

# ‘Tumbleweed Underworld’ uncovers the dark side of the Old West

**ASU professor's book peels back romanticized myths of time period to shine a light on role of narcotics, what we can learn from it**

By Dolores Tropiano, ASU News  
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In the late 1800s, a stop at a bar in the mining town of Clifton in southeastern Arizona might mean belling up for a beer or whiskey — or a dose of cocaine, morphine or heroin.

“There were no restrictions whatsoever on any of those drugs,” said [Eduardo Pagán](#), author of the new book [“Tumbleweed Underworld: A Saga of Morphine and Mayhem in the Arizona Territory.”](#)

“They were sold over the counter.”

Pagán is the [Bob Stump Endowed Professor of History](#) at Arizona State University who specializes in the history of the American Southwest.

The “saga” in his latest book weaves together two stories of the Wild West.

One is the account of a young woman named Georgie Clifford who was sexually abused by her stepfather and forced into prostitution by her mother before descending into a life of drug addiction and sex work.

The second is a well-researched depiction of the time that replaces romanticized ideas of the Old West and instead shows the role drugs and women, like Clifford, played in that world.

## Stumbling on a story

Pagán, who is also an adjunct curator of history at the Sigler Western Museum (formerly the Desert Caballeros Western Museum) in Wickenburg, Arizona, stumbled upon Clifford’s story while

researching the prison population in Yuma for a previous book.

“What shocked me immediately was that this was a prison made for the worst of the worst men in Arizona,” said Pagán, who teaches at [Barrett, The Honors College](#) on ASU’s West Valley campus. “It was never anticipated that women would be housed in the Yuma Territorial Prison, so to find a woman there to begin with was a shock to me.”

She was “Prisoner No. 894,” one of only two women held at the Yuma Territorial Prison. What piqued Pagán’s interest further was that Clifford was wearing a lace-collared blouse in her mug shot — suggesting that she came from money.

“As I looked at this picture, I wondered what was this young woman doing there?” Pagán said.

The book was an effort to answer that question. It sent Pagán into seven years of research into Clifford’s traumatic childhood and troubled life.

That work took him to the Arizona State Archives in downtown Phoenix, the Sharlot Hall Museum in Prescott, the Arizona Historical Society in Tucson and through small-town newspapers and other historical records.

“In many ways, she was my guide into this underworld that existed in plain sight,” Pagán said.

Clifford was born as Minnie Eichler in Clifton, Arizona, located 210 miles east of Phoenix (she later changed her name). Her beauty was widely noted and documented in newspapers at the time.

“I actually found a line in the Clifton newspaper that said she was 'one of the finest specimens' in the territory,” Pagán said. “So men are ogling this young woman. She's 13 years old and they are throwing themselves at her. Just imagine the dynamics, right?”

After being assaulted by her stepfather, Clifford was given morphine to cope with the trauma and quickly became addicted.

Her mother later persuaded her to become a high-class sex worker at a luxury Prescott brothel known as the Double-Decker.

“It was known as a gentleman's club,” Pagán said. “All of the territorial bigwigs would go there. It was one of these places that was set up to provide every conceivable comfort that a gentleman could wish for.”

As part of her work, Clifford administered opiates to clients while regularly injecting herself. Her addiction soon took over her life, which spiraled out of control. One day, she gave a client a fatal dose of morphine, which led to her arrest for murder.

Pagán takes readers through Clifford’s journey — from brothels to homelessness, addiction, multiple asylum stays and eventually recovery and reconnection with her family.

## **Coming clean about territorial life**

But the recurring themes from Clifford’s life were not unique in the Arizona Territory.

According to Pagán, there was widespread drug addiction in the late 1800s.

A variety of drugs were available at bars, sold over the counter at drugstores and even purchased through Sears and Roebuck catalogs. At the time, they were considered treatments for many ailments.

"They used opiates like heroin and morphine in the same way that we use Tylenol and Ibuprofen today," Pagán said. "For every conceivable discomfort from sniffles to diarrhea to backache to kidney stones. I mean, the list goes on and on and on. They were marketed as these wonder drugs.

"And of course, the reason why is because you felt so much better once you took them."

"So many of the events, particularly around violence in the Old West, were likely fueled by opioids," he said. "We accept that gunfights were fueled by alcohol. From my research, drugs were far more commonly used than alcohol.

"How does that then change our understanding about events at that time in history; what does it tell us? We talk about the opioid epidemic today; my point as a historian is that this is not new. Since opioids were introduced to the U.S., there has been an epidemic. What's happening now is not new."

What *is* different were the attitudes toward drugs and sex workers back then.

In the 1870s, the ratio of men to women was roughly 4-to-1, Pagán said.

"(Sex work) was pretty much welcome, because there were so few women around," he said. "It was seen as a social necessity. And in that time, some of the higher-class bordellos would even provide money for schools, for food, for children. They were seen as a community asset. So the attitudes at the mid-century were very, very different."

And in addition to being viewed as medicine, drugs were thought of as more elite.

"... I found one source that revealed that using opiates was considered far more sophisticated than getting drunk at a saloon," he said. "Getting drunk off of whiskey in a saloon was what poor people did, what working class people did. Middle-class people would shoot up."

"Tumbleweed Underworld" is Pagán's fourth book about the Old West. He says he has a passion for research and likes to focus on people's stories rather than academic accounts.

"It's the history of people's lives," said Pagán, who has taught at ASU for 21 years. "And being able to bring their lives back in some way on the page so that readers feel a connection with their humanity. That's the kind of history that I'm attracted to."

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*This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).*

**Main image**



“Tumbleweed Underworld: A Saga of Morphine and Mayhem in the Arizona Territory” is the latest book by Eduardo Pagán, the Bob Stump Endowed Professor of History at Arizona State University’s West Valley campus. Pagán is an adjunct curator at the Sigler Western Museum in Wickenburg, Arizona, where he was photographed on Monday, May 18, in the museum’s Brayton’s General Store exhibit. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

**Text image(s)**



TUMBLEWEED



# UNDERWORLD

*A Saga of*  
**MORPHINE**  
AND  
**MAYHEM**  
IN THE  
**ARIZONA TERRITORY**

EDUARDO OBREGÓN PAGÁN

No caption