

A COURT OF PUBLIC OPINION:  
AMERICAN SEX WORK IN THE GILDED AGE AND PROGRESSIVE ERA

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ABSTRACT

Late nineteenth-century sex workers in the United States left behind few written records. In contrast, men and women not involved in the sex work trade made their opinions well known. To peacefully exist in the public sphere of society, Gilded Age women relied on being perceived as good, moral, and pure. From the dawn of the Gilded Age through the Progressive Era, from approximately 1870 through 1920, the American public perceived a lack of goodness and morality within sex workers, making their visible presence in society unacceptable. This conclusion by the American public that sex workers lacked morality was based in part on religion but also on the legality of the profession and generally held notions of respectability. This perceived lack of morality and respectability led to sex workers growing more socially ostracized than ever before as the Gilded Age ended at the turn of the twentieth century. Using legal proceedings, widely circulated publications, private correspondence, and other forms of communication, sex workers were exploited by many individuals as tools for their personal political agendas and without sincere concern for sex workers' well-being. During the Progressive Era, the crusade against sex work intensified as the solution to the problem of prostitution evolved from regulating the profession to seeking its extermination. Scholars can draw more nuanced conclusions concerning these discourses related to sex work by recognizing the lack of female-authored manuscripts in archives and by analyzing the male-authored sources that are available. Historians, including but not

limited to Barbara Hobson, LeeAnn Whites, Judith Walkowitz, and Sharon Wood, have published landmark texts reflecting on nineteenth-century politics, prostitution, and social reform that closely relate to the topic of this thesis. The State Historical Society of Missouri, Missouri Valley Special Collections, and the Kansas Historical Society possess several collections containing materials reflecting on the American sex work industry during the Gilded Age and Progressive Eras. These materials include newspapers, ledgers, essays, correspondence, census records, pamphlets, and photographs. Though these materials were not the only primary sources consulted, they are the sources that most shaped the analysis of this topic. The purpose of this thesis is to identify how public opinion shaped the legal and social treatment of sex workers over an approximate fifty-year span, and whether early twentieth-century efforts at reform could ultimately be considered successful. After analyzing available primary sources and secondary literature related to this topic, this thesis concludes that sex workers in the United States were depicted by specific groups of individuals as sinful and inherently corrupt in an aggressive attempt to advance extensive social reforms, though in the end, these attempts at reform failed.

## APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, have examined a thesis titled “A Court of Public Opinion: American Sex Work in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era,” presented by Sarah Henkel, candidate for Master of Arts in History degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Public opinions of men and women regarding prostitution during the American Gilded Age, from approximately 1870 to 1900, influenced Progressive Era reforms from the turn of the twentieth century to the early 1920s. These reforms were proposed in response to steadily changing public opinions regarding prostitution. In the aftermath of the American Civil War, conservative views concerning race and sexuality were reinforced through acts of law.<sup>1</sup> Prostitutes, or sex workers, were among the most affected group of this legal and social reform.<sup>2</sup> Prior to the 1900's, prostitution was widely considered a necessary evil of society; afterwards, prostitution was mainly seen as an evil to be eradicated for the public good. How did this shift in public opinion occur from viewing prostitution as a necessary evil to viewing prostitution as a social evil? Morality was seen as the most important quality American women could possess, and sex workers were labeled as immoral.<sup>3</sup> The existence of sex workers and their lack of morality was perceived to be a threat to the traditional social order, and, therefore, a threat to all women's ability to exist and properly perform their roles in civilized society. This traditional social order relied on women to play the part of virtuous wives and mothers, and sex workers did not adhere to these strict societal expectations. Many men and women at this time worried that sex workers would somehow influence husbands to leave their wives, cause virtuous young women to engage in sex work, and overall create a

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<sup>1</sup> Berry, Mary Frances. "Judging Morality: Sexual Behavior and Legal Consequences in the Late Nineteenth-Century South," *The Journal of American History* 78, no. 3 (1991): 835-56.

<sup>2</sup> In this thesis, the terms 'prostitution' and 'sex work' will be used interchangeably. In recent years, the term 'sex worker' has gained precedence over the term 'prostitute', which can carry negative connotations. Going forward in this thesis, both terms will be utilized.

<sup>3</sup> O'Rourke, Tierney, "Coolies, White Slaves, and Purity Crusades: The Rise of Morality in U.S. Prostitution Legislation from Reconstruction to the Progressive Era," *Penn Undergraduate Law Journal* 1, no. 1 (Fall 2013): 85-89.



community culture that fostered vice and immorality. Many of these concerned citizens would make their opinions publicly known by suggesting solutions to the perceived problem of prostitution, solutions that inevitably included legal reform. While proposed reform efforts did produce some short-term effects, such as temporary funding for special hospitals and clinics or the creation of official sex worker registries, the reform movement failed to produce any permanent solution to the social evil of the sex work industry.

Under the guise of protecting good, moral women and families, legislators, congregants, and reformers from all walks of life slandered women engaged in the occupation of prostitution. Citizens of all genders and social classes had concerns regarding the legality and morality of sex work; these concerns helped shape public opinion and legislation connected to the profession through the turn of the twentieth century. Some concerned members of the public worried that prostitution threatened the institution of marriage by encouraging husbands to stray from their wives. Others in communities where sex work thrived worried that young women being targeted by brothel owners looking to lure them into the practice of prostitution. Men and women alike wondered if prostitution was a profession that should be legal and regulated, or if lawmakers should attempt to put an end to it altogether. This thesis explores how publicly enforced moral codes and dramatized rhetoric across class and gender lines encouraged the exploitation of women engaged in sex work in the United States during the Gilded Age and how this exploitation manifested into the sweeping social reforms of the Progressive Era—reforms which ultimately failed at permanently curbing, regulating, or exterminating the sex work industry.

Historians have already examined social changes and policy reform during the Gilded Age and into the Progressive Era.<sup>4</sup> This thesis focuses on the rhetoric related to prostitution and looks at regionally connected manifestations of this rhetoric. Much of the literature related to the topic of late nineteenth century sex work in America is focused on the East and West coasts. While many of these coastal sources provided the scholarly foundation of this thesis, the Midwest, and oftentimes the South, are consistently overlooked in the historical literature for this period. Therefore, it is important to note that the primary sources discussed in the following chapters of this thesis focus on these locations when possible. By filling the gap in the historical record related to these regions and to prostitution, historians will be able to better understand the roots of the generally more conservative policies that are present in the Midwest and South compared to the United States' coastal regions.

In her study of Augusta, Georgia, historian LeeAnn Whites explores how elite white men and women experienced a slew of social changes in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, and how many of those changes varied depending on their gender. Spanning from 1860 to the 1890s, Whites' microhistory counters the male-centric narrative historians have previously put forth regarding the social and political landscape of the Reconstruction Era and Gilded Age. Whites points out that women, too, encountered drastic changes in their

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<sup>4</sup> For more information on the American sex work industry during the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era, I recommend consulting the following sources, though this list is by no means comprehensive: William W. Sanger, *The History of Prostitution: Its Extent, Causes, and Effects throughout the World* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1858); Katie M. Hemphill, *Bawdy City, Commercial Sex and Regulation in Baltimore* (Cambridge University Press, 2020); Mark Thomas Connelly, *The Response to Prostitution in the Progressive Era* (University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982); Barbara Antoniazzi, *The Wayward Woman: Progressivism, Prostitution, and Performance in the United States* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2014); Timothy Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* (W.W. Norton & Company, 1994); Alan Hunt, *Governing Morals: A Social History of Moral Regulation* (Cambridge University Press, 1999); Rebecca Yamin, *Wealthy, Free, and Female: Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Historical Archaeology, Vol. 39, No. 1, 2005); and Jan McKell, *Brothels, Bordellos, and Bad Girls: Prostitution in Colorado, 1860-1930* (University of New Mexico Press, 2007).

lifestyles post-war that significantly impacted their day to day lives. Though Whites' book does focus heavily on wealthy white women of high social standing, women of other races and women of lower socioeconomic backgrounds do make an appearance in the periphery of the book's pages. Whites is not as interested in distinctions of class and race as much as she is interested in how white Southerners of differing genders sought to preserve traditional roles and histories in the aftermath of the Confederacy's, and therefore the South's, defeat. To a degree, Whites believes that these individuals succeeded in dampening the efforts of historically oppressed groups to make large, sweeping changes to the societal order of the post-Civil War South. Whites argues that "moments of social crisis in the dominant power structure may have opened the way for revolt on the part of the nondominant but simultaneously intensified the material difficulties of their very survival."<sup>5</sup>

The arguments Whites puts forth in her book apply to the struggles of female sex workers in the years immediately following the Civil War. Regarding sex workers, Whites notes that they were often vulnerable to physical violence with minimal legal protections. With no clear government policies to protect them during business transactions, sex workers were often financially and sexually abused by their clients. This vulnerability also made them easy targets for overeager reformers looking to eradicate vice in their communities. Overall, Whites' book captures the essence of a reforming social hierarchy that pushed sex workers more firmly towards the bottom, even as their elite counterparts were gaining greater social freedoms. Whites starts a conversation about post-war America that is crucial to understanding the political climate that eventually resulted in the reforms of the early twentieth century. Whites' analysis of white Americans at this time provides a backdrop for

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<sup>5</sup> LeeAnn Whites, *The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender: Augusta, Georgia, 1860-1890* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995).

the analysis of the texts presented in the chapters of this thesis. Her research allows the rhetoric and motivations of late nineteenth and early twentieth century reformers to be better understood. This understanding allows historians to theorize on why the reform movement ultimately failed to achieve a variety of goals related to the curbing of prostitution, gambling, and other vices.

