



MHS Photograph Archives

Looking south on Main Street in Helena, ca. 1890

MONTANA THE MAGAZINE OF WESTERN HISTORY

Strange Bedfellows

by Paula Petrik

On August 14, 1884, the *Helena Daily Independent* reported that it had received numerous complaints against Ming's Opera House, one of the city's prominent theaters. Complainants charged Ming's with the indiscreet seating of prostitutes in the theater's dress circle and parquette. Theater manager John Maguire responded by issuing a notice to vendors of reserved tickets. While he had no wish to bar the "soiled doves" from his establishment, their tickets would hereafter be limited and their seating confined to less conspicuous sections. The Wood Street regulars did not let the slight pass without comment. Somehow, five of their number stole habits from the Sisters of Charity and presented themselves, tickets in hand, to be ushered to the five assigned demimonde seats at an evening performance. Maguire quickly had the interlopers thrown out, but the citizenry rose up indignant at the prostitutes' brazen prank.¹

Tenderloin hi-jinks were not new in Helena, but the citizens' response to the bogus nuns' promenading down a theater aisle marked a change. It indicated a new and less tolerant attitude toward the criminal economy's encroachments on legitimate Helena society. Before 1883 and the completion of the Northern Pacific Railroad to Helena, residents and newspapers noted similar events with nothing more than tongue in cheek; after the railroad came, however, such incidents provoked public comment and stimulated a moral reform effort aimed at reducing vice of all kinds in the community.

For many communities on the trans-

Mississippi western frontier, the arrival of the railroad signaled a number of alterations in their social and economic structure. Especially among mining camps that had managed to survive the nearly inescapable depressions that followed their initial boom periods, the completion of the railroad betokened stability and quantum increases in population and prosperity. While these were the most visible changes in community development, other less salient transformations occurred as some mining towns expectantly and pretentiously changed from urban villages to cities.

In Helena, Montana, a mining town established in 1865 and turned entrepôt during the following decade, the city's incorporation in 1881 and the railroad's arrival in 1883 affected the community in a number of ways between 1883 and 1890. First, the railroad brought new classes of people—unskilled workers, the poor, and wealthy investors—into a town that did not have these groups in significant numbers. Second, the railroad heightened the town's self-consciousness and engendered in its residents a new perception of Helena as a bona fide competitor with Denver for the title, "Queen City of the Rockies." And third, in the light of these new civic expectations, Helena's vice district became an unacceptable public embarrassment. In addition to providing the cynosure for the town's municipal reform effort, the controversy over the vice district revealed the cleavages and ideological differences that characterized a frontier community in transition from small town to city.

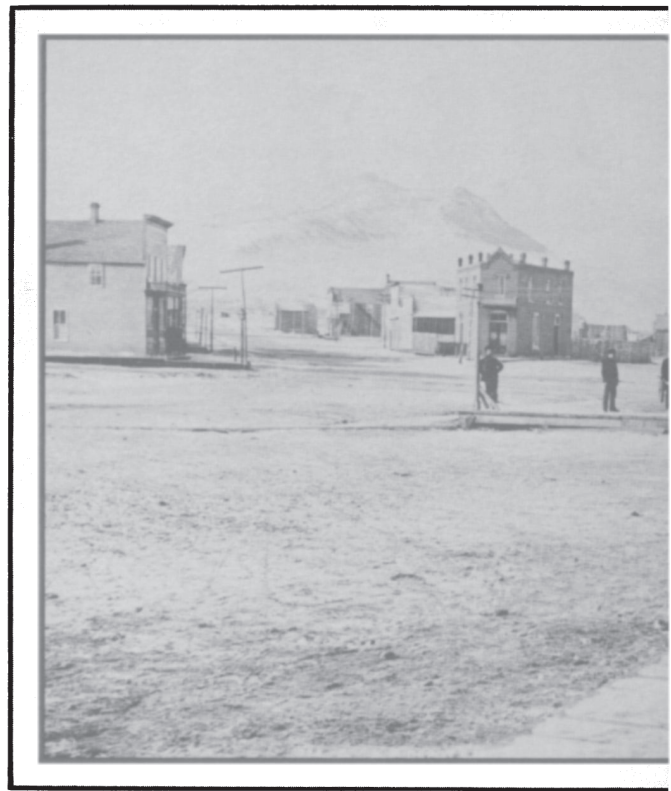
Prostitution, Politicians, and Moral Reform in Helena, 1885-1887

In 1870, five years after the town's founding and the excitement of a major gold rush, Helena had only 3,100 residents; by 1880, it had grown to a mere 3,600—hardly more than a village. From its beginning, Helena was a town that provided services for a predominantly male population. By 1890, however, the census taker counted over 12,000 persons in the city. Although this increase included newcomers and a considerable influx of families, the population was still largely composed of unmarried men who desired wide-open entertainments and amenities.

