

THE THREE SIRENS OF PORTLAND

BY STEWART H. HOLBROOK

NONE of the three was particularly fair to look upon, yet they came to be called the Three Sirens and doubtless earned the title at their respective places of business in the Oregon city of Portland. Customers and police knew them as Liverpool Liz, Mary Cook and Nancy Boggs; and on occasion they were called by other names, though they seemed not to mind.

Of the trio Liz, who was born Elizabeth Smith in Liverpool, England, about 1850, was the best business woman. Nancy Boggs, an American, was the toughest. Mary Cook was unique in that she did her own bouncing — this in a day when bouncing was no genteel matter.

The time was from the late 1870s until a little after 1900. Portland was already old, as age goes in the Far West, but it was easily the liveliest port on the Northwest coast. Grain came here in a flood from the inland counties for shipment to the world. Eighteen big sawmills along the waterfront whined and clattered night and day. Windjammers were always in the harbor waiting to pick up cargo, while their crews cavorted on shore. Loggers arrived in droves to have their dental work done. It was a rich claim for any progressive busi-

ness woman to work. The Three Sirens were progressive and they were hard workers.

Where Mary Cook was born or even where she died is regrettably not known. But she was, certainly, an able and hardy character, a beehemoth of a girl weighing more than two hundred pounds and standing, in her red morocco slippers, a full six feet. She had a consuming urge to be dainty, and veterans of the time and place tell me she was indeed graceful, except perhaps when she was throwing around the crockery and bar glasses.

Mary's establishment was named the Ivy Green, and though a few disgruntled customers said a prefix, namely "Poison," should be added, it was no worse than any combination saloon-brothel, and perhaps considerably better. The Ivy Green catered to sailors and lumberjacks, but it was not exclusive, and most any male with a few dollars was tolerated.

Mary was an excellent greeter. She liked to stand just inside the swinging doors, and smoke big, black cigars while she welcomed the boys. As a blower of smoke-rings she had no equal, male or female, and if you held out a forefinger toward her, she would blow three neat rings around

it, for good luck. If urged, Mary put on her Scotchman-smoking act. She'd blow a single ring, let it drift some three or four feet away, then go after it with her mouth wide open, and swallow it. This amused the customers no end and Mary never tired of it.

Although Mary was good-natured, even jolly, she was a stickler for keeping what she said was good order in the Ivy Green. I should like to have been in her establishment on that gorgeous evening in 1896 when Mary took in hand a celebrated local character by name of John P. Sullivan. This fellow was a part-time logger and a part-time fighter who claimed to be a nephew of the great Boston Strong Boy. He came into Mary's place one night and took on a few. When the bar was well filled he announced himself. "I can," he said, "lick any son of a bitch in the place."

Nobody said anything. Mary herself had just blown a neat ring, but now she let it drift. All was quiet for a moment. John P. Sullivan glared at the crowd. "I can," he repeated in a loud voice, "lick any son of a bitch in the place."

Now Mary Cook spoke. "Does that apply to women too?" The voice was soprano, rather musical, but anybody short of a drunk could have detected an edge to it.

"I am talking about anybody — man, woman or devil," said John P. Sullivan, large as life.

Veterans among the barflies watched with anticipation approaching agony as Mary threw away her half-smoked

cheroot. She dusted her hands a bit, then ambled toward the great John P. Sullivan like a monstrous female moose. A friend of mine, the late Edward (Spider) Johnson, was among those present. "This Sullivan," he told me, "claimed to have wrestled with a shorthorn bull and to have broken the animal's neck. But the poor man — he did not know what was coming now."

John P. stood his ground as Mary approached, planning no doubt to slap the woman's face should she be so foolish as to attack him.

Walking up close to the big fighting-man Mary put her face near his. "Listen," she said, and her voice was like unto jasper, "listen, you mug, have I gotta make an example of you?"

John P. Sullivan started to say something, what no one ever will know, for at that instant the cyclone that was Mary Cook struck him. She grabbed him by his two prominent ears and twirled him around like a top. Next, she applied one heavy hand to Sullivan's coat collar, the other to the seat of his pants. She picked him up bodily from the floor. She turned and heaved, and John P. flew almost the length of the room, hitting the floor just short of the swinging doors.