The desire of white Americans to regulate or exterminate vice in their communities created a movement that, when reflected upon by present day academics, experienced limited success. Social and political agendas of the late nineteenth century heavily shaped these reform efforts to curb vice during the early to mid 1900s. In *Uneasy Virtue*, historian Barbara Hobson observes exactly this, writing that “economic and sexual systems work[ed] in tandem in producing the prostitution economy and the policies to control it.”<sup>6</sup> In her book, Hobson considers three distinct periods of time, one of which is the Progressive Era. She contemplates the complex factors that drove American lawmakers and social reformers to seek drastic changes to policies regarding sex work. She rejects the opinion that sex work was simply a personal career choice of the ‘poor woman.’ The matter is not as straightforward as a greedy pimp or madam luring an impoverished woman in a big city off the streets and into a brothel to engage in prostitution. She writes that prostitution is firmly entwined with mainstream movements for social and sexual equality rather than a simple exchange between two consenting adults.<sup>7</sup> Hobson instead insists that the choice to engage in sex work was a complex combination of factors, such as age, race, economic class, and geographic location. Hobson does note that those who sought to curb vice in their

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<sup>6</sup> Barbara Meil Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue: The Politics of Prostitution and the American Reform Tradition* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 237.

<sup>7</sup> Hobson, 237.

communities often did not agree on solutions to the problem. Kansas's Carry Nation swung hatchets at the doors of bars and pleaded with women barricaded in brothels to seek redemption. Later in this thesis, an account of such an incident is provided by a Topeka, Kansas journalist and fellow supporter of the temperance movement. Other reformers and teetotalers relied on lobbying their legislatures to eradicate or regulate vice. Despite their intentions, none of these individuals focused on attacking the root causes of prostitution, such as poverty, causing their reform movement and most of their goals to falter and fail.

Regardless of the methods used, Hobson emphasizes that the way society handles the question of sex work reflects its organization of class and gender as well as its ability to regulate both morals and markets.<sup>8</sup> Hobson's book explores the American, but also the European, political approach to sex work and its regulation over several decades. While comparing these different approaches, Hobson concludes that sex work is not a "private contract between consenting adults but an issue that is intrinsically bound up with long-term agendas for social and sexual equality."<sup>9</sup> This smart observation encourages future historians to cease looking at sex workers as window dressings of the past and to begin studying them as historical actors. Hobson's book encourages scholars to disentangle the sex worker from the politics that govern the sex work industry, an argument that points to why the reform movements of the Progressive Era ultimately failed to effect change in the United States. As evidenced in this thesis, the inability of the public, both men and women, to separate the sex worker as a struggling woman from the negative rhetoric surrounding her occupation led to no real permanent changes at the close of the Progressive Era. The dramatic, self-serving rhetoric of reformers did not address the root causes of prostitution and, therefore, was

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<sup>8</sup> Hobson, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Hobson, 236.

unable to assist in reaching any of the reformers' goals of long lasting legislative and social change.

The goals of individuals involved in the reform movement varied between social classes, as well as between men and women. Gender was an important factor in the reform movement. Female reformers had their own, often differing opinions amongst themselves regarding sex workers and public policy. Though women's activism increased dramatically following the end of the Civil War through the 1920s, women's groups always had vastly differing approaches to achieving relatively similar goals. In *The Freedom of the Streets*, historian Sharon Wood dissects the culture of vice in the town of Davenport, Iowa at the turn of the twentieth century. Though a small city, Davenport was geographically positioned to have plenty of travelers coming and going, leading to an abundance of saloons, gambling establishments, and brothels where business boomed. Wood presents a story of sin and struggle, where reformers valiantly pushed back against Davenport's successful, yet sordid, industries, but with limited success. The pushback to their actions by others within the town were not the only actions making the reformers' jobs difficult; attempts at reform were also stymied by the reformers themselves, who often disagreed on how to solve what they thought were Davenport's biggest problems. Wood argues that many women's organizations during the late nineteenth century insisted paid employment was an important key to bringing about social and political equality for women. Obviously, members of the community did not include sex work on their list of respectable paid professions, leaving reformers to figure out exactly how to 'save' the women who engaged in this disagreeable profession. Some

women's organizations held the belief that women who engaged in sex work hindered the overarching goal of social and political equality for their fellow women.<sup>10</sup>

Wood writes that “women who embraced the free-labor promise took up the tools of public and personal life to assert the respectability of paid employment and to confront the demon of prostitution.”<sup>11</sup> Through this demonization of prostitution, Progressive Era women's organizations all sought to eradicate the ‘social evil’ of brothels, bawdy houses, and other places of sinful business from their communities. Wood tends to lump the women's organizations into a monogamous entity, pretending as if each organization did not have different strategies to reach the reformers' common goals of equality. However, Wood does encapsulate the social and class differences that separated women who likely should have been advocates for one another. In this case, elite, educated women of higher class standing used the demon of sex work, mainly seen as a poorer woman's profession, as a scapegoat for women's inequality. Sharon Wood's book elevates the complicated history of Davenport, Iowa, giving it a place next to the complex histories of bigger towns that have been covered by historians in greater depth. Wood's book is set in the Midwest, making it an ideal choice to consult for the purpose of this thesis. One of the goals of this thesis is to point out the lacking historiography set in the Midwest and to a lesser extent in the South during the Gilded Age with regards to prostitution, legislation, and reform-minded organizations. This is a conversation that Wood began with *The Freedom of the Streets* and that this thesis aims to continue expanding.

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<sup>10</sup> Sharon E. Wood, *The Freedom of the Streets: Work, Citizenship, and Sexuality in a Gilded Age City*, Gender and American Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 225.

<sup>11</sup> Wood, 9.

Though there are many additional texts providing valuable insights into the various topics related to the response to sex workers and their experiences, Whites, Hobson, and Wood provide key additions to the narrative of economic, political, and social reform that governed turn of the century sex workers' lives. These three works of academic literature are by no means comprehensive, but they have most shaped the analysis presented in this thesis. This scholarship also shares a similar regional focus, which assisted in narrowing the geographical scope of this thesis. While the lack of female-authored sources concerning American sex work in the Gilded Age has proven disappointing during the research stage of this thesis, the overwhelming number of male authors provides a unique opportunity for historical analysis of the issues related to what was increasingly seen as a growing societal problem. During the late nineteenth and into the early twentieth century, overwhelmingly male authors—from ministers to lawmakers to journalists—wrote about sex work, the evils resulting from its practice, and their opinions on the best way to regulate or exterminate the profession.

Through the lens of these authors and other distinguished historians<sup>12</sup>, it is observed that the social and political agendas adapted by many Gilded Age individuals shaped Progressive Era policy reform regarding sex work. This thesis will explore how the crusade against sex workers evolved between 1870 and 1920 and who was involved in the demand for this reform at the turn of the century. In addition, it will discuss how the men and women presenting reform-focused solutions to the problem of sex work failed to achieve their intended goals. This thesis will also add to the discourse regarding prostitution in the

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<sup>12</sup> See the Bibliography for a comprehensive list of secondary sources that were consulted in support of this thesis. Other literature highlights include Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); and Anne Butler, *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery: Prostitutes in the American West, 1865-90* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985).



American Midwest, specifically, as much of the academic literature available on the topic concerns the East and West coasts.

Accordingly, this thesis makes use of primary sources largely obtained from organizations located in the Midwest. A notable collection consulted for this thesis was the Benecke Family Papers at the State Historical Society of Missouri, which contains business and law firm records, civic, political, and legislative papers from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>13</sup> The Benecke Family Papers allow researchers insight into behind-the-scenes legal action taken against sex workers.<sup>14</sup> The State Historical Society of Missouri also houses a newspaper titled *Lucifer, the Light-Bearer*, which was published by Moses Harman between 1896 and 1907.<sup>15</sup> The bulk of the articles in this publication discuss socialism, women's rights, marriage, divorce, children, religion, and prostitution. The newspaper provides a glimpse into the many social issues that were of concern to average individuals. Other primary sources consulted reference Annie Chambers, Kansas City's most prominent brothel owner. Chambers' brothel is recorded in the 1880 census, and there appears to be little legal action taken against her between the 1880s and the 1920s. However, there is a 1922 judgment from the Circuit Court of Jackson County and a 1924 appeal from the Missouri Supreme Court, which relate to Chambers' residence and its use as a 'bawdy house.'

By evaluating these primary and secondary sources, historians can determine what public opinion might have been regarding sex workers at the time and how such opinions

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<sup>13</sup> "Letter to Standard Life & Accident Ins. Co.," September 27, 1890, Benecke Family Papers, The State Historical Society of Missouri- Columbia Research Center, Columbia, Missouri.

<sup>14</sup> "Letter to Isaac H. Kinley, Esq.," September 27, 1890, Benecke Family Papers, The State Historical Society of Missouri- Columbia Research Center, Columbia, Missouri.

<sup>15</sup> Orford Northcote, "Contagious Diseases and Governmental Remedies," *Lucifer, The Light-Bearer*, July 1897, Vol. 1, No. 28, 29, 30 editions, Microfilm, The State Historical Society of Missouri- Kansas City Research Center, Kansas City, Missouri.

might have impacted the lives of the women under scrutiny. This thesis will consider how the archival materials, along with other sources, demonstrate how public discourse and opinions regarding the social evil of sex work in the Gilded Age influenced the rules and regulations surrounding the industry in the Progressive Era. As evidenced by authors of the fifty-year period between 1870 and 1920, one can conclude that public opinion reaffirmed traditional ideals, legislation at every governmental level, and social hierarchies that kept sex workers confined to the fringes of society and impacted their everyday lives.

