

Owensboro's Red-Light Districts

By Jerry Long
c.2024



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Bicentennial Section Part III, 4 July 1976, p.24:

Early residents' concern failed to dim red lights

Places like Elsmere Highland, Huntersville and the Chitlin Ranch mean nothing to most Owensboroans today but there are still those who remember Mulberry Street – the last place in Owensboro where the red lights burned bright.

No one has bothered to record when the first "soiled doves" landed at the Yellow Banks but the place had wide open saloons and gambling almost from its beginnings. It would probably be safe to say that the red lights came on early in Owensboro's history.

Jennie "Blue Jennie" Burton was the first of the big-time madams with a big house on West Fifth Street in the early 1870s. During her reign, there were at least a half dozen other "houses" in town and in 1880, girls from Jennie Burton's, Lillie Seymour's and Skip Bailey's battled in the streets.

Jennie announced her retirement from the late-evening business in 1882 after paying a \$20 fine.

The Messenger hailed this announcement saying, "She has kept a house of ill-fame for more than 10 years and volumes would be required to relate the sad and woeful stories which might be told of hundreds of once pure girls who have lived lives of shame in her brothel.

"Hundreds of young men have been enticed into this den of shame and many of them have felt the scourge of man's most dreaded disease and not a few have found early graves."

But the Messenger was fair. When a prostitute was shot at Annie Kendall's place later that year, the paper noted that one of those who nursed the 23-year-old Spencer County girl back to health was the "sin-besmirched" Jennie Burton.

Jennie hadn't retired though so some neighbors tried to convince her by smashing her doors and windows.

A city ordinance of May 1884 seemed to encourage places like Jennie's, though. It required prostitutes to be off the streets by 9 p.m. a discrimination against streetwalkers in favor of the girls in the houses.

On Aug. 12 that year, Nancy Jane Dusan died at age 50. Better known as Jennie Burton, she left an estate of \$1,800 plus thousands of dollars worth of Owensboro real estate.

Her house was taken over by Temp "Big Temp" Sublett and the "Fifth Street Ranch" continued to prosper. In October 1888, someone set fire to the Sublett house but damage was minor.

Another mob that month tore up the house of Widdy Moore near present Brescia College, breaking windows and smashing furniture.

Around 1890, Temp Sublett got tired of the semi-annual \$100 fines and occasional mob harassment and moved to Henderson. Daviess Circuit Court noted that she owed \$100 on an old fine and brought her back to serve it in jail.

After years as Owensboro's top madam, she was broke and couldn't pay the fine. After 30 days, the court released her on her promise never to return to Owensboro.

During the "Gay '90s," the sporting houses moved east. Fanny Taylor's on Wildcat Hill (on Leitchfield Road), Lee Rice's in Elsmere Highland and her neighbor, Jane "Hard Times" Davis, were among the biggest.

Policemen often had problems with those houses. In 1894 C.C. Bennett and Victor Crook were suspended from the force for drinking on duty and visiting two bawdy houses in other than an official capacity.

Newspaper articles from those years contain numerous stories of country girls coming to town and asking directions to places like Emma Dixon's where they hoped to find glamor and excitement. And there were husbands and fathers who tracked them down and pleaded with them to return home.

When Elsmere Highland (now Street) was annexed in 1895, the bawdy houses closed to reopen next day in Huntersville (around 18th and Breckenridge). It was noted that boys as young as 14 were customers.

Even when police made the infrequent raids of the bawdy houses, the madams often had an easy time in court. A jury in 1897 fined Mrs. Davis a penny after convicting her of running a bawdy house.

Ella Leigh Crook wasn't so lucky three years later though. She was fined \$300 150 days in jail if she couldn't pay.

By then (after 1896) the scene of action was shifting to Mulberry Street (Cedar north of Second).

The street, with five large brick houses, was a free-fire zone for sex and Sunday beer. Police almost never raided those houses – perhaps because county deed books show two prominent lawyers owning property in that block in the early years of this century.

Elmer L. Brown, Owensboro's oldest practicing attorney, was a kid delivering clothes for a cleaning firm when Mulberry was at its peak between 1900-10.

The River Brick at 105 Mulberry, owned by Marion Wilson, was "the" house on the street and she was the most famous madam of them all, he recalls.

Her house, he says, was a large yellow brick with seven or eight rooms. The other four houses between Second and what was then Cherry (now First) were about as large and about as nice, he says.

He adds, "Those were nice houses. People didn't really mind them, though most everybody knew or suspected what they were. People didn't talk about things like that then like they do today."

Probably the greatest drive against Mulberry came in 1916 and was directed against Dave and Edith King, who owned all but one of the houses. Mayor J.H. Hickman vowed to wipe out the "vice dens" and get a new police force if the present force could not do so.

It was said that girls as young as 14 worked in the houses and that young boys were often seen drunk on beer that was sold in great quantities on Sunday afternoons.

The end came in the late 1930s, according to the late Chief Vernie Bidwell, who was a motorcycle patrolman in the West End during the last days of Mulberry Street. It was brought on by venereal disease and drug addiction, he said.

But in memory, Mulberry was a better place than that. As Brown remembers it, "There was a girl named Cleo, she was about 19 or 20 and she was beautiful. I always thought if I grew up and married, I'd want a girl just as pretty and nice as that."

The houses, which he says he only visited once in 1918 while selling war bonds to the girls, "had pianos that you put a nickel or dime in and they'd play."

The player pianos are silent now, the fine houses are gone, the "prettiest girls in the world" no longer stroll down Mulberry to the river on a quiet Sunday afternoon.

Despite a boom time of at least 70 years, prostitution died in Owensboro with the last arrest in 1958.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Bicentennial Section Part III, 4 July 1976, p.24:

75 to 80 years ago, Huntersville stood as wildest spot in county

Drive down 18th Street, heading east across Breckenridge Street. It doesn't look like it today, but 75 to 80 years ago this was the wildest place in Daviess County.

Some of the residents of that day said this place – Huntersville, it was called – was the wildest place this side of a western mining camp.