"Not so good," Mary remarked with a deep sigh. With four long strides she was standing over the fallen man. Again she applied the Ivy Green hold, only this time she picked him up and held him aloft, as if offer-

ing a supplication. "Open the doors, some of you dingbats," she commanded. Wide swung the doors, and then with a truly mighty heave Mary sent John P. Sullivan skidding along the sidewalk, a thing composed of two-inch Douglas fir and abristle with long splinters caused by the calked boots of hundreds of loggers. I have heard that no less than three hundred pieces of wood were extracted from the rear and flanks of John P. Sullivan, who never again made unseemly remarks in the Ivy Green.

"I hated to do it," Mary moaned, in reference to the incident, "I hated to do it, but I just gotta keep my refectory a decent place for gentlemen."

II

Liverpool Liz was no amazon, but she was husky enough for her height, which was about five feet two inches. She was well known for the necklace she wore upon almost all occasions. It was a rugged hunk of jewelry, so large and heavy that nobody ever thought of it as a bauble; and at the end of the enormous golden links hung a cluster of great diamonds. Her limey accent was rich and heavy, and she was a favorite with seamen, the majority of whom in that era were British.

Liz called her place the Senate saloon. The street-level part was actually a saloon. Upstairs she kept her stable of female entertainers, whose number varied according to conditions in the harbor and in the logging

woods. At the back end of the bar were a couple of steps that led up to a small platform. In the ceiling was a hole. When drinks were wanted upstairs, the order would be shouted down, and one of the barkeeps would mix the order and hand the drinks up through the aperture. Why Liz, who was progressive in other respects, never installed a dumbwaiter is beyond knowing. Bartenders disliked the system and complained, but it was never changed.

There was, however, a modern bell system at the bar which Liz found useful on occasion. Say that a customer came in, feeling happy, and saw there were only four or five men at the bar. He'd tell the barkeep to set 'em up for everybody. "Yes sir," the barkeep would reply, meanwhile pressing a button that rang a buzzer upstairs. Within a few seconds anywhere from six to a dozen girls, often with escorts, would troop down the back stairs and into the barroom, laughing, shouting for drinks, including champagne, which Liz kept especially for the gag. The poor sucker who had originally figured that "drinks for everybody" would run to not more than a dollar, thus found himself paying anywhere from five to twenty-five dollars. Liz said that it helped to pay the rent.

Yet Liverpool Liz was a pretty decent sort, and probably more honest than her customers had a right to expect. She never, it is said, permitted a drunk to be rolled in her place, upstairs or down. She had an enor-

mous safe — with an oil painting of Niagara Falls on the outside door — in which she kept the cash and valuables of her customers. This wasn't a racket. The logger or seaman who was overburdened with money and who hoped to make it last for a week or two, turned over such surplus as he wished to Liz. She put it in a manila envelope, sealed it and wrote the man's name on the cover. It was then put into the safe. Even if her place did get most of it in the end, the customer was grateful. He had not been rolled, and the system, moreover, did tend to make his stake last longer. Hundreds of loggers and seamen went away to tout the honesty of Liverpool Liz, and to return to her place when opportunity offered.

Although the record is far from clear, talk has it that Liz was married two or three times. If so, none of them could have lasted, for she appears to have run her place pretty much with a lone hand. One of her noted bouncers was a character called Tattoo Kelly. He had blue and red eagles tattooed all over his body and had once been an inmate of a side-show. He had also been a sailor, an English sailor; and had done a little fighting. He got enough of the latter in the Senate saloon to keep him in trim; but eventually he murdered a man and was sent to the penitentiary.

If Liz had been content with her Senate she might have died a wealthy old harlot. But when the bicycle craze came along somebody talked her into buying a piece of suburban

property and making it into a bicycle track, which she called Evergreen park. Right in the middle of her property she set up a saloon. This was probably an error of judgment, for parents of young cyclists did not approve of saloons in conjunction with playgrounds. Then the bicycle craze passed, and Liz was left holding property into which she had put much of her savings.

Finally, the Senate, on which her small fortune was founded, began to know days and nights when scarcely a seaman showed up for entertainment. The winged ships were passing, and the steam vessels carried fewer men into Portland.