The post-Civil War years were a critical time for political and social change in the United States. Urban areas grew rapidly as newly freed people, immigrants, and others flocked to the big cities, bringing with them foreign ideas, foods, languages, and cultures. The newly reunited country quickly began doubling down on some of their more conservative policies, and sex workers were some of the most affected individuals of this social upheaval. Prostitution was an easy issue to begin targeting, and there were no shortage of concerns surrounding the profession. Women began to work more outside of their homes, and many even renewed their demands for greater political involvement. Single women began moving to cities of their own accord to access better educational resources and job prospects. Reformers were terrified of middle-to-upper-class white women being recruited by pimps, madams, and other immoral characters, especially as women's roles in general began to evolve. Wealthy and middle-class white women and men had higher expectations for the goodness and morality of people from their own class than they did of poorer people and people of color, but this does not mean that reformers from these classes did not target individuals of lower social classes disproportionately for reform during the Progressive movement. Women's changing roles and opportunities in society deeply unsettled a great

number of people of both genders and all social classes and persuaded some individuals to desperately seek a return to the traditional social order.

In the mid-to-late nineteenth century, the choices and behaviors of everyday Americans were made against the backdrop of a fast-changing social landscape. To peacefully exist within the public sphere, Gilded Age women relied on being perceived as good, moral, and pure. Sex workers were not considered to be good, moral, or pure; they frequently flouted gender expectations of the time by sacrificing their morality to support themselves financially. ‘Good’ women were expected to retain their religious piety and sexual purity, regardless of their social status and financial circumstances. Of course, there were limited options for Gilded Age women to make their own living independent of having a husband, but as the nineteenth century ended, more opportunities for women entering the workforce began to emerge. Women began to take on dramatically expanded roles in their communities and were able to access increased educational opportunities as waves of political and social reform swept through the country. Starting in the 1860’s, white American women slowly gained the right to vote in local and state governments, though true universal suffrage would not come until well after the 19th Amendment.

The reality of prostitution in American cities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries could be extremely grim, but individual experiences varied. Women who participated in sex work did not always do so on a consistent, full-time basis. Some women engaged in the profession only occasionally, such as when they needed extra cash to make ends meet or when they could exchange sex for material goods or experiences they could not have afforded otherwise. Regardless of the frequency of their participation, sex workers on the streets of American cities at this time faced social ostracization, unstable wages, lack of

proper healthcare, physical violence, and generally poor working conditions. There were no legal protections in place for women and men involved in the sex work industry, meaning that they could be easily exploited, overworked, and underpaid.<sup>16</sup>

To contribute to the scholarly conversation on the topic of prostitution, this thesis intends to show how the public opinion of sex workers increasingly influenced government policies over a short, but historically tumultuous, span of time. In the end, the goals of reformers were not usually about improving the working and living conditions of sex workers, but rather about expressing concern for their communities and a crumbling social order that upheld a traditional view of women's roles. This lack of concern was the main reason that the reform movement and all the legislation that it created failed to have any long-term effects. This thesis concludes that, in the post-Progressive Era, the opinions and rhetoric espoused by reformers, regardless of gender or social class, did not have any significant, long-term impacts on legislation or social norms. The conversation surrounding prostitution and the question of whether to legalize, regulate, or attempt to exterminate the profession is important, as these dilemmas still plague the United States in the present day. The root causes of prostitution, which many reformers and other members of the public neglected to address during the late nineteenth century, remain present and unaddressed in the modern world. Though this thesis does not attempt to provide solutions to contemporary problems or discuss the root causes of what leads women to take part in the sex work industry, it argues that the rhetoric of authors at this time of social upheaval in American history spurred a reform movement that failed to permanently alter the culture of vice and prostitution in the United States.

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<sup>16</sup> Catherine Holder Spude, "Brothels and Saloons: An Archaeology of Gender in the American West," *Historical Archaeology* 39, no. 1 (2005): 89–106.

## CHAPTER 2

### USING THE PAST TO INFLUENCE THE PRESENT

Around the turn of the twentieth century, many individuals, both men and women, advocated for reform of laws surrounding sex work. Their motivations for demanding reform were often tied to religion or to furthering their personal political causes. These reformers generally were concerned about the effect prostitution had on their communities; they worried prostitution caused men to stray from their wives, facilitated the spread of contagious diseases, and encouraged other vices such as drugs and alcohol. William Clugston was one such man who revealed his own agenda when denouncing the evils of the sex work industry. This chapter argues that Clugston created his own fictionalized account of sex work in the Old West to enforce the public perception of sex workers as socially diseased, immoral women. While Clugston's version of events ultimately ignored the nuanced realities of the sex work industry, his essay on the Old West intended to serve as support for reform efforts during his lifetime.

Born in Kentucky in 1889, William George Clugston was a newspaper publisher, author, reformer, and social critic in Topeka, Kansas. He earned his law degree from the University of Kentucky and worked for the *Kansas City Post* beginning in 1919. Prior to his stint at the *Post*, Clugston was a sports columnist, city editor, and most notably, political reporter for the *Topeka State Journal*. In the early 1940s, he ceased his full-time newspaper career and began writing stories, plays, and articles until his death in 1966.<sup>1</sup> At some time during his decades-long career, he penned a short, undated manuscript, *Cat-wagon Trails*. His work as a political columnist proved Clugston's interest in current events and his

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<sup>1</sup> William George Clugston, "Cat-Wagon Trails," Undated, Microfilm, The Kansas Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas, <https://www.kshs.org/archives/48577>.

willingness to state his political opinions; as such, the manuscript itself turned out to be a thinly veiled commentary on modern day prostitution and Clugston's wholehearted disapproval of the profession. *Cat-wagon Trails* is an account of the sex work industry in the Old West, though no specific location or date is given. Given Clugston's place of birth and where he resided throughout his life, it can be assumed that Kansas and adjacent states likely provided a backdrop for Clugston's fictionalized account. Clugston's manuscript can prove useful to historians in identifying how the sex work business was conducted during the nineteenth century. The fact that Clugston wrote about the Old West as a man in the first decades of the twentieth century suggests this manuscript is more of a reflection on the Old West through the lens of Clugston's Gilded Age values.

Clugston may have been capitalizing on Americans' interest in a West that was increasingly more an idea than a reality. In the 2005 article, "Brothels and Saloons: An Archaeology of Gender in the American West," Catherine Holder Spude wrote, "It becomes quite obvious that the Western prostitute, while providing a service in a predominantly male world, was not doing so because she was depraved, lustful, having a good time, or simply from the kindness of her heart. Her reasons for prostituting herself were as varied as the reasons that men rushed north for gold, and most of those reasons boiled down to one simple denominator: money."<sup>2</sup> Though money as a motivator is evident to present-day historians, pop culture and fiction were not always in agreement with reality. Romanticized depictions of the Old West enjoyed a massive surge of popularity starting with the Gilded Age and extended far into the twentieth century, culminating in novels, films, and much later, television shows. Examples include the wildly popular Western films of the 1950's, 60's, and

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<sup>2</sup> Catherine Holder Spude, "Brothels and Saloons: An Archaeology of Gender in the American West," *Historical Archaeology* 39, no. 1 (2005): 89–106.

70's, featuring the likes of Clint Eastwood and John Wayne, and included television shows such as 'Gunsmoke' and 'The Lone Ranger.' Many of these books and media had a stock character in common—the prostitute. She could be found in the local saloon or traveling from town to town in a covered wagon, plying her trade and was often surrounded by other vices such as tobacco and liquor. Sex workers in these forms of media often associated with a variety of unpleasant characters, but occasionally, the prostitute is given a redemption arc, where she is portrayed as having a 'heart of gold' despite her profession.

Clugston did not differ much from traditional views in his depiction of sex workers in the Old West, explaining, "The male hustler-manager who operated the Wagon, usually with two or three, or, four, girls...saw to it that his workers...stayed near the campsite and attended strictly to the business of satisfying to the best of their abilities whatever customers he was able to bring in."<sup>3</sup> Clugston painted a less than flattering picture of these women and their male companions. As a social critic with a captive audience, Clugston could justify indirectly drawing comparisons between the sex workers of the Old West and the sex workers of the Gilded Age. Clugston hoped to use his account of the past, which he passed off as wholly factual, to advance his hopes and goals for the present moment.

Whether accounts of sex workers were based on fact or fiction did not always make a difference. Clugston's dramatized story aimed to influence the public and other reformers like himself. Though female sex workers received a brunt of the criticism directed toward prostitution, men involved in the sex work trade did not go unnoticed. According to Clugston, Old West men who managed sex workers were "creatures without principles or consciences, too lazy to work, too dumb to become gamblers, preachers or politicians, too

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<sup>3</sup> Clugston, "Cat-Wagon Trails."

cowardly and weak of character to become criminals, or real 2-gun bad men.”<sup>4</sup> Clugston added, “In his role of pimp of the prairies, this despicable creature would visit the livery stable, the pool hall, the saloon, and the gambling joints if the settlement had any, to make his contacts and solicit customers.”<sup>5</sup> Typically, the male operator would take any interested parties back to a predetermined campsite, where clients could receive services from the sex workers waiting there. In describing the managers of the trade, as well as where they sourced their clientele, Clugston reinforced the visuals that would make their way into the films and television shows of the twenty-first century. Gambling, drinking, smoking, and other vices not only surrounded sex work but caused it to thrive.

