

An Evening for



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Chicago Joe and Her Hurdy-

Sin

by REX C. MYERS



Hurdy-gurdy houses were a western institution of long standing. The dance halls developed during the California gold rush of 1849, taking their name from the wheezy hand organ originally employed to provide music. Here the weary prospector found feminine (albeit not necessarily attractive) companionship for one dollar a dance. There was always a bar, and after each dance, management policy prescribed a drink for customer and partner.

With the paucity of frontier females, hurdy-gurdy girls needed more stamina than pulchritude. A more popular "hurdy" might expect fifty dances or more during an evening, splitting the take with her boss. Rarely did the girls become intoxicated and risk damaging their ability to dance or, indeed, their reputations. Few were prostitutes after hours. Dancing was exhausting and a wage of \$25.00 a night was sufficient pay in and of itself. Equally important, most of the girls hoped to marry and become respected members of the community.

Public views of hurdy-gurdy houses, however, varied widely through the years. Some felt that they fulfilled a social need. Others, like Thomas Dimsdale, editor of Virginia City's Montana Post, saw them as a pernicious influence on soul and community alike. But to entrepreneurs, like Mary Josephine Welch, who came to Helena in 1867 and became known as Chicago Joe, they were a matter of pragmatic business.

The mining camp along Last Chance Gulch was scarcely three years old when Miss Welch arrived, but its crude urbanity appealed to the 23-year-old Irish immigrant. Helena became her town, and for the next thirty-two years she ruled its night life like a queen. When Chicago Joe died in 1899, a local newspaper characterized her life as "eventful" and lauded her personally as "a woman of extraordinary strength of character."

Hurdy Girls Girls Girls Girls



Louise

**JOSEPHINE HENSLEY
and a gallery
of imported pulchritude**



Pearl



mostly from Chicago



Lucille



Monica

photos from Lorz Gallery, Helena

BORN IN Ireland on January 1, 1844, Josephine Welch (she early dropped her first name for all but legal purposes) left home for America in 1858, at 14 years of age. By her own account she drifted to Chicago and there learned first hand the interworkings of the city's night life. Experienced in the ways of the evening, she lost her infatuation with Chicago in the years following the Civil War. To the west lay Montana's burgeoning mining camps. Adventure piqued her spirit and she left by stage for the liveliest camp she could find — Helena.

To Helena's muddy streets and bustling social life, Josephine brought her Chicago earnings and experience. It did not take long to assay the taste of Last Chance Gulch miners and realize the potential wealth to be found in a pretty face, a little music, and alcohol. Near the head of Main Street she erected a dance hall — a hurdy-gurdy house — Helena's second, but the first run by a woman. In a field traditionally dominated by men, Josephine Welch quickly exhibited managerial and other talents.

The crude, one-story log building on Wood Street was not much on appearance, but inside were all the necessities for relieving frontier frustrations. The patrons were not long in coming and neither was prosperity.

Prosperity, however, brought its own measure of problems for the young businesswoman. Miners, employees, and others down on their luck frequently appealed to her generosity. Loans were seldom repaid. On one or two occasions she was also robbed. Such difficulties, a case of infatuation, and a severe Helena fire induced Josephine Welch to marry and leave Helena temporarily.

On February 14, 1869, Josephine married a former Chicago gambler named Al Hankins. The same day, fire broke out in Helena and destroyed most of the business district east of Main Street between Wood and Broadway. Her dance hall and adjoining saloons like "The Exchange" and "Kiyus" on the south side of Wood Street were not damaged, but Josephine and her new husband decided it was time to try new fields.

Leaving her property in the care of associates, she travelled with Al Hankins to the new boom camps of Nevada, settling briefly in White Pine. Neither the marriage nor the surroundings

appealed to Josephine Hankins and by 1873 she was back on East Wood Street with a firmer hand on her hurdy-gurdy business and a new beau on her arm.

