

The "Red Light District"

Livingston's B Street
By Lin Lee

Even today it is not difficult to find someone to tell you a story or two about B Street. The "district" was in existence for 60 years, leaving no shortage of stories. Organized prostitution followed the railroad west. Livingston was an end of the track location. The girls followed what was known as the "line." The line extended from Miles City through Billings, Livingston, Helena, and Butte. At Livingston the section crews picked up their paychecks.

Even though this illegal business was done right under the citizen's noses, there were strict guidelines to be followed. New girls would have medical inspections by local physicians and present notice to the police department. New girls could not operate until they had been fingerprinted and registered and a criminal check had been made by the Police Department. No girls were allowed uptown, in hotels, bars or residential areas after dark. There was no open solicitation on the streets, sidewalks, porches or yards in the district, or in the business district, or residential areas. There would be no boyfriends or men associates allowed in the town or in the district. The use of alcohol by the girls in any public place was forbidden.

Given the above rules, you can begin to see that their lives were indeed restricted. Shunned by "respectable folks," the girls lived in a world of their own. They could perhaps be seen downtown during the daytime, shopping, but they were usually in the company of other girls or the madam; in this way they avoided even the pretense of trouble.

The girls had a reputation for wearing the finest clothes, and buying the best food, jewelry and alcohol. They were a boost to the local economy. The clothing stores, bars, jewelers, grocery stores and landlords were understandably tolerant of their neighbors just down the street.

Of interest to me has always been that B Street not only housed

the red light district, but also the Baptist Church and Lincoln School, as well as the Police Department. I suppose that if you are going to have an illegal operation such as this, it might as well be under everyone's watchful eye. There was a move in 1914, by County Attorney Vard Smith, to drive prostitution out of town.

Citizens at the time the Lincoln School was being built were very concerned about its proximity to B Street. Parents would not tolerate their children being thrown into a neighborhood of questionable character. The closure didn't last long and slowly operations were quietly resumed.

When the girls did appear in public, they did not speak nor were they spoken to. Should they attend the local Opera House, they were allowed to sit in the last two rows on the lower level of the theatre, a signal to everyone of their occupation.

You can still find local folks today who will recall for you riding down B Street on their bicycles as young boys, just to see the girls sitting in the windows, waving at them. They were hoping Mama wouldn't find out they had been on B Street, for a whippin' was sure to follow such news.

I must confess, when I first began research for this article, I was surprised at the tolerance Livingston residents had for this illegal business. As stories unfolded, I realized that times then were much different from now. It is unfair to judge the social/moral values of another time by our own yardstick, for it is an inaccurate measurement at best. Good is always accompanied by bad, and I think those who came before us clearly understood this.

The houses were finally closed down in the late 1940's, thus ending an era. Several houses operated outside the city limits until the 1970's, though much was lost in the move from town to country.

Note that no names were used, except a county official. I was asked to delete names, because many of the people involved in this part of Livingston's history are still alive.



