PROSTITUTION IN GRAND ISLAND, NEBRASKA, 1870-1913

by

Anne P. Diffendal

The subject of prostitution in the late 19th and early 20th centuries has not been ignored. In countless contemporary tracts reformers preached against the "social evil." During the first two decades of this century, a number of major American cities established vice commissions to investigate the problem and to make recommendations for its eradication. Between 1911 and 1916, at least twenty-seven cities published the results of these studies. Most popular among the works on prostitution have been anecdotal, journalistic accounts of celebrated madams, notorious red-light districts, and famous murders or suicides involving the demi-monde. Recent studies by historians and sociologists have focused on big cities and on western mining and cattle towns during their boom years.

But what of the rural areas? What of the thousands of small cities—respectable towns in middle America whose citizens promoted their municipality as a good place to raise a family and to escape from the evils of the big city? Grand Island, Nebraska, is such a town. Did prostitution exist there? If so, did it flourish? In what form did it appear? We can attempt some answers to these questions because of the wide variety of sources available, including newspapers, court dockets, city council minutes, censuses, plat maps, city directories, and town and county histories.

Grand Island is located in the south central part of the state on the north side of the Platte River, near the point where the several eastern branches of the Overland Trail to Oregon and California joined to follow the Great Platte River Road across Nebraska. The original settlement was made in 1857 by a small colony of Germans sent by a company of land developers in Davenport, Iowa. The community grew slowly until it numbered approximately 500 in 1866 when surveyors for the Union Pacific Railroad laid out the present town, farther from the river and somewhat north of the original village.

Grand Island is a railroad town, as are all of the towns in Nebraska which have survived and prospered much past their initial settlement. By 1870 the population had reached 1,100, and the town was incorporated in 1872. Thereafter, the population increased steadily: 3,000 in 1880, 7,500 in 1900, and 10,000 in 1910. Throughout most of this period, Grand Island was the third largest city in the state, a status it still enjoys. For the years 1970-1920, Lincoln, the second largest city, was approximately five times larger than Grand Island, and Omaha more than ten times larger. The population of each of four or five other towns, including Hastings, Columbus, Norfolk and Fremont, were nearly equal to that of Grand Island.

The town attracted diversified industry, such as the manufacture of patent medicines, soap, cigars, and furniture
Grand Island developed during the period when the brothel was the predominant form for prostitution in the United States and Europe. The brothel was a house, generally operated by a woman known as the madam. She may have owned the house or may have managed the business for someone else, often a man. Such houses served different classes of customers. Some establishments were expensively decorated, others more modestly. All, however, represented a substantial investment for their owners, not only in furnishings and maintenance but also in rent or mortgage payments and property taxes.

Brothels were well-known in their community. Most operated as public houses rather than private clubs. While they may have developed a regular clientele, any man who behaved properly and had money to spend was generally welcome. Each house had a common room or parlor where there was music and drinking. Sometimes gambling was also available. In Grand Island, however, gambling houses seem to have been operated separately from houses of prostitution. Brothels were generally concentrated in a certain district within a town, whereas larger cities often had more than one such district.

Grand Island's first house of prostitution was built in the mid-1870s by William Henry Anderson and his wife Anna. Because of its location north of the railroad tracks beyond the settled portion of town, it was known as the "Prairie House." The Anderson house was soon joined by that of John and Sarah Gettle. Both husbands operated saloons elsewhere in town while their wives managed the houses of prostitution. The Anderson family lived in the "Prairie House" while the Gettles took up their official residence some blocks away from their house. As the town grew, so too did the houses of ill fame increase. The Anderson and Gettle houses became the nucleus of the neighborhood where the brothels clustered. Located 2-3 blocks north of the Union Pacific tracks and 5-6 blocks west of downtown, this area was known as the "burnt District."

Grand Island's first ordinance regarding prostitution was passed on August 1, 1881. The City Council declared it unlawful for any person or persons to occupy, use or keep any house, room or rooms within the city of Grand Island as a place of prostitution or to become an inmate or frequenter of any house, room or rooms, used or occupied as a place of prostitution.

