

Features

Whorehouse-motel now legal

FBI agent flashes his badge

United Press International
KILGORE — It is doubtful a hit Broadway play will be written about the Pines Motel. Kilgore likely will remain known as the birthplace of a man who defied the law in the tough East Texas oilfields.

Nonetheless, the Pines Motel — which undoubtedly was the best lit whorehouse in Kilgore — deserves a mention.

It was the source of many a good time for oilfield workers and youths. The Pines also turned out to be a prime source of income for a few public officials, and that is what caused its downfall.

The motel still operates on U.S. 29. But "Pines Motel" has been painted over and it is now the Oil Patch Motel. For your money, (\$10.50 a night), all you get is a room — free ice located down the breezeway.

No more than four girls ever worked the Pines, but only the most naive in East Texas didn't know about the goings-on there. It was not unlike the fabled Chicken Ranch in Grange, the basis for the musical "The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas."

Now that the Pines is gone, residents talk and joke about it among themselves. But when an outsider makes inquiries, small-town clannishness takes over and it's as if prostitution had never been invented, — which less thrived — in Kilgore.

Especially unknowing about the Pines sordid past was the man running the Oil Patch. The clerk at the Pines' liquor store wouldn't say a word about the Pines. Nor would the man at Lacy's Garage. The girl behind the counter at the fast food store washed and said she hadn't been living in Kilgore very long.

"Of course, I don't know a thing about it," said the attendant at the gasoline station in nearby Henderson. "I don't know anything about any of those kind of places. I work seven days a week."

A record store clerk refused to give his name but was more candid than most — not to mention candid — about his attitude toward the whole business.

"Never been there but once and I don't really know who all went there," he said. "I think the people

in Kilgore were kind of disappointed when it closed.

"It was a place you could go on weekends. I guess they'll have to open up another, but there's still a couple more they need to get closed."

The good times ended for the Pines Motel in a series of indictments from a federal grand jury investigating prostitution, gambling and corruption in Gregg County. A number of officials were charged with felonies and several resignations followed.

Gregg County Sheriff Tom Welch was convicted of trying to arrange the murder of three men, including a former sheriff's dispatcher who robbed the Pines and is now serving a life sentence for capital murder. One prostitute was killed and another wounded in the 1974 holdup.

King Russell, a former justice of the peace, and Dwight Watson, an ex-constable, were accused of taking bribes from the operators of the Pines but pleaded guilty to lesser or unrelated charges.

The most recent convictions came in early January when Perry Russell Tunnell, owner of the Pines, and portly Odessa Mae "Mildred" French, the lady of the house, were found guilty of racketeering — bribing public officials to ensure the money kept rolling in. They could be sentenced to 10 years in prison and fined \$20,000.

The testimony in the trials was as rollicking as payday night at the Pines. Prostitutes told of having sex with Tunnell, Russell and Watson at French's orders and how an envelope was stuffed with \$1,200 monthly for Watson.

Referring to testimony about two 14-year-old boys patronizing the motel, U.S. Attorney John Hannah Jr. almost went so far as to apologize to the jurors for "splattering you and this courtroom with sordid stories of selling flesh."

Tunnell, 61, claimed whenever he heard his motel was a wide-open whorehouse, he threatened to close

it. When French sent hookers to the room he kept at the Pines for a "date," Tunnell compared it to being offered a free plate lunch.

"I never turned down a plate lunch either," he testified. "I didn't think they (the prostitutes) all loved me all that much but I wanted to think so."

Tunnell and French's court-appointed attorney, Dale Long, said the Pines wasn't allowed to operate because of bribery, but because of

favorable public sentiment in Kilgore, a tough oil town of 11,000.

"The community simply tolerated it," Long said in his closing argument.

Regardless of who was for or against prostitution at the Pines, it ended Jan. 17, 1979, when an FBI agent retired to a room with a hooker and showed her his badge.

An era had ended.

"It (the motel) grew up in the oil boom days some 35 years ago," said Assistant U.S. Attorney Chris Harrison. "According to testimony, prostitution was there since the beginning."

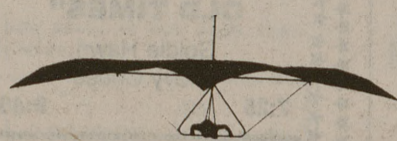
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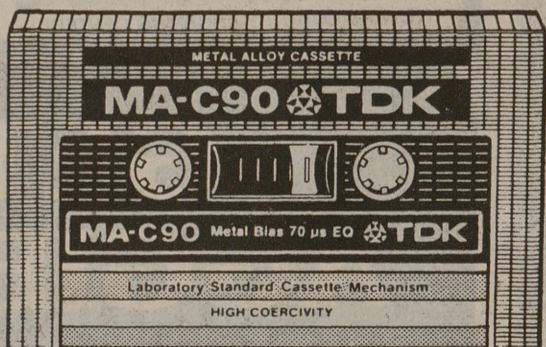
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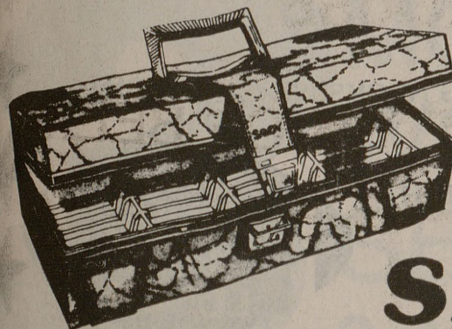


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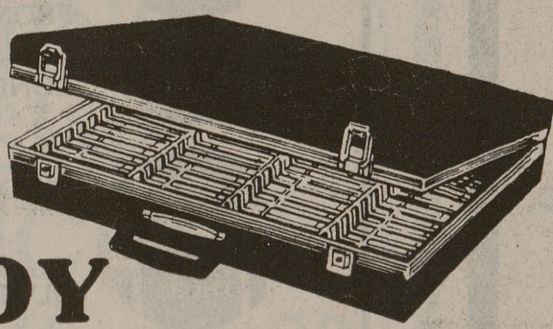
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