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### *The First 'Pendleton' Euro-Americans?*

Did Abram Miller and the Goodwins know they were not the first Euro-American residents of the land claim that became Pendleton, Oregon? In 1889, the *East Oregonian* reported that Dr. William C. McKay, among Eastern Oregon's earliest and most famous pioneers, "wintered" in 1851 and 1852 at what is now downtown Pendleton—at the southeast corner of today's SE 1st and SE Byers Avenue.

Yet it was not until 1907 when the *East Oregonian* editor and reporters were surprised to also learn that four years before the Abram Miller and Goodwin arrivals, Isaiah and Frances Stonebraker, and their four-year-old daughter, reached the same area on August 2, 1860. Frances was pregnant and would give birth to a son, Jerome, the following spring—claimed to be the first Euro-American child born in what became the city of Pendleton. After their grueling trip overland from Iowa, the couple, in their early thirties, were ready to pause for the winter as Frances' pregnancy took its course. They built a log hut on the north bank of the river, a few hundred feet downstream from today's Main Street bridge.

Why build there? The land was steep and not at all good for farming, in comparison with attractive parcels still widely available in nearby valleys. There was not even a road or wagon track to their home. A daily walk to the river was necessary to fetch water.

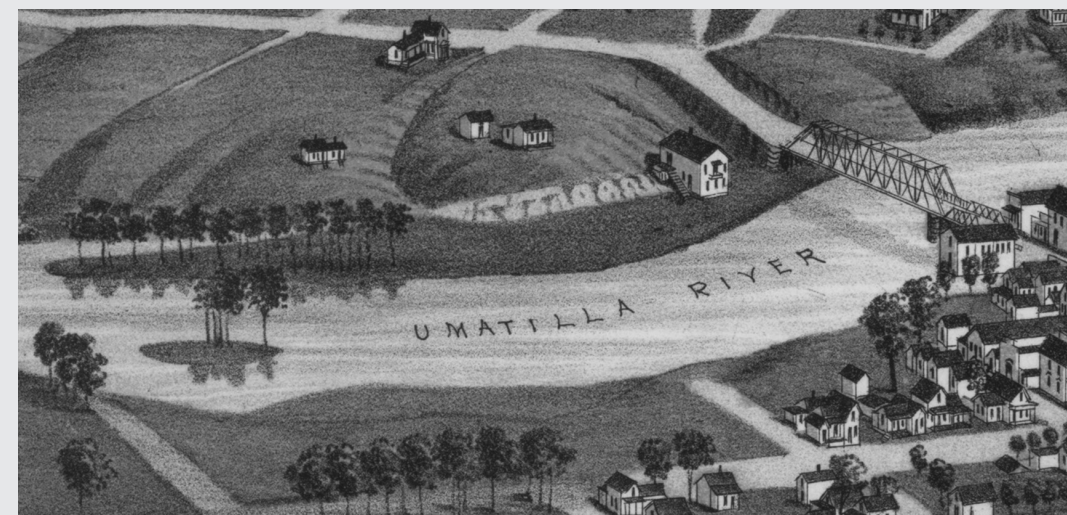
There are two possible reasons.

A decade earlier, the Stonebraker family operated a saw- and grist-mill on the Nodaway River, near Clarinda, Page County, Iowa, where Isaiah and Frances were married. This mill ground corn and cut lumber for customers in a forty-mile radius. Just below his log hut on the Umatilla River, an experienced-Isaiah is likely to have quickly noticed a natural millrace and unique opportunity for a mill—where others indeed later built water-powered mills near the northwest end of the Main Street bridge. Isaiah may have mulled a mill possibility, waiting to watch the river's behavior in winter and spring. If so, there were two problems: he had no money for a mill building and equipment, and markets for lumber or flour would take many years to develop.

A second possible reason is that Isaiah had become skilled in making wooden oxen yokes for local freighters



Jerome Stonebraker and his wife, Melissa, circa 1930. He is claimed to be the first Euro-American child born in what today is Pendleton. *Stonebraker Family.*



The 1884 J. J. Stoner bird's-eye map shows a mill below the likely area where the Stonebrakers built their log hut. Note that the view above is of the second mill located near the bridge; the first mill was built circa late-1878, but was swept away in the 1882 flood—along with a nearby saloon and dance hall. For water power, mill owners at this location enlarged a natural millrace on the far side of the gravel island, later often called "Walter's Island" or "Raley's Island." *Library of Congress.*

and emigrants who needed a replacement by the time they reached one of the Umatilla River crossings, a short distance from the Stonebrakers' log hut. Using cottonwood trees, Isaiah could make three yokes in a day. These sold for \$2 (about \$57 today), a third of the price charged in The Dalles. It was good money in 1860.

