towns, but in watered-down variants that allowed institutions such as prostitution to enjoy a period of tolerance, acceptance and prosperity. While prostitutes were not considered "ladies" as defined by Victorian rhetoric of the time, they were accepted as the next best substitutes by men in Western mining towns and initially enjoyed much the same social treatment that proper ladies were afforded.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, as much as these working girls were treated as ladies by the male populace, their profession alone denied them entry to true womanhood and barred them from achieving respectability as defined by Eastern culture at the time.<sup>18</sup> Having to adhere to neither

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<sup>15</sup> Alexy Simmons, *Red Light Ladies: Settlement Patterns and Material Culture on the Mining Frontier*, Anthropology Northwest no 4. (Corvallis: Department of Anthropology, Oregon State University, 1989), 80.

<sup>16</sup> Barnhart, 8.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Rosen, 6.



the cult of true womanhood nor the rules of respectability, prostitutes inhabited an interesting and uncommon space in Western society. By nature of their profession, prostitutes were often in close and sometimes intimate contact with men from across classes and professions including miners, lawyers, law enforcement officers, judges, and outlaws.<sup>19</sup> They were unique in this sense. Unbridled by the gendered and stratified class expectations imposed on both the "respectable" men and women who outwardly dominated civic life, prostitutes enjoyed a privileged ability to mix, albeit in the shadows, with all different strata of society. However, this is not to say that all prostitutes were able to maneuver at will along the social ladder. Whom a prostitute conducted business with was determined by her "classed" standing within the demimonde.

### **Courtesan or Whore?**

#### **Levels of the Demimonde and How They Affected the Ability for Civic Participation**

Today the term prostitute is used to refer to any woman or man who sells sexual favors. However, prostitute was just one of a vast variety of terms used to describe such a person in the United States during the nineteenth century. The terminology was dependent on several factors, including the location or type of place a woman worked, what type of work she purportedly engaged in, and the moral climate and levels of acceptance felt within the town or city in which the woman worked. Due to the sheer number of names used to refer to prostitutes and their profession during the nineteenth century, this paper focuses only on those terms which were most utilized in Leadville. It is important to note, however, that while the terminology used in Leadville was generally representative of common vocabulary across the United States during

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<sup>19</sup> Fred Mazzulla *Interviews with Laura Evens*, 1951.

that time, it does not encompass the full range of descriptive words and phrases used across the country.

Within the demimonde there are various levels or "classes" of prostitutes, ranging from *streetwalkers* to *courtesans*. Those groups who work at both the lowest and highest end of the spectrum worked on their own outside of the protection and control of the organized houses of prostitution. The lowest classes of prostitutes often plied their trade on the street and completed their sexual transactions outside, in public facilities or behind signboards. Due to the nature of their marketing and transactions these women were referred to as *streetwalkers* or *signboard gals*. For these prostitutes, transactions were brief, cheap and required very little interaction with their client outside of the sexual act itself. Due to their relative poverty, lack of protection offered by prostitution establishments and the perceived notion of their class, these prostitutes had to fend for themselves and were the most exposed to violence, police harassment and arrest, illness and drug addiction.<sup>20</sup> On the opposite end, *courtesans* and *mistresses* were the highest paid, most respected and "classiest" of all prostitutes. Often coming from an educated and high classed background prior to becoming a prostitute these women were typically the partner of only one man at a time and could expect to be paid extremely well, receive lavish gifts, publicly accompany their partner and occasionally participate in society events. These relationships tended to be substantial in character and could last for weeks or even years, allowing the mistress or courtesan heightened influence through their affair.<sup>21</sup>

Many women practicing prostitution however, fell between these two class extremes and worked for a house of prostitution managed by a *Madam, Bawd, or Pimp*. *Madams and Bawds*

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<sup>20</sup> Jan MacKell. *Brothels, Bordellos, & Bad Girls*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 16.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

were often retired prostitutes themselves who were too old to attract customers and had saved enough money during their careers to begin a house of their own. Others were simply astute entrepreneurs who enjoyed the executive opportunity that running their own business provided.<sup>22</sup> These ladies often worked alone, but in some cases cooperated with a *pimp*, the male version of a madam, or worked with a husband or *ceremonial husband* for the purpose of conducting business affairs with greater ease and social acceptability.<sup>23</sup> *Madam* was the title used most often to describe the women who ran the elite or high-class houses of prostitution, while *Bawd* was the terminology applied to women who supervised the cheaper or lower class houses.<sup>24</sup> For many prostitutes, the type of house in which they worked dictated their expected rate of pay, material comforts, ability for upward social mobility and influence, and the level of respectability they were afforded both within and outside of the demimonde.

The houses of prostitution also had a variety of names that designated their level of class or the types of business conducted within. While *brothel*, *house of ill fame*, *house of ill repute*, *house of assignation*, *sporting house* and *bawdy house* all referred to places which explicitly offered prostitution as their major service, more specific names delineated the houses based on its level of class. A *parlor house* was considered the classiest type of establishment. By maintaining decorum and a sense of propriety, enforcing dress codes, and upholding the anonymity of their customers, such houses aspired to meet the particular needs of an elite clientele. Many of these clients occupied the upper echelons of society and included lawyers, judges, mine owners and ranking government officials for whom discretion was of the utmost

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<sup>22</sup>Barnhart, X.

<sup>23</sup>Jan MacKell. *Brothels, Bordellos, & Bad Girls*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 287, 289.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

concern. This is not to say however, that parlor houses were for the exclusive usage of the elite; instead, they were exclusively frequented by men who had money to spend. In Western boom towns, money flowed freely, and a pauper could become a rich man in the span of a day if he got lucky mining, elevating his status, at least temporarily within the society. Parlor house prostitutes could expect to be treated and referred to in a more genteel manner, sometimes acting as the paramour to only a handful of well paying customers.<sup>25</sup> Because of the increased emphasis on propriety and the higher pay offered in parlor houses, the ladies who worked in such establishments tended to be more sophisticated, well groomed and educated, and presented themselves in such a way that earned them politer euphemisms than many other fellow prostitutes. Such ladies were often referenced as *the fair but frail*, *courtesans*, *fallen angels* or *soiled doves*.<sup>26</sup> These prostitutes, due to their comparable wealth and the opportunities afforded to them by their elevated status within the demimonde were in the best position to contribute to their societies, and did so in a number of ways.

Prostitutes who were not fortunate enough to ply their trade in these high paying houses were often to be found in houses referred to as *cribs*, *bordellos* and *bagnios*. The houses themselves were far smaller and less well-appointed than the parlor houses, and the women who worked there could expect to entertain men who made up the working class including, but not limited to, miners, gamblers, outlaws and small businessmen. These women could anticipate more work for less pay and were often afforded less respect in the names their societies used to describe them, such as *harlot*, *whore*, *cyprian*, *hooker*, *good-time girl*, *scarlet woman*, *shady*

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<sup>25</sup> Barnhart, X.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

*lady, sporting girl and strumpet.*<sup>27</sup> While these women had less opportunity to make visible and lasting impacts on their society, they were nonetheless economic contributors and arguably had an even larger impact on the city's colorful character and reputation.

Leadville, Colorado from 1870 to 1915 boasted a vast variety of sporting houses and prostitutes ranging from courtesans to parlor girls to streetwalkers, all of whom influenced the creation and sustenance of Leadville's society. With this in mind, did the socially ambiguous position of prostitutes provide them with greater opportunities for civic engagement than was afforded to their respectable counterparts? Looking at prostitutes from Leadville, Colorado cannot possibly account for the differences in prostitutes and their respective communities in the West. It can, however, stand as a case study through which we can begin to recognize other general patterns of civic engagement by prostitutes throughout the frontier West that have been previously ignored.

### **Why Leadville?**

The gold and silver booms in Colorado during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and the subsequent mass movement west coincided with a period of social, cultural and political changes in the United States. The mining towns which sprung up around the newly discovered lodes were unique microcosms that experimented with the implementation of Eastern social and cultural rhetoric, molding them to fit the distinct circumstances in which these communities existed.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> MacKell, *Brothels, Bordellos, & Bad Girls*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 287 - 290.

<sup>28</sup> Duane A. Smith, *Rocky Mountain Mining Camps: The Urban Frontier*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 1973, 3-15.

Known as "the magic city" or "the cloud city" by many of its earliest inhabitants, Leadville, Colorado, like many Western boom towns, had developed from a small highland community in the wilderness into a bustling and thriving mountain town in such a small span of time that it appeared to be nothing short of magic. At its peak around 1879 - 1880 Leadville was recognized as the second largest city in Colorado, and while the official census recorded close to fifteen thousand in the city limits, many speculated the combined population of the city and all those who lived on its outskirts and closer to the mines to amount to almost thirty thousand people, more than ten times the city's current count.<sup>29</sup> A popular early saying that is still touted in Leadville today is that "everybody came to Leadville," and the saying largely proved to be true, as the town, at points, hosted such characters as the "Unsinkable" Molly Brown, Doc Holliday and Charles H. Dow, American finance pioneer and founder of the Wall Street Journal.<sup>30</sup> While it was known primarily for its mines and the fabulous wealth they produced for Colorado legends such as Boettcher, Moffat and Tabor, Leadville was also widely recognized as a mecca for treasure seekers, adventurers, gamblers and prostitutes as well as wage earners seeking new forms of employment out west.<sup>31</sup>

Due to the unprecedented growth from a near silent forest in 1876 to a bustling town in 1879 Leadville was characterized by loosely defined and upheld laws and thus boasted a particularly boisterous and expansive red light district and a reputation for lawlessness. Prostitution, while restricted in many places throughout the United States, flourished in

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<sup>29</sup> 1880 U.S. Census, Lake County, CO., Database with images, *FamilySearch*. <http://FamilySearch.org>: 14 June 2016. Citing NARA microfilm publication T9. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.

<sup>30</sup> G. W. Bishop, Charles H. Dow, William Peter Hamilton, and Robert Rhea. *Charles H. Dow and the Dow Theory*. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc.), 1960.

<sup>31</sup> Griswold, 4, 125

Leadville's earliest days under the live-and-let-live mentality which characterized many boom towns of the American West.<sup>32</sup> Given the vast disparity between the number of men and women in the California Gulch area near Leadville, 36 women living in the midst of 2000 men in 1860, it is not surprising that prostitutes were allowed and even welcome to practice their trade with impunity.<sup>33</sup> As Jacqueline Barnhart points out in her book regarding prostitution from 1849 - 1900, "what a woman was did not matter so much as to the fact that she was a woman."<sup>34</sup> While this mindset may have been true of the town's earliest days, it was not all encompassing, and prostitutes were mentioned by the newspapers with polite euphemisms such as the "soiled doves" far less than they were with titles such as "notorious cyprian," whore and harlot.<sup>35</sup> Titles aside, prostitutes were an indisputable and permanent fixture of Leadville from its earliest days as a small mining claim through its boom days. Due to its perceived importance and its nature as a profitable business, prostitution was allowed to flourish by the governments and citizens of early mining towns and was understood as a necessary evil.<sup>36</sup> As the turn of the century approached, however, prostitution in the West came to be understood in very different terms.