The culture of vice that fostered the success of the sex work profession also affected how the public viewed the sex workers themselves. Women who engaged in sex work were often considered lazy, though they were severely limited by the jobs available to women at the time.<sup>6</sup> Clugston went a step further in his writing, describing sex workers as “soiled and worn-out merchandise, of not much intelligence, coarse and vulgar—often alcoholic and socially diseased. Far from being five-hundred-bucks-a-night performers, these girls rarely grossed a Sawbuck a night, even when business was booming.”<sup>7</sup> Clugston argued that cities kept sex workers barely outside city limits due to the unwillingness of potential customers to be associated with these socially diseased visitors. The physical distance of the sex workers outside of city limits was not unlike the physical distance brothels and bawdy houses were given during Clugston’s lifetime. Covered wagons outside of city limits were slowly replaced

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<sup>4</sup> Clugston.

<sup>5</sup> Clugston.

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Lirley McCune, “Death of a Prostitute: Suicide and Respectability in St. Louis, 1875-1900,” *Missouri Historical Review* 109, no. 2 (January 2015): 108–27.

<sup>7</sup> Clugston, “Cat-Wagon Trails.”



by placing buildings in ‘red light’ districts; in both instances, sex workers were physically separated from the rest of the community. Clugston proposed that the idea of sex workers being socially diseased was a consistent theme, across both the Old West and into the Gilded Age. Throughout the nineteenth century, women who engaged in the occupation of prostitution were consistently rejected by upper- and middle-class society.

With regards to sex workers and their constant movement from town to town, Clugston observed, “Often, of course, the honest, God-fearing guardians of the community compelled the wagons to move on before one single sin had been committed; always it was only a matter of days until aroused public indignation, or an already oversold or satiated market, made it necessary for the wagons to hit the road and head for new locations.”<sup>8</sup> Moral codes of the time, heavily influenced by religion among other factors, dictated when and where the business of sex work could be conducted. In rare cases, pious Christians, and Clugston, insisted that religion provided a means of redemption for sinful women.

“Occasionally, at least, cat-wagon girls of early Western days quit their sinful traveling ways, got married and settled down to become exemplary wives and mothers, sometimes attaining social prominence in their communities—and noted for their modest graces and Christian virtues.”<sup>9</sup> The redemption of sex workers by religion or marriage is mentioned by several sources in this thesis, creating a common thread by which ‘reformed’ sex workers could eventually be socially accepted under limited circumstances. In saving sinful women, the men who visited them could be saved as well, and by extension, the men’s families could also be spared. One of the goals of this thesis is to demonstrate the link between religion and sex work, and Clugston provided confirmation of this link.

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<sup>8</sup> Clugston.

<sup>9</sup> Clugston.

Clugston's manuscript illustrated how the sinfulness of sex work and those who perpetuate the trade often met with active resistance in the towns they visited and resided in, a resistance which was heavily influenced by religion among other factors. Clugston endeavored to paint a less-than-desirable picture of the sex work industry to reinforce traditional views on the topic. Reinforcing traditional opinions of the sex work industry would reinforce the idea that the issue of prostitution needed to be dealt with one way or another. Clugston believed that sex work was a dirty business in the Old West, making it difficult for any reader to believe that he felt differently about sex workers during his lifetime. By setting his fictionalized story in the Old West, a past many Americans romanticized, Clugston aimed to capitalize on the nostalgia of his audience, which he hoped would lend credibility to his account. Clugston compared his biased version of the past to his present and found that much of his present-day concerns regarding prostitution were reflected in the Old West, such as the proximity of brothels or covered wagons to the local town or city. Regardless, Clugston was not reluctant to express his disdain for sex workers, in the past or the present.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE INTERSECTION OF SEX WORK, ALCOHOL, AND OTHER VICES

Reformers made their widespread disdain for sex workers evident in a variety of public forums. Many people condemned not just sex workers, but their clients and business associates as well. This group included, but was not limited to, men who utilized sex workers' services and landlords who rented out their properties for sex workers to conduct their business. Accounts related to the day-to-day events of the thriving sex work industry were often exaggerated and manipulated to fit the author's purpose. One example of this was Ralph Neal McEntire's *My recollections of Kansas Carry Nation period*, a five-page memoir reflecting on the temperance movement in Topeka, Kansas. While this short essay recounted McEntire's distant encounter with Carrie Nation, the infamous hatchet-wielding teetotaler, he also mentioned local sex workers in its pages.

McEntire, a factory employee, described the building in which his factory was located as a place that "had developed into the center of the 'underworld' and the 'red light' district."<sup>1</sup> Drinking, prostitution, and gambling were no doubt concentrated in the red-light district to which McEntire was referring. He noted that the second floor of the factory was "being occupied by one of the 'red light houses.' We saw the traffic, we saw the customers which sometimes included prominent young men of social standing."<sup>2</sup> Like other accounts of this kind, McEntire did not discuss young men of social standing visiting sex workers nearly as much as sex workers themselves were discussed. However, throughout his essay, McEntire expressed a distaste for the members of his community who were associated, either

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<sup>1</sup> Ralph Neal McEntire, "My Recollections of Kansas Carry Nation Period," 1964 [not before 1901 1875, The Kansas Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas, <https://www.kshs.org/archives/44213>.

<sup>2</sup> McEntire.

directly or indirectly, with the sex work industry. He critiqued not only the sex workers themselves, but also their clients, which included these young men from prominent families who were supposed to be upstanding members of the community. McEntire found the action of these men visiting sex workers hypocritical; they were supposed to extol middle and upper-middle-class virtues but continued to patronize entities in the red-light district on a regular basis.

McEntire recounted the illicit business dealings of his church-going neighbors, most of them related to alcohol or prostitution. “Throwing aside light on public attitudes, we complained to the renting agency about the second-floor occupants and were told that the owner, who was an active prominent church woman in an eastern city, ordered the renting because of exceptional income. I wrote to her, explained the situation, and was very promptly told to attend to my own affairs, and she would to hers.”<sup>3</sup> McEntire wrote to this unnamed woman on the assumption that he could apprise her of the situation and that she would reconsider the source of the income from her rental property. In part, he seemed to have assumed she would reconsider based on her reputation as a prominent church-going woman. In any case, McEntire was incorrect, and the sex workers continued to use the second floor of the factory building to ply their trade. McEntire did not care about the consequences for these sex workers if they were evicted; he was merely concerned for the overall well-being of his religious community. The lack of concern among his neighbors related to the goings-on in the red-light district and who they might have involved frustrated McEntire. In this essay, he took it upon himself to point the finger at various members in his town that he felt were acting opposite in private to the morals and values they claimed publicly.

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<sup>3</sup> McEntire.

McEntire spent most of this essay describing the vice his town was steeped in and the individuals who benefitted from it. “At the same time, the second floor of the building to the north of us was remodeled especially for such occupancy and became one of the most notorious houses in the district...the local agent for that property was a very prominent citizen and very active in his church and was a teacher in the Sunday School. He ordered and supervised the work.”<sup>4</sup> This is the second time McEntire verbally attacked individuals in his community who were supposed to be pious Christians, particularly those who were ‘prominent’ or ‘important’ people in the community. As previously pointed out, he had a particular distaste or distrust for these individuals, whom he deemed hypocrites. To explain how deep the corruption in his town ran, McEntire also explained that the evildoings extended to other members of his community, not just high-profile churchgoers. “Open extreme violations, incapable or corrupt officers, and court and inert, discouraged hopeless folk on the other side, plus far too many nominal, sometimes active, church people who looked the other way, especially if there were unusual profits to be had.”<sup>5</sup> With these statements, McEntire attempted to shame the accused individuals into compliance with proper morals and values. McEntire added:

An additional side light on public attitude. A certain organization (business) held its annual state-wide meeting here one year. One of its leading business men, active in his home city, was a candidate for state president. As one promotion he took a group of his supporters for an evening in this place. In the drunken orgy, he was ‘laid out’ with a bottle by one of the women and has to be taken to the hospital for repairs. The next day, while he was in the hospital for such cause and the situation was known to other business men members of the organization, he was elected State President. These things just show the public attitudes of the period.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> McEntire.

<sup>5</sup> McEntire.

<sup>6</sup> McEntire.

In addition to shaming his less-than-upstanding neighbors, McEntire attempted to expose any unsuspecting citizens of Topeka, the residents who were morally upstanding and law-abiding, to the secretive and hypocritical practices of their neighbors. There may have been a class aspect to McEntire's grievances. As a factory worker who made little money, McEntire's recollections, which heavily criticized businesspeople, law enforcement, and elected officials, made a lot of sense.

McEntire's point of view gave readers a glimpse into the hierarchy of the Gilded Age sex trade. It was not only madams and pimps who bankrolled houses of prostitution; a few appeared to have had outside financial backers from unexpected places. This excerpt from McEntire's essay best demonstrated his contempt for those involved in the business of vice, especially when politics and religiosity were involved. McEntire described how Carry Nation attempted to reason with the sex workers on the second floor of his factory. "Mrs. Nation remained in Topeka trying to locate other violators. She came to the place over one section of our factory, but by that time doors were locked and violators on the alert. She conducted a brief prayer service, begged the inmates looking out of upstairs windows to give up their way of life and offered help."<sup>7</sup> Carry Nation tried to save these women in the same way she tried to save Topeka, by running out those involved in vice-infested industries. McEntire cast Carry Nation and the temperance movement in a virtuous light while looking down on 'the law,' which McEntire believed was an inherently corrupt institution. In McEntire's opinion, law enforcement had allowed immoral activity to continue when they could have taken stronger action.

