

RED LIGHT DISTRICT ETHNOHISTORY IN SEWARD, ALASKA

By Rachel Mason

In 2002, a team of National Park Service historians, architects, archeologists, and cultural anthropologist began a compliance study for a new visitor center in Seward associated with Kenai Fjords National Park. My job was to interview local residents about their memories of the Line, which closed in 1954. I was amazed at the enthusiastic responses both to requests for interviews and to public lectures I gave on the project. The community's appetite for hearing and talking about the Line seemed insatiable.

Both while the Line was open and long afterwards, people in Seward thought the prostitutes who worked there provided a necessary commercial service to transient men. Respectable women supported the Line, in an effort to confine vice to a single part of town. The Line women usually did not socialize with respectable women or even appear in public except at certain times. Despite the prostitutes' isolation, though, one of the main conclusions I drew from researching their history is that that you can't talk about the Seward Line without talking about the whole community.

Local historians have documented much of Seward's early history. Mary Barry's three-volume history gives detailed year-by-year accounts through 1993. John Paulsteiner, Barry's father, wrote a somewhat different book called *Seward, Alaska: The Sinful Town on Resurrection Bay*, published in 1975. Focusing on bootlegging, prostitution, and other illegal activities, the book gives personal vignettes of the characters that populated the town.

I interviewed several people who were children during the days of the Line. While some were surprisingly delighted to help piece together the history of the Line, others were more hesitant. One woman was quite reluctant to contribute to a study that might ridicule or romanticize the prostitutes. She had known several of them personally and emphasized that they were just ordinary people trying to make a living.

Seward, founded in 1903, has seen several employment and population booms during its 100 years. A large number of military personnel were stationed here during World War II, most of them young, single men. During those busy days, when soldiers on leave stood in line to get in to the Line houses, the prostitutes didn't have time to provide much companionship to their customers. Then and at other times when transient male workers swarmed the community, longer-term residents tolerated and indeed supported prostitution. From 1914 to 1954, a row of small houses along Alley B was the city's recognized red light district. Although prostitutes typically move from town to town rather quickly, many of the Seward ladies stayed there for the rest of their lives, buying property and businesses, sometimes marrying local men.

While most of the adventurers who came to Seward were men, female travelers arrived as well. Working on the Line was only one of the moneymaking opportunities an ambitious, independent woman might find. Respectable single women worked as nurses

and teachers. Other women established small businesses, such as laundries. A likely business venture for a prospective madam was to buy real estate. The records of sale of lots on the Line show a rapid turnover of ownership among people whose names we recognize as those of prostitutes or madams.

Opening the Line

Many towns in the Alaska Territory, as elsewhere in the American West, had special red light districts. Often, the prostitutes' quarters were a line of little houses, or cribs, along a road or alley. The Seward Line was a row of houses along Alley B between Second and Third Avenues, and between Railroad on the south and Washington on the north. Its location near the dock made it convenient for seafaring customers. While numerous immoral and technically illegal activities were thought to take place on the Line, its central function was prostitution. The little houses averaged perhaps 16 X 20 feet. While archeologists have identified as many as 26 houses along Alley B, probably not all were occupied at once. Some interviewees remembered only five or six women working at on the Line at one time. Most agreed, though, that there were usually two girls in each house. Undoubtedly the number of prostitutes increased or decreased depending on the demand for services.

The 1910 census for Seward shows a population of 586--431 males and 149 females (Barry 1986:128). The majority of adult men were single, and most women were married. The population was predominantly white; there were 25 Alaska Natives and a few Asians. While 158 people were involved in gold mining, only 16 worked for the railroad.

In 1914, Seward became the official terminus of the Alaska Railroad. Days before President Wilson signed the Alaska Railroad Bill, a member of the Seward City Council requested that the city provide a restricted district to accommodate "denizens of the underworld" (Seward Gateway, March 7, 1914). The Council enacted an ordinance making keeping a bawdyhouse a misdemeanor, with a punishment of a \$25 fine or five days in jail--similar to what one might get for raising a false fire alarm (Bateman 2002). Collected regularly each month, the fines were a good source of revenue for the city.

Women of the Line

Here are some of the memorable women from the Seward Line:

Lydia Griffiths bought several lots on the Line soon after it was established in 1914. She married Al Peel, who had been the town marshal (Capra 1996:11). Lydia appears in the 1920 census as a 53-year-old woman, and, curiously, as a 52-year-old in 1930. The latter seems more correct, as Lydia died in 1947 at age 68. Al Peel died around 1959, but the Peel-Griffiths house, spared in the 1964 earthquake, remained standing until it was burned as a fire department training exercise. The house's interior was ornately decorated, with red velvet brocade furniture.

