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The Death of Madame Mustache: Bodie's Most Celebrated Inhabitant

By
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Folklore remembers Bodie less than other contemporary boomtowns largely because no Bodie resident ever earned the notoriety of Wyatt Earp, Doc Holliday, Calamity Jane, or Wild Bill Hickok. The eastern California mining camp's most celebrated personality was Madame Mustache, a highly regarded card dealer who committed suicide there in 1879.(1) The *Bodie Morning News* reported her death on September 9:

A Suicide—Yesterday morning a sheep-herder, while in pursuit of his avocation, discovered the dead body of a woman lying about one hundred yards from the Bridgeport road, a mile from town. Her head rested on a stone, and the appearance of the body indicated that death was the result of natural causes. Ex-officio Coroner Justice Peterson was at once notified, and he dispatched a wagon in charge of H. Ward [of the Pioneer Furniture Store & Mortuary] to that place, who brought the body to the undertaking rooms. Deceased was named Eleanor Dumont, and was recognized as the woman who had been engaged in dealing a twenty-one game in the Magnolia saloon. Her death evidently occurred from an overdose of morphine, an empty bottle having the peculiar smell of that drug, being found beside the body. . . . The history connected with the unfortunate suicide is but a repetition of that of many others who have followed the life of a female gambler, with the exception perhaps that the subject of this item bore a character for virtue possessed by few in her line. To the goodhearted women of the town must we accord praise for their accustomed kindness in doing all in their power to prepare the unfortunate woman's body for burial.(2)

Long nights in smoke-filled saloons, abundant liquor, and passing years had taken a toll on Eleanor Dumont, demonstrated by the note she left. Along with directions for the disposition of her effects, the letter stated "she was tired of life." A New York tabloid borrowed information from Aurora's *Esmeralda Herald* to prepare a warm biographical sketch of the famed female card dealer:

MADAME MUSTACHE

Remarkable Story of the Strange Life and Tragic Death of a Woman who
for Twenty-One Years had been a Noted Character in the Mining Camps
and Gambling Houses of the Pacific Coast.

For twenty-one years Madame Mustache has been a familiar character to the shifting population of the mining camps of the Pacific coast. From the mines of

British Columbia to those of California, and as far east as the Black Hills, the restless little French woman has followed the uncertain growth of mining camps, always pursuing her profession of gambling. The first known of Madame Dumont, as she was then called, on the coast, was in Nevada City in 1854. She arrived one day on the stagecoach, a pretty, fresh-faced, dark-eyed woman, apparently about twenty years of age, and her stylish appearance created much commotion among the rough inhabitants of the town. The Madame at once rented from the proprietor of a large gambling establishment a table at which she started a game of vingt et un. The novelty of a pretty woman dealing a game attracted many players to her table, and as she paid strict attention to business, and was very lucky, she soon had quite a capital. Her success was so great that she soon opened a large establishment, where a dozen games were kept going night and day. She gained the reputation of dealing honestly, was always smilingly polite, and the miners liked her—even held her in considerable respect.

At that time there lived in Nevada City a gambler named Dave Tobin, who afterward became very well known in sporting circles on the coast. Tobin recognized the business ability and tact of the Madame and formed a business co-partnership with her. Together they opened an immense establishment, running a dozen games day and night. He managed the large games, such as faro and keno, and the Madame superintended the small games, vingt et un (Americanized as twenty-one), chuck-a-luck, etc. The Madame became a great favorite with the miners. She was always agreeable and smiling, accepting her losses with a careless shrug and a smile, and her winnings with the true gambler's indifference. The Madame and Tobin continued their partnership for about a year, when Tobin went to New York, where he died in 1865, leaving a large fortune. The mania for gambling and the love of excitement were insatiable in the Madame, however, and for the next five years she wandered from camp to camp, always successful and always a favorite with the miners. It became a saying of theirs that there was more satisfaction in playing against the Madame's game and losing, than winning at any other game.

She possessed a peculiar power over even the roughest of her customers. One time in Pioche, the room in which she was dealing her game became filled with a noisy, quarreling crowd of miners, maddened with drink and flourishing pistols, evidently bound to have a free fight. The barkeepers and faro dealers were fruitlessly trying to quiet the crowd when Madame Dumont, observing their dismay, quietly approached the noisiest, and laughingly reproving them for ungallant conduct, succeeded in clearing the room and avoiding a bloody row.

