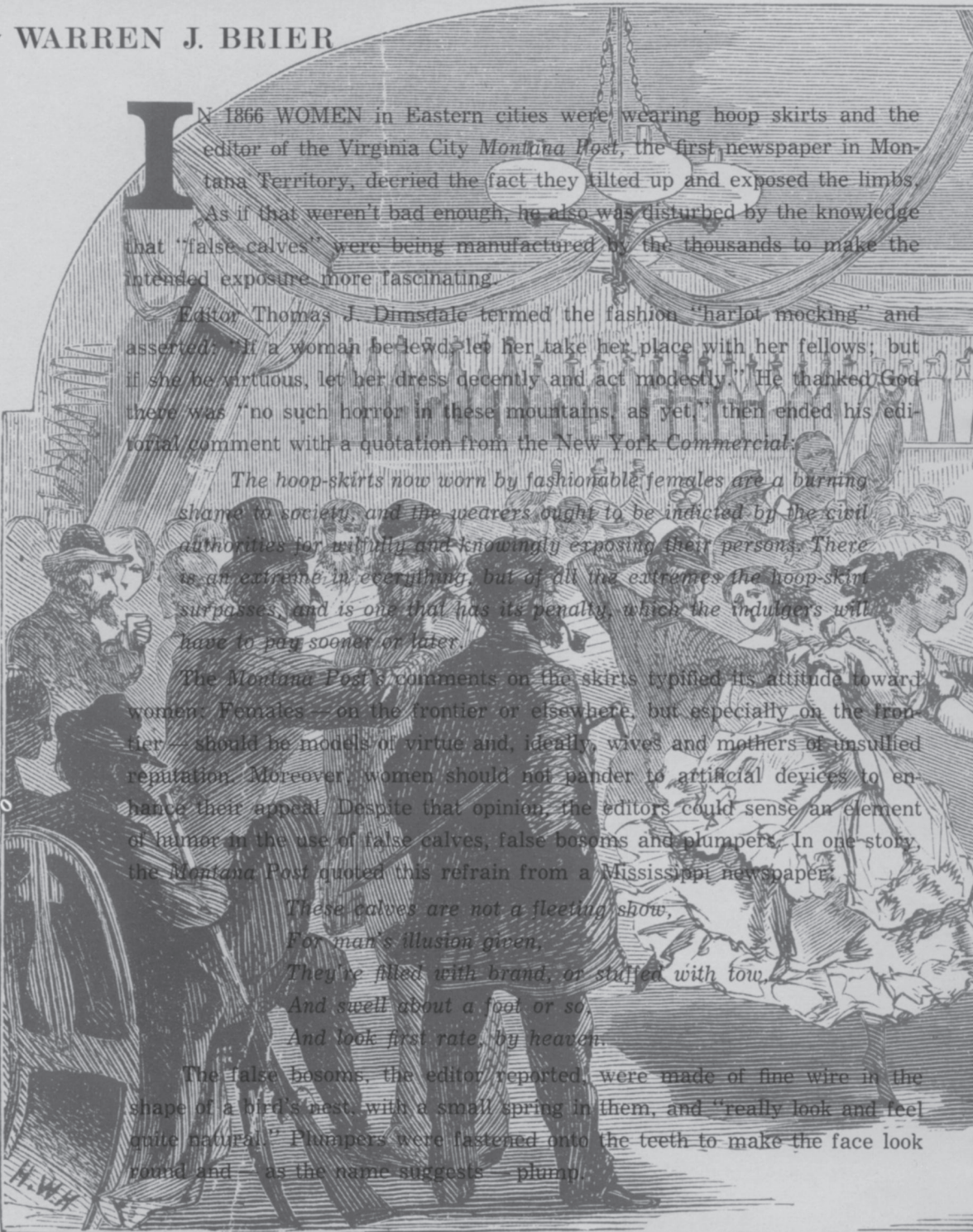


TILTING SKIRTS &

by WARREN J. BRIER



IN 1866 WOMEN in Eastern cities were wearing hoop skirts and the editor of the Virginia City *Montana Post*, the first newspaper in Montana Territory, decried the fact they tilted up and exposed the limbs. As if that weren't bad enough, he also was disturbed by the knowledge that "false calves" were being manufactured by the thousands to make the intended exposure more fascinating.

