'Rash and jealous lover'

Murder in the house at the corner of State, Canal streets

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PHOTO PROVIDED
Illustration by Kate Anderson Illustration, abstracted from various newspapers of the time.

As far back as one can research the written history of Williamsport, stories of enterprising women becoming successful business owners can be found. The women in this story though, found that the law was not appreciative of certain endeavors. I am talking about the "bawdy houses" of Williamsport. They were peppered around the city, but the most infamous houses were near Front Street and in Swampoodle (an eastern part of the city that could easily provide enough fascinating stories for another article), and one especially renowned house on East Canal Street. This is the story of the women of 40 East Canal St.

Mame Irvin began making news regarding her boarding house, a half double at the corner of State and Canal streets, around 1901. Today it is St Mark's Lutheran Church's parking lot. The house was raided on several occasions. She was often fined and/or jailed, and at times banished from town, but she always returned. That is what made her house well-known, but it isn't what made it famous. That happened on Nov. 8, 1912.

The Violent Attack

The following is related from various local newspapers from the early 1900s.

Grace Stidfole, 19, lived at the Irvin Boarding House. On the night of Nov. 7, 1912, she met with frequent acquaintance, John Erble. The two spent that night at a house on Academy Street and were returning at 8:30am the next morning when an argument broke out between them. He wanted her to leave the boarding house and live with him. She didn't want to go. When they reached the Irvin Boarding House, he pulled out a gun and shot her. The door to that half of the house was locked, so she ran across the hall and into the kitchen of Annie Klump and hid in the corner. He found Grace there and shot her twice more. She was still able to run back outside where she finally collapsed a few feet away on the railroad tracks. Erble reloaded his gun and slowly walked out of the house towards the river.

Grace did not die on those tracks. She was taken to the hospital where she told the police who shot her and why. An Officer Berry found Erble by the river bank a short while later and took him by trolley to a cell.

One of the bullets had entered Grace's lung and could not be removed. It was to be a fatal shot, but she hung on for more than four months, dying on March 20, 1913.

Erble's Punishment

Meanwhile, Erble had been kept in his cell the entire time so he could be charged for first degree murder upon her death. His defense lawyer, William Spencer, stated at trial that it should be second degree murder because Erble was "a crazy, drunkin rash and jealous lover" and besides, he had consumed a considerable amount of gin that morning. That defense didn't work and on Feb 3, 1914, he was the last man hanged in Lycoming County.

The House's Other Occupants

The day after the shooting, Mame Irvin was arrested once more for running the bawdy house where it all happened and four days later the house on Academy Street was raided and the keeper of that house, Mary Bowes, was arrested.

Edith Morton next ran the Canal street house until she got arrested in 1913. The housekeeper then took over and also got arrested and additionally was charged with the more serious crime of having an underage girl there.

And what of the other side of the house where Grace Stidfole was shot twice in the kitchen? That side also has a tale. Beginning in 1879, liquor was being sold there illegally by Henry Arnold, who also was arrested for keeping a bawdy house. He died in 1892 and his wife died just four months later. Their daughter and her husband moved in. One day her husband disappeared and his wife had to take in laundry and do "other odd jobs" to survive. A year later her husband's body was found washed up on the shores of the Susquehanna. She died just months later. Her sister Annie Klump, whose kitchen was the scene of the shooting, lived there next. Annie would also be arrested for having a bawdy house.

In this small corner of Williamsport, the women apparently co-operated. Their businesses weren't legal, but they were run well. They not only became successful at it, but they did so while having to pay fines and go to jail regularly. It wasn't as glamourous a profession as you see in old westerns, but it was lucrative, taken on sometimes out of desperation, and sometimes just because they enjoyed the wild lifestyle and the parties that went with it. These women are a part of Williamsport's history.