James T. Hensley, five years her junior, and yet another Helena fire had profound influences on the life and style of Josephine Welch. She dropped the "Hankins" as soon as she dropped the man, although there is no official record of a divorce. On January 9, 1874, Helena's most disastrous fire began in the Chinese section of town near the corner of Bridge and Main. When the flames had died down, over a million dollars in property lay in ruins. Among the establishments destroyed was Josephine's dance hall.

LUCK DEALT both James Hensley and his lady good hands in the midst of disaster, however. In the weeks preceding the fire, Hensley, known locally as "Black Hawk," had been on a heavy winning streak. He gladly bankrolled the reconstruction of Josephine's business on Wood. Many changes were forthcoming. To better withstand any future conflagration, Josephine had her new dance hall built of stone with an attractive brick veneer that fronted Wood Street and extended through to Bridge. Across the front she had painted "Red Light Saloon."

Next door, to the west, she constructed a two-story building, also of stone. The downstairs she rented out to various businesses, while upstairs provided comfortable living quarters for herself, Hensley, and several girls who worked in the dance hall. Throughout town she invested in other properties, sometimes using Black Hawk's winnings, sometimes her own profits. She also invested in securities which she knew would be safe from fire.

Internally, Josephine introduced additional modifications in the dance hall business. The Legislature of 1873 had decreed that "dancing saloons or hurdy-gurdy houses" were illegal. To circumvent this edict, she ceased charging for the dances, but made the post-dance drink obligatory and upped the price of the liquor. She supervised the trips to the bar with great diligence.

Josephine added her own touch to the dance hall business when she began to import



Jessi



Lilli



Ruby



Annette



Kim



Rose



Billie

fresh young feminine faces from back east, principally Chicago. These attractive lasses became the hallmark of Josephine Welch's place and earned for her the colorful and lasting sobriquet "Chicago Joe."

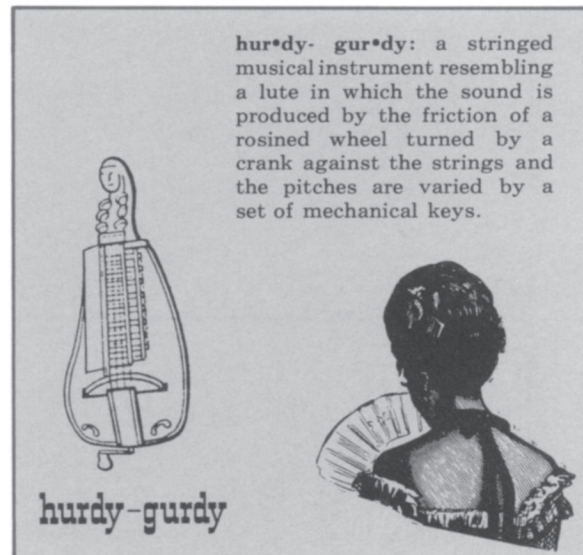
The Red Light became Helena's busiest dance hall and Chicago Joe's prosperity increased. In many ways she was still a soft touch for the downtrodden but she developed a more discerning eye for true sincerity. She also acquired a reputation for helping local businessmen, many of whom became prominent in Helena and Montana affairs, including E. W. Toole, older brother of the state's first governor, J. K. Toole.

Chicago Joe may have established a precedent as the first woman to run a Montana hurdy-gurdy, but her position in the field was not long a solitary one. Bertha Thalan soon joined the ranks of Helena operators while further south a Mrs. Mitchell and four young ladies from Salt Lake City arrived to open up The Institute in Butte.

Mrs. Mitchell and one of Joe's neighbors, William H. Moller of the Fashion Saloon, soon came in conflict with respective local authorities over the Territory's 1873 prohibition on dancing saloons and hurdy-gurdy houses. In precedent-setting cases, both Moller and Mrs. Mitchell had charges dismissed by resorting to Webster's dictionary in their defense. Moller's attorney admonished a jury that a hurdy-gurdy house had to be a place where a hurdy-gurdy was played. Small, three-piece bands had long since replaced the original hand organs and the verdict was not guilty. Similarly, Mrs. Mitchell's attorney pointed out that hers was not a "dancing saloon" — it stood stationary. The defense procedure was a precursor of a later case in which Chicago Joe gained nationwide attention and notoriety.