Editor Thomas J. Dimsdale termed the fashion "harlot mocking" and asserted: "If a woman be lewd, let her take her place with her fellows; but if she be virtuous, let her dress decently and act modestly." He thanked God there was "no such horror in these mountains, as yet," then ended his editorial comment with a quotation from the *New York Commercial*:

The hoop-skirts now worn by fashionable females are a burning shame to society, and the wearers ought to be indicted by the civil authorities for wilfully and knowingly exposing their persons. There is an extreme in everything, but of all the extremes the hoop-skirt surpasses, and is one that has its penalty, which the indulgers will have to pay sooner or later.

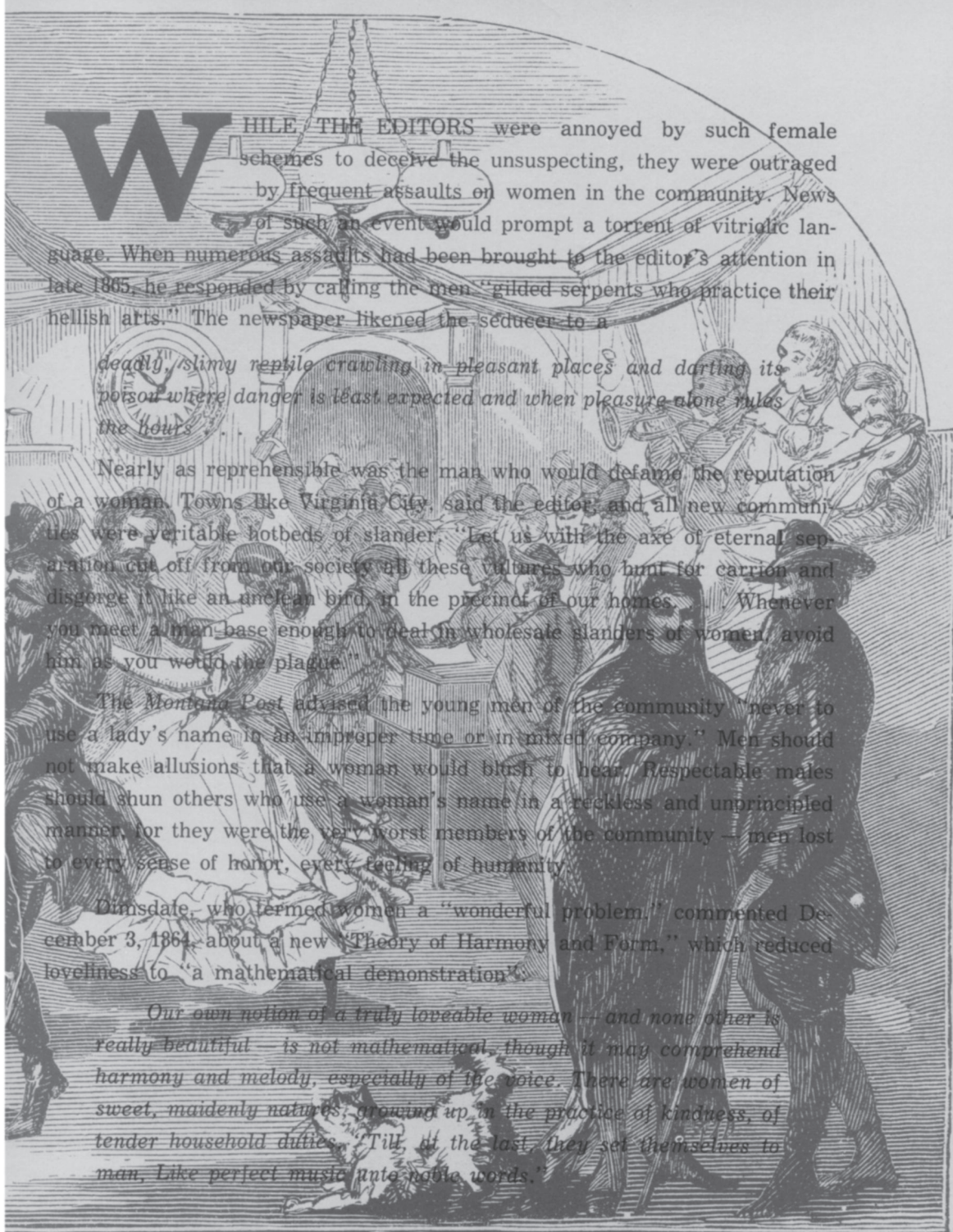
The *Montana Post*'s comments on the skirts typified its attitude toward women: Females — on the frontier or elsewhere, but especially on the frontier — should be models of virtue and, ideally, wives and mothers of unsullied reputation. Moreover, women should not pander to artificial devices to enhance their appeal. Despite that opinion, the editors could sense an element of humor in the use of false calves, false bosoms and plumpers. In one story, the *Montana Post* quoted this refrain from a Mississippi newspaper:

*These calves are not a fleeting show,
For man's illusion given,
They're filled with brand, or stuffed with tow,
And swell about a foot or so,
And look first rate, by heaven.*

The false bosoms, the editor reported, were made of fine wire in the shape of a bird's nest, with a small spring in them, and "really look and feel quite natural." Plumpers were fastened onto the teeth to make the face look round and — as the name suggests — plump.

A COMMENTARY ON

HURDY - GURDIES:



WHILE THE EDITORS were annoyed by such female schemes to deceive the unsuspecting, they were outraged by frequent assaults on women in the community. News of such an event would prompt a torrent of vitriolic language. When numerous assaults had been brought to the editor's attention in late 1865, he responded by calling the men "gilded serpents who practice their hellish arts." The newspaper likened the seducer to a

deadly, slimy reptile crawling in pleasant places and darting its poison where danger is least expected and when pleasure alone rules the hour.

Nearly as reprehensible was the man who would defame the reputation of a woman. Towns like Virginia City, said the editor, and all new communities were veritable hotbeds of slander. "Let us with the axe of eternal separation cut off from our society all these vultures who hunt for carrion and disgorge it like an unclean bird, in the precinct of our homes. . . . Whenever you meet a man base enough to deal in wholesale slanders of women, avoid him as you would the plague."

The *Montana Post* advised the young men of the community "never to use a lady's name in an improper time or in mixed company." Men should not make allusions that a woman would blush to hear. Respectable males should shun others who use a woman's name in a reckless and unprincipled manner, for they were the very worst members of the community — men lost to every sense of honor, every feeling of humanity.

Dimsdale, who termed women a "wonderful problem," commented December 3, 1864, about a new "Theory of Harmony and Form," which reduced loveliness to "a mathematical demonstration":

Our own notion of a truly loveable woman -- and none other is really beautiful -- is not mathematical, though it may comprehend harmony and melody, especially of the voice. There are women of sweet, maidenly natures, growing up in the practice of kindness, of tender household duties. 'Till, at the last, they set themselves to man, Like perfect music unto noble words.'

GOLD CAMP WOMEN

DIMSDALE'S VISION OF WOMEN seemed strangely out of place in the Virginia City of the mid-1860s, for the boom town had its share of hurdies and prostitutes. Indeed, one pioneer recalled years later that at one time the town's population totaled 12,000 but only 20 were women and most of them were trollops.

Jaded women, however, were of little concern to Dimsdale or subsequent editors of the *Montana Post*. Though the newspaper crusaded long and hard against the dancing hurdies, prostitution rarely was mentioned. By its very silence, the *Montana Post* seemed to imply that women of easy virtue were required in a wilderness community of lonesome miners. Occasionally, a brief story or announcement would refer to the town's prostitutes, such as a notice of a forthcoming Grand Fancy Dress Ball at the Shades Saloon, which would not admit "bummers or ladies of doubtful fame."

