SKIDDY STREET: PROSTITUTION AND VICE IN DENISON, TEXAS, 1872-1922

Jennifer Bridges

Thesis Prepared for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

December 2011

APPROVED:

Randolph B. Campbell, Major Professor
Richard B. McCaslin, Committee Member and Chair of the Department of History
Andrew J. Torget, Committee Member
James D. Meernik, Acting Dean of the Toulouse Graduate School
Prostitution was a rampant and thriving industry in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Texas. Due to the arrival of the M.K. and T. Railroad, the city of Denison became a frontier boomtown and prostitution as well as other vice elements grew alongside the town. Skiddy Street was one road south of Main Street in Denison and housed the most notorious brothels and saloons in the city. In the late nineteenth century, few national laws were present to regulate red-light districts and those that existed were largely ignored. Economically, prostitution was an important addition to the coffers of cities such as Denison, and through taxing and licensing of prostitutes, city leaders profited off of the vice industry. The early decades of the twentieth century led to changes in the toleration of prostitution and red-light districts on the national level. Progressive reform movements, temperance, World War I, and the National Railroad Shopmen’s strike, each contributed to the dissolution of Skiddy Street in Denison as toleration and open acceptance of prostitution waned. This study attempts to understand how and why prostitution thrived during Denison’s early frontier days, who some of the prostitutes were that plied their trade on Skiddy Street, and how national, state, and local changes in the early twentieth century led to the termination of most red-light districts, including Denison’s.
Copyright 2011

by

Jennifer Bridges
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LIST OF FIGURES</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER II: EARLY DENISON, 1872-1880</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER III: MADAMS AND PROSTITUTES OF DENISON 1880-1905</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER IV: PROSTITUTES, PROGRESSIVES, AND A RAILROAD STRIKE, 1905-1922</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WORKS CITED</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Grayson County Map, Showing Location of Denison</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Street Map of Denison</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Denison Dance Hall, Circa 1875</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Gambling House in Denison, Circa 1875</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>Rowdy Joe Lowe, Circa 1870s</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Sanborn Fire Map of Denison, 1892</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Map of the Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railway</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Final Run of the Texas Special, 1965</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Venereal Disease Campaign Poster</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Every life is a march from innocence, through temptation, to virtue or vice.

_Lyman Abbott_

During the 1870s many towns around the state of Texas experienced growth and population influx due to rapid technological expansion following the Civil War. As railroads moved westward, Denison was established to be a hub for the Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad, known as “the Katy.” Denison, henceforth referred to as “Katy’s Baby,” was intended to be a principal terminal for the railroad and potentially the greatest transportation gateway into the Southwest. As was the case with many boomtowns that developed along a railroad line, Denison quickly attracted a large transient population and became a center for vice. Prostitution, gambling, saloons, and dance halls abounded in the early days of the town when law enforcement was scarce. Historian Jack Maguire noted, “Ladies of the evening such as Liz, ‘Dirty Legs’ Kitty and others of their ilk did little to improve the quality of the citizenry.” The law came to Denison, Texas eventually, but vice in the forms of prostitution and gambling continued to flourish, even under the watchful eyes of those who favored law and order.¹

Stories concerning vice and prostitution in Denison are extensive, but have never been historically documented before this work. Prostitution was a rampant industry in Texas during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and Denison was no exception. As historian Bill Neal wrote, “Texas lawmakers accommodated the sexual

needs of frontier males in a situation where women were in short supply: no law was passed criminalizing prostitution.” Laws eventually clamped down on prostitution and vice, but it was well into the twentieth century before they were consistently enforced. Consequently, Denison had a thriving vice district for many decades with numerous lively saloons and brothels operating at the heart of the city. Although saloons were a legal enterprise, they were often in close proximity to extra-legal houses of prostitution, and some even allowed “soiled doves,” or prostitutes, to solicit business or rent rooms on their premises. Skiddy Street was one road south of Main Street and for many years contained houses of ill repute. Some saloons also existed on Skiddy, but most of them flourished down the corridor of Main Street with the open toleration of law enforcement and the town’s citizenry. The location of Denison on the border of Indian Territory contributed to its appeal to ruffians and ladies of the night in the early days of the city, as it allowed for a quick and easy escape into anonymity. Additionally, the arrival of the Katy Railroad connected the area to other frontier towns in Missouri and Kansas, which brought a diverse new population to Denison. This included several prostitutes from the city of Sedalia, Missouri who moved to Denison in order to test the waters of a newly built frontier terminal.²

² V.V. Masterson, The Katy Railroad and the Last Frontier (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1952), 186; Bill Neal, Sex, Murder, and the Unwritten Law: Courting Judicial Mayhem, Texas Style (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2009), 234 (Quote). Masterson details the soiled “doves” of Mollie Andrews from Sedalia, MO, such as Millie Hipps.
Figure 1.1. Grayson County map, showing location of Denison.³

³ Graham, Landrum, Grayson County: An Illustrated History of Grayson County, Texas (Fort Worth: University Supply and Equipment Company, 1960). The map can be found on the first page.
On a national scale, two types of works focus on prostitution: studies of the prostitutes themselves and books that examine the legal and regulatory practices of different locales. Ann M. Butler’s *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery: Prostitutes in the American West, 1865-1890*, gives a thorough examination of prostitution in the west and many examples for Texas, which allows for comparison among western cities and the prostitutes that inhabited them. The main focus of this work is the women and their experience as part of the “tenderloin” – as vice districts were called - rather than the legal or regulatory practices of the districts where they plied their trade. Another study concentrating specifically on prostitutes is Ruth Rosen’s *The Lost Sisterhood*:  

---

4 MapQuest Inc. [Street map of Denison, Texas]. 2006. “Gray’s Jewelers.” [http://www.graysjewelers.info/1593370.html](http://www.graysjewelers.info/1593370.html) (accessed August 8, 2011). Gray’s Jewelers is a local Denison business and was simply used as an example for locating an accurate map.
Prostitution in America, 1900-1918. This work follows Butler’s chronologically and details the lives of women of the demimonde during the Progressive Era and how they survived after the national movement to close most red-light districts. The demimonde is a class of women who have lost their reputation due to their behavior, and a member of the demimonde is a woman who has joined the sisterhood of prostitution. Rosen explains how legal changes affected the lives of the women involved. Each of these books is useful in garnering an overall picture of the lives of prostitutes during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.5

In addition to works on the prostitutes themselves, there are studies that pertain exclusively to the legal changes happening in the country that led to the closing of red-light districts. Barbara Meil Hobson’s work, Uneasy Virtue: The Politics of Prostitution and the American Reform Tradition, is a comprehensive study of the politics of prostitution in the United States, which details how various reform movements affected and regulated vice. This is a national examination and shows how the country at large reacted to and controlled prostitution. Another legal study is Mara L. Keire’s For Business and Pleasure: Red-Light Districts and the Regulation of Vice in the United States, 1890-1930. This work is an important and systematic account of the regulatory actions taken with regards to prostitution and vice during the Progressive movement. Although Keire’s book focuses on a national scale, it is significant in explaining how the national movement for reform trickled down to affect cities and towns at the local level, including those in Texas. Mark Thomas Connelly’s work, The Response to Prostitution

in the Progressive Era, concentrates on the legal changes that occurred during the Progressive Era and brought about massive regulation of the vice industry on a national scale. His work gives many useful examples of the evolution that occurred and allows for more in-depth understanding of how national reforms affected local areas. Each of these studies contributes to an examination of prostitution at the national level, while describing how the Progressive movement and subsequent reforms shifted from the national to local arenas.  


The historiography on prostitution in Texas is limited at best. There is no all-encompassing study, but there are several works focusing on how prostitution evolved in certain location within the state. Cities such as Fort Worth, El Paso, and Waco have books devoted to the history of their red-light districts, while Galveston, Dallas, and Austin have theses and journal articles written on prostitution and vice within their borders. The only article that attempts a broad overview of prostitution in Texas is David Humphrey’s “Prostitution in Texas: From the 1830s to the 1960s,” published in the East Texas Historical Journal in 1995. Humphrey’s work is short, though, and it cannot fully outline such an extensive and persistent issue as prostitution in Texas. His article is helpful, however, in getting a broad understanding of red-light districts in the larger cities of the state and will be used throughout this study.  

placed in context and compared to other areas around Texas. In addition to writing the only work on prostitution in Texas, Humphrey also wrote an article detailing the legal history of prostitution in Austin, “Prostitution and Public Policy in Austin, Texas, 1870-1915.” This piece examines public attitudes toward vice in Austin and how those beliefs brought about legal changes in the city. Humphrey’s work ties in strongly with studies on how Progressive reform movements trickled down to affect towns and cities across the country.⁸

Richard F. Selcer’s book, *Hell’s Half Acre: The Life and Legend of a Red-Light District*, is a history of Fort Worth’s tenderloin district from its beginning in the mid-nineteenth century through its legal destruction in 1917. As in Austin, Fort Worth’s district was closed due to Progressive era reform measures and increasing pressures from the national government during World War I to end legally tolerated red-light districts. Fort Worth and Denison share similar beginnings, as both cities were frontier boomtowns; Fort Worth had a cattle trail and Denison had the Katy Railroad. The city of El Paso also has a book written on prostitution within the town’s borders, *The Gentlemen’s Club: The Story of Prostitution in El Paso*, by Gordon H. Frost. Frost looks at prostitution in El Paso and gives details of the institution as it pertained to that city. Thus, his work is useful in understanding how prostitution and vice evolved in El Paso as well as for comparison with other western cities.⁹

---

⁸ David C. Humphrey, “Prostitution and Public Policy in Austin, Texas, 1870-1915,” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 86 (April 1983).

The cities of Waco, Dallas and Galveston are each represented in a thesis or dissertation that studies the specific workings of prostitution and regulation within those areas. Amy S. Balderach’s “A Different Kind of Reservation: Waco’s Red-light District Revisited, 1880-1920,” details the legal regulations that Waco placed on vice and explains the history of the city’s vice district, Two Street, and prostitution in Waco over time. The Oldest Profession in Texas: Waco’s Legal Red Light District, by James Pylant and Sherri Knight, also examines prostitution’s history in Waco, with more focus on actual prostitutes and personal stories from the infamous tenderloin district. Jean M. Brown’s thesis, “Free Rein: Galveston Island’s Alcohol, Gambling, and Prostitution Era, 1839-1957,” explores Galveston’s long history with vice and prostitution and is useful in order to compare and contrast the legal restrictions Galveston placed on vice with those in other cities in Texas. Galveston also poses a fascinating example of a city that was largely unfazed by pressures of the Progressive movement and thus retained an active vice district well into the mid-twentieth century. Finally, Gwinnetta Malone Crowell’s “To Keep Those Red Lights Burning: Dallas’ Response to Prostitution, 1874-1913,” shows how the city of Dallas responded to prostitution and outlines the legal regulations Dallas imposed on vice. Dallas was one of a handful of cities, including Waco, which actually legalized prostitution for a period of time during the existence of the city’s official red-light district.10

---

Where Denison is concerned, only two books exist that offer specific information on prostitution and vice in the early days of the town’s history. Jack Maguire’s work, *Katy’s Baby: The Story of Denison, Texas*, gives the history of Denison as a city, which also includes specifics on Skiddy Street. Maguire offers good insight into early life in the town, including a broad overview of the elements of vice that existed. Additionally, V.V. Masterson’s book, *The Katy Railroad and the Last Frontier*, details the history of the Katy Railroad and has two chapters dealing almost exclusively with Denison. Masterson’s book gives important facts about the early development of the town and captures the rough and transitory nature of the city’s earliest citizens. Although Maguire and Masterson provide a useful overview of Denison’s early days, the evolution of the city’s attitude towards vice and prostitution is in need of further investigation in order to be understood fully.11