Black Hawk's investment in Chicago Joe was considerable, but the relationship was reciprocal. When the gambler fell on bad times, Joe was there to bail him out, financially or legally. On December 17, 1878, the two formalized their association, becoming man and wife.

Through the 1870's and for the first part of the next decade, Black Hawk and Chicago Joe dominated what one Helena paper called the "substratum society" of Helena. To avoid public approbation they changed the name of Joe's saloon to "The Red Star." The men kept



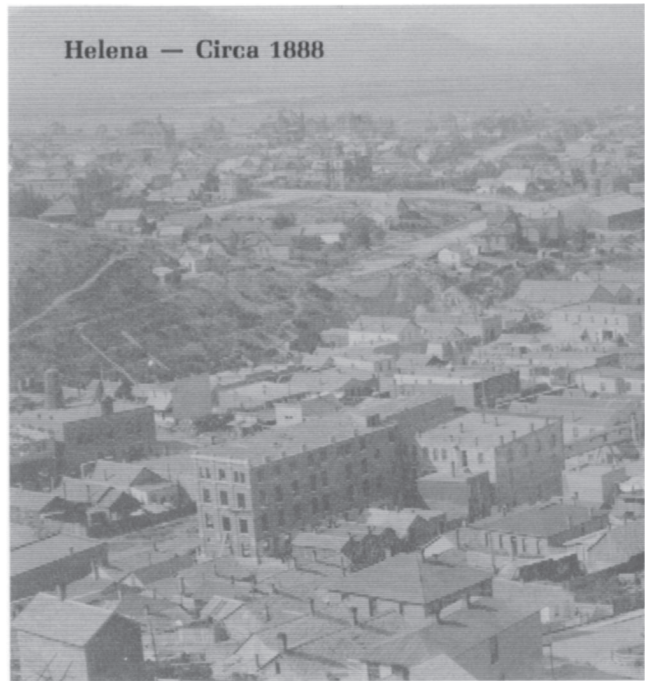
coming, willing to pay for the attractive company of a young lady with regular trips to the bar.

In 1885, Representative John M. Robinson of Gallatin County was ready to try tackling those "pernicious" hurdy-gurdy houses once more. During that Legislative Session he introduced a measure designed to curb their operation. It became effective with the Governor's signature on March 12, 1885.

EVERYONE KNEW the law was on the books and that the Red Star qualified in every sense of the word, but Helena residents were content to leave well enough alone. During the summer of 1886, however, a crusading Republican District Attorney named William H. Hunt decided it was time to clamp down on this degrading form of social life. What better example could he make than the operation of Chicago Joe.

On August 21, 1886, Helena police officers George Bashaw, William Lewis and William LaReau walked into the Red Star and asked Joe to close. She laughingly refused and the officers left. They returned shortly with a warrant, secured through the efforts of Assistant District Attorney Elbert D. Weed. They arrested Joe and two of her girls. Trial was set for August 30.

Chicago Joe secured the best lawyer possible — former Territorial Secretary Isaac D. McCutcheon. They decided to base their de-



fense on the same principal Bill Moller had used a decade before—the definition of “hurdy-gurdy.” Probate Judge Joseph Davis opened the case on the afternoon of the 30th and presided over initial selection of a five-man jury. There was some difficulty finding five men who professed objectivity in the matter of hurdy-gurdy houses, but eventually the two attorneys agreed on a panel: C. P. VanWert, a local dry goods merchant; George T. W. White, a brick and stone mason; Fred Favor; contractor Martin B. Moran, and, surprisingly enough, police officer John A. Quirk.

