



East Texas Historical Journal

A Publication of the East Texas Historical Association

Volume 33 Issue 1

Article 8

3-1995

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Recommended Citation

Humphrey, David C. (1995) "Prostitution in Texas: From the 1830s to the 1960s," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 33: Iss. 1, Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol33/iss1/8>

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PROSTITUTION IN TEXAS: FROM THE 1830s TO THE 1960s

by David C. Humphrey

Prostitution has long been a feature of the Texas social landscape, yet it has received slight attention from historians of the Lone Star State. There are no statewide studies. Little has been written about prostitution in Texas either prior to the Civil War or since the First World War. Much of what has been written is scattered widely in works on individual cities and towns. The historical overview of prostitution that follows, based on a variety of primary sources and an extensive survey of secondary literature, seeks to summarize what is known about the history of prostitution in Texas and to provide a point of departure for further exploration.

Antebellum Texans were by no means unacquainted with prostitution as a social phenomenon and as a municipal issue. In 1817, when Texas was still a Spanish province, nine prostitutes were expelled from San Fernando de Bexar (San Antonio). Hispanic prostitutes resided in San Antonio from its early days under Texas rule. Anglo prostitutes joined them during the 1840s and 1850s, and by 1865 both groups were entrenched.¹ Galveston had prostitutes from its beginning in the 1830s, while the city of Houston was barely three years old when, in 1839, a local newspaper decried the town's houses of ill fame. The next year the Harris County Commissioners' Court went so far as to provide for the licensing of Houston's brothels.² General Zachary Taylor's army attracted prostitutes during its eight-month stay in the Corpus Christi area prior to invading Mexico in 1846, and in 1850 an observer noted that the newly-incorporated town of Brownsville was "infected with lewd and abandoned women" who kept "dens of corruption." Indianola and Jefferson, on the other hand, survived their first years relatively free of prostitution, but during the 1850s an influx of prostitutes spurred both towns to pass ordinances suppressing bawdy houses.³ Prostitution was thus not an uncommon phenomenon in antebellum Texas, but neither was it rampant. In many communities it was either unknown or occurred on such a small scale that little public notice was taken.⁴

From the Civil War to World War I, especially during the four decades from 1870 to 1910, prostitution flourished in Texas and in other parts of the United States. Each of Texas' eight largest cities developed at least one vice district encompassing several city blocks – Austin's "Guy Town", Dallas' "Frogtown" and "Boggy Bayou," El Paso's Utah Street reservation, Fort Worth's "Hell's Half Acre," Galveston's Postoffice Street district, Houston's "Happy Hollow," San Antonio's "District," and Waco's "Two Street." Usually located within a few blocks of the downtown business district and the railroad depot, each vice zone featured saloons, gambling resorts, and prostitutes who worked mainly in bawdy houses and shack-like cribs but also in dance halls and variety theatres. Charging from \$.25 to \$3 and sometimes up to \$5, prostitutes attracted local residents from all walks of life and an array of visitors that, while

varying from town to town, generally embraced sizable numbers of cowboys, farm hands, other laborers, ranchers, businessmen, conventioners, soldiers, politicians, students, gamblers, and drifters. In El Paso and San Antonio and undoubtedly in other cities, some prostitutes had pimps, but brothel prostitutes were managed and protected primarily by madams.⁵

Prostitution also became common on the Texas frontier following the Civil War, thriving at army forts, cow towns, railroad towns, and other gathering points. From late in the 1860s to the 1880s, soldiers stationed at military posts in West Texas and along the Mexican border generated a lively commerce in prostitution. Camp laundresses sometimes doubled as prostitutes, while prostitutes also congregated at the sordid settlements that sprang up near army posts, such as Saint Angela across the Concho River from Fort Concho, Jacksboro adjacent to Fort Richardson, and "the Flat" below Fort Griffin.⁶ Elsewhere in West Texas the spread of prostitution reflected the burgeoning ranching industry and the expanding railroad network. The construction of the Texas and Pacific Railroad precipitated the founding of Abilene, Colorado, and Big Spring, three ranching centers whose saloons, gambling dens, and prostitutes attracted cowhands and other West Texans from throughout the region. In the Panhandle during the 1880s the boisterous but short-lived cattle towns of Tascosa and Mobeetie drew innumerable cowboys to their respective vice districts, "Hog Town" and "Feather Hill," while during the 1890s Amarillo became a major cattle shipping center and home to a wide open red-light district.⁷