And so at last the Senate closed its doors, and Liz herself died not long after, of pneumonia. She was given decent Christian burial in Portland's Lone Fir cemetery, in a grave not far from that of Jim Turk, who had made a business of shanghaiing men, and who had often coordinated his activities with those of Liverpool Liz and Nancy Boggs.

III

It was said of Nancy Boggs that she invented the whisky-scow. This is probably a debatable subject, in which I am not especially interested, but it is a fact that in 1880 Miss Boggs was the owner and proprietor of a floating hellhole that was anchored in the Willamette river, which is Portland's harbor. At that time there were two cities, Portland and East Portland, with the river between

them, each seeking to outdo the other. The lovely and alert Miss Boggs, learning that there was some doubt as to who should administer the law in the harbor, sought to make capital of the situation.

Dredging up sufficient cash to purchase an old sawdust scow, she had erected on its deck a two-story house. The lower section provided for the devotees of Bacchus and Terpsichore, the upper was devoted wholly to Venus. She painted it bright green and stationed it in the middle of the river. In the meantime she had stocked it with the best she could find of what came in bottles and corsets.

Miss Boggs' floating palace of sin was a success from the night it opened. On both east and west shores she stationed boatmen-pimps charged with seducing, then rowing customers to the middle of the stream, where Nancy and her girls took care of the rest. Now and then, some drunk would fall into the water, on occasion to drown; but on the whole the thing worked out very well. If the East Portland cops, in a moment of virtue, set out to raid the place, Miss Boggs, always forewarned, simply upped anchor and moved the scow nearer the Portland shore and thus into the jurisdiction of that city. It also worked in reverse order.

Then, in 1882, came one of those great moral waves that sweep over American cities every decade or so. Egged on by reformers, the police of both Portland and East Portland made a combined raid on the scow.

Do not for a moment believe Miss Boggs was not ready. She herself in person met the combined police forces with hose in hand, and out of the hose issued terrific blasts of steam straight from the scow's heating plant. Cursing and screaming like all the Harpies alive, Nancy poured live steam over the bluecoats, who got out of there quickly.

Returning to their respective stations, the policemen applied grease to their burns while their superiors considered what to do. Eventually they got an idea. Along in the dark of next morning, some unnamed policeman in a rowboat very quietly cut the manila ropes midway between deck and anchor, and Miss Boggs' scow started on a wild trip downstream. The river was high, just then, and filled with eddies and whirlpools. Miss Boggs was aroused to find her houseboat spinning slowly in mid-river, heading straight out toward the Pacific ocean.

A woman of decision and quick action, Miss Boggs first attempted to wake the one man on board. But he was still heavy in his cups. So, bidding her frightened girls be calm, Nancy lowered away a small rowboat, got into it, and rowed as for dear life to the shore at Albina, an East Portland suburb. There, with great speed, she awoke a stern-wheeler captain and talked him into immediate action. He roused his crew and, with Nancy aboard, they set out to get lines to the heaving scow. Then, with Nancy standing staunch and bold as a figure-

head at the head of her scow, it was towed back upstream and anchored at its accustomed and proper place in the middle of Portland harbor. I doubt that it was gone long enough to have lost a dollar in trade.

Miss Boggs continued in business until conditions warranted a move to dry land, and even there she did very well, it is said, but with less gusto than in her scow days.

The Burnside Street bridge across the Willamette bears a marker telling

how the Messrs. Lewis & Clark, explorers, reached that point in their voyage up the Willamette. I think a small footnote could well grace the plaque. It would relate that here was anchored for several years what was doubtless the first whisky scow in all the Far West, operated for the refreshment of travelers and the benefit of Miss Nancy Boggs, able mariner and a notable grower of fine roses in the city whose slogan is: "For you a rose in Portland grows."

SONG FOR A MORNING DANCE

BY CHARLES ANGOFF

The earth spins,
Then stops and glides
From soft memory
To fierce eternity.

Chaos vanishes.
Infinity hops from
Breast to breast,
And every heartbreak
Bursts into
Mad oblivion.

Divine unreason
Corrodes all hope.
But woman's
Heaving smile
Echoes the early sun:
"All dreams
Are true and warm.
Spurn all thinking,
Love has no ending."