On January 28, 1865, a story under headline "Our Social Status" referred to early days in Virginia City when "lawless men and shameless women made night hideous with their unlawful revels and midnight orgies."

When local females were arrested, the incidents were reported in detail and the stories were sprinkled with admonitions. One woman, for example, appeared in Police Court on a charge of violating a city ordinance forbidding "the use of obscene, abusive or profane language calculated to provoke a break of the peace." The court was crowded as testimony of a mirth-provoking nature was given. The defendant's lawyer offered an "able and, at times, highly amusing" argument, but his client was ordered to pay \$20 and costs. She didn't have that much money, so she went to jail. The editor said: "Verily the tongue is an unruly member." The defendant's name was not mentioned.

Three months later, under a heading "Beauty in Distress," the *Montana Post* told about a Cyprian woman who aroused attention by screaming "Murder, Murder." The editor heard the cry, rushed out and learned that the woman allegedly had been beaten by a neighbor of the same sex. Here is part of the lively account:

The attitude of the outraged one was entirely unaffected. Her dress was not much heavier than that of a Sioux princess, when bathing, and she was surrounded by an atmosphere pungently suggestive of the evaporation of the Hiberian "Elixir vitae." Bodily injury not being perceptible, we retired; the crowd indulging in an unlimited use of the privelege [sic] of free speech. The police judge might well harrow the roots of his hair, when pondering over the testimony.



AS THE MONTHS PASSED, scores — then hundreds — of Dimsdale's virtuous ladies arrived in Montana, knowing the disproportionate ratio of men to women increased their chances for marriage. Indeed, Dimsdale had written that Montana easily could accommodate 3,000 to 4,000 women and "be much the richer for the venture."

The first marriage story appeared in the second issue of the *Montana Post*. It told about the ceremony joining Andrew O'Donnell and Miss Elizabeth H. Turin and ended with this advice: "Sensible people, take notice — boys it is going to be a cold winter." That editorial comment set a pattern for wedding stories, which usually included a flash of wit:

WARNING TO BACHELORS. — Our friend Joe Tagart has committed matrimony. We recommend him to plead a justification which we are sure a jury of his townsmen would accept. May the GATES upon which he has so ardently gazed prove, to him, the portal of bliss.

MARRIED. — Mr. Levi Hubbard to Miss Ruth A. Delno. The above notice was accompanied with the compliments of the happy couple, in the shape of a beautiful cake. We don't like to see any of our friends depart from the ranks of single blessedness, but as it can't be helped now, we wish friend Levi and his fair mate happiness and prosperity through life.

When David Pattee of Missoula Falls was wed to Miss Emma Harris of the Bitterroot Valley, the newspaper said:

Sic transit mountainous — another gone. Alas! how fast they are passing away. He was considered to have become a confirmed old bachelor; but, "there is a destiny that shapes our ends, rough hew them as we will." He has met his destiny nobly; and we have the agreeable satisfaction of knowing that he has sacrificed himself to a most amiable and deserving young lady.

Marriages of white men with Indians also were recorded, often sarcastically. In one issue, the editor noted the marriages of several white men to Indian maidens with names such as Miss Old Chamber, Miss One-don't-listen-to, Miss Star Robe, Miss Weasel-Horse, Miss Calf-Shirt and Miss Bear, then commented:

It is a pity, in a national point of view, that a want of congeniality of sentiment alone prevents the indissoluble union of Miss-Ouri and Massa-Chusetts, Missis-Sippi and Con-Necticut.



JOURNALISM THEN, as now, was not an exact science, and the *Montana Post* occasionally erred in reporting society news. For example, it admitted in one issue that it mistakenly wed Mrs. Durgan to Mr. Patton. With the heading "A Trifling Error," the newspaper went on to say:

We have often attended the sick and sometimes buried the dead, but we never had the honor of tying the knot. We unconsciously made an effort in that direction some time since, but the result is not encouraging. The lady repudiates the ceremony as imaginary, and is still in thought, in heart, in fancy — free. We implore forgiveness. It was the fire that threw a false light on the affair. We have sinned editorially and typographically, which we will strive not to do again.