By this time, the city had developed neighborhoods composed of like-minded and economically similar residents. For the first time, the wealthy—those who built their mansions on Helena's west side—established economic beach-heads in the city and significantly contributed to Helena's financial health. At the opposite end of the social scale, the poor—who congregated in the upper gulch area, the city's oldest neighborhood—represented the antithesis of the best of the Gilded Age, the failure to "better their condition in life." And, for the first time, Helena had a large, immigrant, monied population that had ambitions and ideas about city living that differed from those of the original townspeople's. These two viewpoints on what kind of city Helena should be dominated community discussions about reform during the 1880s.

Two groups typified the divergent attitudes toward reform and were instrumental in changing Helena's urban identity. One group, the town's merchant pioneers, had arrived in the city before 1870 and had endured through Helena's depressed years. From the outset, these Main Street denizens had been responsible for the governance and the economic well-being of the community. Their accomplishment was signal: when other towns vanished, these merchants had ensured Helena's survival.

The other group, the prosperous *arrivistes*, were primarily businessmen with little frontier experience who settled in Helena after the completion of the railroad. Unlike the pioneers, the *arrivistes* came directly to the frontier by rail, bringing with them strongly held ideals of civic conduct that were unmitigated by frontier exigencies and compromise. Between 1885 and



1887, the men of these two dominant elites endeavored to engineer a transformation in public morality.

Neither Helena *arriviste* nor pioneer, however, provided the initial impetus to moral reform. The territorial legislature took the lead. Influenced by the newly established Women's Christian Temperance Union, territorial legislators from agricultural areas, and the prospect of statehood, the legislature undertook the question of reform. As one Montanan noted about the legislators' activities, the legislative session in 1885 marked "the first wave of moral reform that [had] struck Montana."²

In 1885, Montana lawmakers considered several measures that dealt with public morals: an anti-gambling statute, an age-of-consent bill, an anti-hurdy-gurdy-house law, and an act to prevent wife-beating. Although the dance-hall proposition was the only measure signed into law, the anti-gambling proposal provoked the

1. *Helena Daily Independent*, August 14, 1884.

2. *Helena Daily Independent*, February 27, 1885.

3. *Helena Daily Independent*, February 25, February 27, 1885; *Helena Daily Herald*, February 14, February 23, February 24, 1885.



Haynes Foundation Collection, MHS Photograph Archives

The modest Northern Pacific Railroad depot in Helena, photographed here by F. Jay Haynes in 1885, was well over one mile from the town's center, which was then beginning to look more like a city than a frontier village.

most discussion. Two sides emerged from that reform debate. One group supported gambling, reluctant to forego the considerable benefit derived from gambling license fees; the other group placed the common good, the safety of future generations, and the purity of community treasuries above monetary gain.³

The legislative discussion also illustrated the variety of reform strategies and the difficulties lawmakers faced in framing legal and enforceable social control statutes. The pro-gambling forces argued that the high business licensing fees, which were applied to each gaming table, supplied local government with essential funds. Moreover, they pointed out that outlawing gambling by legislative fiat would violate the spirit of enterprise and threaten the state's saloon interests. Further, they asserted, illegal gambling would replace legitimate wagering and create an uncontrolled situation. The anti-gambling faction hesitated to give up its uncompromising position, but it also

4. *Helena Daily Independent*, June 6, 1885.

understood local government revenue needs, enforcement difficulties, and gambling's appeal to entrepreneurial spirit. In the end, the gambling proposal went down to defeat, but the voters were prepared to carry on the debate at the local level.

Following the legislature's example, Helena quickly heeded public opinion regarding the opera house brouhaha and initiated its own moral reform program. During June 1885, the city council considered an amended version of Ordinance No. 7, a lengthy rule that dealt with offenses against good order and morals. Section seventeen of the revised ordinance dealt specifically with prostitution:

Any prostitute, cortesana, or lewd woman who shall by words, signs or action ply her avocation upon the streets, at doors, window[s] . . . [or make] any meretricious display of herself upon the streets in any loud or lewd dress or manner calculated to draw attention to her avocation or shall appear on any public street after 9 p.m. except in case of necessity [shall be fined]. . . .⁴

In an unprecedented move, Mayor James Sullivan vetoed the proposal, pointing out that it was unnecessary, unconstitutional, ill-defined, and generally subject to misuse.⁵ "Just to what extent," Sullivan said, "you feared these persons might 'ply their avocation . . . at windows,' I do not know, but I do think the present ordinance, sustained by the community not entirely devoid of decency, will protect us from the supposed evils."⁶

With Sullivan's veto, further discussion of the social evil ceased until October 8, 1885, when the city council approved an ordinance excluding women from any employment on Main Street.⁷ Designed to protect legitimate business interests rather than to attack the skin trade, the rule effectively created a *de facto* red-light district on Wood, Bridge, and Clore streets in the older, commercial section of Helena. Comfortable with this solution, the council turned its attention to other municipal matters and did not bother with the tenderloin or moral affairs until the following year, when Joseph E. Hendry assumed the position of city editor of the Democratic paper, the *Helena Daily Independent*.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

7. Alexander Botkin, *The Charter and Ordinances of the City of Helena With the Rules of Order for the Government of the City Council* (Helena: Journal Publishing Company, 1887), 126-127.

