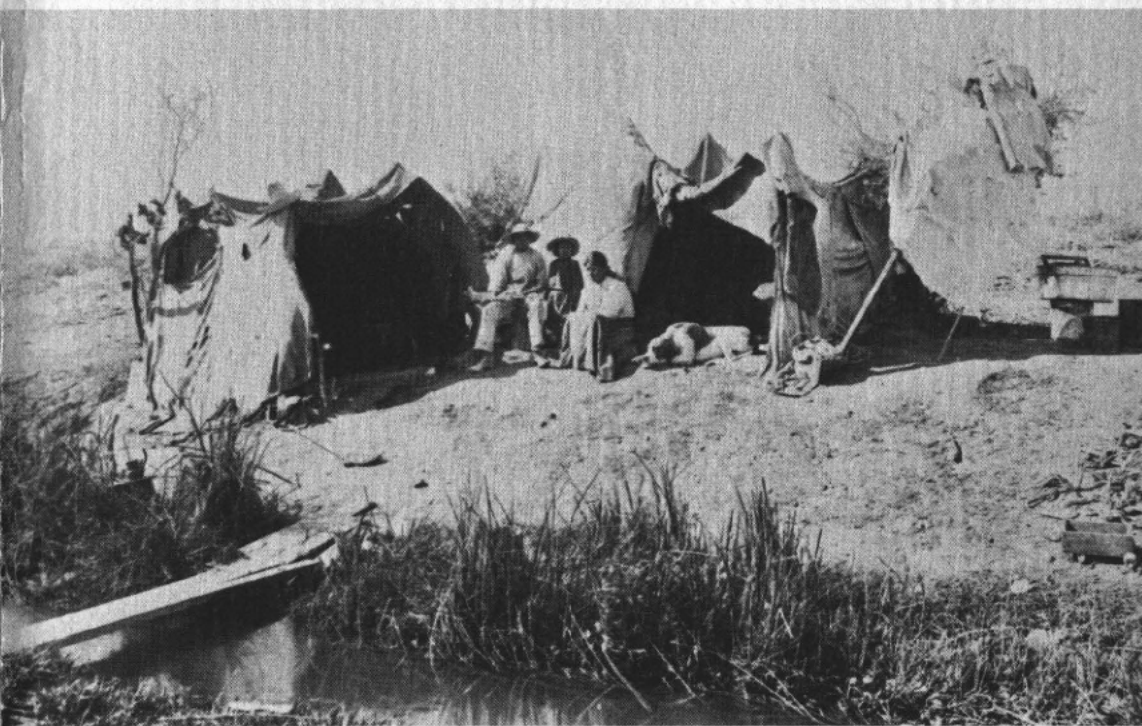


Nevada Historical Society Quarterly



Summer • 1978

Sexual Commerce on the Comstock Lode

by Marion Goldman

True she was a woman of easy virtue. Yet hundreds in this city have had cause to bless her name for her many acts of kindness and charity. That woman probably had more real, warm friends in this community than any other.¹

THUS, THE CITY ATTORNEY of Virginia City, Nevada eulogized Julia Bulette, a fancy woman brutally murdered in 1867. Even during an era of ostensibly rigid morality, prostitutes throughout the American frontier were regarded as important community figures, to be both loved and hated, envied and despised. While most nineteenth century media focused on the bleak aspects of prostitution, often moralizing against it, they also offered glimpses of a zestful, dangerous lifestyle contrasting with the stark existence of respectable working class and poor women.

The luxuries of the fast life were only available to a small number of women at the top of the status structure within prostitution, yet verbal portraits of prostitutes tend to concentrate on the few exceptional women who had golden careers and temporarily amassed fortune and fame.² Both scholars and artists have devoted a disproportionate amount of time to high status prostitution, encouraging the belief that "prostitution comes perilously close to getting something for nothing."³ However, for every one of Matt Dillon's Miss Kittys or Bob Dylan's Lilys, there were hundreds of prostitutes who lived and died in poverty.

While some recent writing on commercial sex has debunked the glorification of women of the night, glamorous prostitutes continue to appear in the popular media.⁴ The spirited, independent frontier dance hall girl is the perfect consort for the wandering cowboy, just as the hooker with the heart of gold serves as an ideal foil for the lone vice squad cop. The survival of myths glorifying prostitution is particularly evident in dramatizations of the American frontier, where "men were men, and women were women," when the latter could not be ladies. This article will examine the daily lives and social relations of Comstock prostitutes with the hope of clarifying the general myths surrounding prostitution and contributing to an emerging history of working and lower class women.

Prostitutes are among the many American women whose images have suffered both intentional and unintentional distortion because of pervasive assumptions about female inferiority. They are sometimes described as having entered the fast life because of free, individual choice or because of personal maladjustment. This analysis blames victims for their

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own fate, ignoring the importance of social structure in fashioning people's lives. Complementing the themes of choice and psychological compulsion, the common emphasis on high status prostitution describes fantastic material and intrinsic benefits actually available to few, if any, prostitutes. This second focus on rewards denies victimization itself, transforming oppression into privilege.

Descriptive accounts of prostitution emphasizing free will and benefits from the fast life tend to dismiss the structural factors creating both the supply and demand for impersonal sex. Prostitution is not an anomaly, but is rather an integral part of American social organization and an extreme case of women's subjugation within this society. It is far beyond the scope of this article to examine the manner in which structural variables of class, sex, and race have interacted to shape three centuries of sexual exchange in the United States. However, a detailed examination of prostitution on the Comstock Lode provides some insight into more general relationships between social structure and prostitution, as well as specific information about the mining frontier.

The Comstock Lode

Hundreds of prostitutes joined miners in rushing to the great sister silver mining towns, Virginia City and Gold Hill, which stood atop the fabled Comstock Lode in western Nevada.⁵ During prosperous periods the towns were almost contiguous; and while Gold Hill had its own small commercial district, it was essentially a working class suburb of Virginia City. Thus, the two will be treated as one community, with downtown Virginia City as its social center.

The Comstock was the quintessential boomtown, growing from a collection of rude shanties to a sophisticated city of almost 20,000 in slightly more than a decade.⁶ At the beginning of the first boom in 1860, there were 2,379 men and only 147 women, but the ratio of men to women was soon decreased by respectable women accompanying their husbands to the new city, and by many prostitutes adding the Comstock to their trade circuit from San Francisco through the California gold towns. By 1870, both ladies and painted women were an integral part of the community, and some of them expected to remain on the Comstock for the rest of their lives. However, despite the addition of large numbers of reputable women, prostitution was always legally condoned.

The Comstock was a unique community, and its enormous wealth from the mines and large population made it an exaggerated case of the frontier phenomenon. Nevertheless, it resembled well established metropolitan areas in its size, density, ethnic heterogeneity, and class structure.⁷ Although some conditions on the Comstock crossed the invisible boundary between the normal and the pathological in American society, most of that crossing was an exuberant extension of general social trends. Examination of the city's economic and cultural development illuminates and clarifies the similar, but more complex structural patterns contributing to the growth of American prostitution in the last half of the nineteenth century.

Although the Comstock began in chaos, with miners staking indiscriminate claims, it soon developed a class structure similar to the industrial East. The absence of industrial diversification kept local economic and social life in constant flux, depending on the condition of the mines, and when the ore pinched out the community was all but abandoned. However, as long as the mines produced profit the Comstock was controlled by a small upper class. Silver mining demanded intensive capital for exploration, construction, and operation, and a small number of capitalists joined together in financial and industrial monopolies dominating the Lode during its most productive years.⁸

The community's upper class included the mine and ore mill owners and superintendents, stock brokers, wealthy merchants, and politicians. A small number of independent professionals were also included in the social and civic activities of this group. Merchants, restaurant and hotel owners, mining engineers, assayers, and independent craftsmen made up the middle class. The large working class primarily consisted of miners, along with men employed in other industries related to mining and in service establishments, such as boarding houses, restaurants, and reputable saloons.

Much of the working class immigrated from England and Ireland, and in Nevada in 1870, 44.2% of the population was foreign born, as compared with only 14% of the entire U.S. population.⁹ In 1875, more than half of the Comstock's residents had not been born in the United States. Men came from all parts of the world seeking their fortunes in the fabled mines and the community surrounding them. Many left their wives behind or were single, and they provided a ready market for prostitutes. However, the scarcity of women was not the only economic factor contributing to the demand for fancy women.

The market economy embraced every area of social life on the Comstock, mediating between people and nature, people and their own labor, and people and each other. The nature and conditions of work under industrial capitalism forced people to think of themselves and others as objects to be used instrumentally. This alienation contributed to men's need to seek out harlots and also permitted them to rationalize their patronage by transforming sexuality into another commodity.

While a larger proportion of upper and middle class men brought wives to the Comstock, some of them still patronized prostitutes.¹⁰ Whether married or unmarried, most men from these classes visited the hurdy houses, bawdy theaters, and brothels at some time. These irregular institutions were simply a part of the men's social lives, and the gaudy balls and masquerades attended by prostitutes were practically irresistible.¹¹ However, the bulk of prostitutes' patrons appear to have come from the working class.

On the Comstock, working people labored and lived under extremely harsh conditions. Some single working men shared tiny rooms with bunks stacked as in ships' cabins and no outside windows, for which they paid \$40 to \$60 a month including meals.¹² In some cases two sets of miners on different shifts shared the same room, with one group sleeping while the others worked. Men living in these rooms could do little more than sleep

in them, and they spent their leisure hours on street corners and in saloons, gambling rooms, or bawdy houses.¹³

The vice districts not only provided "a home away from home," but also offered a necessary release from tension generated by the danger inherent in working in the mines. Between 1863 and 1880 there were three hundred mining fatalities, and when the mines were in full operation there was an average of a serious accident every day.¹⁴ Without access to sexual partners miners may have been unwilling and/or unable to go back underground each successive day, and this may be one reason why mine owners never supported campaigns to close down or limit the location of bawdy districts.

