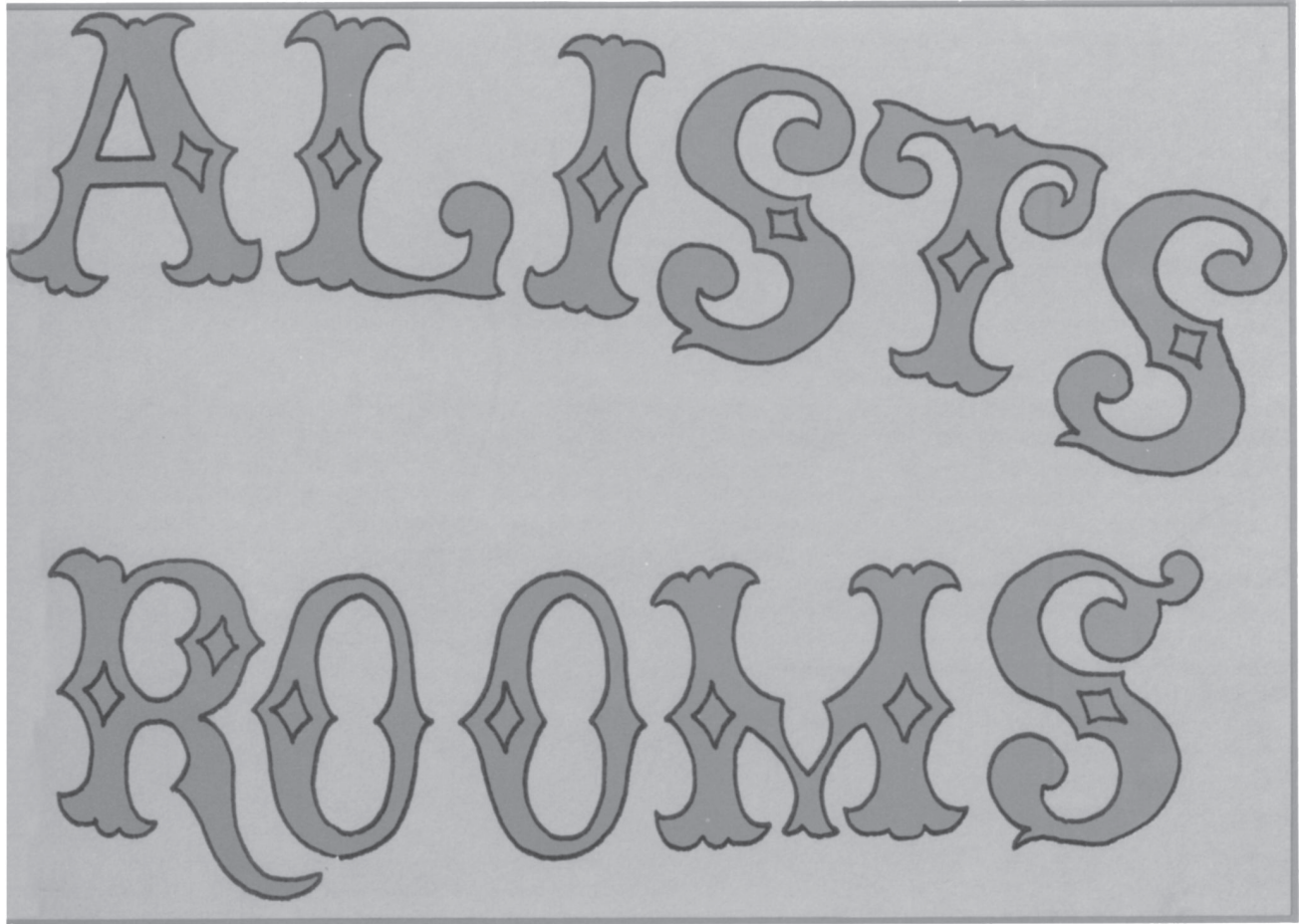




Prostitution in Helena,

by Paula Petrik

Above all else, Helena, Montana, in the nineteenth century was a city of commerce, banking and enterprise. Its leaders were the plucky entrepreneurs who had pursued the main chance beginning in the gold rush of the 1860s, on through the halcyon 1880s and into the troubled 1890s. Samuel T. Hauser, W. A. Chessman, Lewis Hershfield, A. M. Holter, T. C. Power and other lesser-known businessmen dominated Helena's banking, transportation, wholesale and retail trade, and contributed significantly to the overall development of the city. They were recognized as important by contemporaries, then, and by historians, now. Josephine Airey, Lillie McGraw, Mollie Byrnes, Henrietta Bischoff, and Louise Courselle, however, are not listed with the great entrepreneurs nor are they recognized as significant in the economic life of nineteenth-century Helena. Yet, they might have been listed among the



Montana, 1865-1900

capitalist elite, save for the nature of their business. Joe, Lillie, Mollie, and a good many like-minded women were Helena's prostitutes and madams, and while they were not included in Helena's Board of Trade or commercial clubs, they, too, built an "empire" in Helena, a business of considerable proportion that was an important component of the local economy. Between 1865 and 1886, Helena's residents of the demimonde constituted the largest single women's employment outside the home. Keeping a house was second, although a distant second, only to keeping house as the largest female occupation.¹ But, as with other business empires, Helena's demimonde lost its stability and internal strength. At century's end, it was a shadow of what it once was. How that empire was built, who built it, and why it faded is an integral part of the history of Helena and a surprising chapter of the history of women in the American West.

BETWEEN ITS FOUNDING in 1864 and the arrival of the railroad in 1883, Helena's demographic character changed very little. It was like many western towns having their economic base in mining — an urban village. Urban in that within months, Helena had its own theater, school, library, churches, and newspapers. Helena's residents had barely left their tents for log cabins when a dozen social and civic clubs sprang up. Yet, in terms of size it remained a village or at the most a small town. In 1870, Helena numbered a little over 3,000 inhabitants; by 1880, it had increased its population by 17 per cent to a little over 3,600. After 1883, Helena grew. By 1890, its population had tripled and numbered nearly 13,000, an impressive figure for a relatively isolated community, but after 1893, a demographic disaster overtook the community. By the federal census in 1900, Helena had lost nearly a quarter of its population. During this thirty-five year period, the most salient characteristic of Helena's population was the preponderance of young, single men.² In some age groups they outnumbered the women by as much as five to one, and though the ratio of men to women gradually evened, this feature of Helena's population affected the development of the community.³ One result was to intensify the community's orientation toward a predominately service economy.

Young, unmarried men needed a multitude of services — housing, food, clothing, and recreation — services that under normal nineteenth-century circumstances were provided by women within the home and family circle. In Helena during the period, families were at a premium. Consequently, these domestic services were transferred onto Main Street. Women operated boarding houses, restaurants, laundries, and manufactured clothing. In addition, they furnished much of the entertainment, ranging from managing saloons to acting as dancing partners in the "hurdy gurdy houses." Part of this entertainment industry included sexual favors, and to provide such services, Helena had its own flock of "soiled doves." Like women's legitimate business enterprises, prostitution in Helena was an entrepre-

neurial activity characterized by property ownership, a high degree of business acumen and skill, and, in its "empire" days, by an increasingly complex social organization.

