

## Catherine Dunn-Parker-Austin

By Diane Sterne

The sight of a woman at Granite Creek was rare in the early days. While it was common in areas experiencing a gold rush for “sport shops” housing women of negotiable affection to open quickly; wives, mothers and reputable business women appeared later. In 1886, women slowly migrated into Granite Creek with their husbands. One of these women was Catherine Dunn-Parker-Austin.

Catherine was not the frail, husband-dependent woman that most envisage when they think of a woman of the 1800's. She was a successful businesswoman, wife, mother to seven children and prospector.

Born in Ireland in about 1841 (although the 1861 England census puts her birth year at 1837), Catherine Dunn married Samuel Parker in England. Samuel was a “boot closer” (a person who stitches shoe uppers to the soles). Samuel and Catherine had five children: Minnie b. 1859, Kate b. 1861, Sarah b. 1866, William b. 1869, and Grace b. 1872. After the birth of their second child, the family immigrated to British Columbia and in the 1860's the Parker family was living in Barkerville where Catherine operated a boarding house. She had a keen business sense and knew that prospectors were tired of ram pasture accommodations where they were expected to share rooms and sleep on their own blankets on the floor. Catherine advertised her boarding house as having “beds, beds, beds” (Cariboo Sentinel Newspaper, 1869).

**BEDS! BEDS !! BEDS !!!**

**M**RS. S. P. PARKER BEGS TO ANNOUNCE TO her friends and the public, that she has furnished a number of Bedrooms in the most comfortable style, which her patrons may depend upon being carefully attended to.

Wines and Liquors of best quality, as usual, to be had at the Bar.

April 17th, 1869.

Catherine's popularity in Barkerville also grew from her acting abilities in numerous plays in the town's theatre. Following Barkerville, the family moved to Lightning Creek and purchased the Stanley Hotel. On January 31, 1873, Catherine's husband, Samuel, died. He is buried in Cameronton.

Being a widow with many children to feed, Catherine married widower, John Austin seven months later, on August 23, 1873. With John, Catherine had two more children: Clara Elizabeth b. 1875 and John Walter b. 1878.

In 1883 the Austins moved to New Westminster where they operated the Occident Hotel on Columbia Street. This fire proof, stone building had forty rooms and could accommodate sixty guests (Mainland Guardian Newspaper, 1883).

**OCCIDENT  
HOTEL**  
New Westminster, B. C.

THE ONLY FIRE-PROOF HOTEL IN  
THE CITY.

**THE CULINARY DEPARTMENT**  
Is under the charge of an experienced artist.

**T**HE UNDERSIGNED begs leave to  
announce to the public that he has pur-  
chased the above Hotel, where everything  
will be found First-class, and at reasonable  
rates

THE PARLORS AND SLEEPING APART-  
MENTS ARE UNDER THE SUPER-  
INTENDENCE OF MRS. AUSTIN

**PRIVATE DINING ROOMS**  
For Ladies, Families, and Private Parties.

A PRIVATE READING ROOM,  
Conspicuous, comfortably furnished, and  
well supplied with books and papers, is pro-  
vided for the use of guests

**THE BAR**  
Is supplied with the choicest brands of  
WINES, LIQUORS, CIGARS, &c.

John Austin  
Proprietor.

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In 1885, word of the Granite Creek gold rush was spreading quickly. John and Catherine packed up and headed to the excitement. Granite Creek gold production peaked in 1886 when the Austins moved into town. It is reported they built a boarding house there, but little is known about it other than John did apply for a liquor licence. What is of interest is that of the 985 prospectors on the creek, only three were women. One of those three was Catherine Austin.

There were four references to her in the mining records for Granite Creek. On February 1, 1886 she purchased J.W. Mitchell's half interest in the South Fork Company on the creek for \$400.00 (about \$10,000.00 in today's money). On February 18, 1886 she purchased a 100 foot bench claim from Frank Hart for \$50.00. On April 19 of the same year, Catherine was partnered with M. Bourasse and A.T. Spader in the New Westminster Company with a 300 foot hill claim on Granite Creek. Finally, on June 25, 1886 Catherine applied for a Leave of Absence for her 100 foot claim. (Princeton Mining Records, 1886 – Book 2 but labelled Book 4)

The New Westminster Coy. 543  
19 Record of 300ft. Mining ground well  
claim on the East side of Granite  
Creek, being the same ground, as  
formerly known and recorded as  
the New Westminster and Little Jacky, Coy.,  
now consolidated under the  
name above mentioned  
A. T. Spader  
Catherine Austin  
M. Bourasse

Unfortunately, Catherine and John's time at Granite Creek was short-lived. In September, 1886 the Colonist Newspaper advertised that a trustee, Duncan A. McDonald, had been assigned to collect information from the creditors of John and Catherine. The Austins left Granite Creek and moved to Vancouver. Between 1888 and 1890 they managed the Bridge Hotel at 796 Westminister Avenue.

Catherine's full and exciting life was cut short on October 28, 1890. She died in Vancouver and is buried in the Mountain View Cemetery. John passed away on March 21, 1903 and rests beside his wife. Their son, John Walter Austin (died October 10, 1932) is also buried at Mountain View Cemetery.

Catherine was an entrepreneur who did not fit the mold of the Victorian woman. She had the intelligence to focus her businesses on what was needed – be it beds and fine food or fireproof accommodations. She didn't hesitate to get her feet wet and her hands dirty to prospect side-by-side with men. It is exciting to follow Catherine's life across British Columbia and know her footsteps tread through Granite Creek during its most exciting year. Catherine was a role model before her time and we are honoured to know that she was a woman of Granite Creek.

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