

Grand Old Dame

Saved from certain ruin, Bombay Peggy's becomes the Cinderella of Klondike



Peg's now sits on Princess Street.

FEBRUARY 6, 1900

Jack Smith is the first titleholder to Lot 2 on Dawson City's First Avenue. A former entertainer with a travelling troupe, Smith's now an entrepreneur and dance hall owner. He likely builds Bombay Peggy's on his lot around 1900, though the building won't be known as that for another 50 years.

1902-1908

Smith sells the property to managers at the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce. Tenants during the period include two miners, a city clerk, and Dawson's first mayor, Henry C. Macaulay.

1911-1923

Daniel Guggenheim buys the building the year before his brother goes down with the Titanic. The Guggenheims use Peg's as the base for their dredge-mining outfit, the Yukon Gold Company. They pay taxes on the property until 1923.

1924-1934

The building changes hands several times, and is used as a private residence. In 1934, hotelier Peter Knudson buys it.

Whether it's the Lipstick Room, the Gold Room or the Sweet, Peg's has a place for you. See www.bombaypeggys.com

Bombay Peggy's — a great building that has served Dawson City variously as a mining office, a private residence and a brothel — has graced this community at the confluence of the Yukon and Klondike rivers for more than 100 years. Born just after the peak of the Klondike gold

rush, she rode sparkling highs before declining into the cruelties of age and neglect. By the 1980s, Peg's had been all but abandoned and left to sink in a swamp. Then, two women decided there was life in the old girl yet.

1934-1957

Knudson's most famous tenant on Lot 2 is Vera Margaret Dorval or, as she's reluctantly known, Bombay Peggy. (Stories fly about her name. She lived in Asia before and during the Second World War. One tale says her British husband and son died of disease in India, while another says they died in Japanese custody.)

1957 to early 1960s

Peggy Dorval operates Bombay Peggy's as a brothel, buying the structure along with other properties in Dawson. Despite, or because of, her profession, Peg is popular with many Dawsonites. She doles out sweets to the kids, who call her place the Candy House. Long-time friends know her as a wonderful person of storied generosity.

Early 1960s to 1974

After the brothel closes, Peg rents the building to various tenants, including an art gallery. She tries to cash in on federal money earmarked for historic buildings but Ruby Scott's brothel is renovated instead. (Historian Melanie Needham says:

"The old-timers I spoke to suggested it was because Peggy was so outspoken and a no-B.S. kind of a woman; she didn't schmooze the authorities.")

1975-1980

Health failing, Peg moves south, trying to run her Yukon properties from Vancouver. She's unable to make a go of it and sells Bombay Peggy's in 1975 to Willie Harasymow. She dies in 1980.

1980-1999

Harasymow sells Peg's to Frank Callahan, who sells it to Audrey and Gene Gritner. Potential developments aren't feasible because the building isn't connected to infrastructure and is settling into a swamp. By the 1990s, squatters have moved in, kids have defaced it and at least one fire's been set.

Mid-1990s

Despite its state, locals Kim Bouzane and Wendy Cairns admire the structure's elegance. "I fell in love," Kim says. "It had its own energy." The two women talk about opening a B&B.



Proprietor Kim Bouzane in front of Peg's on moving day. Photos courtesy Kim Bouzane.


1997-1998

Cairns and Bouzane approach Peg's owners to find they're selling four lots, including the one on which the building stands, as a package. The following year, the owners change their minds. Bouzane and Cairns purchase just the structure, and move it to its current location on Princess Street.

December 1999 to present

After extensive, Cinderella-type renovations Bombay Peggy's Bed and Breakfast is open for business. Though he couldn't make it for opening night, Bouzane's father is the first customer on record. Once again, Peg's does a brisk business with her lavishly restored rooms and sumptuous bar.

April 2000

Father Tim Coonen OMI of St. Mary's Catholic Church gets the how-to from Rome and then delivers a ceremonial blessing to Bombay Peggy's. 



BY MIFI PURVIS

IN SEARCH OF BOMBAY PEGGY

ACCORDING TO LEGEND,
PEGGY DORVAL
WAS A BOOTLEGGER AND ONE OF
DAWSON CITY'S LAST MADAMS.
SHE WAS MUCH MORE THAN
THAT TO THE PEOPLE WHO KNEW HER WELL

Chungkai War Cemetery lies across the Kwai Noi River, a few kilometres from Kanchanaburi, Thailand. It houses the bones of boys and men who died as prisoners of the Japanese in the Second World War.

In the late 1960s, a lone Yukon woman, Vera Margaret Dorval, made the trip up the river, probably in one of the boats that churn its muddy waters. And it was at Chungkai that she finally found her son. Private Norman Maurice Dorval had died nearly 25 years before, on February 4, 1943, executed while trying to escape.

It's hard to reconcile the picture of Margaret Dorval — a lonely and elderly woman standing over a humid grave numbered 11 A 7-10 — with the legacy of her image in Dawson City. There, she is remembered as Bombay Peggy, a bootlegger and a madam who ran one of the last brothels in the Yukon River community.

