

Edward Louis Senn's Half-Century on the Last Frontiers

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When the underground rings of lawless old Deadwood said to E. L. Senn, a newspaper king of the frontier, "Shut up or get out!" he fired back as he once had done to the cattle rustlers, "YOU get out! That's what I'm here for—to run you out." And being a religious man he ordered them in biblical scareheads to "Get thee behind me, Satan."¹

The Black Hills of South Dakota have an intriguing past filled with colorful characters and places. Wild Bill Hickok, Calamity Jane, Preacher Smith, and Deadwood Dick all have their places in the history of the region. Although largely forgotten today, Edward Louis ("E. L.") Senn also played a significant part in shaping the Dakota frontier. Senn, however, was more than just a character of Old West folklore. In each of his various roles as teacher, homesteader, journalist, prohibitionist, and author, Senn resolved to better the lives of his fellow Dakotans. A fiery crusader with deep moral convictions and an unbreakable spirit, he imagined a prairie governed by justice, a land of opportunity for families, and a Deadwood freed from the vices of drinking, gambling, and prostitution. Defeated on more than one occasion, he refused to relent, maintaining that "one man and God make a majority in any fight."²

1. Edith Eudora Kohl, "Frontier Crusader," *Rocky Mountain Empire Magazine* (11 Nov. 1947):5.

2. Quoted *ibid.*

Senn was born 22 December 1865 in Clinton, Iowa, the youngest of three children born to Christian and Louisa Glass Senn.³ After his parents divorced in 1871, his father disappeared, and his mother soon married Henry Gerold. In 1876, Senn's brother Albert left home for the Colorado gold fields, and the rest of the family moved to Morrison, Illinois, in 1879. Four years later, his mother, stepfather, and sister Lillian traveled to Brule County, near Kimball, in Dakota Territory. Senn stayed behind, graduating from Morrison's high school in 1883 and then teaching school in Deer Grove, Illinois, for approximately one year.⁴

By late summer 1884, his "mother's frequent pleas" brought Senn to Dakota Territory, but he quickly found his new home to be "too small for all of us."⁵ Henry Gerold left the shanty later that year, and Senn became the head of his frontier family. To support the clan, he farmed during the summer and taught school in the winter. After their mother died in 1886, Senn's siblings, deciding that the homestead was worthless, turned all legal rights to the claim over to their younger brother, who stayed to farm and teach school for another year before leaving to attend the Normal School in Valparaiso, Indiana.⁶

Returning to Brule County in the summer of 1888, E. L. Senn sold the homestead and traveled to central Charles Mix County to teach in various frontier schools. When he discovered that the area lacked organized religious services, he established a Sunday School program for local children and was soon draft-

3. Research into the life of my great-great grandfather, Edward Louis Senn, presented a number of difficulties. While several Black Hills area authors and historians mention him in their publications, most ignore him altogether. Despite these limitations, I had the benefit of a great deal of firsthand information. Much of the material in this article comes from two unpublished manuscripts Senn compiled before his death in 1951: "Half a Century on the Last Frontiers," from which the title of this article is derived, and "Regeneration of Deadwood." Many biographical facts presented here (dates of births, deaths, marriages, and the like) come from a family history titled "Our Family Since 1826," compiled by my great-grandmother, Julia Hansen Senn. These items as well as the correspondence cited remain in the hands of Senn family descendants, who have graciously consented to its use here.

4. Julia Hansen Senn, "Our Family Since 1826," Senn Line section, Christian Senn entry.

5. E. L. Senn to Julia Hansen Senn and Patricia Senn Dewald, 28 Dec. 1947.

6. *Ibid.*; E. L. Senn, "Half a Century on the Last Frontiers," chap. 14. This unpaginated manuscript, which Senn completed in 1945 focuses on his early years in South Dakota. It consists of sixty-nine chapters of two to six pages each.

ed to preach weekly sermons to his fellow frontiersmen.⁷ Senn eventually bought a squatter's claim on the abandoned Fort Randall military reserve, anticipating that the area would soon be formally opened to settlers. Despite the hardships of living in an area with no railroads, few doctors, and primitive schools, Senn later described his years in the "Lower Military" as some of the most pleasant of his life. He even found time to form a baseball club with his fellow homesteaders, among whom he found "many fine, fairly well educated people."⁸ During the early 1890s, however, the need to replenish his exhausted funds drew Senn back to central Charles Mix County, where he again found employment in the classroom.