Isaiah and Frances moved on a year later, briefly establishing a working farm at an area of good soil near today's Kiwanis Park in southeast Pendleton, on the south bank of the Umatilla River. There, Isaiah reported that he planted the first crop ever sown in Pendleton. Later in the same year, the family located at what is now the Athena area, where an excellent 160-acre homestead was claimed. Many years afterward, the Stonebrakers lived near Pilot Rock.

Perhaps the most interesting of Isaiah Stonebraker's remarks to the *East Oregonian* writer in 1907 was that from their log hut on the north bank of the Umatilla River, the family could see local Native Americans "breaking horses" on what today is Main Street. When mounted, the ponies were ridden in an area containing many small river rocks, causing them to quickly tire and give up their fight. From the Stonebrakers' perch in front of a crude home on the north hill above the river, they are likely to have been the first lucky Euro-American viewers of a western show in the future Round-Up City.

*Sources: see Appendix, Endnotes: Illustration Sources and Discussion, Front Matter.*



Circus owners were frequent users of vaudeville acts. During a circus visit circa 1896-1902, a sharpshooter is about to shoot a pipe from the mouth of a woman. The location is on Main Street, mid-block between Webb (SE/SW Emigrant Avenue) and Railroad (SE/SW Frazer Avenue) Streets. *Umatilla County Historical Society.*

many 1880s men in saloons, but not for responsible husbands and wives who were raising children. Families wanted entertainment somewhere in the middle—clean, fun, lively, interesting, and easy on the deep-thinking. Knowing this, Pastor bundled together unrelated acts and their presenters into an hour-long presentation. The presenters made life-weary customers laugh, smile, and clap, but without the use of offensive or elitist material. All this cost only five cents (about \$1.25 today). A person could usually stay in the theater's balcony for hours, because the shows were continuous, all day long. Pastor's vaudeville formula was an instant and huge success, and was quickly copied by other New York theaters. The profitable formula became common in large cities throughout the United States.

During the 1890s, as many as 25,000 vaudeville performers became active, most of whom were presenting in towns larger than Pendleton. A small number of well-paid national and regional performers became known to all. The vast remainder of vaudevillians were restless, talented young adults out to present their acts and see the country. This latter group was barely able to make ends meet. Cash Box? What Cash Box?

#### Vaudeville a Late Arrival in Pendleton

Only smatterings of true vaudeville were presented in Pendleton during the 1880s and 1890s. It was not until the early 1900s that vaudeville was frequently available. Before then, Pendletonians needed to take the train to Portland to view professional vaudeville. Its scarcity in Eastern Oregon was because a true, full vaudeville presentation—like Tony Pastor's—was expensive.

The classic vaudeville bill consisted of seven acts, each less than ten minutes. The seven performers or groups were usually independent contractors, who might be appearing at a different theater, or a different city, a week later. For a vaudeville theater manager, this meant seven separate paychecks, hands-on management and coordination, and big audiences to make the Cash Box work. However, volume ticket sales required a large population, which Pendleton did not have. The solution? A traveling troupe arriving in Pendleton required high ticket fees so that their transportation, hotels, and meals were covered. That could happen, but not every day.

Vaudevillians traveling between large cities purchased guidebooks written for these presenters, which reported the theaters available across the nation, who to see, the stage configurations, cheap hotels, and the right train to catch to the next city. In that day, vaudeville performers literally walked into a big-city theater office in the morning and were performing a few minutes or hours later. None of the vaudeville guidebooks in archival collections reviewed by this author mentioned Pendleton.

#### The Troupe Version of Vaudeville

Travelling troupes usually presented the few vaudeville acts seen in Pendleton, contracted to appear at the Frazer or LaDow opera houses well in advance. The performers were not independent contractors who showed up one day and left another. They were employees of the troupe, usually for a season, who presented both individual and group acts, and maybe even performed a play if their manager could get a booking.

*Nevertheless, Pendletonians loved whatever vaudeville they could get.* The genre became more popular as Pendleton grew. The working- and middle-class majority adored the presentation style; most upper-class folks also got a good laugh from the stage antics and oddball jokes.