From 1865 until 1883, Helena's tenderloin was dominated by proprietor prostitutes, women who operated alone primarily, owned their own dwelling on the "line," or had sufficient capital to do so.⁴ Women like Louisiana Martinea, Eleanor Alphonsine Dumont, Henrietta Bischoff, Kate Silvers, and Louise Courselle arrived in Helena with capital, paying between \$300 and \$1000 for their property in cash or in "good clean bankable gulch gold dust."⁵ Between 1865 and 1870 over \$50,000 changed hands as these proprietor prostitutes made their initial investments or exchanged holdings.⁶ Like their male counterparts, the merchants who supplied the miners, Helena's fancy ladies migrated from other mining camps or bonanza towns whose best days had passed.⁷ Similarly, after the fashion of Last Chance Gulch merchants, they were inclined toward dealing with one another. In this respect, they constituted a kind of businesswomen's network.

Between 1865 and 1870, for example, women made 265 separate property transactions. Thirty-seven "soiled doves" were responsible for 119 or 44 per cent of these. Likewise, when the women of the demimonde found it necessary to mortgage their property, they preferred, whether by choice or the circumstances of their business, to deal with women. All twenty mortgages made to women in the period were made to women of the demimonde, and nearly a third of the mortgages were made by one fancy lady to another. When the women could not borrow from each other, they turned to neighboring businessmen. Both respectable and not so respectable city merchants loaned money in the tenderloin — sometimes to these entrepreneurs' financial dismay.⁸ These financial transactions, moreover, were neighborhood affairs. Both the fancy ladies and legitimate business occupied the same area of the community. Prostitution was not only geographically integrated into the community, but it was also an important element in the social structure of the town and operated with the tacit consent of Helena's citizens, male and

1. The female workforce in 1870, defined as all those women eighteen or older, totalled 485 women of whom 22 per cent were employed in an occupation other than keeping house: Actress—1, Boarding-house keeper—4, Cook—4, Dressmaker—3, Gambler—2, Prostitute—56, Saloon-keeper—1, Seamstress—2, Servant—19, Teacher—3, Waitress—8, Washerwoman—4, Keeping house—338, No occupation—39. In 1880 the female workforce numbered 741 of whom 22 per cent were employed outside the home: Actress—1, Boarding-house keeper—6, Chambermaid—1, Clerk—1, Cook—1, Dressmaker—9, Hairworker—1, Hotel worker—1, Housekeeper—4, Laborer—1, Librarian—1, Midwife—1, Milliner—3, Nurse—9, Nurse administrator—1, Photographer—1, School principal—1, Prostitute—53, Real estate owner—1, Seamstress—8, Servant—31, Teacher—19, Washerwoman—4, Keeping house—449, No occupation—127. Information taken from the Manuscript U. S. Census for 1870 and 1880.

2. Statistical analysis derived from the *U.S. Manuscript Census, 1870, 1880, 1900*.

3. *Ibid.*

4. See Table, p. 33.

5. *Record of Deeds, Book C, p. 200; Book D, p. 324; Book I, p. 98, Lewis & Clark County Courthouse, Helena.*

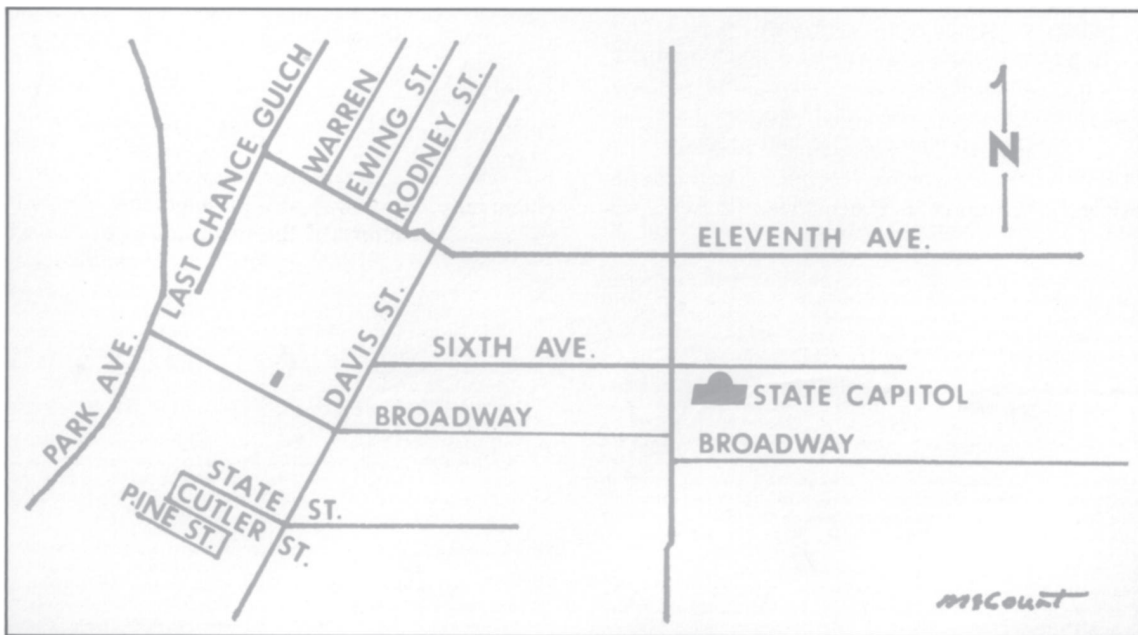
6. Statistics derived from analysis of 116 property transactions of prostitutes between 1865 and 1870.

7. *Helena City Directory, 1867*, (Helena: Fisk Brothers, 1867); *U.S. Manuscript Census, 1870*. Comparison of the two sources suggests that the city directory asked for place of last residence rather than place of birth or origin.

8. Thirteen mortgages went unpaid. Nine of these were made by men to prostitutes. The greatest losses were incurred by Edward Zimmerman and Louise Courselle. Mortgage cancellation does not seem to have been a task that either the contracting parties or the county clerk were especially meticulous about. Oftentimes a mortgage went uncanceled, and yet, the same parties did business again.



Helena's upper Main Street area, where today the Lewis & Clark County Library, Federal Building and Last Chance Gulch Mall are now located, was the center of the prostitutes' land holdings from 1870 to 1900. The modern map, below, will orient readers familiar with contemporary Helena to the location of the prostitutes' houses in the 1870 map, above, and other maps in this article that show property holdings in 1880 and 1890. The small mark on Broadway, between Davis and Park Ave. (below) indicates the location of the Lewis & Clark County Courthouse, which is noted in the upper right-hand corner of each detail map.



female alike.⁹ This is evident in the legal system's response to the demimonde and in middle-class women's attitudes toward the goings-on on Wood Street.

