

The Ladies of Truckee's Jibboom Street

By Corri Jimenez

“Ladies of the Evening,” “Fallen Women,” “Soiled Doves,” and “Jezebels” are just polite terms for one of the world’s oldest professions, best known as prostitutes, that typically carry a negative image though were character-defining to Truckee’s past. Researching this slice of women’s history and its red-light aspects has its challenges because they were never looked at highly by the respected community.

Historically, Truckee’s red-light district was an asset to the town that dates as early as 1867 and brought female companionship to the predominantly male-dominated town. Less than six months after its establishment, the town’s first newspaper, the *Truckee Tribune*, reported the first hurdy-gurdy houses in town where crimson lights lit the houses. Besides this old-fashion name, most Truckee locals called these buildings “jerker houses.”

Second Street was first referenced as “Jibboom Street” as early as April 17, 1869, and was aligned behind Front Street, also known as Commercial Row or Donner Pass Road, which runs through Downtown Truckee. Backdoors to Front Street saloons paired nicely to Jibboom Street, allowing transactions privately to take place between the ladies and their customers. These saloons were reputed as a wild place where Jibboom Street was full of cheap dance halls, opium dens, bad whiskey, as well as female companionship. To this day, these backdoors still carry this detail and are accessible to Jibboom Street. The 1870 federal census cited 12 “white” prostitutes, such as Nellie Colley, Maggie Smith, Pauline Johnson, and Belle Whitney, in addition to 22 Chinese prostitutes who lived in the nearby Chinatown and was its only female mystique among 400 men.

Between January 1874 and October 1875, the town organized to build a one-story, stone jail at the corner of Jibboom Street and Spring Street. Conveniently, it was located only a few buildings away from the houses of ill-repute and it was hoped to bring a little law and order to the street. The *Truckee Republican* reported on the red-light district’s color every month. One article accounted on June 26, 1875 described it:

Times on the back street are getting quite lively, if noise at night can be considered a fair criterion to judge from; but that is a natural consequence of the influx of our idle element, for SATAN always finds something for them to do, if only “to holler.”

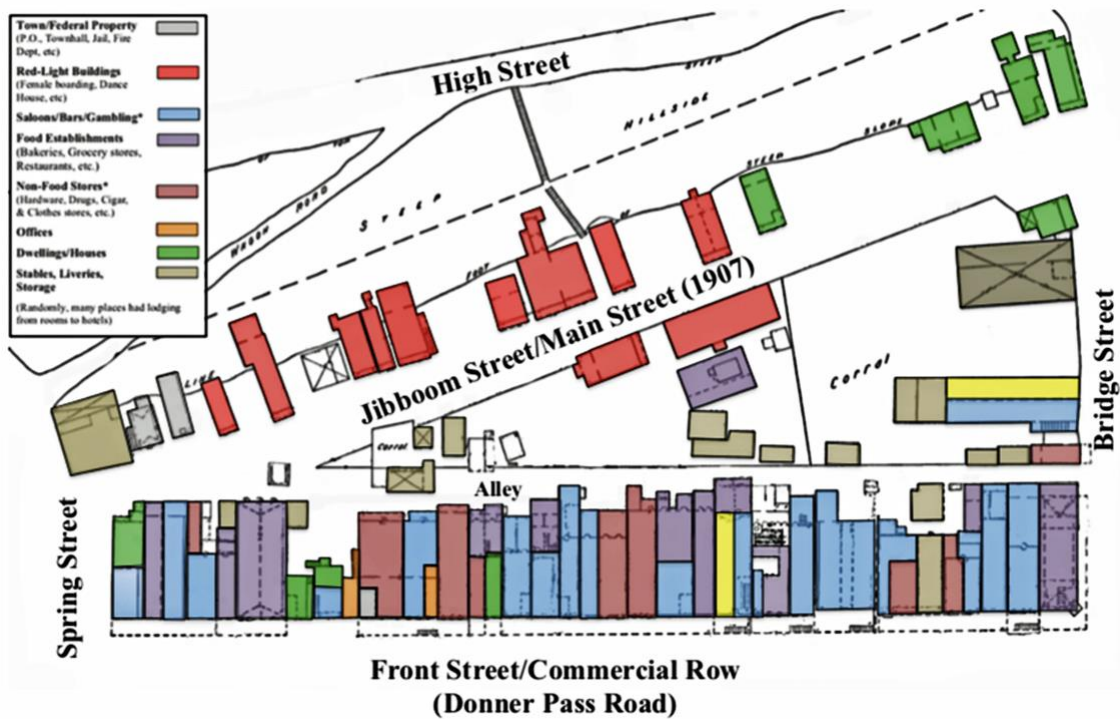
Besides the noise, the houses worked six nights a week including Sundays, which offended “respectable families” living in the area. The *Truckee Republican* on August 24, 1881 posted:

A great many complaints have come to this office about this house being kept open on Sunday night, and we call attention of the proprietors and frequenters to the fact that the protection of the law will be invoked if the practice is not discontinued, and if this is not sufficient there is a 601 * which may be organized on short notice.

