

Dorothy now a figure in Helena history

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Big Dorothy is dead.

Big Dorothy was known fairly far and pretty wide as the operator of one of the traditional businesses in the storied history of this former rough-and-tumble mining camp: a house of prostitution.

The woman lawmen equated with Big Dorothy, the madam, was Dorothy Josephine Baker, a dumpy, gray-haired, 57-year-old diabetic who died Monday morning in a Great Falls hospital.

Background on Mrs. Baker is scanty and hard to come by. Longtime Helena observers recall that she went to work in what some police officials believe was a house of ill repute run by a woman named Ida Ida, a colorful woman who dispatched girl neckties to her beef customers, retired somewhere in the middle '30s.

Dorothy's Rooms
After a brief hiatus as a completely public house as a turn-

ture store, Ida's old stand at 19 1/2 Last Chance Gulch in Helena, a place "Dorothy's Rooms."

Unlike her predecessor, Big Dorothy did not buy neckties. Like her predecessor, she ventured out into the city's livelier areas occasionally to buy a refund for the house as a public-relations exercise for the business she appeared in court, "Dorothy's Rooms."

It was listed in the telephone book that way—some business man recalls hoisting a drink bought by the woman in a Helena bar and asking the bartender, "Who was that woman?"

"He looked at me like I was crazy," the man said.

Virtually every new arrival in town, upon making new acquaintances, was given a driving tour past Dorothy's Rooms. Even though Dorothy's Rooms was a pretty public place, Dorothy stayed pretty much out of court for years. Tourists riding the "Last

Chance," a miniature train that carries sightseers around the city, were merely told as they passed Dorothy's Rooms. "And this is Dorothy's place."

It seemed that short statement was enough.

Death came to Mrs. Baker one week before she was to appear in court to show why she should be allowed to return to her home at 19 1/2 Last Chance Gulch, County Atty. Thomas F. Dowling had successfully filed a court petition contending Dorothy's Rooms should be locked up because it was a house of prostitution.

Dr. Waldemar N. Persson of Great Falls said Mrs. Baker died 10 hours after being admitted to a hospital. He said only that she succumbed to a very sudden, acute illness.

Most Helena longtimers were doubtful that Dowling's charge would really close down Dorothy's Rooms. Ten years ago, a circuit riding county attorney named John Harrison tried to close down the place. Harrison went on to the State Supreme

Court and Big Dorothy went to her rooms.

Urban Renewal
The current legal hassle stems somewhat from the City of Helena's awarding of a \$300 federal Urban Renewal grant for Mrs. Baker to refurbish her house. One city official said he understood the grant would be used to remodel "the main facade" of the building.

Mayor Steven Keim pleaded a court petition contending Dorothy's Rooms should be locked up because it was a house of prostitution.

(Continued on page 2)

(Continued from page 1)

The September city commission meeting. He said, however, that he understood Mrs. Baker needed the money toward establishing "some sort of retail business."

Helena's daily newspaper was flooded with letters from local citizens when Dowling moved earlier this year to try to close Dorothy's Rooms.

The general tone of the letters indicated that this city of some 23,000 viewed Dorothy's Rooms more as smokeless industry than a law-enforcement problem.

Town without a whorehouse
One woman wrote: "My dad, who lived a long good life, always used to tell us kids that a town without a whorehouse was

a stupid place in which to live."

Dowling's action in closing the doors of Dorothy's Rooms came after two undercover police officers reported they were able to obtain two girls at the place.

Dowling said Mrs. Baker's death made the current litigation moot. "This ends it," he said.

He said nothing will be done until an administrator of Mrs. Baker's estate is chosen. The Chance Gulch will continue in the care of law enforcement authorities until a court order releases the property to the administrator.

Mrs. Baker's body is being held at O'Connor's Funeral Home in Great Falls. A funeral

home spokeswoman could not provide information as to where or when the woman will be buried.

Mrs. Baker reportedly has relatives in Great Falls and in Harlowtown. She apparently was in Great Falls when she became ill Sunday. According to one report the woman died of a brain hemorrhage.

Meanwhile, a carpenter contracted to work this morning on renovating the lower floor of "Dorothy's Rooms," according to Larry Gallagher, urban renewal director. Mrs. Baker was restoring the lower part of her building for future development.

"All I know is that the downstairs is nearing completion for rental," Gallagher said. "What will happen now I don't know. We'll wait to be contacted."

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