Among the sporting fraternity she was chiefly admired for her "rustling" qualities. As an instance of the latter quality, a rare accomplishment in mining camps, it is stated that once in Boise City, Idaho, she succeeded in raising a "stake" with which to capitalize her bank when other, well-known gamblers remained sadly stranded for the lack of funds.

No luckless miner ever came "broke" to a camp where the Madame was installed and asked her for a stake without receiving it. Madame Dumont, despite her strange surroundings and unusual mode of living, possessed the respect as well as the admiration of her rough companions. It was not until the turn of luck which inevitably overtakes those who long follow in the path of Chance, found this strange

character penniless among strangers, that the dark chapter of her strange career commenced. For a year she was known in San Francisco as a leader of the demi-monde. The charity of silence, which the kind remembrances of a thousand instances of her kind heart and generous hand have earned for her, should, however, be granted to this tainted epoch of her life.

Returning to the mines she again became fortunate at gambling. Earning in one camp several thousand dollars[;] she invested it in a California farm. She had been frequently heard to express a desire to own and pass the rest of her life in quiet in a home of her own. For a number of years she expended all her winnings on the improvement of her farm. A few years ago she married a man in a mining town in eastern Nevada, and to him turned over her California property, placing him in charge of it, and remitting him all of her earnings. The husband proved a worthless man, and after squandering all of her earnings is supposed to have deserted her. Since then her history has been a repetition of her early life.

Of late, what was years ago only an infantile fuzz on her upper lip, had developed into a growth of unusual proportions for a woman; hence her *sobriquet*—Madame Mustache.(3)

A decade after beginning her career in California's mining region, Madame Dumont joined a gold rush deep into the Canadian Rocky Mountains, where in 1864 she reached the placer mines on Wild Horse Creek. The bonanza town of Kootenay that sprang into existence was described by a veteran miner: "There were about fifty buildings in the camp, including saloons, gambling houses and others. Everything had to be packed on horses 400 miles, from Walla Walla. . . . The money taken out in 1864 brought in about five thousand people in 1865, and that was the year that millions were taken out. . . . I had two partners that year, and my dividends ran over \$1,000 to \$1,500 a week, and I would go to town every Saturday night and spend the whole thing. The next year the gold was pretty well cleaned up and the excitement died out and that was the last of the rush to Wild Horse."(4) Separating miners from their gold, Dumont's establishment was among the raw town's social diversions. Her brief stay in Canada was reported years later:

At the discovery of the Kootenai [sic] mines in British Columbia the Madame joined the throng flocking to the scene of the new gold excitement, and was among the first to arrive at the new camp, where the very flattering appearance of the diggings led her not only to invest all her spare cash but also to run deeply into debt in erecting a large building to be used as a gambling saloon and dance hall.

But the camp failed to realize the expectations of its discoverers; the Kootenai mines fell into disfavor with the fickle prospectors who were led south in droves by the fabulous reports from Carpenter's Bar, Montana, so that the Madame soon found herself in the most dismal of all places, a half deserted mining camp.

Nothing daunted the courageous little woman [who] packed up what little personal property she had left and took passage by mule train for fortune's new dwelling place, in the great West Side camp of Montana. Here she prospered and made money fast. A year later the Elk Creek strike sent her to the mushroom town

of Reynolds City and while there she met the contractors who had built her Kootenai saloon and to whom she was still indebted.

Having been contracted in a foreign country the debt was of course beyond the reach of what little law there was at that time in Montana The contractors, working there for day's wages, would probably have laughed at the idea of presenting their bill. But nevertheless, as soon as the Madame learned they were there, she voluntarily sought them out, ascertained the full amount of her indebtedness and paid it in bankable gold dust to the last dollar.(5)

One sorry encounter with Dumont was recalled by steamboat officer Louis Rosche, whose Missouri River sternwheeler docked at a raucous waterfront town, the primary point of demarcation for Montana's gold fields. Madame Dumont was approaching middle age in the early 1870s, when the young first-mate stepped ashore to tempt the fickle goddess of chance in a frontier community teeming with roustabouts, deckhands, wagon freighters, and miners.

"I heard Madame Moustache had set up one of her gaming houses at Fort Benton," recalled Rosche, "and I decided to satisfy my curiosity. . . . I wasn't a gambler, because I'd worked too hard for the money I made, but I had saved up a couple of hundred dollars, and I intended to 'shoot the works' at Madame Moustache's. I'd heard about miners running a stake of a few dollars into a fortune at her tables in one night. Maybe I would be lucky and make enough to buy an interest in a steamboat." "There's one thing certain," remarked a friendly woodchopper. "If you win, the Madame will pay off. She's shrewd, but she's square. . . . Folks say she's a Frenchwoman. The way I've heard some tell it, she hailed from New Orleans, and she's a hundred percent Creole. . . . They say she didn't have a moustache then, just a few downy hairs sproutin' on her upper lip that wasn't noticeable because her skin was dark anyway. That was in 1854 when they was scoopin' gold dust right out of the streets in Nevada City, and I heard that right away there was another gold rush—into Eleanor Dumont's gamblin' house."

