

Transcript of *What'sHerName* Episode 2: THE SINNER Pearl DeVere

[00:00 - 05:00]

Olivia Meikle: So, picture this.

Katie Nelson: Okay.

OM: It's 1896, you are a wealthy, powerful, well-respected businessman living in the American West. Perhaps you've made your fortune in gold, perhaps you're a banker

KN: Do I have really good facial hair?

OM: [laughs] Probably.

KN: Okay.

OM: You're looking for a good time.

KN: Mm hmm.

OM: Now, if it's 1896, and you are in the western United States, you want to be at Pearl DeVere's Old Homestead in Cripple Creek, Colorado.

[theme music]

OM: I'm Olivia Meikle.

KN: And I'm Katie Nelson.

OM: And this is *What'sHerName*.

[theme music]

OM: No one has heard of this now. I would guarantee that probably almost none of our listeners have heard of Pearl DeVere.

KN: I have never heard of her.

OM: At this point in American history, she is the most famous madam in the United States. Now Pearl DeVere was outstanding at her job. She not only ran her house, she *owned* her house, which was extremely unusual. Usually brothels were owned by men, and run by women. She owned her own parlor house, as it was called, and was well known, not only for

her own beauty, but for the exceptional quality of everything in her house. The food, the music, the company, the other men, and of course the women. And if you were anywhere within reach of Colorado, you would make your way to Cripple Creek to pay a visit to Pearl.

KN: Like a pilgrimage. You are making a special trip to this special place.

OM: Yes. She is described over and over again as a striking woman. She, in my opinion, was one of the most brilliant business women that I have ever read about in American history. The way she ran her business is really amazing to me. I'm deeply impressed by Pearl DeVere.

So this interview that I'm going to play you was recorded at Pearl's Brothel, which has been turned into a museum called the Old Homestead.

Charlotte Bumgarner: My name is Charlotte Bumgarner, we're at the Old Homestead House in Cripple Creek, Colorado - the home that Pearl built.

OM: Charlotte Bumgarner is the curator, the president, the savior of the museum. And I think you'll be able to hear in her voice throughout this interview how much she loves this house and how much she loves Pearl herself. She talks about her not like this interesting distant historical figure, like someone who she has known and loved dearly. And it brings a different feeling to this museum than I think what you would expect visiting a brothel museum. So, we don't know a whole lot about Pearl, but Charlotte has tracked down some information.

Charlotte Bumgarner: Well, she's kind of elusive, she hasn't given us all of her secrets - but what we do know is she was born in Indiana. She came to Denver first and was a prostitute in Denver. I think I found recently, part of the reason she became a prostitute and moved is because she had a baby. And that would have been a real no-no back then. She's recorded to be in Denver under the name of Mrs. Ed Martin, but there's no proof she ever married Ed Martin. I believe that's because when a woman moved to a new town with a baby, she said she was a widow and called herself "Mrs" something.

But I don't know much else about her, unfortunately, other than... I love her. She still is a presence in this house. She tells me things once in a while. But other than that, I just know that she was very beautiful, very loving, and very giving.

In 1891, gold was discovered here in Cripple Creek, and so she ended up here, we believe, in the winter of 1892 the best we can tell, and had a house of prostitution here on the lot where we sit now. It burnt down in 1896, and she rebuilt the house we're sitting in that fall in 1896.

OM (to KN): So this fire that she mentions, it isn't just Pearl's brothel that burns down. It's all of Cripple Creek. There's a really good little pamphlet for sale in the museum that describes what happened. I don't know if this is true, but it's delightful - that on April 25th, 1896, one of the girls from the Central Dance Hall got into a fight with her man and knocked over a

gasoline stove. So that fire goes from the dance hall, leaps from building to building - these are all wooden buildings in this quickly-built Gold Rush town - and burns down all of Myers Avenue. So all of the red light district, all of the bars and saloons and dance halls, anything 'sinful' is gone overnight -

KN: Woah.

[04:57]

OM: ...and perhaps the town was excited about this - except four days later, another fire starts, and all of town that is left is burned to the ground. So: Bennett Street, the main avenue, the stock market, everything is gone. There are few buildings left in the main part of town, fire-damaged. Everything is gone. We have some amazing pictures that I'll put on the website of this complete decimation of the town in four days. Half of the town is homeless.

