Prostitution in the Wild West during the early 19th century

Posted on May 24, 2018

View this essay online:
https://academic-master.com/prostitution-in-the-wild-west-during-the-early-19th-century/

Research Question: Although prostitution was largely illegal and extremely dangerous, many women seeking fame and fortune set up brothels in the booming gold rush towns of the Wild West. How did these women become extremely wealthy, famous, and respectable citizens?

Search Terms and Resources

Search Terms: Mining, Prostitution, Gold Rush, Boom Towns, Wild West, Saloons, and the early 19th Century.

Thesis

In the early 19th Century, a woman who owned property, made high wages, had sex outside of marriage, danced, drank, or walked alone in public, wore makeup and perfume, took baths, and was not ashamed was probably a whore. Prostitutes had all the freedoms that were denied to pioneer women. Prostitutes made their own money; some owned tracts of land, some were famous, and others rose to the top and became madams of their brothels. But, for some, prostitution was a miserable way of life filled with violence, illnesses, disease, and death.

Describe the historical event that you selected. Why is this event significant?

I believe that the era of the red-light district and prostitution in the settlement of the mining towns contributed to their success by bringing in business and, therefore, increasing the economic growth of those boom towns.

Audience and Message

The audience I am writing to is people who are not familiar with the lives of prostitutes in the early nineteenth century. I want to bring to light the hardships and dangers, and their successes. I want to

define these women's roles in creating the economy in mining towns and holding their own against a man's world by using first-hand accounts, secondary sources, and archeological and anthropological evidence to support my paper.

The message I convey to my audience is strictly factual, interwoven with storytelling. I will try to preserve their lives as they were and how they were viewed during that time period. I want to explain the evidence that supports these facts while making it an interesting historical essay.

Essay

The role of prostitution in the economic and social development of the Wild West, in the school textbooks on the history of America, you will not find. But in vain: these pages are important, and sometimes even glorious. They are also unique: perhaps nowhere, and at least in the relatively recent past, selling love did not exist in such golden conditions as on the frontier of the second half of the century before last.

The most successful prostitutes eventually became holders of brothels and bought land and buildings; some even financed the construction of irrigation systems and railways. To grow up to the status of madam, of course, not everyone could manage, but when it was possible, Matty Silks, who started as a street prostitute, by the age of 19, already owned her institution in Denver, 1876 (Barnhart, 1979), for visitors in the living room brothel, a real symphony orchestra played! Later, Silks opened three more brothels and kept a stable of racehorses. Thirdly, the status of a public woman proudly and even brazenly contradicted the patriarchal way of life, in which the woman's place is in the kitchen. It was the prostitutes who invented a lot of dance movements that would later become common and used decorative cosmetics, which no girl from a good family could conceive of, openly and on an equal footing with men who played gambling (and won). But the most incredible is the contribution of the owners of brothels too, as we would put it today (Von Staden, 1949). Anna Wilson, "Queen of the Demigod of Omaha," bequeathed to the city a mansion that became an ambulance hospital.

The institution enjoyed great success, not only because of the lack of competition. Here, for example, is how Molly took a bath, timed the presentation (which was exactly the view) to the days of large payments in the mines, and was accompanied by great advertising. She gathered the guests in her yard, pulled out a bathtub, and filled it with water. "The boys" threw coins into the tub, and when they completely covered the bottom, Molly undressed and climbed into the tub, where she sat chatting with the admiring public about all sorts of trifles and exchanging obscene jokes. As a special privilege, and for a special fee, I allowed some nice prospector to rub his back. In her free time, Molly helped the needy: she fed, treated, consoled, and even saved the city when the smallpox epidemic began (Barnhart, 1979).

The golden age of prostitution in the West was short-lived, as, indeed, was the golden age of the Wild West itself. In the early twentieth century, the boom associated with developing new lands and

fabulous enrichments in silver mines declined. Demographic imbalances were smoothed out, and law and order reigned. Brothels “individuals” began to press, pushing to the social bottom, and were then completely banned. Prostitution, of course, has not gone anywhere (and will never go away), but nothing romantic or heroic in it is left, only the memory, several names of women who went down in history due to beauty, a wise soul, a bright fate, or all this taken together. Her real name is Maggie Hall. She was born in Dublin into a good family and received an excellent education for those times (Spude, 2005). At the age of 20, in search of adventure, she went to conquer America and first settled in New York, but there she had a car and a small cart. Maggie, changing her name to a more sonorous Molly, barely got a job as a waitress in a bar, where she met a man named Berdan, the scion of the wealthy parents who kept him (Clapp, 1949). They married secretly, for Berdan feared that Dad would not remove him from the allowance after learning about the misalliance. I was not afraid in vain: my father did find out and refused to finance me. Molly wanted to return to the bar, but her husband had other kinds on her. It’s easy to guess which: the people started to sell wives (Degler, 1984).