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<sup>7</sup> McEntire.

McEntire did not provide the reader with the conclusion to Nation's actions in Topeka. McEntire alluded to the potentially devastating social consequences of being involved in the sex work industry, not only for the sex workers who plied their trade, but also for every individual involved. He wrote this five-page manifesto to galvanize the virtuous residents of Topeka into action and to urge them to look closer at supposed 'high profile' individuals in their community. McEntire believed that, if others saw corruption as clearly as he did, they would have no choice but to face the effects alcohol, prostitution, and other vices had on the city. Recollections like McEntire's, while clearly affected by the author's personal biases, were crucial in assessing public opinion regarding prostitution. Firsthand accounts such as these are not reliable retellings of reality, but they do provide examples of authors who used dramatic stories to influence their readers and galvanize their support for social and legal reform. McEntire's story was clearly dramatized to increase its effectiveness and appeal to his audience, though it is evident that the city of Topeka was unable to permanently rid itself of the corruption and culture of vice McEntire was fighting against.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONSEQUENCES MULTIPLIED

The consequences of living a life of prostitution were largely ignored by the public during the late 1800's, and it is sometimes unclear to historians exactly what sex workers had to endure due to their profession. Those involved in the sex work industry frequently struggled with problems that were economic, social, and legal in nature. Legally, fines and temporary imprisonment were the most common, but not the only, punishments sex workers faced. The social taboo surrounding prostitution made it difficult for women engaged in sex work to maintain relationships, familial, platonic, or romantic outside of the profession.<sup>1</sup> This chapter discusses the case of a widowed sex worker with two children, who found herself in a custody dispute with her estranged husband's brother, a man who planned to use her occupation in a court of law to justify his plea for custody. This case provides a good example of personal opinions and motivations influencing a court of law, though the outcome of the suit is not known.

The Benecke family was a German American family from Brunswick, Missouri. In the late nineteenth century, the family actively maintained a law firm. On September 27, 1890, the firm distributed two letters on behalf of a man called Mr. Phelan. Mr. Phelan's brother, Daniel, had recently been killed in a workplace accident. Daniel was survived by his estranged widow and two young children, a boy and a girl. Daniel's widow was supposedly employed as a sex worker and had custody of their two young children at the time of his death. This custody arrangement proved to be intolerable to Daniel's brother, Mr. Phelan,

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<sup>1</sup> E. Susan Barber, "Depraved and Abandoned Women: Prostitution in Richmond, Virginia, Across the Civil War," in *Neither Lady Nor Slave: Working Women of the Old South*, ed. Susanna Delfino, Michele Gillespie (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).



who used his sister-in-law's occupation against her in court. The first letter from the Benecke law firm was sent to Standard Life & Accident Insurance Company concerning "Daniel D. Phelan, who obtained your policy... for the benefit of his two children 'Frank and Bessie'...[Daniel] Phelan, was instantly killed in a collision on U. Pacific R.R."<sup>2</sup> This letter provided an additional motivation for why Mr. Phelan wanted to gain custody of his deceased brother's children. As Daniel Phelan's legal widow, estranged or otherwise, she would have gained the life insurance money. Mr. Phelan sought custody of his deceased brother's children, and perhaps a portion of the life insurance money, by using their mother's profession to depict her as an unfit guardian.

The prior two chapters of this thesis considered the consequences of vice and the sex work industry on the residents of local communities. This chapter considers the consequences of sex work on the sex workers themselves. Not only were women who engaged in the profession socially ostracized and largely seen as diseased, morally corrupt individuals, but there also were potential legal ramifications to being involved in the business. The women could always be fined and imprisoned, but their profession could also be used against them in a court of law, as in the case of Mrs. Daniel Phelan. Even being assumed to have engaged in sex work could impact many aspects of a woman's life. There was no supporting evidence found in the letters to either confirm or deny that Mrs. Daniel Phelan was indeed a sex worker, but once she was assumed to be one, her husband's family and his lawyers treated her accordingly. Women who were assumed to be prostitutes, whether they were or not, were socially ostracized. Their assumed profession could impact their employment prospects and be weaponized against them regarding custody of their children.

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<sup>2</sup> "Letter to Standard Life & Accident Ins. Co.," September 27, 1890, Benecke Family Papers, The State Historical Society of Missouri-Columbia Research Center, Columbia, Missouri.

Once a woman had the label of ‘prostitute’ attached to her name, it would have been practically impossible for her to recover her reputation and function in a society where she would have been shunned. In addition, it would have been incredibly difficult for a woman to find any sort of assistance once they were assumed to be involved in the sex work industry. There were no social safety nets in place to assist women like Mrs. Daniel Phelan.

The second letter from the Benecke law firm regarding the dispute between Mr. Phelan and his brother Daniel Phelan’s widow was sent to Isaac H. Kinley, Esq., on his behalf. The letter stated, “Now it seems that this woman had been a public prostitute and that the Humane society of Kansas City had talked about taking charge of the children...[yet] nothing had been done in regard to the children.”<sup>3</sup> According to this letter, Mrs. Daniel Phelan had feared losing her children even before her estranged husband’s tragic death. The letter continued, “[Mr. Phelan’s] object now is to obtain care and custody of the children take them away from the baneful influence of their mother, and provide for them so as to make good citizen out of them.”<sup>4</sup> Mr. Phelan painted the mother of his brother’s children as unfit by attacking her socially taboo occupation, and he knew this would work to his advantage in attempting to gain custody.

The main motive for Mr. Phelan to gain custody of his niece and nephew other than the children’s wellbeing soon presented itself. “Incidentally, I would also state that the deceased has a policy of insurance payable to his said two children for \$2000.00 which is now in my possession, and which will do much to provide for them. This matter is not known to the woman, and it is best to keep it to ourselves for the present.”<sup>5</sup> This insurance policy

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<sup>3</sup> “Letter to Isaac H. Kinley, Esq.,” September 27, 1890, Benecke Family Papers, The State Historical Society of Missouri- Columbia Research Center, Columbia, Missouri.

<sup>4</sup> “Letter to Isaac H. Kinley, Esq.”

<sup>5</sup> “Letter to Isaac H. Kinley, Esq.”

was referenced in the previous letter to Standard Life & Accident Insurance Company. Regardless of his sister-in-law's profession, Mr. Phelan could have sought custody of the children solely to gain the money.

These two letters, sent on the same day, show legal action was taken against prostitutes for a variety of reasons. Sex workers suffered socially and emotionally as friends, family members, or even their children could be taken from them. Clearly, the punishments associated with sex work were not only fines, imprisonment, or violence perpetuated against them; involvement in the sex work industry could also have legal implications. This attitude toward sex workers in 1890 would not dissipate as the twentieth century, and then the Progressive Era, approached. The story of Mr. Phelan, his brother, and his brother's family serves as an example of how personal and public opinions regarding sex work influenced matters of legal importance. It is notable that the outcome of the suit against Mrs. Daniel Phelan is not known, and it does not appear as if there was any legal precedent for Mr. Phelan's attempt to gain custody of his brother's children. Reformers during this time hoped to take concrete steps to create these types of legal precedents, as well as any others that could hamper the practice of prostitution.

## CHAPTER 5

### A SOCIAL EVIL

Earlier chapters of this thesis demonstrate the problems reformers had with prostitution; this chapter will discuss how reformers and legislators attempted to create solutions to the problem of prostitution. Some larger American cities attempted to regulate the practice of prostitution, though none succeeded in legalizing the profession until the City of St. Louis did so in the late 1800's. St. Louis police created a register of prostitutes and physicians were assigned to test these women for venereal diseases. The women who were afflicted with venereal diseases were sent to hospitals for treatment. Eventually, a separate hospital was established specifically for the purpose of caring for prostitutes. There was also funding, provided by a tax on prostitutes and brothels, to teach these women alternative employment skills.<sup>1</sup> Lawmakers hoped this ordinance would help to slow the spread of venereal diseases, reform prostitutes, and regulate the sex work industry.

