

The "soiled doves" of "Lower Sandon" Madames, brothels and the infamous Red Light District

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Known locally as 'Lower Sandon', the red-light district was one of the largest in the Canadian west, with dozens of brothels and 115 'working ladies' plying their trade. One of the better-preserved areas of the site today, Lower Sandon lay on the west end of the city, past the present bridge over Carpenter Creek. The buildings in this area ranged from small shacks to large, comfortable houses with all of the most up-to-date conveniences of the day.

In the 1890s, men outnumbered women in Sandon approximately 10-to-one; for many of the 5,000 or so men who lived in the city and surrounding hills, these "painted ladies" were the only female companionship they were likely to have the opportunity to meet. As a result, these women provided lonely miners with companionship and opportunities to socialize, as much as prostitution. Indeed, many of the women who worked in Lower Sandon ended up marrying and leading "respectable" lives in their later years; even one of the early mayors of Nelson is reputed to have met his future wife while she was working in Lower Sandon.

The families of many of the city's more "respectable" citizens lived in Kaslo or New Denver, as the wives did not want to raise their children around these "sinful" women and the rowdier elements of the barroom crowd. This attitude was condemned as hypocritical and wrong by the

city's crusading pioneer journalist, "Colonel" R.T. Lowery. Always prepared to defend the underdog, Lowery argued instead for legalization and regulation as a means to address what he felt was largely a social concern, rather than a crime. In an 1897 editorial, Lowery wrote:

It would seem more sensible and honest to face the problem of prostitution and if it cannot be suppressed and prohibited, then regulate it. Prostitution is no more a normal moral condition of womankind than leprosy or cancer are normal conditions of the human race. Go into the sweatshops and awful dens in the large cities where women, girls and children, sew garments together for 12 and 14 hours daily at a wage from 20 to 40 cents per day. Read the statistics furnished by the Commissioner of Labour each year, which tells of the miseries of the two-dollar-a-week factory operatives, of the tenement house life within whose noisome purlieu moral death stalks as a pestilence, and you will not wonder that there are so many poor prostitutes, but rather that there are so few.

It is more humane, more honourable for the municipality to take cognizance of the prostitute as an inseparable part of this barbarism we call civilization and deal with her from that standpoint, than to make the stupid pretence that she has no existence simply because the law recognizes her only as a criminal.

While the activities were never legalized, they were certainly tolerated and accommodated. Many of the women were public-spirited citizens too, donating funds to a variety of causes and charities, such as the construction of the Miners' Union hospital. Because these women's houses were all confined to Lower Sandon, however, they were spared from destruction when fire levelled the downtown core of the city in May of 1900. No doubt Lowery, whose newspaper office in the upper gulch area also survived the fire, thought it was highly ironic that so many of the "respectable" citizens had been burnt out while the brothels of the "soiled doves" remained standing.

As the city was rebuilt, these women continued to supply their services, continuing as late as the 1920s, often with a "wink and a nod" from the local law enforcement. More than one early resident clearly recalls the local BC Provincial Policeman travelling to Sandon about once a month, where he would promptly disappear into one of the houses in Lower Sandon, emerging two or three days later. Eventually, however, legal pressures forced many of these women to open "front" businesses, such as providing room and board, or laundry and lodging services.

One such madame was Fanny Pickett, the only black woman to ever live in Sandon, who opened the "Silver Bell Laundry and Lodging". She ordered a sign for her business from Kaslo, and when it arrived at the K&S station, before she could pick it up some local wit added a "y" to the word "Bell", on both sides of the sign. Fanny was reported to be furious, but apparently she did not hold a grudge. In later years, long after she had moved to a fashionable suburb of Spokane, she was still dutifully paying her city taxes on her Sandon property.

In later years the population of Lower Sandon changed as the madames gradually moved away. During the 1960s and 1970s many of these old buildings were vandalized and damaged by "souvenir-hunters". A number collapsed under winter snowloads, and several were deliberately burned down when the road was widened in the 1970s. Today, only a handful (including Fanny Pickett's) are still standing.

One brothel in particular stands out, having been restored by a group of friends in New Denver. A two-storey French Provincial structure, it is known as the Molly Brown Brothel. Although it is not open to the public, visitors are welcome to visit the site and take photos of it and the other old structures in Lower Sandon.