



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

A sign for Belle's Boudoir hangs in the lobby of the brothel that used to occupy the Oak Hotel in Pendleton.



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A phrase is still written in pencil on the madam's door in the old brothel of the Oak Hotel in Pendleton.

# Bringing a brothel back



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Parley Pearce stands in a room full of antique items he has collected from bars and brothels throughout the western United States.

## No prostitutes, but Pearce envisions a boutique hotel

By ANTONIO SIERRA  
East Oregonian

Being a former brothel isn't usually a selling point. But in the case of Pendleton's Oak Hotel, its owner is hoping its reputation precedes it.

Parley Pearce, the co-owner of the Hamley complex of restaurants and stores, wants to restore the Oak Hotel to its former glory — minus the illicit activity.

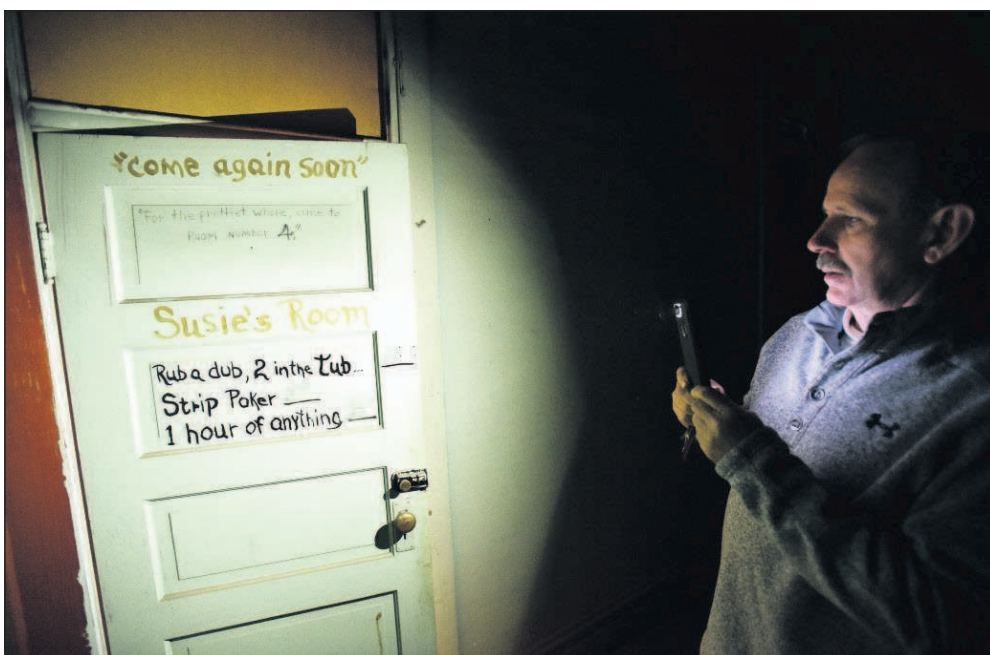
Located at 327 S.E. First St., the Oak Hotel is one of the few historic buildings that's completely unoccupied. The Pendleton Ship Shoppe, a shipping retailer, left shortly after Pearce purchased it several years ago and Zimmerman & Co. True Value Hardware recently moved their warehouse out from the ground floor of the two-story building.

Built around 1900, Pearce said the Oak Hotel began its life as a "worker's hotel," a place where a person could stay for 25 cents a night.

As the hospitality industry changed to favor fancier hotels, Pearce said many of these inns became flophouses for indigents and then brothels — as was the case for the Oak Hotel.

Prostitution was a staple at the Oak, thought not the only vice made available.

Pearce pointed to a trapdoor toward the back of the northern end of the building. He said the door led to a Prohibition-era whiskey bar,



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Parley Pearce holds up his cell phone to illuminate the back of a door on what used to be a prostitute's room in the Oak Hotel in Pendleton.

complete with gambling equipment and a connection to Pendleton's infamous underground tunnels.

While the northern section of the Oak Hotel is mostly suggestive, the southern part leaves nothing to the imagination.

Pearce's "R-rated" storage room features women in various states of undress in all sorts of mediums: paintings, carvings, photographs, posters and more. He amassed this collection of dozens of pieces of art by salvaging them from other historic buildings in Pendleton or from other historic



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

A trapdoor leading into the Pendleton Underground in a room on the first floor of the Oak Hotel in Pendleton.

towns across the country.

Among Pearce's collection, and one of the few pieces under a tarp, is a wooden bust of a naked woman, beer taps protruding from her breasts.

Given the decidedly non-family friendly nature of many of these pieces, Pearce is considering how to incorporate them into his vision of a restored Oak Hotel without offending the public.

Beyond Pearce's collection, the second floor is where the brothel is most clearly preserved. Up the "27 stairs to heaven" are the rooms where the brothel's business took place.

Scrawled on many of the doors are the poems of the "Rhyming Madam," a former madam who wrote dirty ditties to entice customers.

"Love will tire when it's always free, so bring your cash and come see me!" read one of the less salacious poems. Another door had the prices for the various services "Susie" would perform.

Pearce said the brothel operated until the 1960s, but eventually shut down.

The building is now mostly vacant, but a few living souls do occupy it.

Besides an occasional overnight stay by Pearce, Hamley saddle maker Hank Moss is the Oak's sole resident, although he has some suspicions that the sounds he hears at night are ghosts sharing the space.

"It'll make you get out of

bed and check the door," he said.

Whether there are ghosts or not, Pearce is interested in restoring the Oak Hotel with much of its historical character intact. Pearce's current plan would turn the Oak Hotel into a 25-room hotel, complete with a lobby and manager's quarters.

"It's going to be like something out of the Old West," he said.

Pearce said Hamley customers frequently ask if there's somewhere they could stay with a similar spirit to the Western store and restaurant. He wants to be able to provide and said he is willing to invest the estimated \$1 million to make it happen.

Pearce said he's "anxious" to start the project, but he's waiting until the situation surrounding one of the downtown area's other unoccupied buildings — old city hall — is sorted out. The Oak Hotel's neighbor to the north, an explosion badly damaged the building in 2015 and the Pendleton city government has the building's owners under tight deadlines to have it ready for occupation by the end of the year.

Until it's sorted out, the Oak Hotel will remain a well-preserved if inconspicuous reminder of a bygone era.

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