So that seems amazing that a town would bounce back from that, but they were, they just jumped right back in. And they said in two weeks, most of the red light district was up and running again in 'temporary structures.' Pearl took that opportunity to upgrade her establishment. She went to Europe to pick up new business tips, comes back...

KN: Wow! That seems just really surprisingly kind of... cosmopolitan approach?

OM: Yeah, I mean, she was from this well-to-do background. She was able to be classy and elegant. Her establishment caters only to the wealthiest and best of men, you can't just walk in.

Charlotte Bumgarner: You know, the fire was in April. She traveled to Europe a while before she got the house built, and bought a lot of the furnishings over there and shipped them here. And we do have a very interesting room upstairs. It was the Viewing Room, where the gentleman could pick their final girl. And she seen that in France, and that's the reason she built it in her house.

OM (to CB): Ahh, I wondered about that because I've never seen that in an American parlor house before.

Charlotte Bumgarner: Right, yeah. So, she did a lot of really neat things.

OM: Yeah, no wonder the men wanted to be here.

Charlotte Bumgarner: Right.

OM: It was very European.

Charlotte Bumgarner: Yeah, and I think we had a cook that was supposedly fabulous. Known for having the best champagnes and the best liquor around. She did not spare

expense for her men either. But of course they were required to pay extra to drink here and gamble here.

OM: Oh, really? An extra fee applies?

Charlotte Bumgarner: You know, again, the good business woman she was.

OM: Right, of course.

Charlotte Bumgarner: The front of the house has a very rare white brick, not painted white.

OM: It's not painted white? I thought it was painted white.

Charlotte Bumgarner: It is painted white, but it's white under there. It was originally white. Why somebody painted it, I don't know, but to take paint off of brick is kind of hard.

OM: Oh yeah. It's a really distinctive building too. So next door now is a casino, which doesn't look original?

Charlotte Bumgarner: Oh no, no, no. It was built in 1992.

OM: So what would have been next door? More parlor houses?

Charlotte Bumgarner: Yeah, more parlor houses. It was five city blocks, but it looks like the more richer ones, the more elegant ones - because in the echelon of prostitution, parlor houses, which this is a parlor house, is the higher echelon. There was six of those in this town. If you see a picture of the street, they were really crammed together. They would have been butted up to each other. Women back then sent their men down here, after they'd had a baby or two. And good women didn't use birth control...

OM: Well, and at least here there was a doctor, right? and the girls were seeing a doctor often?

Charlotte Bumgarner: Well, all the girls on this street - like I said, we had 350 of them at our highest number - were required to go once a month to a doctor, and take that health certificate to the city hall and buy a license.

OM: So it was a legalized prostitution?

Charlotte Bumgarner: Well, it wasn't legalized. The license was actually a fine - but the city controlled it, I guess you would say. Because they tried to chase the girls away and that didn't work.

OM: Right, so it's a fine that's actually a license.

Charlotte Bumgarner: Right, yeah.

OM: “We don't mind as long as we're making money off of it too.”

Charlotte Bumgarner: Right, yeah. We had girls down the street that were as low as a quarter [Olivia groans], so that's where the miners were. And I think we probably had every price range in between.

OM: Right, there'd be somebody to fill every market. And you said the opera house was across the street?

Charlotte Bumgarner: Yes.

OM: And it's not here anymore.

Charlotte Bumgarner: Unfortunately, it got torn down in the 40s. It was large enough they held the first indoor rodeo in it.

OM: [laughs] In the opera house?!

Charlotte Bumgarner: In the opera house. I just wish I was here back then so I could have saved more buildings. I saved this one!

OM (to KN): So when Charlotte says she saved that house, she's not exaggerating. When the house was made into a museum, there were some irregularities in the paperwork, and that made it possible for a casino that was next door to buy the museum with the promise that they would keep it as a museum and not touch it. Which they didn't do, they kept threatening to take it over. They used a few of the back rooms of the museum for quite a while as office space. They used some of the furniture.

So Charlotte was in this sort of battle with this casino to try to save the house. And she finally prevailed, but the energy that she has put into saving not only this museum, but into drawing attention to Cripple Creek, trying to restore it, trying to bring visitors to the city, is really amazing.