When the city annexed the red-light districts of Elsmere Highlands and Snow Hill to the north, the gamblers, prostitutes and saloonkeepers were chased out. Huntersville, just east of the old fairgrounds on what was then Johnson's Lane (now 18th Street) was outside the city limits and thus outside the law.

Residents there were outraged but Huntersville was doomed to change as the bawdy houses, gambling halls and saloons swung open their doors. A man named A.J. Courtney opened a grocery and restaurant at the corner of Breckenridge Street and Johnson's Lane and Courtney's Corner became the court square of the notorious town.

It was almost a nightly thing for a battle pistols, knives or fists – to be fought on the street outside.

Courtney, mayor of the toughest town in Daviess County, served a type of sweet cider, known as "Courtney's Mule" for its powerful kick.

It was said that four small drinks of "Courtney's Mule" would make a man (or woman) put on his war-paint and gallop around the racetrack at the fairgrounds across the street for half the night and then come back and fight till dawn – unless he was killed first.

Huntersville's heyday lasted only a few years, but many older residents can still remember the time when "no decent woman would be seen on Johnson's Lane after dark."

Courtney died of a heart attack on Feb. 4, 1908, and the Messenger headlined his death, "No More Rides On Courtney's Mule."

But by then Huntersville was part of Owensboro and had been tamed considerably. Those who had caroused there in its prime were dead, in prison or chased out of town. Today it's just another part of town.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 24 July 2008, p.1C:

Owensboro's morals are better now than ever

By Keith Lawrence, Messenger-Inquirer

Prostitution was wide open in Owensboro for more than 70 years.

Not legal, but officially ignored.

Around 1870, 36-year-old Nancy Jane Dusan - better known as Jennie "Blue Jennie" Burton - opened the Fifth Street Ranch, Owensboro's first big-time brothel. When she retired in 1882, The Messenger noted that "hundreds of once pure girls ... have lived lives of shame in her brothel."

Fanny Taylor's Wildcat Hill on Leitchfield Road flourished for a short time in the 1890s. The place's biggest claim to fame was its name.

Also in the 1890s, Lee Rice and Jane "Hard Times" Davis established brothels in Elsmere Highland, which was then just east of the city limits.

When the city annexed what is now Elsmere Street in 1895, the prostitutes moved out.

Then came Huntersville.

In the 1890s, they called this "the toughest town in Daviess County." And A.J. Courtney, whose grocery at 18th and Breckenridge streets sold a powerful cider called "Courtney's Mule," was the unofficial mayor.

When Elsmere was annexed, bawdy houses, gambling halls and saloons moved into Huntersville.

But Mulberry Street was the queen of Owensboro's red light districts.

The short street - now Executive Boulevard - was a "free zone" for prostitution and beer from 1896 to 1939.

There were six houses - brothels - on the street.

But Marian Wilson's "River Brick" at 105 Mulberry - a large, yellow brick structure with seven or eight rooms - was the most famous.

Now think about this for a minute.

Mulberry Street was two blocks from the old jail, three from the courthouse and six from the old City Hall.

Yet it existed for more than 40 years.

And yes, people did know what was going on there.

There were frequent arrests for "keeping a disorderly house."

And that didn't refer to poor housekeeping.

But prostitution and gambling were accepted as part of life in Owensboro back then.

So, yeah, I'll put our morals up against theirs any day.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 4 January 2024, p.1B:

Remembering Death Valley and Cardboard City

By Keith Lawrence, Messenger-Inquirer

The river banks west of Frederica Street has been a haven for the homeless for at least 87 years.

Back in October 1937, the Messenger-Inquirer had an article about “Death Valley.”

According to the story, that summer, near the end of the Great Depression, developers had torn down the nine brothels that had been on Mulberry Street between Second Street and the river and had prospered there since the 1890s.

They planned to reuse the lumber for other buildings.

Mulberry, by the way, became Cedar Street until 1978, when it became Executive Boulevard and then was closed...

Anyway, in the summer of 1937, people with no place to live, scavenged lumber and tin roofs from the old brothels and built seven one-room wood and tin houses below the banks between Locust and Mulberry.

That’s about where the Kentucky Legend Pier is today.....



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 29 August 2013, p.1B:

Mulberry Street may be returning to local map

By Keith Lawrence, Messenger-Inquirer

One of Owensboro's earliest street names may be making a comeback after more than 70 years.

The original 1816 plan for Rossboro, which the Kentucky General Assembly changed to Owensboro, shows four east-west streets — Front or Water Street, Second, Third and Fourth streets.

And there are nine north-south streets — Lewis (now J.R. Miller Boulevard), Daviess, Allen, St. Ann, Frederica, St. Elizabeth, Locust, Mulberry and Walnut.

Mulberry was wiped from city maps in 1940 because of its sordid past.

But a plan on file at the Owensboro Metropolitan Planning Commission for a subdivision extension in rural Daviess County shows one of the streets will be Mulberry.

There was no stain attached to the name until 1896, when somebody got the idea of turning the northernmost blocks of the street — from Second to the river — into a red light district.

Eventually, there were six houses — brothels — on the street.

Marian Wilson's "River Brick" at 105 Mulberry — a large, yellow brick structure with seven or eight rooms — was the most famous.

It was obvious that city officials knew what was going on down there.

In 1906, people who lived on Mulberry south of Second petitioned City Hall to change the street name to Cedar.

They were embarrassed to live on Mulberry, they said.

And so, most of Mulberry became Cedar Street.



