

A Century of Brothels in Wallace, Idaho: Selected Madams and Houses

Video Transcript
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This video looks at some of the women and houses in Wallace, Idaho through the years, beginning in the early mining camp days and wrapping up with the early 1990s.

Some brothels advertised in the papers. This ad announces a party to celebrate the 1890 grand opening of Gracie Edwards's The Star, a high-class brothel located at the corner of 5th and Pine. The Star employed at least six women from 1890-1904.¹ Gracie appointed her house with crystal goblets, satin spreads, and pillow shams on the beds, following the example of larger city parlor houses.

Madam Effie Rogan ran a house called The Reliance on Pine between 5th and 6th streets during the 1890s. In about 1904, she moved from Pine Street to the alley behind the contemporary location of the Oasis Bordello Museum. Effie's housemates reported their occupations as dressmaker and hairdresser to the 1910 census taker, but they were probably both working girls because the following year, Effie was in court for keeping a house of prostitution.² By 1912, she had been convicted of sex trafficking, which was referred to at the time as "white slavery."³ These pictures were taken at the Barnard-Stockbridge studio in 1906.

This ad⁴ is for an establishment in the red light district called the Palm Garden, managed by a woman named Jennie Girard from 1906-1911. The ad is rather vague about what happened there, which appears to have been her main marketing strategy, since Jennie's other house near the Palm Garden, was called the Surprise Theater.

In 1910, four women worked for madam Connie Foss [pictured here in 1908]. Her house was on 'Alley A' [of "Block 23," now home to the Depot museum], north of Cedar Street, between 6th and the river. After President Teddy Roosevelt's visit in 1903, the city began relocating the working girls to this triangle piece of land, which would eventually become the official restricted district.⁵ By 1904, Mayor Rossi mandated that "all lewd women" would be confined "absolutely" to Avenue A, the alley located here.⁶ And in 1905 he declared to the city council that prostitution was "a necessary evil," that must be limited "to its present quarters with a strong hand."⁷

By 1911, much of the country had worked itself into a moral panic over sex work, and many restricted districts closed completely. In the rough mining town of Wallace, full of single men, the thinking went that as long as prostitution was limited to Alley A, it was okay for some women to sell sex in order to, as Rossi put it, keep "virtue in the highest esteem"⁸—that is, prevent other women from getting raped. So the concerns shifted to public health and social hygiene instead. In 1913 the red light district financed local [improvements and was the first part of town to benefit from paved streets and other] upgrades.⁹ The city council voted in 1917 to grant the health officer oversight of the conditions there.¹⁰

Josie Moran [also known as Josi/Jesse Morin/Moore], shown here in a 1914 picture from the Barnard-Stockbridge collection, was a well-known madam at the U&I Rooms.

For a Red Cross fundraiser during WWI, Josie gave Mary Gordon White \$25.00, which would be the equivalent of about \$450-\$500.00 in 2014 currency. Gordon White, who grew up in the house on 301 Cedar Street, wrote about her experience years later: “I rang the bell and a very nice lady asked me to come in. Her living room had pink shaded lights and a lot of shiny satin pillows, and she seemed very friendly and very pretty. [...] When I told about my lucky afternoon at dinner that night, my father said he knew her. She was a very generous lady. She gave money and other helpful things when needed” and was “a very well-known madam who had a booming business in Wallace and the Coeur d’Alenes.”¹¹

By 1917, the United States government had declared a war at home as well as abroad, launching a comprehensive campaign to eliminate the remaining red light districts across the country. This attempt was successful in many cities, accomplished through legislation and enforcement. In other towns, such as Wallace, however, prostitution was such a part of the culture that it would not be eradicated so easily. The War Department teamed up with Brown manufacturing company to distribute “educational” propaganda to sites of industry such as logging mills and mines. These fliers and pay stub enclosures, sent to the Potlatch Forests Company for distribution,¹² were meant to curb the demand for sex work through fear mongering. The government also included suggestions for rhetoric appealing to patriotism and loyalty to country when giving safety lectures to workers. Although this material seems a bit over the top and exaggerated, syphilis was a serious problem.

