

## Famed Brothels Gone, Prostitutes Remain

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Alyce Broshe, a former Peoria madam who now holds a degree in criminology, stands on bleak

Adams Avenue, one of the streets that made up the city's Merry-Go-Round red-light district.

### ***Famed Brothels Gone, Prostitutes Remain***

# ***Play in Peoria Not Like in Old Days***

By WAYNE SLATER, *Associated Press*

PEORIA, Ill.—They were wrong about Alyce Broshe, alias Karen Connally, the last of the Peoria madams.

She did not get shot or stabbed and die in the streets somewhere. She did not grow old and obese and pass away quietly one morning in bed.

Somehow, she has survived. And surely the Alyce Broshe of today would have startled her old cronies in that storied red-light district called the Merry-Go-Round.

"I was the best at what I did," said Broshe, who at 45 doesn't do it any more.

Times have changed.

The city this summer leveled the last of the old houses in the Merry-Go-Round to make room for urban renewal. The old madams are all

dead and gone. The hookers have taken to free-lancing in the street.

"There is no professionalism in it anymore. They're amateurs, really. It's no longer a job or a business or a profession," Broshe said. "It's a crime."

Once, Peoria's riverfront district was legendary. It was a lusty, brawling, wide-open place with gambling, dancing, raw liquor and willing ladies. It was an island of vice in the land the settlers built, and everybody in the Midwest knew it.

The packet boats and the paddle wheelers regularly tied up here for the night. Gamblers from St. Louis and Chicago made fortunes here. And on the Illinois River, whitened by the light of the moon, there glimmered the reflections of the big

pillared brothels where women at the windows tapped silver dollars on the glass, beckoning.

In 1913, the Illinois Senate decided to put a stop to it. The Senate's Committee on Vice held hearings in Peoria to investigate what one lawmaker called "the sporting women" and to determine "what makes a good girl go to the bad."

After long hearings, the committee made a number of recommendations aimed at ending prostitution.

Nonetheless, by the late 1920s, Peoria's red-light district was flourishing. And at the helm was a huge woman with flared nostrils named Diamond Lil.

"She was a Negro and had diamonds in her teeth. If you'd seen her, you'd seen the best," said Julian

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# PEORIA: Merry-Go-Round Has Stopped

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Coultas, 74-year-old retired fireman from nearby Canton.

Diamond Lil had a stable of white and black girls in a big Victorian sporting house that operated not far from the Empire, the leading gambling spot in town.

There was a string of bootleg joints serving bathtub gin, and up on Main Street was a dance hall called the Ingle Terra where a rope was stretched down the center of the floor to separate the raucous Charleston from the more sedate dances.

## Anything Goes

"Anything went if it didn't disturb the peace," Coultas says. "You could take booze into the dance halls right past the police, and those were Prohibition days. The houses were all side-by-side on Washington Street and the women would be sitting on chairs and beating on the windows at you."

Payoffs were common. Every Monday, a messenger dispatched by local hoodlums arrived at City Hall, carrying a sealed envelope filled with cash.

The amount was always dutifully recorded in the city treasurer's report—\$60,000 in 1937 under the title "Special Miscellaneous: Madison Novelty Co."

Clerks nowadays will drag out these dusty old figures and explain how the mythical company got its name from the location of City Hall on Madison Avenue.

## Daring Drive

"In high school our dates used to drive us on a dare through the red-light district," says feminist author Betty Friedan, a Peoria native. "I can still remember those women standing in the doorways."

There was a brief flurry of reform after World War II. Police padlocked the houses. Officials prosecuted the girls.

But the only thing that changed was the location of the red-light district, to new ground a few blocks south bounded by a triangle of streets on which men drove their cars around and around. Thus the name the Merry-Go-Round.

Alyce Broshe was 15 when she started working in the Merry-Go-Round. She was a runaway from Terre Haute, Ind., by way of Chicago where she had run errands for pimps and strippers.

She called herself Karen Connally for no particular

reason and served her apprenticeship under a reclusive, politically well-connected madam named Pam Miller.

"Pam ran the town, police, politicians, everything," she recalls. "I voted when I was 15. Pam piled us into a station wagon and took us all down to vote. Those were the payoff days."

One day in 1950, after a lot of whiskey and cocaine, Karen told her pimp, Blackie Jennings, she didn't want to work that night. Blackie pulled out a .45-caliber pistol and shot her in the head.

She survived, and the feud lasted until 1963, when she walked into Blackie's house and shot him twice in the back. He survived, and she was on her own.

"I was running a turn-out joint," she says. "It was a training school. I took girls, taught them how to dress, wear makeup, how to talk to people."

After the shooting, her booming business turned sour. The vice squad was always at the door and Karen found herself in desperate financial straits.

## Shot in Robbery

A couple of weeks before Christmas, 1963, she walked into a liquor store with a .32-caliber pistol and walked out with a handful of cash. The owner shot her twice in the stomach before she had gone a block.

She survived. Upon her conviction for robbery, for which she was sent to prison for 11 months, prosecutor Morton Goldfine declared: "This is the last of the madams in Peoria. All the rest have been sentenced or put out of business and this puts an end to the Merry-Go-Round."

But he was wrong. Baby Doll Cowan was still in town.

Baby Doll was a grinning, good-hearted woman who said she started selling her services at age 19 after being jilted in a love affair. She had been arrested for prostitution 51 times in Peoria, the last time for soliciting an undercover policeman.

That was five days before she died. She was 73 years old.

Baby Doll's place is gone now, leveled by the wrecking crane. So is Diamond Lil's old place, and Pam Miller's. And so is Karen Connally's.

There is a pile of rubble now where the Merry-Go-Round used to be.

"Hah," says Alyce Broshe, sitting in a restaurant booth with a glass of Chablis before her. "Do rats disappear when you tear down the buildings where they've

been for years? No. They move from one place to another."

She calls them rats now, these independent, undisciplined streetwalkers of the '80s who hustle in the dives and tap on the windshields of passing cars. They have no creed that binds them, she says. They don't see doctors. They regularly rob their customers.

"Outlaws," she says. "Prostitution has become a front for robbery."

And so in 1975, she got out. She locked the door of the house she had operated since returning from prison and she walked away, the last madam of the last respectable house.

Then she went away to college. Last May she earned a degree in criminology from Illinois State University, graduating magna cum laude.

July, 1980. Dusk comes to the Merry-Go-Round.

The girls are out, perhaps 20 hookers in easy view, lounging in front of the seedy brick bars that border the rubble of the old houses, moving in the dark, beckoning.

A young woman approaches the car. "Hey honey," she says. "How about a party tonight?"

She is wearing pink eye shadow and an orange halter top. She has come from the steps of the El Dorado bearing the eternal lusty offer, night after night, like so many before her.

Nearby, a white summer moon rummages for its reflection on the river.

"How about it, honeybun?" she says.