Prostitution flourished in fast growing communities elsewhere in Texas between 1870 and 1910. In Denison, Texarkana, Palestine, and Laredo, an upsurge in prostitution accompanied the economic boom in each town triggered by the coming of the railroad during the 1870s and 1880s.⁸ Thriving Corsicana had several brothels in the 1880s but its two largest, built during the 1890s, prospered by virtue of their location in the heart of the newly-discovered Corsicana Oil Field.⁹ In Beaumont, Gladys City (near Spindletop), Humble, and the Big Thicket hamlets of Sour Lake, Saratoga, and Batson, Texas' first major oil boom attracted a swarm of prostitutes during the initial decade of the twentieth century. Catering primarily to oil field workers, some 200 prostitutes crowded into Batson alone at the peak of the boom, many of them working in bawdy houses on the town's main street.¹⁰ When thousands of army and national guard troops mobilized along the U.S.-Mexican border in 1916 following Pancho Villa's raids, prostitution mushroomed in Texas border towns from Brownsville to El Paso.¹¹ Prostitution was not, on the other hand, uncommon in more stable communities after the turn of the century, among them Greenville and LaGrange.¹²

The managers of Texas brothels late in the nineteenth and early in the twentieth centuries included a good many well-known madams – Austin's Blanche Dumont, Fort Worth's Mary Porter, and El Paso's Alice Abbott – but most prostitutes labored in relative obscurity. Ranging in age from the teens to the sixties but with an average age in the twenties, prostitutes who worked in

Texas were frequently on the go, prompted to move by the cyclical and seasonal fortunes of Texas towns and by recurrent surges of anti-vice activity. Some worked part-time while holding other jobs or engaged intermittently in prostitution when money was short.¹³ At any one time, several of Texas' larger cities probably had more than 100 prostitutes each during the 1880s and at least two to three times that number by 1910. Reliable figures are not easy to establish, due to the transience of prostitutes, their illicit work, undercounting by census-takers, inflated estimates by anti-prostitution groups, and variations in the definition of what constituted prostitution. More than 150 prostitutes marched en masse to an El Paso city council meeting in 1886, while in 1913 a grand jury investigating prostitution in the city's Utah Street district reported finding 367 prostitutes. Austin had at least 100 prostitutes during May and June of 1880, while 239 prostitutes lived in Houston's vice district when federal census-takers made their rounds in 1910. According to a local anti-prostitution group, San Antonio had 630 "immoral women" in its vice district in 1915 and many more outside it.¹⁴

Both Anglo and black women figured prominently among Texas prostitutes. In Austin half or more of the prostitutes during the 1880s and 1890s were Anglos, most of them U.S.-born, while about two-fifths were blacks and some seven percent Hispanics. In 1887 a Fort Worth newspaper estimated that blacks composed more than half the prostitutes in Hell's Half Acre. The rest were mostly Anglos. In Houston in 1917, sixty percent of the women who headed households of prostitutes in the vice reservation were Anglo, thirty-five percent black, and five percent Hispanic.¹⁵ Hispanic prostitutes were more common in San Antonio, El Paso, and Laredo, at army forts in West Texas, and generally in communities closer to the Mexican border.¹⁶ Anglo and black prostitutes lived and worked near each other in vice reservations, but race had a significant bearing on how the districts operated. Anglos predominated in brothels while blacks predominated in cribs. Most bawdy houses maintained color separation among their inmates, and Anglo houses refused, as a rule, to accommodate black men. On the other hand, it was not unknown for black women to keep white inmates, and many white men patronized black as well as white prostitutes.¹⁷