Women and the Economy on the Comstock Lode

Respectable women in the Comstock labor force lived and worked under somewhat better conditions than miners. Domestic workers often resided with their employers, and other working women frequently roomed with private families. However, women's work was by and large menial, difficult, long and ill paid. Working women were in a curious position, since their participation in the public sphere of production and services made their respectability problematic to begin with.¹⁵ Most could only attain full respectable status by finding husbands and withdrawing into their own families of procreation, yet there were few situations in which they could meet eligible men without damaging their own reputations by going out unescorted.

In 1875, only 337 respectable women worked outside the home, and all but 20 of them were unmarried at the time. Most were employed as servants in private homes or in restaurants and boarding houses. Other female occupations included sewing, running small businesses, and teaching school. (See Figure I.)

FIGURE I*
Adult Women's Occupations on the Comstock in 1875

General Category		Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency (Percent)
Dependent	Married Women/Living with Husbands	2,446	68.5
	Adult Daughters Living at Home	109	3.0
	Other Female Relatives of Household Head	41	1.1
	Widows with No Other Occupation Listed	147	4.1
Working Class Employment	Servant	208	5.9
	Laundress	3	0.1
	Seamstress	39	1.1
Petit Bourgeois Employment	Lodging/Boarding House Owner or Manager	44	1.2
	Saloon Owner	3	0.1
	Merchant	2	0.1
	Milliner	5	0.1
	Other Petit Bourgeois (e.g., hairdresser or telegraph operator)	5	0.1
Professional Employment	School Teacher	20	0.6
	Nun	13	0.4
Disreputable Dependent/Living with One Man	No Occupation, Housekeeper or Euphemism for Fallen Woman	180	5.0
Disreputable	Madam	9	0.2
	Prostitutes	298	8.2
Column Total		3,572	99.8 = 100%

*Source: Nevada Legislature; 1875 Census.

Desire for the few available jobs was fierce, and women frequently advertised for dressmaking work or for domestic situations with private families. In the latter case, they not only competed with one another, but also with Chinese men. Domestic workers could expect to earn from \$15 to \$50 a month, depending upon the nature of their work and whether or not they received room and board.¹⁶ During the same bonanza periods, miners earned at least \$80 a month.¹⁷ Other respectable women's jobs brought similarly low wages, but competition was equally great for them, reaching its peak in the case of school teaching.

Teaching was almost the only women's work on the Comstock considered to be worthy of ladies. There were a number of efforts to exclude married women from teaching positions, because of the vast number of single ladies seeking them. For example, in 1877, 120 married women applied for less than 20 posts, and the clamor for teaching jobs was so loud that it prompted Professor J. N. Flint, the male Superintendent of Schools for Storey County, to assert:

It is greatly to be regretted that school teaching is, in the estimation of the female sex, the only respectable occupation which a young lady can follow.

Some women who could be good clerks or waitresses are not good teachers. They must realize any occupation giving them an honest living is respectable.¹⁸

Despite such pleas, teaching remained the only available occupation outside the home conferring women with relatively high status, and it was a poor second to the vocation of marriage. Most women on the Comstock were married, and a large number of other women were related to a male household head in some other way. Some wives helped their husbands manage their businesses, such as boarding houses or saloons, but according to census data, their primary defining statuses were their marital relationships.

Poor and working class wives labored long hours cleaning, cooking, raising children, and producing goods for home consumption. Upper and middle class women frequently had servants perform household tasks and supervise their offspring, and their work consisted of shopping, caring for their appearances, organizing elaborate luncheons and parties, and participating in church and civic volunteer activities. The leisured class of women performing no physical labor and emulating the social formalities common to the upper crust of established cities embodied the concept of the lady as a delicate, fragile being. Hearty women forced to do essential work within or outside their homes had less individual value and social status than ladies. However, whatever their social class, respectable women shared a common moral and social superiority to prostitutes.

Another group of 180 women behaved as if they were married, but were not legally bound to their mates. Most of the women in permanent liaisons lived with working class men amidst respectable families, and many of them raised children. In some cases women informally adopted their partners' surnames, but revealed their status to census takers. Some women living with men drifted from one partner to another and also worked in the fast life, but others stayed with one man.

These relationships grew out of the custom of substituting desertion for divorce, as some men came to or left the Comstock after deliberately abandoning their families. Other men had no original intention of forsaking their wives, but gradually gave up the possibility of sending for them. While these men were willing to forget their previous bonds, they would not risk charges of bigamy by remarrying. Women probably committed themselves to consensual relationships because living with a man was frequently necessary for their economic survival. The fact that many of them had children indicates that they were either widows or deserted wives who desperately needed financial support. Moreover, they could pretend to be married and enjoy the social benefits of wifedom, and the risks of abandonment were no greater than those faced by legal wives. Such permanent liaisons did not diminish the importance of marriage, but merely underscored the necessity of living in a family unit.

Adultery, Divorce, and Prostitution

No matter how sheltered she was, no Comstock lady could have been unaware of the presence and practice of prostitutes. Local newspapers carried almost daily notes on events in the vice district, the city's most notorious bawdy saloons were but a few steps away from its major stores, and middle class women supported frequent, sporadic crusades to drive

fancy women from residential neighborhoods and limit the location of houses of ill fame. These crusades strengthened the moral boundaries between respectable women and prostitutes, as did informal rules ostracizing prostitutes from reputable social events. Although harlots had performed pivotal roles in the community's early civic and social life, by 1869 respectable women could brag that "Ladies of the *demimonde* no longer expect to eat dinners and grace the parties of the haute ton."¹⁹

Wives not only knew that prostitution existed, but also realized that some husbands visited painted women. However, during the twenty-year boom period only two women publicly confronted their husbands about visits to prostitutes. The absence of general female outrage against such association reflected the widespread belief that bawds did not threaten respectable marriages and the general ideology that men had greater, more violent sexual urges than women. The traditional separation of sexuality from maternity and from married women's other roles also reinforced wives' ostensible tolerance for prostitution. However, many women avenged their husbands' visits to the vice districts through their own adultery.

The large number of single men on the Comstock made discreet extra-marital affairs an attractive, viable option for scorned wives. Upper class women developed an intricate set of social rituals allowing them the company of male escorts from their social class without provoking scandal. So long as lovers attended church functions together and avoided any public demonstration of affection, they could go to other, more frivolous events and preserve the illusion of respectable, platonic friendship.²⁰ Middle class women were involved with men boarding in their homes, and working class wives had relationships with neighboring single men. Amorous adventures among people in these classes did not conform to the stylized rituals for adultery common to elites, and less affluent individuals were primarily concerned with finding enough privacy to remain undiscovered. However, recorded adultery in all classes usually involved married women and unmarried men.

While wives' actual behavior did not conform to the rigid Victorian ideology negating ladies' sexuality and demanding their fidelity to a single man, women were expected to appear to be faithful to their husbands. The burden for concealment of adultery rested almost entirely upon women. If love affairs were discovered, women were usually targets for both their husbands' wrath and community disapproval. Many women were brutally beaten and/or summarily divorced for adultery. While unforgiven adultery was listed as grounds for divorce for either partner, in Nevada from 1867 through 1886, two-thirds of the 100 divorces for simple adultery were granted to irate husbands.²¹ Moreover, when a wife's adultery furnished cause for divorce, the woman forfeited all her claims to community property, while no such penalties applied to adulterous husbands. Both law and social custom punished women's indiscretions far more than men's. Usually, men's relationships with prostitutes did not even constitute adultery, since they were based on impersonal sexual exchange which did not threaten the emotional bonds of marriage.

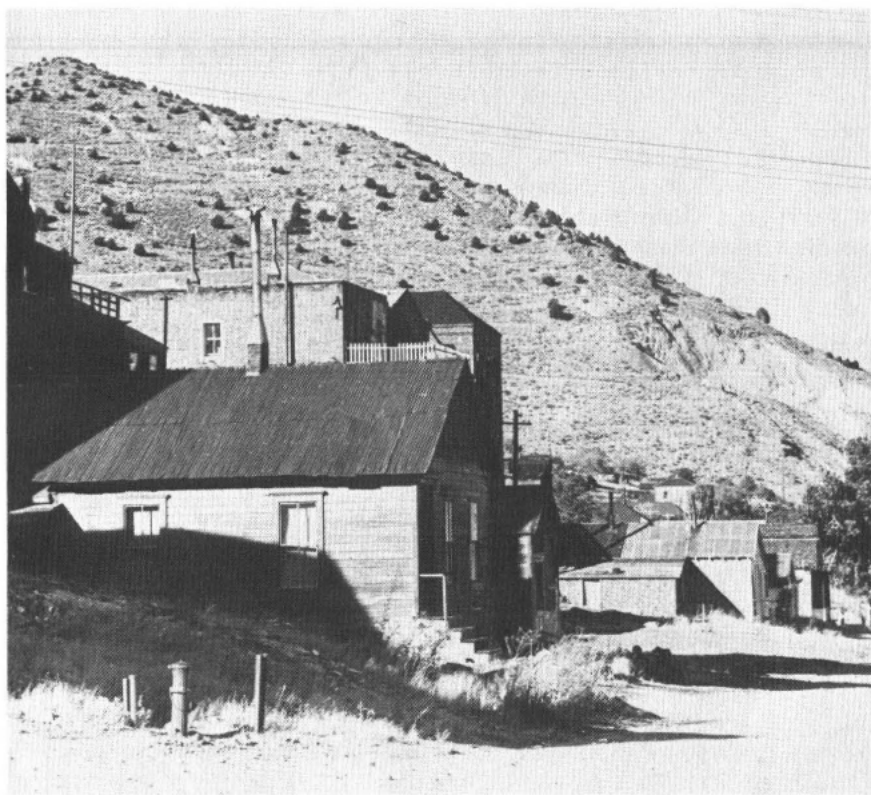
Formal severing of marital ties still stigmatized women and also frequently thrust them out into an unwelcoming labor market. In 1880, the first year such information was recorded in the manuscript census for Nevada, a disproportionate number of Comstock prostitutes were listed as divorced. Local newspapers sometimes published cautionary tales of formerly prominent women who had drifted into drunken, debased prostitution. These stories, along with more explicit editorials against divorce, were implicitly directed toward women contemplating dissolving their marriages. A few women simply skipped divorce and left their mates to enter the sporting life. One Virginia City prostitute left her husband while she was pregnant and took up residence in a Salt Lake City brothel, while another wife waited until her husband was away and removed herself and all of their furniture to a nearby bordello.²²

