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The Door of Hope: Farmwomen, Prostitution and Gender in Nineteenth Century Iowa

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The Door of Hope: Farmwomen, Prostitution and Gender in Nineteenth Century Iowa

Abstract

Throughout the late nineteenth century, Midwestern reformers experienced a shift in the ways in which they viewed and approached prostitution. For citizens of Des Moines, the rural origins and ties of the city played a significant role in the way which Midwestern reformers began to approach prostitution in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Des Moines acted as not only a trading outpost and business hub for nearby farmers, but also as a center of potential employment for young farmwomen. Whether they heard about opportunities for work in Des Moines from friends or found them in newspapers, near the turn of the century young women began migrating to Des Moines from the country in search of employment.¹ This paper will explore the efforts of one particularly successful reform mission called the Door of Hope, which expanded their reform efforts beyond the traditional focus on spiritual salvation and instead emphasized the importance of family and honest labor and focused on placing at-risk young women in safe and supportive rural homes.

Disciplines

History of Gender | Social History | Women's History | Women's Studies

Comments

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Throughout the late nineteenth century, Midwestern reformers experienced a shift in the ways in which they viewed and approached prostitution. For citizens of Des Moines, the rural origins and ties of the city played a significant role in the way which Midwestern reformers began to approach prostitution in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Des Moines acted as not only a trading outpost and business hub for nearby farmers, but also as a center of potential employment for young farmwomen. Whether they heard about opportunities for work in Des Moines from friends or found them in newspapers, near the turn of the century young women began migrating to Des Moines from the country in search of employment.¹ This paper will explore the efforts of one particularly successful reform mission called the Door of Hope, which expanded their reform efforts beyond the traditional focus on spiritual salvation and instead emphasized the importance of family and honest labor and focused on placing at-risk young women in safe and supportive rural homes.²

¹ “Saved Girl From Life of Shame,” Des Moines Register and Leader, November 23, 1904 and “They Ply Their Foul Traffic Even In Des Moines and In Iowa, Claiming Many Innocent Victims,” Des Moines Register, November 8, 1908. While these two article focus on ways in which women were lured to Des Moines, throughout my research I found small advertisements in the papers every day seeking young women to work in a variety of factories.

² The Door of Hope was the Women’s Department of The Sunbeam Mission, which had initially been formed to help unemployed men. As the Door of Hope grew and became more of The Sunbeam Mission’s focus they began refer to the Door of Hope and The Sunbeam Mission pretty interchangeably.

Leading up to the Progressive Era, society tended to have a fairly negative perception of prostitutes. Throughout the mid-nineteenth century, the people of Des Moines referred to prostitutes as gypsies or *nymphs du pave* who lived on beds of grass by the river and flitted around the city creating mayhem wherever they went.³ Early descriptions of prostitutes tended to portray these women as more animalistic than human, promoting the idea that they lacked reason and logic, and perhaps even a soul. These beliefs were reflected in the early reform tactics used on prostitutes, which focused almost solely on the religious reformation of fallen women. Reformers would invade disreputable neighborhoods to deliver sermons and hand out Bibles. They established rescue homes for women seeking shelter and Magdalenian homes for young women convicted of prostitution or lewd behavior. While these early reform efforts tended to be quite aggressive, they overlooked many of the factors that actually led to the perpetuation of prostitution and therefore tended to be fairly ineffective.⁴

Mary Odem noted this in her 1995 book, *Delinquent Daughters*, where she argued that beginning in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, reformers developed a stronger stance against prostitution and as a result, altered their reform methods by fighting for increased legislation against prostitution.⁵ What was different about the Midwest was that while reform efforts in the Midwest continued to expand and adopt

³ “Arrest of a Notorious Cyprian! Angelic Company of Nymphs!” Iowa State Register, June 27, 1866 and “The Social Evil,” The Iowa State Register, April 14, 1871.

⁴ Mary Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 1. Ruth Rosen, *The Maimie Papers*, (New York: The Feminist Press, 1977), xxii.

⁵ Mary Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 1.

more proactive approaches to reform, they managed to still maintain the spiritual basis of their reform efforts.