With respect to the courts, there was a notable lack of legal and judicial concern with sexual commerce. No woman before 1886 was arrested for prostitution or for keeping a bawdy house.¹⁰ This is particularly striking since the police court itself was located within the "red light" district.¹¹ The courts essentially arbitrated squabbles in the demimonde that could not be resolved by the conflicting parties, and, in addition, maintained a minimum level of peace and order there for the benefit of its respectable citizens.¹² C. L. Vawter, a prosperous merchant, ran afoul of Belle Crafton on April 6, 1881. She pulled a revolver from her reticule and threatened to send Vawter to his heavenly reward. The outraged hardware store owner complained immediately that Belle had "exhibited a deadly weapon," and Belle was arrested a few hours later. Just as swiftly, she swept into court, pled guilty, and paid her fine. On another occasion, the court intervened in a month-long quarrel between Annie Glessner and Josephine Airey, at one time or another fining both women for disturbing the peace or assault.¹³

Like the judges, middling women took a tolerant view of the tenderloin. In a face-to-face community such as Helena, it was difficult to keep prostitution hidden. Other women in the town could scarcely avoid coming into contact with the fancy ladies, and while they may not have liked the situation, their disapproval in those few instances when they made reference to prostitution was reserved more for the men who visited Wood Street than for the women who worked there. Writing to her sister in 1871, Elizabeth Chester Fisk, the wife of the *Helena Herald's* editor, noted when a "young man who used to sing and dance in a hurdy house and was an especial favorite with Daisey Dean (a low, bad woman who keeps a saloon) preached at the Methodist Church." Later, in 1873, she related an incident that had preceded the wedding of "Mr. B.," whom Elizabeth described as an aging roue who was often seen drunk on the streets. "I have heard," wrote Elizabeth, "of a

charming little tableau down at the green house when Mr. B.'s old Wood Street mistress drew a revolver on his future bride and threatened to kill her."¹⁴ For Elizabeth, a man's or woman's association with drink and gambling was more damning than his or her involvement in sexual commerce. And since Elizabeth lived nearly on top of Helena's tenderloin, she had ample opportunity to have knowledge, if only superficial, of Wood Street's workers.

In 1870, there were a good number of ladies of negotiable virtue on the streets to further Elizabeth's education. In that year there were approximately forty white women engaged in prostitution. Like their respectable sisters, these "soiled doves" came to Helena from all sections of the country. On the average, they tended to be a little older than the rest of the female population. Most notable, however, was their economic situation. A third of the white fancy ladies reported personal wealth, an average of \$2500 or \$1000 more than the median wealth reported by the men of the community, and nearly 60 per cent owned property, reported wealth, or both.¹⁵ In Helena, though all the women engaged in prostitution were not proprietors or monied, over half had a sound financial base, and those who were not entrepreneurs in their own right worked under the purview of other women.

Prostitution on Last Chance Gulch was women's business anchored in women's property and capital. A micro-economic system, prostitution reflected the vicissitudes of the regular business community. A local depression in 1871 thinned the ranks of the proprietor prostitutes as earlier fires had. Only a few of the original female entrepreneurs remained. They were joined by another woman, Josephine Airey, who had left Helena in 1869 to try her luck in White Pine, Nevada.¹⁶ When she returned in 1871, she sensed economic possibility in the midst of depression and set about reorganizing the demimonde. And although Joe's story is marked with success, her biography is illustrative of other prostitutes who operated on a smaller scale.

9. In the early part of the period under consideration, the business district was concentrated along Wood and Bridge (State) Streets. As Helena moved toward the twentieth century, the commercial area shifted onto Main Street. At one time, for example, the Hershfields operated a branch of their banking operation on Bridge Street. See maps pages 31, 35, 37.

10. Derived from analysis of forty-four court cases involving known prostitutes between 1873 and 1883.

11. The police court was eventually located on the north side of Block 13.

12. Nearly half of the complaints between 1873 and 1883 involved one whom complaining against another. The other half of the court cases concerned men, usually law officers, who brought assault or disturbance charges against the fancy ladies.

13. *Record of Criminal Actions*, Case No. 975, Case No. 196.

14. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to her sister Fannie, January 22, 1871; Elizabeth Chester Fisk to her Mother, March 30, 1873, Fisk Family Papers, Montana Historical Society (MHS), Helena.

15. Statistics derived from analysis of U.S. Manuscript Census, 1870. See Table, p. 33.

16. Josephine Airey "Chicago Joe" Hensley has been the subject of what little research has been done on prostitution in Helena. See Rex C. Myers, "An Inning for Sin: Chicago Joe and Her Hurdy Gurdy Girls," *Montana The Magazine of Western History*, Vol. XXVII, (Spring 1977), pp. 25-33. Herbert M. Peet, "Joe Found Dictionary Better Defense Than Statutes in 'Hurdy Gurdy' House Trial," *Great Falls Tribune*, July 10, 1955, pp. 2, 17. Chicago Joe was illiterate and could not write her name. Her name in various sources is spelled at least seven different ways. I have chosen the one used with the greatest frequency. Numerous notarized documents attest to the fact that at one time Josephine Hensley was known as Josephine Airey. The only times she reverted to her given name were on the occasions of her two marriages: the first to Albert Hankins in 1869 (for which there is no extant divorce record) and the second in 1878 to James T. Hensley.

17. *Record of Deeds*, Book F, p. 194.

18. The record of Chicago Joe's property transactions is a long and detailed one. For examples see *Record of Deeds*, Book L, p. 230; Book F, pp. 377, 379, 432; Book M, p. 438; Book H, p. 70. The inventory of Chicago Joe's property included: Lots 9, 10, 11, 4, 7, 12, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22, 23, 24, 28, 29, 30, 31,

FACTS ON HELENA'S PROSTITUTES

GEOGRAPHIC ORIGIN	1870 PROSTITUTES		1870 GENERAL POPULATION	
Immigrant	27%		23%	
Northeast	19%		18%	
Midwest	31%		18%	
West	4%		8%	
South	23%		12%	
GEOGRAPHIC ORIGIN	1880 PROSTITUTES		1880 GENERAL POPULATION	
Immigrant	24%		23%	
Northeast	28%		22%	
Midwest	31%		13%	
West	4%		20%	
South	14%		13%	
GEOGRAPHIC ORIGIN	1900 PROSTITUTES		1900 GENERAL POPULATION	
Immigrant	38%		25%	
Northeast	6%		13%	
Midwest	26%		21%	
West	8%		34%	
South	11%		7%	
HOUSEHOLD TYPE	1870	1880	1886	1900
Nuclear Family	4%	16%		1%
Exclusively Female	38%	10%		58%
Sexually Mixed	4%	50%		3%
Single Female	54%	23%		38%
WEALTH	1870	1880	1886	1900
Prostitutes Reporting or Having Wealth	45%	30%	22%	0%
PROPERTY OWNERSHIP	1870	1880	1886	1900
Prostitutes Owning Property	45%	13%	12%	0%
COMBINED FINANCIAL RESOURCES	1870	1880	1886	1900
Prostitutes Reporting Wealth or Property or Both	57%	36%	22%	0%

