



Sin City

In the late 19th century, Milwaukee's red-light district rivaled that of San Francisco's Barbary Coast or New York City's Tenderloin — more than 20 houses of prostitution flourished just one block from City Hall

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There are no buildings named for him, nor does a monument to him exist. Although he was elected mayor of Milwaukee five times beginning in 1898, David S. Rose is best remembered for presiding over a scandal-ridden administration where corruption reigned supreme. Rose's place in history is permanently linked with the "wide open" reputation Milwaukee had in those days.

Like comparable cities, Milwaukee had a section of town where the "houses of ill-repute" were located. In the early days of the city, there were several small brothels on the south side of East Wisconsin Avenue where the Iron Block building is today. By 1880, the influx of new buildings and legitimate businesses had driven the brothels to relocate to an area on River Street (now North Edison Street) between East Wells and State streets.

In this secluded, non-residential area, the brothels were able to ply their trade by quietly paying the police to patrol other parts of the neighborhood. In 1881, 20-year-old Kitty Williams, who became the most notorious of the Milwaukee "madams," purchased a mansion at 219 E. State St. Several materials indicate Williams was a former prostitute who accrued a substantial amount of money, allowing her to pay cash for the property.

Within five years, Williams was operating a high-profile establishment that quickly became a favorite haunt for conventioners and wealthy businessmen. Williams' reputation for running a first-class house of prostitution extended to Chicago, where trains regularly began bringing business from that city.

It was at this juncture when former lawyer Rose, who ironically ran on a Democratic reform ticket, was elected mayor. The charismatic politician dazzled the populace with flamboyant outfits, brilliant speeches and a handsome Kentucky colonel goatee. He even adopted a Southern dialect, with *The Milwaukee Journal* quoting him as referring to "my pee-pul" and "this bee-YOO-tee-ful ci-teh." But perhaps Rose's best tactical weapon was his phenomenal memory. He walked in public every day,