In addition, competition among the ladies was fierce and nasty. Irish-born Mollie Forshay was notorious for trouble in the district. Mollie worked aside Mabel Gray and Epimena Anaya and other ladies with more colorful aliases, like Hoodlum Em and Bodie Jake. Mollie fought regularly with Carrie “Spring Chicken” Pryor Smith and the two went on trial for petty larceny where Jibboom Street’s dirty laundry and personalities were outed in

a public forum. Another incident with Mrs. Miriam Hall, a dancehall owner, turned Mollie in for selling booze without a license, setting both women at odds in the districts. Other incidents involved Mollie, her boyfriend Billy, and a whiskey bottle that was used as an “offensive weapon,” which involved a run throughout the town and saloons between Jibboom and Front Streets.

By 1901, the little jail at the end of the street outgrew itself and a brick, second-story was added. The sisters of Jibboom that fell out of line would be housed on the new story and, rumor has it, would perform lewd acts to pedestrians below. A 1907 Sanborn Fire Insurance map displays the plethora of dance halls and “female boarding houses” adjacent to the town jail and firehouse. Beside the twelve red-light establishments, there were 18 saloons on Front Street and many “rooms” were set aside in the back for gambling as well as other illicit transactions.



Caption: 1907 Sanborn Fire insurance, analysis by C. Jimenez (top); Jibboom Street, looking northeast at female boarding houses from the firehouse, located on the left (left); and 1906 Red Light Dance Hall advertisement (right).

In 1914, a devastating fire destroyed most of the buildings in Truckee, as well as two dancehalls (“The Red light” and “The Truckee”). Truckee resident Ethel Marzen McBride recalled among its 1,380 residents, 48 ladies lived in six moderately small houses on Jibboom Street in the 1920s. By 1928, 30 ‘Magadelenes’ working three houses of ill repute and two new dancehalls were added. “Dot’s Place,” located on the north side of Jibboom, was owned by Dorothy (Dot) E. Lane who managed the building between 1928-1936. Her boyfriend, Jack (John) Noonan, was a bartender in the “Past Time.”

Old-timer Frank Titus Jr. recalled three houses of ill-repute in operation in the 1940s and one madam, “Penny,” bought disinfectants in the Loynd’s Drug Store where he worked. He also recalled most of these houses were speakeasies during the Prohibition Era. *Sierra Sun* reporter Doug Barrett recalled one house in operation in 1953 on Jibboom Street, which was significantly cleaned prior to the 1960 Winter Olympics.

Today, this aspect of Truckee women’s history is currently buried and left in unmarked graves in the Truckee’s Jibboom Street Ladies Garden in the town’s cemetery.

Sidebars:

- A short historical walk along Jibboom Street in Old Town Truckee will discuss the “infamous” Red Light District here in town. Date: August 10, 2019. Time TBD.
- To learn more on this topic, join us on August 10, 2019 for a historical talk on the women and how they ended up in Truckee. Location: Art Truckee, 10072 Donner Pass Road, 2nd floor, Truckee. Time TBD.
- For more information and a list of summer activities going on in Truckee to celebrate the sesquicentennial of the Transcontinental Railroad go to <https://goldspike.org> or the Facebook page: Donner Summit-Truckee Golden Spike Celebration.

About the author:

Corri Jimenez is an architectural historian and historic preservation professional working in the Tahoe area. For more information, check out *Truckee: An illustrated History of the Town and its surroundings* by Joanne Meschery (Truckee: Rocking Stone Press, 1978). Chaun Mortier’s “Jibboom Street Ladies Garden” (March 2015) and Gordon Richards’ “Mollie Forshay: a Wild Woman of the Wild West” (March 2006) were reviewed from *Echoes from the Past* newsletters of the *Truckee Donner Historical Society*. *Truckee Republican* newspaper articles, provided by Chaun Mortier, were reviewed, along with Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, “Truckee, Nevada County, California, 1885-1907” and U.S. Federal Census, 1870, Accessed at www.ancestry.com.

* 601 vigilante group