In spite of the presence of permanent liaisons, the common practice of adultery, and much public knowledge of the lures of the fast life, a rigid boundary still separated respectable women from prostitutes. The essence of feminine respectability was shelter by one man within the nuclear family, while the essence of prostitution was indiscriminate sexual exchange with many partners. The lady was a private woman, while the harlot was a public one. Once a Comstock woman crossed the line separating respectability and prostitution she was seldom welcome in the respectable community. The ideology separating ladies from harlots was so strong that a jury returned a verdict of justifiable homicide when a Comstock woman shot a man who had publicly called her "a damned whore."²³

The high ratio of men to women, alienated labor, women's marginal inclusion in the labor force, and the ideology permitting men sexual independence but denying it to respectable women all encouraged prostitution on the Comstock. However, the Comstock bonanza did not last long enough to create a class of prostitutes born within the city, and social conditions on the mining frontier sustained rather than generated prostitution. In 1875, the 307 active prostitutes on the Lode represented the single largest category of female labor outside the home, and that category came close to being larger than all other female occupations combined. While the respectable occupational structure was nearly closed to women, the irregular marketplace welcomed them as part of its own working class.

Prostitution and the Irregular Economy

The term "irregular economy" does not imply any unusual market relations, but merely designates the often illegal and immoral status of various exchange patterns found in the vice districts of the Comstock and every other large nineteenth century city. The traffic in irregular goods and services reflected regular market patterns, and the irregular economy could only prosper because it supplemented the regular economy and served the interests of the mine and ore mill owners. Capitalists benefited indirectly from the irregular trade in drugs, drink, gambling, and women, because those diversions served as panaceas for their workers. Moreover, some of the city's leading citizens owned land and buildings in the bawdy



These two buildings were the last remains of the once glittering main bawdy district of Virginia City. This picture, which faces north on D Street, was taken in the late nineteen-fifties.

districts, which they leased at very high rates of profit. In 1877, John Piper, owner of the local opera house and an active local legislator opposed to limiting the location of brothels, rented Piper's Row to prostitutes.²⁴ Many other holdings in the bawdy district were untraceable. However, a search through 1875 assessment records and the 1875 manuscript census revealed that D Street vice district land ownership was unequally divided between respectable and disreputable owners.²⁵

In 1875, only eight of forty-one registered owners of land occupied by prostitutes on D Street actually resided on the premises. Two such owners were madams who each held several lots and tenements, and two others were madams who only owned the land and buildings which they occupied. Four men listed in the census respectively as a speculator, saloon owner, a gunsmith and unemployed also resided on their own D Street land.

Nine other people owned brothel district land, but lived in high status residential districts. They were two reputable saloon owners, three merchants, and the wives of an assayer, an independent professional, and a

speculator. A respectable widow who lived with her child and a servant also owned brothel land. However, the largest single lot in the main vice district belonged to the obscure estate of a Mrs. Ford.

It was not feasible to trace the direct beneficiaries of that estate, nor was it feasible to locate definitely the other twenty-one individuals holding the titles on D Street land. The difficulties in tracing those land owners, as well as the available information on others, suggests that most D Street land was probably held by members of the reputable upper and middle classes. This inference is supported by modern studies of New York City which uncovered elusive ownership patterns, eventually revealing local elites.²⁶

The high rate of return from irregular enterprise induced respectable individuals to invest in them. This return rate reflected both the risks inherent in illegal operations and the relatively small amount of fixed capital indigenous to the criminal community. Capital did not remain within the irregular marketplace, but instead filtered back to less lucrative but less risky investments.

The irregular occupational structure generally resembled its larger legal counterpart. However, there was more room for individual entrepreneurs in the criminal community than in respectable occupations. Although most land in the vice district was secretly owned by respectable elites, most of its major businesses were run by a different set of disreputable elites, including saloon owners, madams of large brothels, and theatrical entrepreneurs. Below the elites was a small middle stratum of doctors and lawyers catering primarily to the disreputable community, managers, shopkeepers, small scale madams, and high status prostitutes who worked on their own. The status of the professional criminal, however, was somewhat blurred. For example, some professional gamblers carried their own faro layouts and spent many years perfecting their skills, while others were relative amateurs, resorting to sleights of hand at three-card monte. Similarly, some prostitutes working alone earned high fees from a small select clientele, while others lived in shacks, taking any customers they could attract.

Most people in the criminal community were part of its vast working class. Some men were employed by saloons and gambling dens, while others worked at menial jobs ranging from running errands to cleaning livery stables. Still others robbed stagecoaches, picked pockets, engaged in petty confidence games, or lived off prostitutes. Many of these men, along with others on the fringes of the irregular marketplace, were casual laborers who were unemployed much of the time.

Just as women were denied access to high status legal occupations because of pervasive sex-role stereotyping and discrimination, they were also kept at the lower echelons of the criminal community. With the exception of a few high status madams and whores, confidence artists, and some wives of owners of irregular businesses, almost all of the women in the criminal community were common prostitutes. Even those practicing small scale larceny, shoplifting, and bad check passing also turned tricks. However, while prostitutes theoretically belonged to the

criminal working class, seldom holding major investments or amassing great profit from their labor, there were enormous status gradations among them.

Stratification Within Prostitution

Individual fancy women plied their trade everywhere on the Comstock, from elite residential neighborhoods to working class slums, but most organized prostitution was found in Virginia City's three differentiated vice districts.²⁷ Badly built, cheaply run houses in Chinatown offered customers gambling, liquor, opium, and prostitutes. These haunts were known for the dangers of robbery and sudden violence. However, for lawlessness and sheer vileness, nothing on the Comstock could compare to the tiny, predominantly white Barbary Coast on C Street. This district was located on Virginia City's main thoroughfare close to its major businesses and only consisted of five or six small saloons, yet it was the scene of gross profanity, lewd exhibitions, beatings, and murders.²⁸

The better sporting resorts were clustered together on C and D Streets. These included bawdy theaters, dance houses, saloons, gambling rooms, and brothels, with picturesque names, such as Bow Windows and Brick House. A contemporary description of the Alhambra Theater caught the flavor of the whole district:

. . . [the theater] is famous for neither the chasteness of its performance nor the moral tone which it seeks to exert upon its frequenters . . . Good people go there sometimes, and very bad oft-times. This is a free country, and the grown men and women who go there might find a worse place if it were closed.²⁹

Every form of prostitution practiced in nineteenth century America flourished in the bawdy districts and the neighborhoods surrounding them. However, even though various kinds of painted women worked in close proximity to one another, residential patterns within the districts reflected status differences. Prostitutes could live in large or small brothels, in well kept or rundown boarding houses, in their own cottages, in rooms behind saloons, or in cribs. The large variety of workplaces available to prostitutes and the subtle, but definite differences among ostensibly similar living and working situations make it difficult to discover where each individual prostitute fit in the stratification system, but a general outline of the status structure within prostitution can be drawn.

Madams were entrepreneurs at the top of the stratification pyramid, but in many ways they were *outside* actual prostitution. Although they occasionally took customers, they did not earn their livings from selling their own bodies, but instead managed the sexual commerce of other women. There were nine madams listed in the 1875 census, and two of them had large holdings in the D Street district. No single description can capture the many sides of Comstock madams, but notes on three of the Lode's most famous brothelkeepers illuminate some of their many facets.