[9:47]

Charlotte Bumgarner: It's been a museum and part of the reason I think it's been saved, because it's been a museum since 1958. We'll be celebrating 60 years this next year as a museum. It was about eighteen years of struggle, because we ended up being owned by a casino, and they kept threatening... But six ladies here in town formed a non-profit to save it. And I'm the only one original from that six. But we're still saving it - it is now owned by the non-profit. Yeah, it's a beautiful home. Wish more people would come see it. We don't have the visitation we need.

OM (to CB): I mean, I've seen a lot of historic home kind of museums, but this is really beautifully done. You can tell it's done with loving care.

Charlotte Bumgarner: Right. [Laughs]

OM: And you mentioned you just found the original wall color in the front parlor?

Charlotte Bumgarner: Yeah, you know, out of tragedy because we had a radiator break and flood the front parlor, where the girls met the gentleman every evening. It flooded, took some of the old wallpaper, which we knew was from the 50s, off and down through all the layers, we came up with the original color and stenciling in that room. So it's - it's actually very fabulous and I can't wait to do some more of the rooms. [Laughs]

OM: Yeah, oh, it's a very trendy color right now, it's sort of an apple-y green.

Charlotte Bumgarner: Well, when the lady who redid the stencil for us, she goes, 'This is really fashion-forward. Pearl was ahead of her time.'

OM: Now, Cripple Creek itself is really interesting. I think some people know Cripple Creek from the song. I had only ever heard the song and didn't realize it was a real place.

[fiddle and banjo playing "Cripple Creek"]

OM (to KN): It's a gold mine town, that started just as gold fever is starting to peter out in the rest of the country, everybody's giving up. Gold is discovered in Cripple Creek and people who are still hopeful that something can happen all rush to Cripple Creek, way up in the mountains all by itself, to try to get a piece of the action.

At its heyday, Cripple Creek was the financial capital of the country.

KN: Really?!

OM: Yeah, I know. How have we never - how is this possible?

KN: What? Because of the gold?

OM: Because of the gold.

OM (to Charlotte): I was reading the plaque up there on the building, that 20 million shares of mine stock traded every year at the stock exchange here? That's mind boggling.

Charlotte Bumgarner: Mind boggling. Well, my next mission in life is to get Cripple Creek more on the map, because people do not realize that there was more gold taken out of Cripple Creek than Alaska and California's gold rushes combined.

OM (to CB): What? Wow.

Charlotte Bumgarner: And I just learned this year that there wasn't a single millionaire out of California's gold rush that actually made it from gold. We had at least twenty-four.

OM: Wow! Yeah, because I mean the running joke that's actually true is that the miners didn't make any money, the people who sold them shovels made the money. But here they were actually making money? Wow.

You know whenever I mention Cripple Creek to people they say, "I thought Cripple Creek was in Appalachia." Like everyone knows, I think, the song - and somehow, feels like that should be in Appalachia.

Charlotte Bumgarner: No, we're at 10,000 feet up here in Colorado Rockies. And we were the greatest gold rush of them all, but most people don't know that. If you really look back in history, we were the financial center of the US.

OM: Yeah, because they found gold here sort of toward the end of the gold rush, right?

Charlotte Bumgarner: Right.

OM: It was - everyone had burned out.

Charlotte Bumgarner: Everyone else had burned out, yeah. We were 1891 when the rush started. Bob had found it earlier but nobody believed him.

OM: And how long did Cripple Creek continue to be an important center?

Charlotte Bumgarner: 'Til about 1916, that's when gold prices were dropped so they couldn't afford to mine anymore. And our gold is different than anywhere else in the world, it has vertical veins instead of horizontal veins, and it looks different than anywhere else in the world.

OM: Wow so you can identify -

Charlotte Bumgarner: I guess you can test gold and know where it comes from? Cause that's how some recent miners got caught stealing gold from the mine. They took it to California to sell it, but when it was tested they could tell it was from here.

OM: Really?

Charlotte Bumgarner: Yeah. [Laughs]

OM (to KN): Cripple Creek really was the real deal, and people were making their fortunes overnight.

KN: Where is it in Colorado?

OM: It is near Colorado Springs. It's still a pretty productive gold mining town, even today. The red light district in Cripple Creek is called Myers Avenue. And Myers Avenue went from the really posh parlor houses like Pearl's, that were on one end of the street, and then as it went down, there were smaller ones, and then the 'cribs.' And then as it goes down into Poverty Gulch, which is the valley at the end, that would be where the Black women would be practicing their craft.