The advent of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 shortened the travel time from the East Coast to West Coast. The travel time was shortened from a six-month trip to a six-day trip, opening the West in ways that were once unimaginable, serving as the main artery through which the civilizing forces of middle-class Anglo-American women surged westward. Colorado, having been settled by miners almost a decade after California, did not receive the brunt of these women

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<sup>32</sup> Jan MacKell, *Brothels, Bordellos, & Bad Girls*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 2.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>34</sup> Barnhart, 19.

<sup>35</sup> *Herald Democrat*, November 14, 1903.; *Herald Democrat*, February 12, 1901.; *Leadville Daily/Evening Chronicle*, April 13, 1887.

<sup>36</sup> Rosen, 9.

and their moral missions until the early 1880s. This is largely because the vast majority of the early miners were unmarried men who had no wife or family to bring west with them. Further, many men wished to amass a sizable fortune and create a homestead prior to establishing family life in the new territory.<sup>37</sup> For those men who did have wives, the reputation of Western boom towns as under-developed shanty camps rife with lawlessness and lacking the comforts of the modern home was enough to initially deter many women from the mining front. From the 1880s onward however, as moral panic surrounding "white slavery" grew, many of these newly arrived respectable women paired up with religious counterparts in mining towns to spearhead a number of social reform movements. Many of these movements were led by female reformers who sought to gradually but steadily stamp out prostitution as a viable form of employment. In 1915, the pressure from reform groups paid off and the state of Colorado passed the Nuisance Act shutting down houses of prostitution, at least by letter of law, for good.<sup>38</sup>

Despite the passing of the 1915 Nuisance Act, Leadville's "ladies of the lamplight" continued their practices more discreetly well into the twentieth century at places like the storied Pioneer Bar, a saloon and bawdy house which survived almost a hundred years before closing its doors in 1972. While there is a good deal of modern pride and interest in Leadville's tawdry past, especially among its older residents, it is the immense success of Leadville's mines, its relevance as a well-known Colorado city from 1870 - 1915, the notoriety of its vice district and the prevalence of prostitutes in Leadville's records throughout its colorful history which make Leadville an ideal location in which to study the contributions of prostitution to mining societies.

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<sup>37</sup> Smith, 21-23.

<sup>38</sup> General Assembly of the State of Colorado, *Nuisances Houses of Prostitution: An Act Concerning Nuisances, and Providing Penalties and Procedure with Relation Thereto*, April 12, 1915, Senate Bill 88, Ch.123, 360-363.



Tracing this tri-partite chronology of early acceptance, later attempts at regulation and restriction, and eventual abolition as it played out in Leadville, CO from 1870 - 1915 lays out a framework through which prostitute's agency and ability to contribute to society can be understood. Through a close re-examination of archival sources in Leadville, CO, from 1870-1915, it becomes clear that prostitutes, due to their marginalized yet unique position in Western society, occupied a liminal space between law and labor, at least for a time, which allowed them to come to the fore as one of the shaping forces in Leadville's society. Understanding the duality prostitutes employed to navigate their existence in Leadville gives us important insight into an unexplored facet of their lives, and provides us with a new angle from which to view the lives of prostitutes throughout varying Western mining towns. Calling into question our historical representations of prostitutes as either ordinary wage-laborers, victims of social circumstance or crass entrepreneurs, a fresh reading of judicial, personal and legal documents provides us with new understanding of the ways in which prostitutes utilized their unique niche and individual agency to not only sustain and better their own existence, but also to help shape their frontier societies during a tumultuous period of social and cultural transformation in the United States.

### **Existing Scholarship and its Contributions to the Field of Study**

Prostitutes occupy a special place in Western mythology and are often found alongside the cowboy, sheriff, and prospector when imagining old western boomtowns. Romanticized in Western mythology and modern film, pitied in period literature, and vilified by vice committees in the early 20th century, prostitutes were nevertheless a key fixture in every Colorado mining town during the flush years. Prior to 1980, few books had been written on the subject of prostitution, and those which did exist tended to focus on the more salacious aspects, reform

efforts to eliminate prostitution, or on the red-lights districts themselves.<sup>39</sup> These accounts were narrow in their scope, as they utilized mainly published materials and therefore focused on the most visible forms of prostitution and the public efforts to control or eliminate it. Further, few of these studies focused on prostitution in the American West, and even less so in Colorado. In the past 30 odd years, however, scholarship on the history of sexuality has exploded, and prostitution world-wide has emerged as one of the most popular topics of scholarly literary exploration. Many of these studies have utilized previously untapped sources such as police reports, incarceration records, legal cases, census documents, medical records, and voter registrations. Piecing together information gleaned from these sources, scholars of prostitution have uncovered valuable insights into the underworld of the American West.

One avenue of such scholarship has sought to identify who prostitutes were, where they came from, why they turned to prostitution and what their daily lives looked like. Using diaries and letters in conjunction with newspapers and legal documents, these works have provided a less romanticized and more realistic understanding of prostitution in the old West, pulling aside the gossamer curtain that has distorted history's remembrance of prostitutes as real women who worked, lived and died in much the same way as other Western pioneers.<sup>40</sup> This area of study has further been important in rescuing the history of prostitution from the prevailing rhetoric of the Progressive Era, which left no room for alternate understandings of the impetus leading women, and men, to engage in the sex industry.<sup>41</sup> Unfortunately, this sector of study has tended by and large to focus on the few prostitutes who were highly visible, occupying the upper echelons of

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<sup>39</sup> Timothy Gilfoyle, *Prostitutes in the Archives: Problems and Possibilities in Documenting the History of Sexuality*. *The American Archivist* 57, no. 3 (1994): 514-527.

<sup>40</sup> Tracy Beach, *My Life as a Whore, The Biography of Madam Laura Evens 1871-1953*, (Boulder: Johnson Books, 2015).

<sup>41</sup> Rosen, 13.

the red-light districts, and has thus failed to capture what life would have looked like for the majority of prostitutes who occupied the lower stratum of the underworld. Other areas of study have sought to understand and document the racial and class strata which existed inside the demimonde, highlighting the differing experiences of prostitutes and the internal struggles of the profession based on those terms.<sup>42</sup> Alternately, some scholars of western American prostitution have focused on prostitutes and red-light districts in the early twentieth century as a lens through which to study social reform movements and the shifting notions of class and gender roles.<sup>43</sup> Further branches of this scholarship have used the existence of prostitution in gold and silver mining towns in the West as microcosms to study and understand important shifting social and cultural trends in the United States during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. When viewed as an entire body of work, recent scholarship on gold and silver-rush-era prostitution has provided a wealth of information on the previously understudied subject, synthesizing a variety of types of information to paint a fairly well-rounded image of the face and life of prostitutes in Western America.

While such scholarship has uncovered a great deal about the lives of individual prostitutes and the struggles of class and gender in the American West, it has largely failed to explore the ways in which prostitutes, due to their marginalized yet unique position in Western society, were able to cross class and gender barriers to occupy a liminal space between law and labor. The duality prostitutes employed to navigate their existence in Western mining towns is noteworthy and relevant in its own right, but also provides new insights into the ways in which

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<sup>42</sup> Anne M. Butler, *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery: Prostitutes in the American West, 1865-90* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

<sup>43</sup> Elizabeth Jameson, *All That Glitters: Class, Conflict, and Community in Cripple Creek* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

gold rush prostitutes utilized their unique status as fallen women to actively participate in the shaping of their societies.

### **Methods, Sources and Challenges Faced by the Historian of Prostitution**

It is important to note, however, the challenges scholars of gold rush prostitution face in research and synthesis. Due to the rigid social apparatus of Victorian society, prostitution was at best considered a necessary evil and at worst a blight on society which had to be quashed lest it lead to the moral degeneration of America's citizens.<sup>44</sup> Because of its "unspeakable, stigmatized and clandestine nature," prostitution and all that it influenced often went largely unrecorded, and the records which do exist mostly present distorted versions of the truth. Given that prostitutes could not work without customers, these records were carefully crafted to protect the identity and interests of the author and other "upstanding" members of society who engaged with prostitution from public scrutiny and shame.<sup>45</sup> While some diaries and even interviews do exist, they are few in number and limited in scope, meaning that most information is gleaned primarily from legal documents of the period, newspapers, and references in better documented social reform campaigns. These documents, while useful, are also fraught with pitfalls as scholars of gold rush prostitution are forced to consider that the main voices in these manuscripts were not the prostitutes themselves, but judges, law enforcement officers, journalists and police.<sup>46</sup> The relationships that these men had with prostitutes and with the profession itself can often be hard to ascertain in their writings, as such salacious activities were kept hushed, especially if the

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<sup>44</sup> Rosen, 9.

<sup>45</sup> Timothy Gilfoyle, *Prostitutes in the Archives: Problems and Possibilities in Documenting the History of Sexuality. The American Archivist*, pg. 514-527.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

person engaging held a position of power in regards to the upkeep of law. However, understanding the long standing agreements of toleration based on a system of fines between the police department and prostitutes in town, for example, provides interesting insights into the double-dealing relationships they maintained. Even this presents research challenges however, as such shady transactions were often misrepresented in records to protect the "respectable" citizens and institutions involved.

Alternately, when gathering information from newspapers and period media productions, historians must take into account the exterior social, political and economic factors at work during the time of publication as these may have colored the manner in which journalists and organizations understood and spoke about prostitution and those who practiced it. On a large scale, prostitution in the West underwent varying shifts in terms of public acceptance over time, changing vastly from the flush days to the early twentieth century. The shifting understandings of prostitution and its place in Western society can be traced through the shift of rhetoric in newspapers, pamphlets and magazine articles, which once referred to prostitutes using polite euphemisms such as "the fairer sex in bloom," but years later referred to the same women with harsh derogatory terms like "strumpets" or "harlots."<sup>47</sup> The change of descriptors can be linked, in part, to the remanence of the Second Great Awakening religiosity, the rise of American bourgeoisie ideals and social reform movements during the Progressive Era which identified prostitution as the most visible symbol of moral degeneration and a backwards social order.<sup>48</sup> In addition, many of the records pertaining to prostitutes involve instances of public drunkenness,

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<sup>47</sup> Barnhart, 1.