Prostitution in Denison can be understood only within the context of how the “profession” operated in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the nineteenth century, there were no national laws regarding the regulation of vice districts, so states and cities were left to their own devices when determining how to contain and control prostitution. The state of Texas’ penal code, adopted in 1856, “inhibited the keeping of a house of public prostitution within its borders by imposing fines of not less than $100 nor more than $500 to violators,” but this statute was ignored by many Texas cities. At any given time, the larger cities in Texas had more than one hundred prostitutes during the 1880s and that figure tripled by

---

1910. An exact figure cannot be determined due to the transient lives of prostitutes, their illicit work, and under-counting by census takers.12

Texas’s sizable population of prostitutes resided primarily in its urban centers, and eight of the state’s largest cities developed at least one vice district encompassing several city blocks in size. For example, El Paso’s red-light district was known as the Utah Street Reservation, and city leaders took a quasi-moral/quasi-regulatory stance in controlling prostitution. The city segregated the district, taxed the women, and required medical examinations, but it never officially legalized the enterprise. Prostitutes in El Paso were controlled by several ordinances, and began to fall under more strict legal scrutiny in 1882 when the city started enforcing sections 49 and 74 of the city charter, which imposed a licensing fee or fine of $5.00 a week. Later, in the 1890s, the city passed the Reservation Ordinance, which limited the size and scope of the segregated red-light district to a specific location on the south side of El Paso. Over the months that followed, city leaders took regulation a step further by passing ordinances requiring all prostitutes to register with the police and submit to weekly medical examinations in order to check for venereal disease. In spite of the regulation, the Utah Street Reservation flourished in El Paso: more than 600 prostitutes occupied the tenderloin in the 1890s.13

In Waco, the red-light district was called “Two Street”, and it was located just one block from city hall and the business district. In the 1870s, Waco licensed brothels, but

---

the city dropped the measure during the 1880s. In 1889, Waco enacted ordinances that provided for licensing of prostitutes and bawdy houses, and it also required medical examinations for the women of the demimonde. That same year, Waco officially legalized prostitution within a precisely defined district. By the turn of the century, the city boasted twenty-four legal brothels within its borders. The women who worked as prostitutes were required to apply to the City Secretary to keep a brothel or to continue their profession as a bawd. Madams paid $12.50 for each and every bedroom and $10.00 for every “inmate.” The women themselves had to apply and pay $10.00 for an annual license to practice prostitution. Health examinations were required twice a month and had to be paid for by the women or their madams. During the years of Waco’s legalized district, the town supported the idea of having prostitutes segregated and legally subject to arrest and medical examination rather than having the women working throughout the city where it was more difficult to regulate their activities.\footnote{Ann Gabbert, “Prostitution and Moral Reform in the Borderlands: El Paso, 1890-1920,” \textit{Journal of the History of Sexuality} 12 (2003); David C. Humphrey, “Prostitution in Texas: From the 1830s to the 1960s,” \textit{East Texas Historical Journal} 33 (1995), 31; Margaret H. Davis, “Harlots and Hymnals: A Historic Confrontation of Vice and Virtue in Waco, Texas,” \textit{Mid-South Folklore} 4 (Winter 1976), 88-89; For more detailed information on Waco’s red-light district see, Amy S. Balderach, “A Different Kind of Reservation: Waco’s Red-light District Revisited, 1880-1920,” M.A. thesis, Baylor University, 2005; James Plyant and Sherry Knight, \textit{The Oldest Profession in Texas: Waco’s Legal Red-light District} (Stephenville: Jacobus Books, 2011).}

Galveston was known as the most notorious city in Texas in regard to prostitution and vice. Since before the Civil War, gambling, saloons and houses of ill repute were part of the established scene in the coastal city. The red-light district was housed on Post Office Street, and although never officially legalized, was an embedded and accepted part of Galveston’s culture by the close of the nineteenth century.
publicly tolerated vice zones and regularly accessed fines from women as payment for allowing their occupation to continue unfettered by legal hindrances.¹⁵

In effect then, prostitution was extralegal and tolerated in late nineteenth century Texas, primarily due to the revenue that could be gained from its continued existence. Even when prostitution was formally made illegal within a city’s borders, law enforcement more often than not overlooked such directives and continued to allow disorderly houses to exist without harassment. Local cities were allowed to dictate the terms under which prostitution existed and thus various areas, in regulating red-light districts, used a wide variety of control techniques. City councils and mayors were given the power to enforce city statutes on vice, and some chose to legalize formal districts, while others decided to create general laws prohibiting such action. Even when laws existed for restricting or limiting prostitution, law enforcement typically ignored such statutes and often took payment in return for protecting and allowing vice districts to continue. Some cities found red-light districts to be so profitable that vice was a public, if not legal, part of the city’s make-up. Denison was an example of a city that regulated and taxed, but never legalized prostitution.¹⁶

Thus, as long as prostitutes remained within certain prescribed areas, kept a relatively low profile, and paid their fines, they were allowed and even encouraged to continue their work as ladies of the night. Citizens and community leaders tended to

---


¹⁶ A very general framework of prostitution in Texas, including the names of various red-light districts, can be found at: David C. Humphrey, “PROSTITUTION,” Handbook of Texas Online (http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/jbp01), accessed April 25, 2011. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.
view prostitution with an attitude of cautious toleration, and rarely did cities aim to eradicate vice from their borders.

As the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth, national and state attitudes began to change toward legalized and extra-legal red-light districts. Public acceptance of the tenderloin districts wavered as the Progressive movement placed greater pressure on lawmakers and law enforcement to cut down on the allowances formerly given to prostitution. However, in 1907, the Texas legislature created a statute that gave cities the legal authority to establish municipal vice districts while simultaneously giving citizens the right to bring suit against any houses of ill repute not located within such districts. Soon after this law passed, Dallas and Houston established official vice districts by proscribing prostitution outside their boundaries. Subsequent laws were less accepting of prostitution as a necessary evil, and pressures began coming from the national stage.\(^\text{17}\)

The first national Progressive law that effected prostitution in a major way was the Mann Act of 1910. The Mann Act stated, “that any person who shall knowingly transport or cause to be transported, in interstate or foreign commerce, any woman or girl for the purpose of prostitution or debauchery, or for any other immoral purpose, shall be deemed guilty of a felony.” This law came into existence due to a growing fear of “white slavery” in the United States and a concern that women were being enslaved and forced into prostitution. At the time, there was a belief that white slavery and subsequently, prostitution, was being conducted within a national organization, which

\(^{17}\text{David C. Humphrey, “Prostitution in Texas: From the 1830s to the 1960s,” East Texas Historical Journal 33 (1995); Barbara Meil Hobson, Uneasy Virtue: The Politics of Prostitution and the American Reform Tradition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1987, p. 148. Hobson discusses the 1907 law, which is also known as the “Texas Disorderly House” statute.}
was a gross exaggeration. As historian Robert E. Riegel states, "prostitution was, of course, a business, frequently involving organization at the local level, but there was not national or international organization." The coming of World War I sealed the fate of openly tolerated prostitution districts nationally, as efforts to protect soldiers from possibly diseased women became an issue of national security. Very few red-light districts survived the Progressive battle that ensued.\textsuperscript{18}

Before World War I, and after the Mann Act passed, a Texas state law against pandering was approved on March 1, 1911. This law punished anyone who procured a girl, willingly or not, to work in a house of prostitution, as well as anyone who owned such an establishment. Thus, it focused primarily on madams and pimps, rather than the prostitutes themselves. At this point, women were still seen as victims in vice and in need of protection whether they were willing participants or not. Although the law against pandering was not a direct assault on prostitution, it was an attempt to deter those persons who operated brothels and make the possible punishment for such actions more severe.\textsuperscript{19}

During World War I, further legal restrictions were implemented, specifically to shield soldiers from any sexually transmitted disease, STD, associated with prostitutes. The Chamberlain-Kahn Act, enacted by the United States Congress in 1918, gave the government the power to quarantine any woman suspected of having an STD. This


\textsuperscript{19} Hans Peter Mareus Neilson Gammel, \textit{The Laws of Texas, 1911 (Volume 15)}. Book, 1911, digital images (http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark/67531/metapth9792; accessed April 25, 2011), University of North Texas Library, \textit{The Portal to Texas History}, http://texashistory.unt.edu; crediting University of North Texas Libraries, Denton, Texas, 29-30. This site contains the information regarding pandering.
allowed police to arrest women suspected of being prostitutes and hold them in detention centers while they were forcibly checked for venereal disease. The women were often held indefinitely and without concern for their legal rights. This happened because the national priority was to the soldiers who were in possible danger from so-called diseased women, and thus, the legal system overlooked the blatant disregard for women’s civil liberties that was taking place in cities across the United States. Texas felt the national pressure to clamp down on prostitutes and the vice districts that housed them, but each city chose to react to the progressive movement in a different way.\textsuperscript{20}

During World War I, El Paso and Waco both acquiesced to national pressure in some form or fashion. Waco officially shut down their vice district due to World War I campaigns against venereal disease, as new federal and Texas laws during 1917 and 1918 mandated prostitution-free zones around military camps, local clinics to check for disease, and detention for women who were suspected carriers of sexually transmitted diseases. The death of “Two Street” was slow, however, as records show the reservation still operational as late as 1920. El Paso also felt pressure from the War Department and began arresting women in more significant numbers around 1917. The city even opened a detention center where supposedly diseased women were held without bail and inspected. Even though El Paso attempted stronger regulation during the years surrounding World War I, by 1920 the vice district existed almost exactly as it

\textsuperscript{20} For information on the Chamberlain-Kahn Act of 1918, see, Mark Thomas Connelly, \textit{The Response to Prostitution in the Progressive Era} (University of North Carolina Press, 2009).
had in 1890, with licensing fees, registration and health examinations still being practiced.²¹

Among Texas cities in the early twentieth century, Galveston’s red-light district maintained the greatest longevity. While most cities closed down vice districts during World War I due to national pressures from the progressives, Galveston’s Post Office Street survived the war. Although it closed temporarily during the war years, by 1929 the district had more than fifty Anglo brothels, at least two Hispanic brothels, and more than 300 prostitutes. Additionally, 150 to 200 black prostitutes worked in houses and cribs in the alleys and 300 to 400 women worked as prostitutes outside the official district. Galveston’s vice district continued well into the 1950s with city officials and local citizenry reliant on the economic boost the district brought to the town. In 1955 a representative of the American Social Hygiene Association claimed that Galveston was the “worst spot in the nation as far as prostitution in concerned.” Thus, the Progressive movement’s attack on prostitution and official red-light districts had some success, but many cities, such as El Paso and Galveston, still maintained their districts long after the conclusion of World War I.²²

The history of Texas and prostitution is a complicated one, which varies greatly from city to city and between urban areas and frontier boomtowns. There are commonalities between locations, but the purpose of this study is to shed light on