KN: [amazed] In Poverty Gulch.

OM: Poverty Gulch. So Pearl had a really grand vision for her business, she did not want this to just be any parlor house. This was posh, selective, extremely luxurious, the men who came to this parlor house had the ultimate experience in everything. She went all out and it worked. Only the wealthiest, most well-connected, respectable gentlemen were allowed in her establishment.

[15:50]

Charlotte Bumgarner: She was the madam of this house but she did take men on as johns or tricks, however you want to say it. But she was very picky, only took the richest, most prominent ones. A man to visit this house had to give an application anyway, and he was approved both for being able to afford it and of being a good character. They wouldn't let riff-raff in this house.

OM (to CB): There was a literal application?

Charlotte Bumgarner: Oh yes, they had to write a letter of application. [laughter] Pearl was an amazing business woman, first off I think.

OM: Yeah. Just from a marketing perspective. Suddenly you're asking permission...

Charlotte Bumgarner: Right. [laughs] First you have to get permission, make an appointment to come see Pearl's house. And after that Pearl unfortunately didn't get to enjoy her house very long, as she died June 5th of 1897.

[Music]

OM (to KN): You had to submit an application!

KN: Wow.

OM: to come to her parlor house, in advance! Weeks in advance. You have to send a letter of application, you have to send your bank statements proving that you have lots of money.

KN: That's incredible.

OM: You have to have letters of introduction stating that you are a good person, that you're a gentleman, that you're not a known rogue, that you will be well behaved, that... I mean

KN: Wow.

OM: These are only the top of society, bankers, business owners. If you're a hard rock miner who just made a million dollars, you are not getting in. It's so brilliant to me at every step of the way, how clever she is in her marketing. She flips the power dynamic from the minute they walk in the door. They're asking *permission!* She's made it so clear you are entitled to exactly *nothing* in this house. We *might* allow you in. Her girls make \$250 a night!

Charlotte Bumgarner: To spend the night here it was \$250, which equals almost \$9,000 in today's equivalencies.

OM (to KN): Well-paid miners are making \$3 a day.

KN: That's incredible.

OM: And that is just the company of a girl. You pay extra for liquor, you pay extra for food, you pay extra to gamble, you pay extra to use the front parlor. She has this beautiful house, it is extraordinarily well furnished - she's bringing things from Europe, she's got a piano, she has chandeliers that... I mean, it is so beautiful and fashion-forward. It was cutting-edge stuff that she had here, and probably picked up from her time in Europe.

So at every step, she makes sure that every detail is to her advantage. The marketing that she comes up with is amazing, just this process of 'please pick me.' *If* you get to visit, you are one of the special chosen ones - and it becomes a marker of social standing. And so she immediately makes her front parlors the best place to do business. 'Any man in this room has been pre screened for you.' You know they're wealthy, you know they have access to all the best people. She has curated these men to give *herself* this huge store of power.

KN: Yeah, wow. So presumably, I guess, if you think you're somebody, you might apply just to see what happens? *Could I get in?*

OM: Yeah! She has made herself the arbiter of society. A madam of a brothel in Cripple Creek, Colorado is deciding who's *in* and who's *out*.

KN: Yeah.

OM: It's just astonishing, it's so brilliant. And she continues to trade on those things. She makes sure that she decides what is sophisticated. She is always perfectly dressed, she's wearing really extravagantly expensive clothes from Europe, and men are buying her these clothes. She is just constantly reinforcing how important she is.

[18:41]

Charlotte Bumgarner: Pearl had a black stallion that she rode, but she also had a team of black horses that pulled her carriage around town. The girls were not to go up on Bennett [Avenue] any day but Monday morning - but I kind of suspect Pearl broke that rule more than once.

OM (to CB): Right. And so there was like a city schedule? No girl -

Charlotte Bumgarner: Yeah the girls of Myers Avenue were only allowed to go uptown on Monday morning from 8-11. That's when the good ladies were doing their laundry. Oh yeah, it's still in the books. So I can't go uptown...

OM: [laughs] Really? Ha, how fascinating. So she seems to sort of enjoy that, you know - I mean again, brilliant marketing - a great horse, riding around in your \$20,000 dress.

Charlotte Bumgarner: To be fabulously dressed, have the finest clothes. And of course the girls at this house were expected to dress accordingly. This house, Pearl and her girls, dressed in gowns. They didn't dress in what you see pictures of girls of... right, they didn't do that here. I mean the girls could go across the street to the opera house, so they had to know how to handle themselves and be elegant.