Fines were set at not more than $25 for each offense by a "keeper" and not less than $5 nor more than $10 for "inmates" and "frequenters." All revenues were deposited in the city's school fund. Although "inmates" and "frequenters" were treated similarly in the ordinance, in practice women arrested as inmates were residents of the brothels, while frequenters were arrested on the streets or in hotels and boarding houses. Five subsequent ordinances or amendments regarding prostitution
airy products, and grain.

In 1880, four years after opening to the town, the period when the brothel in the United States generally operated by a man was opened to the town, the brothels were more modestly. All brothels were owned by a man. Such brothels were generally welcome. Each brothel invested for its owners, men but also in rent or in the community. Most operate clubs. While they were open, any man who behaved generally would be welcome. Each man who appeared on the court record as an inmate was arrested for intoxication or disorderly conduct. More often than not, she would be unable to pay her fine and would be jailed. Unlike the monthly fines for prostitution, the penalties for other misdeeds were not automatically paid by the madams.

As long as they paid their fines and behaved properly in public, the prostitutes were not troubled by the police. Occasionally a woman who had appeared on the court record as an inmate was arrested for intoxication or disorderly conduct. More often than not, she would be unable to pay her fine and would be jailed. Unlike the monthly fines for prostitution, the penalties for other misdeeds were not automatically paid by the madams.

Arrests for the third kind of offense under the ordinance, that is, frequenting or occupying rooms kept for the purpose of prostitution, did not follow any particular pattern. Men often were arrested along with the women; both were charged with the same offense and received the same fine. The women were, however, more likely to be jailed in lieu of payment than were the men, most of whom paid their fees and were released. The police used this section of the ordinance to conten prostitution in the established houses. Women arrested as frequenters were sometimes given the opportunity of leaving town by a certain hour or being jailed. Many left. Some who were arrested as frequenters for the first time appeared as inmates in subsequent monthly arrests.

This routine, established in the early 1880s, was disrupted in the mid-90s by three incidents: first, the campaign promise of Mayor W.H. Thompson to allow no more new houses to open in the district; second, the return to town of Millard Fillmore Bouguet; and third, the complaints by residents about the presence of brothels in their neighborhood. Events were precipitated by the arrest of Nell Thompson on June 28, 1894. Although she had been arrested as a keeper for the previous sixteen months, there were no complaints from the public as well as from other keepers that she was moving into a different house or opening a new one. Either action violated Mayor Thompson's directive, which had pleased the public and the madams. The latter welcomed the prohibition on new houses because of the protection it gave to their own financial positions. Suffering like other entrepreneurs during the depression of the mid-90s, the madams preferred to forestall any new competition.

Nell Thompson retaliated by swearing out a series of complaints against the other keepers. The resulting flurry
of court appearances made the district and its inhabitants very conspicuous. On August 7, 1895, the City Council received a petition signed by 51 residents of the fourth ward, where the district was located. The petitioners urged especially that the Anderson and Gettle houses be closed permanently because, in their words,

it happened almost daily that school teachers and other ladies were insulted by harlots and the pupils had to witness sights and to hear language corrupting or, at least, apt to corrupt, their decency, innocence and morals. 14

The Council responded by instructing the police not to allow any new houses to open. 15 Complaints continued, however, and so three weeks later the City Council adopted the following resolution:

... whereas there are two ordinances in existence, created with the intention of abolishing this social evil, be it therefore resolved, ... that it is ... the sense and ardent desire of this body to have said ordinances enforced in letter and spirit by our police, and if under said ordinances so existing, said social evil cannot be blotted out within the residence and business portion of our city, that they may be so modified and reordained in order to strike down with stultifying effects this evil wherever it has its footholds and wherever it lies so entrenched behind bars erected by the merchants and the libertine only fostering domestic wrongs and outrages. 16

An extra policeman was added to the force, and the district was closed down. Beginning in September 1895 there were no arrests for prostitution in Grand Island for the next six months. 17 When the regular arrests resumed in March 1896, the district was in a new location, the pattern of arrests differed from the previous one, and a new man controlled the business.

