

From [Soiled Doves: Prostitution in the Early West](#)

Introduction

The "soiled doves" and red light districts were as much a part of the early West as the piles of mine tailings, canvas shacks and garish saloons that dotted the landscape. These ambitious ladies were caught up in the excitement of the frontier and the high demand for their professional services. Although their numbers were low in 1849, the ranks of prostitutes grew steadily as other American women came West and newcomers arrived from nearly every country in the world.

Some of these colorful, if not socially acceptable, "ladies" were dressed in black silk stockings with scanty costumes, others in elaborate gowns with jewels. They brightened the drab frontier with their female chatter and drove the male population wild. Few if any, however, thought to look for the real woman who lay beneath the coldly-warm exterior and forced laughter.

Who was she, this seductive, often rowdy woman, who started her work as the sun's last rays began to disappear? Was she a captive who was caught in the web of poverty, a victim of circumstances, or a willing participant in her profession? Most likely, she was all of the above.

Many of these women came from other countries to escape poverty. They usually had no funds and the majority were uneducated and did not speak English. There were few ways in America for these women to survive. With luck they could marry, or work as a domestic—the alternative was to become a prostitute. Since prostitution paid better wages and the work seemed more exciting, most of the women chose the latter. They didn't have time to consider the consequences.

Most American women of the frontier became prostitutes because they were caught in a situation over which they had no control. Western employment, for the most part, belonged to the predominantly male work force. Regardless of their education, the majority of women were offered only the most menial and lowest paid work. For a young woman who was all alone, over-worked and desperate, prostitution was the logical solution. If she chose the menial job, she was still not respected by society. "Community's did not hesitate to use the needed services of these women, while simultaneously castigating them for their poverty." So why wouldn't they turn to prostitution!

Several women enjoyed being a prostitute. It was their chosen way of life and they became willing participants in the world's oldest profession. These women were devoted to their work and enjoyed the material benefits and freedom they thought it offered. Unfortunately, their dreams of wealth seldom became reality—most ended up in the gutter, with a sick, abused body.

Almost all prostitutes had unsavory reputations. In the West, however, there were many kind, generous ladies of easy virtue. These women spread a silken web of good deeds that sparkled in the wilderness. They contributed to the local charities, hospitals and churches and were the first to lend a hand during a disaster, or offer assistance to the survivors.

During a flu epidemic in Salt Lake, Utah, a local madam had her "girls" go into the town and help take care of the ill. The girls were willing, and many lives were saved because of their tender care.

Mollie May, a madam of Leadville, Colorado, was known for her many kindnesses as well as her many indiscretions. When one of the local children was orphaned, she faced the outrage of the "proper" citizens and adopted the child. When Mollie died, she left enough funds to see that the child was cared for.

The soiled doves were good for the western economy and helped support the community. They spent their money locally, buying fancy clothing, expensive wines and ornamental jewelry. These women paid for business licenses, when required, and fines when they were arrested for breaking the law. The lawmen and ladies usually lived in harmony. There were seldom any special accommodations for women in the jails, so they learned to coexist—it was easier on the taxpayer.

When historians recognize the businessmen of the early West, they often overlook the other entrepreneursÑwealthy madams like Josephine Hensley, Veronica Baldwin and Mattie Silks. These women, and others like them, provided housing and employment for hundreds of women who otherwise would have been on the streets. They displayed a fine sense of business acumen, and played a significant role in the economy of the 19th century. In return, these ladies were ignored, refused admittance to the commercial clubs, and never accepted into society. They were even denied the protection of the law due to the nature of their business.

Although she was socially unacceptable, the western prostitute blended into the fabric of the frontier with an easy familiarity. This book brings to life the early West and the colorful ladies of ill repute who helped to tame an otherwise uncivilized land.

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