Elbert Weed opened the trial with an address to the jury in which he typified hurdy-gurdy houses as immoral sinkholes wherein men’s souls were lured to the “shores of sin by the combined seductive influences of wine, women and dance.” He called each of the arresting officers to the witness stand in turn, and each testified that Chicago Joe did, in fact, run what was commonly known as a hurdy-gurdy house.

In cross examination, McCutcheon asked each officer if he had actually seen a hurdy-gurdy played in the Red Star. The officers admitted they had not. Although Joe and a couple of her girls were present, the former Secretary called no witnesses. He simply

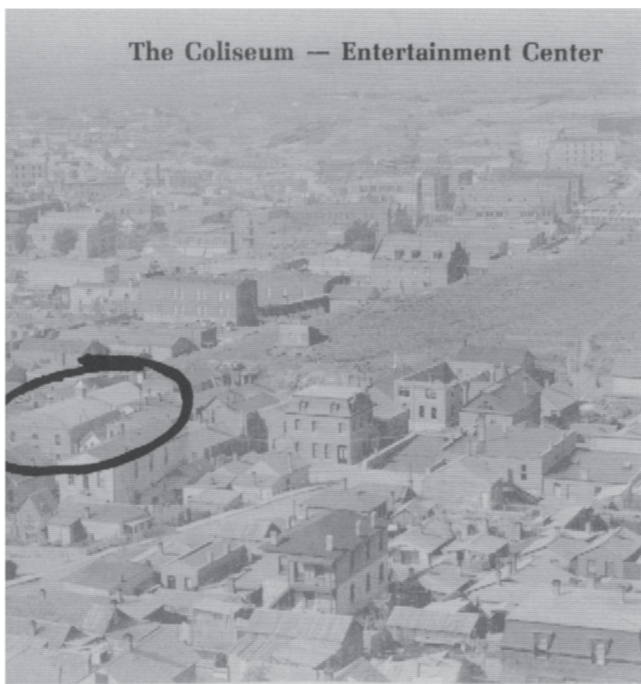
addressed the jury with a copy of Webster’s dictionary in hand. A hurdy-gurdy, he read, was a stringed, flute-like instrument “whose sounds are produced by the friction of a wheel, and regulated by the fingers.” It followed, McCutcheon concluded, that a hurdy-gurdy house would have to be a place where such an instrument was played.

Armed with the formal complaint, a copy of the Territorial law, and an unabridged edition of Webster’s, the jury retired to deliberate Joe’s fate. At the end of an hour they reported themselves hopelessly deadlocked.

“I can’t help that,” Judge Davis replied. “Return to the room.”

At 7:30 the matter was still in doubt so the judge permitted a break for supper. The jury resumed its work until nine that night when the members reached agreement — not guilty. A celebration began on Wood Street.

Helena’s newspapers were aghast at the verdict. “An Inning for Sin,” the *Independent* proclaimed. The disreputable institutions would be back in numbers like the days of yore, the *Daily Herald* lamented in its columns. The hurdy-gurdy trial received nationwide attention and Chicago Joe’s use of Webster’s dic-



tionary in her defense became legend. At the Red Star, it was business as usual.

Josephine Hensley had a reputation for generosity and kindness in Helena, but the impudence of the Republican District Attorney and his assistant raised her ire. Hunt was not running for re-election that fall, but, Joe reasoned, if a Republican had prosecuted her once, another Republican might do the same. She threw her influence and financial support behind Democratic candidate William Wallace, Jr., one of E. W. Toole's law partners. The race was close, but, largely through Chicago Joe's efforts, Wallace won. It was Joe's only try at politics and it was successful.

ADVANCING civilization brought with it an influx of feminine faces. The days of hurdy-gurdy appeal were limited in the West and Chicago Joe knew it. Adapting to changing tastes, she remodeled her saloon in 1887 and opened a small variety Theater called the Coliseum. The format was simple. Patrons, primarily male, paid a minimal admission fee. Inside they were treated to vaudevillian entertainment performed by a select cast, including an adequate number of attractive young ladies. Between performances the girls circulated through the audience to

share drinks with the patrons, receiving commissions based on the quantity sold.