Denison’s relationship with elements of vice. Houses of prostitution, as well as saloons and gambling establishments, existed openly for many decades within the borders of what many referred to as the “Gateway to the Southwest,” and the history of these sometimes illicit institutions has yet to be fully explored.
Denison, Texas owed its founding to the ambitions of politicians and the M.K. and T Railroad. When the Katy Railroad began looking for a terminus south of the Red River, Judge Christopher Columbus Binkley of the 12th Texas Judicial District, and a resident of Sherman, recommended creating a new town close enough to Sherman for reasonable accessibility while sufficiently removed to shield Sherman from the undesirable elements associated with a railroad terminus. Binkley used his influence with Governor Edmund J. Davis to accelerate the sometimes-slow process of city incorporation, and on February 8, 1873, Davis signed the act officially creating the town of Denison. With Denison incorporated, the population increased to between 2,000 and 3,000 inhabitants within the span of four months. Subsequently, along with the railroad came business and the promise of future growth and industry, but inordinately large portions of the city’s early citizens had less than stellar backgrounds. As historian Jack Maguire notes, “Denison, four miles as the crow flies from the sluggish river that separated Texas from the territory, became a kind of unofficial headquarters for a variety of criminals. It was a local brag that at least half of the almost 4,000 residents were ‘ruffians’ and the other offscourings of society.” Certainly, upstanding citizens made permanent home in Denison, but proportionally the town in its early days had a
large criminal base that used the railroad hub to conduct their often illegal, sometimes violent occupations.23

The Denison Town Company was organized on September 20, 1872 by Colonel Robert Smith Stevens, the “Agent and Attorney for the purchase of lands” for the Katy Railroad. He made himself president of the company and placed city lots for sale on September 23. Four months into the city’s existence, the Denison Town Company had sold $90,000 worth of building lots due to the arrival of the railroad and thus the town advanced in the words of one historian “more like magic than like the normal growth of a pioneer settlement.” The beginnings of Denison seemed full of promise, although an early Denison News article stated that “a great many families in Denison are still residing in tents. There are no dwelling houses to rent, as they are occupied as fast as the mechanics can finish them.” Accordingly, the town was made up of two groups of people: those who saw the locale as an opportunity for life and success within the realm of a booming frontier and those whose penchant for debauchery and lawlessness thrived in the freedom that a town such as Denison offered.24

Early Denison was a primitive society, hovering on the outskirts of civilization. In the beginning, there was little recreation other than drinking, gambling, fighting and patronizing prostitutes. Many ruffians called the Indian Territory home and they, along

with Denison’s already rough and tumble elements, came to town “to drink, carouse, and buy whiskey to bootleg to the Indians.” The business community was dominated by occupations that thrived in a town with such seedy recreational tastes. A census taken by the Weekly News six months after the first town lots were sold showed twenty saloons and ten houses of prostitution, and those numbers continued to grow. Eventually, there were fifty-two saloons, which made “the sale of spirituous liquors the predominant retail business in the new town for several years.” Even with the large number of morally questionable citizens and transients, the townspeople of Denison attempted to control the areas where vice was permitted. Thus, Skiddy Street’s reputation came into existence.25

Skiddy Street in Denison was one street south of Main and it soon became the local red-light district. As Jack Maguire states, “It was populated mostly by saloons, gambling houses and brothels and became the ‘sin center’ of Denison.” Dance halls also permeated Skiddy Street in the 1870s, as the Denison News reported in 1873, “the dance halls continue to flourish.” Skiddy Street was a ravine with the underbrush cleared away and each side of the street was lined with as rough a collection of tents, shacks, and cotton cloth and board houses as many casehardened railroad construction men had ever seen. Historian V.V. Masterson recalled that “Here, crowding each other into the befouled former watercourse, were the tented gambling halls, the hurdy-gurdy joints, lowest class saloons, cockfighting pits, variety houses, and the deadly ‘dovecotes’ that served as houses of prostitution for all races, colors, and creeds.” In Denison’s earliest days, Skiddy Street was home to Millie Hipps and her soiled “doves”,

---

who were presumed to have come from Mollie Andrews’ incubator in Sedalia, Missouri. These prostitutes plied their trade to a higher-class customer, presumably from Sherman. Some considered Skiddy Street to be the “rat alley” of Main Street and quite appropriately named “for the modern Skid Row couldn’t compare with it”.26

Figure 2.1. Denison Dance Hall, circa 1875.27

Main Street was not without saloons, but the Denison Town Company attempted to keep only reasonably respectable enterprises on their main thoroughfare and

relegated the more questionable businesses to Skiddy Street. The more upstanding citizens of Denison yearned to use zoning to separate the less attractive aspects of society because “This early effort at zoning somehow separated, for the most part, the respectable citizens from the less desirable.” Saloons, such as the Crystal Palace were allowed to remain on Main Street, along with a scattering of other pool halls and dance houses. Masterson remarked, “Razorback hogs and scrawny cattle might wallow in the mud holes of Main Street, but houses of ill repute had to stay in the next block south, on Skiddy, if they wanted to keep their licenses.” This particular arrangement allowed visitors in Denison to be impressed with the orderliness and safety of the town, while at the same time, Denison achieved a reputation “both among lawmen and outlaws as the toughest town on the border.” Places on Skiddy Street, such as the Palace, the Park, and the Sazerac, some of the more notorious dives, helped give Denison its dangerous reputation. Even though many attempts were made to separate the red light district from more genteel society, “houses of amusement outranked religious institutions in numbers if not popularity,” with only one church erected in 1873 as opposed to twenty saloons and ten brothels. As time progressed, many saloons moved back onto Main Street, where they remained until well into the twentieth century.28

The early history of Denison was tied inextricably to its seedier elements. As the Dallas Morning News reported, “If one could pick the place in Texas where crime and vice flourished with least restraint, that probably would be the Denison of late 1872 and early 1873. With railroads building in from north and south, Denison was crowded with

thugs, gamblers, and loose women.” This connection between the coming of the railroad and the influx of vice and crime is evident throughout Denison’s early days. Every attempt at controlling vice succeeded only in confining its location, not limiting its prevalence and popularity. Journalist and sometime historian Wayne Gard wrote that “Saloons were wide open, operating sometimes all night; gambling houses were crowded and stayed open until the early morning hours; and houses of ill repute operated in the heart of the city.” It seemed that the citizens in Denison who opposed the more scandalous operations on Skiddy Street were fighting an uphill battle between their desire to clean up their town and the transient frontier individuals who preferred Denison as rough and rowdy as it was.29

Skiddy Street was named after Francis Skiddy, a Katy Railroad official who became the only one to ever have that honor rescinded when the street’s name was changed. After Skiddy became known as the “sin center” of Denison, the area farther west on Skiddy developed into one of the finer residential districts in town. The homeowners were embarrassed to have their street address associated with a red-light district and thus “they prevailed on the city commission to change the name to Chestnut after a favorite tree.” Therefore, beginning in the 1880s, Skiddy Street’s name was changed to Chestnut Street, which it remains to the present day.30

Main Street in Denison had a drastically different appearance to outsiders than Skiddy Street. It emerged as a reasonably quiet and decorous area in comparison to its southern neighbor street. Interestingly, only on Sundays would the undesirables from

Skiddy Street make their presence known on Main. On that day “the frail daughters of Skid Row donned their finest plumage and paraded through the town.” Prostitutes were sometimes referred to as “frail” because they were seen as morally compromised and without decency. They rented rigs from the livery stable, which was across from the notorious Sazerac saloon and drove their matched pairs up and down Main Street, all the while screaming and laughing at passers by. This spectacle was well known to locals and often made the newspapers. One day, “a couple of demimondes, seated behind a span of spirited animals, were taking an airing Sunday afternoon, when the horses took fright, ran away, overturning the buggy and threw the occupants to the ground.” Events like these were a clear reminder that only one street separated such scandalous activity from the rest of Denison citizenry, and that line was often crossed.31

Frequently, the disorderliness of Denison’s criminal community became violent and tragedy occurred. Policeman John Shannon Day on February 5, 1874, attempted to arrest a group of boisterous men outside the Eldorado Saloon on Skiddy Street when he was shot and killed by a member of the gang. About a year later, another police officer, Charles Patman was shot and killed while endeavoring to assist a fellow officer in arresting a man for carrying a pistol. In 1879, Grayson County constable James A. Nelms and Denison policeman Joseph E. Johnson were both shot and killed. Nelms was killed trying to arrest a drunken man in the Bank Exchange Saloon in Denison, and Johnson was killed while attempting to arrest a man for stealing a coat. Interestingly, the Bank Exchange Saloon was located on Main Street, not the infamous Skiddy Street. Marshall Sam Ball was also wounded twice one night when he tried to stop a brawl at

31 V.V. Masterson, *The Katy Railroad and the Last Frontier* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1952), 187 (First Quote); *The Denison News*, April 24, 1873 (Second Quote).
the Red Light Saloon. Certainly, Skiddy Street was a dangerous location for lawmen and citizens alike, although the violence often spilled from Skiddy onto the town’s main thoroughfare that city leaders had strived consistently, but in vain, to keep clean.32

It is amazing that, considering the amount of brutality that occurred in the initial days of Denison, outsiders still could feel safe within the town as a whole. The violence seemed to have been mostly restricted to the red light district and the saloons and dens of iniquity that were prevalent there. In January 1873, Edward King, a Scribner’s Magazine reporter, was commissioned to write a story about the newly built Katy Railroad. His travels took him through the south, stopping in Denison, where he stated:

It was exceedingly remarkable, also, that in a community one-half of which was undoubtedly made up of professional ruffians, “terminus” gamblers, and the offscourings of society, and where there was not yet a regularly organized government, there was not more of terrorism. Every third building in the place was a drinking saloon with gambling appurtenances, filled after nightfall with a depraved, adventurous crowd, whose profanity was appalling, whose aspect was hideous. Men drunk and sober danced to rude music in the poorly lighted saloons, and did not lack female partners. In vulgar bestiality of language, in the pure delight of parading profanity and indecency, the ruffian there had no equal. The gambling houses were frequented by hundreds.33


Among the vice and danger of Skiddy Street, prostitution was a thriving institution. The city of Denison controlled and regulated vice of all types, including houses of ill repute. Not only were the brothels regulated, they were licensed and

---

taxed. From the time that the state of Texas incorporated Denison as a city in 1873, the town’s mayor and city council had the power to regulate, license and tax vice. Section 55 of the city charter stated that the mayor and council had the power “to license, tax and regulate billiard tables, pin alleys, ball alleys, disorderly houses, tippling shops, bar rooms, dram shops, or other places wherein liquor is sold or dispensed, bawdy houses, houses of prostitution or assignation, gambling and gaming houses, lotteries, and all fraudulent devices and practices, and all kinds of indecencies, and to suppress and restrain the same.” Section 80 allowed them “to prevent and punish the keeping of houses of prostitution within the city, or within such limits therein as may be defined by ordinances, and to adopt summary measures for the removal, or suppression, or regulation and inspection of all such establishments.” Denison eventually chose to have ordinances relegating prostitution to Skiddy Street, but the city still taxed and licensed the occupation in order to profit from the ‘frail demimondes’.  

In addition to the city charter, Denison passed an ordinance concerning disorderly houses on April 30, 1873. This ordinance made prostitution and brothel houses illegal and mandated that such misdemeanor crimes would be punishable by fines. This was no doubt the city leader’s attempt to appease the growing population of citizens who were very uncomfortable with the rough reputation Skiddy Street had gained. Although this law was put in place during the early days of Denison, prostitution

and vice in general were not dampened, but remained prevalent and public for the next several decades.  

Denison’s early days were plagued by extreme budget difficulties and financial woes. The new town enacted taxes immediately following incorporation, but leaders soon found that the amount was not enough, and by June the town was more than $2,000 in debt. Section 55 of the city charter made it easy for the city fathers to control and profit substantially from the frailties of the citizenry. Collecting fees from the population of prostitutes and those who operated the bawdy houses solved a large portion of this problem. Brothel keepers had to pay a $5 fee each week to the city, and their “inmates” were assessed $1. These funds were distributed to members of the local police force, a practice that not only pleased the marshals, but also eradicated most of the bribes this segment of the populace had been paying for police ‘protection’. However, the demimondes and their landlords did not object as much to the fees as they did to the order restricting them to Skiddy Street and ordering them off of Main Street. Only a few higher-class establishments were allowed to remain on Main.  