The life of Texas prostitutes was difficult. While prostitution paid comparatively well in an era when women's job opportunities were limited and low-paying, few prostitutes achieved upward economic mobility. Most were poor or not far from it and owned little personal property. Their economic prospects deteriorated rapidly as they aged. If some may have found the life easy or exciting, most were beset by the ever-present threats of violence, venereal disease, and harassment by city officials. Many prostitutes used drugs such as opium, morphine, and cocaine, not uncommonly to commit suicide. A considerable number probably left the trade after a few years, taking menial jobs or possibly marrying or moving in with relatives.¹⁸

Many Texas communities routinely passed ordinances outlawing prostitution during the nineteenth century but paid only sporadic attention to

them, influenced as their leaders were by the conventional wisdom that prostitution was ineradicable and therefore might as well be controlled. Community officials also had a keen appreciation of the hefty fines and rents prostitutes paid and the legions of male consumers they lured to town. Towns thus condoned prostitution under certain conditions. Prostitutes in larger cities were expected to work within vice districts or else risk arrest and were to maintain fairly low profiles, such as by not streetwalking and by staying out of “respectable” parts of town. As part of the accommodation, prostitutes in many cities – Amarillo, Colorado, El Paso, Fort Worth, Galveston, Houston – acquiesced in regular assessments of fines that enriched public coffers and private pockets. In every major Texas city, prostitutes operated outside vice district boundaries but usually in smaller numbers.¹⁹

While all of Texas’ larger cities established *de facto* vice zones, Waco, El Paso, Dallas, and Houston also experimented with legal ones. Waco licensed brothels during the 1870s, dropped the procedure early in the 1880s, and then enacted ordinances by 1889 that not only provided for licensing of prostitutes and bawdy houses and required medical examinations but also explicitly legalized prostitution within a precisely defined district. The system lasted about a dozen years. By the turn of the century Waco’s Two Street district, located just a block from City Hall and the business district, boasted twenty-four legal brothels.²⁰ El Paso legally defined its vice district in 1890 and the next year mandated medical inspections and registration of prostitutes with the police, a scheme that apparently operated with some success into the twentieth century.²¹ In 1907 the Texas legislature enacted a statute that recognized the legal authority of cities to establish municipal vice districts while giving citizens the right to bring suit against bawdy houses not located in such districts. Dallas and Houston promptly created official vice reservations by proscribing prostitution outside their boundaries. Houston’s reservation lasted from 1908 to 1917, Dallas’ until 1914. Dallas required health department examinations.²²

Despite the accommodation with prostitution in many towns between 1870 and 1910, the era also was marked by periodic outbursts of anti-prostitution fervor. Often leading the way were crusading ministers, reform-minded politicians, women’s church groups, and angry citizens provoked by the encroachment of prostitution upon their neighborhoods. The cleanup campaigns had some striking short term successes – in San Antonio in 1868, Fort Worth in 1889, and El Paso in 1904 – but within a year the momentarily quiescent vice zones in each city were booming again.²³ While anti-prostitution forces could claim some modest achievements prior to 1910, such as the elimination of prostitution in some smaller communities and the founding of rescue homes for prostitutes in Fort Worth, Dallas, San Antonio, and other towns, the reformers’ success in eliminating prostitution in larger cities had been nil.²⁴