In the Midwest, these shifting perceptions also coincided with the onslaught of urbanization and industrialization. In her 2009 book, *Calling This Place Home*, historian Joan Jensen acknowledged that the out migration of young rural women was an area of particular concern for farm families. As labor patterns shifted, young women began migrating to urban centers in search of more lucrative employment and a greater degree of independence. Families became concerned that these young women would fall prey to urban dangers, specifically prostitution.⁶

In response to these growing concerns, the Sunbeam Mission opened their doors in December of 1893 and soon became one of the most successful public reform efforts in Des Moines. Initially, the Mission's goal was to provide aid to the unemployed men of the city, but they very quickly adjusted their focus to include the fallen women of Des Moines. While the Mission was centered on spiritual guidance, it succeeded where others had failed by expanding their efforts beyond religious salvation and provided women with further education and technical training.

In their first year, the Sunbeam Mission initially had some difficulty retaining women and only managed to save nine of "these unfortunates, who were utterly friendless and suffering from their sins."⁷ In their second year however, Sunbeam Mission worked to expand their services for the "unfortunate and fallen women," by

⁶ Joan Jensen, *Calling This Place Home*, (Minneapolis: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2009) 213.

⁷ Cramer, *First Annual Report of the Sunbeam Mission*, 1.

opening of a Women's Department, which they called "The Door of Hope."⁸ This department had two primary areas of interest when it came to helping the fallen women of Des Moines. The first group they targeted was the *regular* inmates.⁹ These women came off the streets and out of brothels and could be quite difficult to reform. This was primarily due to the fact that many of them sought out the Mission not because they truly wished to lead a better life, but because they simply needed food and shelter. They came to the Mission hoping to recuperate, and expected to return to their previous lives once they regained their strength. In order to combat this problem, the Mission insisted that these regular inmates obey all of their rules and strive towards a more productive life, or else there could be no place for them at The Door of Hope.¹⁰

Their second area of interest was in the *temporary* inmates. They saw these as the, "girls that have not tasted the dregs of abandonment and prostitution." These young women had left their country towns in search of work in the city. When they arrived in the city, young women often had trouble securing employment or found themselves in a poor work environment making very little money. The Door of Hope realized how difficult it was for these single and friendless young women in the city. They acknowledged that, "it is not strange, therefore, that these girls, having spent the last penny, without home and without friends, conclude they must beg or lead lives of sin." They also feared that these young women might be taken advantage of and might, "be led into the life of sin by the deception of some lecherous villain always on the alert for some

⁸ Frank L. Cramer, *Second Annual Report of the Sunbeam Mission*, (Des Moines, 1896), 1.

⁹ Italics in original

¹⁰ Cramer, *Second Annual Report of The Sunbeam Mission*, 2-3.

unwary victim.” The Door of Hope recognized that all these women needed in order to avoid a life spent in prostitution was “a home and an encouraging word and a helping hand at the very ‘nick of time,’ it may mean their soul’s salvation.” They took these young women in and offered them free room and board and helped them find a better situation, whether that meant sending them home or helping them find more secure and respectable employment.¹¹

At the end of their second year, the Mission had admitted thirty-two regular inmates, offered nightly shelter to three hundred and seventy eight women, and overseen two thousand four hundred and eighty six hours of labor. Additionally, they had furnished one hundred and forty two women with homes and other forms of aid and had sent sixteen fallen girls home or had secured good homes for them.¹² This was an enormous difference from the previous year in which only nine women had been saved.¹³

In order to continue reaching these women, The Door of Hope expanded outreach efforts. They began visiting the “chapel districts,” referring specifically to the White Chapel district of Des Moines, which was known for being overrun by prostitution. Reformers from the Mission would invade these neighborhoods and hold meetings late into the night, in hopes of enticing fallen women into reform.¹⁴ As the years went on, they would continue to expand these efforts with their gospel wagon, which would travel through the chapel districts with reformers singing songs, preaching the Lord’s word, and

¹¹ Cramer, *Second Annual Report of The Sunbeam Mission*, 3.

¹² Cramer, *Second Annual Report of The Sunbeam Mission*, 5.

¹³ Cramer, *First Annual Report of The Sunbeam Mission*, 1 & 4.