<sup>48</sup> Rosen, 7.

disorderly conduct, vagrancy and petty crime, and were often destroyed or lost as time passed due to a lack of value seen in preserving them.<sup>49</sup>

As the study of prostitution is inextricably bound with questions of sexuality and sexual activity, historians are further plagued with issues of privacy as many of the materials which could be of use are inaccessible because the information within may embarrass some of the institutions involved, many of which still exist today. Even today some archives do not allow researchers to cite names found in certain record groups to protect the interests of living relations and donating organizations.<sup>50</sup> It is also reasonable to speculate that further primary documents which may have contributed to the study of gold rush prostitution were tampered with retrospectively to paint an organization or person in a light more acceptable to society at the time. Further, many documents were likely simply destroyed or not preserved as such records may have led to the defamation of a person's or institution's legacy or been a source of embarrassment for the living relatives of the prostitutes.<sup>51</sup>

Researching gold rush prostitution in Leadville was fraught with all of these challenges and more. The city, proud of its long and colorful history, has amassed a large collection of records which includes police dockets, letters, photographs, receipts, articles of clothing and court minutes to name a few. The vast quantity of information Leadville has saved is stunning, and in many ways overwhelming. While some items such as city directories seem to have been saved annually, other items appear to have been saved only periodically depending on the mood of the administration. Further, at this point no project has been undertaken to collect and organize the historical records in one, or even two locations. Rather, the documents can be found

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Gilfoyle, 520.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 522.

dispersed amongst multiple municipal buildings, museums and even the Lake County Public Library. The great merit of doing research in Leadville however, is the residents' overwhelming interest in their city's history and their eagerness to aid in the quest for information. Despite the challenges, the shady ladies of Leadville peppered municipal records, personal letters and newspapers, leaving behind compelling proof of their impact on the shaping of Leadville's early society.

### **Background Information:**

#### **The Shifting Cultural Ideologies of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century**

In order to understand the changing societal response to prostitution in Leadville, one must first understand the shifting cultural ideals of the country at large which undergirded them. In the American West, the period ranging from the 1840s to 1870s was synonymous with mining, gold, exploration and lawlessness. However, this time in American history has also been noted by historians as the most influential period of American Victorianism. This new cultural order emerged from the chaos of the Civil War and its aftermath and was further shaped by the abrupt rise of capitalism and with it the American middle class. Victorianism was characterized by stressed social responsibility, personal morality, restraint, virtue and the rigid ordering of society based on class. The main proponents and spokesmen for Victorian culture were urban Northeasterners who were not only literate and well-to-do, but were also often intimately involved in American industrialization. While this group was hardly representative of the entire population of the United States, they were by far the most vocal, and disseminated their ideas effectively, and often quite dogmatically, through newspapers, pamphlets, magazines, and popular fiction, all of which were by in large controlled by this elite middle and upper class

group. Perhaps one of the most notable features of Victorian thought was its sharp focus on the morality, duties and virtues of women, who were upheld as vessels of purity, defenders of the sanctity of home and hearth and bellwethers of societal mores.<sup>52</sup>

One of the guiding forces behind Victorian etiquette and cultural understanding was highly regarded and circulated medical volumes of the time. Particular to this period, medical literature and cultural ideals had a cyclical way of reinforcing each other, especially when it came to the question of men, women and sexuality.<sup>53</sup> William Acton, a nineteenth century British physician who studied prostitution and sexuality in England, was considered one of the leading experts in the matter. In his works he claimed that females had little to no sex drive at all, and asserted "the majority of women are not very much troubled with sexual feelings of any kind."<sup>54</sup> His claim that "what men are habitually, women are only exceptionally," refers to a popular belief which espoused the notion that the male sex drive was a strong and potentially destructive thing which all men must control lest it lead to severe damaging of both the mind and body. This belief perpetuated the double standard which justified men's sexual engagement with prostitutes as a way to protect respectable women from men's destructive sexual desires, while at the same time castigating women who appeared to enjoy and even invite sexual feelings, dubbing them unnatural and not respectable.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Barnhart, 10.

<sup>53</sup> Rosen, 4.

<sup>54</sup> William Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Youth, in Adult Age, and in Advanced Life: Considered in Their Social and Psychological Relations* (Philadelphia, 1865), 133.

<sup>55</sup> Barnhart, 10.



With these mixed notions of respectability and sexuality in Victorian culture it is unsurprising that the spoken and written word and policy in practice were highly contradictory during this time period. While most circles considered prostitution a necessary evil, the best method for dealing with the evil was hotly debated. For the most part, prostitution was quietly tolerated, as long as it remained hidden from the view of "respectable" society and served the purpose of deflecting the destructive sexual drives of men from respectable upper-class women.<sup>56</sup> In Leadville's newspapers, this was commonly displayed in the columnists' concern with the visibility of prostitutes rather than the actual profession itself. As one article states,

The vile language used and the drinking of beer and the smoking of cigarettes is not all, for they appear at the windows sometimes in the scantiest of clothing, bringing the blush of shame to the cheek of all respectable people who are unfortunate enough to see them. The conduct of these women has become so outrageous that respectable women are afraid to pass down that portion of Harrison avenue during the afternoon.<sup>57</sup>

While this may have been the unspoken understanding of society at large, prostitution and the keeping of disorderly houses stood in direct violation of federal and in many cases, state laws which prohibited or limited the practice of prostitution.<sup>58</sup> Thus, when the political climate so demanded, the red light or tenderloin districts were raided. In these raids known prostitutes were often hauled into jail, assessed a nominal fine and released back on to the streets. The raids served to maintain, at least at face value, the letter of law and to placate the moral woes which occasionally afflicted the consciousness of members of respectable society.

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<sup>56</sup> Rosen, 6.

<sup>57</sup> *Herald Democrat*, August 14, 1891.

<sup>58</sup> Edward Blair and Richard E. Churchill, *Everybody Came to Leadville* (Leadville: Timberline Books), 1971, 78.

Some members of Victorian society however, adopted a more realistic view of the evil, and argued that if it was necessary and must be tolerated, that it should be regulated. Proponents of regulation such as William Acton suggested that prostitutes be licensed, required to have medical checkups and be confined to a defined area of the city. Acton and other regulationists based their argument on the deeply held, though little articulated Victorian principle that prostitution was an evil, but a necessary one, which must exist to accommodate the potentially dangerous sexual passions of men so that the purity of the home and true womanhood could be maintained.<sup>59</sup> Led largely by medical authorities and the burgeoning public police force, the movement sought to bring prostitution out of the shadows, arguing that while the evil was ineradicable, it was necessary that the state take an active role in its regulation. Basing much of their argument on recent medical studies which suggested a strong linkage between unregulated prostitution and venereal disease, regulationists maintained that the social and medical problems presented by prostitution could best be dealt with through a system of state control and regulation.<sup>60</sup> To regulate prostitution, however, would be to publicly admit its existence outright, legitimizing the practice and breaking the moral silence which surrounded the existence of the necessary evil.<sup>61</sup> For many Victorians and early Progressives, this was unacceptable, albeit for differing reasons, and in the 1870's they united to produce a wave of moral reform sparked by the growing campaign to regulate prostitution.

These reformers, known alternately as abolitionists, anti-regulationists or social purity advocates, fought attempts to regulate prostitution, espousing feminist, religious and civil libertarian principles with abolitionist language reminiscent of anti-slavery crusades. Calling

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<sup>59</sup> Rosen, 8.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>61</sup> Barnhart, 13.

upon nativist sentiments within the United States anti-regulationists framed the regulation of prostitution as an acceptance of imported and corrupted European and Asiatic morality, and were backed in their assertions by the passing of the Page Act in 1875.<sup>62</sup> At its core the Page Act was an addition to a growing string of anti-immigrant, and specifically anti-Chinese, legislative pieces which sought to curtail the influx of "Orientals" and ensure their temporary rather than permanent stay in mining communities in the American West. The language of the act reinforced pre-existing ideas that linked prostitution, immigrants and the lower class with degraded morals which threatened the fabric of proper American society. Calling on the creeds of American individualism and the nation's blossoming feminist movement, these abolitionists argued that the enforcement necessary to regulate prostitution would create a "police state" which stood in clear opposition to long standing traditions of American liberty. They further contended that regulation represented an antiquated system which upheld Old World beliefs subjugating women and reinforcing their inferiority to men.<sup>63</sup> The anti-regulationists, while recognizing that venereal disease was a rampant problem closely associated to prostitution, pointed to the failure of the British Contagious Diseases Act, which was repealed in 1886 due to immense pressure from feminist groups in Britain, as evidence of both a threat to civil liberties and an impractical system which was doomed to failure.

By the 1880s moving into the 1890s regulationist arguments had been all but stamped out, and the abolitionists established the outright abolition of prostitution as their main objective. "The Social Purity Movement" as it came to be known was focused on the reformation of American sexual morals, focusing on prostitutes, but also on their primarily male customers and

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<sup>62</sup> Rosen, 11.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

financial backers. Rather than viewing prostitutes strictly as willing moral degenerates, these progressive reformers also highlighted social, environmental and economic factors as implicit culprits in a woman's descent into prostitution. While progressives recognized these external failures, the deep seated morality espoused by their Victorian predecessors remained couched within their arguments, casting prostitutes as both victims of a failed social and cultural system and a moral sore.<sup>64</sup> Spurred on by the growing moral panic over "white slavery" progressives worked with religious fervor, using abolitionist language to demand the destruction of "the moral problem that symbolized the shaky state of the nation's soul."<sup>65</sup>

### **Prostitution in Leadville, CO (1870 - 1890)**

#### **Becoming Leadville**

In 1849 thousands of people migrated westward, drawn from across the states and around the world by the promise of California gold. Though some of these intrepid adventurers would pass through the Colorado territory on their journey, most viewed it simply as a mountainous barrier which must be overcome in order to reach the vast fortunes which lay buried in the California hills. While fur trappers, hunters and explorers had been utilizing and occasionally living in the territory up until this point, Colorado was almost entirely populated with Native American peoples, including the Pueblo, Arapaho, Apache, Shoshone, Ute, Comanche and Cheyenne nations. It was not until the large placer deposits in California began to disappear that some of the forty-niners, remembering tales of gold in the Rocky Mountains, decided to make their way back through Colorado. When a gold pocket was discovered in July of 1858 in Dry Creek near the present site of Denver word of the discovery traveled east with traders and by the

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

spring of 1859 the Pike's Peak Gold Rush, so named for its proximity to the famous mountain peak, had begun.<sup>66</sup> With an estimated 100,000 people heading to Colorado at the start of the Pikes Peak rush and a limited amount of placer gold available in the Front Range streams, it is unsurprising that many of the "fifty-niners," as they were dubbed, quickly moved on striking deeper into Colorado territory in search of new lodes.<sup>67</sup> One of these groups was the Stevens party. Working their way up the banks of the Arkansas River the men mined the stream, digging holes and panning the water in search of gold, but results had not looked promising. On April 26, 1859 however, about 5 miles up the gulch, Abe Lee discovered the first load of "pay dirt." Gold had been found!<sup>68</sup> On April 27th, 1859, the mining district was established and named California Gulch. While there are several stories which explain how the gulch got its original name, the most common refers to Abe Lee's supposed exclamation upon finding gold, "By God, I've got California in this here pan!"<sup>69</sup>

Over the course of the next ten years California Gulch produced a noteworthy sum of gold, and as the years passed, the mining claims funneled into fewer and fewer hands, making moguls of men like Samuel B. Kellogg and Horace Austin Warren Tabor. While legend holds that \$2,000,000 worth of gold was placered out of California Gulch in its first season, more accurate reports suggest that in Lake County \$5,412,000 in placer gold was found between 1859 and 1869.<sup>70</sup> By 1860 the mining camp had acquired the name Oro City, and around 10,000

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<sup>66</sup> Blair, 1.

