

The Montana Standard (1929-1936)

Butte, MT

October 27th, 1929 --Pioneer?

September 2nd, 1936

Old-Time Butte Vice Den Exposed to Light of Sun

WPA Workers Penetrate Mysterious Subterranean Depths of Building at Galena and Wyoming; Trick Wiring, Passageway, Rooms and Closets Found.

Hidden “dug-out” bedrooms, tunnels aimed to cross streets under the pavement, criss-cross hallways, unexpected passages and closets, multitudinous exits from halls and inner rooms—these are some of the characteristics of one of Butte’s old dens of vice that is yielding today to the crowbar and hammers of WPA workers at Galena and Wyoming street. Due to the activities of the workers, the labyrinth character of the old eye-sore is for the first time in its history exposed to public view.

House of Mystery

The house is indeed a house of mystery. Why the numerous passages leading in their twisting course to upstairs and down? Why the tunnel in the basement? Why the light wires passing through closets where they could be—and have been apparently—cut to throw the house in darkness. Why the electric plug box outside the window of a closet—inside the building and within easy reach of a stealthy hand which knew the location of the box, a location invisible from inside the closet? Why the buried bedroom with three beds, a room so cleverly concealed that the workers did not know of its existence until they tore up the floor of an adjoining room and exposed the filthy quarters to the light and air.

Two Chinese Beds

Lying on one of the beds in this hidden bedroom was a photograph of two Chinese boys, one clad in American dress and one in Chinese costume. The picture is taken against a Chinese background, but by a photographer in Oakland, Cal.—S.K. Sate—whose shop was on Fifth street in that city.

Three times the city endeavored to have the old rookery of plank and brick-veneer torn down as a fire hazard, but each time the proprietor—Tom Lin, he is called—was able to block the attempt. In recent months a fire occurred in the structure and that, it is said, spelled its doom.

Fronts on Wyoming

The building is a two-story structure—on the outside. On the inside it is a three-story building. It fronts on Wyoming from the alley north of Mercury, to Galena street. It likewise fronts on Galena street for a third of a block. The ground floor was a succession of “cribs” or dives vacant for years—with spasmodic attempts now and then to revive some of them. In one of the tiny rooms a show window had been added. In that window there hung for years obsolete garments of ladies’ underwear—until they finally fell apart from age and dry rot.

But the upstairs part of the building has seen much more recent use, it is indicated. For what purpose no one seems to know. On the ground floor there were as many exits or entrances as there were apartments—about a dozen of them.

Half Dozen Exits

Each apartment had a door leading into a hall in the rear and there were a half-dozen exits from this hall on the opposite side from the street. These exits led down into another passageway which connected with the basement—and the upstairs—through closets. These basement entries were easily concealed holes.

Entrance to the second floor was through three stairways, one on Wyoming street and two on Galena. On the second floor the puzzle began in real earnest. The rooms fronting on the streets had little anterooms that connected with closets, that connected with hallways, that led into other rooms that had closets that opened into other hallways that led a winding course—to one of the floors upstairs or down to the basement—it wasn't really a basement, but a hole dug in the ground.

Runs Into Hard Ground

The projected tunnel ran into hard ground at Wyoming street and stopped. The tunnel toward Galena street was driven only a short distance.

The puzzling character of the second story was due to the fact that it had been divided into two floors, which increased the closet, anteroom and hallway space and made progress confusing. Foreman Driscoll of the WPA, who first called attention to the labyrinth-like character of the building said: "I tried to find my way through the passages before the roof was torn off—and I got lost. It is the most puzzling house interior that I have ever seen."

Fire Trap

But the old fire-trap, rat-trap, "house of mystery" is rapidly going into oblivion. "Discrimination against the Chinese." "There are other houses just as bad." These were some of the arguments used to defeat the attempts to have it torn down in the past. But when one has an opportunity to view the interior in the light of the day—to wander through the ramshackle interior to observe the underground, concealed bedroom—with its three filthy beds and the makeshift cellar with its partially drilled under-street tunnel, the observer is prompted to remark: "If there are any other buildings like this in Butte they can't come down too fast for the safety of the community."

Who Are These Boys?

Picture From Mystery House



Who are these boys? Were they persons against whom the occupants of the hidden bedrooms were plotting—possible victims for the “hatchet men”—or were they smuggled into the United States? The fact that their picture was taken in Oakland negatives the smuggling suggestion. But what was their connection with the hidden bedroom—and who are they? Are they still residents of Butte or are they among the list of Chinese who fell before the gun of an assassin when the Butte tong war was raging? The room in which the picture was found was unquestionably a “hide-out”—its entry so cleverly concealed that the WPA men had to tear up the floor of an adjoining room before the hidden bedroom became visible. But notwithstanding the darkness in which the picture lay it had faded, indicating that it is an old photo or that it had recently found its way into the hide-out after having been exposed for some years to the strong light of the day.