

The Oldest Game in Town

The Oldest Game in Town

Docent Carol Cramer, best known for her terrific walking tours of Old Town on Saturday mornings, and I gave a presentation to a group in Lake of the Pines about Women in Early Auburn. During the question and answer period, one intriguing question came up. Were there many prostitutes in Auburn during the early days of the Gold Rush?

Documentation of the "world's oldest profession" is notoriously difficult to find no matter what the time period. Our local newspaper collection starts in 1852 thus missing the very early years and miner's diaries and letters home conspicuously leave out any reference to "ladies of the night:" the miners were probably trying to keep their reputations intact when writing to the folks left back home.

San Francisco was the first port of call for most Argonauts and the history of prostitution there begins very early and tales of women making vast sums of money are documented. The scarcity of women in the early days meant they could charge very high prices. In San Francisco for a short while, well- to -do prostitutes even "set the fashion and style of the town." For a brief moment in time, female prostitutes were at the top of society before the inevitable plunge into disgrace.

(Kazmien)

In Auburn, 49'er and later Sheriff, John Boggs, who wrote several newspaper articles for the *Placer Herald* relating his first years in Auburn, recalled a dance in 1849 with only two women in town, Mrs. Nancy McCormick and Mrs. Eliza Elliot. Both of these ladies were respectable hotelkeepers.

The 1850 Census does not list a single prostitute in all of Placer County, whether this represents the lack of "ladies" or the lack of reporting, is unclear. It was not uncommon to find "prostitution" listed as an occupation in those days.

Over in the next county in Nevada City, author J. S. Holliday mentions an account where in 1850, the "best house" in town was a whorehouse. In Sacramento in 1850 the first documented report of prostitution is at *The Palace* where Fanny Seymour held sway.

(Holliday & Sac. Library)

By the 1852 California state census, Placer County lists seventeen prostitutes. Interestingly, seven were born in Chili, two in Mexico, 1 in Argentina, one in Spain, one in Louisiana, one in Vermont, one in

The Oldest Game in Town

Cuba and one in California. Their ages ranged from sixteen to thirty-seven years old.

(Census)

Historian Leonard Davis quotes an editorial in the *Placer Herald* from sometime in 1852:

"It is rare that real ladies would be seen on our streets – not only because they were few in numbers but because of the much greater abundance of females who would not justly be classed."

In 1852, there is document in the Court of Sessions records charging John Wright and Susan, Jane, Eliza "and others" with "keeping a house of ill fame in Auburn. " The results of that charge are unknown. In the same year, John Wilson was charged with "keeping a bawdy house in Illinoistown," (present day Colfax) he spent one year in state prison. In 1855 Sara Hannah was charged with running a bar room, dance hall and had nine bedrooms "for the purpose of prostitution" in Todd's Valley. She only got a \$500 fine and one month in county jail

(Knox)

In Dutch Ravine (near present day Ophir) Madame Hunter was a locally notorious brothel owner who routinely showed up in newspaper accounts with tales of stabbings and even murder at her establishment.

(Placer Herald 1857 – 6-20)

The next surge of documents comes with the transcontinental railroad. The Union Pacific's progress was followed by the infamous "Hell on Wheels" camps of saloons and brothels, for example; Benton Wyoming was a town that only existed for the three months the railroad was pushing through. It had a population of 3,000 with 25 saloons and five dance halls. The fact that the Central Pacific didn't have anything equivalent, is probably due to the fact that the majority of the Central Pacific's crew was comprised of Chinese, who were "quieter, thriftier and a more -sober bunch."

(shroop.com)

The 1870 census for Auburn lists an abundance of Chinese prostitutes in town. Nineteen in all, many of them are listed in the same household with a Chinese gambler. Their ages ranged from sixteen years to seventy-two years old.

The Oldest Game in Town

(Census)

The Placer Herald in 1889 reported the arrest of Carrie Stein and Lulu Sproule in a house of "ill fame" on Brewery Lane: they were acquitted within days.

(Herald 10-30 & 11-6)

The next big uptick in reported prostitution in the area comes with the laying of the double track for the railroad in conjunction with the building of the Mountain Quarry rail line between 1910 and 1912. Lillian Rechenmacher, (1898 – 1990 who grew up on Brewery Lane, recalled an establishment called *The Palace* and even recounted some of the "girls'" names known to her: Leona, Black Rose, Ramona and Evelyn. To Lillian, as a young girl, the "ladies" were quite glamorous."

(Rechenmacher)

The 1920's were noted for excess in many forms, with prohibition leading the way. The Brewery Lane area in Auburn was a noted center of the "Red Light" district. Several fires in July and August of 1921 took out around 21 houses including 7 or 8 houses of prostitution, Lillian Rechenmacher recalled.

While prostitution certainly has not disappeared over the intervening years, the heyday in Auburn, is long gone.

Sources:

Kazmien – Essay "Gold Rush Prostitutes" - SFfound.org

Holliday – "The World Rushed in"

Sac. Library – "Sacramento's Gold Rush Saloons"

Davis – "Dry Diggings on the North Fork"

Knox – database of Court of Sessions actions

Placer Herald newspaper

Shroop.com

Census – United States Census

Rechenmacher, Lillian – Oral History

Census – California State - 1852