¹⁴ Cramer, *Third Annual Report of the Sunbeam Mission*, 3. Chapel districts refer to the White Chapel neighborhood of Des Moines, named for the White Chapel murders in London, and was inhabited primarily by houses of ill fame and gambling dens.

rescuing those in need.¹⁵ They would also handout small colorful flyers and meal tickets, which directed people to the Mission.¹⁶ In more extreme cases, when they heard of a young woman in desperate circumstances, it was not uncommon for the head of the Mission to go into the brothels and personally rescue these young women.¹⁷

As they continued to grow, the Mission also broadened their services provided to the inmates, focusing specifically on education and promoting industry. By 1904, the Mission had undergone some major changes. They had expanded their offerings to include a public restaurant, a kindling factory and wood yard, a day nursery for children and a laundry service. They had also added more educational components such as a reading room, a cooking school and a sewing school, as well as industrial classes. The Mission even formed an employment agency in order to help their inmates find respectable employment using their newfound skills. They also worked to integrate the inmates into outreach efforts including street and slum meetings and singing on the gospel wagon. Additionally, the Mission began to provide more social activities for the inmates including musical entertainments, social evenings, and weekly excursions to the park. All the while, the Mission still maintained their spiritual foundation by hosting Bible classes and a Sunday school.¹⁸ All of these additions to their reform efforts helped to not only reinforce a strong religious element in their inmates, but also worked to

¹⁵ Frank L. Cramer, *Tenth Annual Report of the Sunbeam Mission*, (Des Moines, 1904), Cover. It is very likely that the gospel wagon was in use before the tenth year, but the annual reports from years four through nine have been lost.

¹⁶ Cramer, *Third Annual Report of the Sunbeam Mission*, Insert.

¹⁷ Cramer, *Tenth Annual Report of the Sunbeam Mission*, 8-9. This was taken directly from a former inmates letter to the Mission in their tenth annual report, but it seems very likely that Cramer would have done the same for other women in the same situation.

¹⁸ Cramer, *Tenth Annual Report of the Sunbeam Mission*, Cover.

develop a sense of community and highlighted the importance of education and honest labor.¹⁹ The expansion of the Mission in these ways indicated that not only was the Mission supported by the community, but that there was also a large population of individuals seeking reform.

Once the Mission believed that a woman was truly reformed, their final reform technique centered on removing these women from the city, which the Mission believed had led to their downfall in the first place. In some case, women, such as Minnie, one of the beloved former inmates of the Mission, entered into loving and successful marriages. Minnie later wrote to the Mission from “a far away state,” to let them know that she and her husband had just purchased a piece of land and had begun construction on a three-room house. After her time at the Mission, Minnie had also rekindled her relationship with her estranged mother and had invited her to come live with her and her new husband.²⁰

In other cases, where young women had not been able to reconcile with their families or find a suitable match, the Mission worked to find them employment in a loving and nurturing home. Such was the case with Ethel. After her time at the Mission she wrote to inform them of her progress saying, "I cannot thank you enough for your kindness to me, and also for your kindness in getting me this place. They treat me just like one of the family... This is such a good home. They are all so kind to me and I will never forget your kindness to me."²¹ In ensuring that these young women found a safe and nurturing place of employment, the Mission believed that they would have a much easier

¹⁹ Cramer, *Third Annual Report of the Sunbeam Mission*, Cover.

²⁰ Cramer, *Tenth Annual Report of the Sunbeam Mission*, 10.

²¹ Cramer, *Tenth Annual Report of the Sunbeam Mission*, 10.

time maintaining a Christian lifestyle and continuing to live as positive, contributing members of society.

Due to the education, support, and affection given to these women, the Mission was able to achieve a tremendous amount of success. In a span of thirteen years two hundred and ten young women had come through the Mission. Of those women, one hundred and twenty two had kept in contact with the Mission and had begun leading good Christian lives. Sixty one of these women had successfully gone through the Mission but had not kept in touch the way the others had. While they had had many successes at the Mission, there had been those women who could not be saved. Six women had been committed to the insane asylum, four had died, and sixteen had fallen again into prostitution.²² In 1907, the Mission was forced to close its doors, not because of lack of interest or failed efforts, but simply because of the enormity task its founders had taken on had become too much for them in their old age.²³ Ultimately, the Sunbeam Mission succeeded where traditional reform efforts had not because of the broad range of reform techniques they employed. Expanding their efforts beyond spiritual salvation allowed the Mission to not only build a stronger connection with the women they hoped to save, but also worked to combat many of the factors that drove women into prostitution by providing women with further education and technical training, and placing them in loving homes with safe employment.

²² Cramer, *Thirteenth Annual Report of the Sunbeam Mission*, 3. I realize that the breakdown of the numbers adds up to 209, not 210, but these were the numbers provided.

²³ Cramer, *Thirteenth Annual Report of the Sunbeam Mission*, 3.