Stella Brown, a well-known prostitute in the 1930s, was from a prominent East Coast Jewish family. Stella sometimes asked Lee McAnerny, then a teenager, to help her write letters to her young daughter in New York. Lee and her stepfather Sol Urie also prepared Stella's income tax returns, which showed her income to be one of the highest in the Territory.

Dutch Emma, whose real name was Marie Hadley, was probably the best-known prostitute and madam. She owned several houses on the Line, one of which was moved up to Second Street and is still standing. In the mid-1940s, Dutch Emma bought the Mile Seven Roadhouse and ran it with her husband or boyfriend Hooligan Slim Gunners. She died in 1950 at age 69, and is buried as Marie Hadley in the Seward cemetery.

Helen Williams, also known as Irene Nussbaum, was an important madam in the 1940s. She had Emilio the Greek, who was really Italian, act as her chauffeur. He'd wear a leather bow tie and spats and take her around in a fancy maroon Buick. In 1956 Irene bought a laundry (Barry 1993:235), later renting it to a young couple (Duane and Sanna LeVan) to live in.

Carol Erwin was one of the last ladies on the Line. Her autobiography, *The Orderly Disorderly House* (1960) talks of the bawdyhouses she operated in Texas and elsewhere before coming to Alaska, where her adventures briefly included Seward. A talented artist, she usually painted landscapes. In the 1940's the Seward Women's Club sponsored one of her art shows, marking an unusual rapprochement between respectable women and Line ladies (Erwin 1960:210).

Elnora or Francie Jones was an African-American woman who worked on the Line and also ran a barbecue restaurant called Elnora's. A man who had been a young GI in Seward during World War II remembered being terrified by Francie when he went over to the Line to meet a friend. He was sitting in one of the chairs outside Francie's house when she came out and bellowed "Who's next?"—and he took off running. Elnora remained in Seward after the Line closed, but was arrested by the Vice Squad in 1957.

Lives of the Line Women

Most of the prostitutes were white. Several people remembered one black woman on the Line, but no Alaska Natives or Asians. Residents did recall that the prostitutes in Seward seemed unusually old, far above what they imagined were the normal peak years for prostitutes, but that the customers didn't seem very bothered by this. Perhaps related to the ladies' advanced age, none of the people we interviewed remembered seeing pregnant women on the Line, or women with small babies.

Prostitutes on the Seward Line didn't find it necessary to dress very provocatively to vend their wares, supporting the local idea that prostitution was a practical way to satisfy a

natural urge. One woman said that the prostitutes dressed well, in fact much better than the average woman in Seward.

In the early days, women who worked on the Line were practical entrepreneurs. They were not drug addicts, had not suffered traumatic childhoods, and were not especially impoverished. Other than for prostitution, they didn't often run afoul of the law. No one remembered any local women who joined the Line; all the women came from somewhere else.

According to one person, the women's fees were \$5 or \$2, depending on what they did. Another thought they charged \$5 in summer and \$3 in winter. The main status distinction was based on whether the women were independent operators who owned their houses. If they worked for madams, they turned over a portion of the money they made. There is little mention of pimping in the accounts of the Line. I saw no evidence of turf battles between the woman-owned businesses.

Some of the best clues about the lives of the Line women come from the seemingly mundane details our oral history informants dredged from their memories. A woman remembered bicycling through the Line as a girl, and hearing boys her age tittering about seeing a naked woman in one of the houses. Mary Barry, for a brief period, walked Dutch Emma's dog. She remembered that Dutch Emma had a garden, and used to give vegetables to her family. When Lee McAnerny was a teenager, she worked at her stepfather's bakery and remembered talking with some of the women from the Line. She was impressed by their stylish clothes, bought in New York, and by the fact that the ladies had the latest fashion magazines and sometimes gave her make-up tips. Often the women ordered fancy pastries delivered to the Line. Lee's brothers usually got to make the deliveries, although they were much younger. I also talked to a man who had paid \$20 for the coveted paper route in Seward's red light district, and to a woman who, as a young, embarrassed public health nurse, had the task of making house calls to prostitutes to check them for VD. Beverly Dunham remembered that the ladies from the Line would come to the store where she worked and buy records to play during their rendezvous. The most requested song was "Embraceable You."

Seward's Moral and Social Climate

We get some sense of the moral climate in Seward from the newspapers of the time. Even in the early days of the city, there was at least in some circles a practical, unabashed attitude toward sex. A 1914 advertisement in the Seward Gateway for a 320-page illustrated book of Sexual Knowledge touted it as a comprehensive work useful to doctors, lawyers, Sunday School teachers, and anyone else who needed to know about sex matters. It was delivered in a plain wrapper for only \$1.00.

The 1930 census data for Seward show a total population of 504, of whom 150 were female. Again, few adult women were unmarried. While married women were generally listed as housekeepers or homeowners, single women's occupations included teacher, waitress, store clerk or manager, laundress, tailor, cook, and servant.