Denison was in need of law and order to help control and regulate Skiddy Street and its inhabitants. Lee Hall, the City Marshal of Sherman, advanced to Deputy Sheriff of Denison in 1873, where hands “for the heading and cutting out of criminals were as badly needed as in any locality within the state.” Denison’s population could largely be divided into two groups: those to protect and those to watch. Hall’s business was to tone down the recklessness that was so prevalent in the newly developed town. “Bad


men in Denison were ‘thick as fiddlers in hell’ and heavy odds gave zest to the struggle to maintain the law.” Hall scoured Denison for wanted men, often having to search the more lurid establishments to find his prey. “Saloons with women in them, dance and gambling halls, were demanded as civic rights, and with tumultuous gusto the demand was supplied.” The three most notorious resorts - the Palace, the Park, and the Sazerac - were often in complete bedlam. During the slightly less than two years that Hall was Deputy Sheriff, 1,060 arrests were made and seven men were killed. He was wounded five times in the line of duty and was considered fearless by the town’s populace. Hall’s tenure in Denison, before he joined the Texas Rangers, gave a semblance of law and order to the rowdy town, though vice and crime did not lessen.38

The prostitutes of Denison in the 1870s are difficult to document, the women were often transient and rarely left personal records, but information can be pieced together from a combination of newspaper articles, city directory listings, and secondary sources. Much can be inferred from the early Denison newspapers though as to the names and general descriptions of some of the more notorious prostitutes. Where they worked and lived was sometimes listed as well as occasional physical details and personality traits. From its beginning in April 1875, the Denison Daily Cresset reported almost weekly criminal activity and exploits involving prostitutes. Many demimondes were listed multiple times over a period of months and others were mentioned only once. The Recorder’s Court was the most frequent location where the “frail” occupants of Skiddy Street showed up, but occasionally the Cresset saw fit to give a more detailed description of an incident involving a lady of the night. Lizzie, a tightrope walking

38 Dora Neill Raymond, Captain Lee Hall of Texas (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1940), 17 (First Quote), 18-19 (Second and Third Quotes); Donna Hunt, “Red Hall in Denison History,” Sherman Herald Democrat, October 3, 2009.
demimonde attempted to trick a farmer into marrying her until her gambler boyfriend caught wind of the scheme and physically beat her before stealing money from the poor farmer. Amelia and Emma Brown had several mentions in the *Cresset*. They were described as “two notorious negro prostitutes” and were once charged with “stripping a colored girl, tying her to a bedpost and whipping her with a broom.” Emma was also charged with vagrancy and indecent exposure in the Recorder’s Court. On a separate occasion, Emma and Amelia were called “notorious negro nymph du paves” and brought in for obscene language and then sentenced to twenty days on bread and water in jail. The Old Journal Building was evidently the house of the African American prostitutes and the location where Amelia and Emma Brown plied their notorious trade.  

A prostitute named Sallie Miller from the Sazerac was infamous for her ability to get into violent altercations. She was mentioned as having fought with a man named Ed Killian and subsequently plunged a knife into his cheek. Later, Sallie fought with Louise Duvall, apparently with a considerable amount of hair pulling and scratching. Finally, she was brought before the Recorder’s Court for getting into a tussle with a man over a card game at the Sazerac. In all of the occasions, there was no mention of her being imprisoned or fined for her actions.

One of the most common reasons for Skiddy Street prostitutes to be brought before the Mayor or Recorder’s Court was disorderly conduct. Other frequent reasons for prostitutes to be arrested were: vagrancy, drunk and disorderly, fighting, carrying

---

39 *The Denison Daily Cresset*, April 13, 1875 (Lizzie’s story), June 17, July 9, and August 19, 1875 (Amelia and Emma Brown).

40 Ibid, July 5, September 23, and October 11, 1875 (Sallie Miller’s escapades).
deadly weapons, disturbing the peace, and indecent exposure. Vagrancy was such a common reason for arresting prostitutes that women brought before the court on that charge can be safely assumed to be members of the tenderloin. On one day in August 1875, nine people from Skiddy Street were brought before the Mayor’s Court for fighting, which led the Mayor to describe Skiddy as “Dante’s Inferno.”

Newspapers in Denison almost always made a point of prostitutes’ race. Articles were extremely clear in noting the color of a prostitute’s skin and typically were descriptive in such metaphors. Besides Amelia and Emma Brown, Jennie Galbraeth and Caroline Potts, both black prostitutes brought in for disorderly conduct were described in the *Cresset* as being “darker in color than the ace of spades.” When lawmen raided a “negro” den on Crawford Street, they arrested not only Emma Brown for vagrancy, but Mollie Williams and Bellie Ward as well. These women were known to live in the Old Journal Building, which the paper dubbed as a “nigger dive” full of prostitutes and thieves. Denison certainly had a significant population of African American demimonades, but it is also possible that these women were over-represented in arrests due to common prejudices of the time.

Suicide was another significant problem that faced the “soiled doves” of Denison. The year 1875 was considered to be “suicide mania by the frail occupants of Skiddy Street.” Evidently many attempts at suicide were made, more than a few successful. One victim, “Maud,” a demimonde at the Crystal Palace Varieties, committed suicide at Langley’s Dance Hall by taking morphine; she was not yet eighteen years old.

---

41 *The Denison Daily Cresset*, August 10, 1875 (Dante’s Inferno). Reasons for arresting prostitutes were taken from a variety of Recorder’s Courts listings throughout *The Denison Daily Cresset* from 1875-1876.

42 Ibid, August 21, 1875 (Jennie Galbraeth and Caroline Potts, First Quote), June 17, 1875 (Mollie Williams and Bellie Ward), May 22, 1875 (“nigger dive”).
Examples such as this point to the dark and often dangerous side of a prostituest's chosen profession. Of all the prostitutes listed in the Denison News and the Denison Daily Cresset for the years 1873-1875, only one can be found in the City Directory of Denison for 1876-1877. Whether this means that the names listed in the newspapers were aliases or the women had simply moved on by this point, cannot be known. Some of the prostitutes mentioned in the newspapers for this time period were: Lizzie, Minnie Lee, Effie Cregier, Emma Brown, Mollie Williams, Bellie Ward, Sallie Miller, Amelia Brown, Irene Donaldson, Effie Lucas, Pricillia Potts, Amanda Hudson, “Irish Mag,” Mollie Blair, “Rowdy Kate,” Lizzie Davenport, Lizzie Woods, Jennie Galbraeth, Caroline Potts, Maggie Louise, Sandy Overton, Mary Anderson, Louise Duvall, and “Maud.” Out of this group, only Amanda Hudson was listed in the City Directory, in which she was described as “colored” and having no occupation.

One of the more notorious outlaw couples to make a temporary home in Denison were Red Joe or “Rowdy Joe” and “Rowdy Kate”, also known as Joe and Katherine Lowe. They were not actually married as their last name suggests, but rather partners in crime. Their long and illustrious career of debauchery began in Newton and Wichita, Kansas where “the rowdy Lowes managed notorious dives.” These dives were a saloon and dance hall with full “accessories,” most likely a reference to upstairs rooms and prostitutes. Their place in Wichita burned to the ground after Joe killed E.T. “Red” Beard in an infamous gunfight. Beard had owned a dance hall adjacent to Joe’s in

---

44 City Directory of the City of Denison, Grayson County, Texas for 1876 and 1877, Typescript available from Denison Public Library, Dr. Mavis Anne Bryant, September 24, 2010, The Denison Daily Cresset, 1875.
Wichita and was attempting to shoot a prostitute named Josephine through the window when he mistakenly hit another “soiled dove.” This incensed Joe, and he followed Beard outside, mortally wounding him with a shotgun. Wanted for murder in Kansas, Joe and Kate made their move to Texas, landing in Denison for a time, followed by San Antonio and Fort Worth. In Denison, they ran the notorious Sazerac saloon, where Joe’s reputation as a gunfighter continued. “He loved a brawl, liked more than anything else to beat a disgruntled patron to the draw by a sledge-hammer blow to the jaw, followed by a scientific disabling kick.” “Rowdy Kate” was also a force to be reckoned with; she was brought before the Mayor’s Court for fighting. “Joe was described as an immaculately dressed man with a big diamond blazing on his shirtfront and smoking a cigar. Kate, in full evening dress wore blazing diamonds and sat in a corner presiding over a faro game.” They showed up in Fort Worth in 1876, where Joe abandoned Kate and married another woman. He would become a cornerstone in Hell’s Half Acre of Fort Worth, and Kate would move on to Weatherford, Texas where “she ran ‘a den of infamy in the business portion’ of that town.” Joe was eventually shot to death in a saloon in Denver, while Kate continued to move on. In the early 1880’s “Rowdy Kate” appeared in Tombstone, where she and “Big Nose Kate,” Doc Holliday’s mistress, opened the town’s first brothel: “They erected a large tent, ordered barrels of cheap whiskey and hired several ‘working girls.’” The establishment was not fancy but it was successful, although Big Nose Kate’s drinking later became a problem and the ladies parted ways. Where “Rowdy Kate” went from Tombstone is a mystery.45

---

From the standpoint of the law, prostitution in Denison was technically illegal, but the practice was informally sanctioned by the imposition of taxes on the bawds and bawdyhouse keepers as well as the regulation of the locations where the women could work. Even though the women were occasionally arrested for their misdoings, by and large the community and law enforcement did not interfere in the happenings of Skiddy Street. Certainly there were economic benefits for the city of Denison, and perhaps for a time those outweighed the moral outrage of the more conservative citizenry. Gambling, houses of prostitution, dance halls, and saloons encompassed big business for railroad towns, and the 1870s represented the height of Denison’s vice-ridden history. As time progressed, the popularity of vice and prostitution decreased and moral

---


reformers fought to eliminate openly operating brothels. However, Denison’s houses of ill repute survived into the twentieth century and saloons thrived on Main Street for decades.

Denison’s early days were marked by colorful characters, violence, vice, and the moderate attempts by the more respectable townspeople to control such elements. By and large, in the 1870s, Denison’s rough and rowdy crowd went uncontrolled, and throughout its history Denison would be home to a large number of criminals. Being on the edge of the Indian Territory, criminals were attracted to the locality and convenience of Denison. It was the perfect location for criminal enterprises, as escape from the law required only a short distance. Thus, Denison’s shady reputation began in the 1870s, and showed little signs of abating for the remainder of the century.47

Arguably the main reason red-light districts were allowed to remain in existence for so long was due primarily to the financial and economic concerns of the city itself. Denison, along with other frontier Texas towns, needed the money that taxing illicit activity could provide. If such actions were simply made illegal, cities would have had more difficulty in regulating and segregating vice districts. Eventually, in the twentieth century, prostitution and gambling would not disappear, but go underground and become unregulated and untaxed elements of criminal society.