SOMETIME IN 1858 a fourteen-year-old girl with the unprepossessing name of Mary Welch arrived in New York harbor. Mary quickly made her way to Chicago and there learned the ways of the city's night life. As was customary in the demimonde, she changed her name to one with more elegance. Thereafter she styled herself "Josephine Airey" and was known by that name when she arrived in Montana Territory sometime in 1867. Like the "soiled doves" before her, Josephine arrived in Helena with capital and shortly purchased property in the Wood Street area.¹⁷ Beginning in 1871, Joe entered into a series of business deals that eventually made her the queen of the city's "red light" district.¹⁸

Like any successful nineteenth-century entrepreneur, Josephine needed greater capital to invest in order to expand and profit. To that end she

raised money on what real and personal property she possessed by mortgage. In 1871 Joe mortgaged her property to Harriet Truett, wife of the probate judge. Although Mrs. Truett's interest rate bordered on usury and her terms were unyielding, Joe fulfilled the contract.¹⁹ She approached Selig Lavenberg, a Bridge Street dry goods merchant, for her second mortgage. He and his brother, Alex, had extended mortgages to the fancy ladies on other occasions.²⁰

Alex Lavenberg emulated the informal relationships found in the demimonde. The R. G. Dun agent described Alex as "Very hard pay. 'L' lives here with a woman not his wife. He is a very hard case."²¹ Undeterred by the Lavenberg character, Joe mortgaged all her property and personalty. Lavenberg's terms were not as strict as Harriet Truett's, but Joe literally stood to lose the camisole off her back. Josephine Airey had mortgaged everything, including

and 32 in Block 21; Lots 1, 2 in Block 15; Lot 27 in Block 2; Lots 7, 6 in Block 27; Lot 2 in Block 28; and Lot 27 in Block 2 Capital Hill Addition. See map p. 37.

19. *Record of Mortgages, Book F*, p. 149.

20. *Record of Mortgages, Book F*, p. 432; *Book G*, p. 392.

21. *R. G. Dun Reports, Vol. I, Montana and Nevada Territories*, p. 240.

her underwear — “three dozen pair underclothes.” Despite a fire on January 9, 1874, that nearly brought Joe’s financial plans to naught, she was able to pay the unsavory Lavenberg six months before the note was due.²² Joe’s gambles had paid off; her position on Wood Street was assured. But the other proprietor prostitutes were not so lucky. Those who had remained in Helena after the initial placer boom could not recoup their losses, and, in consequence, left Helena for greener pastures or more fire-resistant communities.²³ Josephine spent the succeeding years acquiring these departed doves’ property as well as that of others who had left the territory. By 1883, Joe was the largest land owner on Wood Street.

IN 1880, the census taker found Helena’s “red light” district in transition. The demographic character of the white prostitutes had changed very little. They were, on the average, a little younger and mirrored the regional origins of the city’s legitimate settlers. And the wealth was still there; nearly a third had some kind of working capital. But in the 1870s property ownership by prostitutes had decreased by a third, while Helena’s total financial base (property ownership or wealth) had decreased by 20 per cent.²⁴ In one sense, prostitutes lost their autonomy because they had become primarily renters.

Yet, even as the economic base of Helena’s tenderloin narrowed, there was money to be made. Some prostitutes, the “summer women,” only worked in the city from June to September when the mines were open and building trades busy. Winter in Helena for the prostitutes meant an economic drain on their resources. Working men who remained in town restrained their spending, and the prostitutes’ best customers, the miners, either left for jobs in a warmer climate or economized until the mines reopened in the spring. In the early period, prostitution was seasonal employment and contributed to the already high transiency rate of the demimonde population as a whole. In 1880, several prostitutes maintained bank accounts. Their earnings ranged from Belle Crafton’s monthly earnings of \$179 to Rosa Diamond’s \$337 per month. A fancy lady plying her trade along Wood Street could expect an average monthly income of \$233. When skilled male artisans could command between \$90 and \$100 a month and when bank clerks earned \$125 per month, fancy ladies’ earnings were impressive. Compared with the \$65 monthly wage the highest paid saleswoman could receive, their compensation was royal.²⁵ Even

22. *Record of Mortgages, Book H, p. 70.*

23. M. E. Leeson, *History of Montana, 1885* (Chicago: Warner, Beers and Company, 1885), p. 717. Among those listed with losses in the fire are Louise Courselle, Nellie Perkins, and Mollie Graham. Their losses amounted to nearly \$12,000.

24. Statistics derived from analysis of *U.S. Manuscript Census, 1880*. See Table, p. 33.



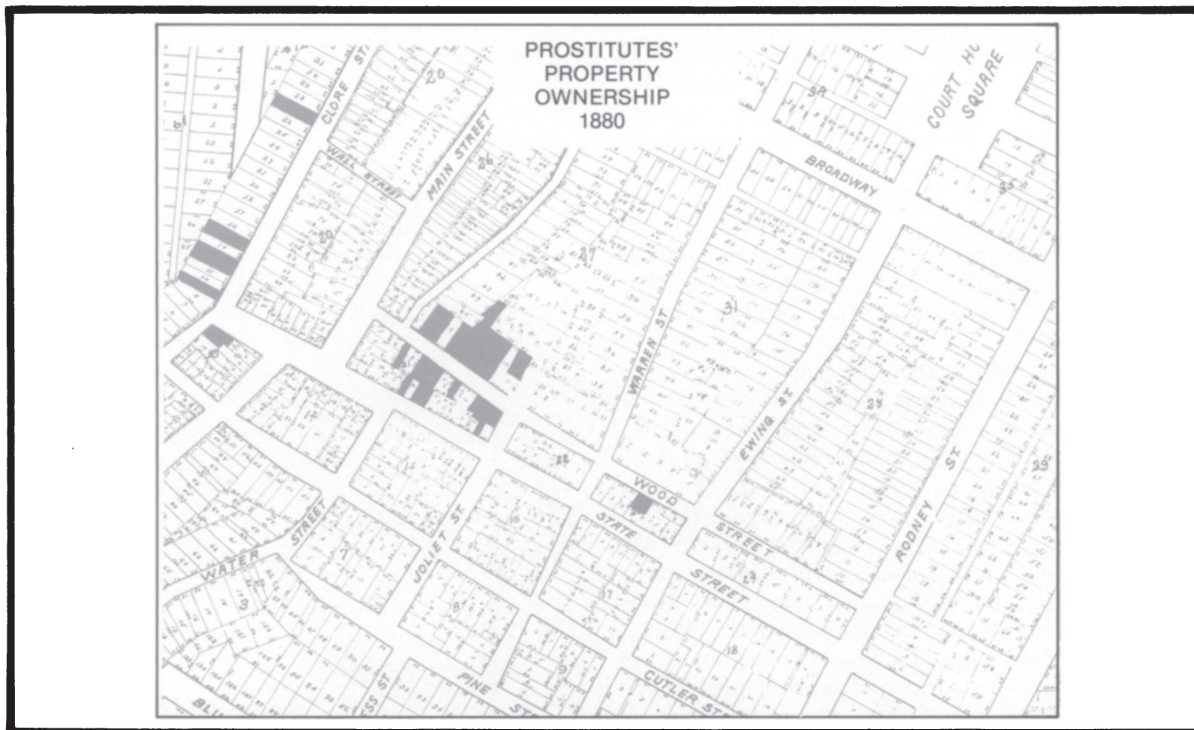
Mary Welch, also known as Josephine Airey “Chicago Joe” Hensley.

