

PROSTITUTION IN GRAND ISLAND, NEBRASKA, 1870-1913

by

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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.¹

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 1100, and the town was incorporated in 1872. Thereafter, the population increased steadily: 3000 in 1880, 7500 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 1870-1920, 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 nearby Hastings, and 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

and the processing of sugar beets, dairy products, and grain. The Union Pacific located shops there in 1880. Four years later a branch line of the Burlington was opened to the town.²

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.³

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.⁴

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."⁵ 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.⁶ 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."⁷

Grand Island's first ordinance regarding prostitution was passed on August 3, 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 or kept 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.⁸ 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

left the description of offenses substantially unaltered, changing only the schedule of fines.

Shortly after passage of the first ordinance, a pattern of enforcement was established which continued to the mid-1890s. This procedure is best described as informal or tacit licensing, and in its practice Grand Island differed very little from the largest of American cities. Once each month all of the keepers and inmates were arrested and brought into municipal court, where they pleaded guilty, paid their fines, and were released. For some periods, all of the women were arrested on the same day; at other times the arrests were spread throughout the month, but each individual was arrested only once a month. For the first several years, there were four or five keepers and 15-16 inmates arrested monthly.⁹

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.¹⁰

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 contain 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.¹¹

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 Bouquette; 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 now 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 both 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.¹²

Nell Thompson retaliated by swearing out a series of complaints against the other keepers.¹³ 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 61 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.

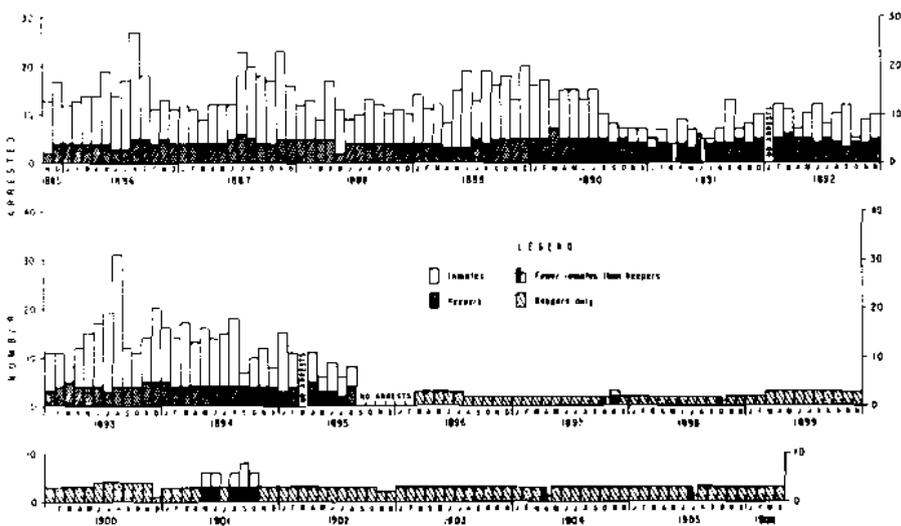
Millard Fillmore Bouquette, known as "Phil," was raised in Omaha and had come to Grand Island in 1879 where he, at various times, worked for the railroad, farmed, or operated a blacksmith shop. During the late 1880s he lived with his widowed mother one block from the Anderson house in the heart of the 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

arrested for the first several months, and the number varied between two and four 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.²⁰

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 Bouquette paid the women's fines amounting 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



ARRESTS FOR PROSTITUTION—GRAND ISLAND, NEBRASKA
NOVEMBER 1885—APRIL 1906

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.²³ 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.²⁴

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.²⁵

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.²⁶

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.

NOTES

¹For a bibliography of published vice commission reports see Mark Thomas Connelly, "Fear, Anxiety, and Hope: The Response to Prostitution in the United States, 1900-1920," Diss. (Rutgers University, 1977), pp. 534-6. Among the most colorful of the popular accounts are several by Herbert Asbury, including The Barbary Coast (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1933) and The French Quarter (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1936); Charles Washburn, Come Into My Parlor: Biography of the Aristocratic Everleigh Sisters of Chicago (Chicago: Knickerbocker Publishing Co., 1934); Pauline Tabor, Pauline's (Louisville, Ky.: Touchstone Publishing Co., 1971); and Cy Martin, Whiskey and Wild Women (New York: Hart Publishing Co., 1974).