<sup>67</sup> Griswold, 1.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. 3.

<sup>69</sup> Blair, 6.

<sup>70</sup> C.W. Henderson. *Mining in Colorado, a History of Discovery, Development, and Production. Professional Paper 138* (Department of the Interior. Washington Government Printing Office, 1926).

inhabitants in and surrounding the city proper—almost exclusively miners searching for gold.<sup>71</sup> In these early days, most golden hopefuls had come as transients, chasing one lode to the next, and as such it was rare to see homes of any permanence as most people lived out of their wagons or tents or set up small shanty houses. One exception to this was Augusta Tabor's log cabin, which the men of the mining camp allegedly built for her. According to her reminiscences, respectable women were treated like queens and even women whose virtues were thoroughly questioned received extreme kindness from the miners as they were the only women in town.<sup>72</sup>

One such woman was known simply as "Red Stockings" for the color of fabric which she wore to cover her peeping ankles. As one old gulcher recalls, Red Stockings drew the admiration and love of all in the camp, and would illicit a great round of cheers every afternoon as she rode her horse through the camp, to which she would always respond with a "bewitching" smile. Though she stayed for less than a year, at her time of departure in 1861 Red Stockings had not only collected the admiration of the miners, but supposedly over a hundred thousand dollars as well.<sup>73</sup>

For the next few years following Red Stocking's departure the placer gold supplies slowly dwindled, and subsequently, so did the number of miners who had come to inhabit the city. By 1865 there were less than four hundred inhabitants and by 1867 the city was all but deserted save for the few who hung on in hopes that the placer gold had come from a much larger, yet undiscovered source.<sup>74</sup> Despite the elevated respect, admiration and seemingly good pay that prostitutes may have enjoyed from the early miners, their market was one of demand

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<sup>71</sup> Griswold, 4.

<sup>72</sup> Betty Moynihan, *Augusta Tabor: A Pioneering Woman* (Cordillera Press; 1st edition, 1988).

<sup>73</sup> *Leadville Daily Chronicle*. April 16, 1879.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* 13.

and as the transient gold seekers left the gulch, so too did the ladies of the night who serviced them. For a brief time, the city, though free of almost all else, was also fairly free of vice.

Through the early years of 1870 little gold was churned up in California Gulch, and in Oro City many of the cabins clustered along the gulch were left crumbling after the years of neglect.<sup>75</sup> Preoccupied with the lust for gold and gold alone, most miners had come and gone with the ebbing of the gold flow. What they had failed to see was that the heavy dark sand and rocks that had been their constant plague while mining for gold, was in fact carbonate of lead, which hid within it silver. In 1874 two men, William Stevens and Alvinus B. Wood, curious about the character of the "heavy porphyry," took samples of a mineral deposit near the south side of California gulch. To their shock and delight they found that the samples contained twenty to forty ounces of silver to a ton of the material. Keeping their findings a secret, the men traced the veins and staked a number of large claims. In 1876, with their claims officially backed by the government, the men announced their findings.<sup>76</sup> The announcement had a negligible affect at first, as few knew the value of the carbonates, but as the 1870s wore on, more and more men struck claims in the hills surrounding California gulch, and as the wealth began to flow in the region again, so too did the stream of hopeful miners heading up to the carbonate csamp. A report produced by the Department of the Interior recorded the mines of Lake county producing \$670,600 worth of gold, silver and lead in the year 1877. By the end of the year the camp was estimated to hold between 300 and 500 residents, though some guessed as high as 1,000, the beginnings of an ore smelting industry, numerous odd businesses and a vast array of halls for

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<sup>75</sup> Griswold, 24.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 24-27.

vice.<sup>77</sup> In 1878 \$2,490,000 worth of material was mined in the county and by the year's end the camp of carbonate had been incorporated and named. Leadville, Colorado was officially born.<sup>78</sup>

### **"Everybody Came to Leadville," 1870 - 1890**

Despite vast separation in both physical space and drastically variant societal circumstance from Eastern society, the mining camp of California Gulch, which subsequently grew into Oro City and finally into the town of Leadville, cannot be separated from the political or social temperaments which guided their eastern counterparts. From 1870 to 1890 Leadville and its inhabitants understood and dealt with prostitution in ways which often mirrored the overarching societal understandings of the time. The fact that "society" and the town as we know it truly only evolved in the later part of the 1870s had much to do with the unique treatment of prostitution and the ample ability early prostitutes had to contribute to the mining society. Thanks to the discovery of the lead carbonate silver carrying ores Leadville had become a lively and bustling town by 1878, and by 1879 had become incorporated by the State of Colorado. The rapid influx of miners and those seeking to make their fortune by catering to the miner's needs had caused the town to surge in population, from approximately 330 to 500 residents in 1877, Leadville was estimated to house almost 30,000 in the city and area directly surrounding it by the end of 1879, ranking it as the second largest city in the state of Colorado.<sup>79</sup> In a letter home dated "January 29, 1879, Tontine Hotel" a young man named George Elder described Leadville, explaining that "You can possibly have no idea of the rapidity of action here. All is push and

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<sup>77</sup> Henderson; Griswold, 74.

<sup>78</sup> Griswold, 59.

<sup>79</sup> 1880 U.S. Census, Lake County, CO., Database with images, *FamilySearch*. <http://FamilySearch.org>: 14 June 2016. Citing NARA microfilm publication T9. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.; Griswold, 74.



bustle. The streets are crowded and every other house is a saloon, dance house, etc."<sup>80</sup> He was not exaggerating in his assumptions regarding the sheer numbers of Leadville's establishments of vice. In 1879 a survey "carefully gathered by a Chronicle reporter" in June of 1879 found that Leadville hosted 791 establishments which could be classed as businesses, including 120 saloons, 19 beer halls, 115 gambling houses, 35 houses of prostitution and 4 dance houses.<sup>81</sup> Thirty-seven percent of Leadville's businesses fell into the category of "vice," while slightly over nineteen percent of them were considered illegal by the State of Colorado at that time.<sup>82</sup>

Although Denver and several other cities in Colorado had passed ordinances to restrict prostitution as well as the keeping of houses of prostitution, it did nothing to halt or slow the practices of Leadville's shady ladies, who had been present in the camp since its earliest days.<sup>83</sup> Leadville, however, was no longer a rough and tumble camp made up of ninety percent men. In the 1880 census the city of Leadville was recorded to have 10,783 men and 4,026 women. Of those women only 1,582 were listed as single, making the ratio of single women to men around 15 women to every 85 men.<sup>84</sup> Though men still far outnumbered ladies, especially single ones, the ratio had changed significantly from the time of Red Stockings in 1860. It is important, however, to note that the 1880 census, as well as several after, very likely failed to capture a true snapshot of the population living in and around Leadville. As an upstart boom town people were

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<sup>80</sup> Edward Blair, *Leadville: Colorado's Magic City* (Boulder: Fred Pruett Books, 1980), 55.

<sup>81</sup> *Leadville Daily Chronicle*, June 7, 1879, p.1.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Jan MacKell. *Brothels, Bordellos, & Bad Girls*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>84</sup> 1880 U.S. Census, Lake County, CO., Database with images, *FamilySearch*. <http://FamilySearch.org>: 14 June 2016. Citing NARA microfilm publication T9. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.

frequently coming and going, living in tents, wagons or as boarders rather than as property owners, making themselves difficult to track and count. Further, it was rare for transients such as gamblers and prostitutes to register themselves with the city. While the census may not provide perfect information it nevertheless presents a clear image of a male dominated society in which ladies, especially single ones, were still scarce. Thus, while prostitutes in the late 1870s and early 1880s may not have drawn the admiration and cheers that their counterparts did in the early days of California Gulch, they were still in high demand as females were scarce, and garnered a level of outward public respect similar to that afforded to Red Stockings and her ilk. Evidence of this manifests itself in the verbiage used by local newspapers and in the accounts of travelers visiting the young city. While the newspapers referred to women of the night as prostitutes, cyprians and courtesans, they were often found to refer to them with more polite euphemisms such as the more tender sex, and the fair but frail.<sup>85</sup> Charles H. Dow, founder of the *Wall Street Journal* and influential financial thinker, visited the Cloud City in 1879, recalling in his letters that the women of Leadville's parlor homes were "attractive in appearance and are treated with all the respect that could be accorded to anybody."<sup>86</sup> While prostitutes in the early years were afforded more respect than their predecessors by nature of their situation as the few women amongst a vast community of single men, the community at large also appeared to be more forgiving in their final judgements of these fallen angels. This can be noted in a newspaper article from 1887, which remembered the passing of a "notorious cyprian" of Leadville as "a woman, who, with all her bad qualities, was much given to charity and was always willing to help the poor and unfortunate."<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> *Leadville Daily/Evening Chronicle*, July 11, 1879.

<sup>86</sup> Bishop, 327 - 328

<sup>87</sup> *Colorado Daily Chieftain*, April 13, 1887

In addition to garnering respect, Leadville's early prostitutes also earned the dotting following of some of the more successful miners, and more than a few of the mines bear the names of favored ladies of the lamplight.<sup>88</sup> In the early 1880s, one such mine, referred to as the "CB Mine," was rumored to have been intended the name Carrie Betts Mine after one of Leadville's most charming soiled doves. However, when the mine proved to be less successful than hoped, its owners chose to call it Codfish Balls instead.<sup>89</sup> While this story is only a story, a prostitute by the name of Miss Carrie Betts was present in the newspaper and in the police magistrate records in Leadville in the early 1880s, while a mine by the name of Codfish Balls was also established in 1880.<sup>90</sup> While prostitutes added greatly to Leadville's colorful charm, they, and the establishments in which they practiced were also often cited as some of the root evils which plagued the city in its early years. Prostitutes were frequently arrested and fined on charges of drunkenness, lewd behavior or inappropriate dress and were often featured in local newspaper articles under such titles as "Knocking Out the Nymph." As the newspapers abounded with tales of prostitutes ranging from touching to funny to strikingly sad to outraged, prostitutes indisputably added greatly to the overall color and variety of the town. However, by far their greatest contributions during this, and every subsequent period of Leadville's history, were economic.

### **The Five-Dollar Fine System**

The City of Leadville established its first true code of written laws in 1881, and published them in a small, neat leather bound book titled "The Revised and General Ordinances of the City

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Blair, 53.