In summary, prostitution, and the alcohol and gambling that accompanied it, served as cornerstones of Denison’s economic survival in the town’s early days and their popularity continued until well after civilization came in the forms of schools and churches. Denison’s location on the border of the Indian Territory made it ideal for

---

47 Maguire, Katy’s Baby, 33 (Quote).
criminals needing a convenient base of operation that provided an easy escape route, and the Katy Railroad brought a diverse and primarily male population to enjoy Denison’s pleasures. This combination created a wild frontier environment. Denison was created for the sole purpose of becoming a railroad center, but with the railroad came prostitution and other forms of vice. The prevalence of prostitution and vice in Denison was as important to its survival as the Katy Railroad was to its formation and existence, and although the Denison of today may appear vastly different from the Denison of the nineteenth century, they share a special history built on the backs of prostitutes and the tracks of the Katy Railroad.
CHAPTER III

MADAMS AND PROSTITUTES OF DENISON, 1880-1905

I could not make a demonstration of affection over men nor any pretense at response to their caresses. For the life of me, I could not understand why they should expect it. They had only bought my body. I could not see why they should want more. My love was not for sale, piecemeal, to every man who had the price to pay for my body.  

As Denison grew from a frontier boomtown to an established railroad city, internal changes occurred that enabled the area to seem more settled than in the 1870s, the town’s first decade. Churches, schools, and industry abounded creating jobs and opportunities for a more civilized population. The number of individuals moving into Denison continued to soar, and the infamous Skiddy Street began to house more than just the frail occupants of the demimonde. Respectable communities arose on the eastern side of the street, which led city leaders to change the name of the road to Chestnut Street in the early 1880s. The western side of Chestnut still housed brothels until the twentieth century, but the name change allowed citizens living on the street to avoid being automatically associated with prostitution.

By searching through city directories and census records from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the names of prostitutes and madams can be found along with certain information about their lives, such as ages, location of birth, and whether they had children. On the whole, details about the personal lives of prostitutes is very scarce and thus it is necessary to piecemeal information together in an attempt to formulate a general account of their lives in Denison. For the 1870s, the only consistent

---

record of prostitute’s lives was in the newspapers, which provided scanty information at best. They gave few specifics about the women: usually only their criminal records and scandalous behavior were worthy of a newspaper mention. The city directory of 1876 was limited in scope compared with later directories and was thus only useful in looking up names rather than gathering considerable information on the citizens. With the 1880s came more thorough city directories by Morrison and Fourmy and Maloney’s out of Atlanta, which provided people’s names, occupations, and addresses. These can be compared across time to find consistency with addresses of brothels, often called female boardinghouses, as well as names of occupants and madams. In fact, the 1896 and 1898 city directories specifically listed the names of madams, the only years this was done.49

Another source that is pertinent in documenting the life of the Denison madams are the tax rolls for Grayson County. Their financial rise and fall can be followed through study of the tax records for the years in question. Tax rolls list the value of their property with a separate number for each property owned. The prostitutes themselves do not appear in these records: only the women who owned property. Madams who

---

49 The city directory of 1876 is available at the Denison Public Library for special viewing only. I also have a copy on file that was given to me by Dr. Mavis Anne Bryant. It has recently been put online through the Denison, Texas Genealogical Society’s Online Document Project at www.txgenweb.com; City Directory of the City of Denison, Grayson County, Texas for 1876 and 1877, Typescript available from Denison Public Library, Dr. Mavis Anne Bryant, September 24, 2010; The Morrison and Fourmy city directories are for 1887-1889 and 1891-1892. They can be found at www.ancestry.com, www.txgenweb.com and at the Denison Public Library; Morrison and Fourmy’s General Directory of the City of Denison 1887-1888, Ancestry.com, U.S. City Directories [database on-line], Provo: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011; Maloney’s city directory of 1898-1899 along with Morrison and Fourmy’s of 1896-1897, specifically mention the names of madams, which is useful to fully confirm certain women’s occupations; Maloney’s Denison-Sherman City Directory 1898-1899, Vol. III, Denison, Texas Genealogical Society Online Document Project, http://www.txgenweb3.org/txgrayson/records2.html (accessed August 17, 2011).
rented their brothels were not listed either. In fact only two Denison madams made it into the tax rolls during the years between 1887 and 1905.  

Prostitutes had several outlets open to them concerning where to ply their trade. They could live and work in brothels, rooms above saloons, small singular rooms called cribs, or as a final resort, the streets. Although there were certainly women in Denison who worked in all of the above-mentioned ways, only the ladies located in brothels are easily discernible through the records that exist for Denison in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, the 1870s were a rowdy time for the city of Denison, when many prostitutes roamed and worked in a variety of locations. As the decades passed, the women were limited to particular brothels located in close proximity to one another in order to control vice throughout the city. Additionally, the acceptance of prostitutes of color seemed to lessen as the years passed. While in the 1870s there were consistent mentions of black female prostitutes working and being arrested, sources from the later 1880s into the early 1900s mention only single white women as working in the brothels. This is not conclusive evidence, of course, as many women may have been attempting to make a living on the streets or in cribs, which potentially lessened the likelihood of their being easily traceable through city directories or census records. Cribs were one-room shanties where prostitutes who were less fortunate than those in brothels plied their trade for pennies.

The prostitutes and madams of Denison may be elusive, but they are not completely lost to history. The city directory of 1876 did not have enough information to

---

50 The Denison Tax Rolls Books for some years are available online through the Texas Genealogical Society Online Document Project. These years include, 1877, 1878, 1902, 1905, and 1906. However, the Denison Assesments Survey Abstracts are available from 1887-1908. These can all be found at, http://www.txgenweb3.org/bxgrayson/records2.html.
determine profession, but by 1887 prostitutes and madams were discernible. One of
the longest running Denison brothels was owned by Madame Lester at 120 W. Chestnut
Street, formerly Skiddy. Pauline or Lina Lester was born in March of 1856 in Michigan
and by 1876 was living in Denison. During the years of 1887 to 1904, she ran a
successful brothel and also was the proprietress of the Little Gem Saloon at 200 S.
Austin Avenue. Through the years, many different young, single, white women boarded
with Madame Lester: some stayed for years, while others moved on quickly. City
directories did not list the ages of the women, but in the Federal Census of 1900, eight
prostitutes living with Lester were between the ages of 15 and 26, which was about the
national average for prostitutes during this period.  

Most prostitutes who resided with Madame Lester throughout the years, stayed a
matter of months and disappeared from the record by the time the next city directory
was released. In 1887, Lester had eleven women working at her establishment on
Chestnut Street: Dora Arnold, Myra Brandenburg, Ella Clifton, Lottie Earl, Lida Early,
Sallie Henry, Eugene King, Lillie Lyon, Ida Reinhart, Annie Williams, and Fannie
Wiliams. She also had two full time employees, Mickey Lane and Gracie Lott, both
listed as “colored.” Nine of these women still lived with Lester during the following year
of 1888, excluding Brandenburg and Henry. By 1889, the only prostitute still working for

51 The first mention of Pauline Lester can be found in, City Directory of the City of Denison, Grayson
County, Texas for 1876 and 1877, Typescript available from Denison Public Library, Dr. Mavis Anne
Bryant, September 24, 2010; She is subsequently listed in every city directory between 1887 and 1904,
as well as, United States Federal Census, 1900; Denison Ward 4, Grayson, Texas;
Roll: T623_1639; Page: 4A; Enumeration District: 100, Ancestry.com, 1900 United States Federal
her birth date and location can be found.
Lester was Fannie Williams, although Annie Williams had simply moved to a different brothel.\textsuperscript{52}

Pauline Lester was not the only madam in Denison during the late 1880s. Mattie Rivers ran a brothel at 116 W. Crawford, which was one street south of Chestnut. Very little information is available regarding the personal life of Mattie Rivers. She was not listed in any census records for Denison, and she was only found in the city directories for two years. During her tenure on Crawford Street, four prostitutes lived with Rivers: Sallie Davis, Daisy Myers, Dora Scott and Clara Wells. She also had a porter named William St. Clair and a cook, Allen Washington. Although Mattie Rivers disappeared from Denison by 1889, her brothel was taken over first by Lydia Walcott and in 1892 by Fannie Williams. Even after the tenure of Madame Rivers, the brothel on Crawford maintained her name when mentioned in the newspapers, typically referred to as the “Rivers bagnio.”\textsuperscript{53}

From 1889-1892, Lester and Walcott ran the two most prominent brothels in Denison. Certainly, there were other women who plied their trade as prostitutes out of cribs or saloons, but these women are harder to identify. The women who lived and worked in brothels were more likely to be openly listed in the census or city directories. In 1889, Lester had eight women working for her: Ella Britton, Lizzie Goodwin, Ollie Howards, Dora Livingston, Ida Rooks, Mable Stanifer, Fannie Williams, and Laura Woods. By this time she had hired a porter, Peebles Boaz, who continued to work at


\textsuperscript{53}Ibid; The “Rivers bagnio” is mentioned in: “More Blood in Denison,” Dallas Morning News, August 14, 1892.
Lester’s brothel for years. Walcott’s girls included: Jennie Hudson, Mittie Hunter, Alice Watson, Ella Wheeler, and Annie Williams formerly of Lester’s place.\textsuperscript{54}

As was typical of late nineteenth-century brothels, the prostitutes were transitory often disappearing into the depths of history. There were, however, women who remained in one location for years and even decades. In 1891, Fannie Williams was still working for Lester, along with Laura Woods. There were several new bawds as well: Bertha Burns, Minnie Eason, Ella Miller, Zetta Moore, Stella Ortelle, and Maud Schulz. Walcott’s brothel had also kept two previous prostitutes: Ella Wheeler and Annie Williams, as well as one stolen from Lester, Ida Rook. She also had three new ladies of the night: Annie Forest, Ella Sherwood, and Lillie Wreaford.\textsuperscript{55}


One consistent appearance throughout the city directories was the presence of two prostitutes: Annie and Fannie Williams. Interestingly, these two women became madams themselves over time. By 1892, Fannie Williams had taken over the “Rivers bagnio” on Crawford Street from Walcott, and in 1893, she opened a new brothel across the street from her longtime employer, Pauline Lester, at 127 W. Chestnut Street. In the 1893 city directory, Pauline Lester and Fannie Williams were the only listed madams, with the Crawford Street establishment no longer apparent.

---


57 Morrison and Fourmy’s General Directory of the City of Denison, 1893-1894, Denison Public Library.
However established the brothels of Chestnut and Crawford Street were, many town citizens were active in their attempts to eradicate the demimonde from Denison. On the days prior to August 14, 1891, a petition was drawn up by a group of townspeople asking the city council to remove the fair but frail citizens – another term for prostitutes - from the area where the Lester and Williams bagnios existed. A man named Tom McCarty, who owned a saloon in that part of town, agreed to sign the petition. Two members of the houses of ill repute in question later beat him in the street. Their names were not listed in the paper, but apparently they inflicted severe abuse on McCarty who was rescued by police officers. The women were fined for their transgression.\textsuperscript{58}

The late 1880s and 1890s were exciting and dangerous decades for the prostitutes of Denison due to several murders that personally affected many of their lives. About Denison in the 1890s, the \textit{Dallas Morning News} stated, “‘Another dead man found in an alley’ has been a sentence used so frequently in Denison during the past three months that its repetition has about failed to awaken public excitement.” Through the years, Madame Lester’s bagnio was the scene of various crimes and murders, including shootings. A young country boy drew a large pistol and shot two men on November 25, 1889. The crime occurred at Lester’s house, but both of the wounded men survived. Interestingly, the culprit was only arrested and charged with disturbing the peace. On October 14, 1891, a conductor for the Katy Railroad named Dan Minnehan was shot to death in George Imos’ saloon on South Austin Street. This saloon was across the street from Madame Lester’s brothel. Evidently the conductor