#### The Circus

Vaudeville acts were also featured by traveling circuses and carnivals, in addition to animal and trapeze acts. These visited Pendleton two to three times each year, arriving explosively with as many as forty-eight railcars.<sup>1</sup>

Circus Day in Pendleton.

Last Saturday was circus day in Pendleton, and it was a day to be remembered forever by the "suckers," who were "taken in." The parade was witnessed by about one thousand people, and was a rather tame affair. The performances in the afternoon and evening were fairly attended. All kinds of "rackets" were worked, and people were robbed right and left. Many lost a few dollars, and some lost as high as fifty to eighty dollars. Some were robbed outright, while others suffered systematically. "Jo Jo" was the feature of the show, and he was not much of a feature. The menagerie was fair; above the average exhibit of wild animals accompanying circuses. After the performances many citizens lost the contents of their henneries. Mrs. Terrill was the heaviest loser, having had stolen "thirty-six chickens and two fat ducks." A bed was also stolen from the Bowman house. Other robberies were committed, and, altogether, the gang of thieves in league with Barrett's circus, did a prosperous one day's business in Pendleton.

*East Oregonian, September 1887.*

### Economic Prosperity Ahead

In proof of Moses Goodwin's vision, during the 1870s, Pendleton tripled in size to 730 residents.<sup>3</sup> Prosperity was everywhere. Cattle-raising had always been a money-maker in Eastern Oregon, but the 1870s also marked an amazing growth in regional sheep ranching. Some sheep owners, like Jacob Frazer, were amassing piles of money, which would become an enormous help to Pendleton's future entertainment industry.

Responding to earlier successful wheat-growing attempts near Walla Walla,<sup>4</sup> in 1878, William Switzler also found success in growing wheat, three miles north of Pendleton.<sup>5</sup> Profitable wheat crops soon covered nearby hills, creating an economic boom for Pendleton. The downtown was thriving. By the end of the decade, most lots on or near Main Street had been sold. Pendleton's new courthouse attracted a wave of visitors during "court weeks." Growth and the good economy meant more money in circulation—and money was a presenter's favorite market characteristic.

### Saloons Become Index of City Size, Affluence

Today's easy availability of clean water is taken for granted. Immigrants and existing settlers in the 1870s still had vivid fears of waterborne disease in large US and European cities.



Milarkey Hall, Pendleton's first public hall, was located in the upper story of the Rothchild & Bean store building, at the southwest corner of today's Main Street and SW Court Avenue, the site of the former Millard White store. Note that the middle brick building (also Milarkey-owned) survives today as the Rainbow Cafe. *John Wilson Special Collection, Multnomah County Library-Central.*

### A Swindling Company.

The "Hidden Hand" is hidden yet, as far as the Pendleton people are concerned—also the feet and all the rest of the blanked bilks. The hotel reserved rooms two nights, Mr. Robbins was put to a great deal of trouble in selling tickets and returning proceeds, bills contracted by their advance agent remain unpaid, and where the company went nobody seems to know. If they had any good reason for not coming, it would have been very easy for them to have sent word here to that effect; but as they did not even do that much, we can only conclude that they are a company of traveling dead beats. There was a report here yesterday that they were in jail at Walla Walla. It is to be hoped this is true.

Not all troupes were reliable. Hall owners instead found that dances were easier and usually more profitable. *East Oregonian*, June 1884.

True, one of the best-tasting, pure, and free artesian wells was conveniently located near the southeast corner of Main and Court Streets on the courthouse grounds.<sup>6</sup> But most believed that processed beer was always a safer bet.

To estimate the size of an early Oregon town, all you needed to know was the number of saloons. In the years ahead, Pendleton excelled when that rule of thumb was applied: it contained more saloons than was usual for its size. Saloons in Pendleton's early years were important community gathering spots. They became busy, informal clubs of like-minded men, where free newspapers were available, information shared, friends greeted, jobs found, a light meal purchased, and of course, drinks downed, gambling games won or lost, and in some saloons, prostitutes visited.

The reason so many saloons could find a business niche in Pendleton had much to do with a lack of "technology." In the days before steam and diesel machinery, scores of male laborers were needed on farms, ranches, and mills and ranches. On weekends, crowds of male workers found their way to Pendleton; few attended a church on Sunday mornings. Most headed back home with lighter wallets, leaving behind happy merchants, gamblers, prostitutes—and presenters.