OM: Right. So you're allowed in the opera house but not on main street?

Charlotte Bumgarner: Well, it was on Myers Avenue, so how could they keep them out?

OM: [laughter] Right, exactly.

Charlotte Bumgarner: This is a funny fact, that there was five city blocks - and just to the west of us on Third Street, the name changes to Masonic. And that's 'cause the good ladies didn't want to live on Myers [laughter], y'know. So they changed the name.

OM (to KN): The opera house is actually, the center of Cripple Creek society - is across the street from Pearl's parlor house. So all of the posh women have to come to Myers Avenue to the opera, and the girls can go to the opera. So they are mixing with the high society types at the opera, much to the disgust of the women of town.

KN: Mm-hmm.

OM: So one of the things that I was really struck with doing this research about her is that... there's this myth of madams in the West, that makes them the conscience of the town. They're the 'hooker with a heart of gold,' right? They're the good woman who is watching out for poor people, and she's standing up for the miners, and she's helping the children, and she's feeding the poor. And that she is this really sort of important functionary in the operating of any of these towns.

And in this case, it's absolutely true. And I really did not expect that. And as I'm doing research into other madams in this time, it really seems to be a story that is true! That these women were filling holes in the social services of the time, when there was nothing - if your husband is killed in a mine accident, you're just dead, you know? Unless your family is willing to bring you home or whatever. You just are *out*, you have nothing, you probably have nowhere to live because it's a company town...

And Pearl really was jumping in and helping these women. She would make sure that these miners' wives and children would be able to get back to their people, or she is taking in people who need some place to be. She's giving large amounts of money to the church. She is running soup kitchens. She is functioning as the social services of the town. And so she was an outsider, she was not allowed - literally *not allowed* - on Bennett Avenue except for a certain time of day, she is not getting invited to functions, but she is a hugely important member of Cripple Creek Society. She is as important as most of the government officials or the people making the decisions for the town. She has a huge amount of sway over what's happening, and who is being taken care of, and how people are being treated.

Charlotte Bumgarner: I think probably in the back of their minds they appreciated her, but they would've never said that in public, and they would've never acknowledged her in public. But you can find from some of the old writings, that she was really known, who she was. Often, like I said earlier, described as this striking woman. And I'm sure some of the miners' wives who she helped loved her, and definitely some of the miners did. But overall did the town accept her? No. Is she an absolute legend in this town today and everybody wants to talk about her? Yes!

OM (to CB): Right. [Laughs]

Charlotte Bumgarner: But in her lifetime, I don't think she'd probably have that acceptance. Overall, she wasn't - wouldn't have been invited to attend one of those churches, or to a city council meeting or something I believe.

OM: Right, she's funding the churches - but can't step foot inside.

Charlotte Bumgarner: And my understanding is Spencer Penrose - do you know who that is?

OM: I don't.

Charlotte Bumgarner: He was one of our first millionaires, who later built the Broadmoor. He was a gentleman that came here, best we can tell, and his wife refused to give money to the churches because Pearl had. [laughter]

[music]

KN: Yeah, it seems like the churches would have... that's a pretty tricky decision whether to take that money or not.

OM: And that they make those kinds of calculations. Apparently she was able to donate more to the church than Penrose was because... you know, they could've returned Pearl's money and taken his...

KN: Yeah.

Charlotte Bumgarner: Well, and I had an interesting thing the other day that the priest from the Episcopal Church showed up the other day wondering if we knew - he said, "We've heard that most of the prostitutes were widows." And he said, "So why didn't the town take care of the widows? Why did they have to come here?" Now, I don't believe most of them were widows, I think most of them were younger runaways - but I can see how a widow may have ended up here. And I know Pearl and some of the other women in town would have taken care of that type of person. And he thought it was really strange that it seemed like the churches and the benevolent societies in this town weren't.

OM (to KN): And Charlotte doesn't have the information to answer that - but I think that's a very interesting question. And I hope he sits with that uncomfortable question for a while. *'Why isn't the church helping these women, and what is the church doing right now to help women who are in a similar situation and need some help?'* Very often women are faced with extremely limited options in a crisis situation. And that, of course, for a time immemorial, prostitution has been one of the solutions for women when they are in a crisis.