Millard Fillmore Bouquette, known as "Phil," was raised in Omaha and had come to Grand Island in 1879 where he, at various times, worked for the railroad, farmed, or operated a blacksmith shop. During the late 1880s he lived with his widowed mother one block from the Anderson house in the heart of the district. In 1890 he moved back to Omaha, married, and resided there until his return to Grand Island. He seems not to have been involved with prostitution during his first residence in Grand Island. However, it is likely that he backed Nell Thompson's attempt to open a new house in 1894. 18

After the first district was closed, the women drifted south across the Union Pacific tracks, causing complaints by residents of that neighborhood. During the winter Bouquette rented a house on east 7th Street near the Burlington tracks. He purchased two of the houses in the former district, put them on wagons, and moved them to the new one. 19 When the monthly arrests resumed in March 1896, three keepers were
istrict and its inhabitants
residents of the fourth
Id. The petitioners urged
nt, or two through the last available municipal
court docket in April 1906. With few exceptions, only madams
were arrested and fined, not inmates. This circumstance can
probably be explained by the fact that the new district was
farther from City Hall than the old one had been. Therefore,
it was at once more difficult and more distasteful to the
public to have the women brought into court.

Beginning in the late 1890s, the number of arrests of
both men and women for frequenting rooms for the purpose
of prostitution increased. Regular arrests in the new district
continued, but they drew little attention in the press. Of
more public concern were gambling establishments which enjoyed
the same kind of informal licensing as did the houses of ill-
fame. The wine rooms in gambling houses where unescorted
women met and drank with men were a particular worry. Raids
throughout the city broke up gambling and the illegal sale of
liquor.10

The summer of 1912 saw the beginning of a series of
major raids which resulted in the termination of the burnt
district in the following year. In July, during a raid on the
Bell Hotel, owned and operated by Bouquette, five men and six
women were arrested for prostitution. In her husband's
absence, Mrs. Sophie Bouguette paid the women's fines amount­
ting to $97.75.21 In August 1912 the district was raided and
all the houses closed, not for prostitution, but for the
illegal sale of liquor. After another major raid in March
1913, two of the houses did not reopen. A final raid in July
brought an end to the district. Shortly thereafter the
Bouquette family moved from Grand Island to Council Bluffs,
Iowa.22
Some might consider it fitting that Anna Anderson, operator of Grand Island's first house of ill-fame, died in July 1913, the same month that the brothel disappeared as the predominant form of prostitution in the town. Her husband, a Civil War veteran, moved into the state home for soldiers in Grand Island where he died in 1924. The Andersons had ceased operating a house when the district was moved in 1895, although they continued to live in the old neighborhood for several years thereafter. So also had the Gettles abandoned their brothel. They, however, had not resided in the district, and they continued to operate their saloon until the late 1890s, when their names disappeared from the records.

Why did Grand Island eliminate the burnt district in 1913? Primarily because the town and its citizens were affected by a number of general trends in American society, which accounted for the close, between 1912 and 1920, of such districts in the 200 largest U.S. cities, including all of those with a population of over 100,000. In 1913-1914 purity and medical forces, both with a long-standing concern about the "social evil," merged into the American Social Hygiene Association. In the second decade of the 20th century, most of the country's largest cities established vice commissions specifically charged with investigating the nature and causes of prostitution and with recommending ways to eliminate it. Such endeavors conformed to a major tenet of Progressive reform which held that education and legislation could change the behavior of individuals for the better. Articles in the daily newspaper attest that the residents of Grand Island were not unaware of these national movements and ideas.

Although the brothel or house of ill-fame disappeared as the predominant form by which prostitution was organized, prostitution itself did not disappear but continued under other guises. Frequent raids discouraged investment in well-known houses. Some social changes encouraged the transformation of the inmate of a house of ill-fame into the call girl, and the replacement of the madam by the pimp. Among these changes were the wide-spread use of the telephone and the shift by urban middle-class renters from boarding houses to apartments. When respectable women could appear in public unescorted, wear make-up, and shorten their skirts, the prostitute was not as easily identified as she had been previously.