Babe Kelly was one of forty-four Shoshone County citizens indicted by a grand jury for conspiracy to violate the Prohibition law [Volstead Act] in the event that came to be known as the North Idaho Whiskey Rebellion. In November of 1929, two weeks after the stock market crashed, the paper reported the wave of arrests by federal agents: “Some of the defendants were visibly affected as they were brought into Commissioner Walker’s office, but the majority laughed and chatted.[...] Most jovial of all was fur-coated Babe Kelly, who draped herself in a chair, lit a cigarette, and began kidding the officers and telling jokes.”¹³

Anna Brass, aka Mrs. Julius Brass, was a madam on Avenue A during the 1920s. In August of 1931, The Health and Sanitation Committee, along with the fire chief and chief of police, recommended to the city council that her brick building needed to be torn down [because it was “so dilapidated and/or is in such condition so as to menace the public health and/or safety of persons and/or property on account of increased fire hazard and/or otherwise.”¹⁴] If she didn’t remove it within ten days, the city threatened to demolish it for her and tax her for the cost.¹⁵ She would, however, continue to run a brothel in the restricted district until at least 1937.¹⁶

After prohibition ended, women began to assume greater leadership roles within the community again. [This is Bess or Bessie Ricard, who owned and operated a joint called the Pepper Box during the 1940s¹⁷. The Pepper Box served beer and liquor and featured slot machines.] Gambling had been technically banned beginning around the turn of the century up until 1947, at which point in time the city council legalized “coin-operated amusement devices,” bringing in about \$22,000 during this first licensing period alone. That translates to nearly a quarter of a million of today’s dollars.¹⁸ [In 1938, the amount would increase to \$38,000, or about \$376,000 in today’s money.] In 1949 the town expanded the ordinance to include “punchboards” and other

“chance prize games.”¹⁹ Ruth Poska, shown here, also applied for such licenses under the name of an establishment called The Club, which was located where the Bordello Museum is today. She was likely the madam upstairs, which was probably called the Club Rooms at that time.²⁰

Dolores Arnold was the “star” madam of the post-World War II era. Here she is twenty-three years old, when she first came to Wallace from Bremerton, Washington in 1943.²¹ People say she could have been a movie star, ran her business in a “classy” way, and was both respected and beloved by people around town. Like Gracie Edwards had done fifty years prior, Dolores hosted Christmas parties for local businessmen and community leaders. And like Josie Morin twenty-five years prior, she gave generously to charitable causes. She even turned some causes into a double-benefit. That is, she bought so many raffle tickets that she would win, and then she would give away the prizes to families in need.²² Around town it was said that she was very aware of image and public relations; she worked hard to lead by example and as a result the madams were perceived as businesswomen.

Luoma Delmonte was also widely seen as a community leader. She was close friends with Dolores and competed with her in the realm of charitable giving.²³ She came to Wallace in 1945 and had made over the Western Rooms into The Jade by 1953. Known around town simply as “Loma,” she had a reputation for being funny and for unleashing a torrent of dirty words if you pissed her off.²⁴ Loma was a devout Catholic, and many of the profits from her house on 611 ½ Cedar Street went to the St. Alphonsus church.²⁵

People who grew up in Wallace didn’t know anything other than sex work as a fact of everyday life. The community embraced its wild “live and let live” mining camp attitude and the underground economy that went along with it. This *New York Times* article confuses some things, but offers an example of the high degree of acceptance the community had toward the madams and houses. It also illustrates how wide Wallace’s reputation had spread. State laws were reformed in the early 1970s and the long-simmering differences in culture between northern and southern Idaho came to a head during this 1973 closure [which had been initiated by Stanley Crow, a so-called “moral crusader” from the southern part of the state].²⁶ The story goes that afterwards, local businessmen Harry Magnuson and Hank Day got on the phone to Governor Andrus and said, “You run your end of the state and we’ll run ours.”²⁷ The houses didn’t shut down for long, but the rooms on the second floors did operate more quietly for a while.