Rosche contemplated the woodcutter's remarks as he walked toward the Madame's place. "The click of dice, the rattle of the roulette ball, and the slap of cards greeted my ears," he recalled. "With my heart beating fast with excitement, I entered the door of the weather-beaten, two-story frame building and stepped into the gambling hall."

The boatman scrutinized the room and took a seat in the corner. "The inside of the gambling house was worse looking even than the outside," recalled Rosche. "The bar and gaming tables were housed in one big downstairs room. . . . The place was foggy with smoke and smelled of sweating, unwashed bodies and cheap whiskey. The floor was filthy. The male customers, nearly all of whom were chewing, were remarkably bad marksmen, the spittoons, placed at strategic locations, all going unscathed. The none-too-clean-looking bar ran along one wall."

Suddenly the medley of laughter, clinking glasses, men's and women's voices, and the sounds of gambling equipment died down as Eleanor Dumont entered the room. "I glanced quickly towards the door," said Rosche. "If I had not seen the unbelievable black brush on the woman's upper lip, I would not have known that this was the famous Madame Moustache. She was fat, showing unmistakably the signs of age. Rouge and powder, apparently applied only halfheartedly, failed to hide the sagging lines of her face,

the pouches under her eyes, and general marks of dissipation. Her one badge of respectability was a black silk dress, worn high around her neck. I closed my eyes in disgust. But, after all, I told myself, I hadn't come here to admire the Madame's looks, but to try my luck and perhaps make my fortune."

Mustering his courage, Rosche walked over to a raised platform in the room's center, where the Madame had seated herself at a table and was shuffling cards, with "her rings flashing." The young boatman stepped up and emptied his poke on the table.

"Ma'am," he uttered, "there's more than \$200 there. Let's get going now, and I don't want to quit until you've got all my money or until I've got a considerable amount of yours.

For the first time Rosche noticed the Madame's brown eyes. He remembered "they, at least, remained youthful."

"What shall it be, young man?" asked the lady proprietor as she studied the steamboat officer. "Name the play."

Rosche realized he didn't play any kind of cards well enough to make a choice.

"Very well then," she replied with a gleam in her eye. "It shall be *vingt-et-un*."

Rosche recalled the sad affair. "It would be painful to exhume the memories of the hour that followed. When it was all over and my bills and gold and silver pieces were stacked neatly in front of the Madame, I got up quickly, returned my empty leather purse to my pocket, and started to leave."

"No, no, no," protested the hostess, waving her hands excitedly. "The steamboatman must not go before he has had his drink on the house."

Just then the barkeeper placed a glass on the table. "I saw to my astonishment that it was filled with milk. I later found out that it was her custom after trimming a sucker to set him up with a glass of milk."

Rosche delayed returning to his boat long enough to watch the Madame fleece the friendly woodchopper and his four drunken companions. "The inevitable didn't take long to happen," remarked Rosche, recalling the money stacked in front of the Madame. After each woodcutter received a complimentary glass of milk, the lady offered to cover return passage to their woodyard.(6)

Gold in the Black Hills of Dakota brought Madame Mustache to Deadwood, where in 1877 a correspondent observed the familiar woman presiding over a game in the Wide West Saloon:

A character who attracts the attention of all strangers is "Mme. Mustache," a plump little French lady, perhaps forty years of age, but splendidly preserved. She derives her name, which is the only one she is known by, from a dainty strip of black hair upon her upper lip. She deals her own game, and is quite popular with the boys, who treat her with marked respect. She has bright black eyes and a musical voice, and there is something attractive about her as she looks up with a little smile and asks, "You will play, M'sieur?"

