

## THAT WAS WATSONVILLE

# When Watsonville was thought of as a 'Sin City'

Watsonville - 2000

RP 1-30-03



That was  
Watsonville

**Betty Lewis**

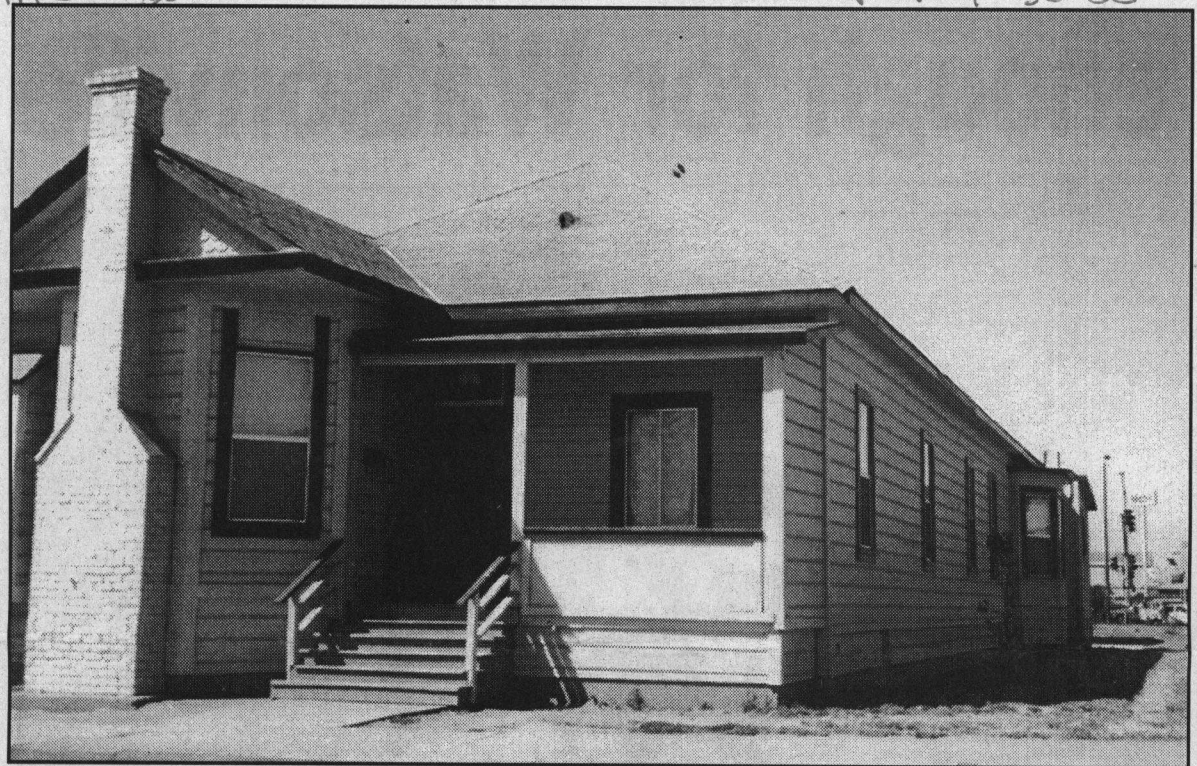
Like any other western frontier town, early-day Watsonville had its share of "ladies of the night." In those rough and ready days, with few women and many men, prostitution was often a means of employment for young women in a limited job market, a way to continue eating and have a place to live — of sorts. As with any segment of society, there were different levels of prostitution from the well-kept "ladies" to the streetwalkers and "crib girls."

There were many labels for houses of prostitution, such as bawdy house, house of ill-repute, red-light house, play pens, fast house, house of ill-fame, disorderly house, house of joy and cat house, just to name a few. This latter designation came from a porcelain cat sitting in the front window. If the eyes were red it meant full house, come back again; green eyes meant come in and welcome; one red and one green meant take your chances; and if the cat was turned backwards, it was warning against disease and police.

In the 1800s, the prostitution ranks in the West were filled with mostly white women, with some Oriental and black women. Liquor and drugs were prevalent in the brothels, and suicide often became the way of escape for these women who were often ill-treated and politically abused. In Watsonville, the city fathers were continually trying (at least publicly) to oust this unfavorable element.

The following is from the Pajaronian, Sept. 7, 1871: "Ordinance No 21 — An ordinance to prohibit and suppress Houses of Prostitution, Ill Fame, Disorderly Houses and Brothels within the town of Watsonville."

This ordinance went into effect on Oct. 1, but within a couple of weeks the newspaper was again



Courtesy of Betty Lewis

**The "long house" at 73 Union Street was one of many houses of ill repute in Watsonville. It was torn down in 1990.**

lamenting the fact that there were disreputable houses flourishing in town. Most local people knew what was going on in the southern part of town, but many wouldn't talk about it, at least in public, until they felt things were getting so bad that something had to be done.

In 1898, 287 citizens of Watsonville signed a petition asking the town trustees to suppress the houses of prostitution. It pointedly related the presence of this evil and urged the trustees to take necessary steps to "purify the tenderloin and give young people protection from the social evil." But the trade went on. In fact, although many people don't care to acknowledge it, Watsonville became rather well known for its palaces of pleasure.

According to the late Albert Snyder, a native of Aromas, the majority of the red-light houses in more modern times were on Union Street, but there were others scattered around town. Albert drove a taxi now and then for his father-in-law, Mr. Pavay. He tells of picking up girls at their place of work - 58 Union St. — and taking them back to the hotels. Some of the

pool halls had a small room in the back with a single bed where a girl would often ply her trade.

"Mary Peralto, a woman of ill fame, stabbed her lover, a low fiend who is known by the name of Jack Manning last night at a house on Second Street. It is about time that fiends, lovers and women of ill fame were told to move out of the city and the police should see that the same is done." — **Pajaronian June 20, 1890**

A woman named Pauline was the "madam" upstairs at the Del Monte and the average fee for a "trick" was \$2.50. Pauline eventually left Watsonville and went over to the Cherry Blossom in Gilroy. Another madam was Mabel, who ran an establishment at 15 San Juan Road. Her brothel was called a "Parlor House" and there were generally four girls available. There were also two red-light houses on Rodriguez Street.

The girls were "inspected" once a week (supposedly) at Dr. Sambuck's office, then located in the Marinovich Building at the corner of Peck and Union streets. Many of these girls were chased out of town off and on over the years.

Some had come from San Francisco and were sent back there.

During World War II, Watsonville became known as "Sin City" by the military in surrounding camps. For years after the war, when telling where you were from, you would often receive an exuberant reply of: "Wow, good old sin city. Gambling, women and liquor - still around today, but never again will they be the same as in the 'good (bad?) old days.'"

"Carrie Smith, a street walker, was run in by Officer Alford Sunday night, and Judge Smith gave her 60 days when he ground out the docket the following day. Officer Alford says there are more of the same class here, and he is making it warmer than the weather for the class and their male parasites and Judge Smith finds plenty of law to fit their class. It is a good work gentlemen, and keep it up. The town can stand such purification." — **The Pajaronian, June 18, 1896**

...

*Betty Lewis, a local historian and Watsonville resident, is a regular columnist for the Register-Pajaronian.*