Here is Dolores Arnold is with her poodle Mikey in 1978. By this point in time, she owned and operated both the Lux and Luxette, which had taken the place of the Jade [at 611 ½ Cedar] in 1968 after Luoma married and moved away.²⁸ In 1977, the State of Idaho had planned to build the freeway through town, so they bought Dolores’s building at 212 6th street, where the Lux had been. Wallace eventually rallied to list its downtown on the National Register of Historic Places, so the freeway ended up going over the town instead of through it. Dolores had already moved the Lux down the block to the Arment building, though,²⁹ as her former house turned into costume and prop storage for the 6th Street Melodrama. Dolores suffered from Alzheimer’s disease and finally closed her houses in the late 1980s.

Ginger, madam of the Oasis from 1963 until its closure, moved to Wallace from Hollywood, California. Like Luoma, Ginger wasn't very public around town, but she also donated to local causes such as the annual mining competition.³⁰ She basically never changed out of her hundred dollar pajamas, but she did make trips to the bank and to sign legal papers from time to time.³¹ Her house, at 605 ½ Cedar, featured an incredible number of mirrors, following in the tradition of brothels like the Everleigh Club in Chicago and Babe Connors's Palace in St. Louis.³² The Oasis is now a museum and novelty shop, preserved in much the same way Ginger left it when she and the girls abandoned town in January of 1988.

Lee Martin came to Wallace in the 1960s and ran the U&I Rooms at 613 ½ Cedar until its closure in 1991. Once you were friends with Lee, you were friends for life³³—she was known for being loyal to her people, and once sent \$500.00 to some local guys who'd run into trouble and gotten themselves stranded in Colorado.³⁴ Her approach to keeping the girls happy was to ensure they had a social life, so it was common during the 1970s and 80s for locals to go up to the U&I just to drink and hang out.³⁵

Tanya, pictured here in 1974, began doing more of the work running things at the U&I during the 1980s. [People talk about what a rookie she was when she first arrived but she was smart, liked her job, and had a head for business, so she advanced to a leadership role quickly.³⁶] Tanya and Lee were the final brothel managers this town would see, since the closure of many of the mines, struggling economy, and worries about AIDS had drastically decreased demand for their work.³⁷ They officially closed in September of 1990 but continued to operate in a quieter way until a few weeks prior to the massive FBI raid in June of 1991. [The story goes, Tanya let on that an agent had told her "in a moment of weakness" that the raid would happen soon and it would be best if the girls took the opportunity to go ahead and leave for good.³⁸] The FBI's two-year investigation had focused on gambling [and public corruption, resulting in a hung jury and an acquittal of the Sheriff³⁹], and had only been a final push for the closure of the last house, whose end was already near.

Credits

By Heather Branstetter (2015) with generous support from The Wallace District Mining Museum and Virginia Military Institute.

Music:

"The Moon," by Young Cardinals, available on their 2015 album, *Flamingos*. Thank you James Forgey (guitar and vocals), Sam Branstetter (bass and vocals), and Marcus Matile (drums), for the use of your song throughout this piece!

Photos:

Dick Caron
Kristi Gnaedinger
Tom Harman

University of Idaho Library Special Collections, Barnard-Stockbridge Collection, MG 362.
University of Idaho Library Special Collections, Potlatch Forests Papers, MG 96 Box 4, "Military."
(Lux & Luxette Calendar in author's possession thanks to Rich Asher at North Idaho Trading)

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Smith, Donna Krulitz. *"It Will All Come Out in the Courtroom": Prohibition in Shoshone County, Idaho*. MA Thesis, University of Idaho, 2004.

Wallace City Council Minute Books.

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My family and other unofficial local memory keepers, archivists, and storytellers inspire my continuing desire to contribute to and share a more complete understanding of Wallace's incredible herstories.



¹ Powell 51.

² Shoshone County Court House, District Court Office, Index to Register of Criminal Actions; Proceedings Book B, No 497, qtd. in Powell 48.

³ Powell 48 and 59.