### Early Saloons Are Not Good Presenter Venues

Presenters found saloons to be difficult venues. Pendleton saloons at that time were seldom larger than 25 feet in width, by 100 feet in length. Many customers stood at the bar, their backs to the rest of the room. Tables and chairs lined the opposite wall. A stage at the rear of a saloon was a rarity and usually unwelcome—it took space more profitably used for gambling or prostitution cribs. Those who sometimes found saloons worthwhile were musicians and, gradually, burlesque performers. As reported in the *East Oregonian*, by the mid-1880s banjo-players and pianists were common: "A number of the saloons in town now have a piano-thumper or fiddler to entice the public within its walls. You can hear this music going the whole length of Main street."<sup>7</sup>

**THANKSGIVING**

**B - A - L - L**

— AT —

MILARKEY'S HALL.

—

PENDLETON, OREGON,  
THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 29, 1877.

—

THE BEST OF MUSIC WILL BE IN ATTEN-  
dance. A general invitation and everybody  
expected.

**TICKETS - \$2.**

—

Supper can be obtained at the Hotel or  
Restaurant if spoken for in time.

This is Pendleton's first entertainment "display advertisement." *East Oregonian*, November 1877.

bawdy houses; when rung, it summoned a bartender, smiling and pleased to take an order.<sup>46</sup>

In later years, local police had an easy time keeping an eye on the “district.” That’s because in December 1908 the new City Hall, containing the Library, Fire, and Police Departments, was relocated to the same block as the bawdy houses; most were no more than 300 feet from the police offices; some were much closer.<sup>47</sup> The nearest was the Oriental House, (later called the Oak Hotel), just fifteen feet across an alley. The government-established and -managed district enabled police to efficiently fine, punish, or suppress unwanted bawdy houses or prostitutes.

*“...the percentage of those [women] who choose to eat is appalling.”*

—Bethene Akers, Pendleton suffragist

### Why Did Sex Workers Work?

Most prostitutes worked only for the money. They needed their earnings—usually, just to survive. When thinking about the social roles of adult men and women in a rural western town during the late 1800s, you could be sure of two facts: there were far fewer women than men and thus many more unmarried men than unmarried women.

Pendleton’s 1880 census reported nearly twice the number of adult men (272) than adult women (161). The number of unmarried male adults (135) was over four times the number of unmarried female adults (31).<sup>48</sup> By economic necessity, the small number of unmarried females (who were not prostitutes) customarily boarded with parents, grown children, or an extended family member.

Men typically found the western frontier to be a land of opportunity; women did not. If single—widowed, separated, divorced, or for some reason unlikely to marry—and without others to rely upon, women seldom were able to earn a living wage. For them, a weekly income of \$5 in 1890 (about \$140 today) was common. It was not enough to support food, clothing, and room expenses.<sup>49</sup>

However, prostitutes in the 1890s could earn \$20-\$30 a week (about \$555-\$835 today) before expenses, a big, meaningful difference. Volume workers earned much more, if willing,<sup>50</sup> or if a prostitute’s pimp or boyfriend demanded it.

A denizen of Webb street took poison, last night, with suicidal intent, but her condition was discovered in time to save her miserable life. Poor soul, she deserves pity.

*East Oregonian*, January 1887.

Most prostitutes would have gladly avoided bawdy house employment. A prostitute nearly always used a false identity to avoid shaming families back home, as well as for security and privacy. Adult “straight” women did not speak to or interact in any way with their fallen sisters.

Doing so was considered a serious breach of frontier etiquette,<sup>51</sup> a custom which persisted for many years. Yet it was also a rule gladly broken by some women—as in the case of an understanding, older employee of the Rivoli Theater, who delivered coke drinks on hot summer days to nearby “upstairs girls” who were reluctant to come down to Main Street for a purchase.

### Ms. Akers Delivers a Jab

The disparity between a young woman’s pay in a normal clerical or retail job—versus her possible work in a brothel—did not go away anytime soon. In 1912, Pendleton women were arguing for suffrage, the right to vote. Brothels were still a large part of Pendleton’s downtown scene, usually ignored by law officials. In a pro-suffrage, anti-prostitution article written for the *East Oregonian*, Bethene Akers, Secretary of Pendleton’s Political Equality League, captured the pay disparity and attraction of a prostitute’s wages with this statement: “...the percentage of those [women] who choose to eat is appalling.”<sup>52</sup>

### Pendleton’s Prostitution Work Force

In most years, the number of working prostitutes in the Cottonwood tenderloin can be estimated at about thirty-five to forty-five, based on the 1900 US Census and later published police reports.<sup>53</sup> A hidden workforce consisted of independent contractors—some affiliated with saloons, some managed by pimps, and some working on their own. These prostitutes were not at all inclined to tell a census enumerator their true occupation and, usually, not even their true name. If an enumerator suspected prostitution, the polite term of “seamstress” or “dress-maker” was often written down. Or, the female respondent might declare herself to be a widow.