In the settlement of Bloomington, the family of George Norbeck, the preacher at the local Norwegian Lutheran church, opened their home to the prairie schoolteacher. Senn had become acquainted with Norbeck during South Dakota's statehood campaign, and Norbeck presided over the Law Enforcement League, a prohibitionist organization for which Senn served as secretary. During his stay with the family, Senn and Norbeck's eldest son, Peter, forged a lifelong bond of mutual admiration.⁹ Peter Norbeck, who would go on to become governor and United States senator from South Dakota, allied with Senn on volatile political issues ranging from state prohibition enforcement to Senn's own crusade to eliminate vice in Deadwood. Norbeck would contribute generously to Senn's Deadwood campaign yet decline his friend's offer of full repayment. "Never mind," he told Senn, "I wont [*sic*] carry the account to the next world."¹⁰

While in central Charles Mix County, Senn frequently visited the home of Charles and Phoebe Elizabeth Stull, with whom he had resided during the spring of 1889 while teaching school in Platte. Christa, the Stull's daughter, had been one of Senn's pupils and became "a favorite not only in school, but also at home."¹¹ Upon returning and finding that his former student

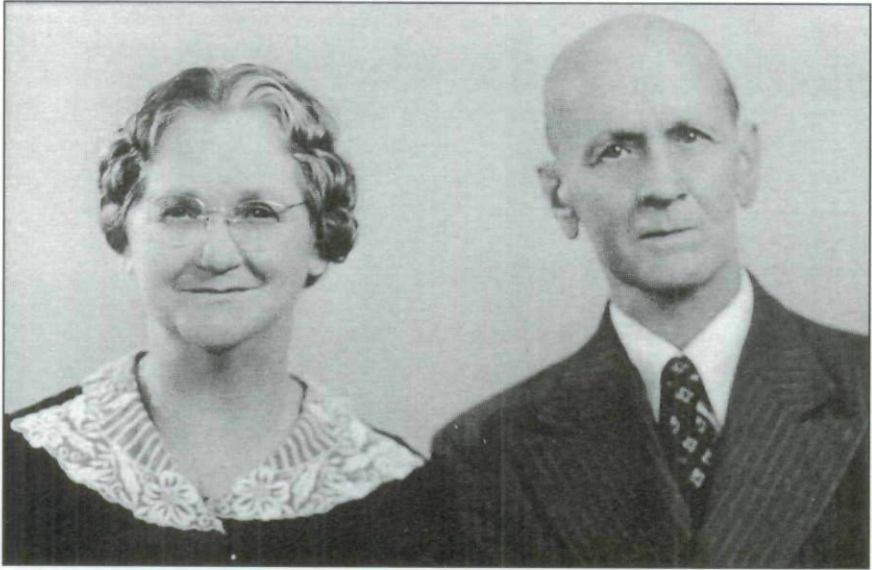
7. *Ibid.*, chaps. 14, 15.

8. *Ibid.*, chap. 17.

9. *Ibid.*, chap. 28.

10. *Ibid.*, chap. 16.

11. *Ibid.*



The editorial career of Edward L. Senn, who battled vice and corruption through his newspapers, spanned nearly three decades. He is pictured here with his wife, Christa Stull Senn.

had grown up considerably, Senn asked for her hand in marriage. Although he was broke and in debt, Christa Stull married him on 14 January 1894, and the couple welcomed their first son, Albert Edward, into the family on 11 November 1894.¹²

Senn continued to teach school and again tried his luck at farming during the early years of his marriage. His wife gave birth to two more children, Edward Louis and Lillian, before Senn moved his family across the Missouri River in 1901. Ready to conquer a new frontier, he filed on a quarter-section tract in Lyman County near the town of Iona. He then purchased one hundred cattle, erected cattle sheds, and built a small home on the site.¹³

While ranching in Lyman County, Senn also began his first weekly newspaper—the Pioneer. Initially produced in a corner

12. Julia Hansen Senn, "Our Family Since 1826," Senn Line section, Edward Louis Senn entry.

13. *Ibid.*; Senn, "Half a Century," chap. 36.

of the family's primitive shanty, the *Pioneer* was small in size (four pages of four columns each) but large in purpose: Senn intended his publication to unite homesteaders in combating the cattle rustlers who terrorized area ranchers like himself. Through the pages of the *Pioneer*, which he described as "all home print with a few advertisements from Oacoma and Chamberlain business men," Senn sought to "give publicity to conditions and arouse honest settlers to action."¹⁴ The rustlers, however, refused to let the bald-headed little editor break their chain of lawlessness and burned his ranch home to the ground, unaware that Senn had moved his print shop and his family to a shanty in Iona. Having escaped unharmed, the editor continued to publish his message of protest. Senn's efforts eventually helped to break up one of the largest cattle-rustling rings in the area.¹⁵

Senn also became active in local politics during the early 1900s, founding the "Citizen's Ticket" party, whose members worked to elect honest, law-abiding men to public positions. The *Pioneer* was instrumental in promoting the party's efforts to combat rustling and enforce prohibition. In 1903, Senn started his second publication, the *Lyman County Record*, in Dirks-town. After the birth of the couple's fourth child, Bernice, in 1904, Senn moved his family and the *Pioneer* to Oacoma.¹⁶