<sup>90</sup> *Carbonate Chronicle*, March 13, 1880.; *Weekly Herald*, April 10, 1880.; Blair, 53.

of Leadville."<sup>91</sup> While there was very little outward objection to the practice of prostitution or gambling both were restricted by state law and thus the Leadville city council took the next step, passing ordinances decreeing both illegal. In regards to prostitution and gambling, the book had several entries which by and large copied the state's existing laws regarding the illegal activities with very few changes in the wording or intent. The seventeenth section of the Ordinances' *Town and Cities, General Laws* charged the city government with the duty to "suppress bawdy and disorderly houses, houses of ill-fame or assignation, within the limits of the city or town, or within three miles beyond...and also to suppress gaming and gambling houses, lotteries and fraudulent devices and practices, for the purpose of gaining or obtaining money or property, and to prohibit the sale or exhibition of obscene or immoral publications, prints, pictures or illustrations."<sup>92</sup> The ordinances further set out the limitations of vice within the city in Chapter VII *Misdemeanors* Article I - *Offenses Against Good Morals and Decency*. Sections five through nine of Article I dealt entirely with laws regarding prostitution and gambling, clearly establishing that it was illegal to own, run, be an inmate of or be in any way connected with houses engaging in either form of vice. It further established that "any prostitute, courtesan or lewd woman, who shall, within the corporate limits of the city of Leadville, by word, sign or action, ply her avocation upon the streets, or at any place...or make any public meretricious display of herself upon the streets or in any public place in this city, shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor..."<sup>93</sup> To be found guilty of any of these misdemeanors required the guilty party to pay a fine "in any sum not less than five dollars and not more than one hundred dollars."<sup>94</sup> This fine system, which

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<sup>91</sup> *The Revised and General Ordinances of the City of Leadville*, Office of the Clerk, Leadville, Co, 1881.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 136-137.

lasted until 1915, was one of the greatest sources of income for the city and remained fairly constant throughout the years, fluctuating slightly depending on the political and moral climate of the city and its inhabitants and the relative production of the mines. Long since a fixture of the boom town, most of Leadville's respectable citizens, while perhaps not agreeing with prostitution or even accepting it as a necessary evil, accepted the practice as part of daily town life. With the passing of the ordinances, however, the city gained a new way in which to capitalize on the existence of prostitution.

From 1881 to 1915 saloon licenses and taxes and the fine money collected from prostitution and gambling accounted for over half of the city's revenue. Saloon taxes and licensure aside prostitution alone accounted for twenty-five percent of the city's income on average, far surpassing the income collected on any one legal taxable business in Leadville.<sup>95</sup> The fine system was understood by officials and denizens alike as a method from which law and illegal labor could profit, and coexist. In essence, the system successfully created a mechanism through which the municipality could allow the practice of prostitution to appease the soiled doves and their clientele, while at the same time seemingly upholding the law, in practice if not wholly in spirit, to appease the moral forces which demanded its suppression.

How did a system like this manage to maintain in a society squarely settled within the Victorian period of thought? Leadville, like many boom towns in the American West, was slow to import the principles upon which eastern society was structured for several prevalent reasons. For one, the early populations of boom towns were largely made up of groups of transient male adventurers, gamblers and entrepreneurs who had no qualms picking up and moving in search of

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<sup>95</sup> "City Collectors Reports," *Herald Democrat*, January 4, 1879 - December 4, 1879 -1915.

new fortune. After all, that was how they arrived in Leadville in the first place. Because of this mentality very few came with the intent to shape their societal surroundings in a way conducive to long term standards of living. Another, perhaps less tangible reason can be described as the wide-open spirit of the West. This refers to a notion, widely held at the time, that the West, away from the eyes of established society, was somehow freer.<sup>96</sup> Those who braved the journey westward often found themselves surrounded by strangers in a brash and unapologetic new place which had little practical use for the prevailing laws of culture and etiquette.<sup>97</sup> Perhaps most critical in explaining the slow uptake of Eastern mores is the striking absence and later unproportionately small numbers of women present in the first ten years after Leadville's birth. Women, seen as the protectors and upholders of morality and virtue, were also largely responsible for the dissemination of cultural values, and in their absence the rules which governed Eastern society only slowly trickled in. All things considered, Western boom towns like Leadville were often years behind their Eastern counterparts in taking up the crusade against vice.

As yet untroubled by the moral crusades of the East, Leadville's fine system worked as a well-oiled, though far from perfect machine. On the last day of each month, prostitutes, or the madams under whom they worked, were expected to report to the police station to pay a fine of five dollars per dove.<sup>98</sup> Once the fine was paid the women were free to go on their way and operate for the next thirty days without fear of interference by the authorities so long as they did not ply their practice on the streets, appear drunken or engage in lewd behavior in public. This

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<sup>96</sup> Smith, 3-15.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>98</sup> *Police Court Dockets*, City of Leadville, 1885 and 1887; *City Jail Registers*, City of Leadville, 1898, 1900 - 1920.

system of back-door dealings was at times problematic, and the contradictory nature of its practice was occasionally revealed. In July of 1881 it was brought to light twice in local newspaper The Leadville Daily Chronicle. The first instance dealt with the court case of a prostitute identified as Miss Julia Stanton. Miss Stanton was charged with being an inmate of a house of ill fame without having paid the required license or fine of five dollars. The reporter, while faithfully reporting the circumstances and outcome of the case, nevertheless seemed puzzled by the law under which she was arrested, stating,

Whether this is imposed by the City Council or how, does not clearly appear. That any such license is legal, all, anyway versed in law, know to the contrary. Prostitution can no more be licensed than can pickpocketing or house breaking...It would appear from the developments of this trial, that the city of Leadville has permitted this crime to be carried on within the city limits upon each guilty person paying in to the city treasurer five dollars per month.<sup>99</sup>

While the reporter astutely noticed the contradictions which undergirded the fine system, it did not appear to offend his sensibility, and he in fact seemed to tacitly agree with its logic as he followed up the statement by saying "Of course the revenue from this is very large."<sup>100</sup>

Remonstrances were periodically made to the council and the police marshal was instructed to engage in a show of police enforcement. While this was often enough to appease the moral busy-bodies, it also occasionally demonstrated the absurdities implicit in a system which only upheld the law at its bare minimum. Two weeks after Miss Stanton's case the chief of police issued orders to arrest any woman soliciting on the streets, or from the doorway or the windows of her

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<sup>99</sup> *Leadville Daily/Evening Chronicle*, July 11, 1879.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

home. This offered quite a challenge for the police force, which had difficulty ascertaining whom to arrest, as many of the women had already paid their 30-day immunity fine.<sup>101</sup> While the five-dollar fine system worked well for both the Leadville City treasury and the ladies of the night, a growing negligence to show up to court each month eventually led to the appointment of a special Deputy City Collector, whose job it was to collect fines from prostitutes. In an interview with the Carbonate Chronicle in 1883 Deputy Collector Jack McGill noted that there were,

about 150 from whom I collect fines, but there are over a hundred that ought to be made to pay that cannot be reached. There are several blocks of Harrison avenue, the upper parts, which are occupied exclusively by prostitutes, but they are dead on to me, and whenever they see me coming they close the door; besides, it would be a difficult matter to make a case stick against them, as they are not inmates of regular houses and I have no way of proving their character.<sup>102</sup>

As Deputy McGill noted, regular houses of prostitution and the girls who resided within them had frequent, at least monthly, interactions with the city's governing officials, trading fine money for the ability to practice their trade in Leadville. While prostitutes were compelled to pay the fine and did not have a say in the money's use, they were nevertheless societal contributors as the money they paid into the city treasury was used to support many of the city's civil projects, including water supply, road upkeep and pay rolling the police and fire departments.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> *Daily Chronicle*, July 21, 1881.

<sup>102</sup> *Carbonate Chronicle*, September 29, 1883.

<sup>103</sup> "City Collectors Reports," *Herald Democrat*, January 4, 1879 - December 4, 1879; January 4, 1880 - December 4, 1880; January 4, 1881 - December 4, 1881; January 4, 1882 - December 4, 1882; January 4, 1883 - December 4, 1883; January 4, 1884 - December 4, 1884; January 4, 1885 - December 4, 1885; January 4, 1886 - December 4, 1886; January 4, 1887 - December 4, 1887; January 4, 1888 - December 4, 1888; January 4, 1889 - December 4, 1889.



The fine system, while the most significant economic contribution made by Leadville's shady ladies, was not their only contribution. A prostitute of relatively good standing, that is to say, a prostitute who plied her trade in a recognized house, could expect to make at minimum fifty cents per "lay," or customer serviced.<sup>104</sup> Depending on the perceived status of the house and the beauty or charm of the lady, the price per fling could be much higher. According to Laura Evens, a former prostitute and later madam of her own brothel, on miner's payday if a girl "didn't average 75 to 80, it meant she didn't have a nice taking way with her. Seperatin' those miners, maybe seventy-five to eighty. Maybe a hundred dollars."<sup>105</sup> Judging by the number of women each month fined for prostitution (as the Deputy Collector indicated, this meant the women belonged to a recognized house) it is fair to assume that while not all women made off so well in an evening, a fair few did. If the supposed financial earnings of Red Stockings, and the actual financial legacy of Miss Mollie May, one of Leadville's leading soiled doves during its first ten years as a city, can be used as a kind of yardstick by which to judge the earnings of well-known prostitutes in Leadville during this time period, then it is clear that soiled doves could just as easily make a fortune as the lucky miner. When Mollie May passed away in March of 1887 she left behind an estate valued at \$25,000, with her diamonds alone being valued at \$8,000.<sup>106</sup> Her home, "one of the most imposing residences in the city" was purchased by Lake county for \$10,000, and became, ironically enough, the county's first court house.<sup>107</sup> While all prostitutes did not necessarily attain the wealth of either Red Stockings or Mollie May, they nonetheless made good money, especially for women in their time. According to the Leadville Daily

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<sup>104</sup>Jan MacKell. *Brothels, Bordellos, & Bad Girls*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 2.

<sup>105</sup> Fred Mazzulla, *Interview with Laura Evens*, May 4, 1951, Tape 4, p. 6.

<sup>106</sup> *Colorado Daily Chieftain*, April 13, 1887.

<sup>107</sup> *Denver Daily Tribune*, March 7, 1879.

Chronicle, some of the most popular jobs for respectable women included working as a dress maker, private maid or chamber maid, Which ranged in pay from all of which averaged a pay from two to four dollars a day. This was a paltry amount when compared to the earning of many sporting women.<sup>108</sup> Though it was quite popular for prostitutes to invest large quantities of their money in jewelry, diamonds, rubies and even gold pieces, they also invested money back into the community, purchasing goods from the local stores and even investing in the mines.<sup>109</sup> High ticket items such as dresses and hats were one of the more prominent items on which prostitutes spent their pay. One millinery and dress making establishment in 1879 claimed that " they rarely sell a lady's suit for less than \$100, and that \$25 is about an average price for a lady's hat."<sup>110</sup> While such items would have exceeded the pay grade of many respectable working women, they would also have been a largely unnecessary luxury item. For high-class prostitutes working in Leadville's parlor halls, however, these items were a necessary part of their profession, especially given the importance placed on outward appearance and decorum in houses which catered to the city's elite residents and distinguished visitors. In addition to purchasing clothing items, prostitutes and the houses in which they worked were good customers of grocery shops, apothecaries and liquor dispensers, spending vast sums on items which were necessary for the lavish dinners and drinks served to guests as well as the medicines and mixes prostitutes used to clean their clients, protect themselves from venereal disease, and keep unwanted pregnancy at bay.<sup>111</sup> As economic contributors, prostitutes were as active as any a member of Leadville's society, paying "taxes" and contributing their money back into the burgeoning economy in ways

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<sup>108</sup> E.F. Irey, *A Social History of Leadville, Colorado, During the Boom Days, 1877 - 1881*, 149.