Variety theaters replaced hurdy-gurdy houses throughout the West and Helena was no exception. Again, Chicago Joe's business acumen became apparent, for the Coliseum was an immediate success. Returns were sufficient the first year to finance construction of a large (40 feet by 200 feet) stone theater at 16 Wood Street, just east of Joe's original saloon.

The new Coliseum had its grand opening on July 4, 1888, with an appreciative, capacity audience and a performance to equal that of any variety theater in the United States. The playbill listed Josephine Hensley as proprietor, with George Clayton as stage manager, and Billy Mack as business manager and featured performer.

Inside were tasteful paintings and decorations, a modern stage, comfortable chairs, and, of particular importance, private boxes on both main and balcony levels. Here discreet patrons could enjoy a drink and some companionship shielded from public view by heavy velvet curtains. Beer was \$1.00 per bottle; "champaign" \$5.00 per pint. For the ultimate in discretion, the private boxes had electric bells connected with the bar to facilitate reordering.

NEW
Coliseum Theater
19 WOOD STREET.

Proprietor: **MRS. JOSEPHINE HENSLEY**
Manager: **GEORGE CLAYTON**
Business Manager: **BILLY MACK**
Musical Director: **CHAR. A. BOYD**
Machinist: **TED HUTCH**

Our Souvenir
JULY 4

Our Nation's Day, on which occasion we will begin our entertainment with a beautiful opening act, entitled,

Music and Mirth
Replete with new song, jokes, include funny sayings, witty remarks, puns, etc. and will conclude with a Grand Allstaric Tableau, entitled

LIBERTY
Also the greatest of all Finales

THE AUCTIONEER
Prof. Chas. A. Boyd and his Grand Orchestra
Overture, My Country..... in Songs
Miss Louise Leslie..... in Songs
Miss Violet Redmond..... in Dance

FOY and RIVERS,
American's representative sketch artists
In their unparalleled acts and impersonations. Vocalist, in Songs

Miss Kittie LaRaine.....
Miss Jennette Lewis.....

THE HALLS
Great Success of the Favorites
HERBIE
CLARENCE
In their New Sketch, entitled, "Flirting in the Park."

MISS MINNIE FLYNN
First appearance in this city
Vocalist, Dancer and Comedienne
The Little Queen of Darkers..... **JIMMY**
MACK AND THOMPSON, "Sweet Amelie"
In his Clog Exercises
Songs and Dance,

BILLY
In their great black faced songs and dances.....
MR. JOHN LAWRENCE
The very refined tenor vocalist
Miss Jessie Chapman..... Orchestra
Mr. P. C. Foy,
Will sing Longfellow's Beautiful Song, "The Bridge."

Overture, very select.....
Now comes Billy Mack's great comedy
UNCLES
James Thompson
Violet Redmond
Orchestra
Uncle Jack (Geo. Clayton) Uncle Horace
Beautiful Songstress
In Fancy Dance

Uncle Jack (Geo. Clayton)
Overture, Wait for Leo.....
Louise Leslie.....
Kitty LaRaine.....

Lawrences **BIRDIE**
Wonderful success of the great musical artists and dancers, the
In some of their great specialties. In new Songs
In Berio Comic Song

JOHN F.
Jennette Lewis.....
Miss Jennie Hall.....
Now comes the society entertainers
REDMOND and ALICOTE **JAMES**
VIOLET..... The Beautiful Songstress
In their great specialty, entitled, The Salvation Army, replete with songs, dances, jokes, etc.

JESSIE CHAPMAN
Now comes the world's greatest ariel artist, pre-eminent and alone
THOMAS LEO
Introducing his wonderful Leader of Life. This gentleman flies through the air with the ease and grace of a swallow, and performing athletic stunts unheard of feats in the gymnastic world. Don't fail to see him.

