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comments, call JS Floodline re-  
porter Pam Hoffman at 686-3100.

*VF Peo - Crime (Prostitution)*

# Peoria prostitution — always a tricky, risky enterprise

*Peo J-Star 10-3-93*

□ '70s reform took toll, but these days a new fear emerges from shadows

**Editor's note:** The business of prostitution once was transacted very differently in Peoria. It either was ignored, tolerated or publicly cursed by politicians and police, depending on the current political climate. The Journal Star is printing this story and those on Page A12 to add context to the recent slayings of three Peoria prostitutes.

**By BILL MITCHELL**

*for the Journal Star*

Unease and fear have walked Peoria's streets since the recent killings of three prostitutes.

The slayings are under scrutiny from city, county, state and federal investigators and are at the center of a national media storm. Prostitutes more accustomed to the shadows have appeared regularly on the nightly news and been questioned by dozens of eager reporters.

But this isn't the first time those who make sex-for-cash deals have jumped from the police reports to the front page.

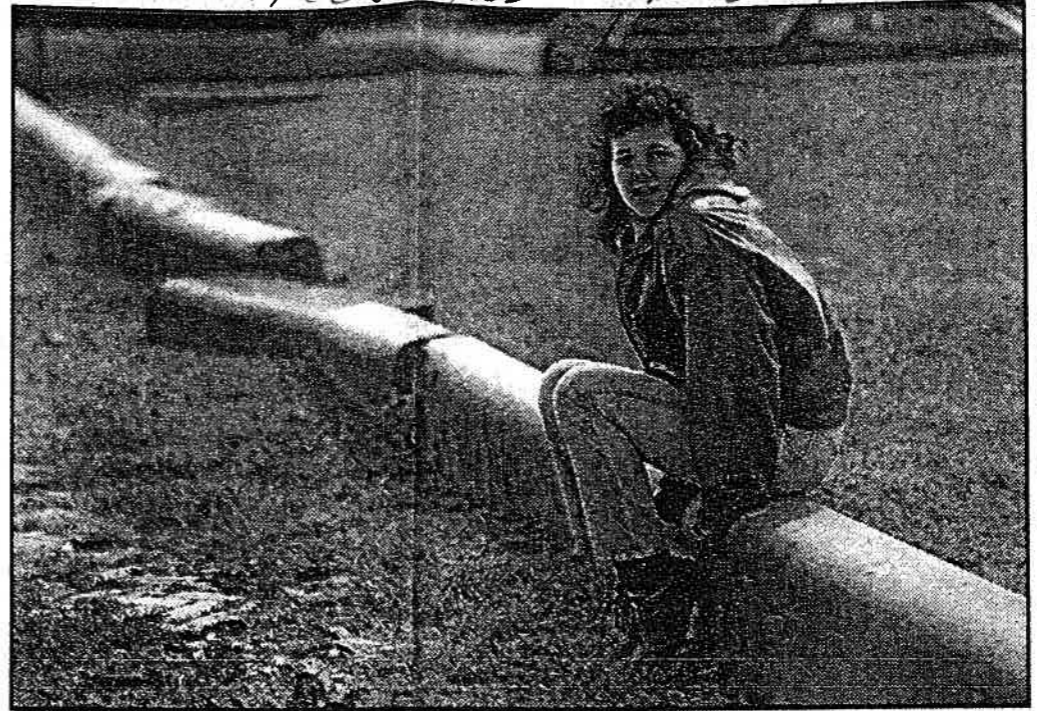
The history of prostitution

- No new charges filed against man arrested Thursday. **B16**
- Priest: Peoria needs shelter to help prostitutes escape. **A9**
- A man who knew slain prostitutes describes the life. **A12**
- An ex-madam recalls the 'Merry-Go-Round' era. **A12**

in Peoria has been colorful, to say the least. The city's brothels once were nationally famous and tolerated by local officials for half a century.

Reform movements finally ended prostitution's heyday in the mid-1970s. Famous houses of ill repute were knocked down as part of the Southtown urban-renewal project, and well-known madams retired and moved away.

But prostitution itself didn't end in Peoria as reformers had hoped. Women and their bosses just took the trade to the street, spreading the so-called "Merry-Go-Round" from the Sheridan Road-Kumpf Boulevard-Jefferson Avenue area south to a stretch along Adams and Washington from State to Pecan streets. Another pocket of activity is cen-



Waiting for customers along Hancock Street, across from the Catholic church, Julie, 23, says she has been working Peoria as a prostitute since December. Despite the three recent killings of prostitutes from the same territory, Julie says she's not too worried.

FRED ZWICKY/Journal Star

tered at Morton Square on the Near North Side.

And with the change in locations came changes in the prostitutes.