⁴ Tom Harman primary sources files in 2014 Wallace District Mining Museum (WDMM) Brothel Project digital repository.

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- ⁵ *Spokesman-Review* articles in Dick Caron files, 2014 WDMM Brothel Project digital repository. City of Wallace, City Council Record Book, 28 October 1901 to 10 September 1906, Minutes of Council Chamber, 24 April 1905, qtd. in Powell 104-105.
- ⁶ Powell 104.
- ⁷ Powell 104.
- ⁸ Powell 104.
- ⁹ City of Wallace Council Minute Books, 1913-1916, pgs 30-36, 22 September 1913.
- ¹⁰ City of Wallace Council Minute Books, 1916-1923, pg 167, 10 September 1917.
- ¹¹ Mary White Gordon, "A Child's Eye View," personal narrative, WDMM archival collection.
- ¹² Potlatch Forests Papers, MG 96 Box 4, "Military."
- ¹³ *Wallace Press-Times* 11/14/29, pg. 1
- ¹⁴ Wallace City Council Minute Book 1931-1939, 24 August 1931, p. 423
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pg 424. The legal description indicates this building was just behind and moving toward the East of where the Oasis is today.
- ¹⁶ Wallace City Council Minute Books, 1931-1939, 14 December 1936, pgs 658-659.
- ¹⁷ Wallace City Council Minute Books, 1939-1947, 8 January 1945, pg 958.
- ¹⁸ Wallace City Council Minute Books, 1939-1947, Ordinance 292, 24 March 1947, pg 1024-1028. The State of Idaho and Shoshone County each received a quarter of this money, while the city kept half (pg 1026).
- ¹⁹ Wallace City Council Minute Books, 1947-1960, Ordinance 300, January 1949, pg. 1085.
- ²⁰ Richard Magnuson told me (2014 interview) he thought the Oasis was called the Club Rooms. Police records document that it was known as the Oasis by 1952.
- ²¹ Picture records, Barnard-Stockbridge Collection. Town of origin information, Lynn Mogensen and Eva Truean (2014).
- ²² Personal Interview with Gary Morrison (2010).
- ²³ Personal Interview with Richard Magnuson (2014).
- ²⁴ Reverend Dr. Jim Ranyon personal narrative (2008) in Dick Caron files, WDMM Brothel Project digital repository.
- ²⁵ Phone Interview with Penny Garr (2014).
- ²⁶ Personal Interview with Richard Magnuson (2010 and 2014).
- ²⁷ Personal Interview with Dick Vester (2010).
- ²⁸ Penny Garr (2014) said she married and moved to Seattle or Tacoma, but Dick Magnuson (2014) thinks she went to the Portland area.
- ²⁹ There is some dispute on locations, but the Lux-Luxette calendar (in my possession and pictured in this video) is evidence of their location as of 1978.
- ³⁰ Personal interview with Penny Michael. The Oasis Rooms is listed, along with the Lux and Luxette, among the contributors to the first contest in 1984 (can be found in primary sources in the digital 2014 WDMM Brothel Collection).
- ³¹ Personal Interview with "Art" (2010) and Richard Magnuson (2014).
- ³² Abbott, Karen. *Sin in the Second City: Madams, Ministers, Playboys, and the Battle for America's Soul*. New York: Random House, 2007. Kindle Edition. Chapter One, Kindle Locations 340-345.
- ³³ Personal Interview with Patti Houchin (2014)
- ³⁴ Story independently told during personal interviews with Bill Mooney (firsthand knowledge of the story, 2014) and John Posnick (secondhand knowledge of the story, 2010).
- ³⁵ Personal Interviews with Chuck Roberts (2014) and Bill Mooney (2014).
- ³⁶ Personal Interview with Kristi Gnaedinger (2010, 2014), Chuck Roberts (2014), and Bill Mooney (2014).
- ³⁷ This is pretty much community consensus.
- ³⁸ Personal Interview with Sue Hansen (2010 and 2014).
- ³⁹ Personal Interview with Sam Eismann (2010).