**Daviess County Historical Quarterly, Vol. X, No. 3, July 1992,
Daviess County Historical Society, Owensboro, KY, pp59-61:**

LIFE ON MULBERRY STREET

By Shelia Brown Heflin

How did life on Mulberry Street differ from life on any other Owensboro, Kentucky street? The professions and activities of Mulberry Street residents created an insurmountable divide between themselves and the other Owensboro citizens. Prostitution reigned as the profession of the women on Mulberry Street. Mulberry Street -- a two block area which lay between Second Street and the Ohio River became Owensboro's most famous or infamous red light district. Action shifted from other sections of the city to Mulberry Street in 1896 and the area continued to be a vice problem until 1939 when the city rezoned the land for commercial use.(1)

To reach the notorious immoral resorts, a gentlemen caller crossed the wooden bridge behind the tobacco house at Second and Mulberry. Immoral resorts lined both sides of the street.(2) The largest and most handsome of the houses stood at 105 Mulberry on the river bank. People referred to it as the Mansion or the Yellow Brick house.(3) Its facade included huge pillars and an extra long porch with many windows and doors leading inside. Well kept grounds surrounded the Mansion.(4)

It outclassed all the smaller houses along the street with its ornately decorated interior. Red velvet drapes hung at all the windows to hide the girls from non-paying voyeurs.(5) Countless times the girls led panting men over the inlaid hardwood floors, up the staircase with the beautiful carved wood banister and into one of the ten rooms, completely neglecting to appreciate the beauty surrounding them.(6)

Dave King owned most of the Mulberry Street resorts.(7) He hired competent madames to run the houses and care for the girls. Each madame handled all the business transactions concerning her house and its inmates. She collected fees, paid bills and made sure the girls never lacked for the necessities of the trade.(8) Visitors preferred to call their favorite house by the madame's first name rather than the street address -- Mabel's place, Edith's place or Minnie's place.(9)

Although the good men and women of Owensboro claimed they never laid eyes on Mulberry Street they always knew about the activities occurring therein and enjoyed gossiping about them with the neighbors.(10) They seldom referred to the houses as whorehouses before innocent little children. Women substituted the words "Nanny House,"(11) while men preferred the term "Sporting House."(12) Regardless of what parents called the palaces of ill repute, they repeatedly warned their children to stay away from North Mulberry Street. The children received instructions to run, not walk, whenever passing the street became unavoidable.(13)

Teenage girls needed no warnings from their parents. They feared being kidnapped, forced to work as a prostitute and dying without anyone knowing what happened to them. Therefore, they stayed far, far away from Mulberry Street. (14)

Probably irritated with the snickering whenever they gave their address as Mulberry Street, the families living south of Second decided the street required a new name. In July 1913, the thoroughly outraged citizens presented a petition to the City Council. The petition, signed by nearly every South Mulberry Street resident, demanded a new street name. Every Councilman

present attempted to be the first to move that Mulberry be renamed. The totally sympathetic Council passed the motion unanimously.(15)

The city ordinance changing the street name received final approval on August 19, 1913. Section 1 of the ordinance changed Mulberry Street south of Second to the city limits to Cedar Street. The area north of Second remained Mulberry Street.(16)

M. [note: see Bibliography at end of article] pointed out that the hypocrisy of fathers, businessmen, police and other respectable citizens. They passed laws against prostitution and warned their children about the evils lurking in Mulberry Street, yet many of these pillars of society frequented the immoral resorts as much as any unscrupulous character.(17) They slipped down back streets after dark to preserve their shell of respectability.(18)

Cab drivers discreetly delivered potential customers to Mulberry Street resorts. They received one-third of the girls one to two dollar take for their efforts at hustling.(19)

Boats docking along the Owensboro bank of the Ohio River meant a very lucrative evening for the immoral resorts. After their womanless journey, the men welcomed an opportunity for a few good times. Wine, women and song -- or rather hard liquor, nickelodeon music and paid-for women satisfied the men during their shore leave.(20)

Naturally, the girls expected business to be excellent during the yearly tobacco market. Each year, the county farmers brought wagons filled with good Kentucky tobacco to Owensboro for sale at auction. Faced with the choices of sleeping in the wagon, going to a hotel alone or going to Mulberry Street, many chose Mulberry Street. The farmers seeking a soft bed with a warm companion hurried down to Mulberry Street, paid the price and spent a night or two or three.(21)

Names and faces changed as the years passed, but major activities of Mulberry Street inmates remained the same. Each girl acquired a nickname, which probably described one of her special characteristics. The girls' nicknames included Little Bit, Big Mary, Leapin' Lena, Teddy Bear and Step-and-a-half.(22)

Methods of procuring girls today remains much the same as methods at the turn of the century. Country girls coming to the big city searching for glamor and excitement headed straight for Mulberry Street.(23) The "Big Man" added girls of all ages and types to his houses. A forlorn looking youngster, without a penny to her name, was very easy prey. She could easily be persuaded to join the ranks with a promise of good clothes, food and a place to live.(24)

During daylight hours the girls dressed very fashionably. They wore high heeled, button up shoes with baby doll toes and lots of furs and jewelry. B. compared their general appearance to Miss Kitty on "Gunsmoke." Many wore a black beauty spot on the face to look sexy and alluring. Their gorgeous taffeta dresses, sewn in a variety of colors, had full skirts, long sleeves with lace around the wrists and lace decorating the neckline.(25) Prior to World War I the girls wore their hair long or in a fancy braid.(26) Short hair styles gained in popularity during World War I. The marcel style appealed to many of the girls. This style consisted of very short hair with regular waves covering the head. At times the girls added a few spit curls to enhance their beauty.(27)

Surely some of the good women folk of Owensboro envied the girls' beauty and magnificent clothing. According to B. the girls were strikingly beautiful and varied in size from slender to heavy.(28) Their age ranged from eighteen to thirty. They seldom worked after age thirty, their enticing features began to fade rapidly at that age.(29)

At dusk, alluring finery replaced the fashionable day clothing. Each dress revealed a physical aspect which enhanced the girl's charms. Low cut backs, plunging necklines and slinky material clinging to every voluptuous curve were a few methods used to attract a customer.(30) One Mulberry Street girl had her dress constructed to reveal her extremely large breasts. Of course,

the material snugly fitted her curves, but she added, maybe I should say subtracted, something from her evening gown. She removed the front panel which covered her breasts and substituted a thin veil. Dressed in this manner, she enticed the men by giving them a peek at the merchandise before they doled out cold, hard cash for her services.(31)