Serious studies which concentrate on large cities include the classic by William W. Sanger, The History of Prostitution (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1858); Walter Reckless, Vice in Chicago (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1933); George J. Kneeland, Commercialized Prostitution in New York City (New York: The Century Company, 1921); and Howard B. Woolston, Prostitution in the United States (New York: The Century Company, 1921). More recent is Vern L. Bullough, The History of Prostitution (Hyde Park, N.Y.: University Books, 1964). Several recent dissertations relying on evidence regarding prostitution in the largest cities are cited elsewhere. To them add, Ruth Rosen, "The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution During the Progressive Era," Diss. University of California at Berkeley 1976.

For prostitution in western mining and cattle towns see Marion Goldman, "Sexual Commerce on the Comstock Lode," Nevada Historical Quarterly, 21 (Summer 1978), pp. 99-129, and "Prostitution and Virtue in Nevada," Society, 10 (November-December 1972), pp. 32-38; George M. Blackburn and Sherman L. Ricards, "The Prostitutes and Gamblers of Virginia City, Nevada: 1870," Pacific Historical Review, 48 (May 1979), pp. 239-258; Carol Leonard and Isidor Wallimann, "Prostitution and Changing Morality in the Frontier Cattle Towns of Kansas," Kansas History, 2 (Spring 1979), pp. 34-53; Robert R. Dykstra, The Cattle Towns (New York: Atheneum, 1974); and Paula Petrik, "Prostitution in Helena, Montana, 1895-1900," Montana: The Magazine of Western History, 31 (April 1981), 28-41.

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

²For the history of Grand Island see generally, A.F. Buechler, R.J. Barr and Dale P. Stough (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, 1915 (Lincoln: Legislative Reference Bureau, 1915), pp. 609-615.

³ Bullough, History of Prostitution, 1967; James Wunsch, "Prostitution and Public Policy: From Regulation to Suppression, 1858-1920," Dis. University of Chicago 1976, pp. 23-4.

⁴ Connelly, "Fear, Anxiety, and Hope," p. 30; Woolston, Prostitution in the United States, pp. 103-5; and Bullough, History of Prostitution, pp. 194-5.

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

⁶ United States Census of Population, 1880, and Nebraska State Census of Population, 1885, in the Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln; Grand Island City Directory, 1887-8 in Edith Abbott Memorial Library, Grand Island.

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, 1886-1900: Changing Attitudes Toward the 'Social Evil,'" and Ruth G. Hall, "Prostitution in Lincoln, Nebraska: 1871-1895,"--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.

¹⁵Ibid., August 10 and August 28, 1895; Grand Island Free Press, August 16, 1895; Grand Island City Council Proceedings, August 7, 1897, in the office of the City Clerk, Grand Island.

¹⁶Ibid., August 21, 1895.

¹⁷Grand Island Free Press, September 13, 1895.

¹⁸Grand Island Daily Independent, April 29, 1940; Nebraska state census, 1885; Grand Island City Directory, 1887-1891; Grand Island Independent, July 11 and September 29, 1894.

¹⁹Ibid., October 2, October 26, and December 14, 1895; City Council Proceedings, December 18, 1895, and February 5 and March 4, 1896.

²⁰Central Nebraska Republican, February 19 and August 20, 1898; February 18 and March 11, 1899.

²¹Ibid., July 19, 1912.

²²Ibid., August 20, 1912; March 25, April 2, and July 12, 1913.

²³Ibid., July 8, 1913; October 20, 1924; Buechler, History of Hall County, pp. 93-4; Grand Island City Directories, 1896-1914.

²⁴Ibid., 1887-1893.

²⁵Connelly, "Fear, Anxiety, and Hope," pp. 61-9; John C. Burnham, "The Progressive Era Revolution in American Attitudes Toward Sex," Journal of American History, 59 (March 1973), pp. 885, 897-8; Roy Lubove, "Progressives and the Prostitute," Historian, 24 (1962), pp. 308-330; Grand Island Daily Independent, January 28 and March 13, 1913.

²⁶Jacqueline Baker Barnhart, "Working Women: Prostitution in San Francisco from the Gold Rush to 1900," Ph.D. Diss. University of California at Santa Cruz 1976, p. 197; Wunsch, "Prostitution and Public Policy," pp. 155, 157; Bullough, History of Prostitution, 1978; and Reckless, Vice in Chicago, pp. 115-6.