MINNIE—FLYNN and LAWRENCE **BIRDIE**
Another great feature, the first appearance of
In double songs and dances, sad clogs, reels, jig, etc. Orchestra

Overture, Wait for the Afterpiece.....
The evening's grand performance will terminate with the great comedy,
Inauguration!
With the entire strength of our mammoth stock company, concluding with a grand finish.
Wait for it
Admission as Usual

Performance commences at 8:15.
Look out for great attractions.
RECORD SHOW PALTING EYES, KELEVA, MONTARA.



Roxie



Maud

JULY 4, 1888

Presiding nightly over the Coliseum and all Helena after hours life was Chicago Joe. Her girlish figure had gone with earlier days, but her presence was impressive, all the same. Swathed in a flowing robe of dark green or purple velvet, she supervised the cashing of checks and general theater business. About her neck was an enormous, pink-lined, Elizabethan collar, and girdling her waist was a jewel-studded, golden sash. Carefully painted and powdered, she presented an imposing appearance as she swept through the theater, sparkling in the light from the jewels fastened to every possible part of her dress.

It was the height of Chicago Joe's prestige and power in Helena. Her theater was a success, generating a weekly payroll of \$1,000 and more. She paid taxes on more than \$200,000 worth of local property and could be counted on to respond liberally to local charities and public subscriptions. Anonymously, she supported the education of two younger sisters, two nieces, a nephew, and a half-brother. Some said she also had a son in St. Joseph, Missouri, but no one knew for sure.

Chicago Joe's parties were famous in Helena. Her Valentine, grand masquerade and fancy dress ball of 1889 stands out in the city's social history. Of such stature was the event that daily newspapers sent society editors to report the affair.

"Orgies were the order of the evening," observed one reporter, going on to detail the suggestive style of undress worn by some of Joe's girls: "Frail coquettes in silken tights and decolletted bodices, their symmetrical limbs and snow white arms revealed to public gaze, glided to the enchanting numbers of melodic music over the glassy floor, forming a picture pleasing to behold." Joe held forth, as always, like "a queen of ye olden times" in an array of fluffs and laces.*

**Helena Daily Record*, February 14, 1889.

EVEN AS the masquerade ball was breaking up in the early morning hours, changes were in the making that would end Josephine Hensley's way of life. Legislators then meeting in Helena bowed to public sentiments and passed a statute prohibiting the sale of liquor in any place frequented by women, either as actresses or waitresses. Undaunted by the letter of the law, Chicago Joe had holes cut between the Coliseum and her adjoining saloon. She served liquor in the latter; but *delivered* it in the former. Perhaps with an eye to past events, the local district attorney never challenged Joe's theater operation.

The same social changes that presaged the demise of the hurdy-gurdy were at work on the variety theater. Helena became cultured, citified. The Coliseum was no longer a novelty. Tobacco and beer stained the heavily curtained boxes, the decorations became worn and faded, lights burned out. The boisterous, transient, dollar-a-dance, dollar-a-beer clientele dwindled. Yet Joe held on to the theater, to her securities, and to her other investments, hoping for better times.

What social change did not accomplish, the financial panic of 1893 did. Bank failures, real estate foreclosures, and depression did what the fire of 1874 could not — they broke Joe's spirit. She and James Hensley operated the old Red Star saloon, too, but the cards and the good times did not return. Early the morning of October 25, 1899, Chicago Joe died in her room at 15 Wood Street, near the site where she had established Helena's first female-operated hurdy-gurdy house 32 years earlier.*

Amid the funeral cortege was E. W. Toole. He rode behind the casket in an open carriage, followed by mourners from all levels of Helena society. Chicago Joe was dead. Her life had, indeed, been eventful. Her personal "Inning for Sin" had ended.

**Helena Daily Independent*, October 26, 1899.



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