On February 19, 1874, Lieutenant Governor Charles P. Johnson delivered a fiery speech to the Missouri Senate condemning lawfully regulated prostitution four years after the 'Social Evil Ordinance' was enacted by the City of St. Louis. In this speech, Johnson condemned St. Louis's Social Evil ordinance. He explained that traditional consequences for sex workers convicted of plying their trade and for individuals who ran brothels and bawdy houses, which typically involved fines and imprisonment, did not go far enough. Johnson felt that the Social Evil laws, which sought to regulate sex work in the City of St. Louis, were insufficient to deal with the perceived moral shortcomings surrounding the industry, and that lawmakers needed harsher punishments that aimed to eradicate prostitution rather than

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<sup>1</sup> Caitlin Crane, "'Occupation: Social Evil,'" *Becker Medical Library* (blog), October 12, 2015, <https://becker.wustl.edu/news/social-evil-hospital/>.

merely regulate it. Johnson painted a troubling picture of what someone would find if they encountered a house of prostitution:

It will need but a casual glance of one versed in the ways of city life to recognize the character of [houses of prostitution]. Names...in connection with the business of the bawd are stamped in artistic design upon massive gilded door plates...the beautiful form of women robed in silks or satin and decked with that profusion of jewelry...To this may come associated an idea as to whether it was ever dreamed by our fathers that the republic would produce such a parasitical growth...receiving legislative sanction and official support...Now, sir, this is a licensed house of prostitution. This is an establishment, where men can gratify their lustful propensities to their hearts' content for the payment of money.<sup>2</sup>

In a 1991 article, historian Mary Frances Berry demonstrates the link between personal moral codes and the law in the post-Civil War United States, a link which reaffirmed a strict social hierarchy. Berry argues, “The judgements of the legal elites certainly affirmed male power and control in southern society.”<sup>3</sup> She discusses a post-Reconstruction period she called Redemption, where the official rulings came down with renewed intensity against interracial marriages, sexual relations, and inheritance disputes. Considering Berry’s argument, Johnson’s call for a renewed crackdown on sex work less than ten years after the Civil War was not surprising. In the case of Johnson’s speech, it is important to note that he was not only speaking to his colleagues, but also to his constituents. As we have seen demonstrated in the previous chapters of this thesis, public opinion was, by and large, on Johnson’s side regarding sex work. Though members of the public clearly had differing opinions on how the profession should be dealt with, many of them agreed that sex work had to be minimized in some way. These feelings of public indignation toward sex

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<sup>2</sup> Charles P. Johnson, “The Social Evil. The Honesty and Virtue of the Citizen the Only Safety of the Government. Speech of Lieut. Gov. Chas. P. Johnson, on the Bill to Abolish the So-Called Social Evil Law of the City of St. Louis” (Jefferson City, Missouri, February 19, 1874), Charles P. Johnson Papers (C4229), Box 001, Folder 15, The State Historical Society of Missouri- Columbia Research Center, Columbia, Missouri.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Frances Berry, “Judging Morality: Sexual Behavior and Legal Consequences in the Late Nineteenth-Century South,” *The Journal of American History* 78, no. 3 (December 1, 1991): 835–56, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2078793>.

work clearly influenced lawmakers like Johnson not only in the period immediately following the Civil War, but for generations afterward. The Social Evil laws of St. Louis would not even survive the decade, and the state of Missouri would only push forward legislation that restricted sex work as the twentieth century got underway.

Johnson's choice of language during his speech indicated that he was keenly aware of public opinion on the issue of these ordinances. The crimes of sex work, Johnson argued, "Are they crimes and offenses found in permanent society construction or are they but temporary enactments to meet transient evil?"<sup>4</sup> Johnson wondered whether the practice of sex work, as a persistent but temporary social evil of society, could be eliminated, or whether it was a permanent, necessary evil of society that could never be eradicated. With this speech, Johnson criticizes the City of St. Louis's efforts to deregulate the sex work industry. "[Lawmakers who supported deregulation] little thought then when voting for this charter that they were voting to make prostitution a respectable business, and to give to the vile, the degraded and the vicious a protection, extending to an immunity from punishment for the commission of crime."<sup>5</sup> As Daniel Phelan's brother did when he attacked his brother's widow, Johnson defended his opinions when he equated legality with respectability and morality. The city of St. Louis, in agreeing to regulate sex work, had upset this notion. Prostitution had long been illegal before the Social Evil ordinances were put into effect, and Johnson made the case for why it should have stayed that way. "Prostitution is an offense against society now, as it has ever been; and like all other offenses strikes against the interests of the good and true, merits no quarter, and should receive no sympathy."<sup>6</sup> As with

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<sup>4</sup> Johnson, "The Social Evil. The Honesty and Virtue of the Citizen the Only Safety of the Government. Speech of Lieut. Gov. Chas. P. Johnson, on the Bill to Abolish the So-Called Social Evil Law of the City of St. Louis."

<sup>5</sup> Johnson.

<sup>6</sup> Johnson.

Clugston and McEntire, Johnson emphasized the effect sex work has on his constituents and their communities by calling it an offense against society. He suggested that legalizing sex work led to the protection of undeserving individuals.

To his colleagues in the Missouri legislature, Johnson posed a question: “Did your laws succeed in suppressing prostitution? I answer, no... Crimes exist in all civil society. But good men struggle to prevent; good men struggle to decrease them, and good men oppose under all circumstances their recognition in any other light than as crimes.”<sup>7</sup> Johnson was appealing to his colleagues’ sense of morality, or their concept of good versus evil. Johnson reasoned that if his fellow legislators were good men, they would move to squash the practice of sex work. There were religious overtones in Johnson’s argument, as there were with Clugston and McEntire. In addition to this attack on the morality of his colleagues who supported deregulatory legislation, Johnson argued that making prostitution a legal or respectable practice led to an increase in marital problems. He believed that the newly lax Social Evil laws allowed men to be tempted more easily, thereby ruining their marriages. “Therefore, when you take away all these restraints, what may you expect except an increasing indulgence of the evil propensities of our nature.... Surely this law presents temptation to young men.”<sup>8</sup> He suggested that sex workers could influence men to leave their good, respectable wives, and insisted that good women were the biggest proponents of removing the social evil ordinance in St. Louis. Johnson worried that respectable women would in effect be labeled the same social status as sex workers. “The distinction in the minds of men between good and bad women will be gradually weakened. The constant sight of them in public places will wear from them their stamp of shame and degradation. A

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<sup>7</sup> Johnson.

<sup>8</sup> Johnson.

lowering in opinion of the female character will ensue.”<sup>9</sup> He theorized that making prostitution respectable would decrease marriage rates. He also feared that young women with beauty, but no money might engage in prostitution to achieve riches and material goods.

As Johnson remarked, “Innumerable are the ways in which young girls are inveigled into these houses.”<sup>10</sup> For historians, it is easy to observe how some young women were coerced into the profession. Sex workers did not earn substantial sums of money, typically came from the poorest class of women, and often had trouble forming close relationships with other sex workers, despite occasionally maintaining familial relationships outside of the profession.<sup>11</sup> With no systemic help for those in poverty or regulations to protect them during business transactions, sex workers were easily exploited by others and subject to a great amount of violence.<sup>12</sup> For all his dramatic examples, Johnson failed to capture the nuances of every situation in which someone might engage in sex work. His speech focused on providing shock value to his listeners rather than on the reality for many women, some of whom felt they had no choice but to engage in the industry for their material survival. Johnson’s rhetoric, though popular at the time, was rather sensationalized.

During his speech, Johnson did acknowledge that most prostitutes were sympathetic figures, entitled to “virtuous reformation” if they so desired it. This is reminiscent of Clugston’s account of the Old West, where he proposed that some sex workers later married good men and became models of Christian values through religious redemption.<sup>13</sup> Johnson

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<sup>9</sup> Johnson.

<sup>10</sup> Johnson.

<sup>11</sup> Anne M. Butler, *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery: Prostitutes in the American West, 1865-90* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985).

<sup>12</sup> Butler.

<sup>13</sup> Clugston, “Cat-Wagon Trails.”



made the case for not decriminalizing sex work based on preserving the social hierarchy of the day, where respectable men and women would be held in higher regard than those involved in the sinful occupation. Linking his challenge of the Social Evil ordinances to religious values would have been appealing to his audience. Johnson's speech and its general appeal to the public certainly played a role, however small, in the short-lived nature of the Social Evil ordinances. Though an early example of public opinion influencing social and legal policies, Johnson's 1874 speech was a precursor of Gilded Age public opinion influencing legal matters related to prostitution years into the future. The power struggle between reformers, some who wished to regulate prostitution and some who wanted to end the practice completely, never resolved itself. This example of new legislation, which aimed to make positive changes to the issue of prostitution, being overturned in the face of increasing conservatism was only one example of many that played out between the 1870's and the 1920's.

## CHAPTER 6

### REGULATING LOVE

Some reformers were outwardly kinder to sex workers in their writings, though they often had ulterior motives for doing so. Approaches to solving the problem of prostitution were varied, and some men and women advocated for unconventional approaches to the issue. Orford Northcote took the unconventional approach when presenting his thoughts on prostitution. In an 1897 article, Northcote insisted that being kinder to sex workers would be beneficial for everyone, and he in turn used this argument to support his thoughts regarding adult relationships. Northcote, a supporter of the anti-monogamous ‘free-love’ movement, wrote several articles for Chicago based publication *Lucifer, the Light-Bearer*, including “Ruled by the Tomb: A Discussion of Free Thought and Free Love (1898)” and the subject of this chapter, “Contagious Diseases and Governmental Remedies (1897).” Moses Harman was the publisher of *Lucifer, the Light-Bearer*. At the time of the publication’s first edition, Harman was a former Methodist teacher and future proponent of the eugenics movement in the United States. In 1907, Harman rebranded *Lucifer, the Light-Bearer* as *The American Journal of Eugenics*. As a regular contributor, Northcote’s *Lucifer, the Light-Bearer* articles frequently featured topics relating to divorce, marriage, child-rearing, religion, and prostitution.