From 1911 to 1915 anti-prostitution groups in Texas waged a more sustained and successful campaign as part of a national moral crusade by Progressive reformers to eliminate prostitution’s most visible form, the red-

light district. Ministerial groups in most of Texas' larger cities and in smaller towns such as Corsicana mobilized against "segregated vice" (a term commonly applied to red-light districts), unleashing a torrent of words warning Texans about the perils of white slavery and venereal disease. Joining the churchmen at the forefront of the movement were civic groups such as El Paso's Committee of 10 and the Law Enforcement League of San Antonio and political reformers such as Austin's Mayor A. P. Wooldridge, but no Texas city went so far as to establish a municipal vice commission like those set up at the time by twenty-seven other U.S. cities. The anti-prostitution forces succeeded in shutting down vice districts in Dallas, Austin, and Amarillo by 1914. Segregated vice in San Antonio, El Paso, and other cities took some punishing verbal, political, and judicial blows but survived the assault. Entrenched political groups, the police, many businessmen, and liquor and vice interests backed the reservations, contending that their elimination would only make matters worse by dispersing prostitutes into residential and other parts of towns beyond the control of the police.²⁵

In 1917 anti-prostitution crusaders gained a powerful ally in the U.S. War Department. Expressing both Progressivism's moral zeal and its commitment to social hygiene, Secretary of War Newton Baker ordered that American soldiers training for World War I be protected from prostitution and venereal disease. The doughboys must be "fit to fight." To Texas cities that already had substantial military camps – El Paso, San Antonio, and Galveston – and those that wanted them – Fort Worth, Waco, and Houston – the War Department minced no words: close your vice districts and enforce anti-prostitution laws or suffer the consequences. Local civic and ministerial groups, seizing the opportunity to cripple protected vice, put pressure on city and county officials. So did the newly formed Texas Women's Anti-Vice Committee and local women's organizations. Politicians and businessmen noted that protected vice suddenly had become an economic liability rather than an economic asset. Between March and August 1917, Fort Worth, Houston, El Paso, Galveston, San Antonio, and Waco officially shut down their vice districts and stepped up arrests of prostitutes. New federal and Texas laws during 1917 and 1918 mandated prostitution-free zones around military camps, local venereal disease clinics, and detention of women suspected of venereal infection. Women's groups set up "camp mother" committees to provide clean entertainment for soldiers. The cumulative effect of these measures was to reduce prostitution temporarily in the larger cities but not to eliminate it. Many prostitutes moved on, but others stayed or relocated within or nearby the same communities. Law enforcement was erratic. The situation in El Paso remained so unsatisfactory that Secretary Baker refused to build the new army training center for which the city had been selected earlier.²⁶

World War I was barely over when prostitution entered a new phase marked by the persistence of red-light districts and traditional bawdy houses and also by the increasing significance of other forms of prostitution. During the 1920s and 1930s it became more common for prostitutes to work in hotels,

apartments, and rooming houses and to communicate with customers by telephone. The "call girl" system had the added advantage of making police detection difficult in an era when some cities were less tolerant of prostitution. Prostitutes also adapted to the automobile, cruising the streets for clients, arranging with taxi drivers to supply customers, and working in roadhouses located just outside the city limits.²⁷

The Progressive era's assault on segregated vice notwithstanding, red-light districts still operated in a variety of Texas' cities and towns during the 1920s and 1930s, among them Beaumont, Borger, Corpus Christi, Corsicana, Dallas, El Paso, Galveston, San Angelo, and San Antonio.²⁸ Galveston's came closest to the classic turn-of-the century segregated district. Its wartime closing only a momentary phenomenon, the venerable Postoffice Street district had more than fifty Anglo brothels and at least two Hispanic brothels in 1929, housing more than 300 prostitutes. One hundred fifty to 200 black prostitutes worked in houses and cribs on adjacent streets and in the alleys. City officials, the police, leading citizens, the newspapers, and even some clergymen offered the traditional defense that a vice district provided the best way to handle an irrepressible urban problem. Another 300 to 400 prostitutes toiled more precariously outside the district, giving Galveston a total of 800 to 900 prostitutes in 1929.²⁹