Primarily the girls conserved all their strength and energy for their evening activities. However, after recuperating from a night of hard labor they might go shopping or driving. Since the townspeople abhorred the idea of mixing with prostitutes the girls shopped in Owensboro only when absolutely necessary. On those occasions, all the girls, under the madame's supervision, traveled downtown to purchase the items which could not be delivered. The girls, plus their madame, always patronized McAtee's shoe department where they received prompt and courteous service.(32)

The madame ordered just about everything else, including groceries and drugs delivered to the house. She acted as mother to the girls providing all food, clothing and whenever necessary health care. She also made sure the black maids kept the girls' rooms, clothing and the rest of the house neat and orderly.(33)

The girls worked only at night. Their daylight tasks consisted of simply lounging around looking pretty. When the girls tired of sitting on the front porch the chauffeur took them for an afternoon drive in the Hudson. These trips served a twofold purpose -- the girls immensely enjoyed the change of scenery while the madame enjoyed the free advertising.(34) Surely, any man catching a quick glance at an intriguing face would follow up on the sneak preview to take a gander at the rest of her charming body.

At the turn of the century Mulberry Street visitors adapted an old railroad song as the streets theme song. It accurately described the beginning of a typical evening at a Mulberry Street resort.

First you ring the bell and then you ask for
Anna...

Down the line
Anna comes down in a pink komona (sic)
Down the line...

All dolled up in powder and cologne
Down the line...

First you spend the dollar for a couple of
rounds of beer
Down the line...

Then a dime for music that you want to hear
Down the line...

Then a couple of dollars for a couple of
weeks of beer
Down the line...

An evening of fun and entertainment began with the madame scrutinizing each potential customer before they entered her house. She rejected those too young, the moneyless or the troublemakers.(36) Once inside, the madame escorted the caller into the parlor where they engaged

the girls in social chit- chat.(37) They purchased drinks for their favorites and kept dance music flowing through the room by feeding nickels to the nickelodeon.(38)

After a caller selected his companion for the evening he approached the madame to pay for his forthcoming entertainment She acquired of each gentleman, "French or Regular?" Upon their answer she charged appropriately -- one dollar for regular, two dollars for French or three to four dollars for an all night visit.(39) With the business transaction completed the couple retired to the girl's upstairs room.

The big boss forbade the girls to roll any man. A girl caught rolling her John received a beating. A girl learned very quickly not to steal from the customers.(40)

Many customers formed special attachments for a girl. An ironic example of this involved the lover who berated his paid date for smoking because it was unhealthy. Evidently, the gentlemen thought prostitution the lesser of the two evils.(41)

Most girls dream about finding Mr. Right and settling down. Prostitutes were no exception. In many cases a girl worked several years, fell in love with a customer, answered yes to his marriage proposal and lived happily and normally everafter. According to C. several girls married millionaires and are worth a small fortune today.(42)

However, happiness flitted just out of reach like a butterfly for other girls. An unhappy experience prompted Grace Foster, an inmate of a Mulberry Street house, to attempt suicide. Her evening passed quite joyfully until she and her male friend retired to her room. Soon after retiring they quarreled. Depressed over her lover's departure and vow of never returning, Grace decided to commit suicide. She swallowed a large quantity of laudanum, desiring death, rather than a life without her lover. Fortunately, the other girls discovered the semiconscious Grace and called a doctor, who successfully administered an antidote.(43)

Harry, a salesman for a Louisville, Kentucky clothing house enjoyed the Mulberry Street entertainments until the money ran out -- the company money. During his Owensboro business trip he spent the evenings with a fast set of young men. On Sunday evening they visited a Mulberry Street dive, where Harry insisted that they enjoy themselves at his expense. Big time spender Harry grew despondent as he realized he had spent all the company money and attempted to slit his own throat with a pocketknife. His friends foiled the suicide attempt and collected enough money among themselves to repay a portion of the amount he had spent on them.(44)

A male bouncer or the stout madame usually handled any problem arising with boisterous customers. All the women attempted to keep trouble to a minimum within the houses. No trouble meant less problems with police and other city officials.(45)

City policemen knew every Mulberry Street inmate by name. Being assigned to Mulberry Street entailed walking through the houses every two hours checking for disturbances, breaking up fights and handling any situation too difficult for the inmates to handle themselves.(46)

Policemen visited Mulberry Street officially and unofficially. They were not adverse to creating a little ruckus themselves during an unofficial visit. M. related a story concerning a huge policeman who enjoyed sitting and talking with the girls. One evening a girl retorted very smartly to the officer. In retaliation for her rudeness, he picked the girl up by the heels, spread her legs and used her "bread and butter" as a spittoon for his wad of chewing tobacco.(47) Needless to say, the girl resented this action, but I bet she never crossed the man again.

Policeman also acquired the duty of arresting girls who failed to appear for their weekly check up. A doctor appointed by the city examined each girl for venereal disease and filed a report on her condition. Failure to keep an appointment led to immediate police arrest and a few days in

jail. If the doctor discovered any venereal disease the girl remained in jail for the public's safety.(48)

The doctor issued each healthy girl a card stating she did not have a venereal disease and the date of her examination. The girls were required to place the cards on their dresser.(49) Any disease-conscious patron clearly saw the card and knew the odds for contracting a venereal disease was very slim. His relief allowed him to enjoy his date and return home without worrying about spreading a social disease.