Famed for her generous spirit and shady businesses, the figure she cuts in Dawson's near-history fits easily into the frontier mythology that reaches back to the city's beginnings in the Klondike Gold Rush. And the memory of Peggy is a prominent feature in the community today, thanks largely to the efforts of Wendy Cairns and Kim Bouzane.

Bombay Peggy in Dawson City: A tough-talking, no-nonsense woman, Peggy Dorval was known for her generous spirit and mysterious past. Photo courtesy Dawson City Archives.





In Dawson City there are rumours that in Asia Peggy had been a prostitute (or a model, or a nanny) and she told at least one person she had lived in Russia, too

A few years ago they purchased the large Victorian home where Peggy had rented rooms to prostitutes. It had been in decay for years and was sinking into a swamp. Cairns and Bouzane moved the building to Princess Street and lovingly restored it. Expanded, renovated and tastefully appointed with Victorian antiques, they reopened the building as a historic inn.

Today, it's not the kind of place you would find Peggy. She wouldn't recognize the chic, well-appointed rooms. She would probably be more at home in the cramped office underneath the stairs, a bottle for sale at her side.

"I imagine she led a pretty marginal existence," says Cairns who with Bouzane, continues to collect facts, tall tales and anecdotes from Peggy's life. Cairns and Bouzane know Peggy's nickname is like the false front on one of Dawson's old buildings. It does as much to draw attention as it does to conceal the rest of the story. Peggy's many friends can fill in the details, but much of her story remains hidden — perhaps because she wanted it that way.



TOP: Did Peggy use this house as a brothel?
ABOVE: Peggy outside the Gresham in Vancouver.
Photos courtesy of the Dawson City Archives.

SURROUNDED BY THE mountains and creeks from which its gold was mined, Dawson City today is an odd blend: a slice of small-town Canada grafted onto a giant gold rush diorama. It's an appealing mix of Victorian houses, both tarted up and run

down, log cabins and modern homes, modest and fancy.

It's also an improbable place that, with the discovery of Klondike gold at the end of the 19th century, leapt onto the map as if fully sprung from someone's imagination. Within a couple of years, what had been a

seasonal Tr'ondek fishing village had become a boomtown of more than 30,000 people. Most of the thousands who descended on Dawson seeking riches were men. Hundreds more were women with a decidedly independent streak. The women came from all walks of life, but the stereotype would have it that all, with rare exceptions, were dancehall girls and prostitutes. The most famous became the stuff of legend — Diamond Tooth Gertie, Annie the Pig and Dutch Kate.

In recent years, researchers have mined the historical records to uncover the stories of other women. Still, it seems that the more notorious a woman's reputation, the more likely she was to be remembered. It frustrates historians. John Gould, a second generation placer miner and Dawson historian, shakes his head when the question comes up. "Prostitutes. Why is it always the prostitutes?"

In the early years of the 20th century, Dawson's boom came to an end and the population began to shrink. The stampeders who panned for gold in the creeks and streams of the Klondike left — usually broke — and independent mining gave way to large-scale dredge operations. By the 1930s, almost all of the gold men of the Klondike were the hundreds of workers who found seasonal employment on commercial mining concessions. *Continued...*

A close-up photograph of a young, downy bird chick, possibly a frigatebird, sitting on a nest constructed from dry twigs and branches. The chick has white down on its head and neck, with darker feathers on its back. It is looking directly at the camera.

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There were some Dawsonites figured prostitutes kept the local girls out of trouble and the dredge miners from brawling. This was the Dawson City that greeted Peggy Dorval in 1943

Both women were happy with this manufactured reason to keep Peggy in the North and Peggy would write Mrs. Beaveridge once or twice a year. "She'd say 'No luck yet, but I have a good lead,'" recalls Margaret Wallingham, a long-time Yukoner who was a good friend to Peg. "This went on for years until all the relatives died. She never did find the uncle."

Bombay Peggy is often mentioned in the same breath as Ruby Scott, who ran a

brothel in Dawson for 27 years. Both women lived outside the social norms. Both were renowned for their generosity and each was doing what she could to get by on her own.

Aside from that, the women had little in common. Ruby was short, stout and refined. Peggy — at 5' 10" — sometimes dressed like a man and was often said to have the biggest breasts in town. She'd wear a tam or a ball cap. People could tell

how much she'd had to drink by the direction the cap pointed. Ruby was a gourmet cook. Peg loved to watch a good softball game. Ruby knew who and how to schmooze to keep her business — sometimes she had as many as six girls — running and profitable. Peg had less to protect and fewer reasons to impress.

There's the story about the leaving parties of 1953, the year the territorial capital was moved from Dawson to Whitehorse. Before they left, Yukon Territorial Government employees partied around town and said their goodbyes. To see them off, Ruby put on a lavish spread — tables groaning under the weight of the fabulous food and drink. "Then the party moved on to Peggy's," according to an observer. "And there's Peg with a few bottles of whiskey and some dirty glasses saying: 'So, you sons-of-bitches are finally leaving.'"

The difference in style may be the reason why Canada's Historic Sites and Monuments Board eventually earmarked Ruby Scott's house for designation and money for a facelift. The decision annoyed Peggy. She believed her building was the finer of the two. Architecturally, Ruby Scott's place is a homely sister compared to Peggy's.