<sup>109</sup> Bishop, 328.; Fred Mazzulla, *Interview with Laura Evens*, May 4, 1951, Tape 4, P. 1.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Fred Mazzulla, *Interview with Laura Evens*, May 4, 1951, Tape 4, 1951.

which were unique to their particular profession.

With a laissez-faire approach to governing the bawdy sections of its society, Leadville and its sporting gals moved along through the 1870s and 1880s in relative harmony, mutually benefiting from their tenuous but profitable arrangements. The live and let live mentality which seemed to permeate Leadville in its early years created a social climate in which prostitutes, though occasionally vilified, were afforded some levels of respect and even admiration which allowed them to participate more fully in society. In addition to adding to the colorful character of the city, they also left permanent marks on the land in the form of mine names. Some prostitute's close and intimate contact with investors, city officials and nouveau riche miners allowed them to exert some influence on the affairs of the city, though in an indirect manner.<sup>112</sup> Further, all prostitutes and houses of prostitution actively participated in the economic flow of the city through their buying power, spending the money earned in Leadville on local goods such as dresses, spirits and medicines. But there were some, like Mollie May, who were also noted for contributing parts of their earnings to local charities.<sup>113</sup> Despite all this, by far the most tangible contribution prostitutes made to Leadville society in its early years was the vast quantities of fine money which filled the city's coffers. While prostitution could not be taxed as it was an illegal institution, the fine system nonetheless acted as such, and in return for paying the five-dollar a month fines, prostitutes could expect to be allowed to practice their trade with relative liberty. The city, on the other hand, was able to utilize the money in its treasury to supply water to Leadville, build and upkeep the road systems and provide payroll for the police and fire department. As moral figureheads, prostitutes in Leadville did almost nothing to contribute. The

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<sup>112</sup> Bishop, 328.

<sup>113</sup> *Colorado Daily Chieftain*, April 13, 1887.

economic boon and the colorful character which these bawdy ladies brought to the city however, were instrumental in shaping Leadville's early society.

### **The Moral Climate Shifts Again, 1890 to 1905**

As the 1890s rolled onward into the early 1900s the moral climate of the United States again shifted as the crusades of the abolitionists gained steam. In the midst of growing moral panic about the enormous perceived rise in prostitution, white slavery and venereal disease, progressive reformers stressed the necessity of government interference, and called upon Congress to create and facilitate a commission to investigate the causes of the great social evil and the extent to which it polluted America's cities.<sup>114</sup> When the federal government failed to act, reformers took matters into their own hands, organizing vice committees across the nation. Backed by medical literature of the time, which issued severe and graphic warnings of potential venereal disease epidemics, these reformers sought to expose the shady agreements which had long allowed prostitution to flourish in many cities. By exposing the government and law officials double-dealings, the reformers sought to force municipalities to uphold their anti-vice laws. A mixed coalition of feminist agitators, religious moral reformers and scientific social hygienists, the progressives who spearhead the anti-vice campaigns understood prostitution in a myriad of ways, and had very different motivations and attitudes towards solving the great social evil.<sup>115</sup>

While these reformers could not entirely shake the moral repugnance with which their earlier counterparts viewed prostitutes, they did emphasize the role of social and economic

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<sup>114</sup> Rosen, 14.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 16.

factors in aiding in the rise of prostitution as a profession and encouraging the moral downfall of those women who chose to engage in it. For female reformers especially, prostitution came to symbolize the subjugation and degradation of women by a social, economic and political system run by and for men. Within this framework prostitutes came to be viewed more as victims of circumstance rather than outright moral deviants.<sup>116</sup>

With this in mind, progressive's campaigns centered on trying to oust the back-door dealings of city governments, who they believed levied their political power in ways which allowed them to benefit from the well-being of the vice district. While these reformers won several political victories and police departments across the nation cracked down on vice, most of the actions amounted to little more than show to assuage the growing pressure placed on them by the crusading reformers. What the reformers unwittingly enacted was a shift in the system of prostitution itself. Prostitutes who had previously sold their services in a relatively open and unorganized marketplace were increasingly forced underground by stricter police repression. Madams who had previously run their own operations were increasingly forced to work as a manager for the men whose financial backing and protection gave them considerable control over prostitutes and their business. Ironically, it was not the prostitutes who benefitted from the results of the reform crusade. The increased enforcement of anti-vice laws allowed businessmen who owned the property or houses in which the prostitutes practiced their vocation to charge exorbitant rent fees, while city's law enforcement officers, government officials, and coffers grew wealthy from increased fine collections.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 76.

## The Leadville Reaction

Leadville and its citizens, while affected by the changing moral climate and growing reform movements permeating from the East, were on the whole far less concerned about the effects of the great social evil on the city. As prostitution had been a visible fixture of the town since its boom days, citizens were far less shocked to suddenly "uncover" the hotbed of vice amongst which they lived. As usual, Leadville was slower to import the reform movements and their agendas to the city than their Eastern counterparts, and applied their principles in ways which mirrored, but also undermined, the principles on which the movements were built. Leadville's prostitutes continued to contribute to their society much the same as in earlier years, through the five-dollar fine system and their buying power. However, localized circumstances combined with the changing attitudes towards prostitution affected both the amount, and the manner in which the soiled doves could shape their society.

Although the five-dollar fine system in place in Leadville had never been a voluntary contribution to the city's coffers on the part of prostitutes, it was viewed as a tax of sorts and was generally enforced, serving to maintain congenial relations between the law and the ladies of the lamplight. As waves of reform washed over Leadville pressure mounted against the city to enforce its anti-vice laws. In 1895 Judge Frank W. Owers was appointed judge of the district court of Leadville and advocates of enforcement found an ally.<sup>118</sup> By the end of 1895 the city of Leadville had collected a total of \$14,647 in fines from prostitution and gambling, more than doubling the amount collected by the city just four years prior in 1891.<sup>119</sup> Three years later Judge

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<sup>118</sup> *City Directory of the City of Leadville*, (Leadville: Democrat Printing Company), 1885, 37.

<sup>119</sup> "Annual City Collectors Reports," *Herald Democrat*, January 4, 1892 and January 4, 1896.

Owers was still not pleased with the enforcement of Leadville's anti-vice laws, and during a 1898 trial in which several of Leadville's police officers and the City Marshall were called for testimony, Judge Owers publicly accused the entire department of allowing houses of prostitution, dance halls, gambling halls and saloons to remain open past midnight, breaking a Colorado state ordinance. Threatening to charge Marshall Pierce and his deputies with neglect of duty, Judge Owers scored a point for reform activists, while at the same time revealing the inconsistency behind words and actions which governed Leadville's system of fines.<sup>120</sup> His statement itself illuminates the fact that houses of prostitution were still quite active in the city. While he chastised the Marshall and his officers for neglecting their midnight closing duties, Owers admonitions in no way directed the officials to address the fact that the houses of prostitution were open, and thriving enough to merit being an issue at midnight. In a 1901 statute passed by the Lake County District Attorney F.E. Purple, a slip in verbiage further highlights the half-hearted attempts to truly end prostitution through heavy suppression. The statute, which reads

that all saloons, bars, dance halls, variety shows and houses of ill fame or other place in the county of Lake, state of Colorado, where spiritous, vinous, malt or other liquors are kept, sold, bartered, exchanged or given away, shall be closed and kept closed from 12oclock midnight until 6 in the morning everyday...

again acknowledges the existence and activities of houses of prostitution, only looking to enforce the ordinance which decrees their midnight closure.<sup>121</sup> While prostitution contributed more to the

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<sup>120</sup> *Aspen Daily Times*, December 20, 1898

<sup>121</sup> *Herald Democrat*, August 8, 1901

city's coffers than ever before due to the increased enforcement and policing of the five-dollar fine, it did not stop the soiled doves from continuing and perhaps even escalating the amount of money they pumped back into Leadville's economy in the form of material purchases and outings. Interviews with Lara Evens, a prominent courtesan in Leadville from 1895 to 1900, reveal that despite the supposed growing public intolerance for prostitutes, Leadville's painted ladies mixed freely with respectable society, attending masquerade balls, enjoying the revelry of the circus and indulging in ice skating and drinks at the famed Leadville Ice Palace, which lasted through the winter of 1896.<sup>122</sup> Further contributing to the economy of Leadville, Laura and other parlor girls frequently purchased new dresses and hats, and occasioned at least once to have portraits taken by a local photography studio.<sup>123</sup> The parlor houses in which prostitutes plied their trade were also contributors, often purchasing delicacies to serve as dinner to guests who had "bought the keys," renting the entire house out for private parties.<sup>124</sup>

### **Exerting Their Influence**

Prostitutes did more than simply pay into Leadville's economy during this period. Patronized by important figures including mine investor Eben Smith and Arthur Nichols, the right hand man to D.H. Moffat, prostitutes "had plenty of good backing up there in Leadville".<sup>125</sup> Thought to be one of the richest men west of the Mississippi River, Mr. Moffat was a large owner in the First National Bank of Denver and Senator Chaffee's partner in mining investment, and owned many of the homes in Leadville which were rented out for the expressed purpose of

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<sup>122</sup> Fred Mazzulla, *Interview with Laura Evens*, May 4, 1951, Tape 4, P. 7.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Beach, 106.

<sup>125</sup> Fred Mazzulla, *Interview with Laura Evens*, Tape 7, p. 61 -62.



vice.<sup>126</sup> Mayor of Leadville from 1895-1897 Mr. Samuel D. Nicholson, was also noted as frequent patron of the ladies of the lamplight.<sup>127</sup> While these men have been linked directly to prostitution through the women's own accounts, they were but a few of the many influential and wealthy businessmen who were rumored to have deep financial investments in the business of vice. Due to the extensive financial investments in prostitution many "high moguls" frequented Leadville's houses of assignation, and in this way, high-class prostitutes often held the attention if not the ear of very influential men. While the overall influence they were able to exert in terms of society shaping decisions is up for debate, their influence was at least enough to earn them the occasional free pass for breaking laws which had no connection to their profession as prostitutes.<sup>128</sup> Further, the connections some prostitutes had with men in high power positions allowed for them to exert considerable influence over the hire and fire of regular working men, especially those who had connections to the mining business. As prostitute Laura Evans recalled, her connection with Arthur Nichols, gave her the power to get men who had lost their job in the mines re-hired again simply by calling or visiting her beau and giving him the name of the miner and the mine in which he worked. In this way, Laura's work as a prostitute allowed her to be a "little mother to them all."<sup>129</sup> In addition to providing pretty company to high profile men, and occasionally bending their ear, prostitutes in Leadville during the great 1896 mining strike filled another unique and important social utility.