Although an 1898 city ordinance declared prostitution and houses of ill repute unlawful,(50) the sex business flourished in Owensboro. The police turned a blind eye on their activities until the girls stepped way out of line or the townspeople demanded action against the unlawful establishments. In May 1905 police arrested Marion Wilson, Minnie Aldridge and Daisy Ross, all three keepers of immoral resorts, for selling beer without a city license. It was the first time a case of this type ever came to trial in police court.(51) However, since the madames pleaded guilty to running immoral houses the judge filed away the charge and fined them fifty dollars each.(52)

In January 1907 Mayor O'Bryan ordered Chief of Police Meishenheimer to instruct his men to notify the girls that remaining in Owensboro meant weekly raids. The order resulted from a grand jury recommendation that the houses be raided weekly. If the officers refused to comply with the recommendation, the grand jury suggested returning indictments against the men for neglecting their duties. City authorities preferred a total closing of the houses to instituting weekly raids or being indicted by the grand jury.(53) The girls departed in droves. Both Saturday evening trains departed Owensboro filled with prostitutes. Quiet reigned for the first time in many years at the Mulberry Street houses.(54)

As the situation cooled down Mulberry Street returned to its normal activities. M. recalled 1912-1919 as Mulberry Streets most prosperous years. M. stated that Police Chief Ollie O. Haynes successfully closed the houses and chased all the girls out of town.(55) Haynes declared war and began cracking down on immoral resorts shortly after taking office on January 1, 1918. His co-worker, Judge Pinkston supported his efforts by levying stiff fines against those convicted of running immoral resorts.(56)

By January 19, 1918 the grand jury had indicted ten women for maintaining a nuisance. The five who resided in Mulberry Street --Minnie Aldridge, Jessie Westerfield, Mabel Carr, Edna Bell and Cora LaVarde -- were placed under bond and held over to the May court term.(57) In May each madame pleaded guilty and received a fine ranging between seventy-five and one hundred dollars.(58)

In September Minnie, Edna, Jessie and Mabel appeared before the grand jury again, charged with three counts -- nuisance, selling liquor without a license and selling liquor to minors.(59) During police court in November Jessie, Edna and Mabel received twenty-five dollar fines for conducting immoral houses.(60) Minnie, back in the news on Christmas Day, received a twenty-five dollar plus court cost fine for operating an immoral resort.(61) Throughout 1918 Haynes kept the girls in court almost as much as their customers kept them in bed.

Little did the girls know that on January 7, 1919 in Daviess Circuit Court they would put themselves right out of business. On that day Minnie, Edna, Mabel, Cora and Jessie entered pleas of guilty to the usual indictment which read in part:

she did knowingly procure, suffer and permit divers and sundry lewd persons both men and women of evil name and fame to assemble and congregate who remained in said house drinking, tippling, cursing, whoring and indulging in other vulgar and disorderly conduct

unknown to the grand jury, and have sexual intercourse one with another, said persons not being married one to the other, to the common nuisance of all the good citizens of the Commonwealth of Kentucky...

Each madame paid her fifty dollar fine and returned to work.(62)

Chapter Sixty-one of the *1918 Acts of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Kentucky* required the County Attorney or the commonwealth's Attorney to institute injunction proceedings against anyone pleading guilty to operating an immoral resort.(63) Saturday, February 1, 1919 Claude Smith and Herman Birkhead, Commonwealth and County Attorneys respectively, filed injunctions asking for an order of abatement against Mabel Carr, Minnie Aldridge, Edna Bell, Dave and Edith King, Jessie Westerfield and Cora LaVarde.(64)

Following the filing of the injunctions Mulberry Street residents arranged to dispose of all their furniture, musical instruments and household goods.(65) Abatement proceedings required the above mentioned items be sold by the state to pay court costs and that the houses remain closed for one year.(66) The girls kept city transfer wagons busy until very late, moving furniture and personal belongings. The Samuel- Bittel Music store quickly reclaimed the sixteen electric pianos on which they held mortgages. The threat of abatement proceedings and Mayor Calhoun's instructions for police to make sure all the girls left town prompted much of the hurried disposal of goods and departures.(67)

The *Owensboro Daily Messenger* lamented the loss of revenue for the city with the end of immoral houses:

The operation of immoral houses in Owensboro has been a source of considerable revenue to several agencies. In addition to paying fines two or three times a year, the greater portion of which went to the prosecuting attorneys, the women have been very liberal customers at the stores and shops of Owensboro. Nice profits were realized by the three taxi- cab companies in Owensboro, and the current furnished by the city amounted to no little sum.(68)

Judge Slack granted temporary injunctions in the abatement cases against Edna, Mabel, Cora and Minnie.(69) They could gain the release of their property from the order of abatement by posting the required bond, receiving approval by the court and proclaiming the property would not be used for immoral purposes.(70) Evidently Minnie Aldridge complied with the terms and retained her home at 104 Mulberry Street. Her name never appeared in the criminal courts after the January 1919 case.(71) She continued to reside at her Mulberry Street home until 1926.(72) In 1926 her name disappeared from the city directory and another person was listed as the owner of 104 Mulberry.(73)

Beginning with the *1920 Owensboro City Directory* people with printable professions were listed as home owners of the famous Mulberry Street immoral resorts.(74) Throughout the 1920's the houses changed hands continuously. Many were rented as apartment houses and during the Depression even the coal sheds were rented to homeless families.(75)

Although Mulberry Street houses were used for lawful purposes after 1919 the street still retained its bad reputation. Street walkers and drugs became the problems on Mulberry Street between 1920 and 1939. Street walkers blatantly grabbed men by the elbow and invited them to join them, for a price.(76) Many girls simply begged for twenty-five cents to help support their drug habit. Girls from prominent families moved into the area, hoping to earn enough money as street walkers to purchase drugs.(77) Prior to and during World War I white mule and home brew were the problems, not drugs.(78)

The town slop dump stood in the middle of the intersection of First and Mulberry Streets. Above the slop dump hung a solitary lightbulb which came on at dusk. As evening fell girls attired in their finest dresses gathered at the slop dump. Eventually seven to twelve girls presented themselves under the light at the slop dump. Everyone knew about the slop dump whores so potential customers arrived quickly. The girl's price attracted many customers -- two bits -- one quarter for a fun filled evening. Their price earned them the nickname of two bit whores and the reputation of being the cheapest thrill in town. Police ignored their activities until ten o'clock. Anyone caught soliciting after ten received a trip to jail and a fine.(79)

According to the late Police Chief Vernie Bidwell, venereal disease and drugs were the downfall of Mulberry Street. Police drove the drug traffic from the area and prostitutes followed soon after.(80) By 1939 Mulberry Street was only a memory -- all the houses and girls had vanished.