In the July 1897 “Contagious Diseases” article, Orford Northcote wrote of sex workers, “For while recognizing the value of their work, I by no means admire all of the motives which inspired it.”<sup>1</sup> Northcote did not make clear what he believed these motives

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<sup>1</sup> Orford Northcote, “Contagious Diseases and Governmental Remedies,” *Lucifer, The Light-Bearer*, July 1897, Vol. 1, No. 28, 29, 30 editions, Microfilm, The State Historical Society of Missouri- Kansas City Research Center, Kansas City, Missouri.

were. He later admitted, “The name ‘prostitute’ with all its social stigma is not one to be courted.”<sup>2</sup> Northcote worried about the American government adopting compulsory inspections for sex workers. Compulsory inspections were part of a piece of legislation enacted by British lawmakers in the 1860’s to control the spread of venereal disease. Northcote argued, “What so alarmed British religious opinion was the possibility that men might be able to indulge promiscuous desire with safety; and it was by no means minded to facilitate departures from monogamic morality.”<sup>3</sup> Northcote feared these pieces of legislation, dubbed the Contagious Disease Acts, set a dangerous precedent for other countries. The first of these acts was passed in 1864, revised in 1866 and 1869, then fully repealed in 1886. The 1864 act was passed with the goal of preventing venereal diseases within the British military. “There is little doubt that the underlying motive of the agitation was a puritanical one, and that its supporters were quite ready to infringe the liberty of the individual when it suited their puritanism to do so.”<sup>4</sup> Northcote was correct in this assessment. The Contagious Disease Acts, despite their eventual repeal, influenced future laws and social policies in Britain and abroad, much like the St. Louis Social Evil ordinance of the 1870’s.

In his article, Northcote contended, “It is hardly necessary to insist that a system of compulsory examination...only stands in the way of the adoption by society with such enlightened views, under which prostitutes would voluntarily co-operate with society in staying the ravages of diseases which are their most dreaded enemies.”<sup>5</sup> Northcote argued for sex worker agency. He insisted that sex workers would not have to be coerced into exercises

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<sup>2</sup> Northcote.

<sup>3</sup> Northcote.

<sup>4</sup> Northcote.

<sup>5</sup> Northcote.

meant to improve their lives. Despite the Contagious Disease Acts' repeal in the United Kingdom in 1886, Northcote posed a question to his American audience: if the government can go after sex workers and their bodies, what is stopping them from escalating to regulating other freedoms and bodily autonomy? He realized the plight of sex workers was not a cause likely to appeal to the public. Northcote noted, "while also, to the average man, considerations of the liberties of prostitutes are not likely to strongly appeal, it is of the utmost importance to discuss whether the proposed preventative measures are in reality efficacious, or whether they stand in the way of the adoption of other and better methods of dealing with this grave social danger."<sup>6</sup> These better, more effective methods Northcote mentioned included holding men to a standard of accountability for the spread of venereal disease. Of course, most of the onus was still on sex workers to prevent or detect their ailments. He pointed out that sex workers could have been purposefully concealing these illnesses, but the concession of inadequate male cleanliness was a step toward making venereal disease transmission a shared responsibility. "We will suppose that venereal disease carried with it no stigma...and that Society were prepared to establish an adequate number of hospitals where such diseases could be scientifically treated and where the patients, temporarily incapacitated from following their employment of prostitution, could be humanely supported and kindly dealt with."<sup>7</sup> Northcote preserved a shred of sex workers' humanity with this statement, while acknowledging that the stigma surrounding their profession had previously stripped them of it.

As the nineteenth century ended, the concept of sex work being a social danger was firmly entrenched in American culture. Northcote wrote, "Bearing in mind that the public

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<sup>6</sup> Northcote.

<sup>7</sup> Northcote.

idea of a prostitute is that she is a woman to be kicked into the gutter if necessary, it is not surprising that the hospitals devoted to the care of diseased prostitutes are institutions dreaded like prisons.”<sup>8</sup> Many individuals were concerned with the clients of sex workers, and in turn, concerned for their current and future spouses. Northcote observed that this resistance to the practice of sex work was not a new phenomenon; prostitution was always targeted by society and by legislators. As historian Sarah Lirley McCune pointed out in 2015, women who were not deemed ‘respectable’ bore the brunt of the consequences legislative action brought.<sup>9</sup> Historian Judith Walkowitz agrees that poor, sexually promiscuous women were the victims of legislation aimed at sex work. In her 1980 book, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, Walkowitz argues, “Through the control of sexuality, the act[s] reinforced existing patterns of class and gender domination.”<sup>10</sup> According to Northcote, however, these attempts at control and regulation did not always achieve the desired results. Northcote wrote:

We have seen that regulation is devoid of effect... No attempts to cure the evil are likely to succeed which ignore the fact that prostitutes in its present form is the outcome of centuries of Christian moral teaching. Christianity having put the ban on sexual intercourse, tolerating it only in marriage, the idea has been fostered that sexual pleasure outside the priestly or legal condition is sinful. As a direct consequence, the women who lend themselves to men’s sinful pleasures have been branded as outcasts and treated as such. Not only have they been allowed no social standing, but they have been subjected to the most shocking tyrannies and cruelties.<sup>11</sup>

As Clugston, McEntire, and Johnson did, Northcote made the critical connections between human sexuality, religion, and respectability. Northcote believed Christian ideals contributed to sexually repressed adults and limited them to their monogamous marital bed to

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<sup>8</sup> Northcote.

<sup>9</sup> Sarah Lirley McCune, “Death of a Prostitute: Suicide and Respectability in St. Louis, 1875-1900,” *Missouri Historical Review* 109, no. 2 (January 2015): 108–27.

<sup>10</sup> Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

<sup>11</sup> Northcote, “Contagious Diseases and Governmental Remedies.”

satisfy their sexual desires. He argued that these limits left married couples unsatisfied and led men to seek out sex workers' services as a sexual outlet. "When the ring-fence of the marriage system is broken down, and the youth is enabled to enjoy love relations unsullied by pecuniary considerations; and the adult may satisfy his desire for sexual variety with women similarly inclined, prostitution will be hard put to it to exist...Such a sentiment would do more to annihilate prostitution than all the scorn that could possibly be heaped upon the prostitute."<sup>12</sup> Northcote recognized a societal problem and concluded that a free-love lifestyle was the best solution to reduce the need for sex workers. Northcote was not free of bias or agenda when he proposed this solution. After all, "ring-fence of the marriage system" was a description that evoked negative connotations. In Northcote's mind, free love would have eliminated the need for sex work. Northcote appeared to genuinely believe that the less regulations there were surrounding practices like marriage, sex work, and bodily autonomy, the better off everyone would be. Northcote clearly aimed to promote his free-love agenda by writing of its possibly positive effects on society, such as the decrease in sex work.

Northcote exploited the issue of sex work to argue his own free love agenda, despite his apparent concern for the well-being of sex workers themselves, therefore. Northcote's public declaration of opinion to the established readership of *Lucifer, the Light-Bearer* is worth noting in this thesis; it provides yet another example of an author using dramatized rhetoric to attempt to influence public opinion, which he hoped would in turn influence social and legal reforms. Northcote's solution to the problem of prostitution would be considered as strange and radical in the present day as it was in the 1900's, a fact which remains a testament to the dramatic nature of Northcote's article. From the most conservative approach

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<sup>12</sup> Northcote.

put forth in this thesis, which is the extermination of prostitution as a profession, to the most liberal approach, which is undoubtedly Northcote's endorsement of free love, no approach was. completely successful.

## CHAPTER 7

### SEX WORK IN KANSAS CITY

This thesis brings together primary sources of a similar geographic location, largely located in the Midwest. Kansas City, Missouri and Kansas City, Kansas are two Midwestern sister cities located in the heart of the country, a location which necessitated inclusion in this analysis of prostitution, sex workers, and the reform movement. To achieve a more balanced argument, this chapter will discuss a supporter of the sex work industry, Kansas City's Annie Chambers, and how her words and actions attempted to sway public opinion just as much as the opponents. Chambers, a prominent Kansas City brothel owner, attempted to directly influence a reform committee's policy decisions, but as this chapter will demonstrate, she failed in using her personal experiences to overcome the personal biases of committee members and alter their decisions.

Mrs. William Kerns, alias Annie Chambers, was an ardent defender of the sex work industry. During the Gilded Age, Chambers was a well-known Kansas City brothel owner. An unknown journalist wrote an article about Chambers in 1932, just three years before Chambers' death.<sup>1</sup> The article from the *Kansas City Journal-Post* recounted Chambers' lecture at a meeting of the committee of the Society for the Suppression of Commercialized Vice. The unknown journalist describes Chambers, Kansas City's most infamous brothel madam in the late nineteenth century, as "a matronly appearing woman with white hair and spectacles and not at all flashily dressed."<sup>2</sup> The word choice of the journalist appears

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<sup>1</sup> Unknown, "Says Scattering of Vice Is Wrong: Woman from Former Isolated Zone Tells Crusaders They've Made Error," *Kansas City Journal-Post*, November 12, 1913, Microfilm, Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City, Missouri.

<sup>2</sup> Unknown.



calculated. Chambers may have dressed this way on purpose, or perhaps the journalist was surprised Chambers did not fit their idea of what a brothel owner was supposed to dress like—that is not conservatively. Chambers came with an agenda and understood that her wardrobe choices would impact her impression on the Society. Chambers strategically attempted to restore her sex workers’ humanity in the eyes of the Society, claiming that, ““I have helped many a girl rise where men had turned her down and her sisters had cast her off...Our girls do not come from Kansas City, but from other places. Girls from here who have fallen go to the larger cities. They honestly seek work. Often they can’t find it and if they do it is not at living wage and the result is the haven of last resort.””<sup>3</sup>

The journalist depicted Chambers as framing her work at her brothel as though it was a charity, or a service to the community. Her use of the word ‘haven’ influenced the audience of her speech to feel sympathetic towards the sex workers in her care. The women Chambers described who likely had relocated to Kansas City hoping to get a fresh start in a bigger city than the ones from which they came. The audience for this lecture was twofold, the first being those in attendance at the meeting, and the second being the readers of the unknown journalist’s article. The author of the lecture itself was Chambers, but the second author was the journalist who paraphrased her words for widespread consumption. Chambers said, ““There were twelve inmates at my house when the closing order came. Where are they now? Right here in Kansas City, but I’d cut my throat before I’d tell you just where. I have sent some of them money, but most of them are being cared for by good businessmen.””<sup>4</sup> As Clugston wrote that marriage provided some sex workers with a chance at redemption,

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<sup>3</sup> Unknown.