Aself-confessed “pilgrim, even of the pin-head type,” Hendry was a brash newcomer to the fraternity of Helena journalists. Having arrived in Montana with the railroad, Hendry followed Northern Pacific rail towns and their newspapers from Billings to Livingston to Butte and finally to Helena, where he took over management of Montana’s largest daily.⁸ Editor Hendry knew his business, and immediately the *Independent* changed from a bland hodge-podge of reporting to an aggressive metropolitan paper. Two of Hendry’s innovations were detailed listings of police court proceedings and investigative pieces on Helena’s various vice problems.⁹

Hendry had correctly perceived a market for detailed local news. The *Helena Daily Herald*, the town’s Republican paper, reported city council meetings in the most perfunctory manner and made little mention of police court doings except to note the most sensational. The *Independent*, however, reveled in its detailed descriptions of the most interesting offenders, accompanied with appropriate commentary, and recreated dialogue from the city council meetings.

In the *Independent*’s columns, Hendry also gleefully praised the swift justice of the police magistrate, detailing the moral turpitude of the defendants and joyfully tallying the fines accruing to the city. When, for example, Hendry reported that May Stewart, a Bridge Street saloon owner, and Jack Bernard, her consort, had been embroiled in a stolen property controversy, Hendry sent a moral message to other young men. “She has ruined my life,” Hendry reported Bernard saying, “dragged me down from decent manhood to this condition, and now I’m going to give her away. Half the goods stolen in town are sold here and will find lots of them concealed here now.”¹⁰ From time to time, these daily tabulations were bolstered by sensational investigative reporting. When the body of a child was found frozen, for example, the *Independent* hinted darkly at abortion and determined to ferret out the facts of the case. The story was not

as ghastly as the *Independent* had imagined. Evidently, an impoverished German couple had only been trying to bury a stillborn child themselves, because they had no money.¹¹ The *Independent* had always been interested in reform, but Hendry brought a new fervor to its vice reporting.¹² Hendry, in fact, began his Helena career with an exposé of Helena’s Chinese opium joints, claiming that such places threatened young, white womanhood.¹³

“Old times,” the *Independent* observed, “are rapidly changing in Montana and a new life, a new blood is giving an impetus to the prosperity of the city, and which deserves a recognition and representation in the government of the public weal.”¹⁴ When Hendry was not totaling up crimes, he was advocating the cause of young Democrats by encouraging the grand old men of the party to open their ranks and nominations to young, up-and-coming party members.¹⁵ In short, Hendry kept up a steady drumbeat for moral reform by treating *Independent* readers to daily recitals of their city’s public disgraces and, at the same time, he represented the interests, attitudes, and political aspirations of Helena’s newcomers. Despite the *Independent*’s enthusiastic support of a balanced Democratic ticket, Helena as a relatively new municipality followed the county’s long tradition of “turnstile” politics. Voters turned out the Democrats and ushered in the veteran merchant Republicans.¹⁶

The new Republican administration immediately responded to the *Independent*’s social criticism. In his first address as mayor, T. H. Kleinschmidt indulged in a bit of hyperbole when he described Helena as a “diamond in the rough that needs cutting and polishing until its prismatic rays are fully developed.”¹⁷ A few days later, the council gave substance to Mayor Kleinschmidt’s metaphor when it passed an ordinance to suppress opium dens and their habitué’s.¹⁸ Barely a week after the measure was made part of the municipal code, the city police, accompanied by the mayor, raided Helena’s

8. *Helena Daily Herald*, December 13, 1887; *Helena Daily Independent*, June 12, 1886.

9. The *Herald* concentrated on national and state news, and its editorial columns were filled with the *Herald*’s interpretations of these events and scathing attacks on its competitor. This circumstance was probably a result of the political aspirations of *Herald* editor Robert E. Fisk, who spent much of his time angling unsuccessfully for political administrative appointments. Hence, the historian must rely almost entirely on the *Independent* for a record of local events.

10. *Helena Daily Independent*, August 26, 1886.

11. *Helena Daily Independent*, March 19, 1887.

12. *Helena Daily Independent*, September 9, 1885. The *Independent*’s sole reform interest before Joseph Hendry’s tenure was the opium problem and the presence of the Chinese. It is interesting to note that Hendry began his reform journalism with the same topic, thereby maintaining the continuity established by the previous management.

13. *Helena Daily Independent*, March 3, 1886.

14. *Helena Daily Independent*, April 5, 1886.