The editors scanned exchange newspapers for marriage items and frequently reprinted sentences or stories in which the writer's syntax was less than perfect:

The editor of the Weston (Mo.) TIMES makes the following announcement to his readers: "Hereafter we will not publish marriage notices for nothing, but will be happy at any time to announce the death of our friends."

Marriages that failed provided the *Montana Post* with paid notices such as this:

I hereby notify the Public that I will not be responsible for any debts hereafter contracted by my wife, ESTHER BARTHOLMEW, she having left my bed and board without any cause whatever.

CHARLES BARTHOLMEW

In one issue, the editor said he had been handed a dollar in greenbacks to reprint an advertisement from the *New York Herald*. It read:

*On the 26th of June, on the night of Monday,
Eloped from her husband, the wife of John Grundy;
His grief for her absence each day growing deeper,
Should anyone find her, he begs them to—keep her.*

The *Montana Post* often was explicit about the attributes of a good wife. Above all, she must be well-educated. She must have a thorough, practical knowledge of house-wifery, for a "gay, indolent, ignorant, loose-ended novice is as great a curse as a good wife is a blessing."



WHILE AN INTELLIGENT, resourceful wife was to be cherished, the dance hall women and their places of work — the hurdy-gurdy houses — were held in contempt by the editors for two reasons: the hurdies and their employers took the miners' hard-earned gold and many evenings at hurdy-gurdy houses included brawls.

In his serialized *The Vigilantes of Montana*, which later became the first book published in the Territory, Dimsdale offered a detailed description of the houses and the employees. "Let the reader picture to himself," he began, "a large room, furnished with a bar at one end — where champagne at \$12 (in gold) per bottle, and 'drinks' at twenty-five to fifty cents are wholesaled (correctly speaking) — and divided, at the end of this bar, by a railing running from side to side."

He told how the outer enclosure was crowded with men of diverse garb and how beyond sat the dancing women

sometimes dressed in uniform, but more generally habited according to the dictates of individual caprice, in the finest clothes money can buy, and which are fashioned in the most attractive styles that fancy can suggest. On one side is a raised orchestra. The music suddenly strikes up, and the summons, "Take your partners for the next dance," is promptly answered by some of the male spectators, who, paying a dollar in gold for a ticket, approach the ladies' bench and — in style polite, or otherwise, according to antecedents — invite one of the ladies to dance.

He then described what he termed a first-class dancer as being of middle height and rather full and rounded form. Her complexion was pure as alabaster. Her hazel eyes were dangerous looking. She had a slightly Roman nose and a small, prettily formed mouth. And:

Her auburn hair is neatly banded and gathered in a tasteful, ornamented net, with a roll and gold tassels at the side. How sedate she looks during the first figure, never smiling till the termination of "promenade, eight," when she shows her little white hands in fixing her handsome brooch in its place, and settling her glistening earrings. See how nicely her scarlet dress, with its broad black band round the skirt and its black edging, sets off her dainty figure. No wonder that a wild mountaineer would be willing to pay—not one dollar, but all that he has in his purse — for a dance and an approving smile from so beautiful a woman.



Moreover, the hurdis had been imported from “almost every dancing nation of white folks.” Though they all were superb dancers, some — Dimsdale later admitted — were “the reverse of good looking.”

What bothered Dimsdale was the fact the hurdis earned modest fortunes at the expense of the miners. It was not uncommon to see a hurdy in clothes that cost from \$700 to \$800. Many were known to have invested gold worth thousands of dollars. Dimsdale said men lavished cash rewards and presents on the dancers; thus, they were able to earn more in one week than a well-educated woman could earn in an Eastern city in two years.

While appalled because the miners spent their earnings in the houses, Dimsdale was chagrined at what happened when the patrons had drunk too much. Most of the men, he said, wore a U.S. belt from which hung a loaded revolver and a sheath knife. The combination of dancing women, liquor and weapons created an explosive milieu and explode it often did. “As might be anticipated, it is impossible to prevent quarrels in these places,” Dimsdale said, “and in the mountains, whatever weapon is handiest — foot, fist, knife, revolver, or derringer — it is instantly used.”

