

Baker City's Tenderloin Districts

by
Gary Dielman

Belle Brooks' funeral was held on September 26, 1905, at Welch & Sons undertaking parlor in Baker City. Her casket, covered with flowers, was sung over by a quartette. Rev. J.R.N. Bell of the Presbyterian Church, one of Baker City's most active and respected preachers, conducted a touching, if a bit awkward, service. Belle, who was born Belle Coleman and came from Idaho, had died three days earlier at St. Elizabeth Hospital—today's site of the YMCA gymnasium—a day after accidentally setting her clothing on fire in Jenny Duffy's bordello on Bridge St., where she worked as a prostitute.

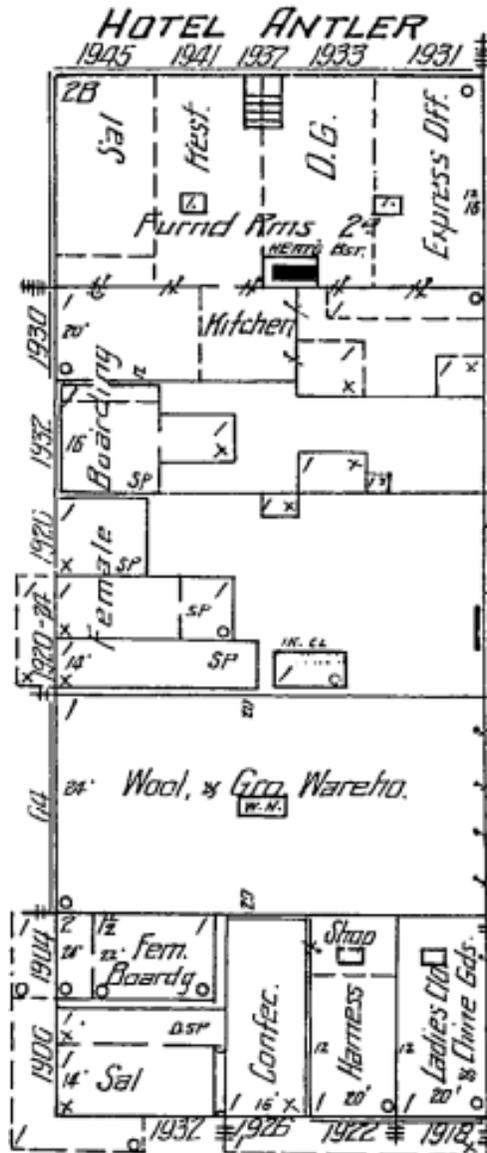
In attendance were Belle's friends from among the many houses of prostitution that populated portions of downtown Baker City. Belle's parents in Idaho, although notified of their daughter's death, did not attend the service. Not surprisingly, no local men showed up to serve as pallbearers, so the casket was loaded onto a wagon by the drivers and transported to Mt. Hope Cemetery for burial. The next day there appeared in the *Baker City Herald* a Card of Thanks to Rev. Bell for conducting the service "for our friend the late Belle Brooks," signed "Jenny Duffy and Friends."

In September 1905, Jenny Duffy and "friends" were under fire from city hall. Shortly before Belle Brooks' death, city council had ordered all prostitutes to vacate within thirty days their lodgings in a couple of areas of town which newspapers of the time referred to as the "red light" or "tenderloin" districts. Of particular urgency for evacuation was the east side of the 1900 block of First Street south of the Antlers Hotel, where six of seven structures were "female boarding," a euphemism used on 1903 Sanborn fire insurance maps to designate a brothel.

Five substantial new buildings were in the works for First Street. Immediately south of the five-year-old Antlers Hotel would be the site of the Rogers Hotel. And next to it, Pacific States Telephone & Telegraph Company had bought a lot for a new two-story brick building. The new structures would displace several of the one-story wood frame houses of prostitution in the First Street red light district. Just cater-corner from the Antlers Hotel, local lawyer, and later Oregon Supreme Court justice, John L. Rand, was in the process of erecting his gray stone-clad Rand Building--today a hole in the ground after being destroyed by fire in 1985. Construction of two other stone-clad buildings lay on the planning board: the Pythian Castle of the Knights of Pythias just south across the street from the Rand Building and the Shoemaker Building on the southwest corner of First and Court.