MHS Photograph Archives

The *Helena Independent* moved its offices several times before it took over the ground floor of the Parchen Block on Broadway in 1885. This photo shows the paper's offices on Bridge Street in about 1875.

opium dens and arrested the joints' managers, owners, and clients. The *Independent* was overjoyed and totaled the fines as they dropped into the city treasury.¹⁹ One informant was probably correct, however, when he pointed out that although saloon keepers contributed equally to Helena's vice, "the best they [the city council] could do was jump on the poor Chinese."²⁰

Spurred on by the raid's success, council members mounted an attack on another group of moral delinquents—the soiled doves. Because they had few champions and apparently had little economic resources or political clout, the residents of the tenderloin probably were easier marks than the liquor or gambling interests but more difficult targets than the Chinese opium dealers.

Helena's women and religious leaders, two groups normally associated with moral reform and anti-prostitution crusades, were curiously

15. *Helena Daily Independent*, April 3, April 5, 1886.

16. *Helena Daily Independent*, April 6, 1886.

17. *Helena Daily Independent*, April 9, 1886.

18. *Helena Daily Independent*, April 15, 1886.

19. *Helena Daily Independent*, April 30, 1886.

20. *Helena Daily Independent*, May 15, 1886.

absent from the Helena debate. From time to time, both newspapers asked local ministers for comment, but the preachers' opinions never received any particular notice. In 1886, women had more pressing business in mounting an offensive against saloons and Sunday drinking. The following year, their defense of Reverend Kelsey, a reformer and supporter of women's causes, would occupy them during the council debate over prostitution. In addition, the Poor Committee records and the minutes of the state WCTU indicate that women felt some sympathy for the soiled doves. The WCTU's committee on "fallen women" did no significant work, and the Poor Committee helped women in "trouble" rather than censuring them.

On June 4, 1886, Mayor Kleinschmidt directed the ordinance committee to prepare a regulation for the purpose of confining women of questionable character to a specific area in the city.²¹ The committee dutifully undertook the task but could not agree on an acceptable bawdy-house measure.²² The council was more successful as a group, and it hammered out a sweeping anti-prostitution ordinance that simply banned prostitution from the city in bald, uncompromising terms.²³ Although the *Independent* noted this moral triumph under the headline "Wood Street Shaken to Its Core," it editorialized that such laws were difficult to enforce. "It is at least well," the *Independent* remarked, "to have such an ordinance ready for use in case the social evil becomes too bold and intrusive in its demeanor."²⁴

The newspaper's support for the stringent anti-prostitution ordinance notwithstanding, the *Independent* saw that the practical intent of the ordinance was not to eradicate prostitution but to make it less conspicuous and more economically advantageous to the city. During July 1886, the *Independent* noted: "... the ordinance against prostitution besides returning considerable sums in fines to the city, has a pronounced effect in quieting down the social evil—making it less obtrusive and offensive."²⁵

21. *Helena Daily Independent*, June 4, 1886.

22. *Helena Daily Independent*, June 18, 1886.

23. *Helena Daily Independent*, June 26, 1886.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Helena Daily Independent*, July 27, 1886.

Although the *Herald* disliked prostitution, its editors thought the ordinance misdirected. "Unless men went to such places and supported them, they would all be closed inside of sixty days. . . . The greatest criminals," observed the *Herald*, "were not even mentioned."²⁶ What the city council meant by its own regulation was unclear, but its enforcement was apparently not what the aldermen had in mind. The *Independent's* claim for a fattened treasury aside, few arrests for prostitution appeared in both newspapers' police court notices.²⁷

Later that summer the city's and the *Independent's* reform program suffered a severe setback. On August 21, 1886, authorities arrested Josephine "Chicago Joe" Hensley under the territorial law prohibiting hurdy-gurdies.²⁸ As her attorney, Joe retained the former territorial secretary, Isaac D. McCutcheon, a man renowned for his ability to extricate with legal legerdemain the guilty from the law. True to his reputation, McCutcheon secured a verdict of "not guilty" by using a technical defense, which rested on the common definition of "hurdy-gurdy."²⁹ Both the *Independent* and its competitor, the *Herald*, were outraged. The *Herald* writer went so far as to predict a renaissance of hurdy-gurdies across the state.³⁰ With the failure of the anti-hurdy-gurdy law, the one state statute that had threatened the demimonde, and Chicago Joe's successful courtroom defense, the *Independent* lost its most newsworthy story from the tenderloin. Its coverage of the red-light district abruptly ceased.