Were the Mulberry Street resorts really so bad when compared to the street walkers? No! The madame in the houses of ill repute supervised her girls, took care of them and made sure they visited the doctor regularly. However, street walkers carried venereal disease and drug habits whenever they went. Weighing all the advantages and disadvantages tips the scale in favor of organized prostitution. C.O.Y.O.T.E., P.O.N.Y. and A. S.P.**, all flourishing prostitutes unions, may not be such a bad idea after all.(81)

**Acronyms for Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics, Prostitutes of New York and Associated Seattle Prostitutes.

Endnotes

1. "Early Residents' Concern Failed To Dim Red Lights," *Owensboro Messenger & Inquirer*, July 4, 1976, Bicentennial Section, Part III, p.24.
2. M., private interview, June 1978.
3. A., private interview, February 15, 1978
4. B., private interview, July 1978.
5. M.
6. A.
7. "Early Residents' Concern Failed To Dim Red Lights," p. 24.
8. A.
9. M.
10. B.
11. G., private interview, July 1978.
12. J., private interview, March 9, 1978.
13. M.
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15. "Change Name of Mulberry Street," *Owensboro Daily Messenger*, July 22, 1913, p.4.
16. *City Ordinance Book*. Owensboro, Kentucky, p. 50.
17. M.
18. W., private interview, April 1978.
19. K., private interview, March 3, 1978.
20. A.
21. H., private interview, May 26, 1978.
22. J.
23. M.
24. A-
25. B.

26. A-
27. B.
28. *Ibid.*
29. M.
30. F., private interview, August 1978.
31. M.
32. B. 33.A.
34. B.
35. J.
36. M.
37. A.
38. J.
39. M.
40. A.
41. M.
42. C., private interview, February 10, 1978.
43. "Wanted To Die," *Owensboro Daily Inquirer*, April 26, 1906, p. 5.
44. "Too Fast," *Owensboro Daily Inquirer*, May 21, 1906, p. 1
45. M.
46. *Ibid.*
47. *Ibid.*
48. C.
49. M.
50. Chapeze Wathan et al., eds., *Charter of the City of Owensboro, Kentucky and Ordinances of Said City* (Owensboro, Kentucky: Mack F. Payne, 1898), Ordinance No. 46, pp. 106-107.
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53. "Quit Reigned On The 'Line'," *Owensboro Daily Messenger*, January 6, 1907, p. 1.
54. *Ibid.*
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56. "Fines In Police Court Run 62,219," *Owensboro Daily Messenger*, December 1, 1918, p. 3.
57. "Twenty Indictments Are Returned By The Grand Jury," *Owensboro Daily Messenger*, January 19, 1918 p. 2.
58. "Manslaughter Is Charge Made In An Indictment," *Owensboro Daily Messenger*, May 26, 1918, p. 1
59. "Forty-two Indictments Have Been Found By Grand Jury," *Owensboro Daily Messenger*, September 11, 1918, p.2.
60. "News of Courts," *Owensboro Daily Messenger*, November 28, 1918, p. 3.
61. "News of Courts," *Owensboro Daily Messenger*, December 25, 1918, p.4.
62. Commonwealth of Kentucky v. Minnie Aldridge, 8340 Daviess Circuit Court, January 1919.
63. *Acts of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Kentucky 1918*, chapter 61, sec. 11.
64. "Death Knell Is Sounded For" Line" Suits Are Filed," *Owensboro Daily Messenger*, February 2, 1919, sec. I, p.8.
65. "Little Property Will Be Found," *Owensboro Daily Messenger*, February 4, 1919, p.7.
66. "Death Knell Is Sounded For" Line" Suits Are Filed," p.8.
67. "Little Property Will Be Found," p. 7.
68. *Ibid.*
69. "Injunctions Are Granted Under New State Law," *Owensboro Daily Messenger*, February 28, 1919, p.4.
70. "Death Knell Is Sounded For "Line" Suits Are Filed," p. 8.
71. *Criminal Index Off Docket*, Daviess Criminal Court, 1876-1931.

72. *Owensboro, Kentucky City Directory 1925-1926* (Danville, Ill.: Heber Page Directory Company), p. 102.
73. *Folk's Owensboro City Director y1926* (St. Louis, MO.: R.L. Polk & Co., Publishers, 1926).
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80. Keith Lawrence, "The Good Old Days--Are They Really Gone?" *Owensboro Messenger & Inquirer*, July 4, 1974, sec. B, p. 1
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**Daviess County Historical Quarterly, Vol. X, No. 3, July 1992,
Daviess County Historical Society, Owensboro, KY, pp.62 & 64:**

Seamstresses, Strumpets and Servants:
Women's Work in Owensboro in the 1870's

By Lee A. Dew

In the 1870's "women's work" had changed little from the time of the Old Testament. For farm women their lives were ones of unremitting toil dictated by families, crops and seasons. For urban women there were the basic economic roles which had existed since time began. The economic role of urban women was dictated by social class and race, and limited by tradition, culture and religion. There were few occupations which were open to women

. An analysis of the census records of Owensboro, KY for the Census of 1870 shows that "women's work" fell into three distinct categories. For white women the main acceptable occupation was that of seamstress, with minor fields such as milliner included in this category. There were fifty-one women listed as seamstresses in Owensboro in 1870, out of a total population of 3,437

Schoolteachers constituted the next group of white working women. Eighteen women gave this as their occupation

. The next - largest occupation for white women was that of prostitute[after seamstresses & school teachers]. Six white houses of prostitution were identified in the census, each operated by a madam whose occupation was unflatteringly listed as "keeping whore house." Without exception these were women of property. One woman, a 38-year-old, was shown as possessing real estate worth \$2,000 and personal property of \$ 100, the second richest woman in her own right in Owensboro in 1870. Another madam boasted personal property worth \$500, while another had property worth \$300, and employed an 18-year-old black girl as a servant Other madams included a 24-year-old Irish girl with property worth \$200, and native-born women with property valued at \$250 and \$100. Clearly there was money to be made in prostitution, since no other occupation listed in the census so consistently showed their practitioners to be women of property.