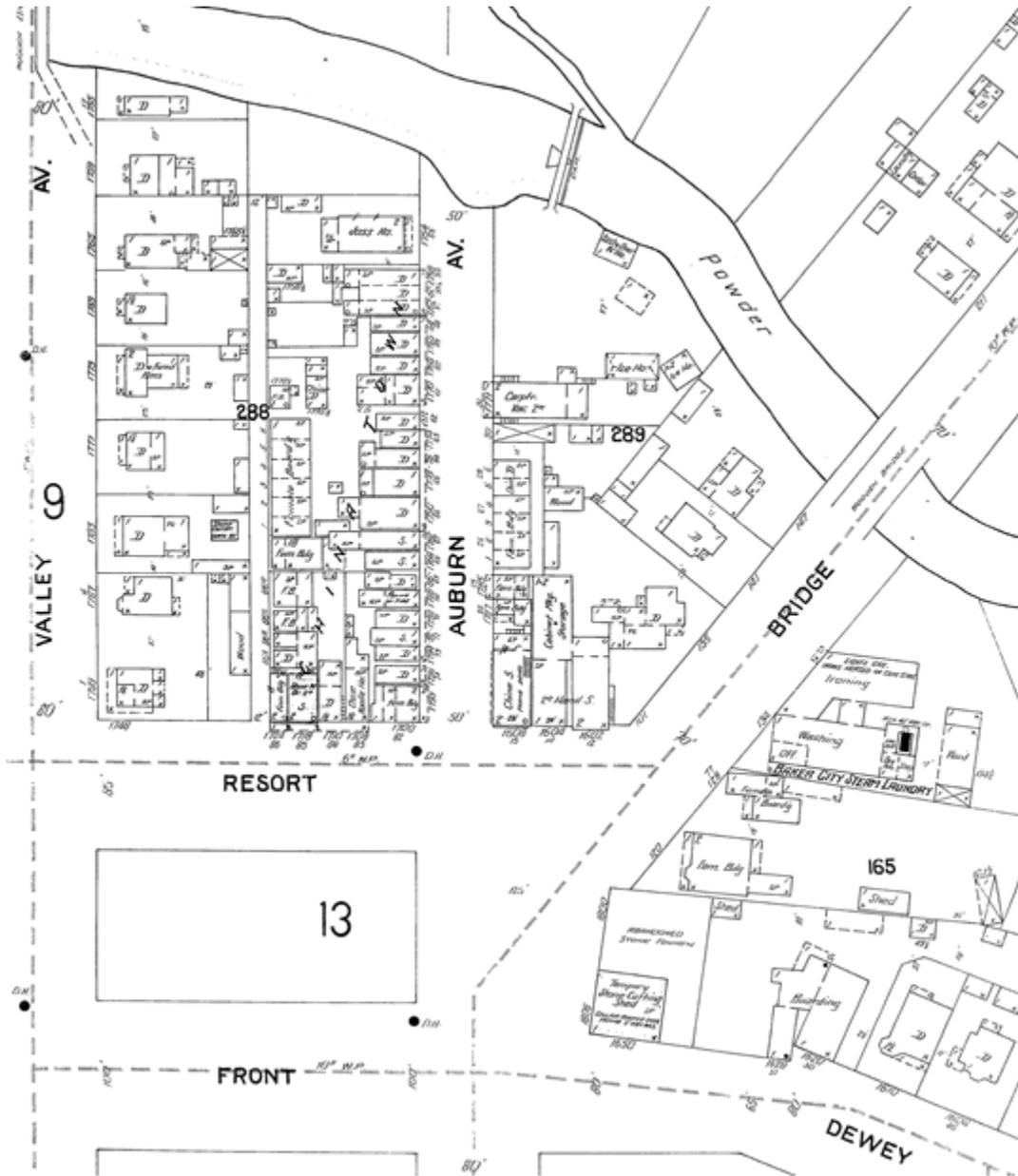
While city council was in the mood to relocate prostitutes from an area of town that was suddenly becoming more upscale, it also included in its edict three

establishments located at the southeast corner of the business district--today called Old Post Office Square. Dominating the east end of today's Chevron Station lot sat madam Jenny Duffy's large mansion-like brothel. And just across the square were three others, Fanny Hall's two-story structure—standing empty today next to the Old Post Office—and two other one-story buildings owned by Jenny Duffy near the site of today's Bridge Street Inn. A city councilor suggested the prostitutes from the two areas could take up residence in the "Horseshoe District," where there were some "cribs," but the location of that area of town has been lost to current memory.



In 1906, six prostitution cribs labeled "Female Boarding" were located between Antlers Hotel (top) and a saloon (bottom left).

City council did not include in its order the twenty-one “cribs” of prostitution in Chinatown, referred to in newspapers as the “Nile District.” The Chinese ghetto occupied a two-block area of Baker City on the east side of the 1600 and 1700 blocks of Resort Street extending on east down both sides of Auburn Avenue to



Powder River, which at that time dead-ended at the river. Crossing of the river at that point was restricted to a foot bridge, part of a diversion dam that directed water into an east-side irrigation ditch. Today the area is the site of Clark Electric and Baker City Police Department, the latter located on the former site of the

Chinese Joss House, a religious shrine that contained a statue of a sitting Buddha.