Respected townsmen — including judges and legislators — patronized the dance houses. Dimsdale noted that the pastor, standing at the door but never entering, would “lecture on the evil of such places with considerable force; but his attention is evidently more fixed upon the dancers than on his lecture.” And gray-haired men participated gaily in the terpsichorean activities, while their wives — in blissful ignorance — sat at home.



THE FIRST MENTION of the houses appeared in the October 15, 1864, *Montana Post*, and the subject rarely was excluded from issues published in the next two years. Significantly, the first mention was in no way critical. The editor merely said the hurdy-gurdies “were all the go.”

On November 12, he referred to them as places of “nocturnal amusement.” Then on November 26 appeared the first evidence — mild as it was — of a forthcoming editorial crusade against the houses: A “lyceum . . . will be established, where the long winter evenings may be profitably and pleasantly spent by the young men in place of making the rounds of the many dance houses now nightly crowded by all.”

On December 3, the editor said seven-eighths of the able-bodied males of the community could be found in the hurdy-gurdies after nightfall, “marriage and gray hairs to the contrary notwithstanding.” That issue also pointed out, under the heading “Juvenile Jailbirds,” that many boys were frequenting the “dancing resorts with which our city is cursed.”

A significant two-sentence item appeared December 17 on page three: “Hurdy gurdy houses in Oregon must pay a tax of \$100 per month. Bad climate for such institutions.” The Territorial Governor, Sidney Edgerton, may have read that notice, because in his message to the first Montana Legislature he suggested that the burden of taxation should fall on superfluities, adding:

In Oregon the dance houses have to pay a license of \$100 per month. Why not in Virginia City? Let those who want to dance pirouette at will, but, until some other less necessary subject for taxation be found, let the Hurdy-Gurdy houses pay their quota, and all other like places also.

That statement seemed to mark the official start of an aggressive, continued editorial crusade by the *Montana Post* — a crusade that used every known device to depict what the editors considered the enormous immorality of the hurdy-gurdies.

The newspaper argued for a municipal ordinance regulating the houses — more specifically, a law that would license the establishments. One editorial said, “The abatement of nuisances will be much needed, and the stringent regulation of all houses of public entertainment or amusement cannot be deferred.”

Official action was taken quickly, for voters passed, on February 16, 1865, a city ordinance licensing hurdy-gurdy houses. A license cost \$400 a year; the fine for running a house without a license was \$50 to \$100. Despite later efforts to repeal city laws, the hurdy-gurdy license remained in effect and subsequently contributed in large measure to the decline of the houses.

The *Montana Post* never missed an opportunity to report melees, gun fights and other degrading or unusual activities in the houses. One story, for instance, described a shoot-out in a house called the “Something New.” The two combatants each fired six times. One man was hit twice in the chest, the other once in each arm.

The cause of the fight? A woman “as is so often the case.” The story ended with these words, including the question mark: “After they had done shooting, the ladies (?) returned, having fled during the firing, and the dance went on.”

On November 25, 1865, the newspaper told about a patron who sprinkled one of the hurdy-gurdy floors with snuff or cayenne pepper — or both. “The girls stamped and the boys stampeded. Stamping and snuffing, sneezing and swearing, were momentarily the order. The perpetrator very considerably escaped the wrath of male and female by leading the stampede and ‘keeping very dark’.”



INCIDENTS IN hurdy-gurdy houses in other communities also were reported. In Helena, for example, a new dancer at the Gayety Saloon stepped out the back door and dropped 10 feet onto rocks “unfitting herself for business for a short time.”

On rare occasions, when the editor commented favorably about a dance house, he invariably followed the compliment with criticism. On September 5, 1866, the People’s Theatre in Virginia City offered the final presentation by a touring husband and wife team named “The Irwins.” The hurdies had been unable to attend the show, because they worked at night. But at least one dance house closed on that final night so the girls could attend the theater, evoking this comment in the newspaper: “We are glad to see even the spirit of generosity made manifest by the actions of the dancehouse proprietors. It is time, however, that they were exhibiting *some* commendable traits of character.”