\textsuperscript{58} “‘Done Up’ By Demi-Monde,” \textit{Dallas Morning News}, August 15, 1891.
was drunk and harassing the bartender Robert Allen, which led Allen to shoot him twice, once missing him and once hitting him square in the forehead. Lester provided eyewitness testimony at the hearing of Robert Allen on October 17, 1891 where she stated that, “Minnehan did not abuse not make any demonstration as if to hurt Allen during the exchange of words in the saloon just before he was shot.” Although the crime did not take place in her establishment, the proximity is an example as to the prevalence of violence that surrounded the lives of prostitutes during this time.59

While the first incidence with the conductor’s death was simply an example of violence in Denison, the second crime of the 1890s was devastating to the bordellos of the city. On the night of May 16, 1892, four women were murdered in what would come to be called “the horror at Denison.” None of the women had connections with one another before their shootings. Two of the women, Hattie Haynes and Tina Hawley, were considered to be socially genteel and each was killed in the homes of their families with their families present. The reason for the murders was a mystery and seemed disconnected. The other two women shot were both prostitutes, Maude Kramer and Rose Stewart, although they did not know each other. Maude lived and worked for Madame Lester on Chestnut Street and she was fatally shot in Lester’s house of ill fame. She was shot through the window while sitting in the parlor with six other women. Kramer died of her wound after several days suffering.60


The death of Maude Kramer led to the discovery of her true identity and the reasons for her fall into prostitution. Friends and family came forward to claim her body and it was revealed that her actual name was Julia Martin of Ironton, Missouri. Her father was a farmer in Missouri and sent Julia to boarding school in Popular Bluff, Missouri when she was young. While there she fell in love with a baggage man named Edgar Peale on the Iron Mountain railway. They soon eloped and lived as a married couple until Edgar abandoned Julia. From there she moved to Denison and began her life as a member of the fair but frail. Maude Kramer was described as a tall, handsome woman with long black hair and above average intelligence. Newspapers of the time were often dramatic in their descriptions of the lives of prostitutes and Maude was no exception. The *Dallas Morning News* stated, “the romance of her life would fill a book, yet in its sad and bitter ending the curtains of silence are drawn about her memory, perhaps, the better it will be for society and humanity.”

The second demimonde victim, Rose Stewart, was a recent addition to the “Rivers bagnio,” which was operated by Madam Fannie Williams. She was shot through the window in her bedroom while undressing. Her wounds were serious, but unlike the other three women, Rose survived her injuries. Very little was revealed about the intimate life of Stewart as opposed to Kramer. Perhaps her ultimate survival kept the sordid details of her personal life from being recounted. Eventually an arrest was made and Dick Edwards was tried and convicted of the murder of the first victim, Hattie Haynes. Both Fannie Williams and Pauline Lester were witnesses at the trial of Dick Edwards and testified as to the experiences they had on the night of May 16, 1892. He

---

was sentenced to life in prison for his crimes, although he was only convicted of killing one of the four women.62

The crime spree of 1892 was not over, however, as another murder occurred on August 13 between Main and Crawford Streets. A man named Jack Mills was found dead on the street from a gunshot wound with a blood trail that led to the door of Madam Fannie William’s establishment on Crawford. Fannie gave the police information, which led to the arrest of Warren Jeffries who claimed to have shot Mills in self-defense. The prostitutes in the “Rivers bagnio” admitted to having heard gunshot fired, and two of them were witnesses in the trial against Jeffries. The first prostitute to testify was named “Jennie”, but she passed out from the heat before she could speak. The second woman, Nellie Neal, was new to Denison from Bonham and admitted seeing the defendant drinking bottles of beer with Fannie on the night in question. She also mentioned witnessing an altercation between Mills and Jeffries earlier in the evening. Prostitution may have been considered a degrading and socially unacceptable form of employment, but the females of the demimonde were often witnesses in court and their word was trusted in the eyes of the law. In reaction to the murders of 1892, the movement to close sporting establishments in Denison was renewed, although the brothels and saloons continued to operate even with the increased displeasure of the populace.63


63 “More Blood in Denison,” Dallas Morning News, August 14, 1892.
By 1898, there were five madams listed in the city directory: Lina Lester, Fannie Williams, Tobe Johnson, Emma Gudgel, and Annie Williams. Annie Williams’ brothel was located at 115 S. Austin Street, just across from Pauline Lester’s Little Gem Saloon. Tobe Johnson’s place was at 112 W. Crawford, and Emma Gudgel’s was slightly further away at 115 W. Owings. All the above-mentioned locations were within walking distance of the downtown district and one another.  

Unfortunately, the 1890 census was destroyed by fire and is thus unavailable for research on prostitution in Denison. However, the 1900 census is obtainable for perusal and reveals details about Pauline Lester, Fannie Williams and the ladies working for them at the time. The 1900 census reveals Pauline Lester’s birth date and location, as well as her ownership of her brothel without a mortgage, and the fact that she had three children, none of who were still living by 1900. She had eight ladies boarding at her brothel, all between the ages of 15 and 26. They were: Minnie Anderson, Etta Dye, Florence Edwards, Mollie Edwards, Zaepha Edwards, Mamie Gentle, Mable Matson, and Hattie Moore. Three were born in Texas, two were from Missouri, and one each came from Colorado, Indiana, and Kentucky. All the women were listed as white, single, and literate. Also mentioned in the 1900 census were Fannie Williams and the eight prostitutes who worked at her brothel. Fannie was born in October of 1862, and was supposedly a widow with four children, two of whom were still living. She owned her brothel but paid a mortgage unlike Lester who owned her place free. Fannie had a two-year-old adopted son living at the brothel by the name of Gabriel Gaunnon. Interestingly, his place of birth was listed as Texas, but his parent’s

---

names and birthplaces were listed as unknown. No further details about his existence were found. Of the eight women boarding with Fannie, only one was originally from Texas and they ranged in age from twenty to thirty-eight, slightly older than Lester’s girls. The others were born in Ohio, Arkansas, Indian Territory, Iowa, Indiana, and Pennsylvania. Their names were: Maude Atkins, Pearl Douglas, Etta Ellis, Annie Forest, Emma Gudgel, and May Johnson. Again, all were listed as single, white, and literate, and Miller was a mother, with one of two children still living. Some of the women had been prostitutes in Denison before, such as Annie Forest and Etta Ellis. Curiously, Emma Gudgel was listed as a madam in 1898 before moving to Fannie’s place by 1900.65

By 1900, Annie Williams no longer ran the brothel at 115 S. Austin Avenue, but rather a young couple, Charley and Robbie Fauke, rented it. They had four prostitutes working for them: Mina Meader, Josie Groves, Edith Brown, and Bessie Bird. These women ranged in ages from seventeen to twenty-one and two were born in Indian Territory, one in Missouri, and one in Tennessee. Mina Meader was listed as a widow with one child deceased. The rest of the women were single and all were white. In the 1901 city directory, all but Meader were still plying their trade at the Austin Street brothel, although the madam for that year is unknown. Pauline Lester and Fannie Williams still operated their respective brothels on Chestnut Street, but Fannie Williams had significantly more prostitutes in 1901 than Lester. Lester had only three women

listed: Maggie Keithley, Elise Wade, and Mabel Watson, with Peebles Boaz now listed as her bartender. Williams had nine women working for her: Della Brown, Florence Campbell, Vesta Cook, Sadie Cox, Mollie Edwards, Etta Ellis, May Reynolds, Maud Riley, and Nellie Strong. As time progressed, Williams’ brothel increased in size, while Lester’s slowly decreased. The reason for this change is unknown.\(^{66}\)

In addition to city directories and the United States Federal Census, tax records are available to add further documentation to the lives of the more successful madams. Pauline Lester and Lydia Walcott were both listed for many years in the Denison tax assession abstracts. Lester’s tax history began in 1887 when she was only worth $1200 and had one property. As the years progressed, she added two more properties and the value of their respective worth increased. By 1896, her three properties were valued at a combined total of $6500 and she maintained this until 1903. At that point, she lost $2000 and by 1904 had only $1000 in taxable property value. This was the last year Pauline Lester was listed in Denison; by 1905 she became lost to the historical record. Lydia Walcott’s tax record began in 1890 when she was valued at $1600 with one property to her name. She continued to be listed as such until 1896 when she too disappeared from Denison’s record. Curiously, although Walcott was listed in the tax records until 1896, she had ceased running the Crawford Street brothel in 1892. One possibility is that she continued to own the establishment but allowed Madame Williams to run it for a time. Thus, both of these women were financially successful Denison

madams, with Lester additionally owning and running a saloon. The reasons for their departures are unknown, but neither of them turns up in the historical narrative after they leave Denison.\textsuperscript{67}

Although the law was typically forgiving of prostitution in the late nineteenth century, the times were changing and pressures against openly tolerated vice were steadily increasing. Even the brothels and madams of Denison were not immune to the displeasure with vice districts that was picking up steam nationally. Many cities began inflicting harsher punishments on bawdyhouse keepers at the turn of the twentieth century. In the fall of 1900, both Pauline Lester and Fannie Williams were brought up on criminal charges for keeping houses of ill repute on Chestnut Street in Denison. On October 25-26, 1900 they were each brought before the Grayson County judge at the Criminal County Court to face the law for enabling prostitution to thrive beneath the roofs of their respective establishments. Going to court did not destroy each madam’s ability to run their brothels however, since both of their businesses were still thriving in 1901 and 1902. The exact details of the Lester and Williams court cases are unavailable as most of the criminal records for that time have been either lost or misplaced. The Grayson County Courthouse burned in 1930 and so did many of their earlier records. Information may later become available, but at this moment the results are lost. However, the cases did signal change for the Chestnut Street brothels as both Pauline Lester and Fannie Williams only worked a few more years in Denison.\textsuperscript{68}


\textsuperscript{68}“Criminal County Court,” Sherman Daily Register, October 25, 1900. This source lists both Pauline Lester and Fannie Williams on the court docket for the days mentioned above. It does not depict their exact charges.
At the turn of the century, prostitution and vice in Denison showed no evidence of slowing down. In 1898, there were sixteen saloons on the first three blocks of Main Street, which lends credence to that idea that every third building on Main Street was a saloon. There were at least nine more saloons on the neighboring streets and five officially listed brothels. Denison moved from being a frontier town built for the purpose of housing a Katy Railroad depot to a thriving urban town, which still primarily existed due to the Katy Railroad. Thus the population of Denison expanded and diversified but still maintained an element of transients, single males, and a large railroad workforce that appreciated the ability to partake easily of alcohol and women. The history of vice in Denison would not end without a fight.
CHAPTER IV

PROSTITUTES, PROGRESSIVES, AND A RAILROAD STRIKE, 1905-1922

If we fail to meet our problems here, no one else in the world will do so. If we fail, the heart goes out of progressives throughout the world.

Eleanor Roosevelt

With the dawn of the twentieth century, a new era began in the United States. A growing population, expanding transportation and technology, and a revolution of ideas quickly tamed areas that had once been part of a wild frontier. In previous years, individuals regarded elements of vice, such as prostitution, as being inevitable attributes of cities and towns with an extensive male population. Progressive ideas, however, became more prevalent during the first decades of the twentieth century, which resulted in national changes to policies and laws on many subjects, including vice. Changes on the national level trickled down over time to effect states and cities around the country, and Denison was no exception. Temperance movements had been building for years in the United States, and the connection between alcohol consumption and prostitution was considerable. Alcoholic beverages were typically served in brothels, saloons, and gambling houses, and these facilities profited greatly from the sales of spirited beverages. As a result of a variety of influences coming together in a relatively short period of time, such as progressivism, temperance, World War I, and a railroad strike, prostitution in Denison faced intense and lasting changes soon after the dawning of the twentieth century.