KN: Mm-hmm. But I also think that, even if it's not the last desperate saving grace, that is an immensely well-paying job.

OM: Yeah and there's no evidence that it is the last resort, right? Most of these girls seem to have 'made decisions,' not 'been stuck.'

[25:54]

KN: Yeah, we always have been conflicted about that, but in modern America, we're still very conflicted about that. Is that wonderfully empowering? Should we applaud women for making those kinds of choices? Or is that sad evidence of the situation in America that women have to do that? Y'know?

OM: Oh, yeah, it's still one of the major arguments in academic circles. How do we respond to sex work? Do we celebrate the decisions of women to work in sex work, or...

KN: Their ability to choose that and make a lot of money.

OM: Right. The ultimate argument being 'there is no choice there.' That you can *pretend* like you're making a choice, but given the variety of other choices, you wouldn't have made that choice.

It's a very problematic argument because in the course of the argument, you are infantilizing women. And I don't know if there is a correct answer to that. I don't know if there's ever a solution - because are there women who consciously choose this? Yeah, probably. Are there a huge majority of women who are pressured into this against their will? Yes. And so how do you balance those arguments?

And I just give up on that. I think there's no way that you can decide a hundred years ago what was happening. All I can do is be incredibly impressed at how well she did this job. The way that she empowered herself - literally - that she handed herself the keys to all the decision making, that she owns this building, she is not beholden to a man who owns the building. That 'her girls,' as she called them, were incredibly well paid, that they were extremely well treated, at least by her. That by all the standards and all of the stories about her, that she was a genuinely kind, caring, compassionate person to anyone who was in need or in danger, and that she saw her social capital and then used it in ways that were really impressive and really unusual for the time when she lived.

KN: I wonder if some of the reversal of gender roles that she achieved was part of the appeal? Like, might have made it more exciting for men, in a kind of erotic thing. 'You're entering a house of women where women are completely in charge. All of your power is gone, you are no longer the dominant figure.' And in many ways that might have been part of the appeal of it?

OM: Yeah. She's also just brilliant at understanding the male mind.

Charlotte Bumgarner: So men came here and a lot of them already had their favorite girl. But if they didn't, they would tell the madam one or two they were interested in. The viewing room is upstairs - the girls would go up there, get disrobed, so that he could stand at the window, cause it's a viewing window - and pick the final selection.

OM: [Laughs]

Charlotte Bumgarner: Now, there's a lot of people that disagree with me, I don't believe the girls went full nude. I think they were in lingerie, some other people think they went full nude.

OM: Right. So the girls are in one room, the men are in another, through a window?

Charlotte Bumgarner: Yeah. We call it window shopping. [laughs]

OM: That's brilliant marketing!

[Music]

OM (to KN): So, you send your letter, she responds, you literally *make an appointment* to arrive. If it's your first time, or you're not sure, you would make some selections from the parlor and then head upstairs to the viewing window. And you would stand at the top of the stairs, and there's a window inside the house that looks into the bathroom. And the girls are inside the room. I mean, it's so voyeuristically wonderful, like, what a smart woman!

And there is also - I'm not clear on exactly how this worked - but there was a bathtub in the viewing room as well. And there were mirrors in the bathtub, or in the bathtub area - so that if you wanted to you could also have the experience of just watching from all angles while a girl had a bath.

KN: And you just watch it through...

OM: And you just watch it through the viewing window. [laughter] I don't know if this is before an event, or its own event... just these extra services that she has figured out. And then you've made your decision, and you would retire to that girl's room. You would spend the entire night. You'd have dinner, you would drink, you would gamble, you would play some music. Again, all of these are extra - it's extra for dinner. Russian caviar, French wine, all these things coming in on the train. Again - advertising - the big crates of French wine, '*what are those for? Oh, those are for Pearl's.*' Because there were several parlor houses in Cripple Creek, but none were anywhere close to the standards of hers.

[30:28]

OM: So at the height of her fame, Pearl was hosting a party on the behalf of a particularly wealthy patron who was often visiting her. He was throwing a huge party at the brothel for a bunch of people. He had bought her a new dress from France, it's a \$600 dress - again, that's a \$20,000 dress.

