

*THE HISTORIC STRATER HOTEL PRESENTS*

# ROOM 305: THE DIAMOND BELLE SALOON GIRLS

## Where Charm Meets the Wild West

Originally the hotel's saloon, the Diamond Belle on the corner of the Strater Hotel has had many identities including the Strater-Thorpe Drug Store, followed by Turner Investment and Silver State Security Co., and eventually the Colorado Employment Agency. When Earl Barker Jr. proposed restoring the room to its original purpose, his father dismissed the idea: "You'll never get more than the \$25 rent we're collecting from the Colorado Employment Agency."



But in 1957, while Earl Sr. wintered in Arizona, Earl Jr. and Bob Blomstrom decided it was easier to ask forgiveness than permission. They transformed the space back into a turn-of-the-century saloon. When Earl Sr. returned to find his friends enjoying themselves in the Belle, he proudly claimed the idea had been his all along.

The Diamond Belle Saloon evokes a bygone era. Staff costumes and ragtime piano entertainment recreate the spirit of the Old West, and the saloon girls are among the most photographed figures in Durango. The balcony — originally built for apothecary storage during the drugstore years — overlooks the room. The pressed tin ceiling is original, though now painted, and chandeliers hang from lion-head fixtures inspired by a historic design discovered in Telluride. Beneath the balcony railing, a gilded sign reminds patrons: "Work is the curse of the drinking classes."



Many original features remain. The upper plate-glass windows and hand-painted oak wainscoting date to 1887. The stained glass above the front door is also original, and matching panels were commissioned in 2005 when a new front door was installed. The flocked wallpaper, imported from England during a 1985 remodel, was complemented in 2005 by hand-screened blue star wallpaper from Bradbury & Bradbury, selected to highlight the ornate bar.

The bar itself has a storied past. Discovered in a dilapidated Durango warehouse, it originally belonged to Giuseppe "Joe" Corazzo of the National Hall Saloon before becoming part of the Belle in 1957. A bullet hole in the bar recalls a robbery attempt against Corazzo. Its unusual finish was achieved by painting it pink, applying a second coat mixed with stale beer to create slip, and then graining it by dragging a turkey or crow quill across the surface.



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Throughout the years, the Belle has been a gathering place for locals and visitors alike. Cowboys meet every Tuesday to share stories, poems, and songs — and on occasion, have even ridden horses and mules into the saloon. Real estate deals have been sealed on cocktail napkins. Renowned ragtime pianists and popular local musicians have entertained generations of guests.

Author Louis L'Amour is said to have written much of his Sackett series while staying in rooms above the Belle, inspired by the piano music, clinking glasses, and cheerful laughter below.

Earl Barker Jr. and his wife, Jentra, envisioned a full revitalization of the old “Strater House,” renovating the property from basement to rooftop and modernizing its utilities throughout. Central to that transformation was the rebirth of the Diamond Belle Saloon — a venture that quickly proved far more profitable than the modest state rent it replaced.




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In March 1957, another Durango legend was born: the ***Diamond Belle Saloon Girl***. Dressed in fishnets and feathers, she embodied charm, grace, and spirited fun. Over the decades, her style evolved while retaining its Victorian flair.

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In the 1950s, many early uniforms were sewn by the girls’ mothers. The 1960s introduced a “hot pants” look, followed by chemise styles in the 1970s and ’80s, and velvet, fringed one-piece designs custom-fitted by sewing them inside out while worn. In the 2000s, jewel-toned corsets and tiered lace skirts became the signature look—always paired with the iconic fishnets and feathers.

A patron once wrote to an early Belle girl Merlie Lou Shepherd, “You have something no other girl has got.” That something — indescribable, magnetic, and genuine — has lived on through generations. Women like Laquita Wagner, Dolores Whitley, Evelyn Waddell, Merlie Lou Shepherd, Suzan Lane, and so many others were never simply servers. They were storytellers, ambassadors, and living symbols of Durango’s Western allure.

Today, the legacy of the Diamond Belle Saloon and its storied saloon girls remains a point of pride. Each new Belle steps into a living history, carrying forward the spirit of the Strater Hotel and its legendary saloon.

