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Razing Levy's Alley

Civic leaders crusaded against prostitution.

by Nicholas Canfield

A kerosene lantern backlit the scarlet curtains above the saloon-bordello called the Bucket of Blood. On June 30, 1892, the *Idaho Statesman* reported that the curtains had closed for “a hard crowd” expecting “a wild orgy.” It was a “den of horrors,” the *Statesman* continued, where “blear-eyed females” danced with “sodden faced tin horns . . . whose fond parents no doubt thought they were tucked away in bed.” When a “negress” prostitute tossed the lamp at a white customer, the wooden structure barely escaped purification by fire.

Prostitution was a fact of life in frontier cities. In Boise it was barely hidden in the heart of commercial downtown. Wherever men caroused in crowded saloons to drink and gamble, saloon keepers and madams ran prostitution. And wherever rum, fallen angels, and morphine spread vice through the center of cities, crusaders demanded reform.

Prostitution once had its place in frontier society as the “necessary evil” that protected chaste women from dangerous men. Boise’s first prostitutes were mostly immigrants or daughters of immigrants. “Cottage” prostitutes worked in hotels and parlors. Often, in city directories, they were listed as seamstresses or housekeepers. More common “crib” prostitutes rented small rooms above saloons or lining the alleys. In Boise by 1890, the crib district extended from about 9th Street to 6th in the alleys bounded by Main and Idaho. Fire insurance maps showed more than 20 saloons with back rooms labeled “FB” for “female boarding.” The plumbing was all outside.

The *Statesman* reported “shooting and cutting scrapes and an occasional killing” in the early decades of Idaho statehood. Bawdy saloons included Hart’s, Jack Elliott’s, and Gilbert’s Free Roll, so named for its offer of free chips for playing Faro. Like moths to a flame the district lured “the rough tough men from the mines, the lumber jacks and loggers from the woods, the mule skinnners of the freighting outfits, and the ranch hands and riders of the range.” Men of higher standing patronized parlors of prostitution in downtown hotels.



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Temperance crusader poster circa 1870

Boise officials mostly tolerated the bawdy houses so long as the vice could be confined. But pastors, boosters, and reformers pushed hard in the other direction. The Woman's Christian Temperance Union, the Columbian Club, the Ladies Auxiliary of the Florence Crittenton Home, and many other civic organizations backed mayors who denounced prostitution, demanding reform.

Davis Levy, the Kingpin

“He is a typical miser – greedy, crafty, and cruel,” said the *Idaho Statesman* of the city’s most illicit slumlord. Davis Levy came to Boise with the Idaho gold rush. In 1867 he sold cakes and crackers on Main Street near 6th where dance halls and bars still cluster today. Expanding, he opened a grocery store, a saloon, a lunch place, and a candy shop. Sometime in the 1880s—after being assaulted and robbed at gunpoint and

after being arrested for “disturbing the peace”—Levy expanded into leasing small rooms for prostitution. By 1893, in the alley behind the 600 block of Main Street, he added 12-foot plank wood cribs. Levy’s Alley, Boiseans began to call it.

Municipal government did what it could. On April 1, 1896, the city council ordered the chief of police to cleanse downtown and remove its “fallen creatures.” Parlor madams and male proprietors could be arrested or fined.

“Evil in the alleys” became a rallying point for Moses Alexander of Main Street in an anti-prostitution campaign. Alexander, elected mayor in 1900, called Levy’s Alley “a menace to public order.” It was “monstrous . . . intolerable . . . a disgrace.” But police could only charge the miserly Levy with “allowing a house of ill repute to operate in his buildings.” A judge found him guilty and fined him \$44. Levy appealed, this time going before a jury, who found him not guilty.

Alexander went on to lead the cause for statewide prohibition as the first elected Jewish governor in the United States. Levy, also Jewish, went on to die a deplorable death by strangulation. On April 5, 1901, soon after Alexander took office, Boise police found Levy’s rotting corpse in an office above his alley. The body was 3 days cold. Implausibly, the chain of evidence led to another Boisean named Levy (no relation), described as a “whoremonger” and “pimp.” The man’s name was George “Joe” Levy, said to be a “white slaver” and “Jewish Bohemian” from France. He was captured in Oregon while boarding a ship for Europe. Convicted in Boise, sentenced to hang, commuted to life in prison, he was pardoned for lack of evidence and released. He later returned to the Idaho Penitentiary to serve a sentence for “white slavery.” The whoremonger Levy who allegedly murdered the miser Levy of Levy’s Alley professed his innocence to the end.



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French-Bohemian
George “Joe” Levy,
convicted of murdering a
brothel landlord, 1901

Ellen Bush, the Queen Madam

Ellen Bush was the daughter of Milton Kelly, one of the *Idaho Statesman’s* first owners, editors, and publishers, and Lois Kelly, a prominent woman active in nationwide women’s rights organizations. She was also a crib manager. In 1878



Judge Milton Kelly

Milton Kelly bought 626 and 628 Main Street from Davis Levy. When Kelly died in 1892, he bequeathed the property to his daughter Ellen, who used it for female boarding houses. Bush added at least four cribs to the rear of her Main Street properties, with the alleyway between Main Street and Idaho Street their only access point. Both Ellen and her husband James Bush managed multiple properties designated as “female boarding houses.” Ellen took control of the property on Idaho Street when her husband died in 1897. Bush added more cribs to the Idaho Street property around 1898 and managed them all until her death in 1920. As a property manager, Bush leased rooms and spaces on her properties to prostitutes, providing shelter and a relatively safe area for them to practice their trade. One of the people Bush leased space to was Dixie Laurence, who served as a madam for Bush’s 620 Main Street property.