[music]

Charlotte Bumgarner: A special gentleman caller was hosting a party in the house that night, which was very common for rich men to throw a big party in this house. And they had an argument, and he got on the train and went to Denver. The party went on without him, 'cause they had already gotten caviar from Russia and flowers from Mexico and French champagne. They weren't going to waste that, so the party went on. So she didn't go to bed 'till probably early early the morning after the argument. And then she woke up - Maude woke up at 10 o'clock the next morning, and found her having difficulty breathing.

OM (to Charlotte): I read that there was some not very well accepted speculation that she may have killed herself, but...

Charlotte Bumgarner: Oh no, there's no way my Pearl killed herself. She wouldn't have killed herself over some man. She just flat wouldn't have done it. Of course, maybe that's just because I worked in her house for 22 years, and I feel that about her. But, no, I think she was too much of a businesswoman - had too much going for herself to have killed herself over a man.

She used to bug me a lot, like there was something she wanted me to know. And finally, one day there was a lady in here who was an intuitive. And she looked at me and she goes, "Do you know that Pearl's death was an accident?" And I said, "Well, I believe so." And she goes, "Yeah, it wasn't morphine, it was some other drug meant to kill Maude." And that has been confirmed by three other intuitives. And since that time, Pearl seems more relaxed and she doesn't bug me.

OM: Do we know who Maude was?

Charlotte Bumgarner: Maude was one of the girls, and that's whose room she was sleeping in. It's very logical that... cause all the girls, even women - "good women," as they called themselves - used morphine almost daily, because it wasn't a controlled substance back then. And there probably was a bottle of morphine on the side of the bed, so the doctor called it a morphine overdose. But it very easily could have been another drug in that vial that was meant for Maude to get, but perhaps not. Yeah, sad.

OM: It was a tragedy either way around. It kind of shattered a lot of people's lives. Because as soon as she died, all of the girls were cleared out of the house.

KN: By whom?

OM: By the police, it sounds like, because they don't own the house. It was this long protracted battle, because everyone assumed that Pearl was really wealthy, but she had spent all of her money to rebuild the house after the fire. And to refurnish the house in a really extravagant style. So when she died, she actually had almost no money. And if she had been able to continue on for a few more years, she probably would have been very wealthy, but it becomes this really complicated legal battle.

Charlotte Bumgarner: All the girls were moved out of here immediately on Pearl's death. They weren't allowed to stay here, so they probably scattered to some other homes or other towns.

OM (to CB): So what happened to the house after Pearl died?

Charlotte Bumgarner: Well, it took quite a while actually to have a settlement on the house because she had no will. Her sister came from Indiana to claim her body, and discovered she was a prostitute and refused to take it.

OM: Right, 'cause she thought she was a dressmaker?

Charlotte Bumgarner: A hatmaker. Pearl had written home and told them she made hats at a millinery shop here in Cripple Creek. So when the sister got here and it said right on her death certificate she was a prostitute, she refused any of things... And supposedly when she was taken to the mortuary, she had dyed red hair, and the mortician tried to get the red out, make her more acceptable for her family. But I guess it turned pink, which would have been -

OM: Well that was her favorite color.

Charlotte Bumgarner: So it was okay. It was quite a long probate situation, and the house was finally sold at sheriff's auction. But it went to a woman that Pearl had borrowed money from. And I believe she borrowed money from this woman to build the house. So it went to that woman who lived in New York. I'm still trying to figure out what the connection is there. That woman turned around and sold it to a man the next day, who then sold it to Hazel Vernon, who was our second madam and the longest reigning madam of this house.

OM: I didn't realize that, so there's another - another woman took over.

Charlotte Bumgarner: Yeah, we actually, I think, had four madams. Pearl was first. And then Hazel bought the house after Pearl's death, and she was here about eight years. And then the next owner we show was actually the woman who was Hazel's housekeeper. I'm pretty sure she wasn't a working madam because she's not a very attractive woman, so...

OM: And did the reputation of the house go down?

Charlotte Bumgarner: Oh no, no. Hazel ran it the same way. Hazel's often referred to as the best prostitute in Cripple Creek ever had. Now, I believe Pearl probably would have been, but she just wasn't here as long, unfortunately.

[35:55]

OM: So after she died, I know that you mentioned she didn't have a lot of money, and I know that she was wearing a really expensive dress that day.