For the girls who worked in the houses, life was harder. None were listed as property-owners, and most were very young. Of the sixteen white women listed in the census as "strumpet" one was 15 years of age, two were 16, and three were 18 years old. The oldest working prostitute was 24, and several listed children as dependents, living at the same address as the mother and madam



Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, 12 May 1882, p.4:

SUSPENDED.
—
**Jennie Burton Announces Her Intention
to Close Her Doors—A Suspension
That Will be Hailed
With Delight.**

Thousands of people anxiously watch the reports of failures and suspensions in the various branches of business in the country.

We have the pleasure of announcing to our readers to-day a suspension which will, perhaps, be of as much interest to people in Owensboro and Daviess county as any that have excited commercial circles in the last decade.

For many years the name of one Jennie Burton has been notorious. She has kept in the west-end a house of ill-fame for more than ten years, and volumes would be required to relate the sad and woeful stories which might be told of hundreds of once pure girls who have lived lives of shame in her brothel. Some have doubtless entered it with that purity without which woman is forever lost, others were already blighted flowers, but all who entered departed without woman's most sacred treasure. Hundreds of young men have been enticed into this den of shame and many of them have felt the scourge of man's most dreaded disease, and not a few have found early graves.

It is hard to conceive how the little daughter, who twines her tiny arms about the necks of father and mother, and who impresses on their lips the sweet innocent kiss of childhood, can ever become the willing inmate of such a hell. Yet many, whose early nights were spent in innocent sleep under the affectionate watch of a loving mother, have spent later nights in this place of perdition trying to forget their sense of ruin in drunkenness and shame, and many a night have they made hideous in their downward course which they seldom can or will retrace.

But, we will not pause to relate the too sad stories of fathers who have found their daughters beneath Jennie Burton's roof, nor of brothers who have sought in vain to reclaim their fallen sisters who found shelter there. We are content to state that this notorious mistress of courtesans, having been again recently fined \$20 and costs in the police court, has announced her fixed intention to abandon her business which has ruined fully too many already.

Her suspension will be hailed with delight by all lovers of virtue, and the cunning wiles, of this fallen woman, which have lead so many young men and. women into irretrievable ruin, will no longer entice from virtue's peaceful paths.



Owensboro Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 6 May 1904, p.4:

The residents of Mulberry street desire the name of that thoroughfare changed on account of the obnoxious character of the denizens of the north end of the street. The change will not remove the fact that the same disreputable element lives on the same street with the good people from Main street southward. We suggest that they do better than changing the name of a portion

of the street by uniting in a demand for the clearing out of the obnoxious neighborhood that is a disgrace, not only to the people of Mulberry street, but to the whole city.



Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, 22 July 1913, p.4:

CHANGE NAME OF MULBERRY STREET

It Will Be Known as Cedar South of Second.

Without a dissenting voice the common council on Monday evening passed an ordinance on its first reading to change the name, of Mulberry street from Second street. south to the city limits to Cedar street. A petition of practically every citizen of the street within the boundary was tendered to the council main body, and every councilman tried to be first to make the motion granting the request, expressing their sympathy with the movement. From Second street to the river, the thoroughfare will continue to be known as Mulberry.



Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, Saturday, 1 February 1908, p.3:



POSSIBILITY THAT HIS OWN "MULE" KICKED HIM.
SERVED LONG TIME AS "MAYOR"

A. J. Courtney Died Suddenly at His Grocery on South Breckenridge Street Friday.

"Did his own 'mule' kick him This was the question asked by the "older" residents of Huntersville last night.

A. J. Courtney, of Courtney's Mule" fame, died suddenly of heart trouble yesterday afternoon at his home on Breckenridge street. He had been in poor health for some time, but his death was unexpected. Mamie West, a negro woman, who has been keeping house for him, discovered that he was in a serious condition about 2 o'clock yesterday afternoon and she rushed to the door and called Hillary Rice who was passing. Courtney died a few minutes afterwards.

Coroner Grausz was summoned to the house and viewed the remains. Dr. Armendt was called to make an examination of the body. He gave the cause of his death as heart trouble. Coroner Grausz notified Ula Courtney, of New Albany, Ind., of the death. He arrived last night. Carl

Courtney, another son, survives but his whereabouts are unknown. A daughter also lives at Evansville. Ind. No arrangements for the funeral have been made.

Courtney conducted a grocery and restaurant at the corner of Breckenridge street and Johnson's. When Huntersville first sprang notoriety it was almost a nightly occurrence for a "battle" to be fought in the neighborhood of Courtney's corner. That was in the reign of the Mofields and "Hard Times" Davis in Huntersville. There were several other "celebrities" who held "official" positions in Huntersville at the time, but they were killed in "battle" or are residing at Frankfort or Eddyville at present. Courtney served as "mayor", longer than any one else.

When Huntersville was in its prime it resembled a Western mining camp on Saturday nights. It is claimed that Courtney served a sort of sweet cider, commonly called "Courtney's Mule" – given the name on account of its kicking qualities. It is said by residents of Huntersville that four small drinks of "Courtney's mule" would cause a denizen of that section to put on his war paint and gallop around the race track at the fair ground for half of the night and then return to Huntersville and fight till daylight – unless he was killed before morning.

In recent years Huntersville has been a rather orderly section of Owensboro. It may be that it is because the supply of "Courtney's mule" ran low in the barrel or it may be that the "village cut-ups" departed or were sent to other fields.

In the death of Courtney Huntersville lost one of its most "famous" characters.



Hartford Republican, Hartford, KY, 7 February 1919, p.1:



The death knell of "The Line," a North Mulberry street in Owensboro is called, has been sounded. In a few nights the red lights will be extinguished for all time, the jingle of the pianos will be stilled and the inhabitants of the residences in that section will have migrated to other fields. Not only will the immoral resorts on North Mulberry street be closed, but similar action will be taken in other sections of Owensboro.

Five keepers of resorts on Mulberry street have been caught firmly by the teeth of the 1918 statute, something possible that they did not realize was in effect.