The tenderloin's respite from legal and journalistic harassment did not last long. During the 1887 session, legislators began a new moral offensive against another demimonde institution, the variety theater. Early in the session, they worked on a statute to prohibit the sale of liquor and the employment of women in variety houses.³¹ Because variety theaters specialized in bawdy entertainment and often fronted for prostitution, the bill threatened the sexual market-



R. H. Beckwith photo, MHS Photograph Archives

Partner in a major Helena banking house, T. H. Kleinschmidt was mayor of Helena during the late 1880s and represented the business community on the city council.

place by removing one of its central clearing-houses. More to the point, the legislators aimed their bill, which banned *in toto* variety theaters, at three establishments in the territory, one of which was Helena's Coliseum Theater, owned by Josephine "Chicago Joe" Hensley. When the bill passed, the *Independent* confidently predicted that the variety theater statute doomed Hensley's Coliseum.³² But Joe Hensley was moving toward social legitimacy; she simply turned the Coliseum into an extraordinarily successful operation by changing its entertainment from burlesque to vaudeville, providing temperance beverages, and getting rid of her female employees.³³ It was not long before the *Independent* was mentioning the Coliseum's attractions in its columns.³⁴

26. *Helena Daily Herald*, June 28, 1886.

27. *Helena Daily Independent*, July 17, 1886. The monthly general report of the police magistrate to the city council for 1886-1887 included only a handful of prostitution arrests, and both journals made no mention of notorious women with the single exception of the multiple arrest on July 17, 1886. This occasion, however, was used by the newspapers to provide an object lesson on the fate of fallen women. One of the women arrested was the daughter of a New York bank president, and she was being assisted by "one of the best known of the younger residents of Helena" to escape her sad fate.

28. Civil Case No. 1767, Old Series, Office of the Clerk of Court, Lewis and Clark County, Helena, Montana.

29. Paula Petrik, "Capitalists with Rooms: Prostitution in Helena, Montana, 1865-1900," *Montana the Magazine of Western History* 31 (Spring 1981): 28-41; Rex C. Myers, "An Inning for Sin: Chicago Joe and Her Hurdy Gurdy Girls," *Montana the Magazine of Western History* 27 (Spring 1977): 25-33.

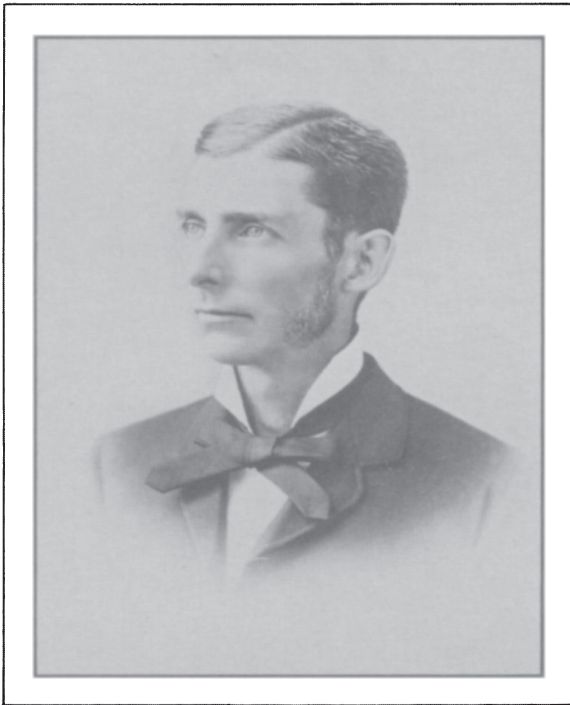
30. *Helena Daily Independent*, August 31, 1886; *Helena Daily Herald*, August 31, 1886.

31. *Helena Daily Independent*, January 30, February 2, 1887.

32. *Helena Daily Independent*, February 16, February 26, 1887.

33. *Helena Daily Independent*, June 27, March 3, 1887; Petrik, "Capitalists with Rooms," 36.

34. *Helena Daily Independent*, April 5, 1887.



Bundy and Train Photo, MHS Photograph Archives

R. H. Howey (above), representing the *Independent*, and Joseph E. Hendry, representing the *Livingston Enterprise*, probably first met at the founding convention of the Montana Press Association in 1885.

The city elections in 1887 changed the political scene in Helena. Unlike earlier contests in which the Republicans would have been replaced with Democrats, city electors returned control of the council to the Republicans. One of the two Democrats who won council seats, John Worth, was a Main Street saloonkeeper who represented several constituencies, including the red-light district.³⁵ The election also broke the pioneer merchants' exclusive control of the council, as four relative newcomers gained alderman's seats.³⁶ Foremost among them was Richard Howey.

Educator, lawyer, minister, and businessman, Richard Howey had come to Helena in 1880 to be superintendent of schools. The following year he became superintendent of

public instruction for the state, and by 1884 he had accepted the position of business manager of the Independent Publishing Company. He shared with his wife, Laura Spencer Howey, a number of reform interests: temperance, women's education, women's rights, and work among the poor.³⁷ Howey provided the council with a new perspective, not only on the financing of municipal improvements but also on the moral improvement of the city.