though a “soiled dove” had expenses, she could expect to make a profit of \$500 during a summer on Wood Street, or not so typically she could, like Rosa Diamond, leave with \$1000 in her portmanteau.

Money in the tenderloin opened up the possibility for both upward mobility in the demimonde’s hierarchy and outward mobility into marriage and respectability. In light of prostitution’s high transiency rate, tracing the West’s fancy ladies proves virtually impossible. But there are some tantalizing glimpses of women who made these successful transitions. Louise Courselle, for example, left Helena after the fire in 1874 and established herself in Bozeman where she expanded her operation into a bawdy house.²⁶ Although it is not possible to know exactly what business Mollie Graham entered into, it is certain that she became Mrs. J. A. Aiken and moved to Portland. Delores Jarra was one of those women

25. Bank deposit statistics based on analysis of seven bank accounts between June and September, 1880. First National Bank Collection, *Individual Ledgers*, Vols. 21, 22; Merchants National Bank Collection, *Individual Ledgers*, Vols. 32, 33, MHS; *Report of the Secretary of the Helena Board of Trade, 1887*, pp. 12, 14.

26. *U.S. Manuscript Census, 1880*.



who made the transition from prostitution to marriage and family life. Before she entered into her liaison with John Stanchfield she legally “died” by transferring all her Wood Street property to her minor daughters and making Stanchfield their legal guardian. This effectively protected her investments, provided for her daughters, and supplied the family with rental income from the “Twin Cottages” on Wood Street. To further her daughters’ separation from the demimonde and from her own irregular lifestyle, she enrolled them in a girls’ boarding school in Helena. She and Stanchfield continued to live on the ranch she had purchased in the Prickly Pear Valley.²⁷ And finally, Josephine Airey was able to move up out of actual prostitution into a managerial position.

In 1878 Josephine Airey married James T. “Black Hawk” Hensley, a local gambling talent, and by 1886 she had acquired the name that would stay with her for the remainder of her life — “Chicago Joe.” The demimonde had expanded once again; Lillie McGraw and Belle Crafton joined Joe. A number of lesser lights owned property on Wood Street, but Joe and her new associates together dominated that area until the end of the nineteenth century. They

27. *Record of Deeds, Book 8, p. 303; Probate No. 187, Old Series.*

28. Lillie McGraw, also known as Bridget Ryan, was born in St. Louis, Missouri. She arrived in Helena sometime in 1875 from Portland, Oregon, but it was not until 1880 that Lillie established herself on Wood Street. The inventory of her property included lots 11, 12, 13, and part of 91 in Block 27. In the late 1880s she sold part of lots 13 and 91 to James Stranahan, the architect and first owner of the “Bluestone House.” After Stranahan’s untimely death the property passed to J. S. M. Neill, a local newspaper editor and real estate investor. The “Bluestone House” is often confused with the “Castle,” and this is not an unlikely confusion. Lillie McGraw’s houses of prostitution were located directly south of Stranahan’s house, and the

became the principle architects of the Wood Street “empire.”²⁸

At this time, Helena’s demimonde was experiencing yet another transformation. Although prostitution continued to be carried on in women’s social and economic space, that entrepreneurial enclave was, by 1883, becoming separated from the regular business community. Legitimate merchants who had earlier felt free to do business with the fancy ladies no longer dealt on Wood Street.²⁹ The demimonde was becoming a world unto itself. Part of this segregation resulted from the city’s incorporation in 1881 and the battery of civic ordinances concomitant with this reorganization.

A FEW YEARS after its incorporation, Helena entered into an increasing frenzy of moral reform. Along with vagrancy, opium use, drunkenness, and public profanity, prostitution caught the attention of the city fathers. Within a two year period the city council enacted a series of ordinances that were intended to curtail sexual com-

“Castle” was situated across Wood Street facing on Joliet Street. There is no evidence to suggest that the “Bluestone House” was connected with prostitution in the early period. Mollie Byrnes, also known as Belle Crafton, was born in New Orleans, Louisiana. She, too, became a Helena resident in the early 1880s, and purchased property on Wood Street. At one time or another the inventory of her property included: lot 6 in Block 21, the site of the Kiyus Saloon; lot 10 in Block 27; lot 4 in Block 23; and Lot 1 in Block 22. The latter was the site of the “Castle.”

29. Helena’s commercial area had by this time moved securely onto Main Street leaving the Wood Street district to the “soiled doves.” In addition, there are no further instances after 1883 of businessmen loaning money in the demimonde.

merce. The first of these in 1884 prohibited solicitation for the purpose of prostitution. Passed in 1885, the second resolution effectively barred prostitution from the legitimate business area and created a de facto district in much the same way local laws had in other western communities. And finally, in the summer of 1886, the city fathers made a determined effort to remove prostitution from their midst. In bald terms, prostitution and any of allied forms were prohibited from the city. Almost immediately this last ordinance and the state law that had prompted it were put to the test.³⁰

In August 1886, authorities charged Chicago Joe with operating a "hurdy gurdy house." The assistant county attorney in his opening argument described "hurdies" as immoral "establishments where men's souls were lured to the shores of sin by the combined seductive influence of wine, women, and dance." Joe's lawyer, armed with a Webster's Dictionary, countered with a technical defense based on the legal definition of "hurdy gurdy." Specious as it was, the counsel for the defense carried the day by pointing out that the music at Joe's saloon was provided by a violin, piano, and cornet and not by a hurdy gurdy, a boxed, stringed instrument played by turning a crank. The jury returned a verdict of "not guilty." Once the state and local statutes were found faulty, neither Joe nor the other Wood Street regulars were threatened with legal action.³¹ The community continued to turn a blind eye toward Wood Street.

