

# Mansion symbol of city's lusty past

Such is progress. When the unsentimental bulldozers began knocking down the walls of the Etta Clark mansion in 1947 to make way for Paisano Drive, many older men were seen picking up and carrying away bricks as souvenirs.

The building at Second and Mesa streets, so apt a reminder that a house is not a home, was part of the city's gaudy, bawdy, lusty past back in the days when Utah Street, later changed to Mesa, was El Paso's red light district.

Clark was determined to build the finest house in the district when work started on her mansion in 1889, just eight years after the first railroad reached the city. It became a showplace often pointed out (usually from a distance) to visitors arriving around the turn of the century. It had cost \$9,000 to build the two-story brick, but another \$50,000 had gone into the ultra-swank interior. It far outshone other houses being run by such famed madams of the day as Mae Palmer, Tillie Howard and



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Gypsy Davenport.

In 1915, the district was considered too close to Downtown and respectability, and was ordered moved farther south. Etta Clark had died in 1908, and the mansion had declined in popularity through a succession of madams.

But it didn't give up without a fight. In 1916, it had acquired a new landlady in Clark's sister, Eva Mercier Johnson, a widow who had moved here from Georgia and became the eccentric but strait-laced owner of the former palace of pleasure. She proceeded to turn it into a boarding house, occupying the

first floor, renting part of the basement for a restaurant and clearing away all the plush interior, covering expensive murals with humdrum wallpaper.

Johnson became a recluse, haunted by a fear of persecution. Often, she would call the police to report imagined prowling and her calls always were relayed to the late Jess Manigold, then a lieutenant, who could always calm the woman's fears.

Her miserliness led to her giving up electricity, using an oil lamp and stove for light and cooking, an outhouse for the only sanitary facility. Often, she would walk to the Downtown area and, according to her attorney, the late E.B. Elfers, would limit herself to 10 cents on such excursions.

If she was able to resist the temptation to spend the money, as she often did, she would return it to a bureau drawers. When she was finally found to be mentally incompetent, her guardian found several handkerchiefs in the drawer, each

with two nickels tied in their corners.

When the building was condemned for the highway and ordered razed, Detective Tommy Rascon had called to inform tenants they would have to vacate. He was met by Johnson with a drawn pistol. He discreetly left. The sanity hearing was a result. When the woman's assets were inventoried, it was found she was worth more than \$100,000, a substantial sum in those years.

With the commitment of the 80-year-old Johnson to a mental institution, the building was emptied and the wreckers arrived. They found little trace inside of the house's glory days except for the hand-carved doors and woodwork. If some enterprising reporter had been on the job, he might have learned that some of those doors and woodwork were reborn in modern El Paso homes.

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