Nellie Sayers ran a "ginshop of the lowest class" on the Barbary Coast.³⁰ Her small, one-story house had a barroom, kitchen, and two

bedrooms in which four prostitutes lived and slept. Allegations of adultery, accessory to murder, and kidnapping a minor finally forced Nellie to close her establishment.³¹

Rose Benjamin, an Englishwoman in her thirties, was not so villainous as Nellie Sayers, but she was equally notorious. In 1875, her brothel on D Street housed seven prostitutes over whom she presided from a residence in another part of town. She was involved in several legal actions, including a suit against a prostitute in her debt and a battle to retain custody of an infant deeded her by another employee.³²

Finally, Cad Thompson owned a brothel on the Comstock from 1866 through at least 1880. Her house was the scene of pranks and piano-playing. Cad's nickname, "the Brick," indicates her reputation as a good sport.³³

Information about high status prostitutes who managed nothing other than their own sexual commerce is difficult to find. Unlike madams, those women had little need for public recognition of their sale of sex and many of them only remained on the Comstock for a short time. Mistresses of the upper class were usually hidden by their patrons and attempted to live behind a veil of respectability. Visiting actresses, who appeared in light plays and "shape shows" such as *The Black Crook* were often available for a price. The most famous members of this group were high-ranking prostitutes available only to selected clients.³⁴ To be sure, not all actresses were prostitutes, and some, such as Lotta Crabtree, capitalized on their virtue. However, others gave private exhibitions as "modele artistes," or even joined Rose Benjamin's house after their engagements were over.³⁵

Another group of high status prostitutes was most important during the Comstock's first decade. They lived alone in cottages and could be selective of their clientele.³⁶ Most of them saw only one customer a night. A neighboring cottage prostitute described Julia Bulette's plans on the night of her murder:

. . . she did not tell me the name of the man who was to sleep with her; said he was a friend; a friend is generally spoken of among us in that way.³⁷

After these prostitutes came women working in the largest parlor houses, the finest saloons, and the best dance halls. The next rank of women worked in small brothels and bars. Chinese prostitutes were close to the bottom of the status structure, although there was status differentiation among the Chinese houses. At the nadir of the status structure were bawds living in ill kept rooms in the red light districts or in shacks at the outskirts of the community.

The stratification system of prostitutes reflected a number of nuances within the profession. Usually, the more flagrant a prostitute was, the less status she held.³⁸ Thus, women who sat at the windows of cribs or solicited customers outside saloons ranked considerably lower than those who were kept as clandestine mistresses or remained within comfortable brothels.

The status of a form of prostitution also depended upon the extent to which attributes other than pure sex entered into bargains with customers. The higher a harlot's occupational rank, the more other attributes were involved in the exchange. High status mistresses sold companionship and temporary fidelity along with sex. Visiting actresses and women dancing in major saloons could command high prices because their talent and celebrity increased the value of their sexual services. Even women in the major brothels sold more than sex, since conversations and conviviality in the public rooms were part of the attraction of the important parlor houses.

High status prostitutes had more control over their daily lives than their lower ranking sisters, and could turn away visibly diseased or violent customers. Moreover, better class whores usually saw only one man each night, since they could command high fees from each customer. The social class of the patrons was an extremely important, albeit somewhat tautological influence on a prostitute's rank. Rich men usually sought out high status whores. When regular patrons of a form of prostitution were wealthy, it had high status within the profession.

What form of prostitution a woman engaged in depended upon her race, ethnicity, initial social class, education, appearance, specific talents, and experience within the profession. Many of these attributes are difficult to measure for Comstock prostitutes, since it is impossible to trace their careers prior to their arrival on the mining frontier. Nevertheless a general profile of women who were prostitutes casts some light on their backgrounds and professional experience.

Prostitutes' Ethnicity

Most prostitutes came to the mining frontier already established in the *demimonde*. Many of the American born drifted to Nevada from other cities where they had been unable to support themselves in any other occupation.³⁹ Others were immigrants who became prostitutes shortly after they arrived in this country or actually journeyed to the United States in order to earn a living in the sporting life. Despite the fact that so many people on the Comstock were immigrants, a much larger proportion of prostitutes than respectable women were foreign born. (See Figure II.)

FIGURE II*
PLACE OF BIRTH AND RESPECTABILITY
OF COMSTOCK WOMEN IN 1875

Birthplace	Respectable Women	Prostitutes	Women in Permanent Liaisons	Total
U.S.A. (White)	87.5%	7.1%	5.4%	1,252 (35.0%)
U.S.A. (Black and Indian)	77.3%	13.6%	9.1%	22 (0.6%)
Canada	90.3%	4.6%	5.1%	175 (4.9%)
Central and South America	48.9%	46.7%	4.4%	45 (1.3%)
China and Japan	12.0%	81.5%	6.5%	92 (2.6%)
Ireland	90.6%	4.9%	4.5%	1,136 (31.8%)
England, Wales, Scotland	92.9%	4.0%	3.1%	450 (12.6%)
France and Switzerland	74.2%	19.7%	6.1%	66 (1.8%)
Germany and Austria	77.0%	5.2%	7.8%	231 (6.5%)
Scandinavia and the Low Countries	87.5%	6.3%	6.3%	32 (0.9%)
Balkans and Southern Europe (e.g., Italy, Greece, Spain)	89.5%	5.3%	5.3%	38 (1.1%)
Other (e.g., East Indies, Australia, aboard ship)	66.7%	16.7%	16.7%	12 (0.3%)
None Listed	57.1%	38.1%	4.8%	21 (0.6%)
	86.4%	8.6%	5.0%	3,572 (3,085)
U.S.A. (White) and Canada	87.8%	6.9%	5.4%	1,427 (180)
Foreign Countries or non-White American	85.4%	9.8%	4.8%	2,145

*Source: 1875 Nevada Census

American born, British, French, and German women were members of the highest status ethnic groups within prostitution. When a native born hurdy girl attempted suicide, the newspaper story about her noted her comparative advantages, commenting that she was an "American girl and good looking."⁴⁰ German harlots were similarly valued, and an enterprising saloon owner in Carson City specifically imported a group of

Teutonic whores to raise the tone of his establishment.⁴¹ In 1852 and 1853 hundreds of French prostitutes arrived on the Pacific Coast with free passage gained from giant national lotteries conducted by Louis Napoleon who sought to rid France of some of its criminal and potentially revolutionary elements.⁴² Many of these skilled women soon rose to the top level of San Francisco's disreputable community, and their alluring reputations and the general glamor associated with Second Empire France contributed to the high status ascribed to French harlots on the Comstock.

While foreign birth sometimes added to a prostitute's status, non-white skin color always detracted from it. Black and Chinese prostitutes lived in segregated areas and never lived in an establishment also containing white women. South and Central American prostitutes could ply their trade in the main red light district, but they were often isolated in "Spanish houses" and bars hiring only brown harlots. While white customers patronized women of color, Black and Asian men seldom sought out white prostitutes.

Chinese prostitutes were located at the low end of the continuum within prostitution. They were prostitute-slaves whose earnings were kept by male brothel keepers associated with the great Chinese secret societies headquartered in San Francisco.⁴³ These women had been sold once in China and again when they reached the Pacific Coast. This slavery was common knowledge on the Comstock, and the kidnapping of a Chinese whore merely evoked a comparison of American horse-stealing with Chinese woman-stealing.⁴⁴

With the exception of Chinese and Black women who clearly ranked below all other prostitutes, ethnicity did not directly determine a woman's status within the profession. Harlots of every other national origin could be found among rich men's mistresses and also among the slatterns occupying shanties on the city's fringes. However, ethnicity frequently determined how women were grouped within categories of prostitution, as illustrated by the distinctions among brothel prostitutes. For example, Bow Windows was among the city's highest status bordellos, and customers often went there for parties and musical entertainment, as well as sex. In 1880, it contained five women, from Europe and the United States. (See Figure III.)

FIGURE III
ROSTER OF BOW WINDOWS BROTHEL AT 15 SO. D ST.*

Name	Occupation	Marital Status	Age	Birthplace
Caroline W. Thompson (also known as Cad the Brick)	Madam	Widowed	53	Ireland
Annie Burnett	Prostitute	Single	28	U.S.A.
Kitty Caymont	Prostitute	Single	29	U.S.A.
Emma Hall	Prostitute	Single	27	U.S.A.
Annie Miller	Prostitute	Married	32	France

*Source: U.S. Manuscript Census, 1880

A lower status brothel specialized in Mexican women, and it was the important "Spanish house" in the city. Other houses with five or more women included French and American born prostitutes, and also Irish women. Irish prostitutes had lower ethnic status than those from other western European countries, and they were generally excluded from the best houses. However, Irish women were important in the smaller brothels serving working men, and were also active in saloons and hurdy houses catering primarily to the large Irish working class.

Ranking below the larger brothels were a number of smaller establishments scattered through the vice districts and fanning out into working class residential neighborhoods. While these houses of from two to four women were often internally homogeneous, prostitutes of every nationality lived in them, and it is impossible to order the small brothels simply from information about the ages and ethnicities of the women working in them.

By and large, the status of an ethnic group within prostitution reflected its status in the larger occupational structure. However, French and German harlots were particularly valued because of a mystique of sophistication surrounding their sexuality. Ethnicity was related to women's initial class position and education, both of which were also important in determining their status within the profession. Of all of the background characteristics listed in the 1875 census, ethnicity was most strongly related to a bawd's status; and age, traditionally regarded as critical in determining a woman's rank, was not particularly relevant to Comstock prostitutes' position in the fast life.

Prostitutes' Age

Most Comstock prostitutes were less than thirty years old, and many were under eighteen. (See Figure IV.) However, respectable people never protested against prostitutes in their early teens, unless girls from the local community were in danger of being recruited into the sporting life.⁴⁵

FIGURE IV
AGE STRUCTURE OF THE ADULT FEMALE POPULATION
IN 1875

Age	Respectable Women	Prostitutes	Women in Permanent Liaisons	Row Total
18 or below*	118	35	15	168
19-24	550	101	51	701
25-29	634	75	33	742
30-34	639	42	36	718
35-39	489	29	28	546
40-44	336	19	10	365
45-49	158	5	6	169
50-54	70	0	1	71
55-59	33	0	0	33
60-98	58	1	0	59
Column Total	3,085	307	180	3,572
	86.4%	8.6%	5.0%	100%

*Women under eighteen were not counted as adult unless they were married or employed outside the home.