The move and his subsequent association with Harry Hunter, an agent for the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul & Pacific Railroad, gave Senn the opportunity to pursue his career as a newspaperman. The railroad was expanding its line from Chamberlain to Rapid City and had plotted town sites along the proposed track. Hunter, who was in charge of selling lots to individual settlers, reached a lucrative deal with Senn. The railroad would give Senn a choice lot in each town, and he would establish a frontier newspaper office on the site. In return, Senn would advertise, at no cost to the railroad, the town lots it had for sale.¹⁷

14. Senn, "Half a Century," chap. 38.

15. *Ibid.*, chap. 45.

16. *Ibid.*, chaps. 39, 49, 51.

17. *Ibid.*, chap. 53.

Thus began Senn's frontier newspaper empire. He became known as the "Final Proof King" of South Dakota, for the primary source of income for his papers were the "final proof" notices settlers were required to publish in compliance with the Homestead Act of 1862. Under the act, the United States government would grant a "free" 160-acre tract of public land to anyone who resided on it for five years, made specified improvements, and paid a modest processing fee.¹⁸ Before the government would grant a homesteader title to the land, he or she was required to publish for five consecutive weeks in the newspaper nearest the claim the names of witnesses who would attest that the individual had fulfilled the act's requirements. For each final proof published, the homesteader paid the newspaper five dollars. Anyone contesting a settler's notice paid a publication fee as well.¹⁹

Senn used these federal regulations in tandem with his railroad arrangement to expand his chain of final-proof papers between 1905 and 1908. Taking the old equipment from his early newspapers, Senn was able "to establish new papers at frontier points covering most of [an] area." Other entrepreneurs tried the same scheme, but few were able to accumulate more than two or three papers. "I had the inside track," Senn reported, "and kept my string profitable by purchasing some established by others. As final proof fields became less profitable, two or more were combined, thus expanding the areas for those remaining." Senn admitted in his memoirs that he could not recall the names or locations of all his frontier newspapers, which eventually totaled approximately thirty-five.²⁰ Senn's former employee and long-time friend Edith Eudora Kohl later wrote that Senn moved his newspapers "across the prairies like checkers across the board."²¹

18. Later legislation expanded the acreage a settler could claim. Homesteaders also had the option of purchasing the land for \$1.25 per acre after residing on it for six months. Howard R. Lamar, ed., *The New Encyclopedia of the American West* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 492-93.

19. Edith Eudora Kohl, *Land of the Burnt Thigh* (1938; reprint ed., Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1986), p. 37.

20. Senn, "Half a Century," chap. 53.

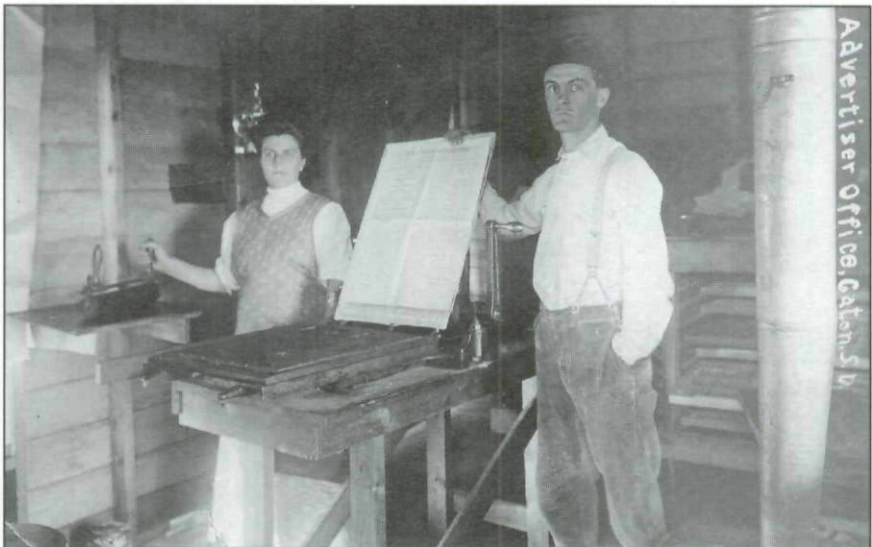
21. Kohl, "Frontier Crusader," p. 5.

