Red Lights, White Chapel: The Working Girls of Des Moines at the Turn of the Century

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Red Lights, White Chapel: The Working Girls of Des Moines at the Turn of the Century

Abstract
Hope Mitchell, who is perhaps better known as Iowa's “Prostitution Historian,” will be the featured speaker. Mitchell earned the Iowa History Center’s Outstanding Master’s Thesis in Iowa History award this year for “Sacrificing our Daughters: Changing Perceptions of Prostitution in Iowa, 1880-1915.” She will share her research exploring the relationship between prostitution and farming culture, particularly among the women who worked in Des Moines’ red-light district, nicknamed “White Chapel” after the district in London’s east end where Jack the Ripper was known to haunt. Currently, Mitchell works as the Assistant Coordinator of the Digital Repository at Iowa State University, where she helps to preserve the scholarship of faculty and students.

Disciplines
History of Gender | Social History | United States History | Women’s History | Women's Studies

Comments
This is a presentation from The Des Moines Historical Society Meeting (2014):1-19. Posted with permission.
Red Lights, White Chapel:

THE WORKING GIRLS OF DES MOINES AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY
Outline

- Historiography
- Research Process
  - Challenges
  - Breakthroughs
- Prostitution in Des Moines
  - Shifting Perceptions
  - Legal Changes
  - Social Changes
**Historiography of Prostitution**

- **1970: Society > Prostitution**
  - The Maimie Papers
- **1980-1990: Prostitution > Society**
  - Prostitution empires
- **2000: Differing points of view**
  - Historical archaeology
  - Class theories
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>East</th>
<th>West</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban prostitution</td>
<td>Abundance of literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious driven reform</td>
<td>Development of prostitution empires</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little emphasis on developing life skills</td>
<td>Rise and fall of boom towns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ex: Mamie Pinzer</td>
<td>Ex: Julia Bulette</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Prostitution in the Midwest?

- Located between East and West
- Limited Historiography
- Why?
  - Perceptions of Midwest
  - Lack of attention to Midwestern History
Where to begin?

- State Historical Society
- Door of Hope
  - Des Moines based reform society
  - Detailed annual reports
Hurdles

- **Dead end with Door of Hope**
  - Track down descendants?
- **Newspapers**
  - Very time consuming
- **Asylum Records**
  - Lack of detail
- **Court Records**
  - Petition a judge?!
Breakthrough

- Governor’s Papers
- Lacking women’s prison
- Dual Perspective
  - Testimonies of women
  - Correspondences of prosecutors
July 6th, 2013

- State Historical Society
- John Zeller
- District Court Records
- Newspaper Articles
Setting the Scene...

- **Perceptions of prostitution**
  - 1860’s: animalistic, chaotic, “nympha”
  - 1870’s: pathetic, drug addicted, beyond saving

- **Increased industrialism**
  - Trains
  - Factories

- **Increased freedom for women**
  - Opportunities for life off the farm
Shift in Blame

- Previously, women were to blame
- Husbands
- Landlords
- Irredeemable Women
Role of the Media

- **Newspapers**
  - White Slavery
  - Melodramatic
  - Warnings to parents
- Increase in public awareness (aka fear)
- Fuel the fire to action
Legal Reform Efforts

- Parole before commitment
- Undo negative upbringing
- Remove women from negative environment
- Mixed results
  - Alice McCarl
  - Anna Lind
Social Reform Efforts

• Traditionally...
  ○ Emphasis on spiritual reform

• Door of Hope
  ○ 1893-1906
  ○ Family environment
  ○ Education
  ○ Rural placement
Door of Hope
Door of Hope

Get on the Right Road

Are You Discouraged?
Have You no Friends to Help You?
Are You in a Tight Place?
Do You want to be Happy?

God is your friend. He helps everybody out of tight places, saves their souls, and gives them peace, friends and work if they trust and serve Him.

Sunbeam Rescue Mission

Is open every night to help people on the “Right Road” and saved people to keep on the “Good Road”

Take the road to Walnut Street, keep out of the saloons and strike for No. 212—it’s on the alley. They will give you further directions about the “ROAD” which leads to eternal life.
Reflections on Prostitution

- 1908: Prostitutes gone
- Prohibition: 1920-1933
- Great Depression
  - Destruction of White Chapel
Importance of this History

- **Better understanding of society**
  - Prostitutes as a lens
  - At the mercy of society
- **Better understanding of Midwestern history**
  - “We didn’t have those here...”
  - Strength of cultural values