During the same years Helena put its civic house in order, the city experienced a building boom and a change in its leisure tastes. The Wood Street customers wanted more than a quick rendezvous in a clapboard house. They wanted the kind of sophistication, elegance, and entertainment found in Helena's sister cities, Denver and San Francisco. Entrepreneurs on Wood Street sensed the shift in the market and went about reorganizing services to accommodate their clientele. As a result, the fancy ladies undertook a building program of their own. The three leaders of the demimonde refurbished and expanded their establishments. Chicago Joe built the Coliseum, a vaudevillian variety theater, and Belle Crafton, now known as Mollie Byrnes, constructed a tasteful *maison de joie*, later known as the "Castle." Not to be outdone, Lillie McGraw remodelled and added to her Joliet Street houses.³² As Helena's demimonde changed externally, it also altered internally. By 1886, prostitution had become big business.

The social organization of prostitution had grown increasingly complex. Fewer women operated alone; the majority now worked in bawdy houses or under the purview of one of the demimonde's

leaders. These bawdy houses exhibited a high degree of managerial specialization and organization, having acquired a group of mid-level managers. In addition, the houses maintained communication with "red light" districts in other cities. Lillie McGraw kept her ties with Portland's tenderloin, and Joe continued to import women from Chicago. Prostitutes now numbered the time they spent in a city by the weeks rather than by months or years.³³



Rosa Diamond, who left Helena richer by \$1000.

Montana Historical Society

AS THE DEMIMONDE underwent this transformation, the fast life with its attendant hazards — alcoholism, alienation, drug addiction — began to take its toll. No Wood Street woman before the mid-1880s had died of a drug overdose, nor had any prostitute taken her own life. After the middle of the decade, this changed. Each year saw several Wood or Clore Street regulars succumb to the hazards of their profession. Blanche Mitchell and Kitty Williams, both aged twenty-six, committed suicide by taking an overdose of morphine. Lillie Fillmore died of syphilis at thirty. And Nellie Sommers, a black prostitute on Clore Street, ended her life with whiskey laced with arnica.³⁴ Whoring no longer held out the illusion of opportunity for the

30. *Ordinances of the City of Helena*, pp. 59, 126-127, 136.

31. *Helena Daily Herald*, August 23, 1886.

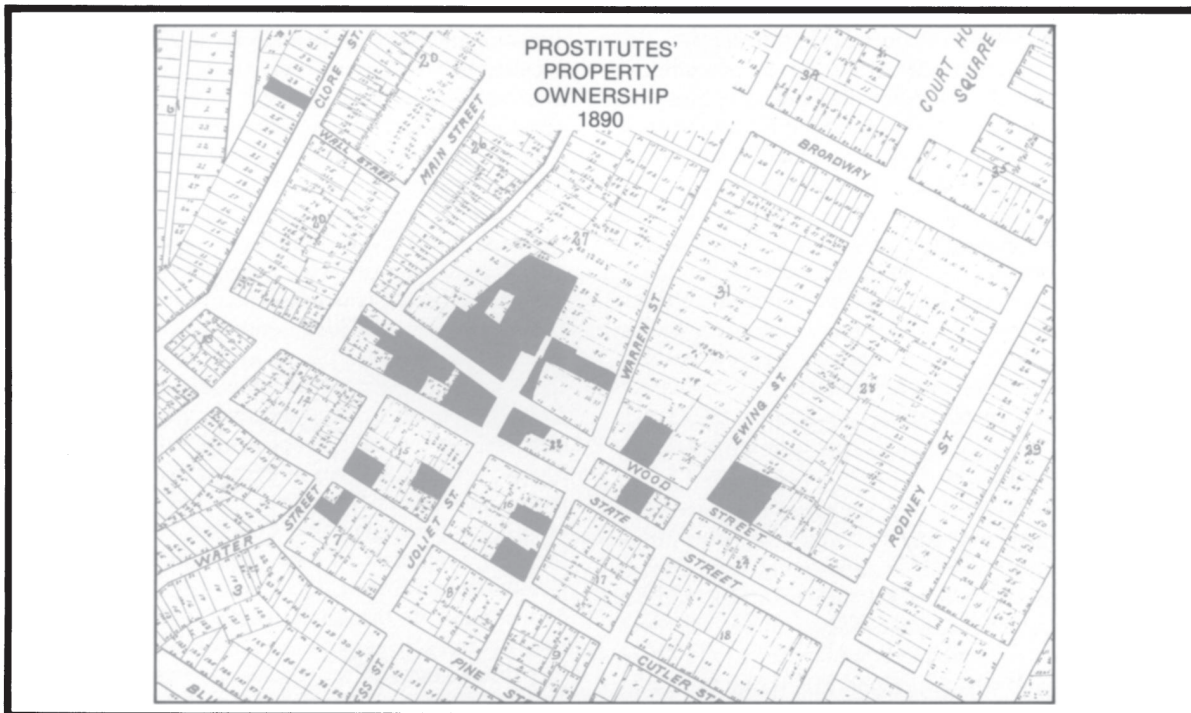
32. *Report of the Secretary of the Helena Board of Trade, 1887*, p. 10; *Helena Daily Record*, January 1, 1889; Sanborn-Perris Insurance Map, 1888.

33. Coroner's Inquisition No. 278. From this and other inquests it is possible to glean some idea of the internal organization of Helena's bawdy houses. The inquest cited is concerned with the double suicide attempt of Dora Forrest and Madge Dowd in which Dora Forrest perished.

34. *Register of Deaths in Lewis and Clark County, 1883-1907*.

35. *Record of Marriages*, License No. 194.

36. *Helena City Directory, 1891*; Abstract No. 2482, *Helena Abstract and Title Company* (hereafter HATC).



“line workers.” And even for those who occupied the few places at the top of the demimonde’s hierarchy, the possibility of escape into a better life dimmed. One of those who tried to cross the line into respectability was Mollie Byrnes.

After completing the “Castle,” Mollie made her bid for nineteenth-century middle-class existence. For her consort she chose Thomas Butler Eddingfield, a salesman at Feldberg’s clothing store. When they married in 1890, Mollie was thirty-two and Eddingfield was twenty-eight.³⁷ The next year, Mollie leased the “Castle” to a demimonde parvenu, Lillie Ashton, and she and Thomas moved up to her new residence at 212 State Street.³⁸ For three years Mollie enjoyed the life she had planned, but Thomas Butler Eddingfield proved to be a poor matrimonial choice.