Kohl, who later chronicled her experiences on the South Dakota frontier in her 1938 novel *Land of the Burnt Thigh*, met Senn when she took over one of his frontier print shops. Arriving on the Lower Brule Indian Reservation in 1907 as homesteaders, Kohl and her sister, Ida Mary Ammons, quickly realized that they needed extra income to survive on the relentless prairie. Despite her lack of printing experience, Kohl boldly asked Senn, whom folks claimed was as “heartless as a Wall Street corporation,” for ten dollars a week to take over the *McClure Press*.²² Although the sum was two dollars a week more than the previous printer had received, Senn apparently admired Kohl’s temerity. “I don’t know whether you are worth \$2 a week more than Myrtle or not,” he told her, “but anybody that has the nerve you exhibit in asking for it no doubt deserves it. Moreover, I like to flatter such youthful vanity.”²³

22. Kohl, *Land of the Burnt Thigh*, p. 39.

23. Quoted *ibid.*, p. 40.

The sparse furnishings of the Caton Advertiser office, which Senn may have owned for a time, typified the newspapers of the Dakota frontier.



Heartless or not, Senn needed someone to continue the *McClure Press*, for printers, with or without experience, were the lifeblood of his "monopoly out here on the raw prairie."²⁴

As their working relationship and friendship developed, Kohl learned that the reputation of the "Final Proof King" was perhaps undeserved. After a particularly frustrating morning, Kohl unleashed her fury over the antique press she had inherited with the print shop. Armed with the "nerve" and "vanity" Senn so admired, she traveled to Presho to confront the editor and demand a new press. "To my surprise, he asked no questions," she wrote in *Land of the Burnt Thigh*. "His kindness so melted my exasperation with the press that I was at a loss to know how to begin the fighting talk I had come to make." Kohl did not have to fight. Despite the financial problems Senn was apparently having at this time, Kohl gained a new press and the respect of the "ruthless" Final Proof King as well.²⁵ In a 1947 article titled "Frontier Crusader," however, Kohl allowed readers a glimpse at the fiery personality that enabled Senn to stand up for his beliefs. During the publisher's early days as editor of the *Pioneer*, Kohl recalled, "a gang leader strode in with a gun in his hand and kicked over the ink bucket." In response, the agile Senn grabbed a six-shooter and ordered the intruder to "get your cattle rustlers out of here or I'll smear this whole county with printers' ink!"²⁶

An important event that Kohl reported on and later depicted in *Land of the Burnt Thigh* also played a role in the newspaperman's next move. As Kohl vividly described, the Rosebud land lottery of 1908 drew thousands of people to south-central South Dakota to register for a drawing for land that the government had removed from the Rosebud Indian Reservation and was now opening to non-Indian settlers. Senn himself registered and drew a lucky number, awarding him the opportunity to choose the location of his fourth homestead. In the

24. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 78-79, 81.

26. Kohl, "Frontier Crusader," p. 5.

spring of 1909, he moved his family to their new home in Tripp County.²⁷

Around the same time, Senn acquired his first daily newspaper, the *Deadwood Daily Telegram*. With the purchase of the *Telegram*, Senn enlarged the scope of his business by establishing a "ready print" department that furnished "patent insides" for about twenty west-river newspapers in addition to his own thirty-five weeklies. While this expansion demanded



Would-be homesteaders, Senn among them, flocked to towns like Dallas in 1908 to register for a chance to homestead land the federal government had removed from the Rosebud Indian Reservation.

that he spend much of his time in Deadwood, Senn traveled occasionally to his Tripp County homestead, where his family spent much of the year. During the winter, they joined him in Deadwood, where his children attended school and where his fifth child, Ruth, was born in December of 1911. In 1912, after

27. Senn, "Half a Century," chap. 57. In writing his autobiographical account of this chapter in his life, Senn paid Kohl a tribute of his respect, quoting, with her permission, her account of the 1908 lottery (chap. 55).

Senn sold his homestead improvements and relinquished his filing to the government, his family made Deadwood their permanent home.²⁸

When Senn took over the *Telegram* in 1909, Deadwood had changed little since its founding during the Black Hills gold rush of 1876. Saloons operated at all hours of the night, bawdy houses advertised openly and freely, and gambling halls emptied the pockets of many a patron. Many of Deadwood's most powerful businessmen, Senn found, directed their resources toward maintaining the lawless atmosphere. Using financial pressure, they exerted a strong hold on local law enforcement authorities and much of the city's population, one-third of which made a portion of its living from some form of vice.²⁹

28. *Ibid.*, chap. 58.

29. E. L. Senn, "Regeneration of Deadwood," 3, 7 Feb. 1911. This unpaginated manuscript is primarily a collection of excerpts, arranged by date, from the *Deadwood Daily Telegram* and press comments from other South Dakota newspapers, along with several "Author's Notes" by Senn. See also Watson Parker, *Deadwood: The Golden Years* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), pp. 212-13.

Even though brick buildings had replaced the tents and false fronts of gold-rush-era Deadwood by the time this 1913 view was recorded, the town's lawless atmosphere persisted.