The temperance movement had existed for decades by the 1880s, but it came roaring into Denison when the Women’s Christian Temperance Union held the Texas
state convention in the city in 1889. Denison had previously hosted Francis Willard, the national president of the W.C.T.U., as a speaker in 1882. At that time, Willard helped to establish the local chapter out of Sherman, Texas. By 1889, the state president, Sarah C. Acheson, was from Denison. Through the tireless efforts of the W.C.T.U., Grayson County adopted the local option for prohibition on March 7, 1903. Denison, however, voted to stay wet. Before the W.C.T.U., the churches and church leaders of Grayson County had been the main voices for prohibition, but as women became more involved in the public sphere through female clubs, this began to change.\(^{69}\)

Prohibition was a legal attack against vice in all forms since the sale of liquor was such an extensive part of red-light districts as a whole. As the years passed, reformers intensified their fight against legalized alcohol and amazingly the United States Congress approved the 18\(^{th}\) Amendment to the Constitution on December 18, 1917, which needed only to be ratified in order to make alcoholic beverages illegal across the nation. Ratification succeeded on January 16, 1919, and individuals were given one year until all activity involving alcohol was prohibited. As a result, bootlegging became a lucrative enterprise and many entrepreneurs in Denison continued to make and offer liquor for a price. Thus, prohibition did not eradicate vice in Denison, but rather established another avenue for members of the criminal population to make a living. Ironically, prohibition may have made saloons even more attractive to particular elements of the population who found pleasure in flouting the law.\(^{70}\)


One of the most important social changes that brought about antiprostitution reform was the rise of women’s groups in the Progressive Era. There were two trends during this time that created an impact: the growth of separate women’s organizations and the integration of women into mainstream legal, medical, and educational institutions. Beginning in the 1890s, the suppression of prostitution became an open part of the reform agenda, in addition to prohibition, for the W.C.T.U. These women reformers felt that the destruction of prostitution was linked to the emancipation of women, as they believed such institutions legitimized women’s sexual degradation. Due to the significant impact of the W.C.T.U. in Denison, most assuredly their national campaign against prostitution strongly encouraged the dissolution of the long-standing acceptance the city had with the demimonde.71

Despite the changes occurring nationally and the rising prohibition movement, prostitution in Denison remained a thriving market during the first two decades of the twentieth century. What did change was the ability of brothels to exist openly without fear of legal reprisal. With the Progressive movement picking up steam, the pressure on city leaders to clean up their towns increased. Denison leaders had previously ignored laws and civic demands due to the profitability of the tenderloin and the belief that such institutions were inevitable in a railroad town. However, as state and national leaders embraced the Progressive ideas that aimed to close red-light districts, laws were passed that claimed most districts by the beginning of World War I.

One of the greatest differences in Denison, as elsewhere, was the change in toleration that had previously been the status quo. The new moral regulations put in

---

place by laws, such as the Mann Act and the state law against pandering, created a new criminal urban underclass from those who were personally affected by the prohibition of drugs, alcohol, and prostitution. The Mann Act, passed nationally in 1910, controlled the ability of women to travel or be transported across state lines for possibly immoral purposes. The following year, 1911, Texas passed a law against pandering, which punished those who procured women to work as prostitutes as well as those who ran such establishments. Both of these laws were considered Progressive successes and seen as protections for women, who were thought of as weak and susceptible to such inclinations. National attitudes towards vice, specifically in regards to its effect on women, changed rapidly during this time and continued to change dramatically during the coming decades. 72

Although Progressive laws were intended to reduce crime, prohibition encouraged the illegal sale of liquor and bootlegging to thrive in Denison, and the dissolution of openly accepted brothels sent prostitutes out of madam-protected houses and into the streets or cheap hotel rooms. Interestingly, the prohibition of vice that became the typical response in the early twentieth century, perpetuated the growth of organized crime and took the power of regulation out of the hands of city and state leaders and placed it under the less dependable control of crime bosses and pimps.73


Technically, the city of Denison already had laws on the books from the early days of the town that prohibited prostitution and the running of brothels. Gambling and alcohol consumption were also highly controlled and limited by city ordinances. Before the first decades of the twentieth century however, Denison police and city leaders allowed the open existence of brothels, saloons, and gambling houses, even after Grayson County passed the local option in 1903. The passage of the local option, followed by the Mann Act and laws against pandering, began a fast growing movement against vice that Denison found difficult to fight. There is not a specific day in Denison’s history to mark the absolute end of the acceptance of vice, but after 1908 the location of brothels was no longer flaunted openly. Prostitution continued as a practice within the city, but the madams of Denison moved to other locations after the first decade of the twentieth century.74

In addition to pressures from temperance reformers and women’s groups, the onset of World War I increased national awareness of red-light districts and the hazards associated with them. Fear of venereal disease and the desire to protect soldiers from supposedly infected women gave reformers more legitimacy and the backing of the military and War Department. During the earlier stages of the Progressive Era, prostitutes were seen as victims of male society who needed protection. The passage of laws, such as the Mann Act, showcased reformer’s desire to protect women from the possibilities of kidnapping and white slavery. However, the focus of antiprostitution champions changed as World War I approached. The same individuals who once

74 Digital Sanborn Map, 1908, Denison, Texas, http://sanborn.umi.com/cgi-bin/auth.cgi?command=ShowLogin. (accessed November 16, 2010). This map is the last time the female boardinghouses of Denison are absolutely identifiable.
sought to help women escape a vicious cycle now blamed and punished women solely as the culprits of sexual misconduct. Female prostitutes and loose women became enemies of the state.\textsuperscript{75}

The growing national fears of promiscuous women led to the passage of the Chamberlain-Kahn Act in July of 1918. This was the law that gave local health boards the authority to force anyone suspected of carrying a venereal disease into a detention center for a mandatory medical examination. Although the law did not mention the sex of the individuals, women were most often affected. Women accused of immorality, often with no proof, were medically inspected and occasionally detained in reclamation houses. These detention centers held women for indefinite amounts of time with little concern over their civic rights. The discovery of women carrying venereal disease made their mandatory stay in reclamation houses even longer. American cities placed the protection of current and future soldiers far ahead of the need to maintain the legal rights of possible transmitters of venereal disease. Of the 15,010 women the War Department statistics showed as being detained during the war years, only a third were charged as prostitutes. The other women were brought in with charges ranging from suspicious conduct and incorrigibility to disease. Although no record has been found of a detention center in Denison, the growing fears of women’s open sexuality during World War I led to massive national closures of red-light districts and previously tolerated brothels. Women were labeled as diseased predators and men as helpless victims, which was a notable change in attitude from previous decades. Prostitutes

\textsuperscript{75} Barbara Meil Hobson, \textit{Uneasy Virtue: The Politics of Prostitution and the American Reform Tradition} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). Chapter 7 is titled “Public Enemy Number One” and gives numerous details as to how reformer’s views on women and prostitutes changed due to the war effort.
moved from parlor houses to the criminal margins of society and organized crime replaced commercialized vice on a national scale.⁷⁶

After World War I and the passage of the 18th Amendment, red-light districts almost completely closed nationwide. Some reopened during the 1920s, such as in El Paso and Galveston, but others, including Denison, were forever altered. The existence of vice in Denison had not been eradicated, however, and many prostitutes and gambling establishments still remained, although much more in the shadows than in previous years. Townspeople still felt their presence though and many in Denison fought against prohibition by becoming bootleggers and protecting the continued existence of vice.

Greater changes came to Denison not through progressive tactics as much as through economic upheaval in the form of a railroad strike. The strike of 1922 had grave consequences for the city of Denison and caused permanent changes to the town’s economic structure and potential future growth.⁷⁷

---


⁷⁷ Information regarding the railroad strike of 1922 can be found in several places, including *Dallas Morning News* articles and books on Denison, including: Jack Maguire, *Katy’s Baby: The Story of Denison, Texas* (Austin: Nortex Press, 1991). Chapter nine is entitled, “When the Army Took Over the Town.”
On July 1, 1922, the National Railroad Shopmen’s strike occurred. Over 1200 employees, who worked in six federated shop crafts, left their posts of duty in Denison. Although some of the men worked for other railroads, such as the Texas and Pacific, the largest number were employed by the Katy in their car and locomotive shops. They were ordered to take their tools with them and not to cause any disturbances until a settlement was reached. In Denison, the strike had 100 percent support and the only

---

men who remained working were foreman and maintenance workers not affected by the strike orders. The entire economy of Denison, from grocery stores to saloons, was deeply affected by the abrupt interruption of the railroad services.79

Although the men on strike were specifically ordered to avoid destructive behavior, on July 11, a group of forty-seven men arrived in Denison to replace the shop employees who had walked out. Strikers seized fifteen of the men, called “scabs,” and drove them across the Red River where they proceeded to beat them. Two days after the beatings, Secretary of War John W. Weeks warned the state of Texas to prevent acts of violence in the strike, or he would. Texas Governor Pat M. Neff responded by sending three Texas Rangers, led by Captain Tom Hickman, to Denison to investigate the situation. Although the Rangers thought that no more troops were needed, Governor Neff decided to come to Denison and check for himself. On July 18, disguised as a potential new worker, he approached strikers to ask about getting work, but their answer was always, “None of you ‘scabs’ need apply.” Neff felt that troops were unnecessary in Denison, but due to pressures from the federal government, he sent the Texas National Guard to control the situation. A facility in Forrest Park, called Camp Ellis, was quickly erected and three months of martial law began with 536 Guardsmen patrolling and controlling the citizens and activities of Denison. Curfews and round-the-clock surveillance by the military were put into practice. During the period of martial law, almost 300 civilian arrests were made on charges ranging from serious felonies to more minor infractions. The Guardsmen were assigned specifically

to prevent violence associated with the strike, but they often took on the role traditionally reserved for civil authorities.\textsuperscript{80}

Another role the Texas National Guard pursued in Denison involved cleaning up the remaining elements of vice that permeated the town. On August 20, 1922, they began raiding farms where bootlegging of whiskey was occurring and subsequently made arrests. They also went through town closing down illegally operating saloons and areas where prostitutes still plied their trade. This imposition of authority largely eliminated the vice elements still thriving in Denison, although a few resumed their activities after the martial law was lifted in October. On October 21, 1922, Governor Neff returned Denison’s business affairs to its civil government and the Texas National Guard returned home. However, the destruction to Denison’s economy, legal and illegal, that occurred during the three month long ordeal left permanent marks on the town that forever altered its growth and success.\textsuperscript{81}

Unfortunately for Denison workers, the Katy locomotive shops entire operation had been moved to Waco during the strike. Thus, the jobs they wanted to return back to no longer existed. The economic effect on Denison was dramatic with the population soon dropping from a pre-strike high of 17,000 to 13,500. Although the Katy still operated railroad car shops and freight classification yards in Denison, the railroad gradually started a slide out of the city that continued for decades. Due to the 1922 strike, the decline of the Katy’s quantity and quality of service in Denison began, and


eventually the railroad left Denison all together. As historian Jack Maguire stated, “Katy’s baby now is Katy’s orphan.”\textsuperscript{82}

The combination of national Progressive movements, World War I, and finally the railroad strike of 1922 led to the dismantling of not only vice in Denison, but the city’s entire economic system. What was once a city brimming with possibilities for growth and promise became a shell of its former self after the first decades of the twentieth century. The destruction of prostitution and vice in Denison was connected to a larger part of the city’s economic survival, the Katy Railroad. Most railroad towns had significant portions of their population connected to red-light districts and often the town’s revenue as well. With the arrival of the Katy Railroad in Denison, large numbers of transients and single male workers moved in, which enabled prostitution, saloons, dance halls, and gambling establishments to thrive for decades. As pressures to clean up the town grew in the early twentieth century, alterations to Skiddy Street and the vice establishments occurred, but they changed rather than disappeared. The railroad strike of 1922 was the largest contributor to the dissolution of prostitution and illegal bootlegging in Denison, but that event proved to be a double-edged sword for the town. Denison may have finally achieved a semblance of success in discouraging vice, but at what cost? Prostitutes moved to other cities as the Katy slowly abandoned Denison, but Denison never recovered from the loss of its founder. Denison simply became a railroad town without a railroad, and its possible future growth was permanently stifled.