On July 9, 1898, Mollie petitioned the district court for a divorce, charging that Thomas had repeatedly beaten her over the previous five years and that he had “applied to her vile and opprobrious epithets, calling her ‘low shanty Irish’ and reflecting upon her chastity as a wife.” Mollie further specified that Thomas had secured large sums of money from her on the pretense of going into business. Instead of taking up a trade, Thomas had consumed the money “in dissipation and riotous living.” In addition, Mollie charged that her husband drank to such excess “as to be disqualified thereby the greater part of the time from properly attending to business.” Although Eddingfield may have rightly reflected on his wife’s

fidelity, he was perfectly aware of Mollie’s past and had anticipated an easy and indulgent life. For the sake of respectability, Mollie stayed with a man who abused her and humiliated her. But this woman, who had once threatened C. L. Vawter with a revolver, had had enough. The court found Mollie’s claims justified, and on August 31, 1898, the Eddingfield marriage was dissolved. Thomas Eddingfield failed to appear.³⁷

Mollie, however, did not easily give up her goals of marriage and middle-class life. Less than a month later, on September 24, 1898, she married William “Willie” Weinsheimer, a man who purported to be a wealthy sheep rancher from Marysville.³⁸ Despite their recent divorce, Mollie and Eddingfield continued to see one another. In February of 1899, for whatever reason, Mollie and Thomas got drunk together. In the course of the evening, Mollie sold Thomas an undivided half interest in the State Street property. A few weeks later Eddingfield filed the bill of sale at the county clerk’s office. When Mollie discovered what had happened, she brought suit against Eddingfield to void the deed. She complained that Thomas had induced her “to drink of drugged or intoxicating beverages until she became utterly incapable of doing business. . . .” and that while she was in this condition, Eddingfield had persuaded her to convey the property to him.³⁹ The court ruled that the “consideration of \$1.00 for such deed was grossly inadequate” and ordered Eddingfield to restore the property to Mollie.⁴⁰

37. Civil Case No. 4460.

38. *Record of Marriages*, License No. 2645; *Probate No. 348*, New Series.

39. Civil Case No. 4646.

40. *Ibid.*; *Record of Deeds*, Book 44, p. 349.

Nearly a year later, on December 11, 1899, Mollie sold the "Castle" to John Steinbrenner, the owner of the Cosmopolitan Hotel, for \$7000 subject to her lease to Lillie Ashton.⁴¹ The property had provided a comfortable income for Mollie and her husbands in the preceding years, and Willie Weinsheimer saw it all slipping away from him. On December 9, 1900, Mollie made a will that designated Weinsheimer as her sole heir. Although Mollie was literate, she signed the document with an "X".⁴² Three days later she was dead of acute alcoholism, and Willie Weinsheimer became a rich man. Mollie had sold off much of her property earlier, but her estate was still valued at \$20,000.⁴³

Mollie made two poor matrimonial choices, one of which may have cost her her life. It is, perhaps, too much of a coincidence that Mollie conveniently died so soon after she made Weinsheimer her only heir; perhaps Weinsheimer resorted to poison after all as Mollie's brother hinted in a subsequent contestment trial.⁴⁴ Certainly, Mollie's attempt to attain middle-class respectability failed, since, while she had moved up in the demimonde's hierarchy, she could not move out entirely. An alcoholic and tied to Helena by her business interests, she could not leave for greener pastures. Besides, it was no longer so easy to blend into the West's transient population; cities were settling down. Like most nineteenth-century women, Mollie wanted marriage and the whole panoply of that life. The men who were attracted to Mollie did not want her, they wanted her money. In the 1890s prostitution was no longer even a dubious opportunity. But a decade before her death, Mollie clearly did not feel her fortunes begin to change. The "empire" was at its zenith, and for Mollie and the denizens of the demimonde in 1890, there was much to be optimistic about.

IN THAT YEAR there were eight land-owning demimonde women who held property with an assessed value of \$102,560. They contributed nearly \$1000 to the city's coffers in personal and property tax. Only a few of Helena's most successful entrepreneurs and the Northern Pacific Railroad paid more tax than the demimonde. These women and other female investors controlled nearly all the property in Helena's Wood Street area. Catherine Richardson, Emma Howard, and others like them, although they kept their distance from Wood and Clore Streets, were content to rent to the fancy ladies and profit accordingly.⁴⁵

41. Abstract No. 2482, HATC.

42. Will No. 349, New Series.

43. Probate No. 349, New Series.

44. *Ibid.* Record of the subsequent contestment trial is contained in the probate documents.

These businesswomen provided housing or employment for approximately one hundred white prostitutes who worked out of the nearly thirty-five houses in the district.⁴⁶ Some of these women lived alone or in pairs in the cribs along Clore Street or in the better houses on both sides of Wood Street. Lillie McGraw's *maison de joie* could accommodate as many as ten women; Lillie Ashton, Mollie Byrnes' lessee at the "Castle," employed up to seven women; and Chicago Joe provided work for a good many in her various establishments. But even at its height, the "empire" was cracking apart. Beginning in 1890, Chicago Joe ran into financial difficulties.⁴⁷

The building program that the demimonde had embarked upon in the last years of the 1880s had strained the female entrepreneurs financially. Lillie, Mollie, and Joe had all mortgaged their property to meet their construction costs. Joe's had been the most ambitious program (the Coliseum and her other building projects had cost over \$30,000) and when Helena experienced local and national financial depressions in the early 1890s, Joe found herself over-extended. She could not meet the terms of three large mortgages to the Thomas Cruse Savings Bank and to Jacob Switzer, a liquor wholesaler.⁴⁸ In the end, she sold all her property to Switzer for the amount of his mortgages, a sum far less than the value of the property. More importantly, on a spring afternoon in 1896, two-thirds of the demimonde passed out of women's control.⁴⁹ Neither Mollie Byrnes nor Lillie McGraw suffered the financial losses that Joe did, but both Lillie's and Mollie's property ultimately went to businessmen who saw opportunity in the demimonde.

What economic reverses did not do, the years did. On July 17, 1898, Lillie McGraw died of cirrhosis of the liver at the age of sixty-one, at her house on Joliet Street. Her property was leased for a time to Allie Carleton, an enterprising young madam from Butte, but Lillie's heirs, unable to pay the property tax, saw the lots go on the sheriff's block in 1900.⁵⁰ A little over a year after Lillie's death, on October 23, 1899, Chicago Joe died of pneumonia in her home on Wood Street; she was fifty-six. Joe left the world as she had come into it — poor, illiterate, and honorable. Three months before her death, she made the last interest payment and satisfied her mortgage to Jacob Switzer. And, finally, Mollie "Belle Crafton" Byrnes died at the age of forty-two on December 12, 1900.⁵¹ All the dowager queens of the demimonde were dead at the opening of the twentieth century. With their passing, prostitution came under men's control and ceased to be women's business.

45. *Tax Assessment List, 1890.*

46. *Sanborn-Perris Insurance Map, 1890.*

47. Probate No. 187, New Series; *U.S. Manuscript Census, 1900.*

48. *Record of Mortgages, Book 5, p. 38; Book 10, p. 434.*

When the census enumerator made his rounds in the summer of 1900, his tabulations reflected this. The "soiled doves" were fewer, a little older, and primarily foreign-born. They lived by themselves or in exclusively female households, paying rent to landlords and not landladies. Not one woman owned property in the tenderloin, neither did any have accounts in the banking houses that succeeded the failed banks in the 1890s. Although several of the old houses were still in operation, Helena's demimonde had moved away from Wood Street onto Clore Street.⁵² With this shift, male pimps assumed a larger role in the sexual market place. At the turn of the century, Helena's "red light" district had much of the sadness, desperation, and exploitation that were the hallmarks of prostitution of other cities.⁵³ Not until after World War I would prostitution again become the province of women with the advent of Ida "Jew Ida" Levy, Glenn Parker, and Dorothy "Big Dorothy" Baker.