Source: 1875 Nevada Census

Except in the case of madams, there was no clear association between a prostitute's age and her status within the profession. Of nine madams active in 1875, only one was under thirty, and this is not surprising, since both capital and experience were necessary to run a successful bawdy bar or brothel. The necessary characteristics for other job categories within prostitution were more ephemeral and not so strongly associated with age. For example, Julia Bulette, the Comstock's most famous courtesan, was approaching middle age (thirty-five). This fact flies in the face of much popular and scholarly writing about the fast life.

Moralists often traced prostitutes' downward progress from opulent parlor houses to the gutters, and sociologists have emphasized youth as a desirable attribute in women's sexual exchange, asserting that the younger the prostitute, the higher her potential status within the profession.⁴⁶ However, age is not always directly related to attractive appearance, one of the key determinants of a harlot's status. Sexual specialization experience, conversational ability, and vivid interactional style are other important assets which may develop with age. It is probable that fancy women's age did not negatively affect their status until they began to look old, and women could remain in the type of prostitution they entered for well over a decade.

How Prostitutes Lived

Many prostitutes lived and worked alone, but their situations differed greatly depending upon their status within the profession. Both the Comstock's highest status courtesans and its outcast slatterns plied their trade by themselves. However, rich men's mistresses generally lived secluded lives, while low status women of the town often solicited openly in the streets.

Rich men's mistresses occupied their own cottages in residential neighborhoods or lived in well kept boarding houses or hotels. Little else is known about these women, because their prostitution was so clandestine. The only public notes about this group of harlots discuss a few tragedies occurring when their patrons left them or when they were discovered by their lovers' wives.

One Cornish woman left her husband because she had fallen in love with another married man. After that affair, she became a mine owner's mistress and eventually poisoned herself after he left her alone in a small room she had rented in a respectable neighborhood.⁴⁷ Another hapless mistress suffered injuries when her lover's wife discovered them in a comfortable room in the International Hotel. The affronted spouse did nothing to her husband, but shattered a handy bottle of champagne over his companion's head.⁴⁸

More information is available about visiting actresses who stayed at the city's best hotels. Not all actresses who visited the Comstock were whores, and some women who appeared in legitimate dramas or were major musical stars vigorously defended their virtue. However, women cast in light plays and song and dance productions were frequently available to men. The Swiss Bell Ringers, a troop of Lancashire women, performed on the stage, and after their engagement was over they moved into one of the city's better brothels.⁴⁹ Other actresses were more discreet, yet they often added to their incomes and obtained favorable publicity by dispensing their sexual favors.

Most high status actresses traveled from city to city, and their transience explains the fact that only one prostitute was classified as an actress in the 1875 census. Moreover, other women appearing on the stage were simply listed as prostitutes or gave no occupational listing. Most of these women worked in bawdy theaters, the largest of which was the Alhambra Melodeon at the corner of Union and D Streets in the heart of the city's main red light district. The prostitutes singing and dancing in melodeons ranked well below actresses employed in respectable theaters, and their status corresponded with that of women working large saloons.

Although the bawdy theaters had small private rooms in which prostitutes could entertain customers, some disreputable actresses took men home to their boarding houses.⁵⁰ Women working large saloons and dance halls also lived in rooms on the edges of the D Street district. The "pretty waiter girls," "beer jerkers," "hurdy girls," and "slingers," were paid low wages for waiting on tables and entertaining and were generally expected to supplement their incomes by taking patrons. During working hours they merely flirted with men, and they usually had only one customer a night.

A large number of women working alone were not attached to any disreputable institutions, and they lived in cribs or shanties, soliciting customers in front of saloons or in the crowded streets. They occasionally had lower class men live with them for several weeks or months, but they usually returned to their lonely occupations. Many of these bawds were drunks, habitually arrested for disorderly conduct, and others were so impoverished and/or diseased that they eventually came to depend upon charity for survival.

Women working in brothels traded independence and control of their earnings for other advantages. They gave at least half of their income to madams in exchange for bed and board, a place to work, an established clientele, and a modicum of organized protection against violence. Employment at a better bordello also offered prostitutes entrance into the parlor house circuit, and they sometimes spent part of the year in San Francisco brothels. However, the women employed in the houses not only had to give up a large part of their wages, but also had to submit to supervision of their dress, manners, and recreational activities.

While no Comstock bordello was as lavish as the great houses in San Francisco, which abounded in antiques and crystal chandeliers and served only fine champagne, the best Nevada brothels had large comfortable salons with pianos. Liquor and conversation were provided in these public areas, and customers stopped by to drink and to listen to music, as well as to engage prostitutes. The major *maisons des joies* were relaxing meeting places, and sexual commerce was conducted beneath a veil of conviviality. Prostitutes had their own private rooms which servants cleaned, and the madams sent their washing to Chinatown laundries.

Little is known about the private barter between brothel prostitutes and customers, except that men had a choice of a short visit or of remaining all night. Prostitutes in the best houses probably received from a \$10 to a \$20 gold piece from each customer, since that was the price for short visits to top San Francisco parlor houses during the same period.⁵¹ Fees for uncommon sexual practices were higher, and there are indications that these services were available in the best houses. One harlot at Bow Windows, known as the German Muscle Woman, was noted for having a ready supply of whips, and the availability of young girls and several sets of sisters at the best houses also suggest some willingness to accommodate sexual perversions.⁵²

Most brothel prostitutes lived in houses of two to four women, charging substantially lower prices than harlots working in major bordellos. A few of these small houses were run by madams, but in most cases the prostitutes working in them either gave most of their earnings to a male landlord or split the cost of running their establishment among themselves. A description of one such house noted that it had a small reception parlor with a badly worn horsehair sofa, a spotted carpet, and three chairs. The madam was an old woman, and according to the account, it was as elegant as three-fourths of the Comstock's houses.⁵³

A small number of bawds worked in Barbary Coast dives, where they occasionally helped set up drinks, but neither waited on tables nor danced nor sang. These small saloons were comparable to the lowest ranking

brothels and each housed only one or two harlots. The Barbary Coast was notorious for fights, shootings, card cheating, and drugged drinks. Prostitutes working in saloons along the Coast were frequently ill-treated and were occasionally locked up for "safekeeping." Two women sometimes shared the same bed in cramped backrooms where they both slept and brought customers.⁵⁴

Although life on the Barbary Coast was sometimes horrible, the women working in those saloons could usually leave, while Asian harlots were trapped as slaves in the Chinatown houses. They were often beaten by their owners and kidnapped by men from rival secret societies. Most Asian prostitutes wore Chinese-style clothes, either dressing simply in black pajamas and red-checked aprons or wearing more elaborate silk costumes.⁵⁵ There is no information about Chinese prostitutes' prices on the Comstock, but the usual fee for a short visit to an Asian brothel in San Francisco was \$1.⁵⁶

The Myth of Mobility

The conditions under which most harlots lived and worked did not allow them to accumulate enough money to leave the fast life and establish small, respectable businesses or simply live off their savings. Historical fiction about frontier prostitutes often contains allusions to the use of prostitution as a path to respectable financial autonomy, as well as references to harlots who married rich patrons and became pillars of elite society.⁵⁷ Neither of these themes can be verified empirically, since prostitutes who move from sin to respectability would have changed their names and hidden their pasts. However, evidence from the Comstock suggests that comparatively few prostitutes left the criminal community before they died.⁵⁸

Many prostitutes died young, killed by the routine misfortunes that were an integral part of the skin trade. Such problems included violence from customers, faulty abortions, and addiction to alcohol and narcotics. One common "solution" to these related difficulties was suicide — the greatest hazard of all.

Prostitutes were routine targets for indiscriminate male hostility. Sometimes men's anger took the form of pranks, insults, and ridicule, which shady ladies were expected to bear with tolerance. Other incidents could not be dismissed so easily, since physical brutality frequently left lasting reminders. Nevertheless, patrons smashed furniture in brothels and bars, threw rocks at harlots, and beat them with impunity. Some D Street prostitutes wore whistles with which they could summon police, but they seldom called upon lawmen to help them to deal with routine violence, because the brutality of customers was an individual risk inherent in prostitution.

At least eight Comstock prostitutes were killed by men during the twenty-year boom, and there were many other near misses. However, with the exception Julia Bulette's assassin, no man was ever convicted of murdering or attempting to murder a prostitute. They ranked so low in the scheme of human types that there were few serious efforts to find their killers.

Other hazards of the fast life were more elusive than brutal customers. Imperfect birth control methods made contraception a constant problem. Although condoms, diaphragms, and douches were available from mail order houses and pharmacies, none of these devices was entirely effective. Moreover, some contraceptives, such as carbolic acid douches, were very dangerous.⁵⁹

Pharmacies also sold abortifacients ranging from oil of tansy to strychnine. While both the sale of abortive substances and the performance of abortions were illegal in Nevada, the law prohibiting them was seldom enforced on the Comstock.⁶⁰ Abortion was never noted in the newspapers, unless harm to a woman forced public mention of the subject. Two prostitutes were known to have died from faulty abortions, and probably others were killed by similar operations, but had their deaths attributed to other causes.⁶¹

Some prostitutes endured pregnancy under harsh conditions and were later faced with finding homes for their children. Foster homes, orphanages, and boarding schools were alternatives usually available only to high status prostitutes. Sometimes a woman's parents might take a child, or, if she had her child prior to entering the fast life, the father might claim it. Despite these choices many women without resources were faced with the choice of killing their children or raising them in the disreputable community.