### **The Bustle**

#### **Prostitute's Engagement with Leadville's Largest and Most Violent Mining Strike, 1896**

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<sup>126</sup> Bishop, 255.

<sup>127</sup> Fred Mazzulla, *Interview with Laura Evens*, Tape 7, p. 61 -62.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 74.

By 1896 miners in Leadville had unionized, creating strong blocks of workers who could levy their usefulness as laborers against the mine bosses to demand better working conditions, shorter days and higher pay. After the dramatic drop in silver prices in 1893 due to the panic surrounding the repeal of the Purchasing Act of the Sherman Law, mine owners cut the pay of their employees from three dollars a day to two dollars and fifty cents try and make up for their losses.<sup>130</sup> By 1895 however, the city's mines had recovered, and Leadville was once again one of Colorado's most productive mining camps. By 1896 ninety percent of Leadville's miners were represented by the Cloud City Miners' Union (CCMU), and they demanded that mine owners return their pay to its previous three dollars a day standard.<sup>131</sup> On June 19, 1896 mine owners rejected the union's request and the CCMU unanimously voted to go on strike until their demands were met. Rather than meet with the miners to discuss a negotiation, the mine owners, David H. Moffat and his partner Eben Smith present among them, closed all of the mines in Leadville, doubling the number of unemployed miners. On August 13, the mine owners presented the union with the "August Offer," which promised to pay miners \$2.50 when silver prices were below 75 cents per ounce, and \$3.00 when it was above that. When the CCMU refused the offer mine owners began to import strikebreakers from Missouri. Tensions intensified between the unemployed and disgruntled miners and the mine owners and their strikebreakers, and on September 20th miners attacked the Coronado and Emmett mines, setting off dynamite and exchanging gunfire with the mines' guards. By morning five men were dead and the state militia was called in to the city.<sup>132</sup> While there were no more extensive violent

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<sup>130</sup> *Herald Democrat*, November 10, 1893; William Philpott, *The Lessons of Leadville Or, Why the Western Federation of Miners Turned Left* (Denver: Colorado Historical Society, 1994) 43-44.

<sup>131</sup> Philpott, 2.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.

outbursts, the strike turned into an extended stalemate. The mine owners continued to operate the mines using strikebreakers or "scabs" from Missouri, while the miners continued to stake out the entrance to the mines, using threats, wayward shots fired and shows of arms as a means of intimidation and sabotage. The unemployed miners sought to block payments to the scabs and thus dishearten them to the point of quitting, forcing the mine owners to engage in negotiations with the union. The strikebreakers, fearing for their safety rarely came out of the mines. It was under these conditions that prostitutes came to be indispensable to Leadville's mine owners in 1896.

To keep the entrenched strikebreakers happy, mine owners who had investments in houses of prostitution implored the working girls to ply their trade below ground. With a large majority of the miners unemployed, business slowed down for Leadville's shady ladies and a few were willing to put up with the harassment of the unemployed miners in order to make money. However, the company of women could not serve as a substitute for pay, and as the strike wore on one mine in particular struggled to get payment to the scabs down in the mine. The Maid of Erin was one of Mr. Moffat and Eben's principle mine holdings, and for weeks the owners had not dared to take payment up for fear of retribution from the striking miners who were camped with rifles in the hills surrounding the mine's entrance. In interviews with her attorney in the years preceding her death, Laura Evens, a prostitute working in a parlor house which Mr. Moffat allegedly owned, and the mistress of Mr. Moffat's right-hand man, Arthur Nichols, recounted volunteering herself to ride the money up to the mine. Hiding the twenty-five thousand dollars due to the strikebreakers in the bustle under her skirts, Miss Evens rode her horse through a flurry of bluff shots fired into the air around her by the resentful miners. Making it to the Maid of Erin unscathed, she delivered the payroll, effectively dashing hopes of the striking miners that

they may be able to force negotiations.<sup>133</sup> For her troubles, Mr. Moffat thanked her in person, shaking her hand and passing her a hundred-dollar bill exclaiming that he was "awfully proud to meet the young lady."<sup>134</sup> While this occurrence is the only one of its kind on record it seems likely, given the circumstances, that prostitutes plying their trade in the mines could have worked similarly, carrying money and messages from the mine owners, who often doubled as investors in the profitable business of vice, to the strikebreakers and their superiors camped within the mines.

Mine owners, businessmen and other wealthy financiers in the American West were often heavily invested in the vice districts of boom towns, and maintained a shadowy symbiotic relationship with the madams, pimps and prostitutes with whom they worked. This common, though little publicized practice originated in cities along the eastern seaboard, New York principle among them.<sup>135</sup> As prostitution was illegal in most established cities in the United States during the late 19th century and early 20th century, landlords quickly found that they could rent houses to madams and pimps at higher than normal monthly rates, and even make a cut of the profit off of the prostitution business in return for their silence and complicity about the kind of business which their renter was running. Further, these wealthy businessmen could use the brothels as social gathering places in which to entertain and impress their male guests, conduct business discussions and relax. In this way, up-scale houses of prostitution provided a gentleman's club atmosphere. In this setting, men could enjoy female companionship, the fellowship of male peers, gambling, and fine wines and liquors without fear of social

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<sup>133</sup>Fred Mazzulla, *Interview with Laura Evens*, May 4, 1951, Tape 4, p. 8 - 10.

<sup>134</sup>Fred Mazzulla, *Interview with Laura Evens*, May 4, 1951, Tape 4, P. 2.

<sup>135</sup> Timothy J. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920*. (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University), 1987, 275 - 92.

stigmatization or obligations.<sup>136</sup> Because upscale parlor houses held their clients anonymity in the highest regard, meetings and social gathering at brothels were in many ways ideal, and alleviated men from the rigidity of societal niceties and rules. The doubled use of the brothels as both a private social gathering space and a means of revenue in the form of heightened rent meant that businessmen who maintained these relationships with the realm of vice were also heavily invested in its well-being.

While this was an acknowledged practice, it is nevertheless quite difficult to trace these shadowy connections in legal records. As upstanding businessmen and respectable members of society, outward and open connections to houses of prostitution would have been scandalous and stigmatizing if recognized by the public, and thus the relationship was carefully hidden. Although some of these relationships can be uncovered combing through records, others have come to light through personal interviews with prostitutes themselves. In a series of interviews with her attorney, former prostitute Laura Evens revealed the shadowy connection and investment both mine owner Daniel Moffat and one of his partners and investors, Eben Smith, had with the brothel in which she worked in Leadville.<sup>137</sup> To avoid direct association with the prostitution business, Mr. Moffat used his right-hand man, Arthur Nichols to collect rent payments from the landlady, a Mrs. Broroned.<sup>138</sup> His partner Eben Smith, on the other hand, utilized the brothel as a gentleman's club, and at least once "bought the key" to the house, renting the entire place for a private party in which guests enjoyed the company of all the house's

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<sup>136</sup> Estelle B. Freedman, *Their Sisters' Keepers: Women's Prison Reform in America, 1830-1930*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), 1981, 255.

<sup>137</sup> Fred Mazzulla, *Interview with Laura Evens*, May 4, 1951, Tape 4, p. 7.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

inmates, a dinner of quail, and cigars and whiskey.<sup>139</sup>

### **Prostitutes in the Polls**

In 1893 Colorado became the second US state to enfranchise women by popular referendum.<sup>140</sup> However it was not until 1900 that prostitutes became an important constituent in the political race. Touted as "The Greatest Political Machine in the World," in 1900 the Tammany Hall political machine was a democratic force in New York City known for its willingness to "buy votes," using immigrants and prostitutes as voting blocs to support their cause. Similarly, when a democratic-populist alliance formed to run for control of Leadville's municipal seats, the alliance was often referred to as a "Tammany Hall Machine".<sup>141</sup> This had little to do with the party alliance, rather, it gained its moniker from the constituents who the alliance sought to register. Capitalizing on the enfranchisement of Colorado's women, the alliance and its supporters sought out prostitutes throughout the city, sweeping the notorious State Street and the surrounding hotbeds of vice in an effort that was decried as registering "the scum of humanity."<sup>142</sup> The move, while exposing the willingness of the politicians to buy votes, had the unintended consequence of providing prostitutes another way in which to affect change within Leadville. By registering to vote in Leadville's upcoming election, prostitutes signaled their willingness to trade their legally recognized vote for the ability to continue their practices in the city under the system of legal permission maintained through the fine system. Prostitutes

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>140</sup> Laws passed at the Ninth Session of the General Assembly of the State of Colorado. Denver: The Smith-Brooks Printing Co., 1893, pp. 256-258. [LCCN: 01-023535]

<sup>141</sup> *Herald Democrat*, March 24, 1900.; *Herald Democrat* December 5, 1900.

<sup>142</sup> *Herald Democrat*, March 17, 1900.

however, weren't unique in their form of political engagement. During this time period political parties, Tammany Hall chief among them, would secure jobs and housing for newly arrived immigrants, who in turn were expected to vote for their benefactor's party.<sup>143</sup> While this may not scream of personal agency as it is likely that monetary bribes were issued, prostitutes nonetheless utilized their rights as citizens of the state of Colorado to vote in such a way that protected their livelihood. In spite of the portrayals of Leadville's newspapers, prostitutes had participated in democracy in much the same manner as their fellow citizens, placing their vote behind the political party that promised them the greatest support and benefits. In this way, prostitutes in Leadville were active participants in shaping the political climate of their city.

As Leadville became more firmly established as a permanent city it was steadily populated by more women, children and families, who brought with them many of the principles which governed eastern society. In attempts to bring heightened civility to their new locale, these respectable women launched campaigns, gradually but forcefully applying the eastern societal values and ideals, albeit in a more lackadaisical manner, to Leadville and its citizens. Progressive reform campaigns and moral panics regarding venereal disease and white slavery which blossomed in urban centers like New York and Chicago affected the way in which Leadville dealt with its own vice, and pressure mounted as citizens called on the city government to enforce its laws. While this affected the ways in which prostitutes could contribute to Leadville's society, it did not have the restrictive effect many reformers had hoped. Although prostitutes did not maintain the respect which earlier society had afforded their counterparts, they were

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<sup>143</sup> Reginald H. Pitts, *Suckers, Soap, Locks, Irishmen and Plug-Uglies: Block 160, Municipal Politics and Local Control*. *Historical Archaeology* 35, no. 3 (2001): 96.  
<http://www.jstor.org/colorado.idm.oclc.org/stable/25616941>.

nonetheless able to continue to ply their trade in the city, and as a result of stricter police enforcement of the anti-vice laws, contributed more to the city's treasury than ever before. While the correlation between prostitute's economic contributions and civic engagement were not always clear, one hundred percent of the fine money the ladies of the night paid went to the creation and maintenance of the City's municipal utilities and services. Further, despite the turning of the moral tide, the influence which prostitutes were able to exert on their patrons was by and large undiminished, and during Leadville's mining strike, they proved to be an unusual yet effective aid in mitigating the conflict. Further, Leadville's prostitutes joined numerous other Coloradan men and women after 1893 in exercising one of their greatest civic duties, voting. While their vote was arguably tainted by corrupt politics, they nonetheless were active participants in shaping the political outcomes of the 1900 municipal election in Leadville. Overall, what the soiled doves lost in public respect they made up for with larger economic contributions to the city than ever before and aided in shaping the outcomes of individuals' professions, political races and social conflicts in Leadville from 1890-1900.