HISTORIANS, like their counterparts in the arts, have often glorified the harlot's progress and concentrated their efforts on the flamboyant lifestyles of high-class, successful madams: the Comstock's Julia Bulette, Denver's Mattie Silks, and the great madams of San Francisco.⁵⁴ More recently, both have taken the opposite tack. Several historians have argued that the majority of fancy ladies died in poverty and degradation, trapped in a profession not of their choosing.⁵⁵ Helena's example shows that the answer lies somewhere between these two extremes. Between 1865 and 1883, for every woman who had a definite chance to leave prostitution, having accumulated enough capital, there were two who had less of a chance. Whether any significant number from either group managed to edge safely into middle-class respectability is purely a speculative matter. Certainly, there is evidence from Helena to suggest gain within the profession. Of those who can be traced, a good number of them were able to move out of actual prostitution and up in the tenderloin's hierarchy. By the same token, there is evidence that indicates this upward mobility within prostitution and possible outward mobility into nineteenth-century society became virtually impossible for Helena's fancy ladies after 1890.

There is no denying that the social and economic conditions of the nineteenth century created an en-

vironment conducive to the development of prostitution. Women were refused any but the most menial and lowest-paying work. At the same time society paraded before women all the material wealth available only to a limited number of them. For a young woman alone, over-worked, or poor, prostitution was a means to survive and to acquire the luxuries industrial America produced. Nevertheless, it has been argued that achieving success through prostitution was, at best, a pyrrhic victory. For prosperity in the demimonde, a whore paid equal social costs. Yet, the history of women in the nineteenth century is littered with comparable hollow triumphs. Sexually vulnerable, nineteenth-century women embraced the ideology of "passionlessness"; in doing so, they traded their sexuality for their elevation to moral and intellectual beings.⁵⁶ Catherine Beecher sought to enlarge women's influence by turning the home into a female domain and domesticity into a science. Instead, the home became a prison and domesticity, destiny.⁵⁷ Similarly, the frontier provided some women with the opportunity to capitalize on a dubious situation. If nineteenth century capitalism depended, in part, upon the exploitation of women's sexuality, at least the fancy ladies of the urban mining frontier could, in some measure, control and profit from their own exploitation. Only so long as the social structure of the frontier remained loose and the West's population continued to be fluid was this possible. Once the social structures tightened and settled, prostitution became another circumscribed role for women. The history of prostitution in Helena is illustrative of this process. Between 1865 and 1883, the fancy ladies did achieve the economic means for upward and outward mobility. They were "capitalists with rooms." The years afterward saw this possibility closed to them. In the same year that the U.S. Census Bureau could no longer draw a frontier line, Helena's Wood Street "empire" began to topple.

The history of prostitution in Helena also suggests something less easily documented. Although the "empire" lasted only a brief time, it left a legacy for other women in the community that made itself felt into the twentieth century. Responding to a social in-

49. *Record of Deeds*, Book 37, p. 396.

50. Probate No. 187, New Series; *Register of Deaths in Lewis and Clark County*.

51. Cancellation of the Switzer mortgages was made July 18, 1899. All of Chicago Joe's property transactions were signed "Josephine 'X' Hensley, her mark." In later years, Nellie Reynolds, one of Joe's managers, accompanied Joe and signed for her. *Register of Deaths in Lewis and Clark County*.

52. Statistics derived from analysis of the U.S. *Manuscript Census*, 1900. See Table, p. 33.

53. For an indication of the changes on Clore Street see William L. Lang, "The Nearly Forgotten Blacks on Last Chance Gulch, 1900-1912," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, 70 (April 1979), p. 56; Lang, "Tempest on Clore Street: Race and Politics in Helena, Montana, 1906," *Scratchgravel Hills*, 3 (Summer 1980), pp. 9-14.

54. Dee Brown, *The Gentle Tamers: Women of the Old Wild West* (New York: Bantam Books, 1974); Curt Gentry, *The Madams of San Francisco* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1971).

55. Marion Goldman, "Sexual Commerce on the Comstock Lode," *Nevada Historical Quarterly*, XXI (Summer 1978), pp. 99, 118; George M. Blackburn and Sherman L. Richards, "The Prostitutes and Gamblers of Virginia City, Nevada, 1870," *Pacific Historical Review*, XLVIII (May 1979), pp. 239-258.

56. Nancy Cott, "Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1850," *Signs*, 4 (Winter 1978), pp. 219-236.

57. Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catherine Beecher*, (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1973).

vestigator's questions, a Helena bartender in 1953 said: "This is Montana . . . Women have a right to sit in bars . . . Nobody thinks anything of it around here . . . They're all good fellows . . . Not a hustler among them . . . We got houses for that."⁵⁸ Implicit in the barkeep's answer is an attitude that did not develop overnight. Aside from expressing a nineteenth-century attitude about prostitution's deflecting male sexuality away from respectable women, the bartender hints at two inter-connected ideas related to both regionality and women. There is the sense in his remarks that the West, in this case, Montana, is somehow different, and second, that the women of that region have social rights unavailable to women elsewhere. Women outside the demimonde had acquired the freedom to come and go as they pleased in all manner of public places without fear of censure. From the barkeep's point of view prostitution had something to do with this phenomenon. In this he was probably correct. Since prostitution removed the threat of male sexuality and eroded nineteenth-century ideas of female propriety, respectable women profited over the years from other women's willingness to trade with their bodies. *AM*

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

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58. Attorney General of the State of Montana, *Confidential Report on Commercial Prostitution, 1953*, p. 2, MHS.



This general scene of Helena, looking north into the Helena Valley and taken about 1915, shows the Wood and State Streets area where prostitution headquartered in the 1880s. Starting at the end of the central street (Joliet St.) in this photo where the stone "Bluestone House" stands, the first crossing street is Wood, the next State, and the nearest



Cutler. Mollie Byrnes' "Castle" stands at the corner of Wood and Joliet. Across the street, at the corner of State and Joliet stands Chicago Joe's first establishment, and at the west end of that block (down the hill toward Last Chance Gulch) the dark-roofed large building is Joe's Coliseum Theatre with her Red Star Saloon just to the west of it. Just below the

"Bluestone House," on the northwest corner of Wood and Joliet was Lillie McGraw's *maison de joie*. Up Wood Street, behind the "Castle" were small houses that were rented by prostitutes, and in fact many of the houses in this area were used, rented or owned by prostitutes at one time or other in the 1870 to 1900 period.