Infanticide was enough of a problem that Nevada passed a law defining concealment of the death of a bastard as a criminal offense, and adding that the criminal involved could also be indicted for murder.⁶² While only one of six murdered infants on the Comstock was linked with a prostitute, the existence of a law against infanticide indicated that it may have been more widespread than the records suggest, and many bodies could have remained undiscovered.⁶³

In 1875, according to the census, twenty-five prostitutes had children with them, and infants were living in six different Comstock brothels. There are no histories of what became of the children raised in these circumstances. The strains of pregnancy under extremely difficult circumstances and the decisions to be made once children were born undoubtedly wore down prostitutes' physical and emotional stamina.

Venereal diseases also debilitated prostitutes and contributed to their early deaths. While there is no specific information about disease rates on the Comstock, a number of studies indicate that syphilis and gonorrhea were highly prevalent in nineteenth-century America. In 1874, it was estimated that one out of 18.5 people in New York City was syphilitic, and a later treatise claimed that one out of every 22 people throughout the United States was infected with syphilis.⁶⁴ On the Comstock, surviving hospital records and newspapers do not explicitly mention venereal diseases, but mention of "cancer of the brain" and "internal disease of unknown origin." However, common newspaper advertisements for various cures indicate that syphilis and gonorrhea were widespread problems. One such ad read:

Surest and quickest known [cure] for private diseases of both sexes, young and old. The worst cases of stricture and chronic venereal disease quickly retrieved. No mercury used.⁶⁵

If Comstock prostitutes contracted venereal diseases, they would have spread to customers, some of whom were married. However, there was never any public recognition of that danger, although it is probable that fears of it contributed to respectable women's intimate motives to curtail prostitution. During the same period, New York feminists did speak out against prostitution on the grounds that it endangered wives and their unborn children with disease.⁶⁶ However, on the Comstock feminism was considered to be nearly as dangerous as syphilis, and venereal disease remained a hidden, private problem.

The routine hazards of ill treatment, contraception, and venereal disease contributed to another problem — alcohol and narcotic abuse. It is doubtful if women became prostitutes in order to obtain these drugs, since they were cheap and readily available on the free market. Instead, drugs made prostitution possible for many women, because liquor and narcotics allowed them to function in situations fraught with physical and emotional degradation.

Many low status harlots were chronic alcoholics who became involved in street brawls when they were drunk. The negative impact of alcohol on prostitutes' careers caused some to turn to other drugs, and the results were equally disastrous. Pharmacists sold laudanum, morphine, and raw opium over the counter, and opium derivatives were also components of patent medicines. Narcotic addiction was never considered a public issue on the Comstock except in the case of the Chinese, and growing anti-Asian sentiment was responsible for an ordinance declaring opium dens a public nuisance. However, the city fathers quickly made it clear that they were not concerned if Chinese people or disreputable whites smoked the demon poppy, but were merely worried about protecting respectable citizens from the Asian menace.⁶⁷

Prostitutes not only took drugs to make their lives more bearable, but also used them to die when their lives grew unendurable. Morphine and laudanum were the two poisons most commonly taken by the fifteen harlots who killed themselves and the eighteen others who attempted suicide between 1863 and 1880. The actual number of suicides and attempts is probably far larger, since suicides among all classes often went unreported, attempts were frequently ignored, and some fancy women took their lives in other communities on the parlor house circuit. There was no clear pattern of suicides among harlots; those of every age, nationality, and status within the profession killed themselves.

The profits from prostitution seldom rested in the harlots' hands, but were instead amassed by madams, other disreputable entrepreneurs, and respectable elites with investments in the irregular economy. Julia Bulette was a member of a small group of upper middle status prostitutes who occupied individual cottages. She was among the most successful Comstock harlots, and her popularity allowed her to adopt a petit bourgeois lifestyle. However, when Julia Bulette died, she left behind large debts for professional expenses of rent, clothing, liquor to serve her patrons,

and medical services. Her final estate was valued at \$1,200, and the claims against it had to be met at one-third of their value.⁶⁸

If these were the complete assets of one of the Comstock's highest status, best loved prostitutes, others of lower rank must have accumulated far less. On the other hand, madams of all kinds became wealthy. For example, Mit Raymond, the fifty-six-year-old owner of a prostitute bawdy saloon, left a substantial estate, including \$40,000 worth of real estate in Sacramento, Oakland, and Marysville, California.⁶⁹

Friends and Enemies

The quality of the relationships prostitutes had with men made it difficult, if not impossible, for them to achieve social mobility through marriage. In one case, a former Comstock prostitute did become rich after she married a pimp and moved to a mining community in eastern Nevada, where they owned several brothels and also invested in some legitimate businesses. However, after three generations, her heirs are still stigmatized by association with prostitution.⁷⁰ Many prostitutes never became seriously involved with men, and those who did often entered into liaisons or marriage with individuals who were also part of the criminal community, and the women either kept on working in the skin trade or assumed other roles in the irregular marketplace.

Five key masculine roles were salient to prostitution: customer, lover, pimp, employer, and lawman. None of these roles was mutually exclusive, since police received painted women's favors and special customers could eventually turn into lovers. However, at a given time, only one masculine role was critical in defining the relationship between a harlot and a man.

While men often sought them out for companionship as well as sex, that interaction was merely an additional service supplied by fancy women, and their friendships with customers were superficial. The underlying foundation of economic exchange, and the overwhelming difference in social power between prostitutes and customers, mitigated the possibility of deep, lasting mutual esteem. Thus, a former patron wrote this entry in his diary when a bawd he had known killed herself:

Little Ida that I used to --- some two years ago was found dead in her bed at Bow Windows (Jenny Tyler's) this morning. She had been rather dissipated for some time past and lately had taken to opium. —Ida Vernon was her name — a man was sleeping with her and found her cold in the morning. Rest in Peace Ida — she was her worst enemy.⁷¹

Some prostitutes wisely separated business from pleasure and seldom became entangled with respectable patrons. However, a number of sporting women did take male lovers from the criminal community. Marriage or long term affairs were more feasible for madams than for other fast women, since madams' jobs did not require that they barter their own sexuality, and they could separate love and sex from business. Some Comstock madams had consorts who owned their own disreputable businesses or pursued professional criminal careers, and their relation-

ships had a measure of equality. However, the men in romantic relationships with common prostitutes invariably exploited them to a greater degree than men involved with madams. Either prostitutes' lovers were economically independent and used their greater social and economic power to dominate the relationship, or, more commonly, they lived off a harlot's earnings.

Despite informal prohibitions against discussing pimps, and a formal city ordinance banning "all lewd and dissolute persons who live in and about houses of ill fame," pimps thrived on the Comstock.⁷² The 1875 census listed thirty-eight obvious parasites residing in brothels or with individual prostitutes and calling themselves "sports," "speculators," or "gentlemen of leisure." More such men may have lived on the Comstock, but they did not dwell with painted women and could not be definitely identified.

Eleven of the pimps were born in southern or border states recently disrupted by the Civil War, seventeen came from the eastern United States, one was from the midwest, and two did not list their birthplaces. Only seven pimps were foreign born. One was from Germany and six were Irish. Most of these fancy men were between thirty-five and forty-four years old. The successful ones usually came to the Comstock from other American cities, and their ethnicities indicate that their ability to live by their wits and manipulate women was enhanced by their familiarity with American culture.

Unlike their modern counterparts who exercise power over an average of two or three harlots at a time, Comstock pimps usually had only one woman.⁷³ However, in other respects the relationships between painted women and fancy men have changed little over the past century. The liaisons were based primarily on prostitutes' emotional commitment, rather than on fear or coercion. Pimps rarely solicited customers for their women or assisted with business in other ways, except to protect harlots sporadically from unusually rowdy or violent customers. Their principal function was to provide prostitutes with an illusion of romance that could not be found with anyone outside the fast life. Since higher status men in the disreputable community probably preferred liaisons with women who could promise them temporary sexual fidelity, prostitutes had to find lovers among parasites.

There is little information about the few fancy men who may have been honest, loyal, and true to their women. However, there are numerous reports of Comstock sports who mistreated prostitutes and gambled away their women's earnings. By and large, pimps took painted women's money, abused them, and eventually left. Some fancy men were forced out of the community when they became involved in murders and other major misdeeds, but most simply moved on to the fast life in other boom towns.

The men who ran bawdy saloons and theaters, owned buildings in the red light districts, or bought and sold Asian prostitutes did not belong in the same social category as gentlemen of leisure. Although these men earned money through prostitutes, they did not necessarily have love affairs with them. The financial arrangements between prostitutes and

male entrepreneurs and managers of disreputable enterprises were relatively impersonal; while pimps encouraged tumultuous, one-sided romances.

Like pimps and disreputable entrepreneurs, police frequently took money from prostitutes, but lawmen often gave even less than other men in return for sexual favors. It was common for prostitutes to bribe police with money and/or sex in order to avoid arrest for discretionary offenses, such as disorderly conduct. Sometimes officers brutally arrested harlots who wouldn't pay them, and occasionally they were called to account for misusing their power.⁷⁴ However, the commerce between prostitutes and police usually continued unhindered by the city ordinance forbidding on-duty police to enter bawdy establishments except to discharge their professional duties.⁷⁵

Police pay was low, and some lawmen were recruited from the fringe of the criminal community. However, while police were close to prostitutes, their relationships were characterized by unequal power. Sexual intimacy and other favors, such as providing alibis, were exchanged for protection from arrest; and most interactions between bawds and lawmen were comparable to impersonal prostitute-customer transactions. As agents of the respectable community, lawmen always had the power to betray fast women, and the sheriff was no more the prostitute's comrade than the vice cop is the modern streetwalker's confidant.

