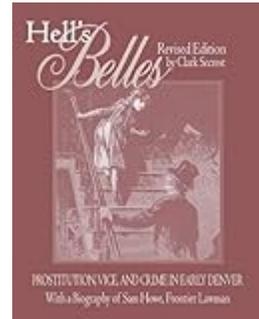




**Clark Secrest.** *Hell's Belles: Prostitution, Vice, and Crime in Early Denver, with a Biography of Sam Howe, Frontier Lawman.* Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2002. 392 pp. \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87081-633-8.



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## Lust and Gore in the Mile High City

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Readers furtively picking up Secrest's *Hell's Belles* hoping to satisfy prurient tastes will be disappointed, but only slightly. The author discloses virtually everything about the inner workings of Denver's early vice operations, excepting graphic description of commercial sex acts themselves.

Clark Secrest, recently retired editor of *Colorado Heritage*, discovered long-forgotten scrapbooks of newspaper stories, compiled over nearly forty years by Denver detective Sam Howe, that documented virtually every aspect of vice in the Queen City between 1883 and 1920. The author made good use of them. His opening chapter traces the long career of Howe, who joined the Denver police force in 1874, then later became a detective. Howe was, by virtually all accounts, upright, dedicated, and honest; these characteristics were in remarkably short supply in local law enforcement during these years.

During Denver's first quarter century, maintaining morality and any sense of decorum in the brawling, lusty frontier town was virtually always an iffy propo-

sition. Secrest describes the debauchery of lonely miners and others passing through Denver in voluminous detail. He quotes at length newspaper descriptions of bawdy houses, from the sumptuous quarters of renowned madams such as Mattie Silks and Jenny Rogers to the most squalid "cribs" located a few blocks farther north along Market Street. The book probes the origins and motivations of some of the rapid transformation of many innocent girls into "brides of the multitude." According to Secrest, prostitution provided one of the few economic "opportunities" for single women in a harsh frontier environment. Unmarried women insisting on keeping their virtue intact had few other choices beyond poorly paid domestic work as nannies and maids, or even more dreary jobs as shop girls, seamstresses, or, perhaps, cigar makers. Not surprisingly, many of them eventually slipped into lives of degradation.

However, prostitution was but one of the author's topics. Gambling was another attraction in the Queen City, as sharp-eyed bunco artists exploited every chance to separate miners from their hard-earned gold. Howe's newspaper accounts included vivid descriptions of every

possible con game.

While many game operators were dishonest, a few gamblers survived, even prospered, for decades. One of the most famous was Edward Chase, who allegedly ran scrupulously honest games in several elegant establishments and regularly entertained many of Denver's most influential leaders.

One of the worst scourges afflicting the Mile High city in the early years was bad booze. Some of Denver's suppliers sold reputable liquid refreshments, but others dispensed potions so dangerous as to resemble poison. In the early years, police made more arrests for public intoxication than for any other transgression. Secrest also provides ample documentation of violence in early Denver. Newcomers were initially amazed to read about nearly daily shootings on the streets; within days, many of them had gotten used to it and were no longer being surprised to hear shots ringing out. Stout branches of trees along Cherry Creek frequently served as hoists for the objects of vigilante justice.

According to Secrest, by the early 1880s, Denver's vice district had a reputation so widespread that it ranked third in notoriety behind only San Francisco's Barbary Coast and New Orleans's Storyville. Visitors to the city could even purchase guidebooks to the various entertainments offered...not that they needed them. Most of the city's seamiest attractions were within a few steps of Union Station, and none but the most nave visitors could fail to understand what they represented.

Residents and decision makers in Denver tolerated the tenderloin district for many reasons. Vice was generally good for the local economy. Many men came to the city specifically to partake of its "entertainments." When in town, they often spent lavishly on other goods. As long as madams conducted their business discreetly, and "crib girls" did not advertise their availability too crudely, authorities indulgently looked the other way. Public officials had good reason to appear oblivious, as their palms were invariably well-greased. Denver's politicians and police were among the most corrupt in the nation. For decades, there were very few honest cops on the force, and some patrolmen were as depraved as the criminals they allegedly pursued.

Some good citizens objected to the Saturnalia of vice

and corruption. Every few years, reformers, usually led by churchmen, or the few denizens of Capitol Hill who never visited the brothels and opium dens of market Street, tried to shame public officials into "cleaning up" the city. In such cases, even the most cynical city councilmen and police chiefs ritualistically voiced "shock" and "outrage" at "discovering" the very conditions from which they so handsomely profited. They would conduct highly publicized "sweeps" of gamblers, prostitutes, and drunks. The "cleanups" usually lasted a week or two, or until newspaper editors lost interest. For a few days, even weeks, the madams and bunco artists would lay low, until the "reform spasms" petered out. Within a month, often less, it was back to business as usual. Not until World War I, and Prohibition, would the lights in Denver's tenderloin district begin to dim, and public officials in the Queen City had very little to do with it.

Secrest has written a very interesting and useful book. It is packed with information and vivid details. There are surprises. Interspersed among tales of degradation and woe are occasional vignettes showing outbreaks of compassion and generosity within the ranks of those normally most cynical, even brutal. In addition to perusing vast amounts of primary source material (chiefly the Howe scrapbooks), the author familiarized himself with relevant scholarly literature. Although the text is generally free of scholarly analysis, the author often provides needed context in his footnotes.

There are weaknesses. There are far too many lengthy block quotes, many of which are basically repetitive. In addition, organization is largely absent. There is very little thematic development, and chapters sometimes meander aimlessly, mixing tales of gambling, drinking, violence, prostitution, political corruption, the losing of souls of minor girls, vocal outrage among the "finest" citizens ... and then repetitions of similar deprecations. Nevertheless, Secrest has performed a valuable service. The book is accessible to lay readers as well as scholars.

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