After assessing the deplorable moral situation in Deadwood, Senn wasted little time in calling for change. "Yea, verily, 'To labor is to pray,'" he began a scathing editorial on 21 December 1909. "There are many good people in Deadwood who offer prayers for a betterment of civic and social conditions here. If they would back their prayers with more work, they would be more regarded, and more effective." In particular, Senn chided those individuals who failed to act for fear of hurting business. "It is ineffectual for citizens, who believe in civic righteousness to keep it to themselves or express [it] only to those who feel the same," he concluded. "To make it effective they must make it known to others, and must assist and encourage those whose official duty it is to enforce the laws."³⁰

Senn urged those who favored decency to join forces and elect city officers who did the same. He demanded that local officials follow and enforce the laws of the state. Finally, he warned the owners of illicit businesses that their control over Deadwood would soon end. In a January 1911 editorial, he compared his fight to General Ulysses S. Grant's campaign against Vicksburg, writing, "If storming the citadels of vice in Deadwood will not avail, a siege will be instituted, and shot and shell will be poured over the walls until devastation will be such that the decent people of the city can walk in and take complete possession."³¹

Although many South Dakotans appreciated Senn's clean-up campaign, those on the home front did not respond kindly to his efforts. Within a few months, Senn had illuminated Deadwood's dirtiest and most deeply hidden secrets, and some of the town's most influential businessmen were far from appreciative. The owners of several prominent concerns boycotted Senn's publication, refusing to advertise their goods or services in the *Telegram* and, according to Senn, coercing other businesses into doing the same.³²

The moral support that poured into Senn's office from around the state, however, was overwhelming. Fellow newspa-

30. *Ibid.*, 21 Dec. 1909.

31. *Ibid.*, 27 Jan. 1911.

32. *Ibid.*, 24 July 1911.

per editors publicly praised his efforts and urged him to continue his noble fight. The former editor of a local mining magazine, who undoubtedly knew Senn's opposition, was especially emphatic in his condemnation of those whose "cloak of pretense" hid "hearts as black as the pit, and minds as putrid as a sewer." He continued: "These and such as these will oppose by boycott or bullet anybody and anything that tends toward righteousness, reform and right living. They are so thoroughly inoculated with the virus of the shameless that present day demands of society are unobserved and unwelcome." Punctuating his indictment of the greedy and the morally indifferent with exclamations of "Shame! . . . Shame! . . . Shame!" he concluded, "Continue as you have begun, Brother Senn. As certain as there is a God above us you will succeed in your contentions for a purer, cleaner, respectable and respected Deadwood."³³ Outside supporters also bought advertising space in the *Telegram*, even if they had nothing to sell. Nevertheless, Senn was forced to sell off portions of his weekly newspaper chain to finance the *Telegram*.³⁴

Despite the debilitating boycott and his dwindling funds, Senn remained confident that most Deadwood residents desired the changes he advocated. Measuring success in terms of "small victories" over the lawless element, the editor was pleased to report that by early 1911, three gambling halls had been shut down and their gaming activities forced out of public view. Furthermore, most saloons were complying with ordinances restricting after-hours sales of liquor. Finally, the *Telegram's* appeals to the men of Deadwood "to respect themselves and their wives, daughters and sisters" appeared to have reduced business in Deadwood's red light district.³⁵

As the power of Senn's press grew, his most virulent enemies turned to violence. One Saturday night in July 1911, P. N. Carr, the owner of the Mansion, a popular bawdy house and frequent target of Senn's editorials, brutally attacked the editor, kicking him repeatedly and breaking several of his ribs. News

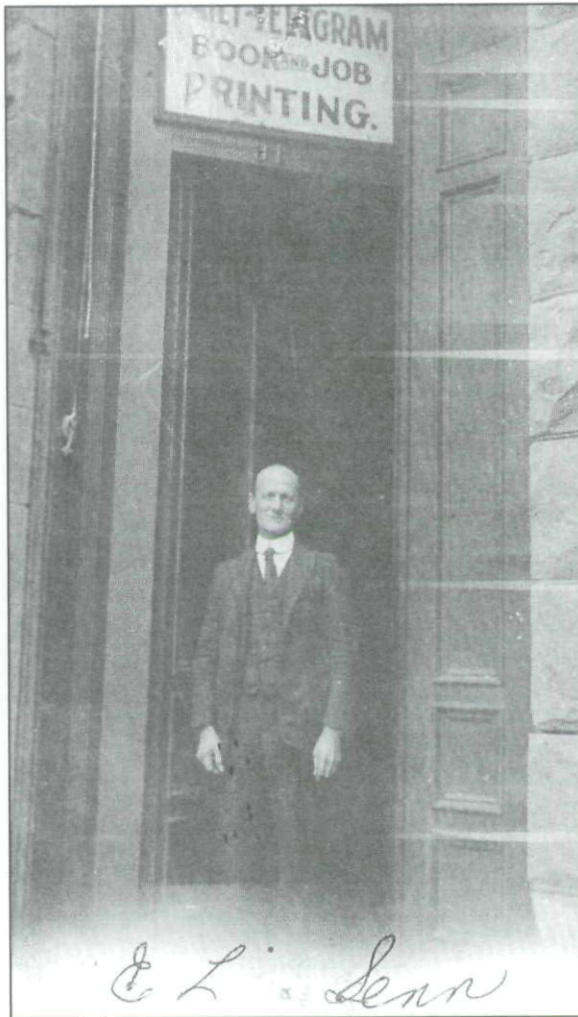
33. *Ibid.*, 6 Feb. 1911.