"No one knows her history," the journalist mused. "She is said to be very rich." The Madame remained aloof within the "sporting fraternity," as professional gamblers

were called in the gold camps. “Always alone, always the same polite, smiling little woman, always making money.”(7)

Months later, a charmed Bodie reporter recorded Madame’s May 1878 arrival at that California boomtown: “Madame Moustache, whose real name is Eleonore Dumont, has settled for the time in Bodie, following her old avocation of dealing twenty-one, faro, etc., as force of circumstances seem to demand. Probably no woman on the Coast is better known. . . . She appears as young as ever, and those who knew her ever so many years ago would instantly recognize her now.”(8)

Slightly more than a year passed before a columnist described the Madame’s final hours in the remote bonanza town. “It seems that her bank running low, she borrowed \$300 of a friend and with her own funds opened a faro bank. It only lasted a few hours. She mentioned not a word to any person, but wandered to the place where with her dead body was discovered a vial which told the tale.”(9)

Telegraph wires carried the story throughout the West: “Bodie (Cal.) The *Free Press* thus alludes to the death of a character well known. The inquest on the body of Eleanore Dumont (‘Madame Mustache’) took place this afternoon at 3 o’clock. The drug used by the unfortunate woman, in taking her life, was morphine. Dr. Roe analyzed the contents of the bottle found by her side, and it proved to be a mixture of claret wine and the above narcotic.”(10)

George A. Montrose, attorney and former editor of the Bridgeport *Chronicle-Union*, recalled Madame Mustache’s funeral at Bodie: “She had the reputation of being honest in her dealings and always paying her debts. Upon this she prided herself, and woe unto anyone who claimed she did not play fair. . . . It is said that of the hundreds of funerals held in the mining camp, that of ‘Madame Moustache’ was the largest. The gamblers of the place buried her with all honors, and carriages were brought from Carson City, a distance of 120 miles, especially to be used in the funeral cortege.”(11)

One Dumont admirer penned the lady gambler’s eulogy: “Truthful and honest, whatever other faults she might have had, always smiling, never forgetting the politeness of her native France, and her purse ever open at the appeal of sickness or suffering, ‘Madame Mustache’ leaves friends in almost every class of Western society to regret the sad closing act of her life’s drama.”(12)

Readers across the nation were moved by the heartfelt remarks of an aging San Francisco gambler who had spent much of his life in the mining camps. Upon learning of the Madame’s suicide, the seasoned sport exclaimed with tears in his eyes, “Poor Madame Mustache! Her life was as square a game as was ever dealt. The world played against her with all sorts of combinations, but she generally beat it. The turn was called on her at last for a few paltry hundred; she missed the turn, none of the old boys were there to cover the bet for her, and she passed in her checks, game to the last. Poor Madame Mustache.”(13)

NOTES:

1. Whether directly or indirectly, recent Madame Mustache biographies rely on Duncan Aikman, whose flamboyant writing and disregard for documentation suggests embellishment typical of unreliable historical literature. See, Duncan Aikman, *Calamity Jane and the Lady Wildcats* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1927), 280-307. Other Madame Mustache biographies that should not be accepted as factual are by Chris Enss, Jan MacKell, Anne Seagraves, and Ben Traywick. Intended for the tourist trade, their research is shallow and relies on secondary sources. Mostly they copy each other. Particularly troublesome is their emphasis on prostitution. Eyewitnesses describe a card dealer, not a madam, suggesting these writers confuse “Madame” with “madam.” For speculation regarding Dumont’s ownership of a San Francisco brothel, see, Curt Gentry, *The Madams of San Francisco* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1964), 139-144.

2. *Bodie Morning News* (Bodie, CA) 9 September 1879.

3. *Esmeralda Herald* (Aurora, NV) 13 September 1879; *National Police Gazette* (New York, NY) 4 October 1879, 10.

4. Fred J. Smyth, *Tales of the Kootenays: With Historical Sketches by the Author and Others* (Cranbrook, BC: Office of *The Courier*, 1938), 53-59.

5. *Weekly Miner* (Butte, MT) 23 September 1879.

6. Robert A. Hereford, *Old Man River: The Memories of Captain Louis Rosche, Pioneer Steamboatman* (Caldwell, ID: Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1942), 105, 200, 204-233.

7. *Daily News* (Gold Hill, NV) 1 September 1877; John S. McClintock, *Pioneer Days in the Black Hills: Accurate History and Facts Related by One of the Early Day Pioneers* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1939, reprinted 2000), 66-67.

8. *Bodie Weekly Standard* (Bodie, CA) 29 May 1878.

9. *Daily Bodie Standard* (Bodie, CA) 8 September 1879.

10. *Weekly Miner* (Butte, MT) 23 September 1879.

11. *Chronicle-Union* (Bridgeport, CA) 11 January 1922.

12. *Weekly Miner* (Butte, MT) 23 September 1879.