The white city fathers purposely turned a blind eye to goings on, including opium dens, in Chinatown, apparently not concerned about the internal moral affairs of the Chinese. However, in September 1906, city council considered ordering erection of a tall fence to wall off the Nile District “to make it less offensive to the people passing on the several thoroughfares bordering that district.” Access to Chinatown would be through a gate in the fence at the corner of Resort and Auburn.



Baker City Prostitute, ca. 1906

White prostitutes were not the only persons that concerned city authorities. Their clients and procurers sometimes ended up in Judge Levens' police court. E.F. O'Brien was charged with visiting an illegal bawdy house over the Gem Saloon. His guilty plea netted him a \$15 fine. The prostitute, who had also been arrested, was released the next day with just a warning to abide by the regulations that restricted prostitution to certain areas of town. On another occasion three men were fined \$20 each for visiting bawdy houses. And a young man with a red necktie, probably a symbol that he was a pimp, was sentenced to seven days in jail for “living off the earnings of a prostitute.”

The seed for city council's crackdown on prostitution may have come in a July 1905 speech by W.H. Moore, president of the National Good Roads Association, who was in town touting the benefits of paved streets, as if the locals needed to be sold on doing something about downtown's mud and ruts. The rampant prostitution business in Baker City attracted Moore's attention. He admonished city fathers that it was "a civic and paternal duty to see that red light districts were relegated from the main thoroughfares, where they would not flaunt the vices thereof before the eyes of rising generations." Curiously Moore did not believe in "attempts at obliteration but merely in regulation and restriction."



Baker City Madame, ca. 1906

Just two months later, on September 6, 1905, the *Morning Democrat* commented that, "Conspicuous bawdy houses are to be abolished and the inmates are to be relegated to a more restrictive district. Mayor Johns has issued the edict." (Mayor C.A. Johns was a local attorney, whose residence was what is today the funeral home at Dewey and Estes and who unsuccessfully ran for the Republican nomination for governor of Oregon in 1906.) However, city council's eviction notice was met by passive resistance on the part of the prostitutes, a lack of action which, on September 25, prompted this editorial comment in the *Baker City Herald*: "The thirty days allowed the inmates of the bawdy houses on Bridge Street and First Street are about up, but as yet there has been evidenced no

disposition on the part of these people to vacate. Make them move and move in a hurry.”

Hurry they didn't. Not only did the prostitutes remain in their traditional “female boarding” houses, but some also plied their trade in restricted parts of town. On December 28, 1905, the *Baker City Herald* headlined an article, “Must Keep in their own District,” in which it reported, “Having learned that it is the custom of the denizens of the tenderloin district to leave that portion of the city late at night and to take quarters in Front (Main) Street lodging houses, Chief of Police Jackson has issued an order to the effect that this must cease at once.” According to the newspaper, the Chief admonished the Front Street lodging managers that they “must find another class of trade or close up their places.”

A day later the *Morning Democrat* complained about “the brazenness of the women of the bawdy houses in parading the streets during daylight and darkness in company with men who are forgetful of public decencies.” And on December 30, the newspaper criticized city officials for allowing a sign on “the most conspicuous bawdy house” in town, Fanny Hall's mansion, that read “Furnished Rooms to Let,” as if it were a regular boarding house.



Baker City Prostitute and Son, ca. 1906

In early 1906, frustrated by inaction on the part of the houses of prostitution, city council ordered Chief of Police Jackson to instruct the residents of the “undesirable class” to vacate their “hovels” on First Street and on Bridge Street.

A motion to just arrest the prostitutes everyday until they moved failed, because some councilors considered that course of action to be persecution. Chief Jackson said he was ready to obey any order given, but he wanted to be assured that he would have city council's full support. And he got it. Councilors unanimously passed two motions. One motion required the First Street prostitutes to vacate by March 1st. And a second motion set an April 1st deadline for the establishments of Fanny Hall and Jenny Duffy on Bridge Street. Two weeks later city council changed its mind and moved ahead the deadline for the Bridge Street brothels to March 1st.

The day after the March 1st deadline, the *Morning Democrat* headlined a short article "First Street Red Lights Were Out Last Night" reporting compliance with city council's orders. No mention was made of the houses on Bridge Street, but one may assume they, too, were shut down.

Prostitution in Baker City did not end in 1906, nor did city council have that as its goal. Members of the so-called "oldest profession" were simply relegated to certain not-so-visible areas, so as not to be adjacent to prominent business buildings and to be out of sight of "respectable people." With changing administrations at city hall, continued enforcement of the new restrictions no doubt wavered over the years. Old-timers know that prostitution in Baker City continued well into the twentieth century, especially in the second-stories of Main Street business houses.

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Revised June 2013.

(This article has been revised to show that Jenny/Jennie Duffy owned the mansion where Chevron is today, as well as the two one-story buildings east of Fanny Hall's two-story building, which is still standing beside the Old Post Office Building.)