After the election, the *Independent* renewed its campaign against prostitution, although in an oblique manner. Its editorials lauded the police magistrate's handling of an incident at a black bagnio on Clore Street, condemned a Butte jury's inability to interpret the recent variety bill, and promised that justice would soon deal with "the attaches and the habitués of certain white dens of infamy."³⁸ On June 4, 1887, sixty-five white and Chinese cyprians were arrested in the city's two red-light districts. According to the *Independent*, ". . . [t]he roundup was the first of a quarterly raid to be hereafter made and the fines so collected to be considered as a license for the privilege of conducting such institutions as efforts to totally suppress the practice are considered useless, the evil being one like gambling, ungovernable by either legal, social, or moral laws."³⁹

Two weeks later, bawdy houses monopolized the discussion at the city council meeting. Subsequent council discussions about the informal licensing policy and prostitution's effect on property values revealed the range of solutions, the differences in perspective between old-timers and arrivistes, and the extent to which behind-the-scenes arrangements governed public policy. For the most part, the pioneers were concerned with the economic impact of the situation and generally supported some form of licensing and relocation; the newcomers tended toward a policy of removal predicated equally on moral and economic considerations. When council members made economic arguments, however, they looked at the repercussions from quite different viewpoints. The old-timers

35. *Helena Daily Independent*, April 7, 1887. It is interesting to note that John Worth's election from Helena's Second Ward marked only the second time that a Democrat had been successful from that area of the city. One might reasonably assume that Worth's occupation and his probable ties to tenderloin interests influenced his political success.

36. U.S. Manuscript Census, 1870; U.S. Manuscript Census, 1880 (computerized total population data sets in author's possession); *Helena City Directory*, 1883-1884 (Helena: George E. Boos, 1884); *Helena City Directory*, 1886-1887 (Helena: George E. Boos, 1887); Michael Leeson, *History of Montana* (Chicago: Warner, Beers and Company, 1886). The entire membership of the fourteen-person city council was composed of men who had settled in Helena before 1870, with the exception of Richard

Howey, educator; Ernest Thieme, proprietor of the Grand Pacific Hotel; John H. Saul, proprietor of the Commercial Hotel; and Richard O. Simons, agent for the Singer Sewing Machine Company, who settled in Helena in the post-railroad period. William Lorey, a wallpaper dealer, arrived in 1874, and it seems fairly certain that Robert C. Wallace, a grocer, also came to Helena in the late 1870s.

37. Leeson, *History of Montana*, 1223-1224.

38. *Helena Daily Independent*, April 14, 1887.

39. *Helena Daily Independent*, June 4, 1887.



Bundy and Train Photo. MHS Photograph Archives

Helena's mayors in the 1880s: (back row, l to r) Col. James Sullivan, Col. William B. Hundley; (front row, l to r) T. H. Kleinschmidt, John Kinna, E. W. Knight

stressed prostitution's effect on their *individual* financial situations, while the late-arrivals underscored prostitution's effect on the *community's* financial welfare.

William Lorey, a wallpaper dealer and relative newcomer, began the debate by protesting the presence of houses of prostitution on Water and Cutler streets "contrary to the tacit understanding between members of that locality and the city council. . . . It was," he continued, "understood that they would confine themselves, to Wood, Clore, and Bridge Streets."⁴⁰ Lorey's solution: remove the women from Water and Cutler streets.

Robert Wallace, grocer, suggested that the "soiled doves" be moved to newer localities in the city and be licensed, giving the city additional revenue. Richard Howey was dismayed: he "did not want to derive revenue from houses of that kind; did not want to take a cent in any shape or manner from houses of ill fame; that source of revenue," he added, "was dis-

40. *Helena Daily Independent*, June 20, 1887.

41. *Ibid.*

reputable and objectionable to the best people of Helena."⁴¹ Wallace reiterated his plea for licensing, but Archer O. Simons, Singer Sewing Machine *parvenu*, was of the opinion that it could not be done. On the contrary, replied pioneer real estate broker Richard Hoback, prostitution was a trade and occupation under the language of the revenue ordinance. Marcus Lissner, veteran proprietor of the International Hotel, argued that the doves should leave because their presence depreciated property values in the area. Marshal John Read presented the lawman's point of view: "Who would be the prosecuting witnesses should the police make arrests?" "There are plenty of witnesses," snapped Howey, "if you can only find them."⁴² With that the council agreed to secure the city attorney's opinion and deal with the issue at the next meeting.

42. *Ibid.*

43. *Helena Daily Independent*, June 25, 1887.

44. *Ibid.*

45. *Ibid.*



MHS Photograph Archives

This photograph of the members of Montana's 15th Territorial Legislature, which met between August 29 and September 14, 1887, was taken in the legislature's temporary quarters in Helena's Merchants Hotel on Broadway.