The only close, long standing friends prostitutes had were other women of ill repute. They lived together, drank together, fought and reconciled, protected one another from violent customers and petty madams, and sometimes attempted joint suicides. While lesbianism was never documented among Comstock prostitutes, it was common among harlots in other communities and probably occurred on the Comstock as well.⁷⁶

Intimacy between prostitutes was facilitated by the bonds they shared through a common argot, set of customs, and pattern of career experiences. They were also bound together by their separation from the respectable community and by their social distance from customers. The trade talk of prostitution and the sharing of anecdotes and philosophy among women cemented their bonds, and even fancy men could not fully participate in such discussions, since they had not sold their bodies.

Even if love between harlots went unconsummated, other, non-sexual aspects of it were clearly evident. Prostitutes in small brothels sometimes shared the same beds after customers had departed. Women of higher rank traveled in pairs on the parlor house circuit and paid visits down the mountain to other fancy women in Carson City. Harlots gave one another small keepsakes, traded clothes, and recommended their friends to customers. When courtesans died, other women in the fast life buried them, and if they left any property, it was usually to their female friends.

Conclusion

Comstock prostitutes' daily lives resembled those of other women of ill repute dwelling in cities throughout the United States during the same period. Drawn to the mining frontier by prospects of wealth, those who

came of their own choice usually remained poor, caught in a cycle of sexual and economic exploitation. Chinese bawds worked and died as slaves, and their situation was an extreme extension of the degradation experienced by other women in the fast life.

The traffic in women was legally tolerated and secretly encouraged because of the immense profits it brought respectable elites and because it was considered necessary to sustain the large labor force of lone men. Moreover, much popular ideology supported St. Augustine's assertion that prostitution was as essential to marriage as cesspools were to a palace, and many people believed that harlots provided a necessary outlet for the overwhelming sexual urges that good men could not inflict upon their innocent, fragile wives.

Although married women's frequent adultery contradicted the belief system negating ladies' sexuality, that ideology was strong enough to force the burden of punishment for adultery and/or divorce on women. Both respectable women and prostitutes depended upon men for their economic and social survival. While one group remained isolated within their parlors, the other was confined behind the veil separating the bawdy districts from the respectable community. However, both ladies and harlots alike shared a common fate of having their sexual behavior critical in defining their social identities. Ostensible fidelity and sexual reserve were key characteristics of respectability, while promiscuity and apparent sexual abandon were major aspects of disreputability.

The centrality of sexual conduct in defining women's social identities reflected the pervasive belief that moral women could control their instincts, while men could not be held accountable for their strong sexual drives. Women's sexual behavior was also critical to their social identities because few females could attain social position by earning a living outside the home. Men derived a sense of who they were by means of their occupation, while women seldom did.

In 1870 only 14.7 per cent of all women over sixteen years old in the United States were breadwinners.⁷⁷ This marginal inclusion of women in the productive and service spheres of the economy blurred the absolute boundaries separating prostitutes and wives in traditional societies, because respectability was no longer an ascribed characteristic. Working women had to both earn their livings and protect their moral reputations, and prostitution became a matter of "choice," rather than a role into which one was born. However, that choice was often illusory, since few jobs were available to women, and those that were usually had poor pay, seasonal layoffs, and grueling working conditions. Moreover, the ideological dichotomy between ladies and most working women was grounded in the reality that many women worked under the control of male supervisors or employers who took sexual advantage of them.⁷⁸

Women's precarious economic position in the larger society was mirrored in the irregular marketplace. While the criminal community welcomed prostitutes, most women were excluded from other, more lucrative occupations. Moreover, many men employed in irregular capacities could cross over into reputable jobs, while prostitutes were damned as part of the *demimonde*. The whole stratification system within

prostitution was a distorted reflection of sex stratification in the larger society. High ranking courtesans were valued for ladylike manners and attractive appearance, and prostitutes' race critically influenced their professional rank. Racism forced women of color into the most menial respectable jobs and also doomed them to the lowest echelons of prostitution.

The economic organization of industrial capitalism not only contributed to the supply of prostitutes, but also to the demand for them. Famines and political upheavals sweeping nineteenth-century Asia, South America, and Europe impelled women and men to seek their fortunes in the United States. Both immigrant and native born men worked long hours under dehumanizing conditions. Many workers sought emotional release and fleeting power through relationships with women of ill repute. As male workers were transformed into interchangeable objects in the factories, mills and mines, they in turn objectified women and traded part of their wages for sexual contact.

Prostitution was an integral part of the social and economic structure of all large American cities during the mid-nineteenth century. Although the traffic in women was labeled deviant, it was an essential part of social life. While prostitution's internal social organization has changed dramatically over the past century, it is still embedded in social structure. Sexism, racism, and capitalism continue to shape the skin trade. The common emphasis on the lures of the fast life obscures the social roots of prostitution. Myths about prostitutes' mobility and glorious careers were attempts to turn dirt into gold, but like other forms of alchemy they failed, and dirt remains dirt.

Notes

1. *Virginia City Territorial Enterprise*, June 27, 1867, p. 3, col. 1.
2. A large number of popular books on prostitution describe famous courtesans, wealthy madams, and call girls. Among these works are: Lesley Blanch, ed., *The Game of Hearts: Harriet Wilson's Memoirs* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), Joanna Richardson, *The Courtesans: The Demimonde in Nineteenth Century France* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1967), Curt Gentry, *The Madams of San Francisco* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1971), and, of course, Xaviera Hollander, *The Happy Hooker* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1972).
3. Several classic works on prostitution spend a disproportionate amount of time discussing life among high status harlots. For example, see Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1952) ch. xix. Many scholars implicitly assume that all prostitution resembles elite sexual commerce. Thus, the quote about prostitution coming close to getting something for nothing appeared in one of the landmark articles in the sociology of deviance, Kinsley Davis, "The Sociology of Prostitution," *American Sociological Review*, 11 (October, 1937), p. 750.
4. Some of the best recent scholarship debunking the myths about prostitution includes Stephen Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth Century England* (New York: Basic Books, Inc. Publishers, 1964), Kate Millett, *The Prostitution Papers* (New York: Avon Books, 1973), and Gail Sheehy, *Hustling: Prostitution in Our Wide Open Society* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1973). Another important contribution to the emerging scholarship on sexual barter is the revitalization of Emma Goldman, *The Traffic in Women and Other Essays on Feminism* (New York: Times Change Press, 1970).
5. This study used almost every important primary and secondary source of data for the Comstock boom years from 1860 through 1880. Sources included territorial manuscript

censuses for 1860 and 1861 and the manuscript United States Census for 1870 and 1880. Special emphasis was placed upon the manuscript state census of 1875, since it provided the only detailed data on the community during a bonanza period, when there was a maximum number of prostitutes, a large general population, and an established, albeit flexible class structure. Newspapers carrying frequent small items about prostitution were another central source. Every surviving issue of the *Territorial Enterprise* was used, because it was the largest, best written, and most influential paper on the Comstock. Information from the *Enterprise* was supplemented with data from the *Gold Hill Evening News*, the *Virginia Daily Union*, and the *Virginia Evening Chronicle*. National publications, such as the *New York Times* and the *Overland Monthly*, also carried news about the mining frontier. Other printed materials included journals of the Nevada legislature, business and mining directories, and contemporary histories. These sources were supplemented by three available prostitutes' probates, diaries of respectable citizens, and a scattered collection of ephemera and photographs housed in the Nevada Historical Society, Reno. Comparative data were gathered from published histories of nineteenth-century prostitution in San Francisco and New York City. Finally, valuable insights about the similarities and differences between past and present prostitution were gained from brief fieldwork in Ely, a modern Nevada mining town, and extensive contact with members of COYOTE, the San Francisco loose women's organization.

6. Nevada Legislature (1875 Census), *Appendix to the Journals of the Senate and Assembly of the Eighth Session of the Legislature of the State of Nevada*, Vol. III (Carson City: John J. Hill, State printer, 187), p. 615.
7. Louis Wirth, "Urbanism as a Way of Life," in *Louis Wirth On Cities and Social Life*, ed. by Albert Reiss, Jr. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964), pp. 62-66.
8. Russell R. Elliott, *History of Nevada* (Lincoln: University Nebraska Press, 1973), pp. 123-144.
9. Wilbur S. Shepperson, *Restless Strangers: Nevada's Immigrants and Their Interpreters* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1970), pp. 13-14.
10. See for example, *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 8, 1883, p. 3, col. 7-8 on the divorce action filed by Theresa Fair against James Fair in District Court of Storey County. See also, Kenneth Church Lamott, *Who Killed Mr. Crettenden?: Being A True Account of the Notorious Murder That Stunned San Francisco, the Laura D. Fair Case*, (New York: D. McKay Co.: 1963).
11. See for example, *Gold Hill News*, Feb. 24, 1864, p. 3, col. 1, and *Territorial Enterprise*, July 7, 1868, p. 3, col. 2.
12. Robert B. Merrifield, "Nevada, 1859-1881: The Impact of an Advanced Technological Society Upon a Frontier Area" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1957), p. 33.
13. See for example, Mrs. C. M. Churchill, *Little Sheaves: Gathered While Gleaning After Reapers* (San Francisco, 1874), pp. 77-78 and *Territorial Enterprise* March 11, 1872, p. 2., col. 1 and June 15, 1872, p. 3, col. 3.
14. Robert B. Merrifield, "Nevada, 1859-1881," p. 163, and *Territorial Enterprise*, September 11, 1877, p. 3, col. 2.
15. Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," in *The American Family in Social-Historical Perspective*, ed. by Michael Gordon (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc.), pp. 227-250 and Eli Zaretsky, "Capitalism, the Family, and Personal Life: Part I," *Socialist Revolution*, III (January-April, 1973), pp. 102-115.
16. *Territorial Enterprise*, March 9, 1879, p. 27, col. 3-4 and Louise M. Palmer, "How We Live in Nevada," *Overland Monthly*, 11 (May, 1869), p. 461. See also Alfred Doten Diaries, Special Collections, University of Nevada at Reno, October 12, 1874. (While these diaries have been published by the University of Nevada Press, the manuscripts were used because they were more accurate and had not been abridged in editing.)
17. The average wage was \$4 per day for an eight- to ten-hour day. See Elliott, *History of Nevada*, pp. 142-143.
18. *Territorial Enterprise*, July 28, 1877, p. 3, col. 2.
19. Palmer, "How We Live in Nevada," p. 462.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 461-462.