Retired police officer Herman Cornish, who worked on

the vice squad from 1958 to 1965, said prostitution used to provide security and jobs for women who otherwise might have been destitute. Today, many young women choose the profession to support drug or

alcohol addictions. "Prostitutes during the early '60s were doing it (to earn a living). Drugs were not that prevalent," said Peoria Police

**Please see PAST, Page A12**

# Barren land in Southtown once teeming with brothels

Reform efforts in '50s, urban renewal of '70s spelled end to 'houses'

By BILL MITCHELL

of the Journal Star

Now only the wind prowls the streets and alleys of what was once known as the "Merry-Go-Round," heart of Peoria's infamous red light district.

The area was cleared away more than 20 years ago as part of the city's urban renewal efforts, but for half a century it served as home to the city's prostitution subculture.

Brothels there were run by women with names like Sarah "Baby Doll" Cowan and Margaret "China Bee" Parker, and prostitutes plied their trade from open windows, calling to passersby and flashing scantily-clad bodies.

What remains today is a curious houseless area bounded on the east by Kumpf Boulevard, on the south by Jefferson Street and on the west by Sheridan Road. The buildings that once filled the area were removed under an urban renewal project that renamed the area Southtown.

Police called the district the Merry-Go-Round because prostitutes were often bonded out and back at work before the police officers who arrested them could finish their reports.

Old-style house prostitution was centered there from the turn of the century to the mid-1970s. It was an illegal activity that was either ignored, tolerated or publicly cursed by politicians and police, depending on the current political climate.

Now the area is a commercial/industrial park that, despite the best efforts of

city and private developers, has remained sparsely occupied.

The area police now call the Merry-Go-Round has moved farther south, lining the area from Adams to Washington and from Pecan to State. A pocket of prostitution has also turned up in the Morton Square area on the Near North Side.

The effort to clean up the city's reputation started in the early 1950s, when public criticism became louder and pressure on civic leaders became stronger.

But advocates argued prostitution was unlikely to disappear. Better to know where it was, license it, tax it and control it than to chase it into hiding.

The reformers won. It didn't happen quickly, though. Laws had to be changed. Money appropriated

and the old ways of dealing with vice rethought.

Vice raids changed from being a ritual accepted by both sides to a high stakes game of survival.

What finally brought the end was the bulldozer and wrecking ball. Urban renewal in the late 1960s and early 1970s meant the wholesale clearing of real estate to make way for new development. The theory was if the houses were destroyed, prostitution would disappear.

As their traditional business places were systematically padlocked, condemned and torn down, as court fines increased a hundredfold and jail terms were doled out, the madams and pimps struggled to hold on to their old ways.

Some tried moving their houses to other parts of the city, but it didn't work. The well-known hunting grounds

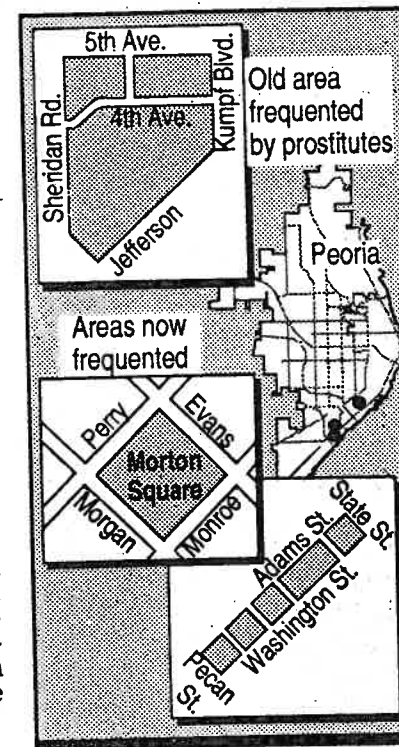
had been decimated.

The "johns" or patrons did not seek out the new pastures. They turned to streetwalkers — mavericks with no base of operation who took their tricks to cheap hotels or cars.

Just as the buildings in which the brothels were housed have disappeared, so have the madams who ran them.

Most of the old-timers have died, taking with them the memory of times and lives that likely won't be seen again.

Their names were infamous — Pam Miller, Diamond Lil, Betty Behymer, Vallie Bush and the Pryors. Most have died, but others, like Karen Connally, Margaret "China Bee" Parker, Blackie Jennings, Reuben Taylor and Dolly Madison, are known to be alive.



FROM PAGE A1

## PAST

Capt. Larry Gray. "Most prostitutes now are drug users and doing it to support their habits."

Despite the perception, the brothels rarely were the scene of drug abuse, theft or physical violence, Gray said. As a new police hire in 1964, Gray participated in several raids on local brothels.

"Most of the houses that I had the opportunity to go in were clean. The girls were all fairly clean looking. They weren't dirty looking like the ones we've got walking the streets now," Gray said.

Most of the madams would take the women to a doctor every two or three weeks to have them checked for venereal disease. Their health certificates would be posted in their rooms, he said.

