

Laura Evans and the Spirit of E Clampus Vitus

By

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Laura Evans was slim with large expressive eyes and claimed Southern heritage. She enjoyed rolling her own cigarettes and telling stories about herself and others. Some might even have been true. Laura probably took on the name "Laura Evans" and the career of prostitution in St. Louis, Missouri about 1890. Within a few years she drifted to Market Street (formerly known as Holladay Street) in Denver, Colorado's red light district. What could Laura Evans have in common with the spirit of the California gold rush fraternity known as the E Clampus Vitus (ECV)?

The members of the ECV share some common characteristics. The ECV attracts those with a predilection for pranks, parody, and ridicule of pretension. The ECV has attracted great visionaries such as King David, King Solomon, Xerxes, Marc Anthony, Jefferson, Washington, Webster, Clay, Jackson, and Calhoun. The objective of the ECV is to take care of widders and orphans, particularly the widders. Thus the spirit of ECV is the spirit of pranksters, visionaries, and benefactors.

Laura was known throughout Colorado's mining towns as being an outgoing, outspoken woman and prankster. She left Market Street around 1893 for Leadville, Colorado because of Denver's Jack the Ripper. She was involved in a long string of pranks. Her first year in Leadville, she bribed the caretaker at a circus to hitch up the horses and chariots. She and a friend, Lily Lee, raced the chariots, each hitched to three horses, through the streets crowded with people. They were arrested.

Another time when she and a friend were stopped for racing horses on the main street, she managed to avoid arrest. A city official got her off because she mentioned an "injury" which she had received. Actually the city official had taken a bite out of her thigh while enjoying her company a few days earlier.

About 1895, Laura continued her enjoyment of horses by driving a sleigh into the Crystal Carnival's Ice Palace. She wrecked the sleigh and parts of the Ice Palace itself. Supposedly Laura decided to become a madam so she could afford a horse of her own.

In Central City, Laura once won a bet by dressing up as a nun, attending a masquerade ball and making the rounds of the local saloons without being recognized.

Laura finally wore out her welcome in Leadville when she carried a \$27,000 payroll in her bustle to strike breakers at the Maid of Erin Mine. She sought out another town that had a source of customers other than miners.

By 1898 Laura was plying her trade in Salida, Colorado. In 1900, she became a full time madam opening a female boarding house on Front Street near the Denver & Rio Grande Western railroad center. In 1906 she bought a building with six small apartments at 130 W. Sackett Street.

Laura exhibited her vision by taking advantage of modern technology in her new establishment. She installed what may have been the country's first pay phone because she was tired of paying for the calls that drunks made from her business. She had the pay phone which accepted silver dollars, half dollars, and quarters made and installed for \$1,800. In 1914, she purchased a large Wurlitzer PianOrchestra music box for her parlor. This orchestra in a box consisted of a 61 note piano with mandolin attachment, 30 piccolo pipes, 37 flute pipes, 30 violin pipes, 19 viola pipes, 30 cello pipes, a 30 bar xylophone, a 13 bar chime set, snare drum, bass drum, kettle drum, triangle, tambourine, and castanets. She played the liveliest of tunes to hasten the "turnover" of customers.

The Denver Post described Laura as "generous to all and sundry. During her lifetime she loaned without thought of recompense, sum after sum to friends and strangers". Whenever she came to Denver she'd always bring presents to Blind Sadie who continued as a madam even after she went blind. When approached by evangelists trying to convert her, Laura gave them each \$5 and said not to bother with her—she already had a ticket to hell.

When Laura's PianOrchestra no longer worked she donated the snare and bass drums to some happy Boy Scouts who somehow had made her acquaintance.

Laura's business was closed down in 1950 by Salida's town council. After that she rented out rooms to local railroad men whom she enjoyed as card playing companions.

Once a revival preacher soliciting money asked her "for sociological reasons" how many male organs she had taken care of in her time. Laura replied, "I suppose all of them, if placed end to end, might reach from here to Cheyenne. But they sure would look out of place, don't you think, Reverend, lying out there on that lonesome prairie?" The preacher accepted her \$20 for his prayer meeting.

Laura Evans died in 1953 at the age of 91 and was buried in a cemetery outside of Salida. Mainly Denver & Rio Grande railroad men attended her funeral. Laura clearly exhibited the qualities that are associated with members of the E Clampus Vitus: having fun, innovativeness, and taking care of others.

CREDO QUIA ABSURDUM, What say the brethren?

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