34. *Ibid.*, 24 July 1911.

35. *Ibid.*, 3 Feb. 1911.

of the attack on Senn spread rapidly throughout the state. Various newspaper editors condemned the assault but predicted that it would serve to awaken Deadwood's slumbering public conscience.³⁶ Unfortunately, Senn reported in a *Telegram* edi-

36. *Ibid.*, 13, 24, 29 July 1911.



Despite personal danger and financial hardship, Senn campaigned unceasingly to expose Deadwood's dark side. He is pictured here in front of the Daily Telegram office.

torial, the incident "did not cause as much stir in Deadwood for a day as a recent footrace has caused for a week." Even the county state's attorney was indifferent. He refused to press charges against Carr and, according to Senn, implied that the editor "might have expected what he got, . . . and that if he didn't quit he probably would get worse." If the public conscience had been awakened, Senn concluded, "it quickly went to sleep again."³⁷

October 1911 brought further violence against Senn and the *Telegram*. Early on a Sunday morning, intruders broke into his print shop and set fire to his equipment. "Just how the better element of Deadwood can stand by and see these things done without interfering we can not understand," commented the editor of the *Parker Press Leader*. "Possibly there is no better class." Senn, however, defended his silent supporters, writing, "The same forces which have made the road so rough for for [sic] the *Telegram* do not hesitate to seek to deprive of employment or injure business of any who are caught giving assistance to the *Telegram*."³⁸ Senn realized that while he needed the support of Deadwood's "decent" class, they needed their jobs. He could only hope that this silent majority would soon realize its power.

Senn's scathing editorials and daily sermons on morality appeared to help quiet the gambling rooms and saloons, but prostitution was not as easily removed from the Deadwood way of life. Toward the end of 1913, Senn began a full-fledged war against the city's three remaining houses of prostitution: the Mansion, the Rome, and the Topic. One editorial described local madame Fannie Hill as a "purveyor of the honor of women and a panderer to the lust of men. She owns a lot of such girls, body, clothes and soul. She is permitted to offer them for sale nightly to debauch Deadwood men. And she is permitted to parade them on the streets of Deadwood the same as other 'business interests.'" Senn went on to condemn the city authorities who collected one hundred dollars a month in license fees from brothel owners and thereby legitimized the

37. *Ibid.*, 29 July 1911.

38. *Ibid.*, 28 Oct. 1911.



An influential Deadwood businessman and mayor, Nathan E. Franklin suffered Senn's editorial wrath for his alleged complicity in immoral activities.

enterprises in violation of state law. He concluded by placing the ultimate responsibility for the town's moral character in the hands of the average citizen. "Is it not time for the people of Deadwood who believe in decency and obedience to law," he wrote, "to insist that officials close the three remaining bawdy houses in this city, and take steps to do it themselves if the officials will not do their sworn duty?"³⁹

Senn later expanded on the idea of public moral accountability, calling the people of Deadwood "partners in three bawdy houses on Main street." In the editor's view, the city treasury was "a joint purse of the people of the city. All who pay taxes benefit from payments made to it, to the extent in which it reduces their taxes." Those who did not object to the use of the tainted profits were voluntary "silent partners" in the immoral businesses. For those who ignored their moral duty to

39. *Ibid.*, 1 Nov. 1913.

protest the city's practice, eternal penalties awaited. "When their final accounting is made to the great Judge," Senn warned, "those who profess allegiance to the cause of Christianity and righteousness, may expect to find charged against them in the book of life, their silent partnership in the bawdy house business of Deadwood."⁴⁰

Senn himself went before the city council to demand that the practice of licensing the brothels stop and that state law prohibiting such establishments be strictly enforced. Senn then sent a copy of his comments to the county state's attorney asking for cooperation in prosecuting these "resorts." Both the city council and the state's attorney ignored Senn's requests, and open prostitution, along with the editor's efforts to eliminate it, carried on for many more years.⁴¹

