

Last Chance Gulch loses a legend

Big Dorothy Baker's place had heart and prestige

By TOM TIEDE
Newspaper Enterprise Assn. Writer

HELENA, Mont. — There was a statue in one of the rooms at Dorothy Baker's house which read: "It's a beautiful day—now watch some bastard louse it up."

Sure enough, somebody did. That afternoon, Helena police knocked at Dorothy's door, said she was running a whorehouse and carried out a writ of injunction to "physically remove the occupants and physically secure the premises."

The opinion of the police came as no surprise to Helena residents. Many have had suspicions about Dorothy Baker's house for more than 20 years. But what did surprise many—and anger them too—is that the famed home on Last Chance Gulch would, after more than 20 years, be raided at all.

INDIGNANT CITIZEN

It's the height of sanctimony, one citizen wrote to the local newspaper: "Dorothy ran her place for a number of years and the list of her patrons would make the who's who column

Chickee bringing new wealth to Seminoles

HOLLYWOOD, Fla. (AP)—The chickee—an open-sided palm-thatched roof shelter—is catching on as a status symbol in South Florida, a Seminole Indian official says. For centuries the poverty-stricken Seminoles have lived in chickees in Florida's Everglades. Only a few had been built for outsiders.

Now they're being built for golf course shelters, condominium sales promotions and for the wealthy few as backyard shelters. "We'll make them any size you want, from one square foot to 1,000 square feet," said James Billie, director of the human resources division of the Seminole tribe. Tribal members charge a minimum of \$3 per square foot for the chickee. Chickee roofs are made of specially selected palmettos woven into a thick mat.

Mormon home set

SALT LAKE CITY (AP)—Dedication is set May 26 for the restored home of Mormon colonizer Brigham Young and four other buildings in Nauvoo, Ill., the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints announced.

look small. I say to all you Helena hypocrites, you lost your best tourist attraction and a true asset to the town."

Tourist attraction? Town asset? The letter writer placed Dorothy Josephine Baker right up there with motherhood and the right to bear arms as a Montana institution. And he hasn't been the only one to think so. Since Big Dorothy's was closed, says the editor of the Helena Independent Record, "I've had many letters, most condemning the police action."

The opinion is echoed on the streets and in the suburbs. Quiet, compact, staid Helena, Mont., is mourning the loss of an old if controversial pal.

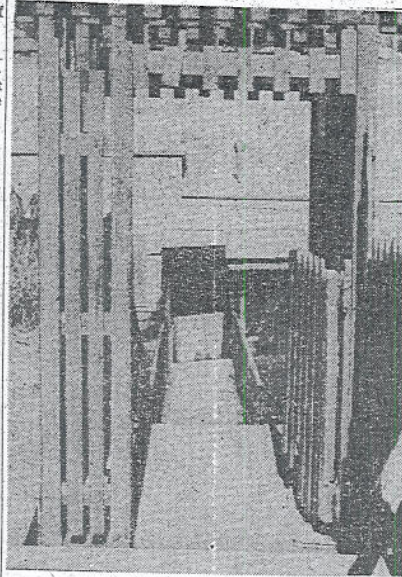
The loss is as much historic as anything else. Helena, as most Montana communities, grew up raw. Forget the stories of the cowboys kissing their horses—gambling and womanizing were here before the churches. And though the churches may have the slight edge now, the past still has its monuments.

A HEART OF GOLD?

Big Dorothy is one. Police say she has operated one of the best-known, most prestigious houses in the state. And done it, "as all good mamas should, with a heart."

Agrees City Commissioner Ed Lorz: "I've known Dorothy for a long time and she's always been a fine woman. She was always doing something for somebody. She'd lend you money. She'd tip the police off to drug pushers. I remember when a ladies service organization here called Dorothy with a problem. They said they had this crippled boy who they wanted to help. As I understand it, she wrote out a check right there. The boy went on to college, graduated at the top of his class and is now an auditor in Denver. I don't think he's ever known who paid for it all. But I do. It was Big Dorothy."

Commissioner Lorz, as it happens, is perhaps the most outspoken of Big Dorothy's admirers. For some years he ran a delicatessen across from her place on Last Chance Gulch (formerly Main Street,



The gate is still open, but the door is closed at Dorothy Josephine Baker's house, by police order.

and more recently characterized by Lorz, as "Last Chance Gulch).

"Dorothy," he says, "has just as much right to be part of this town as the air we breathe." Especially now. "Look at the kids of today. All they hear about is sex, sex, sex. Well, by the time they get 15 or so, they want to find out what it's about. That's where we need good, clean prostitutes."

ALWAYS BEEN CLEAN

And Dorothy's, according to police, has always been as clean as a kernel of corn. One raiding cop describes it as "plush." The house, sandwiched between two abandoned businesses, has five sitting rooms and seven beds: "One of the rooms is about 18 foot by 18 foot, red carpet on the

floor, king-size bed with red velvet covers, and red wallpaper on the walls. Another room is a nice blue. The whole place is like that. And it is constructed so that when one customer came he'd never know anybody else was there."

There was nobody there at all the day the police raided. Only Big Dorothy (who got her nickname from her bulk, once estimated at 240 pounds) and another woman who was found hiding in a closet. But County Prosecutor Tom Dowling says he instigated the action on previous evidence.

One of Dowling's affidavits, sworn to by an undercover police officer, says that the officer visited the home, was coupled with a girl, given a drink for \$1

—then asked the girl to "take off her clothes and roll around on the bed." She did. That was enough for Dowling. In addition to running Dorothy out, he ordered plywood to be nailed to the doors and windows of her home.

Says Dowling: "Criticism? Yes, I've gotten some."

'PIPSQUEAK MORALITY'

Indeed. An official of the state's agriculture department, of all places, says Dowling's move was "the asinine morality of a pipsqueak." Larry Belgarde, sipping beer in the Palace Bar, says the house "never did one bit of harm to nobody."

One merchant, several doors down from Dorothy's, says he objects to the raid for sentimental reasons: "When my wife got ill for a year, I had to do something. I went to Dorothy's, naturally."

Angriest of all is Commissioner Lorz. "What they've done is force prostitution out on the streets. You watch our VD rate go up now. A n d rapes? Helena seldom has had rapes, but watch out now."

Lorz just doesn't understand it.

"Why didn't they just let the woman alone?" She had a good place. Her girls were all nice. Every bed had a health certificate right above it. How do I know? I've been there. Just say I had to fix the plumbing or something. Just say that."

For her part, Big Dorothy Baker isn't saying anything. Old now, rarely seen, she lives in seclusion outside town. Some think she's rich. Some think she's not. No matter.

"Dorothy is legend and reality in one," says a sympathetic local minister. "I can't agree with what she may have done, but I wonder if it's really so terrible. Oh boy! I shouldn't say that. Please don't use my name—I have enough trouble getting people to church as it is."