In a 1985 interview, the late Virginia Darling told of the prostitutes' self-imposed isolation from respectable society. When Virginia was a small baby, her mother came up to Seward from Seattle on a boat. She was terribly seasick, and a nice woman helped her with her baby. Virginia's mother's new friend turned out to be Lydia Griffiths, who owned several houses on the Line. After that, Virginia's mother said hello to Miss Griffiths when she saw her coming out of the beauty shop. Later the beauty operator delivered a message from Miss Griffiths that she appreciated the greeting but she'd prefer not to be acknowledged in public.

Beverly Dunham told a story about Dutch Emma. Beverly's brother-in-law was a practical joker. When her mother was in town looking for some property, her brother-in-law fixed it so that Dutch Emma showed her around town in a big black car, complete with driver. They even went together to one of the bakeries to have coffee and donuts. When the mother got home, the brother-in-law informed her that her afternoon companion was a prostitute. She was mortified and refused to leave the house for weeks. Dutch Emma was either unaware of the joke or too gracious to identify herself to her guest. In fact, since she owned so much real estate in Seward she was an appropriate person to show houses. However, at the time a respectable woman did not want to be seen in a car with women like her, regardless of how much money or land they had.

While the prostitutes themselves were segregated from society, the community accepted the institution of prostitution as a necessary part of life. Herman Leirer, now deceased, used to run a dairy. In a 1994 report, Leirer said that after the Line closed, there was no more control over prostitution. The prostitutes were good citizens, he said. In all the years that he delivered milk to them, he was only gyped out of \$8.25. He thought that was pretty damned good (Mobley 1994:22).

Seward residents remembered that periodically, ministers and churches tried to close down the Line or made other efforts in the name of morality. Not all of the ministers did, though. One of them, in fact, was said to be occasionally found down on the Line with some of the other businessmen, because that was the only place you could get a drink after 1 a.m.

The Line was not physically walled off from the city, but most of the time the upstanding residents preferred to ignore it. A citywide cleanup in the spring of 1950 sent Boy Scouts to gather up debris in the alleys between First and Second Avenues, and between Third and Fourth Avenues, but conspicuously not in the alley between Second and Third, where the Line was (Seward Seaport Record 1950, May 2).

The Closure of the Line

Mystery shrouds the closure of the Line in the 1950s. The only reference we could find definitely dating its closure came in the Seward Seaport Record on March 19, 1954. In a front-page article, the Mayor denied flatly that he had ever told police chief Don Balmat to "re-open" the Line. Mr. Balmat had resigned as Police Chief after an altercation on the Line: one of his officers had caused a disturbance by trying to help a naked prostitute

retrieve her clothes from the house where another prostitute and a bartender were celebrating their wedding night. Subsequently, Balmat placed charges against the city for legalizing the Line—surely a futile effort, since the city had no record of officially endorsing prostitution. Sometime in 1954, however, the city stopped even informally allowing prostitutes to operate. The women of the Line left town, took up other businesses, or became freelancers.

There's not much left of the Line in Seward today. Long ago, the little houses burned down, were destroyed in the 1964 earthquake, or fell to urban renewal. Now, a north-south line of trees marks where Alley B was (Mobley 1994:22).

Changing Memories

Many of those who remember the Line were children when the prostitutes were there, and did not fully realize what was going on. Some of the young wives made it their business not to know about the Line. Also, men and women have different memories. Men remember the prostitutes with hearts of gold; women remember the part of town where they were not supposed to go.

The story of the Line is part of the story of Seward. The prostitutes were separated from the community, but their segregation appeared completely voluntary. They weren't supposed to mingle with the "good" people except during certain hours. But they were a buffer between the real outsiders--the military, the railroad men--and the core community. As Willard Dunham said,

Well, in the first place, they were part of the community.... And they were in business. And, I doubt that if there's any, or very many, old businesses that go back into the early days that the girls of the Lines of the various cities weren't connected to financially. They were where you went to get money when the banks or the rest of them didn't want to loan money, or didn't want to loan the amount that you wanted. A big share of the old madams all dabbled in real estate. They were just part of the community...

In the good old days, the prostitutes did not steal, at least not from locals. They brawled with each other, but didn't hurt any Seward residents. There were no pimps, only good-hearted madams. They may have been addicted to drink or drugs, but didn't appear as hardened as later prostitutes. For all the sin it describes, Paulsteiner's book tells of Seward in an innocent day. Even the bad guys seemed somehow harmless. The fates of bootleggers and prostitutes are intertwined with the fates of the upstanding citizens of the town.

Seward residents who remember the Line disagree on details such as exactly how many prostitutes there were, or what their stage names or real names were. What emerges from their memories, though, is a strong sense of community that included both the Line and the people around it. Through unspoken understandings and city ordinances, Seward's citizens not only tolerated but actively embraced the women of the Line.

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