

Peoria To Say Goodbye To 'Merry-Go-Round'

They're ripping down an institution in this city — an institution which appeared invulnerable for decades to those who tried to destroy it; an institution of tarpaper shanties and gum-chewing, purse-twirling prostitutes.

By Rick Baker

It was known as the Merry-Go-Round and there was nothing anybody could do about it. Editorial writers wrote about what a shame it was. Cops went on about how illegal it was. Judges ordered the joints padlocked and shipped the girls off to jail.

Sarah "Baby Doll" Cowan was an illustration of the futility of attempting to erase the Merry-Go-Round. Baby Doll was to Peoria prostitution what Babe Ruth was to professional baseball.

Baby Doll was arrested more than 50 times on prostitution-related charges in Peoria. The great bulk of those busts were in the Merry-Go-Round. Her last arrest came about a week before she died.

And when she died at 74, a mortician drove his ambulance down to the Merry-Go-Round, hauled her body away, and left behind the only evidence that Baby Doll had ever been in the Merry Go Round — a book the old girl was reading when she died.

The book was entitled: "The Happy Hooker."

Baby Doll, if you hadn't of died then, you surely would die now. Because the Merry-Go-Round will soon become a great big Caterpillar Tractor Co. training center.

The girls used to sit in the windows and tap on the glass with coins. Sometimes, when it was hot and there weren't any cops around, they'd hang out the window and bark verbal advertisements.

There were black houses, white houses and multi-racial houses, all squashed into that little area on the near South Side known as the Merry-Go-Round.

It was a place of poverty and squalor and decadence. It was a place where the first clown who stumbled down the street with a pocketful of change could pick from dozens of women.

It was a place of racial hatred between the black houses and the white houses.

It was part of the childhood environment of comic genius Richard Pryor. Two years before Pryor's mother died of cancer at 46, she was arrested for being a madam in the Merry-Go-Round. Pryor's father was busted on a charge of being a pimp. Pryor was still in his teens.

And in the area that will soon become a training area for Caterpillar employees, you can still see a prostitute or two standing in the window. Maybe she'll even tap on the window with a coin.

He's a maintenance man at a Peoria high school now. Today

he's trying to figure out how to get spray painted graffiti off the exterior of the school without having to sandblast the whole thing.

He used to worry about different things. He used to be a vice detective for the city of Peoria, and he worked the Merry-Go-Round for 20 years.

"Tearing down the district isn't going to do anything toward erasing prostitution in Peoria," he says. "All it's going to do is spread it around, and make it sneakier."

He recalled his first case in the Merry-Go-Round. He was a rookie cop, and he was ordered to raid one of the houses in the district. A sergeant on the force went with him.

"When we got to the place, the sergeant wanted to stay outside," the former vice detective said. "I knocked on the door and was let in."

The rookie cop showed his badge. Before he had time to stick it back in his pocket, two pimps and five prostitutes were on top of him.

"They ripped my shirt off and started digging into me with their fingernails. By the time I got up, I was covered with blood."

But he managed to hang on to two of the women, and dragged them outside to be arrested.

"When we got outside, the sergeant looked at the girls. One of them was the madam. And all the sergeant could say to the madam was 'Don't blame this on me, Barbara. Don't blame this on me.'"

"He was on the take from the houses," the former vice detective said.

It was suspected the sergeant — now retired — was being paid off to warn prostitutes of upcoming raids.

Another former vice detective, when asked about the sergeant, said: "He won't be able to help you any. He was on the take."

And, a person close to the police department said: "Yeah. He was being paid off. Every time some cops were sent out on a raid, the sergeant would run next door and phone the red light district."

"He would say: 'Ducks on the pond,' then hang up."

