

Just a Personality Conflict: A Madams' Duel

By Dennis Payton Knight

At the age of eighteen in Springfield, Illinois, Mattie Silks had already established herself as a Madam, trading in the world's oldest profession. She came to Colorado in 1875, settling first in Georgetown but soon moving on to Denver to set up her operations. Two years later, she met Cortez Thompson, a married man with a daughter. When his wife died in 1884, Mattie and Cortez, now available, had a big engagement party at the Olympic Gardens on Colfax near the Platte River.

One of Mattie Silk's competitors was another madam, Kate Fulton. What likely began as merely a drunken brawl in 1877, probably only booze-inspired, involving the two entrepreneurs ended up in the newspapers. The stories and court documents were revisited decades later by a creative journalist, and the brawl became known as the Silks-Fulton duel.

Forbes Parkhill wrote for five Denver papers before moving on to New York City and then El Paso where, in 1915 he so embellished a story about Pancho Villa that his editor pronounced it to be a work of fiction and suggested he turn his writing in that direction. Novellas, pulp westerns, adventure stories, mysteries, and movie scripts followed.

By 1950, Parkhill was gathering a book-length collection of anecdotes from Denver's past, and he recalled hearing of that confrontation between two Denver madams. He went to the library, read the *Denver Times* article in August 1877 and took notice of the first sentence in the *Rocky Mountain News* account, that "Mattie Silks and Kate Fulton were principals, two men, (including) Thompson were seconds." Parkhill deduced from the words 'principals' and 'seconds' that it must have been a duel of madams.

"This is the story of lovely Mattie Silks," he wrote, "the fastest woman in all the West, and her knight in tarnished armor, Cortez D. Thomson, who tried hard to be the fastest man. It begins with an account of the only known formal pistol duel ever fought between women. This duel was on the night of August 25, 1877, in the Olympic Gardens at Denver. The principals were Mattie Silks and Katie Fulton. Feminine marksmanship being what it is, Mattie missed Katie, and Katie missed Mattie, but Cort was shot in the neck."

It was entertaining, the stuff Parkhill wrote, but wrong in nearly every particular, from date to place. He attributed what he called the duel to jealousy over Thompson, but also acknowledged said reason had not been factually established. Other creative writers over the years have advanced the legend, embellishing it even more, to the point that the lovely madams had lost their shirts and the duel was in the nude.

More recently, Denver's Clark Secrest and others have gone through the original newspaper accounts and court records to set the story as straight as they can. Too bad. The famous Silks-Fulton Duel might be exaggerated, but you must admit, it got to be interesting when it went topless.