<sup>4</sup> Unknown.

Chambers also argued that ““These girls will accept good men who will marry them and take them away.””<sup>5</sup> According to Clugston and Johnson, one of the only ways for a sex worker to become respectable or be redeemed was getting married, or perhaps through embracing religion. This painted men as a savior of sorts for these ‘fallen’ women. As shown in Clugston and Johnson, men deemed respectable often engaged with the sex work industry. These men financially and physically supported the industry, and occasionally married the women engaged in the work. Chambers insisted, ““When they [the young women] come to us they have no place else to go. Their parents have turned against them, the church gives them no welcome, their friends spurn them and society kicks them further down...We do not send for them. It is the haven of last resort where the whole world has cast them off.””<sup>6</sup> Chambers denied seeking these girls out, contradicting the popular narrative of madams preying on vulnerable young women to lure them into the sex work industry. She reiterated that not every woman could be caught early in her career as a sex worker, and that women deeply entrenched in the profession deserve charity and consideration. ““Throw the mantle of protection about the young girl who has met her first fall,”” she continued, reverting to her original advice. ““Why not help then when the time is ripe? You wait until too late if you expect to accomplish much by reforming girls who have had the public stamp placed upon them.””<sup>7</sup> Public opinion obviously had an impact on whether a woman was able to redeem her image. According to individuals who weaponized morality to sway public opinion, there was a point where it became too late to salvage a woman’s reputation.

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<sup>5</sup> Unknown.

<sup>6</sup> Unknown.

<sup>7</sup> Unknown.

Chambers claimed that swindling women into engaging with the sex work industry is not what she did on a day-to-day basis, but rather, she engaged in plenty of philanthropic acts. ““Miss Chambers said that many churches in Kansas City have appealed to her for aid and always gotten it. She also was a regular subscriber to charities. She did not mention any of them, but says she has checks bearing endorsements and letters to prove her assertion.”<sup>8</sup> This is another instance of churches, or churchgoers specifically, and sex work being closely related. Annie Chambers pointed out that her money—which was a result of her successful brothel—supported local charities that had no qualms about cashing her checks despite their active fight against prostitution.

This hypocrisy and contradictory behavior are not only demonstrated by the authors of some sources in this article, but also by the membership of the Society for the Suppression of Commercialized Vice. In 1934, the president of the society and at least three of the gentlemen on the board of directors for the society held the title of reverend. Despite her pleas, the committee chose to largely ignore Annie Chambers’ advice. The journalist describing the meeting observed, “While admitting freely that the advice to ‘begin at the beginning’ was good and should be followed as far as possible, the committee did not take the rest of the talk seriously.”<sup>9</sup> Doing away with the fining of women and giving them a prison sentence only was discussed after Chambers’ talk, so this outcome made it appear as though Annie Chambers had partially accomplished her goals.

Any gains sex workers might have made during the Gilded Age were quickly repealed. Ideas surrounding of changing regulations for sex workers ground to a halt in 1934, when the 1934 Report of Secretary for the Society for Suppression of Commercialized Vice,

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<sup>8</sup> Unknown.

<sup>9</sup> Unknown.

Inc., was published two years after Chambers' visit.<sup>10</sup> The previous year's report in 1933 had lamented the lack of improvement in Kansas City's moral compass. "While repeated statements of bad moral conditions have been made to the police with requests for their removal, no determined effort has been made by the officers to subdue them."<sup>11</sup> This indicated that the sex work industry was operating as usual. According to the 1933 report, written by the Society secretary Nat Spencer, the society listed at least "57 different places used for immoral purposes."<sup>12</sup> In 1934, the report was not promising, either. The report included a summary of more than the rising sex work industry. Gambling and liquor consumption, too, were inexplicably on the rise. This rise in moral shortcomings was not due to lack of action on the Society's behalf. "Prior to the city election in March 27, and on the initiative of our Society, a letter outlining the bad moral, liquor and gambling situations in Kansas City, was sent to the 22 candidates for office. A statement was asked from the candidates regarding their attitude toward the elimination of the conditions described."<sup>13</sup> Again, legislative action was sought to curb the sex work industry's moral influence on the city of Kansas City and in Missouri. At this time, federal agents and local reformers were also attempting to quash the Pendergast machine, which had a monopoly on the vice industry in Kansas City. The reformers working on the many issues surrounding vice included women who had just gained the right to vote, making it imperative that all women who could vote be as far removed from the culture of vice as possible. Indeed, sex workers were not the ideal type of voter as far as legislators and reformers were concerned.

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<sup>10</sup> Nat Spencer, "Society for Suppression of Commercialized Vice, Incorporated Report of Secretary, October 23, 1934" (Society for Suppression of Commercialized Vice, Inc., October 23, 1934), Clippings, Missouri Valley Special Collections, <https://pendergastkc.org/collection/9130/mvsc-094-7-s67-076/society-suppression-commercialized-vice-incorporated>.

<sup>11</sup> Spencer.

<sup>12</sup> Spencer.

<sup>13</sup> Spencer.

“Amidst all this wretchedness shall we abandon our fight against entrenched wrong?... No! Let us gird up our loins, put on our armour and continue the battle against the forces of evil,”<sup>14</sup> Secretary Nat Spencer declared. The fight against vice, and sex work specifically, was not going to slow down for the Society. Just two years later, in 1936, the society underwent a name change. The newly branded Kansas City Anti-Vice Society issued a regularly published leaflet titled *The Informant*, with a section dedicated to so-called houses of ill fame.<sup>15</sup> “Our recent partial report to the Director of Police gives the location of 42 immoral houses. In general, they are operated from one to several women and are usually found in poorly kept buildings...Quoted from the report to the Director of Police: ‘Some evenings ago a party drove through these districts and reported a seemingly solid section of depravity and was horrified at the situation presented.’”<sup>16</sup> The newspaper article concerning Annie Chambers’ meeting with the Society and the Society’s annual pamphlets were all published in the 1930’s, about twenty years removed from the period this thesis aims to study. However, these materials were directly connected to the unfolding events from the turn of the twentieth century. The Society’s pamphlets document the chronic frustration of individuals who sought to remove vice and the sex work industry from their communities, despite doing so would have perpetuated harm on sex workers.

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<sup>14</sup> Spencer.

<sup>15</sup> “The Informant, No. 2” (Kansas City Anti-Vice Society, formerly the Society for Suppression of Commercialized Vice, September 1936), Clippings, Missouri Valley Special Collections.

<sup>16</sup> “The Informant, No. 2.”

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSION

This thesis established links between morality, respectability, sexuality, religion, and the law in the United States during the Gilded Age. This thesis has also observed that public opinion of the sex work industry deeply affected the lives of those who engaged in the occupation in many ways. A great many people saw sex work as an evil that could and should be eradicated for the good of society. Despite the relative lack of female voices in archives and libraries concerning this topic, looking through the lens of the late nineteenth century, male authors provided historians with a window into how sex work was viewed by the public. This thesis has argued that sex workers were not only exploited physically; they were also exploited by many men as tools for their political agendas and without sincere concern for the sex workers' well-being, even when these men appeared to be well-intentioned. This thesis has also concluded that the failure of Progressive Era reformers to successfully push forward legal and social changes lies within their reliance on exaggerated storytelling and their inability to attack the root causes of prostitution and vice within their communities. If these reformers would have been transparent about their personal concerns and motivations for attacking prostitution, rather than feigning concern for the well-being of sex workers or for those vulnerable to the sex worker's influence, perhaps Progressive Era legislation would have been more successful at achieving their goals of regulating or outright eradicating vice in their communities. As a result of reformers' failure to push through any surviving, long-term legislation, drinking, gambling, and sex work all continue to thrive in the twenty first century.

Nineteenth-century sex workers penned few firsthand accounts of their experiences, leading to male voices dominating the historical narrative for far too long. Future research might focus on the social evil ordinance in St. Louis and similar laws in other cities across the United States. Historians might also investigate the ties between sex work and religion. For example, a study could examine how many sex workers were supposedly ‘reformed’ and encouraged to leave the profession through marriage or religious conversion. This proposed study would demonstrate religion’s long-held grip on the American consciousness and how this influence continues to affect legislation today. In the twenty-first century, the movement to decriminalize sex work in the United States at the federal level has gained significant traction despite the social stigma attached to the profession. Studying sex workers in the Gilded Age, when the occupation was actively targeted as a social evil, can provide a fresh perspective on contemporary conflicts, and explain how the occupation is still treated with disdain by the American legal system. Though few effects of Progressive Era reforms targeting prostitution remain visible in 2022, it is crucial to realize that the treatment of sex work in the United States continues to be an ongoing series of debates. One of the most pressing issues today related to the treatment of sex work relates to the problem of sex trafficking, which primarily targets young women and children. By reviewing the rhetoric of prior reformers and concluding why their efforts failed, future efforts to reform or regulate the sex work industry might proceed with a greater success rate.

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## VITA

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