BAS 283 Red-Light District Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Butte’s long-lived red-light district represents a loss to which many would say “good riddance,” but like it or not, it was a vital element of Butte for more than a century.

No records describe the early ramshackle red-light area in Butte’s gold-rush days of the a860s and in the growing town of the 1870s. As Butte became a populous, settled community, the services provided by ladies of the evening were in increasing demand, as was the case with every service. By 1884 the district was centered on East Park Street, but as businesses took over that area, the district migrated a block south to Galena Street.

In 1888, using the euphemism for brothels on the Sanborn fire insurance maps, at least 8 “female boarding” establishments could still be found on Park Street, but at least 56 single-story cribs were in business on Galena and Wyoming Streets. A concerted effort by city fathers about 1890 to push the district as far as possible from the city center drove it just one more block to the south, to Mercury Street.

Prostitution and brothels were made illegal in Butte in 1890 - illegal but tolerated so completely that brothels operated openly in Butte until 1982.

By the peak of everything in the 1910s, Butte’s district rivaled San Francisco’s Barbary Coast and New Orleans’ Storyville in repute and numbers. Estimates vary, but it is likely that at least 1,000 women, and maybe as many as 2,500, worked as prostitutes in conditions ranging from elegant parlor houses to ramshackle cribs. There were a few concerted attempts to shut the district down, such as one in late January 1911, but the papers reported by the end of February that things were quote “back to normal.”

Important parlor houses on Mercury Street included the Windsor, where madame May Malloy famously threw out reformer Carrie Nation when she came to Butte in 1910, the Victoria, and the Dumas. The Dumas, built in 1890, is the only surviving parlor house in Butte, and it’s probably the longest-lived surviving house of prostitution in the United States. It finally closed down in 1982 when the last madam, Ruby Garrett, was arrested for tax evasion. Across the street, the Blue Range building, once owned by US Senator Lee Mantle, represents the only surviving example of street-facing brothel architecture in Butte.

Venus Alley, between Galena and Mercury Streets, held the back entrances to many parlor houses as well as some cribs. The Windsor’s last madame, Beverley Snodgrass, alleged that her failure to pay protection money resulted in a city-government sponsored fire that destroyed the business in 1968.

14 South Wyoming, operated by “Blonde Edna,” was in business until the 1970s. Today part of that property is a small park, known by only a few as “LaCasse Park” in memory of Edna La Casse.

As writer Edwin Dobb has said, "Like Concord, Gettysburg, and Wounded Knee, Butte is one of the places America came from." Join us next time for more of Butte, America’s Story.