### **More of the Same, 1905 - 1915**

Moving into the twentieth century the efforts of progressive reformers and their anti-vice campaigns across the United States began to pay off. Public outrage steadily mounted as connections between police departments, wealthy businessmen and city governments with prostitutes and districts of vice were uncovered in Eastern cities. Vice commissions, which had begun much of their research in the first few years of 1900 published reports of their findings. The reports further connected the spread of venereal disease to prostitution, linked poverty and immigration as causes of prostitution and announced that the public's greatest fear was true - men



did in fact buy and sell young girls into the sex industry.<sup>144</sup> In response to the ripple of angry shockwaves Federal, State and Municipal governments passed laws which sought to address the corruption and vice which appeared to lurk everywhere. One of the most notable laws which was born of the moral backlash was the White Slave Traffic Act, better known as the Mann Act, named after its author, Illinois congressman James Robert Mann. Passed in 1910, the Mann Act prohibited interstate or foreign transportation of "any woman or girl for the purpose of prostitution or debauchery, or for any other immoral purpose."<sup>145</sup> Enacted during a time of great social change and moral panic, the act was meant to assuage the fears surrounding white slavery. However, nativist sentiments of the time period allowed for a broad application of the law and a loose interpretation of the term "immoral purposes," and many criticized it for being an instrument of racism.

While the majority of the nation reeled from the discovery of such complicity to vice, in Leadville there seemed to be very little surprise regarding the connections between the law and vice districts, as the symbiotic relationship which they shared was neither new nor hidden. Though reformers and moral crusaders were duly outraged, and the city's law enforcement officers were pressured into stricter enforcement of the letter of law, Leadville's municipal government and its prostitutes continued to operate in much the same fashion as they always had. In 1907, 1908 and 1909 the City's Police Court Dockets showed that the city continued to charge its soiled doves five-dollars per month for practicing prostitution. Each month all prostitutes, with the exception of Madam Mabel Clarke, were referred to by first name only, suggesting a

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<sup>144</sup> Chicago Vice Commission. *The Social Evil in Chicago; A Study of Existing Conditions with Recommendations by the Vice Commission of Chicago*. (Gunthrop-Warren Printing Company, 1911).

<sup>145</sup> 61st Congress of the United States, *White Slave Traffic Act*, December 21, 1909, House Resolution 12315.

familiarity and order between the police court and the sporting girls.<sup>146</sup> While the city of Leadville made some measures towards restricting the tenderloin and its range within the city limits in January of 1907, by June of 1908 the City Council had rescinded the action allowing the district to spread out once more.<sup>147</sup> In 1911 Leadville's City Marshall McKay announced that

I have notified the women of State street that the city ordinance regarding prostitution will be enforced after today. When asked by a reporter 'Are you going to close up State street?' the Marshall replied 'No, the present move is simply to keep the evil within reasonable bounds. Prostitution cannot be prevented. But we can prevent it being flaunted.'<sup>148</sup>

Despite the moral outrage which engulfed the nation and the flurry of lawmaking efforts that followed, Leadville had fallen back to its old understanding of the relationship between prostitutes and the municipality. Whether prostitution could not be prevented or the law and city simply did not mind its continued existence as part of the fabric of Leadville's society is unknown. Regardless, despite the passing of forty years, many reform movements, several laws and thousands of citizens, Leadville continued to allow the practice of prostitution within the city, so long as it was not put on display. Interestingly, beginning in 1910 Leadville's Police Court Dockets have almost no mention of crimes or fines paid in regards to prostitutes or houses of ill fame.<sup>149</sup> Further, no mention is made in the City's newspapers announcing the monetary amount collected in prostitution fines by the city collector, and prostitutes themselves seem to

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<sup>146</sup> *Police Court Dockets*, City of Leadville, 1907.

<sup>147</sup> *Herald Democrat*, June 5, 1907

<sup>148</sup> *Herald Democrat*, February 19, 1911.

<sup>149</sup> *Police Court Dockets*, City of Leadville, 1910 - 1918.

have disappeared entirely from the pages of the papers.

By the time the Colorado state legislature passed Senate Bill 88, a Nuisances Act regarding houses of prostitution, in 1915, Leadville's papers, jail reports and court dockets all showed that prostitutes, once one of Leadville's greatest sources of "taxable" income and intrigue, had seemingly left Leadville altogether. The act deemed all houses or buildings "used or resorted to as a public or private place of lewdness, assignation or prostitution" a nuisance. The law had far greater consequences than any of its predecessors, prescribing a fine of "not less than two hundred dollars nor more than one thousand dollars, or by imprisonment in the county jail for not less than one month, nor more than six months, or by both such fines and imprisonment."<sup>150</sup> The harsh terms of its penalties may have accounted for its success in effectively shutting down the industry in Colorado once and for all.

Despite the "official" end to prostitution in the State of Colorado by the passing of the 1915 Nuisances law, the profession and its ladies continued to live on in Leadville and many other cities in Colorado as they had throughout the passage of every prior legal attempt to abolish the practice. While the City Jail Register stopped listing prostitute's fines, old timers in Leadville today pass down tales which suggest that the fine system, while abolished legally, continued to thrive for years afterward. In fact, in 1969 Leadville still maintained The Pioneer Bar, perhaps the last remnant of the Colorado brothels of old. An interview conducted with John Healy by the Lake County Public Library in 2013 reveals the lasting legacy prostitution left on the City of Leadville, and gives interesting insight into the resident's reactions to Ma Brown, the last

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<sup>150</sup>General Assembly of the State of Colorado, *Nuisances Houses of Prostitution: An Act Concerning Nuisances, and Providing Penalties and Procedure with relation Thereto*, April 12, 1915, Senate Bill 88, Ch.123, 360-363.

Madam of Leadville. Taking Office as District Attorney General of the 5th Judicial District (Clear Creek, Lake, Eagle and Summit County) in 1969, John Healy knew of the presence of Ma Brown and the transactions which took place at the Pioneer Bar. Concerned about how he should treat the situation, Healy gathered extensive information from Leadville's residents, asking what they knew of the establishment and its proprietress and what they thought he should do about it. Overwhelmingly, he heard praise and was told to leave Ma Brown and the Pioneer alone. Asking a rather prominent community member his pointed opinion on the matter, the gentleman told Healy that he "considered Ma Brown to be one of the outstanding businesswomen of Leadville."<sup>151</sup>

Despite much of the social turmoil which engulfed the United States during the start of the twentieth century, Leadville's municipal arm, if not her population, maintained much the same relationship it had always enjoyed with its prostitutes. Officially, prostitutes continued to enrich the City's coffers until 1910. Thereafter they disappeared almost entirely from the municipality's legal, judicial and print journalism documents, and while prostitution was effectively stamped out by the 1915 state anti-prostitution law, the stories recounted by many of Leadville's older residents paint a different picture. The continued existence and use of Leadville's the Pioneer Bar into the late 1960's speaks to the fact that prostitution in Leadville lingered on far past its prescribed closing date. Further, the feelings of Leadville's modern day citizens in regards to the bar and its proprietress's existence nod to the quiet acceptance and laissez-faire style of enforcement that characterized Leadville through its height as a mining center.

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<sup>151</sup>John Healy, Interview by Lake County Public Library, May 30, 2013.

## **Conclusion**

The United States underwent a period of rapid change from 1870 to 1915, transitioning through various cultural and ideological shifts, each of which understood prostitution's causes, effects and overall place in society in a variety of way. While the shifting cultural, economic and political tides which affected the United States at large also affected Leadville, the notions were often slower coming, and less deeply embedded into the society. Because of this, prostitution flourished in Leadville despite changes which greatly affected the profession in urban centers in the East.

While paying into a fine system may not strike the modern person as a display of agency, this study would argue that by paying into the five-dollar fine system from 1870-1910 prostitutes in Leadville were able to maintain a certain degree of freedom within their society. Through the fine system prostitutes contributed to the growth and development of Leadville in ways that most people were unaware of. The fines they paid allowed the city council to commission infrastructure projects such as the building of roads, drainage ditches and sidewalks which benefitted the society as a whole. Without the revenue from prostitution, it would likely have taken the city years and significant raises in citizens' taxes to pay for. In this way, Leadville progressed in terms of growth and development faster than was otherwise possible. Because of this, it can be argued that prostitutes were perhaps one of the main contributors to the infrastructure of the city. By working with the legal apparatus of the city, prostitutes were able to practice their profession despite its repression and eventual illegality throughout Leadville's

boom days, moral crusades and sweeping reform movements. This ability to practice in turn afforded them relative material comfort, avenues for social mobility and the ability to contribute to and shape their society in many ways common to all citizenry, but also in ways unique to their marginalized position as prostitutes. In addition to consistently being one of Leadville's greatest sources of revenue, prostitutes also made significant steady contributions to the economy of the city. The nature of their profession both required and allowed for them to purchase luxury items such a gowns and hats which most respectable working girls could not afford and further did not need. The houses in which prostitutes plied their trade also contributed to the market, purchasing liquors, spirits and delicacies to serve high power guests. While prostitutes' greatest contributions to Leadville's society were undoubtedly financial ones, they were also able to contribute to the political climate of their society by way of the vote. Once women were enfranchised in Colorado prostitutes became an important voting bloc. Whether by method of bribery, promises of protection, or by simply showing a willingness to turn the other cheek in terms of prostitution, politicians actively sought to engage prostitutes as a voting bloc to achieve their own ends. More subtly, prostitutes were able to enact small but significant changes through their favorable connections with wealthy clientele. In times of social upheaval such as the 1896 mining strike, prostitutes like Laura Evens utilized their unique liminal position between the mining moguls and common miners to shift the tenuous balance of the strike.

In a variety of ways, Leadville's ladies of the night proved themselves to be active citizens who worked both with and outside of the law. Their financial contributions alone ranked them, as a group, far above most of Leadville's respectable citizens, and the city owes much of its early infrastructure projects and municipal payrolls to them. As both striking individuals and as a class of working citizens, Leadville's prostitutes utilized their unique niche to not only

sustain and better their own existence, but also to help shape their frontier society during a tumultuous period of social and cultural transformation in the United States.

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