Senn's morality campaign suffered another setback in February of 1914, when Nathan E. Franklin announced his candidacy for mayor of Deadwood. "Czar Franklin," as Senn would later refer to him,⁴² wielded a great deal of influence as president of Deadwood's First National Bank and had used it, Senn claimed, "in every way against the cleaning up of the bawdy houses and other lawlessness." Senn was certain that if elected, Franklin would "stand for a more wide open town than has the present city administration." As he had done in previous city elections, the editor challenged decent, law-abiding citizens to step forward in the contest "between those who believe laws should be obeyed and those who do not; [and] between those who think more of the virtue and welfare of the youth of this city than they do of the dollars that come to them from toleration of vice."⁴³

Despite Senn's campaign, voters elected Franklin mayor in the spring of 1914, and the editor lost no time in attributing an increase in immoral activities to the leniency of his administration. Senn reported that under Deadwood's former mayor, William E. Adams, the saloons had generally operated in a legal, orderly fashion. Under Franklin's guard, he asserted, an

40. *Ibid.*, 14 July 1914.

41. *Ibid.*, 7 Oct. 1913.

42. *Ibid.*, 19 June 1914.

43. *Ibid.*, 28 Feb. 1914.

increasing number had reverted to ignoring both state and municipal operating restrictions. Slot machines were reappearing, and back-room gambling had resumed, much as Senn had expected.⁴⁴

Near the end of 1914, Senn once again suffered a personal attack at the hands of his enemies. On a Saturday night in early October, a Deadwood policeman assaulted and beat the editor as he walked down a Deadwood street. The action apparently came in response to Senn's comments about the officer's involvement in another case.⁴⁵ Calling the attack "one of the most cowardly in the history of the state," the editor of the *Mitchell Clarion* went on to claim that "such assaults only go to prove that what Senn has said about Deadwood is more than true." The Mitchell editor predicted that negative publicity from the attacks on Senn would "do much toward cleaning up the city."⁴⁶

The *Clarion's* predictions proved far from accurate, however. In fact, later that month Senn reported that Mayor Franklin was allowing the city to become "the dumping ground for Lead and other Black Hills cities which are crowding out their undesirables of both sexes." The mayor of Lead, unlike Franklin, had clamped down on vice, restricting bawdy houses, limiting alcohol sales, and banning gambling. "Possibly when all the refuse in the Black Hills has been dumped into Deadwood," Senn speculated, "the condition here may become so nauseating that decent citizens will find their nerve and join with the rest of the state in demanding a clean-up."⁴⁷

Despite Senn's efforts to unseat Franklin, Deadwood voters again elected him mayor in the spring of 1916. Conditions quickly went from bad to worse, according to editor Senn. The bawdy houses' supply of inmates steadily increased, saloons operated back rooms all night long, and slot machines made their way back into Deadwood's bars. "These violations," Senn claimed, "are known to the city and county authorities, as they are not blind, and only a blind man could help seeing them."

44. *Ibid.*, 25 July 1914.

45. *Deadwood Daily Telegram*, 5 Oct. 1914.

46. Senn, "Regeneration of Deadwood," 15 Oct. 1914.

47. *Ibid.*, 29 Oct. 1914.

Again, the editor reported, local authorities failed to take an active stance against vice. Nor did South Dakota's attorney general seem concerned with the blatant disregard of state laws.⁴⁸ Franklin's reelection appeared to have been a major victory for Senn's enemies, but the editor refused to accept defeat.

Toward the end of 1916, Senn began to focus his efforts on the prohibition movement that was spreading across the state. In an October editorial, the editor identified alcohol as the vice ultimately responsible for prostitution. "It is generally conceded by investigators of the 'social evil,'" Senn asserted, "that drink is directly responsible for the downfall of a large majority of fallen girls; and that the sale and use of intoxicating liquors is a necessity for successful commercial prostitution." Banning liquor and closing saloons would therefore effectively battle the "white slavers" and their vast network of vice. "Most women who have entered into a life of shame must have liquor to deaden their mental and physical sensibilities," Senn claimed, "and most men who patronize houses of prostitution, would not do so unless under the influence of liquor."⁴⁹

Senn's prohibition rhetoric may have had an effect on Deadwood, for in November 1916, a majority of the city's voters joined the rest of South Dakota in endorsing statewide prohibition. A rejuvenated Senn confidently proclaimed, "In less than two years Deadwood will overthrow the corrupt and lawless influences which have dominated its elections and prevented enforcement of laws against prostitution, gambling, and other evils."⁵⁰

Several historical accounts indicate that Senn's crusade was ultimately successful. Watson Parker, author of *Deadwood: The Golden Years*, reported that Deadwood's "respectable inhabitants . . . in time gained the upper hand and to all intents and purposes cleaned up the town."⁵¹ Senn was also rewarded personally when President Calvin Coolidge appointed him prohibition director for South Dakota in 1925. As the state's chief

48. *Ibid.*, 3 June 1916. Also see the Oct. 1947 author's note appended to the 10 June 1916 clipping.