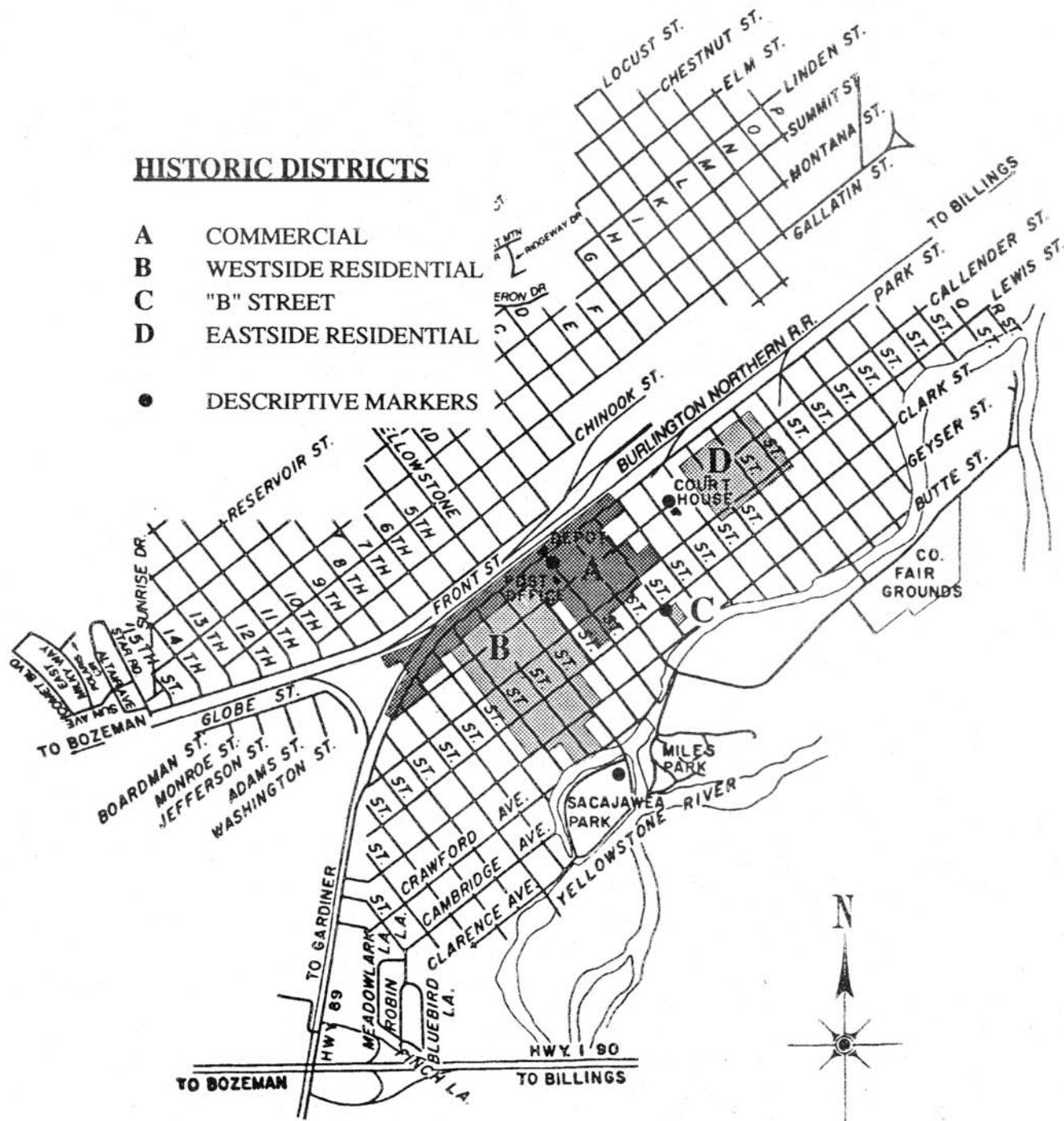
Livingston's B Street Historic District

These four small one story houses are the only remnants of Livingston's once-thriving red-light district. A convenient but respectable distance from the railroad hub, commercial district and residential neighborhoods, here the "painted ladies" quietly plied their trade. The houses were originally built as duplexes between 1896 and 1907. Their design resembles the gables and porches of larger houses with subtle decorative variations. B Street's establishments prospered from the 1890s to the 1920s, catering to ranch hands, shepherders, itinerant railroad workers

and local residents. Though technically illegal, prostitution in Livingston achieved a certain "illegitimate respectability" and the district grew to encompass nine houses along a block and a half. Old-timers recall the ladies sitting in the windows with their companion lap dogs, illuminated by a red light. Though they were not socially accepted, restricted to the last rows of the Opera House and not allowed in saloons, local merchants profited from the ladies' earnings spent on clothes, perfumes and furs. Deliveries, however, were made only to B Street's back doors. In the late 1940s, B Street's establishments closed and the ladies moved to the outskirts of town. Some long-time residents say that Livingston "lost a lot of its color when the red lights went out."

HISTORIC DISTRICTS

- A COMMERCIAL
- B WESTSIDE RESIDENTIAL
- C "B" STREET
- D EASTSIDE RESIDENTIAL
- DESCRIPTIVE MARKERS



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Keeping Up Appearances

Storefront Guidelines

The traditional commercial storefront can be considered the cornerstone of Main Street. Dating from the 19th and early 20th centuries, these buildings share a remarkable similarity - a consistency that creates a strong visual image for the downtown.

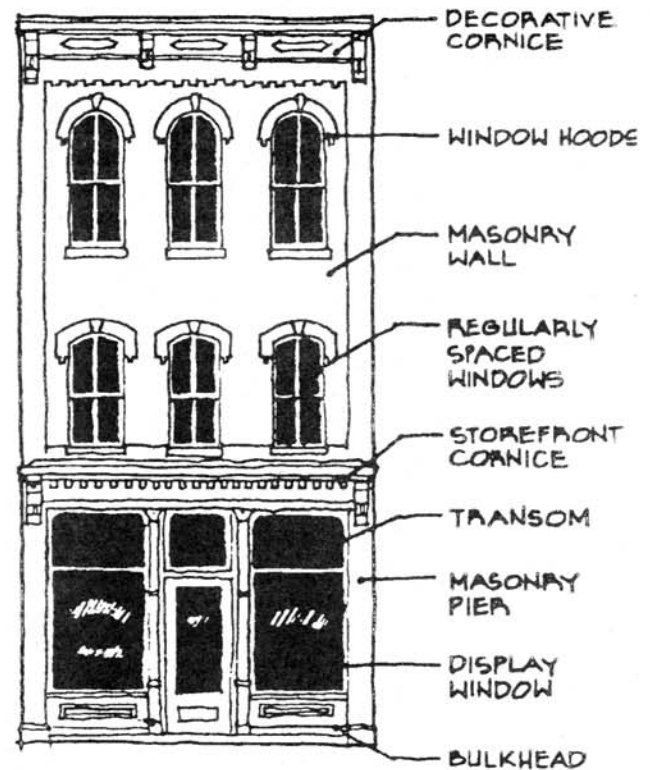
Because they were composed of similar parts, the blocks have a consistent, organized and coordinated appearance. Any one facade is visually related to its neighbors.