At the last term of the criminal court, Mabel Carr, Cora LaVard, Sarah L. Thomas, alias Minnie Aldridge, Edna Bell and Jessie Westerfield, entered pleas of guilty to the charge of maintaining a nuisance by operating immoral houses. A fine and costs was assessed against the women. This was a self admitted fact that they were guilty of the offense charged in the indictment, and now there is no escape from the rigid provisions of the new law. The women were beaten at their own game, and Commonwealth's Attorney Smith held the "joker" up his sleeve, without even mentioning the fact to his closest friends.

On Saturday Commonwealth's Attorney Claude Smith and County Attorney Herman Birkhead, acting for the commonwealth of Kentucky, filed injunction suits in the Daviess circuit court against the proprietors of the alleged immoral resorts asking for an order of abatement. The defendants are Mabel Carr, Minnie Aldridge, Edna Bell, Dave and Edith King, owners of the property in which the resorts are kept, Jessie Westerfield and Cora LaVarde.

The action was taken under the injunction and abatement law that was passed by the last legislature. It is one of the most drastic laws of the kind ever enacted in Kentucky. In the next few days the attorneys for the commonwealth will ask Judge Slack for a temporary injunction against the defendants. If this is granted an early date will be set for hearing of a permanent injunction.

The new law requires that the commonwealth's or county attorney take action when any one has been found guilty of conducting an immoral resort. It also gives a citizen the right to institute the proceedings.

At the last term of court the above named defendants entered pleas of guilty and were fined. There were other women in other sections of the city who also entered pleas of guilty and against whom similar proceedings will be taken, it was announced.

In the injunction suits filed Saturday the abatement of the nuisances are asked and the closing of the property in which the alleged immoral resorts are located, is asked for one year. If the injunction is granted, the law requires that all of the furniture, musical instruments and fixtures in the house be removed and sold by the sheriff. The house is then to be closed for one year. A violation of the injunction calls for a fine of from \$200 to \$1,000 and imprisonment in jail for from three to six months, or both. The proceeds derived from the sale of the personal property shall go to pay the costs of the action. If any of the funds are left after the sale of the property they are to be turned over to the defendants.

If the defendants desire to secure the release of the property from the order of abatement, it will be necessary for them to execute a bond approved by the court, to the effect that the property will not be used for immoral purposes. All costs of the actions must be paid by the defendants, including the fees for the attorneys for the plaintiff.

Immunity from prosecution is given to any witness who testifies in the proceedings.



Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, 17 October 1937, p.8B:

**Death Valley, Owensboro's Newest Addition,
Is Rent Free And Has A Song Of Its Own**

Cold Weather and High Water May Force Settlers to Move

"When you come down to Death Valley
To have a little fun, Get your \$15 ready
So when Nance and Bidwell come."

So sings Sammy Bollin, the troubador of Death Valley, co-writer of the "Death Valley Blues," of which the verse above is a part, and other ballads which he renders for his pleasure and the entertainment of the 26 other residents of Owensboro's newest addition, located under the river bank between Locust and Mulberry streets.

When Sammy sings "When you come down to Death Valley," might well emphasize the word "down" for the only entrance is down a steep path at the head of Mulberry street, just over one of the city's trunk line sewers. The community, however, is upstream from the drain and escapes the sewer odor that greets one's nostrils when approaching the "valley."

The \$15 of which he signs, and the "Nance and Bidwell" have reference to two police patrolmen, George Nance and Vernie Bidwell, and the cost of a visit to police court when they find some of the Valley residents or visitors having more than Just "a little fun."

There are several more verses to the "Death Valley Blues" one of which ends with "For we are rough and rowdy and not afraid of any man," but on the day a Messenger writer and photographer was introduced to the settlement by Patrolmen William Weideman and Mack Gabbert the rough and rowdy were not in evidence.



Sammy Bollin, Death Valley's troubadour, interests the young and old alike with his playing and singing of the "Death Valley Blues."

...

On negotiating the steep path to the strip of level land, about midway between the Ohio river at its present stage and the top of the bank, the visitors were confronted with a double row of seven one-room tin and wood houses and two tents which house the valley residents. One was fenced in with a skiff in the yard but the others shared the community street and yard. Near the door of one house was a phonograph. Occupants of two others had guitars, including the one occupied by the troubador. Beds, tables and stoves take up most of the interior space of the buildings.

Residents of Death Valley include men, women and children ranging In age from eight months to 65 years. Some of them have jobs. Others make money catching and selling fish and

others use still other means of keeping the wolf away from their doors. One resident, a woman told the reporter she had sold \$60 worth of fish to a local market since the valley was settled last summer.

...

Death Valley sprang up when the owner of nine houses in Mulberry street between the river and First street decided to tear them down and use the lumber elsewhere. Occupants of these houses pitched tin from the house roofs over the river bank and picked up wood where it could be found. With these, nails, hammers and other materials and tools they began work on their own low cost housing project. Since then they have lived rent free but without many of the conveniences other residents of Owensboro enjoy.

For instance, when they want water for drinking or cooking purposes a trip over the top of the bank is necessary with a bucket since the river water is not safe to drink. For lights they use kerosene lamps. When it rains their street is muddy, but despite these shortcomings the health of the community is said to be better than it was when it was settled. One baby and one man were on the sick list when they moved down. Now both are in good health.

...

One advantage is claimed for Death Valley. It is well shaded and enjoys a good breeze right off the water. These factors, the Messenger reporter was informed, cooled the camp to the extent that each night last summer the residents were obliged to sleep under covers. Then too, Death Valley commands a good view of the river and Dam 46, and has its own boat landing for the fishermen residents.

With winter approaching, the breeze from the water has the people there thinking. Two families have already moved out. One householder sold his property for \$1.50 and the other got \$2. Still others are looking for houses "up in town" but the rest expect to stay on until the cold or high water force them out.

Why the community was given the name of Death Valley no one knows. None of its settlers has died since moving there and really it isn't a valley. Until some one suggest, the name that stuck, the place was known as "North Mulberry street" or "Wildcat alley." At any rate it is the end of the "line."

.....