Charlotte Bumgarner: The official story was the gentleman had brought her a \$600 Parisian gown. The sister rejected her, so the girls of this street and some of the hard rock miners she had helped started planning her funeral, but they didn't have the money. Talked

about selling that beautiful gown - but fortunately they didn't have to, because a check of \$1,000 and a note requesting she be buried in that gown was brought to the mortuary.

OM: From the same gentleman?

Charlotte Bumgarner: We believe it to be from the same gentleman. We don't have his signature, it was anonymous. But the logical reason would be that it was him.

This town had to put a cement slab over her grave back in the 60s because the rumor was there was gold thread in this dress, so people were trying to dig it up. That was probably just a rumor, I can't imagine them sewing a dress with gold, but -

OM (to KM): Her funeral is maybe the most well remembered event in Cripple Creek history.

Charlotte Bumgarner: Of course, she was buried in that dress. Beautiful pink dress, pink was her favorite color. She had a lavender coffin, which was pretty unusual for the time. Lots and lots and lots of pink flowers, I'm told. There was every lady from this street and hundreds of the miners, marched with her to the cemetery. But she also had the 40 piece [Elks](#) brass band and four mounted police escorted her to the cemetery, and the crowds are on the street, even women. Some people say the women were there cheering because she was gone. [laughter]

OM: Because she was dead?

Charlotte Bumgarner: Others, I think more - it was more curiosity. They heard it was going to be a big to-do, so they wanted to be there. But yeah, she is the only prostitute that's buried in our regular cemetery with a headstone.

OM: Right, in a church cemetery kind of...

Charlotte Bumgarner: Yeah, most of the other girls are buried up in the paupers' area with no markings, or even outside the fence. So she's got a very pretty prominent - and the town, like I said, she's such a legend, the town bought her a new headstone in the 60s. Her original headstone is up at the other museum. But yeah, it was quite an affair.

Her black stallion pulled her carriage down the street with the seat filled with pink flowers. And he went down the street prior to her casket. The band played all the appropriate music, we're told, up the hill, including "Goodbye Little Girl, Goodbye."

But as they turned for home, the girls started singing and the band started playing, "It'll be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight," which Pearl would have loved. That song was written here on the street by a Black cook. If you look in history books, it said it was written by a man out in New York - that's not true, we have proof that it was written by a Black cook here. And it was sang every night to open up the street, and welcome people to the street. So she would have liked it.

[excerpt from “It’ll be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight” performed by Daniel Henderson and Amanda Setlik Wilson]

[39:28]

KN: So if there really was such a parade and such an event, that seems a testament to how she really was helping the masses or the downtrodden - if all the folks were coming out for this big event, the common folks, presumably.

OM (to KN): Right! The people who will never know her, who will never probably even get to talk to her, really mourn her death.

KN: Because of the ways she was indirectly helping them?

OM: Yeah, and I think there seems to be, in people’s remembrances about her - she seems to have inspired this kind of idol worship of passionate love, from people who only saw her from far away. There’s this beautiful story from a little girl who saw her once across the street and, like, locked eyes with her, once. And she describes this feeling of, like, being utterly thrilled and amazed and delighted, and that from that point on, Pearl DeVere was her idol.

She calls her ‘the focus of her fantasies,’ meaning, like, ‘I could be like her.’ That she just hero worshiped her, she used to sneak out of the house to go and just watch her ride her horse down the street, or see what she was wearing, or just watch her, in a way that seems like they’re witnessing some sort of divine something. And that she seems to be now, still sort of inspiring that same sort of relationship, that same sort of feeling, from the women who run this museum, from the people who are researching her life - that she was the kind of person who just...

KN: Like, worthy

OM: Everyone fell in love with her.

KN: a kind of reverence?

OM: Yeah.

KN: Hmm.

OM: Then also, fun-loving and delightful, and ready to have “A Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight”, played at her funeral. [laughter]

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[credits] Thank you to Charlotte Bumgardner and the Old Homestead House Museum. Music for this episode has been provided by the Earth String Band, the New Hot Five, Amanda Setlik Wilson, Daniel Henderson, and Half Pelican. Our theme song was composed and performed by Daniel Smith.

On our website, you can find photos, links, more information about the bands and performers and books and resources, if you'd like to dig deeper into the story of Pearl DeVere. If you'd like to support more episodes of the podcast, visit our website at What'sHerNamepodcast.com and click on donate.

This episode was edited by Olivia Meikle and *What'sHerName* is produced by Olivia Meikle and Katie Nelson.