21. Carroll D. Wright, Commissioner of Labor, *Marriage and Divorce in the United States* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1897), p. 103 and pp. 708-711.
22. *Virginia Evening Bulletin*, April 16, 1863, p. 3, col. 1, and *Territorial Enterprise*, August 4, 1875, p. 3, col. 3.
23. *Gold Hill Evening News*, December 12, 1863, p. 3, col. 2.
24. *Virginia City Evening Chronicle*, February 21, 1877, p. 3, col. 3; February 22, 1877, p. 2, col. 2 and p. 3, col. 2; and *Territorial Enterprise*, Feb. 15, 1877, p. 2, col. 2 and p. 3, col. 3.
25. This search was quite difficult because prostitutes could be located by address, but not necessarily by lot parameters. In order to be accurate, the blocks known to have been almost entirely devoted to commercial vice were examined. First, land ownership was studied. Then lists of the owners were compared with listings in the 1875 manuscript census and with lists of prostitutes and madams in the 1880 manuscript census. Ownership was established only when there was definite correspondence between last names and first names or initials.
26. Sheehy, *Hustling*, pp. 116-154.
27. Two of those districts loosely conformed to ordinances relegating the traffic in women to Chinatown and an area on North D Street. The third, the Barbary Coast, was always illegal. The exact location of prostitution was established through the United States Census manuscripts for 1880, which listed clear street addresses.
28. See, for example, *Territorial Enterprise*, March 11, 1873, p. 3, col. 2; June 3, 1874, p. 3, col. 2; and January 20, 1877, p. 3, cols. 2-4.
29. *Territorial Enterprise*, November 7, 1878, p. 2, col. 3.
30. *Territorial Enterprise*, August 5, 1875, p. 3, col. 2.
31. *Ibid.*, August 6, 1875, p. 3, col. 2 and June 7, 1877, p. 3, cols. 2-4.
32. *Ibid.*, June 28, 1875, p. 3, col. 3; August 4, 1875, p. 3, col. 3; July 10, 1877, p. 3, col. 2.
33. *Ibid.*, November 20, 1866, p. 3, col. 1.
34. Although Lola Montez never visited the Comstock, and Adah Isaacs Menken is not known to have formed any liaisons there, each of these women exemplifies the actress-courtesan of the American frontier.
35. *Territorial Enterprise*, April 18, 1871, p. 3, col. 1 and August 17, 1872, p. 3, col. 1.
36. *Ibid.*, June 27, 1867, p. 3, cols. 1-3.
37. Testimony of Gertrude Holmes quoted in *Territorial Enterprise*, June 27, 1867, p. 3, cols. 1-3.
38. See Sheehy, *Hustling*, pp. 35-36, for an excellent typology differentiating high and low status prostitutes.
39. The harsh urban economic conditions forcing women into prostitution are documented in the cases of 2,000 New York harlots interviewed by William Sanger in 1858 for his classic work on the subject. See William W. Sanger, M.D., *The History of Prostitution: Its Extent, Causes and Effects Throughout the World* (New York: The Medical Publishing Company, 1897), chs. xxxii and xxxiii.
40. *Territorial Enterprise*, October 6, 1867, p. 3, col. 2.
41. Shepperson, *Restless Strangers*, p. 103.
42. Gentry, *The Madams of San Francisco*, pp. 72-75, and Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, trans. by Daniel De Leon (New York: New York Labor News Company, 1957), pp. 107-108.
43. Stanford M. Lyman, *The Asian in the West* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1971), pp. 18-19.
44. *Territorial Enterprise*, June 9, 1878, p. 3, col. 5.
45. *Ibid.*, June 7, 1877, p. 3, col. 4.
46. Travis Hirschi, "The Professional Prostitute," *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, VII (Spring, 1962), p. 42, and Sanger, *The History of Prostitution*, p. 557. Both of these works discuss the negative relationship between age and status within the profession, yet modern

call girls in COYOTE have frequently been in the business for more than ten years, and they assert that the key variable defining a woman's status within the profession is the level at which she entered. Young streetwalkers grow to be older streetwalkers, and young call girls simply mature at their high professional rank.

47. *Territorial Enterprise*, September 24, 1871, p. 3, col. 2.
48. *Elko Independent* (Elko, Nevada), July 14, 1879, p. 2, col. 1.
49. Shepperson, *Restless Strangers*, p. 103.
50. Some hurdy houses and bawdy theaters emphasized the availability of "private and dressing rooms," such as those noted in the Villa de Belvilier's opening announcement in the *Territorial Enterprise*, June 13, 1867, p. 2, col. 6. However, most did not, and customers sometimes fought over who would accompany hurdy girls home after hours. See, for example, *Territorial Enterprise*, January 14, 1872, p. 3, col. 2.
51. Gentry, *The Madams of San Francisco*, p. 153.
52. Shepperson, *Restless Strangers*, pp. 102-103.
53. *Gold Hill Evening News*, December 20, 1873, p. 3, col. 2.
54. *Territorial Enterprise*, August 6, 1875, p. 3, col. 3.
55. *Ibid.*, June 22, 1867, p. 3, col. 1, and Doten Diaries, Feb. 13, 1866.
56. Gentry, *The Madams of San Francisco*, p. 57.
57. Dee Brown, *The Gentle Tamers: Women of the Old Wild West* (New York: Bantam Books, 1974). This popular history presents many legends about frontier prostitutes as if they were fact and also contains copious references to other sources which glorify western harlots.
58. Various causes of prostitutes' early deaths have been noted elsewhere in this article. Few of them left behind enough property to go through probate, and even those who did had comparatively little material security. See the probates of Susan Ballard, Jessie Lester, and Julia Bulette, Storey County Courthouse.
59. John S. Haller and Robin M. Haller, *The Physician and Sexuality in Victorian America*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), pp. 113-124.
60. Nevada, *Statutes of the State of Nevada Passed at the Twelfth Session of the Legislature* (Carson City: State Printing Office, 1885), p. 1020. This law was first passed in 1869.
61. *Territorial Enterprise*, January 3, 1877, p. 3, col. 4 and October 12, 1880, p. 3, col. 3. These are the only two recorded prostitutes' abortions.
62. Nevada, *Statutes of the State of Nevada Passed at the Twelfth Session of the Legislature*, *loc. cit.*
63. For a discussion of the ways in which legislation reflects problematic areas of social life see Kai T. Erikson, *Wayward Puritans: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1966).
64. Haller and Haller, *The Physician and Sexuality*, p. 258.
65. *Territorial Enterprise*, April 17, 1872, p. 2, col. 3.
66. Pamela Roby, *Politics and Prostitution: A Case of Formulation, Enforcement, and Judicial Administration of New York State Penal Laws* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, forthcoming).
67. *Territorial Enterprise*, August 30, 1876, p. 3, col. 3, September 13, 1876, p. 3, col. 2, and September 15, 1876, p. 2, col. 1.
68. Debts Against the Estate of Julia Bulette, Storey County Court House, Virginia City, Nevada.
69. *Territorial Enterprise*, June 3, 1874, p. 3, col. 2, and June 6, 1874, p. 3, col. 4.
70. Personal interview with a member of the family.
71. Doten Diaries, February 6, 1868.
72. William R. Gillis, ed., *The Nevada Directory for 1868-1869* (San Francisco: M. D. Carr and Co. Book and Job Printers, 1868), p. 263. Business and mining directories frequently compiled city ordinances, and this reference is to the law against pimping on the Comstock.

73. For material on modern pimps see Christina Milner and Richard Milner, *Black Players: The Secret Life of Black Pimps* (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1972), p. 12.
74. *Territorial Enterprise*, May 5, 1875, p. 3, col. 2, September 9, 1876, p. 3, col. 3, and October 18, 1876, p. 3, col. 1.
75. Gillis, *The Nevada Directory for 1868-9*, pp. 256-257.
76. Haller and Haller, *The Physician and Sexuality*, pp. 106-107. This is a general discussion about prohibitions against lesbianism in the nineteenth century. One of the most famous frontier tales about lesbians describes the day that Calamity Jane was finally dismissed from a brothel in Bozeman, Montana, for corrupting the other inmates. See Lucius Beebe and Charles Clegg, *The American West* (New York City: Bonanza Books, 1955), p. 349.
77. U.S. Congress, Senate, *Report on the Condition of Women and Child Wage-Earners in the United States*, by Helen L. Sumner under the direction of Charles P. Neill, Commissioner of Labor (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1910), p. 11.
78. Sanger, *The History of Prostitution*, pp. 532-534.