

Nancy Boggs Mullery (1833–1905)

By Donnie/Don Horn

From the mid-1870s through the 1890s, as Portland grew into the largest regional shipping and commercial center south of Seattle, a number of brothels and "parlor houses" became part of the city's landscape. Most bordellos were north of Burnside Street, on the North End, but Nancy Boggs established one of hers on the Willamette River. The legend of Boggs's floating brothel survives through the work of Stewart Holbrook, a self-proclaimed "low-brow" historian and writer. Calling Boggs the Madame of the Willamette River, he spun her story into more myth than fact for publications such as the *American Mercury* (1948) and the *Portland Oregonian*. But behind the myth was a real person with a compelling story that provides insight into the legal and economic innovations of unmarried women in nineteenth-century Portland, when they had few rights and little protection.

Born in Beaver, Pennsylvania, in 1833, Nancy Veazey married Isaac Boggs in Gallia, Ohio, when she was twenty years old. Their son Alexander was born the same year, followed two years later by daughter Eliza. Elisha Veazey, Nancy Boggs's brother, settled on a Donation Land Claim in Silverton, Oregon, in 1853, and Nancy and her family joined him about three years later. Isaac Boggs became the town's first blacksmith, but within a couple of years the couple had divorced. Nancy Boggs and their daughter moved to Portland, while Isaac Boggs and their son moved to Clatsop County, where Isaac married fourteen-year-old Mina Ann Kimball in 1860. He died in 1867.

Much of what we know about Boggs comes from local newspapers and directories, which document some of the typical socioeconomic obstacles faced by lower-class women at the time. By 1860, Boggs was working as a "domestic," living with her daughter at the Howard House, a hotel operated by James W. Going at 5 North Front Street. Nine years later, she was operating a Stamp Store on First Street. The next year, the *Morning Oregonian* reported that she had been convicted of larceny but acquitted on appeal. In 1870, Boggs reportedly sued a faithless lover, saloonkeeper Ira Morrill, for "breach of promise" and was awarded \$15 in damages. She also sued the local dogcatcher, Charles Lawrence, in 1873, charging him with seducing her daughter; the charges were dropped. Then, in 1874, the *Oregonian* reported that "William Palmer of Portland, tried to kill Nancy Boggs with his little hatchet. He now languishes in dungeon damp."

In 1877, she opened a house of prostitution in downtown Portland at 46 Pine Street and became a well-known personality in the city. Boggs continues to show up in newspapers, often the victim of violent assault by male patrons. Prostitution during that time was not legal, but it was often tolerated by City Hall; still, police raids were frequent enough to disrupt business.

Portland was three cities in the 1870s: Portland on the west side of the Willamette River, and East Portland and Albina on the east. Each city had its own government and police force, and evading the law sometimes meant simply getting across or even into the water. In 1880, Nancy Boggs purchased a scow and expanded her business to the Willamette River, possibly the first floating bordello in the city and, by some accounts, one of the first west of the Mississippi River. Stewart Holbrook wrote that she and two other brothel owners, Liverpool Liz and Mary Cook, became known as the Three Sirens of Portland. The stories of tough women handling rowdy men resonated with Holbrook's audiences.

In 1880, 5,147 women lived in Portland; 340 of them were forty-seven years old, the same age as Boggs. Most women were housewives, domestics, seamstresses, teachers, students, and professionals of one sort or another. Boggs was one out of only two divorced women listed on the 1880 census, and she would have faced many obstacles purchasing the scow on her own, having it retrofitted, and piloting it on the Willamette. Her 40-by-80-foot vessel moved up and down the river, with rowboats ferrying people on and off the 3,200-square-foot craft. The arrangement gave her mobility and allowed her to accommodate customers as she moved between Portland and East Portland. By staying on the river, she evaded city taxes and the police.

During the 1880s, local law enforcement officials decided to crack down on floating whiskey scows and bordellos. Police from Portland, Albina, and East Portland repeatedly attempted to raid Boggs's scow, less because of the bordello and more because she wasn't paying her liquor taxes. Holbrook

describes these raids as dramatic escapades, with Boggs using imaginative schemes to get away.

In 1882, the city police departments agreed to conduct joint raids on Boggs's brothel. At first, she supposedly escaped them by floating downriver to Albina, where a sternwheeler captain agreed to anchor her boat. But one night a line got caught and the boat moved into vulnerable waters, where it was raided and she and her workers were arrested. Boggs paid a fine and was released, but she gave up the scow and moved to East Portland, near present-day Southeast Pine Street and Martin Luther King Boulevard, and for a short time operated another brothel.

On September 5, 1888, Boggs married Edward "Ned" Mullery. The couple moved to Emerald Island, a two-acre island in the Columbia River (now Bunker Hill Landing) in Washington. Nancy Mullery continued to live on the island after her husband drowned in 1903. When she died on June 20, 1905, her will cited no children as survivors, only her brother John, several nieces in Iowa, a nephew in San Diego, and a nephew in Woodburn.

Stewart Holbrook picked up Boggs' story from interviews with a bartender and "sort of reporter" for the *Portland Sunday Mercury* named Spider Johnson. Holbrook embellished Johnson's account of the 1882 river raid in several publications, beginning in the 1930s. Those stories persist, a mixture of truth and clever storytelling.

Sources

City Section, *Morning Oregonian*, January 11, 1870: *Justice Court, in front of Recorder Anderson, yesterday Nancy Boggs was fined twenty-five dollars and costs or thirty days imprisonment in the county jail. An appeal was taken to the Circuit Court. The charge against her is larceny.*

City Section, *Morning Oregonian*, August 5, 1870, p. 3: "A "lone lorn creetur" of the name of Boggs has bought suit against a faithless lover named Morrill to recover the value of a \$5,000 heart smashed all to smithereens, as is alleged, by his promises".

"Proprietress of a saloon on Pine Street." *Daily Oregonian*, December 21, 1877, p. 3.

Duniway, Abigail Scott. *New Northwest*, November 2, 1878: "We learn that the 'one more unfortunate' who died last night of drunkenness and debauchery at St. Vincent's Hospital, was taken in and cared for by Mrs. Boggs, as an act of charity, after the poor creature had been left to die without a priest or person. Mrs. Boggs keeps a lodging house, and is a hard-working woman, who, we are told, does not deserve the censure cast upon her by the city press....It is not the province of this journal to wrong man or woman. The latter's way, if compelled to struggle for a livelihood, is hard enough at best, and the blessed truth is always bad enough about even the best of both sexes".

"The Rural Telephone." *Corvallis Gazette*. May 29, 1903.

Holbrook, Stewart. "Shanghai Days in the City of Roses." *Sunday Oregonian*, October 8, 1933, p. 61.

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"Liverpool Liz, Mary Cook, Nancy Boggs are The Three Sirens." *American Mercury* magazine, May 1948, 544-7.

McKenna, Gail. "Shanghai Hell." *The West*, September 1965, p. 38-9.

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