



Soapy Smith: a Sketch of the Notorious Gambler and Scoundrel in Colorado's Mining Camps (1906)

George Tower Buffum



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George Tower Buffum (1846-1926) was an American author of books on the Old West such as "On two frontiers," [1918], and "Smith of Bear City, and other frontier sketches," [1906].

Jefferson Randolph "Soapy" Smith II (November 2, 1860 – July 8, 1898) was a con artist, saloon and gambling house proprietor, gangster, and crime boss of the 19th-century Old West. His most famous scam, the prize package soap sell racket, presented him with the sobriquet of "Soapy", which remained with him to his death.

Although he traveled and operated his confidence swindles all across the western United States, he is most famous for having a major hand in the organized criminal operations of Denver and Creede, Colorado, and Skagway, Alaska, from 1879 to 1898. In Denver, he ran several saloons, gambling halls, cigar stores, and auction houses that specialized in cheating their clientele. In Denver, Soapy began to make a name for himself across the country as a bad man. Denver is also where he entered into the arena of political fixing, where, for favors, he could sway the outcome of city, county, and state elections.


He used the same methods of operation when he settled in the towns of Creede and Skagway, opening businesses with the primary goal of gently robbing his customers, while making a name for himself. He died in spectacular fashion in the shootout on Juneau Wharf in Skagway.

Buffum writes:

"I HAVE never known just where to pigeonhole Soapy Smith; a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde he certainly was. Meet him away from home, and what do we find,—a bunco-steerer, a tinhorn gambler, when not a proprietor where brace games were dealt, the associate of desperate ruffians, a professional bad man of the border and an adept in all lines and ways of winning the money of the unwary through nefarious schemes and devices; in short, he was a leader in the flagrant lawlessness which marked the frontier days. He had the reputation of being afraid of neither man nor devil. No one was ever more ready to draw his gun and fight to the death; death mattered little to him if while he lived none dared to dispute his courage and his readiness to do, dare and die. In the lower strata of society he was admired and loved for his fearlessness and generosity and his faithful ness to his associates when in trouble.

Wicked and sinister though he was to the outside world, and as merciless as a pirate in capturing booty, place him in his home among his own and we find a devoted husband and father, and across the threshold of this home no one of his evil companions was ever allowed to step. In his own home he was Mr. Jefferson Smith, a gentleman above reproach, and to his wife and children the dearly beloved who guarded them from all harm and bountifully provided for their every want, ministering to their happiness in every possible manner."

Originally published in 1906; reformatted for the Kindle; may contain occasional imperfection; original spellings have been kept in place.

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