Perhaps because they were run as businesses, the houses were more acceptable, Capt. John Stenson said.

"It was somewhat — I don't want to use the word tolerated — accepted. There were some advantages then," Stenson said.

"These people realized fully that to function as a business, which is what they were trying to do, the best thing was to keep trouble down. They po-

after they got off there, they would go back to their lives."

And there were some advantages to the system, said Lt. Russ Hawks, who also was assigned to the vice squad after being hired in 1964.

"They were good sources of information," he said. "They'd snitch on each other. They were a warehouse of information."

Despite that, none of the officers would want old-style house prostitution to return to Peoria. Besides, it wouldn't work now, they said.

"It was different people then," Hawks said.

Hawks and Gray remember well their first raid on a brothel.

"They sent seven of us to a house down on (Aiken) Alley," Gray said. "When we got inside, the madam . . . asked us for our driver's licenses. As she was reading them off, she said, 'Well, there's a new policeman hired by that name,' and kept going down the list of each one of us."

"On the wall they had a clipping from the paper (with a story and photos) of all the new policemen that had been hired," Gray said. "She would look at a license then look at the article on the wall and check each one of us off."

"She was mad at her pimp, so she let us all in, knowing she was going to get busted. All of

the whole house."

Gray and Hawks eventually would become well-acquainted with all the brothel owners. They can remember Ethyl LaMar, a longtime black madam, and the Pryor family, who ran a house that would be featured in comedian Richard Pryor's autobiographical movie, "Jo Jo Dancer, Your Life is Calling."

Hawks, now middle-aged and graying, remembers madam Margaret "China Bee" Parker, who operated a house on Southwest Washington for 32 years. Arrested dozens of times, she never was sent to jail.

Parker's security system was so tight during the later years of her operation that she only would accept customers from out of town, and then only by appointment and with references, Hawks said.

But Cornish, the retired vice squad member, added that there was a flip side to the so-called "rackets," especially when a pimp would assume too much control.

"I saw something one night at a bar that bothered me for a long time. There was a woman sitting at a table and her pimp asked her for her money. She gave him two rolls of bills, but he wouldn't give her a quarter

## Hookers enslaved by addictions

Customer, confidant of prostitutes says most 'walk' to support a habit

By ELAINE HOPKINS

of the Journal Star

The boredom of small town life often drives Don to Peoria's Near North Side, where he has made friends with some of the hookers who work the streets there.

Now three of the prostitutes he's known are dead.

Their stories are the same, said Don, who is also a customer of the prostitutes and asked that his last name not be used. "The pattern is inevitable."

The women first become addicted to alcohol and drugs, he said, and then become slaves to their habits and to those who can furnish the drugs — the male dealers who control the area's drug and prostitution trade.

They buy crack cocaine but will take any drug available, including heroin, he said. "Ten dollars for half a rock will give them happy thoughts for 10 minutes," he said.

They earn the money mainly by performing oral sex for \$20, he said.

The women know each other because they buy drugs from the same dealers, he said.

the dead prostitutes — Marcia Logue, known on the street as Amber — at the Jig Saw Tap in 1989. Amber and Helen Dorrance, also known as Ann, "walked together," Don said. Both were found dead in a Peoria County ditch on Sept. 18.

Amber once told Don that her former pimp/dealer was black, and that he had bragged about getting revenge on whites for the way blacks have been treated.

"This was retribution, to make slaves out of the white women. And that was the way he treated her," Don said. The dealer, known as Sonny on the streets, later died in prison, Don said.

Often the women are defiant teen-agers who are lured into relationships that lead to pregnancies and drugs and finally to working the streets to support their habits and children.

Don, who is middle-aged and divorced, said he's tried to help these prostitutes. "I've talked with them, offered my house as a sanctuary."

Some have stayed for a while, to sleep off drugs or recover from exhaustion, he said. But soon "they get the shakes and the sweats," Don said. They call their drug dealers and demand to be taken back to the Near North Side.

Don said he was on Peoria's

Sept. 17 when he saw Sandy — Sandra Csesznegi, the third slain prostitute — on Monroe Street. "We exchanged greetings," Don said.

Then he encountered Julie after 2 a.m. on Spring Street. "She needed a date for money."

Don said he offered to drive her somewhere. "If you've got no place to go, you can sleep in my car, with me," he said he told her.

Don bought her some cigarettes, then drove to a restaurant parking lot where they fell asleep in his car.

They awoke after sunrise, grabbed a fast-food breakfast, and she made a phone call from a pay phone on Spring Street, Don said. He then drove her to a house on the Near North Side, where she had arranged a date.

She gave him the phone number and asked him to call an hour later, pretending to be her pimp and ordering her back on the streets, Don said.

He refused and threw the phone number away, he said. Then he left town.

Don grew worried when he learned a prostitute named Julie might be missing. He launched his own search for her last week and finally found her alive and well on the Near North Side.