On June 24, 1887, the debate continued. Reassured by the city attorney that the bawdy-house ordinance was sufficient and enforceable against any or all establishments, the council members wrestled with the question of interpretation. According to the *Independent*, “. . . the feeling prevailed that the scarlet women should not be suppressed but rather confined to . . . the places originally intended where they should reside.”⁴³ The council then ordered that the prostitutes be forced from the streets in question.⁴⁴ Richard Howey, however, was not finished. In an impassioned speech, he suggested yet another consideration:

All sin and fault is laid at the doors of the women; no charity is expressed for them and no consideration given as to the cause or reason for being inmates of such places; they are not there through choice, but by the grinding heel of destiny or fate. Some mercy should be shown them; they should not be driven out from every quarter; it is an evil arising from the vile passions of

men that made them what they are, consequently they should not be the more degraded. . . . Tacitly prescribe the limits here they shall dwell as done heretofore by the council, thereby exercising our charity by permitting them to remain unmolested.⁴⁵

In his speech, Howey encapsulated much of the nineteenth century liberal reformist view as well as a good deal of myth. Like many of his peers, he viewed prostitution as the product of a seduction or other unfortunate sexual experience and an employment that women did not voluntarily choose. But unlike many of his contemporaries, Howey linked the skin trade not only to women's weakness but also to men's. His pragmatic view of vice in the community was a combination of a live-and-let-live attitude, charity about those things he could not alter, and a program of change and betterment regarding matters over which he had some control. When he had finished his speech, Howey moved that the council adopt a resolution preventing the execution of Ordinance No. 86 for the purpose

of raising revenue. The resolution passed unanimously, and the *Independent* quickly protested. "The council," wailed the editor, "is compromising its own ordinance and, worse still, is compromising with the houses of ill-fame."⁴⁶

Between June and October 1887, city fathers occupied themselves with other municipal matters, and the "social evil" did not merit public discussion until the quarterly roundup of soiled doves. On October 7, 1887, the *Independent* reported that approximately one hundred women were arrested under the provisions of Ordinance No. 86. The arrests, the *Independent* explained, constituted a quarterly fine in lieu of licenses.⁴⁷ The incident immediately provoked a clash of authority between the city attorney, who refused to prosecute the women because of Howey's resolution, and the police magistrate, who fined them under Ordinance No. 86. The doves themselves were willing to pay the quarterly assessment, considering the arrangement cheap compared with that in other cities. The city fathers once again found themselves discussing prostitution.

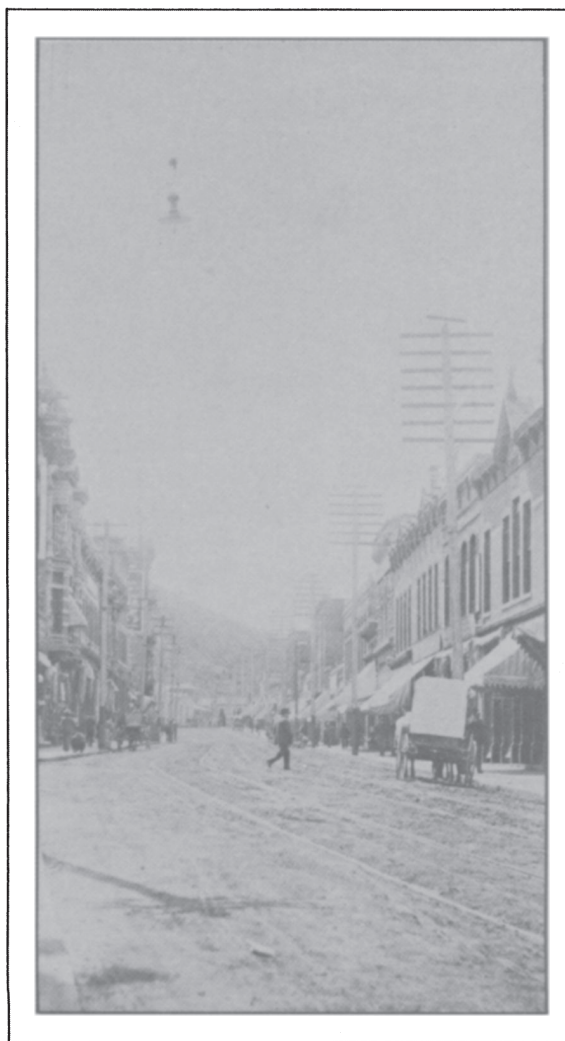
Richard Howey reminded the council of its resolution, and then he rephrased it to guarantee that fines would be refunded to the offenders. After considerable debate over the propriety of vice raids in general, the council voted on Howey's amended resolution; the pioneer majority on the council agreed with Howey, while the newcomer minority did not.⁴⁸ The city council had reached a kind of compromise between the partisans of tolerance and the supporters of unyielding moral reform; the city would accommodate prostitution within bounds, but the local government would not profit from it. For the time being, moral considerations outweighed economic ones.

The city council meetings during October 1887 fairly settled the issue of the suppression of prostitution in Helena. The death of twenty-seven-year-old Joseph Hendry on December 13, 1887, further assured that the new status quo would remain undisturbed. With Hendry's death, the *Independent* discontinued its social criticism and returned to its former journalistic somnolence. Hendry had proved to be the necessary ingredient to initiate a program of

46. *Ibid.*

47. *Helena Daily Independent*, October 7, 1887.

