

Way We Were
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Park City's Red Light District
Chris McLaws, Museum volunteer

Our series on women's history would be remiss not to touch upon prostitution. It was a fact of mining town life that some women had no choice but to sell their bodies for a living.

Rachel Beulah Urban was a brothel madam and one of Park City's most well-known characters. Born in Ohio to Irish immigrants, it's likely that Rachel was a prostitute in her younger years. She was 25 and had already been married and divorced when she first came to town with her only surviving child, a baby girl named Florence. About nine years later, in 1898, she married George Urban, a local miner and carpenter.

Rachel had a big heart, giving generously to the poor and needy. She was a large woman, weighing about 200 pounds, with a peg leg and a pet parrot that swore at passersby from the front porch. As a madam, Rachel took good care of her girls, which is likely how she got her nickname "Mother Urban." She wanted them to be cultured and educated. They weren't allowed to walk the streets and if they broke the rules, she bought them a one-way ticket on a train out of town.

In most western mining towns, red light districts were adjacent to the railroad. This was true for Park City. In the 1890s, the red light district was near the train station on Heber Avenue (now Zoom Restaurant). In 1907, many Parkites protested its presence so close to homes and businesses. The city forced the district further east up what is now Deer Valley Drive. It's likely George Urban put his carpentry skills to work building the sixteen "houses of ill repute" often called "the Row" or "the Line."

Mother Urban's house was at 346 Heber Avenue, near the corner of Swede Alley. Called the "Purple Parlor," it had lace curtains and fancy furniture. Miners came for socializing, drinks, and gambling. There was no charge to visit the girls on the main floor. If the miners went upstairs, they paid \$2.50. It was \$10.00 to stay the whole night. At the time, most miners made about \$3.00 a day. According to historian Cheryl Livingston, "Mother Urban always held a Christmas party for [bachelor miners] and it was considered a respectable place where they could gather...The mining company's owners seemed to regard Rachel Urban as providing a valued and much needed service."

The city was aware of her business but didn't want to shut her down, as it was profitable for them too. Each month, Urban would walk up to City Hall and pay her fines: \$40 for herself as madam and \$20 per prostitute.

In 1933, at age 69, Rachel Urban died of stomach cancer. She was buried in the Park City Cemetery. In his book *Death and Dying in Old Park City*, Gary Kimball noted, "she was honored with one of the most impressive funerals in Park City history." Funeral expenses totaled \$515, a small fortune in the era of the Great Depression.



Image ID: uncatalogued, no number

Credit: Park City Historical Society and Museum, Raye Ringholz Collection

Caption: Rachel Beulah Urban, seen here in an undated, rare photograph, was one of Park City's best known madams.

Sources:

Kimball, Gary. *Death and Dying in Old Park City*. Park City: Tramway Books, 2005.

Livingston, Cheryl. "Mother Rachel Urban." In *Worth Their Salt: Notable but Often Unnoted Women of Utah*, ed. Colleen Whitley. Logan: Utah State University Press, 1996.

MacKell, Jan. *Red Light Women of the Rocky Mountains*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2009. See page 315.

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