The good citizen of Grand Island may not have been happy to admit it, but in all of its significant aspects the "social evil" existed and flourished in their town as it did in the larger, reputedly more sinful cities.
Anna Anderson, oper-
of ill-fame, died in July in a state home for soldiers in the town. Her husband, a
state home for soldiers in the old neighborhood for the Andersons had ceased to reside in the district, 1895.
was moved in 1885, from the records. 24

the burnt district in 1913? citizens were affected by a society, which accounted for all of those with a popular account. 25
the social evil. vice association. In the most of the country's missions specifically were and causes of prostitution eliminates. Such an idea of Progressive reform which could change the behavior of the criminal in the daily news, 1875. Grand Island were not.

of ill-fame disappeared. Prostitution was organized, hoped but continued under managed in the town. Aanges encouraged the trans- mission of ill-fame into the call dam by the pimp. Among the use of the telephone and letters from boarding houses, women could appear in and shorten their skirts, identified as she had been.

and may not have been as significant aspects published in their town as were sinful cities.

NOTES


One exception to the lack of research on smaller cities and towns is James Henry Gray, Red Lights on the Prairies (Toronto: H. Macmillan of Canada, 1971), a study of prostitution in the Canadian prairies.

For the history of Grand Island see generally, A.P. Buschler, R.J. Barr and Dale P. Stought (eds.), History of Hall County Nebraska (Lincoln: Western Publishing and Engraving Company, 1920); Grand Island-Hall County Centennial Official Souvenir Program (Grand Island: n.p., 1957); A Study of Grand Island (Grand Island: League of Women Voters, 1962); Grand Island Times Supplement, January 13, 1875 and December 23, 1880.

For the population of Nebraska towns, Nebraska Blue Book, 13 (Lincoln: Legislative Reference Bureau, 1929), pp. 603-615.

4 Connelly, "Fear, Anxiety, and Hope," p. 30; Woolston, Prostitution in the United States, pp. 193-5; and Bullough, History of Prostitution, pp. 194-5.

5 Buechler, History of Hall County, p. 94.


7 Locations of the houses mentioned throughout were identified from the U.S. censuses of 1880 and 1900, the Nebraska state census of 1885, and Grand Island city directories published biennially from 1887 through 1925.

8 Ordinance #41, Grand Island City Ordinances in the office of the City Clerk, Grand Island.

9 Conclusions about patterns of arrests in Grand Island are drawn from the Grand Island Municipal Court Dockets, 1886-1906, in the Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln. For patterns of arrests elsewhere see Wunsch, "Prostitution and Public Policy," pp. 61-71; Philip D. Jordan, Frontier Law and Order (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970). It appears that other towns in Nebraska also followed an informal licensing system. Although there are individual variations, two seminar papers for History 941-2 at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln--Helen Brooks, "Prostitution in Norfolk, Nebraska, 1886-1906: Changing Attitudes Toward the 'Social Evil,'" and Ruth G. Hall, "Prostitution in Lincoln, Nebraska: 1871-1905,"--find such systems. Further research on Lincoln by Beverly Hayes and Donald D. Snoddy confirms Hall's conclusions. Scattered evidence, mostly from newspapers, for Omaha and several towns of the size of Grand Island, including Columbus, Fremont, Kearney and Hastings, suggest that similar patterns can be found in those communities.

10 For example, Grand Island Municipal Court Docket, December 27, 1886 (I, p. 96), and August 20, 1891 (IV, p. 90).

11 For example, Ibid., August 26, 1896 (VI, p. 166); December 9, 1897 (VI, p. 503); and March 3, 1886 (I, p. 21).

12 Grand Island Independent, August 17, 1895; Grand Island Evening Times, June 30, 1894.

13 Ibid., June 29, July 3, and July 4, 1894; Grand Island Independent, July 7, 1894; Grand Island Municipal Court Dockets, June 30, 1894 (V, pp. 334-5); July 2, 1894 (V, pp. 338-9); and July 3, 1894 (V, pp. 341-2).

14 Grand Island Independent, August 10, 1895.