Figure 4.2. Picture of the final run of the Texas Special out of Denison, circa 1965.  

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Some may try and tell us that this is the end of an era, but what they overlook is that in America, every day is a new beginning, and every sunset is merely the latest milestone on a voyage that never ends. For this is the land that has never become, but is always in the act of becoming. Emerson was right: America is the land of tomorrow.

Ronald Reagan

The story of prostitution in Denison is ultimately one of change. During the town’s early days as a bustling and rowdy railroad center, prostitution and other elements of vice thrived and overwhelmed all other aspects of life in the city. There were more saloons and houses of ill repute than there were churches and schools, and the early town founders profited greatly from the sinful enjoyments of the citizens. In fact the early development and success of Denison owed much to the less decorous members of society for they were the financial bread and butter of the city during its first decade of existence. Certainly Denison became more than just a haven for the criminally inclined, but even as church membership and school attendance grew, the brothels and saloons that the city had developed in its first years continued to prosper. Not until the first decades of the twentieth century, when national and local progressive movements placed intense pressures on city leaders to clean out prostitution and gambling, did Denison begin to really change its response to vice. There had always been a sense of toleration and acceptance in Denison, at least on the part of law enforcement and leadership, but progressives, along with the temperance movement and the onset of World War I, did not accept the peaceful coexistence of red-light districts and so-called
decent society. There was a war being fought against vice in the United States, and even railroad cities such as Denison were greatly influenced.

During the first decade after Denison’s incorporation as a city, the town was a rough and rowdy epicenter for the Katy Railroad. Single male workers and other transients that often accompanied the railroad industry allowed a vibrant red-light district to develop. Skiddy Street became the center for most of the prostitution and gambling houses in town. Main Street housed many saloons too, but they had to follow stricter codes of conduct than places one street south on Skiddy. Those early years were filled with murders, drunken brawls, and infamous encounters. Denison newspapers were filled with the happenings on Skiddy Street, and they were not short of stories to report.

The original city charter of Denison enabled city leaders to license and tax brothels and saloons as well as to punish bawdyhouse keepers if desired. Early town leaders rarely inflicted punishments on such establishments, however, since a large portion of revenue for the town was accrued through their taxation. Without at least cooperating with madams and saloon owners, the town of Denison would have lost a significant portion of its early funding.

Additionally, city government passed an ordinance in 1873 making prostitution illegal in a technical sense. Most likely, however, this was just an attempt to appease complaining groups of upstanding citizens since it was not enforced regularly until well into the twentieth century.

The first women who worked as prostitutes in Denison are difficult to identify, and much of their personal lives remains a mystery. The earliest city directories did not list occupations and only listed general locations for residences. Most of what can be found
is within newspapers, which gave detailed accounts of the scandalous sisters of Skiddy Street. The women’s names were often aliases or nicknames, but it is still possible to get an understanding of how tumultuous the lives of prostitutes were in a nineteenth century railroad boomtown. While prostitutes were often seen as outliers of acceptable society, they were still an active and important contributor to the development and successful continuation of Denison as a city.

Although prostitution remained active and open in Denison for many decades, the exact appearance of it changed. After the wild and wooly days of the first decade, town leaders decided to change the name of Skiddy Street to Chestnut Street in order to alleviate the stigma that had grown attached to the name. Many townspeople not connected with the vice district began moving onto Chestnut Street in the 1880s and thus instigated the name change. Even though the name changed, the business of the street remained the same, with most of the city’s bagnios still residing on the lower blocks. From 1887-1905, the madams and prostitutes of Denison are the easiest to recognize and document. A large supply of city directories, census records, newspaper articles, and tax rolls reveal that the ladies of the Denison demimonde were the most active during this period of time. City directories became more inclusive, listing occupations and exact locations of residence, which allows the women to be traced over time. The madams were the only women listed consistently, however, as most prostitutes were as transient as the railroad population they served. Rarely were the women listed for more than one year at a time, but there are a few instances of persistence. In some cases, the women who remained for longer stretches became madams themselves, as in the case of Fannie and Annie Williams.
The most persistent madam of Denison was Pauline Lester, who ran a brothel on Chestnut Street for two decades. She was also the proprietress of the Little Gem Saloon, which was across the street from her house of ill repute. Financial records show that she was successful and actually owned the properties in question. Her major competition came from a former member of her house, Fannie Williams. Fannie started as a prostitute in Lester’s bagnio and ended up running two different brothels in Denison. Both Lester and Williams were the most oft-listed madams in newspapers as well as court cases. During their reign as the madams of Denison, many murders, gunfights and dangerous altercations took place in or around their working establishments. They were witnesses to multiple homicides and even the murder and attempted murder of their own employees. The lives of prostitutes were often short and violent as can be attested to by women such as Maude Kramer and Rose Stewart. Women joined the ranks of the demimonde for various reasons, and occasionally they were successful at making a decent living for themselves, but the life involved risks, and oftentimes resulted in injury or death for the prostitute rather than survival and success. Lester and Williams were both indicted by the Grayson County Court in 1900, but the results of their cases were not recorded. They did not close their establishments until later in the decade though, so the cases most definitely did not end their time in Denison.

The pressures of the Progressive movement began to pick up speed after the turn of the century, and the face of prostitution in Denison soon was forever altered by the movement’s national and statewide legal successes. The heyday for Denison’s prostitutes ended in the first decades of the twentieth century. After 1908, established
and openly tolerated brothels no longer operated in any obvious way. Certainly
prostitution continued to exist, but its nature changed. The women dispersed into the
city, operating in upstairs rooms of saloons, out of hotels, or even on the streets. As a
result, the madam became less important and the pimp took over. Unfortunately then,
for the good intentions of many reformers, the closure of official red-light districts and
female-run houses of ill repute led to more dangerous conditions for the women than
had previously existed. They had less control over their surroundings and were often at
the mercy of male pimps and criminals, who saw them simply as financial assets. As
Karl Marx stated in his work *Capital*, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.”84

Along with World War I came the Chamberlain-Kahn Act, which allowed women
to be detained and medically inspected for venereal diseases. Unlike previous laws that
had showcased women as the sexual victims of men, this act was accusatory of women
as sexual predators who were not to be trusted, especially in light of the war.
Progressives that had once championed women as innocents now proclaimed that
women were enemies of the state and carriers of diseases. Interestingly, men were
never accused or punished accordingly for having a sexually transmitted disease. Men,
and especially soldiers, were the ones in need of protection and campaigns about the
dangers of sex with so-called promiscuous women were prevalent. Women who were
possibly prostitutes, which could mean they were simply walking on the street without
an escort, were arrested, forced into a medical evaluation, and held in reclamation
centers until they were deemed worthy of release. Many women were held for months
without access to an attorney or any means of release. Although there is no

documentation of a reclamation center in Denison, other cities in Texas, such as El Paso and Fort Worth, certainly had them. The nationwide fear of venereal disease and female sexuality was at an all-time high during World War I and led to the unfortunate suspension of thousands of women’s civic rights. After the war it was discovered that only one third of the women held and examined were actually prostitutes.

Figure 5.1. Venereal Disease Campaign Poster, circa World War II.85

All of the national changes regarding prostitution and vice had acute effects on Denison in addition to the rest of the country. However, it was not until the railroad strike of 1922 that vice suffered the most debilitating blow to its existence. Although

85 Poster is actually from a World War II campaign against venereal disease, but it represents the type of posters that were available and the way in which women were made to be the enemy rather than the victims, http://longstreet.typepad.com/thesciencebookstore/2011/08/jf-ptak.html, (accessed September 27, 2011).
prostitution was no longer allowed openly in Denison after World War I, many women still plied their trade in hotels and other establishments throughout the city. After prohibition, bootlegging was a major operation in the town. Officially these two vices may not have been legal, but they were still part of a thriving underground market that was accessible and operating in Denison. When the Katy Railroad operatives went on strike in the summer of 1922, the town of Denison was virtually frozen with economic activity suspended for three months. Hostilities led the governor of Texas to declare martial law in the town, and Texas Rangers and National Guardsmen swarmed the city. Denison was kept under a tight reign with over 500 military and law enforcement officers scouring the town for vice and disturbances. Technically the men were only supposed to control the strikers, but they often used their authority on the civilian populace as well.

During the strike, almost all remaining elements of vice were dispersed from Denison. Although prostitution was not completely eradicated, it was never openly acceptable again. Perhaps the most important element of the strike was that it led to the Katy Railroad's first removal of services from Denison. Many of the shops were moved to Waco during the strike and the railroad continued to move business away from Denison over the next years and decades. Never again would Denison be a thriving railroad epicenter and all aspects of business and economy in the town were forever altered by the loss of the Katy. Thus, along with the destruction of vice and prostitution in Denison came the dissolution of legitimate business. Denison was founded as a railroad town, which included brothels, saloons, gambling and dance halls, and the transient population that frequented those establishments. Denison may have finally been free of the darker side of the railroad, but at what price? It seems that the
continued existence of prostitution and saloons may have been worth the continued
growth and prosperity of the town. Unfortunately, Denison was not given such an option
and the town never recovered from the Katy Railroad’s upheaval.

Why is the story of vice and prostitution in Denison a pertinent one in today’s
society? First, the story of the city of Denison is underdeveloped. During the nineteenth
century, it acted as “the gateway to the southwest” and yet today very few people
outside of North Texas are even aware of its existence. When the beginnings of a
railroad town are studied, vice inevitably appears as an issue because it was always
connected to such places. Secondly, prostitution in Denison has never been examined
in depth and historical analysis of prostitution in Texas, as a whole is still severely
limited. Any addition to this historiography is an important contribution to understanding
an industry much older than the state itself. Women have been working as prostitutes
throughout history, and understanding their stories and situations is an important
element to the foundation of women’s history. The reasons why women chose such a
profession are tied inextricably to the society they were living in and the limitations
women have faced throughout the ages. Prostitutes were seen as part of an underclass
of criminals who spread debauchery and disease, but many such women were simply
working to survive and found they had very few options for work at their disposal. There
are countless reasons as to why women became prostitutes and unfortunately there are
few records in existence that enable understanding and confirmation of why they chose
such a profession.

No matter what one thinks personally about prostitution and the women who
worked such a trade, they were still women attempting to establish and help a small
town like Denison succeed. In the end, Denison was harmed not by the existence of
prostitutes within its borders, but by their departure. The women of the demimonde
helped shape the town of Denison, and their story is tied both to the city and the railroad
that started it all.
WORKS CITED

Primary Sources

Newspapers


The Denison Daily Cresset, 1875-1876.

Denison Daily News, 1873.

The Denison News, 1872-1873.

Sherman Daily Register, 1900.

Sherman Herald Democrat, 2009-2010.

City Directories

City Directory of the City of Denison, Grayson County, Texas, for 1876 and 1877. Typescript available from Denison Public Library. Dr. Mavis Anne Bryant. September 24, 2010.


Miscellaneous


Secondary Sources

Books and Articles


Humphrey, David C.  “Prostitution and Public Policy in Austin, Texas, 1870-1915.” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 86 (April 1983).


Theses and Dissertations