49. *Ibid.*, 6 Oct. 1916.

50. *Ibid.*, 21 Nov. 1916.

51. Parker, *Deadwood*, p. 213.

enforcement officer in the war against liquor, Senn and fifteen deputies worked from headquarters in Sioux Falls to combat bootlegging and speakeasies until 1933, when Congress repealed the Eighteenth Amendment.⁵² Bob Lee, editor of *Gold—Gals—Guns—Guts*, called Senn's appointment the end of an "uphill battle . . . against sin" but noted that the editor "lived to see the gambling halls, the saloons, and the girls back in business" when prohibition ended.⁵³

52. Helen Rezatto, *Mount Moriah: "Kill a Man—Start a Cemetery"* (Aberdeen, S.Dak.: North Plains Press, 1980), p. 216.

53. Bob Lee, ed., *Gold—Gals—Guns—Guts* ([Deadwood, S.Dak.]: Deadwood-Lead '76 Centennial, Inc., 1976), p. 246.

Spectators looked on as Governor Peter Norbeck signed the state prohibition law in 1917, a moment that marked a victory in Senn's war against vice.



After his stint as prohibition director, Senn divided his time between Deadwood, where his son Albert had taken over operation of the *Telegram*, and Pomona, California, where he maintained a home for several years.⁵⁴ He spent his remaining years pursuing his passion—writing—although on a less intense level than he had done as a newspaper editor. During the late 1930s, he wrote and published three pamphlets about early Deadwood's most famous characters: Wild Bill Hickok, Calamity Jane, Preacher Smith, and Deadwood Dick. As Senn aged and his health deteriorated, his old friend Edith Kohl urged him to record his unique frontier adventures. "You must have time to leave to the w[or]ld your knowledge and experience in the building of our West," she wrote in 1948. "No one else has that invaluable knowledge to give." She even sent copies of the articles she had written about him to some of her "motion picture friends in the big studios telling them . . . to contact you if they are at all interested."⁵⁵

After being confined to bed for an extended rest, Senn was finally able to complete three book manuscripts: "Half a Century on the Last Frontiers," "Regeneration of Deadwood," and an untitled manuscript on Wild Bill Hickok. He was working on his fourth manuscript, "Historic Deadwood Pioneers," when he died. He had corresponded frequently with the Caxton Press in Caldwell, Idaho, but none of his book manuscripts were ever published.⁵⁶

In the final chapters of his first book manuscript, Senn summarized his life's work. "The first half of my half century on the last frontiers," he wrote, "was devoted to constructive work, building up successive area[s] opened up for settlement, by personal labor and use of the string of 35 weekly newspapers I had established or purchased as the frontier advanced." He characterized his second quarter century as being "devoted chiefly to destructive work, in tearing down the false, foul social conditions established in Deadwood and other mining

54. *Deadwood Pioneer-Times*, 19 Nov. 1951.

55. Kohl to Senn, ca. 5 Mar. 1948.

56. *Deadwood Pioneer-Times*, 19 Nov. 1951. Senn's correspondence includes several letters written to and from Caxton Press between May and December 1947.

camps.”⁵⁷ Black Hills author Helen Rezatto later concluded, “Whatever he was—evangelist or hypocrite, impartial judge or prejudiced observer—people who knew this firebrand of South Dakota journalism would probably agree on one point: Edward Senn was a man who had the strength of his convictions.”⁵⁸ In 1954, Senn’s colleagues honored him posthumously by inducting him into the South Dakota Newspaper Hall of Fame.⁵⁹

Senn was nearly eighty-six years old when he died in his Deadwood home on 19 November 1951. He was buried in Deadwood’s Mount Moriah Cemetery, where his wife, Christa, was later buried at his side. In reflecting on his experiences, he had once commented to Edith Kohl: “I wanted to carry a torch, no matter how dim, for all the frontier newspapers to follow in making the west a good and safe place to live and raise children. Lawlessness cannot stand in the light of publicity.”⁶⁰ Senn had carried that torch fearlessly and proudly throughout his career. Whether combating cattle rustlers from a corner of his homestead shanty or fighting vice in Deadwood from his Main Street print shop, the editor demonstrated how one man could fight many.

57. Senn, “Half a Century,” chap. 68.

58. Rezatto, *Mount Moriah*, pp. 217-18.

59. Sioux Falls *Daily Argus-Leader*, 2 Oct. 1954.

60. Quoted in Kohl, “Frontier Crusader,” p. 5.

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