Free-lancing pimps in Pendleton managed women who used hotel or lodging rooms, with or without the owner’s knowledge. During the summer of 1887, when the Cottonwood-area sex industry was already well underway, an *East Oregonian* editor claimed fifty pimps were active in the tenderloin, living off their mistresses.<sup>54</sup> Pimps were heavily scorned, as in this 1888 news item:

One of the class of nuisances known as “pimps” was arrested by Marshal French last night for shooting within the town limits, and this morning was fined \$10 [about \$265 today]. He is a specimen of a number of degraded fellows who live upon the earnings of the fallen women who live in the vicinity of the Occidental hotel. These fellows confer no benefit upon anybody and seem to be one class of earth’s creatures that are utterly useless. Their room is needed here far more than their presence.<sup>55</sup>

Occasional reports were made of wives from residential neighborhoods working in the district,<sup>56</sup> or from their home,<sup>57</sup> sometimes at the urging of husbands.<sup>58</sup> This apparent residential district prostitution was taking place in 1887:



East Oregonian, September 1921.

Rave reviews were received for the organ music, the highest-quality presentations many customers had ever heard.

At the Rivoli, only the best, first-run films would be shown, along with an occasional road show. Already booked in addition to the *Marcus* troupe was the *Robin Hood* comic opera, and Nance O'Neill in *The Passion Flower*.

The advance agent for the coming *Marcus* road show was soon in town. He announced, "There is no playhouse playing either pictures or legitimate attractions west of Omaha that for beauty and convenience can compare with the new Rivoli."<sup>8</sup>

As soon as the opening festivities were concluded, Matlock and Greulich dropped their prices: adults, 35 cents (about \$5.20 today); children, 10 cents (about \$1.50 today). Loges sold for 40 cents (about \$5.95 today). As road shows and special films came to town, the public was warned that prices would be raised.<sup>9</sup>

**The First Opera**

The Rivoli's capabilities and financial returns enabled the partners to immediately attract national road shows. The "musical sensation of the last two years in a hundred cities," the comic opera *Robin Hood*, arrived in Pendleton just a month after opening night. Prices ranged from \$1.10 to \$2.75 (about \$16.25 to \$41 today). During the intermission, the troupe's manager came out on stage to compliment the Rivoli owners and declare the theater to be well-fitted to road show needs.<sup>10</sup>

When Pendleton readers scanned the front-page reviews the next day, there were some who may have decided that there was even better news: bored stiff by opera of any kind, they were instead able to see a movie at the Arcade or Alta. The Arcade had something much better than an opera—the *Miracles of the Jungles*, where you could watch a man and lion "fight to the death," or see a band of savages "blown to pieces." It beat opera, hands down. At the Alta Theater, May Allison starred in *Big Game*, a story of her timid husband and a courageous

suitor. How May escaped her dilemma (did she?) was a story that "stirred the heart deeply." There were now so many choices; Pendletonians were living in the lap of theater luxury.

*There is no playhouse...west of Omaha that for beauty and convenience can compare with the new Rivoli.*

—Agent, Marcus road show

In another three weeks, the long-awaited *Marcus Show of 1921*—a bit risqué—arrived by train, carrying its hundred-person cast in two Pullman cars, accompanied by three double-length baggage cars. Pendleton was now in the big time.<sup>11</sup>

**First Blockbuster Film**

*The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, was the Rivoli's first smash-hit film, shown for three nights in December 1921. The lengthy silent film was much in the news—some in Portland attempted to stop the anti-war film. This movie, the best-selling film of 1921, elevated Rudolph Valentino to stardom. He became Hollywood's "Latin Lover," a silent film standout and sex symbol. It was Valentino who made gaucho pants popular, and set off the tango dance craze.<sup>12</sup>

Studios and distributors now rated the Rivoli as "a first run theater" in Oregon, with regular access to the best of movies. Pendleton audiences responded by filling the house.



In its first three months, the Rivoli brought to Pendleton-area residents the best in entertainment. Highlights were a major city road show, a Broadway opera, and one of America's most classic films. *East Oregonian*, October-December 1921.