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Prostitute fared poorly in court

Some of Sedalia's prostitutes did appear as plaintiffs in civil suits, but were generally denied the protection that the law might have afforded a more-respectable woman. One such case involved inheritance.

On Feb. 25, 1899, J.F.C. Rennison, a 75-year old farmer from the Longwood area, married Nettie Stokes, a 29-year-old woman who was, according to his family, "living a life of shame."

The couple settled at Rennison's farm home.

On Aug. 13, Rennison died without a will, leaving an estate that included 178 acres valued at \$15,000, approximately \$84 per acre, or approximately \$1,848 per acre in today's dollars. He also left personal property worth \$2,500 (\$55,000 in today's dollars), according to Nettie Rennison.

Under the law, a widow was entitled to a dower portion of the estate, which included one-third of the real estate, up to \$200 (\$4,400 today) worth of books including the family Bible, a year's worth food, all wearing apparel, up to \$500 (\$11,000 today) worth of furniture, and up to \$400 (\$8,800 today) worth of other personal property.

The day after Rennison was buried, the 10 Rennison children came to the home, claiming that Net-

tie had no legal right to an interest in the estate. They returned on Aug. 16 with a quit-claim deed for the property, which they persuaded her to sign by threatening to "burn the house down over her head." She signed the deed in exchange for \$150.

In December 1899, Nettie filed a suit asking that the court set aside the quit-claim deed, stating that the Rennison heirs "wrongfully and fraudulently" told her that she had no right to any of the estate, that she was at that time "utterly ignorant" of her rights under the law, and that she feared they "would carry out their said threats and burn the house on said premises or do the plaintiff some great bodily harm."

Nettie's case came to trial on March 16, 1900 under a specially appointed judge, Louis Hoffman, with San-

gree and Lamm representing the Rennison heirs and Steele, Lovinger, and Bohling representing Nettie Rennison. Testimony centered on two issues — the legality of the marriage and the legality of the quit-claim deed.

The Rennison heirs contended that the marriage between their father and Nettie Stokes had been a "pretend marriage"; they further claimed that he was unable to enter into a marriage contract because he was physically ill and mentally unbalanced.

Two witnesses, Dr. Cartwright and attorney D. D. Duggins, testified as to J. F. C. Rennison's health. Under cross-examination by attorney Bohling, however, neither could provide conclusive evidence that the old man was unbalanced; the strongest evidence they could provide was that his "actions and conversation ... were very silly."

The administrator of the estate, G. T. Jenkins, testified that he had no knowledge of the value of the estate, of whether the marriage was legal, nor of whether the Rennison heirs had threatened or coerced Nettie Rennison to sign the deed. He did, however, testify that Nettie Rennison had indeed relinquished her interest in the estate and that the property thus belonged to the Rennison heirs.

The judge annulled the marriage, despite the presence of a marriage license and the couple's having lived together six months. The court also ruled that since Nettie had signed the quit-claim deed, she had no interest in the property.

The rights legally afforded a widow were denied Nettie Rennison to the degree that she could no longer even consider herself a widow. The animosity of the Rennison heirs toward their stepmother seems apparent here, as does their greed.

Nettie Rennison returned to her life of shame, living and working at Sallie Todd's bordello at 209 West Main St.

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