Davis Levy's boarding house, Main Street, 1880

Dixie Laurence struggled in her work as a madam for Ellen Bush. She toiled to improve the 620 Main Street property and went so far as to sublease many of its cribs, while faithfully paying the rent owed to Bush each month. Correspondence between Laurence and Bush’s attorney indicated that Bush was

pleased with Laurence's work as madam and "seemed to desire that [she] remain there right along under the same terms and conditions as [she] now had it." But in November 1901 Frank Maley, another prominent Boise businessman, "purchased Ellen Bush's interest in the property," thus occluding which property owner owned what land, and how that ownership would affect Laurence and the working girls, who lived and worked with virtually no job, housing, or life security each and every day.

Laurence worked hard to ensure that the women in her employ did not suffer any more than they already did. Madams such as Laurence provided their girls with as many supplies as could be afforded. In return, the girls gave to the madams a percentage of their wages. The madams who worked in Levy's Alley were in essence some of Boise City's first pimps, managing the working girls while simultaneously contending with particular customers and the occasional city official. But despite all of Laurence's efforts, because of the lack of security and options for a better existence, bitter fighting among crib workers was commonplace. Inane acts such as name calling were often responded to with violence—a crib worker stabbing another with a pair of scissors was the most common reply.

In tandem with fighting, depression and suicide were also common experiences. Grace Ashton attempted suicide in September 1903. Grace Ashton attempted suicide in September 1903. She ingested "antiseptic tablets," a common method of suicide among prostitutes. The tablets most likely contained mercuric chloride, with each tablet containing nearly half a gram of the compound. Because they were used for "preventing conception," these antiseptic tablets were commonly found among prostitutes. Acute mercuric chloride poisoning caused protracted and incalculable suffering. The compound acted so quickly that measures such as induced vomiting did not prevent the poison from reaching the stomach. Grace Ashton suffered for nearly a week as her stomach lining dissolved, before she finally succumbed to her injuries. Although she was married and had a living parent, Grace had no family living with her in Boise, and her sister



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Mercuric chloride, known as corrosive sublimate in the 1800s, was commonly used as a contraceptive and means of suicide among prostitutes.

workers were her only companions. The women gathered enough money for a funeral service, and Grace was laid to rest in Morris Hill Cemetery. Grace's life and death served as a harrowing example of the type of life lived by the prostitutes of Levy's Alley: almost no protection, no assurances or security, and very little chance of social mobility. Whereas prostitution was a trade in which access and involvement were easy, self-removal and disengagement proved nearly impossible.

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A wagon advertises Moses Alexander's Men's Store on the 700 block of Main Street, about 1896. Alexander spearheaded the anti-prostitution crusade.

Boise's Urban Renewal

It proved hard to obliterate Levy's Alley. Boiseans recall the smell of opium and blue lights, not red, in the 1930s. Skid row bars had semi-clad dancing girls in the 1940s and 1950s, and Boiseans remember prostitution as well. In 1965, the Idaho State Legislature helped Boiseans pave over the menace with legislation allowing for urban renewal. Business leaders hoped to replace the blight with a downtown shopping mall.

At the center of that urban renewal were three city blocks. Spanning Capitol Boulevard, they stretched from Moses Alexander's Men Store to the Turnverein Building in Old Boise, from 9th to 6th along Idaho and Main. The city's police annex, a thrift store, and a row of small office buildings fronted the infamous alley. Properties with brick two-story buildings were appraised at less than \$50,000. One disinvested lot was priced



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at \$0.12 per square foot. Mayor Richard Roy “Dick” Eardley, elected in 1973, thought the alley ideal for a city hall.

Razing Main Street,
1974

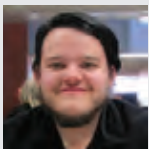
In 1975 the bulldozers of urban renewal began flattening Main Street’s 600 block for what Eardley called “beautification.” Two years later, on Tuesday, March 15, 1975, Mayor Eardley and the Ada County Commissioners officially dedicated the imposing orange-brick Boise City/Ada County building. Boise’s new city hall, said the *Statesman*, was “a job well done.” The blight had been crushed at last.

Today, appropriately, the city’s history office faces Old Boise in the approximate location of the Bucket of Blood. Backlit curtains of scarlet are no longer an embarrassment to the mayor’s office or the focus of city planning. City hall’s “temperance fountain” is the only oblique reminder of the heyday of Levy’s Alley. Erected in 1910 by the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, the fountain recalls the wholesome ideal of the sanitized city that the anti-prostitution crusades hoped Boise would one day become.



BOISE CITY

WCTU temperance fountain, City Hall Plaza



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