Site once housed notorious saloon

Workers uncover the name of ‘Big Jack’ Clower above an upstairs archway.

When the signs were removed from the front of the Prairie Edge building last fall, crews found a name engraved over the archway on upstairs doorway.

It read: “John Clower, 1900.” Clower, a longtime Rapid City businessman, ran a saloon and gambling hall in the building for several years. Varying accounts of “Big Jack” paint very different pictures.

A 1949 story in the Rapid City Journal described Clower as an active businessman whose real estate interests included at times the Elks Building, the Hotel Alex Johnson and St. John’s Hospital.


Leedy claimed Big Jack’s saloon was notorious for literally rolling drunk shepherders and cowboys who stopped in for a payday shot of whiskey. Apparently there was a special whiskey bottle that had been laced with a drug, Leedy wrote.

“In a few minutes, (the victim) would be out in the back room. The board sidewalk behind the saloon on Sixth was about four feet above the ground and, after the customer had been relieved of the wealth in his pockets, he was rolled off the sidewalk into the gutter ...” Leedy wrote.

“If a man had courage, he could find Big Jack alone and generally get his money back. ... However most of his victims took their losses and didn’t go back, chalking them up to experience.”