In the final months of its crusade, the newspaper’s criticism centered on a Jackson Street establishment identified only as “the dance house.” Included in the crusade were letters to the editor such as this one:

EDITOR POST: — Why don’t you pitch into that infernal nuisance on Jackson Street, called by some a dance house? I live a few doors from it, and nearly every night my rest is broken by the shouts of drunken prostitutes and their partners. Sometimes the tumult lasts until morning, and it is high time that this sink of infamy was removed. Fights are always occurring and the dancers utter, hour after hour, the most profane and obscene remarks. Many fools throw away their money here, and we shall be obliged to support them the coming winter. Why don’t the mayor or the police suppress the nuisance? If the contemptible sum or license, which they pay, excuses their misdeeds, I and my unfortunate neighbors will agree to make up to the city what would be lost if the vile place was cleaned out. Show up the miserable wretch who runs the machine and denounce those that patronize his bar or musicians.

A day or two ago, the mayor notified a woman of doubtful reputation to vacate a house which she bought, because a gentleman in this city complained. Why can’t he use his power in this case, and gratify the wishes of many other families? Follow up this matter until the nuisance is abated.

Yours in distress, SUBSCRIBER

That same week, a customer in the Jackson Street house accused a hurdy named Ranche Belle of stealing three silver half dollars. The man, who was not identified, reportedly “shed tears freely to affect the heart of the



magistrate.” But further testimony was postponed, and the patron eventually paid the court costs and let Ranche Belle keep the half dollars. Observed the *Montana Post*, “The fool and his money are soon parted.”

Ranche Belle was in the news again the following month. This time she was fined \$5 and costs for “using indelicate and disgusting language.”

On December 22, 1866, the newspaper’s crusade against the hurdy-gurdies ended with this comment: “There is no hurdy-gurdy house in this city. This is a remarkable fact in its history.”

THE GENERAL SUBJECT of women, however, was accorded considerable space in the newspaper throughout its five years. In April, 1869, editor James B. Mills noted wryly that a young Montana woman had been charged with putting on airs when she refused to go to a ball barefooted. He said: “The effete corn propellor who dragged his pontoons around till that thought struck him merits the punishment of a Bunyan.”

In its final issue, the *Montana Post* — then in Helena — carried a brief paragraph mentioning the appointment of an “editress” of the Home Department of the *Colorado Transcript*. Mills said:

If Goldrick, Hall, Thomas or some of the bachelor barnacles of society down below the first bar on the Western gridiron don't see that spinster is duly, speedily and happily provided with some better occupation than providing inanimate “copy,” they are totally depraved and incorrigible and should be compelled to show cause why they should not be immediately put to death.



WARREN J. BRIER, professor and dean of the School of Journalism at the University of Montana, holds three degrees in journalism: B.A. from the University of Washington in 1953, M.A. from Columbia in 1954 and the Ph.D. from the University of Iowa in 1957. He has had extensive newspaper experience, working as a reporter on the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, a copyreader on the *Seattle Times* and a newsman for the Associated Press in the Seattle, Los Angeles and Helena bureaus. The son of a University of Washington journalism professor, Dr. Brier chose to follow his father's academic career. He taught journalism at San Diego State College and the University of Southern California before joining the University of Montana faculty in 1962. Dean Brier, known as the “history buff” at the journalism school, edits the *Montana Journalism Review* and is adviser to the Montana Interscholastic Editorial Association, a state organization of high school journalists and journalism advisers. Two books by Dr. Brier appeared this year: *The Frightful Punishment*, published by the University of Montana Press, describes the six “great glove fights” in pioneer Montana, and *Writing for Newspapers and News Services*, published by Funk & Wagnalls and written with Howard C. Heyn. Articles by Dean Brier have appeared in *The Writer*, *National Observer*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *Journalism Quarterly*, *Editor & Publisher*, *Pacific Historical Review*, *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, *Frontier Times* and other publications.