

Belle Dewey shaped Nampa's future

COMMUNITY: Developer says local pioneer's spirit and independence symbolize downtown area revitalization

By Lee Vander Boegh Idaho Press-Tribune

NAMPA — As downtown Nampa stirs to life, one developer hopes to rekindle the once bustling district to its former glory.

In that historic spirit, Laurel MacKinnon has chosen the name "The Belle District," in recognition of Belle Dewey, who along with her husband helped develop the city about a century ago.

"I'm just thrilled they're going to name it after her," said Wendy Miller, curator at the Canyon County Historical Museum. "She was a wonderful woman and I'm glad she's getting some of the recognition she deserves."

Details of Belle's life are sketchy. There wasn't much written about her, which Miller said wasn't uncommon for women at the time.

"She's not even referred to until her husband's death in 1903," Miller said. "And even then it's only as 'Mrs. William Dewey.'"

Belle was born Isobel Hagan on Oct. 8, 1855, in Longford Country, Ireland. Her family immigrated to the United States and settled in San Francisco when she was 10. It was there that she met and married William H. Dewey — a miner from Silver City, Idaho — in 1875. He was 52; she wasn't yet 21.

The Deweys returned to the rough Idaho mining town and had their first child, William Cornelius — "Con" for short — in 1884. The couple's second child, Mariam, died in infancy before their daughter, Sarah Marie, was born in 1891.

Mr. Dewey was imprisoned for the fatal shooting of Henry Koenig in 1884. A retrial found him not guilty a year later, but the legal costs drove the Deweys \$40,000 into debt. Belle stood by him the entire time, sewing knee pads onto his pants while he crawled on his hands and knees looking for gold.

Within a few months, he found what was to become the Empire State Mine.

The Deweys extracted a half million dollars in gold from the mine and paid off their debts. They sold their mining interests and in 1896 purchased the mortgage note for the Nampa Town site Company, an investment that resulted in 2,000 town lots. They also built the Boise, Nampa and Owyhee Railway, which connected Nampa to Murphy, Idaho.

"She had to be a very strong woman to support her husband through all those ups and downs," Miller said.

The couple soon moved to Nampa and built the Dewey Palace Hotel — a \$250,000 endeavor — in 1900. William died in 1903, leaving Belle to manage much of the Nampa Town site.

"She managed a lot of the properties and built a lot of buildings and houses after he died," Miller said. "She really got involved in the early building up of Nampa."

Belle died June 28, 1918, in Nampa at the age of 62. Out of respect, many of Nampa's businesses closed during the funeral hours.

"That alone is a pretty good indicator of how important she was to the community," said Glenn Rummler, principal owner of Blam Designs, the company that helped research the Belle District concept.

MacKinnon, owner of The Mackinnon Group, thinks Belle's strong and independent spirit are symbolic of the revitalization efforts in Downtown Nampa.

"She was a woman of vision," she said. "Her past contributions to Nampa are embedded in the fiber of our community. Her story is inspiration for us as we work to revive our downtown into the unique and vibrant center that it once was."



This painting of Belle Dewey hangs in the Canyon County Historical Museum. Dewey and her husband, William, were instrumental in Nampa's development. A downtown project — not far from the museum — has been named the "Belle District" to recognize her contributions to the city. **IPT staff photo**