

Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places

In the western frontier of 1849 there were only two women for every hundred men, as the rush for gold lured many a prospector away from families and homes in search of the rumored riches out west. Soon, more women followed, looking for the same freedom and opportunities sought by men. These women found countless lonely miners, trappers and gamblers willing to part with their hard-earned money for services only a woman could provide. Some women who found themselves on their own were able to work as a laundress or a cook, but by 1870 more than half of the employed women in the west were plying their trade in the 'oldest of professions' – prostitution.

Regardless of the town they worked in, the paths that led these ladies to become 'public women' are echoes of one another. A sizeable number of women were orphaned or abandoned during their youth, unable to find a suitor or widowed into poverty, and compelled by circumstance to seek food and shelter at the doors of brothels and bordellos. For countless 'sisters of misery,' their life was difficult and brief, as they had little hope to find respectable employment after working in a parlor house, a job that aged their bodies rapidly. The story of so many 'soiled doves' are collectively sordid and similar, lacking the significance to be recorded as individuals, but their contributions to the settlement of the western states cannot be overlooked.

The business of running a brothel rose and fell alongside the mining operations that supported many western towns, but even in the smallest of encampments a man could most always find a woman to keep him company for a short while. Frontier towns and mining camps were not known for the decorum or refined behavior of their inhabitants, and Eastern Oregon was no exception. Most of the towns along the route of the Oregon Trail, such as Pendleton, The Dalles and Baker City are still home to historic buildings that contain many small rooms, the former 'cribs' of these long-forgotten women.

Not many women who worked in this industry ever saw the opportunity to write about their experience as a prostitute for the historians who would later document their lives. But in Lincoln, Nebraska, one madam did keep journals from her life as a public woman, and hoped to educate people about the misery and exploitation of prostitutes.

Josie Washburn spoke for innumerable women in her statements

Our women have absolutely no friends outside of their world... No flood of pity will rush into the souls of good people for our benefit... As long as men desire the services found at parlor houses there will be men who solicit women for such services.

Source: Pistol Packin' Madams: True Stories of Notorious Women of the Old West by Chris Enss. Globe Pequot, 2006; Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery: Prostitutes in the American West, 1865 – 90 by Anne M. Butler, University of Illinois Press, 1987; Soiled Doves: Prostitution in the Early West by Anne Seagraves, Wesanne Publications, 1994;