Indeed, Peggy had hopes of fixing it up herself in the late 1950s, Emery Shilleto says. "She asked us if we wanted to put money in. But we raising a family... She said 'Now, you can drive a taxi, Emery, and your wife can cook. The children will be just fine. They can pack in wood.' She had it all figured out."

At various points, Peggy had hopes of making something of the old place. Once she had ideas of making it a fine dining club. Another time she even tried to turn it into an art gallery. But for the most part it remained empty. Peg lived there seasonally for a couple of years. Otherwise, she rented it out. For a while, her tenants were women who worked as prostitutes. It's unclear how much Peggy herself was involved in their business.

Some say that in the brothels of the day, only single men were allowed to visit the girls. Married men were welcome to stop by for a drink, which they sometimes did accompanied by their wives. Bootlegging was as big a part of the business as anything else. At the time most establishments only had beer licences. You could buy a legal shot at nasty plywood bar known as the Snake Room. The brothels and bootleggers offered a more convivial environment and longer hours of service. *Continued on Page 73.*

Come for the History...

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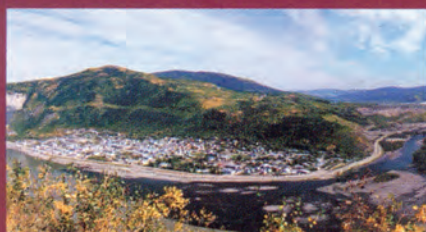
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BOMBAY PEGGY

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Even in this social scene, Peggy lived on the margins. She would occasionally travel to Keno to look after some silver claims she had in the area. Rumours say she took girls up there and did a little bootlegging. Her friends say otherwise. Her main home, however, was a log cabin on Dawson's Princess Street with a wood stove, no running water and a tenuous electrical connection. From there, she conducted her trade in bootleg liquor. More often than not, it was lonely old-timers who stopped by for a meal and a drink. She took care of them even though they were flat broke.

BY THE MID 1970s, Peg was getting on in years and less able to take care of herself in her cabin. She left Dawson for Vancouver. A year or two later, in 1979, the Princess Street cabin washed away in a flood. Dawsonites Bill and Fran Hakonson recall that it had been damaged by a drag race that went bad. One of the racers had careened into the side of the building, knocking it loose from its foundation. When the flood waters hit, the Hakonsons watched it float away, still pretty much intact.

Peggy moved to a room at the Gresham Hotel in Vancouver, in an area where many Yukoners stayed on their trips to the city. During this time Peggy was increasingly worried about her properties in Dawson. She wrote querulous letters to her long-time friend, Yukon artist Jim Robb, whom she had taken care of in his early days like some lost son.

Peggy's room in the Gresham was dominated by a big bed and decorated with Asian pictures. A large Buddha sat atop the TV. Yukoner Iris Warner visited Peggy there once. Peggy offered her a seat and an ancient bottle of O'Keefe's Extra Old Style beer from under the bed. "We had a nice visit, an hour or more," Warner says. "She seemed to want me to do something for her, but I don't think she ever came out with it. She asked about Dawson and the house and so on, but nothing more. I asked if she was ill and she said she was just old and more comfortable in bed."

*Bill and Fran
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A couple of years later another Dawsonite, Beryl Zaykowski, was on a flight home and found herself sitting beside a young university student from British Columbia. She peppered Beryl with questions about Dawson's history and asked if she'd known Peggy. The girl had befriended Peggy as a hospital volunteer. She told Beryl that Peggy had been very ill and had died in hospital. "She turned to me, pointed to a box at her feet and said 'That's Peggy's ashes'," Zaykowski wrote in a letter to Wendy Cairns and Kim Bouzane.

Zaykowski directed the girl to the MacDonald Lodge, where several old-timers who had known Peggy lived. She heard later that the girl and Dawsonites Sox Troberg, former RCMP Jimmy Mellor and Father "Bob" Bobillier shared a bottle and scattered Peg's ashes in the Pioneer Cemetery. The matron of the old folks home had to go looking for Jimmy and Sox. A fine send-off, but Peggy can't be found in that graveyard now. There's no tombstone for her, anyway.

Margaret Wallingham recalls the last time she saw Peggy, in front of the Gresham at Easter 1981, about a year before she died: "She was all dressed up in her hat, gloves and a nice olive green wool dress. She was off to her lawyer's for Easter dinner. I admired the dress. One month later she sent it to me." Peggy wouldn't be in Vancouver in spirit now, not with its mild climate, not even at the Gresham, whose fortunes have waxed and waned with the years, too.

At Bombay Peggy's Victorian Inn in Dawson City, Peggy Dorval's picture hangs over the bar on the pub side, like a benevolent forebear. In the picture she's wearing a man's white linen suit, and there are palm trees in the background. Nobody can say for sure where it was taken. There is no record of who was standing behind the camera.

Of Peggy now, there's just a collection of vignettes and stories, apocryphal or true. Maybe in the end, the real Peg was loosed from her moorings long ago, and like her Dawson cabin, she floated away, wholesale, down the muddy Yukon River. **B**

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