



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Actors point guns at each other in the Shamrock Card Room while simulating a standoff over a poker game during the Pendleton Underground Comes to Life recently in Pendleton.

History in action

The Pendleton Underground comes to life with the help of actors

By JADE MCDOWELL
East Oregonian

Melissa Hale played a lot of different parts during her high school theater days, but when she stepped back into acting last weekend it was for a more grown-up role.

Hale, who recently moved to Pendleton from San Diego, helped Pendleton's Underground Tours come to life by playing a working girl in the Cozy Rooms bordello.

"I had a blast doing it," she said.

The Underground Tours take visitors on a journey through the tunnels that during Pendleton's "wild West" days held card rooms, saloons, brothels, a butcher shop, a Chinese laundry and more. Once a year the tours take on a new dimension by adding 75 live actors.

Some of the actors have been returning participants for over a decade, but for Hale it was her first time getting dolled up like a 1930s prostitute.

"I researched the hair and make-up, to make sure I fit the part," she said. "The hair was more frizzy than today. The make-up was very bold — the red lipsticks and heavy eyeliner — so it was fun to mess around with."

The young women clad in corsets, pantaloons and fishnet stockings drew some "playful" joking from some of the older men that they might just skip the rest of the tour to stay there, Hale said, while others didn't seem to know where to look.

"I definitely saw some men



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Tour guide Holly Krokosz of Pendleton talks about the underground walkways while giving a tour of the Pendleton Underground.

trying not to stare," she said.

Hale and a friend of her sister's hung out in the Cozy Rooms' kitchen, passing out fresh-baked cookies to guests. They had a loose script of facts to point out, from showing off the room's original glass tiles to discussing the rise of Tollhouse cookies, but also got to do plenty of ad-libbing as they interacted with tourists.

Prostitution may carry a certain

stigma, but Hale said many of the women who resorted to working in Pendleton's brothels during the late 1800s and early 1900s had no family to live with, and there were few avenues available to single women back then to support themselves.

"It was just a way to earn a living," she said.

Women who worked for Cozy Rooms madam Stella Darby were

paid more than most working girls at the time, and Darby was famous for helping teach her girls to budget and save to enable them to escape the life as soon as possible.

Dana Grieb, who played Darby this year, said the madam was highly respected in Pendleton despite her line of work.

"She was a real business-woman," Grieb said. "She was very trusted because she was very frank.

"It takes tons of volunteers. It's fun. There are people you see every year when it comes back together."

— Tricia Mooney,

Hermiston volunteer who played a saloon girl this year

She was really trying to help the girls and not exploit them."

Darby even helped out the cowboys visiting her brothel by offering to hold onto a portion of their money for the duration of their visit to Pendleton so that they didn't drink and gamble it all away.

Grieb has been participating in the Underground Tours Comes To Life day for the past 10 years, as a can-can dancer in the saloon or a working girl. Tourists may flirt with those actresses, she said, but they took on a more serious and respectful attitude with her this year.

"I feel like I got a promotion," she said.

Grieb said hanging out with the other actors and interacting with tourists is always fun, but each room is a different experience. In earlier rooms the tourists are

See UNDERGROUND/4C



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Melissa Hale of Pendleton hands out cookies to guests while portraying a working girl in the Cozy Rooms bordello in Pendleton.



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Mark Odegaard of Hood River and Sharon Hull of The Dalles act out a scene in the Empire Meat Co. section of the Pendleton Underground Tours.