The Catholic priest refused the poor thing in forgiving her sins, and she fled to the West, where she continued to sin, although she was now working for herself, not for her husband-gigolo. In 1884, Molly was 31 years old – she read in a newspaper about a gold mine discovered in Murray, Idaho, and went there. On the train, Molly met another famous courtesan of those times, Desperate Jane. The ladies judged that they would be cramped together in the same town. They divided spheres of influence, Molly drove, as she planned, to Murray, and Jane returned to her home in Dakota. To do the last part of the journey, Molly bought a horse and joined the train when the railway was no longer there. Along the way, a heavy snowfall began. One woman, walking on foot with a small child, began to freeze, fall behind, and fall. Molly pulled her furs out of the trunks and ordered the cartload to go further, and she stayed with this woman and the baby in a roadside hut that served as a shelter where they spent the night in fur coats, and the next day they reached Murray, where they could no longer see them alive. A young Irishman with a spark in his eyes asked the beautiful woman her name. “Molly Berdan,” she replied. “Oh, Molly Bi-Dam!” – He exclaimed, not having heard (play of words: it turned out “Molly Bud-Ty-Cursed”). Molly opened the brothel (Clapp, 1949).

People were frightened away at home, and then Molly assembled a city meeting, where she screamed at the cowardly inhabitants (Hapke, 1989). Some people felt ashamed. At least when Molly and her “girls” broke away from the usual classes, and were re-qualified as nurses, they were joined by the only doctor in the city and O’Rourke, the Irishman, whose light hand she was called Molly Thou, Cursed, and later others. They defeated the field hospital, where patients were brought and treated all that was at hand. Molly worked from morning till night, forgetting to eat and change, feeling fatigued, and ignoring the cold. And the epidemic retreated. But Molly herself became sick with tuberculosis and died in January 1888 at the age of 35. Even after death, the Catholic Church, from which she was excommunicated in New York, did not agree to release her sins, and a Methodist priest visited Molly on her deathbed. On the day of the funeral, all the entertainment establishments in the city were closed. At the funeral, several thousand people gathered. Dying, Molly asked to have her real name, Maggie Hall, which was done. Still, in the few surviving salutes, Murray sings songs about Molly B-Dam, a prostitute with a heart of gold (Hapke, 1989). So, no one thinks that the life of public

women of the gold rush times was a continuous holiday, and if there were tragedies, they are beautiful and heroic, like the story of Von Staden. Some other time, I will talk about the sex slaves (Degler, 1984).

Lou Graham funded the first public schools in Seattle. After the earthquake in 1906 in San Francisco, the Diamond Jesse Heyman, cooperating with other Madams, paid for food and clothing for the homeless. And how much the income from corrupt love is richer by the sick fed hungry and built churches in small towns, and does not count. To the movement for civil rights, the benders also made a hand. Mary Ellen Pleasant, a quart-maker and a runaway slave from Georgia, 1852, settled in San Francisco and quickly gained wealth and influence. Among the clients of her brothels were the strongmen of this world and the colored ones who turned to her for help. Mama Pleasant not only fed but also arranged for work. She regularly donated large sums to the abolitionists and even fought in court against racial segregation in public transport (Clapp, 1949).

In 1850, the population of California, not counting the Indians, consisted of 93% men. A census of the population of miners' towns in the area of the silver mine of Comstock (Nevada) in 1860 registered 2,306 men and 30 women. You understand, with such demand for the same solvent, any girl of easy virtue was doomed to a dizzying success, including commercials. Another factor is the frontier. Absolute freedom, police, official law, and even religion, not to mention prejudices and proprieties, are somewhere very far away, beyond brackets. As a result, prostitutes enjoyed, as a matter of course, many rights for which decent ladies only began to fight much, much later. First, prostitution until the beginning of the twentieth century remained the highest-paid of all the hiring jobs available to women (Gentry, 1964). For example, in the town of Helena (Montana), night butterflies earned an average of $ 223 per month, while the most expensive saleswoman earned only $65. By the way, for comparison, male workers (carpenters, masons, etc.) received $90-100, bank clerks – $125. Secondly, if married women could not own property, then the "fallen" such problems would not exist. In the same Helena for the same period, women were given 20 bank loans secured by real estate.

References

Barnhart, Jacqueline Baker. (1979) "*Working Women: Prostitution in San Francisco from the Gold Rush to1900*". Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, San Francisco.

Clapp, Shirley. (1949) The Shirley Letters from the California Mines, New York: Knopf.

Gentry, Curt. (1964) *The Madams of San Francisco*. New York: Ballantine.

Hapke, L., (1989), Girls Who Went Wrong: Prostitutes in American Fiction: 1885-1917: Bowling Green, OH, Bowling Green State University Popular Press.

Von Staden, Margaret. (1949) "My Story: The History of a Prostitute's Life in San Francisco." HLP. Box 10, Folder 162. Typescript.