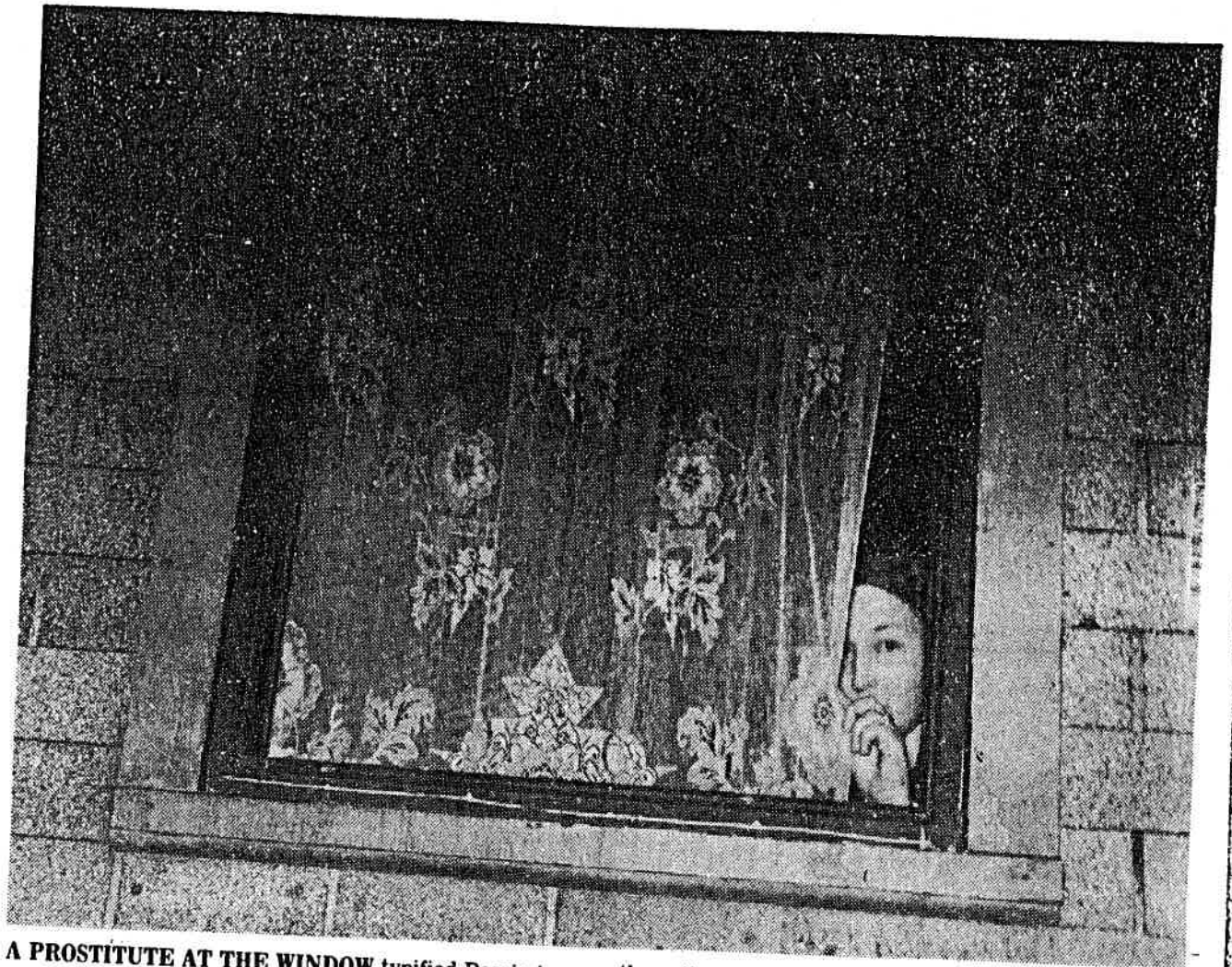
Newspapers have libraries full of file envelopes which are stuffed with clippings of news stories about people and things. Clippings of most specific people and things can be contained in one clipping envelope.

But some stuff has so much written about it, more than one envelope is needed. Jimmy Carter, for example, has four envelopes filled with clippings.

Peoria prostitution stories are contained by no less than 71 file envelopes. It takes a whole bunch of stories to fill an envelope. There has been a lot of prostitution in Peoria.

When Baby Doll hit 70, the cops had a lot of sympathy for her. None of the pimps wanted anything to do with her. She was too old and ugly.

But Baby Doll contended she didn't make enough money to



A PROSTITUTE AT THE WINDOW typified Peoria to a photographer of the Farm Security Administration 40 years ago in a project that sought to picture the state of

the nation at the end of the Great Depression. The Merry Go Round made Peoria "a very lively city" for Arthur Rothstein, the photographer, then 21.

live good off Social Security, and had to keep working to put food on the table.

Without a pimp, Baby Doll freelanced down on the Merry-Go-Round. Near the end cops would even try to avoid arresting her. But sometimes they had to.

About a week before she died, an undercover cop entered a house on the Merry-Go-Round. There was Baby Doll.

Then there was fat Nona Crowe — Peoria's vice queen during the 1940s. Nona liked her grits. While she wasn't much more than five feet tall, she weighed about 350 pounds. She got so fat she could no longer walk.

When she was last arrested, in the early 1950s, Nona had to be carried into the courtroom on a stretcher, and couldn't even sit up as the judge hit her with a \$5,000 fine for tax evasion.

"From 20 to 25 percent of the police department's manpower is constantly tied up with prostitution cases," a former vice detective for the city of Peoria said. "And it's all a waste of time."

The vice detective says during his career that the city was throwing hundreds of thousands of dollars away, trying to do the impossible, erase prostitution in Peoria.

The vice detective contends that the city is wasting money where it could be making money by licensing prostitutes, taxing the occupation, and making routine medical checkups mandatory.

"Men and women will get together no matter what you throw in front of them. It's a natural thing to do. Tearing the Merry-Go-Round down is just going to shift neighborhoods."

And, the vice detective said, he thinks he spent a pretty good chunk of his career bothering people he really didn't want to bother.

"Like old Baby Doll. I put her in the lockup lots of times. Here was an old girl with one of the biggest hearts in the world, and we rode the hell out of her."

What's going to happen when the old Merry-Go-Round — that triangle of houses formed by Aiken Alley and Oak and Warner streets — comes down?

According to a prostitute familiar with the area the erasure of the Merry-Go-Round isn't going to have much impact. The houses will simply be relocated. Many of them already have.

"Nobody's going to stop being a prostitute when they tear it down," said the prostitute (who has a child in kindergarten.) "We'll still have bills to pay."