The parts of the facade were often compatible enough to be interchangeable. A commercial building from the mid 1800s could be easily modernized by inserting a new 1900s storefront. Although the styles and details changed, the proportions remained the same.

Technological developments, coupled with changing tenants and merchandising trends, encouraged frequent storefront changes, while the upper facade stayed the same, deteriorated or was covered over.

The storefront became increasingly transparent, but it still fit into the framed opening provided by the the original building. When a storefront is not contained within this frame, it looks out of proportion with the upper facade.

The basic commercial facade consists of three parts: the storefront with an entrance and display windows, the upper facade usually with regularly spaced windows and the cornice that caps the building. These components appear in many shapes, sizes and styles but result in essentially the same facade.



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TYPICAL UPPER FACADES



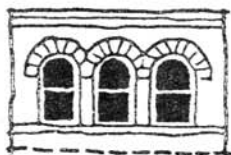
Early to Mid 1800s

- SIMPLE CORNICE
- LINTELS OVER WINDOWS
- SMALL WINDOW PANES



Mid to Late 1800s

- BOLDLY DECORATED CORNICE
- WINDOW HOODES
- 2 OVER 2 WINDOWS



Late 1800s to Early 1900s

- CORBELLED BRICK CORNICE
- LARGE, ARCHED WINDOWS



Early 1900s to 1930s

- SIMPLE BRICK CORNICE
- LARGE WINDOW OPENINGS WITH MULTIPLE UNITS

TYPICAL STOREFRONTS



Early to Mid 1800s

- POST AND BEAM FRAME
- DIVIDED DISPLAY WINDOWS
- SIMPLE DECORATION



Mid to Late 1800s

- BOLDLY DECORATED CORNICE
- CAST IRON COLUMNS
- LARGE DISPLAY WINDOWS



Late 1800s to Early 1900s

- SIMPLE CORNICE
- TRANSOM WINDOWS
- RECESSED ENTRANCE



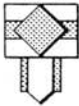
Early 1900s to 1930s

- METAL WINDOW FRAMES
- STRUCTURAL GLASS
- RECESSED ENTRANCE



LIVINGSTON
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City of Livingston
(406) 222-2005



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The sudden, catalysmic destruction of cities is a rare occurrence. Cities usually are destroyed bit by bit - nicked to death, if you will, by the urbaplanning equivalent of a million paper cuts. It begins when a traffic engineer notices that tie-ups are starting to occur on a particular street, so the street is widened. New turn lanes are installed at busy intersections. A bit later, one-way signs go up, and traffic lights are synchronized in a further effort to speed the flow. When the traffic flow speeds up, more cars appear to take advantage of the improvement. When congestion starts to occur again--and it always does--the roads grow wider and wider. More buildings and trees are bulldozed, more asphalt is poured for more parking lots, more neighborhoods are scarred, more Main Streets destroyed.

Adding Up To Noplace

It happens as a series of steps, each apparently logical and innocuous enough, but the cumulative effect is devastating. The final result, as Jane Jacobs pointed out in her landmark book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, is that "every place becomes more like every other place, all adding up to Noplace."

Changing old habits won't be easy. It took centuries of throwaway mentality to bring us to this point. Before we go any further, we owe it to ourselves and our children to decide whether we really like living in a society in which, to paraphrase Joan Didion, the only thing constant is the rate at which it disappears. Do we really like the kind of cities our transportation policy has created? I don't think so. If we liked them, we wouldn't be on the brink of abandoning them. So perhaps what's most needed is a fundamental change in America's willingness to demand the kind of communities it wants, rather than merely accepting the kind of communities it gets.

This commentary is adapted from a speech delivered on March 10 by National Trust President Richard Moe to Town Hall Los Angeles. Reprinted with permission of Historic Preservation News, the newspaper of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

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Design and Production:

Larry Raffety Architect
Rainbow Enterprises

Research and publicity:

Lin Lee

Editing:

Bonnie Hyatt Murphy

Distribution:

Travis Chevallier

The Historic Preservation Commission is a volunteer board charged by City Ordinance with overseeing Livingston's four historic districts.

Bob Segil, Chairman

Travis Chevallier

Tom Hardy

Lin Lee

Chris Petrik

Larry Raffety

Carita Adams

Clay Ward

Ellen Woodbury

Tim Parks, City Building Inspector
222-2005 ext. 209

Jim Woodhull, City Planner
222-2005 ext. 208