Sacrificing Our Daughters: Changing Perceptions of Prostitution in Iowa, 1880-1915

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Abstract
Ankeny native Hope Mitchell was this year’s recipient of the Iowa History Center’s annual award for the Outstanding Master’s Thesis in Iowa History. Mitchell received her MA in history from Iowa State University in the spring of 2014 and was recognized for her thesis, “Sacrificing our Daughters: Changing Perceptions of Prostitution in Iowa, 1880-1915.” Not only was she honored by the Center with a plaque and $1,000 prize, she was also featured in a front-page article in the Des Moines Register. Mitchell’s study focused on prostitution in Des Moines and examined the city’s changing attitudes and approaches to the issue. “We are thrilled to recognize Hope’s work,” said Bill Friedricks, director of the Iowa History Center. “She pieced together an intriguing story through an array of unique and under-utilized sources. Her thesis is an important contribution to Iowa’s social history.”

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

Comments
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SACRIFICING OUR DAUGHTERS: CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF PROSTITUTION IN IOWA, 1880-1915

Hope Mitchell
Outline

- Research Process
  - Historiography
  - Finding Sources
- Writing Process
- My Findings
- Graduate School
Historiography of Prostitution

- 1970: Society > Prostitution
  - The Maimie Papers

- 1980-1990: Prostitution > Society
  - Prostitution empires

- 2000: Differing points of view
  - Historical archaeology
  - Class theories
Historiography

- Urban prostitution
- Religious driven reform
- Little emphasis on developing life skills
- Ex: Mamie Pinzer

East

- Abundance of literature
- Development of prostitution empires
- Rise and fall of boom towns
- Ex: Julia Bulette

West
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
Brick Wall

- Dead end with Door of Hope
  - Track down descendants?

- Newspapers
  - Very time consuming

- Asylum Records
  - Lack of detail

- Court Records
  - Petition a judge?!
Eureka!

- 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
The Hard Part

- Sifting through sources
- Transcribing everything
  - Zotero
- What do you have?
- What does it mean?
Use of Narrative

- Seminar on Narrative
- Descriptive take on actual events
- Creative solution to brain lock
- Gives a voice to your sources
Setting up the Historiography

- Perceptions of prostitution
  - 1860’s: animalistic, chaotic, “nymphs”
  - 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

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Donations of Clothing, Provision, Bequests and Gifts, Old Papers, Books and Magazines, Furniture and other articles you desire to be used or assisted in the work of the Mission, will be gladly received. First used in making up garments.

Just a Few of Our Babies.

open for me and that was to the bad. I became a street-walker and finally a bawhoo, and traveled around with a show as a Kootche Kootche dancer, taking in the street fair, etc. Finally I landed in Sioux City in a house of ill fame, and there until
Door of Hope

An example of the fliers that reformers at the Mission would have handed out to fallen men and women in the White Chapel neighborhood of Des Moines.

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.
Door of Hope

An image, taken from the 11th Annual Report, which shows a photo of the building that housed the Mission.

The Sunbeam Mission’s Gospel Wagon, which would have been used to patrol White Chapel.
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
Grad School

- Re-learn how to read
  - Not about every single detail
- Reading Schedule (front load)
  - Get as much done as early as you can
- Rough Drafts
  - Take advantage of any extra aid
- Pick something you love