

Way We Were
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Milk of the Poppy

We are all looking for a way to escape the stresses of life, a way to erase the tough times and forget the hauntings of our past. Life wasn't much different in Park City in the late 1800s. Mining wasn't a glamorous job; unless you were on top, it was a dirty, dangerous and almost always a fatal occupation. Miners died from diseases, made little pay, and worked long hours. Saloons and bars provided that escape for the community by giving them a safe house, a place where they could drink, be merry, and forget all the dreadful things going on in their lives.

However, saloons weren't the only place that one could escape to and forget their troubles. Quite possibly one of the oldest continuously used natural drugs in the world, opium, has flourished and still to this day is an important part of life. Opium has been viewed in both a negative and positive light since its earliest known reference in 3400 B.C. Mesopotamia. It has been used as an anesthesia, an anti-depressant, an illegal drug, and as a base for pharmaceutical drugs. The use of opium in Park City during its earliest days is not unheard of; however, it was not as accepted as alcohol or tobacco.

Opium comes from the poppy flower pod. A sticky white liquid also known as "milk of the poppy," opium after being processed tends to be found in a powder form. The drug came west with the Chinese, during the building of the transcontinental rail line, and thrived in newly founded towns along the way. Chinese immigrants not well liked or well treated by others living in the same community, banded together and built their own mini-towns most commonly known as Chinatowns. They had their own restaurants, Laundromats, groceries, saloons, and opium dens. Opium dens in Park City were not advertised as saloons were since it was illegal to sell or use opium. Many legitimate businesses in Chinatown were merely a front for the opium parlors.

The Park Record printed several articles underlining the severity of opium and the pain that it can cause individuals. Many arrests have been made throughout the years in Park City involving the use of opium and even some large drug busts have been made. One such bust happened on July 10, 1915 in Chinatown, at a Chinese grocery store. Federal officers from Salt Lake City found nearly fifty pounds in powdered opium, large amounts of paraphernalia, and \$2500 in cash. This article explained the great lengths owners went to in order to fool police, *"The den was found fitted with four bunks for the repose of opium smokers. These were in a room extending back under the hillside against which the shack occupied by the Chinese was built. Numerous playing cards smeared with opium were regarded as evidence that a retail trade had been engaged in. The usual means of retailing the drug in small quantities to smokers is by means of placing it within the fold of a playing card."*¹

The allure of the Wild West had its hold on millions, and once living that dream most needed to find a way to try and forget their misadventures.

¹ Park Record, July 10, 1915 – Opium Confiscated



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Caption: Shacks in Park City's Chinatown are a good representation of the buildings opium dens were housed in.

Credit: Park City Historical Society & Museum