48. *Helena Daily Independent*, October 14, 1887.



MHS Photograph Archives

Helena's winding Main Street in about 1890, when the town aspired to the title of the "Queen City of the Rockies"

reform, but his support derived from a broad base of Helena's citizenry who endorsed his positions and elected like-minded individuals to policy-making positions. Although Helena's interest in moral reform disappeared, the vitality that had once characterized such activity was redirected toward an equally pressing issue, the improvement of the city's services and appearance—adequate sewage facilities, improved streets, and water for the town.⁴⁹

49. *Helena Daily Independent*, August 3, August 10, 1888, January 24, 1891, April 20, 1889; *Helena Daily Herald*, December 13, 1887. There is the sense from later issues of the *Independent* that law enforcement officials found a way to circumvent Howey's resolution. After Howey's departure from the city council, the *Independent* made a brief reference to a quarterly roundup of prostitutes. By 1891, pimps, instead of prostitutes, were being arrested on a regular basis.

The majority of Helena's citizens, arriviste and pioneer alike, concurred in the need for civic moral reform. They understood that unless Helena dealt effectively with its public vices, the city would remain a trumped-up "mining camp" with many of a camp's hallmarks: opium dens, gambling, and prostitution. Such a place would not attract emigrating families and potential investors. While Helenans agreed on these points, they differed on the means to effect moral reform.

Initially, the reformers advocated ejecting the offenders on purely moral grounds, rooting out vice for the good of the community and its sons and daughters. But the failure of state and local statutes soon made it clear that vice could not be suppressed. Consequently, the reformers tried to control rather than to eradicate it. To control prostitution, some reformers proposed direct assaults on the bawdy houses, others advised legal prosecution of the fancy ladies, and still others suggested the arrest of demimonde patrons or the confinement of the women to designated areas in the city.

At the outset, Hendry's *Independent*, which represented the newcomers' attitudes, supported the most rigorous control policy. Although Hendry wanted to remove prostitution from the body politic, the *Independent* developed a more pragmatic approach. If the city were to harbor prostitution, argued the *Independent*, it should be made unobtrusive; it should be made economically onerous to the women, thereby providing an incentive for their departure; and the community should be financially compensated for its public embarrassment. In a few short months, the *Independent* had revised its reform position.

The city council, which reflected the sentiments of the pioneers, was more concerned with economic considerations. On the one hand, they worried about depreciating property values and the threats posed to the city's growth and to their own entrepreneurial futures by conspicuous, expanding prostitution. On the other hand, they understood that prostitution, as a legitimate employer and customer, contributed significantly to the business community. The tenderloin required groceries, liquor, insurance, construction, and more. Bestowing a civic blessing on the skin trade through a formal licensing system made most pioneer aldermen uncomfortable, but they did not want to ban the prostitutes and their profits from the city. They wanted

some measure of social control, but its form was problematic.

Into this dilemma stepped Richard Howey who, in one sense, stood squarely between the arrivistes and the pioneers. Neither a post-railroad arrival nor an original settler, Howey successfully mediated a compromise. He satisfied the moralists by keeping the city treasury devoid of tainted money, and he helped to preserve property values and tenderloin business prospects for the merchants. He favored the *Independent's* view that prostitution should be confined, and he even safeguarded the doves' livelihood. New and old members of the city council accepted Howey's compromise and voted in favor of his resolution.

Along with the appearance of class divisions and social amenities such as grand hotels and an opera house and the proliferation of banking institutions, Helena's moral reform campaign signaled Helena's transition from an exuberant—even vulgar—mining town to a refined, mature city. Helena's anti-prostitution campaign illustrated the further development of the community's identity. After 1882, Helena's citizens realized that a city was more than the sum of its business profits. Entrepreneurial health was necessary to the survival of a town, but a capital city also had to provide a wholesome atmosphere, to display some sophistication, and to maintain a semblance of culture. Critical to this process was the coming of the railroad, an event that introduced a sufficient number of people who wished to recreate the cities they had left behind.

Although both newcomers and old-timers seemingly shared this view, they were often motivated by different conceptions of urban life and civic responsibility. The newcomers advocated relatively uncompromising reform measures that emulated eastern society, while the pioneers reconciled the moral laxity of frontier society with a new sense of community identity. In effect, the newcomers established a new standard for behavior in Helena society, but it was one that would often be modified by the pioneers' earlier, more tolerant perceptions. ❧

PAULA PETRIK, Associate Professor of History at Montana State University, is the author of a forthcoming MHS Press book, *No Step Backward: Women and Family on the Rocky Mountain Mining Frontier, Helena, Montana, 1865-1900*, and wrote a Paladin Award-winning essay on Helena's prostitutes (Spring 1981).