San Antonio's vice district, in contrast, exhibited the deterioration that beset many such districts nationally between the two world wars. Higher-priced prostitutes abandoned the district to operate as call girls in hotels. Many of the larger brothels closed down. Wretched slum housing proliferated in the district and the surrounding neighborhood. Violence and petty crime escalated, particularly with the demise of the unofficial but powerful committee of madams, pimps, saloon keepers, and others that had enforced its own version of order in the district during the first quarter of the century. The Depression brought additional women into the trade, drove down prices, and left many prostitutes on the edge of survival. By late in the 1930s, hundreds of low-priced prostitutes, charging from \$.25 to \$1.50, walked the streets and solicited from their jerry-built, one-room cribs. City officials openly tolerated the district during most of the interwar period but exercised little effective control over it. In the city as a whole in 1939 there were at least 2,000 prostitutes. Roughly forty percent were Hispanics, with Anglos probably composing a similar percentage. Black, Chinese, Japanese, American Indian, and Filipino women made up the rest.³⁰

Prostitution took a different form in Austin, where the red-light district had closed for good in 1913. Unhappy with the free-wheeling activity of some prostitutes, city officials instituted an unofficial system for Anglo prostitutes during the 1930s that required them to register with the police, live with four or five other prostitutes in one of several downtown hotels located on lower Congress Avenue, and abide by a set of strictly enforced rules that barred pimps and forbade streetwalking or even appearing on the city streets after noon. Black prostitutes operated much more freely on the east side of town,

but the police knew their identities and restricted them to East Austin. Austin had few Hispanic prostitutes. While prostitution in the Texas capital thus survived the closing of the red-light district, it re-emerged on a much smaller scale. Overall, prostitution in Texas' older cities during the 1920s and 1930s was marked by a far greater variation from town to town than had been the case between 1870 and 1910.³¹

Prostitution reached its most frenetic pace during the interwar years in the many oil boom towns. Thronged with single men earning relatively high wages, towns such as Borger in the Panhandle, Wink and McCamey in West Texas, and Kilgore in East Texas attracted dozens of prostitutes who moved with the tide of workers from one oil boom town to another, working in brothels, rooming houses, hotels, saloons, dance halls, and shacks. While Wink had about forty-five prostitutes, Borger had 300 when law officers raided the town in 1929. Prostitutes also found a ready supply of customers in established oil cities such as Wichita Falls, Corsicana, and Midland.³²

Itinerancy did not characterize the lives of oil-circuit prostitutes alone. Hardly unusual was the career of twenty-one year old May Belle Ash from Dallas, who revealed when interviewed at a Galveston brothel in 1929 that she had operated in the leading hotels of most of Texas' larger cities during the previous four years. If business was good, the hotel management tolerant, and the city interesting, she had stayed put; if not, she moved on.³³ Many other prostitutes moved frequently within a single city. A Mexican-born El Paso prostitute entered the trade in 1920 by operating independently for a year in a small hotel. Then she worked for five months in a modest-sized brothel, saved enough money to open a house of her own, and catered to hundreds of soldiers from nearby Fort Bliss before the police closed her down in 1923. Next she rented a small crib, where her business boomed on soldiers' payday. Shut down once again by the city, she opened a six-room house that lasted for five years, until 1929, when the police closed it. She and her husband promptly started the "Silver Dollar," a one-story place with ten or twelve crib-like rooms that survived for most of the 1930s despite numerous police raids and closings.³⁴

Many other prostitutes no doubt aspired to the same success, but few achieved it, although prostitution continues to pay competitively well for many women. Higher-priced prostitutes charged in the \$3 to \$5 range, but even a lower-priced crib prostitute in San Antonio earned more from a single customer a day than from steady work at hand sewing or pecan shelling. The road to prosperity was littered with many obstacles, however. Many towns engaged in erratic but heavy-handed law enforcement that disrupted business, with police raids far more frequent and less predictable than prior to 1910. During the Depression desperate women flooded the market at a time when men had less money to spend. LaGrange's best known madam started accepting chickens instead of cash during the 1930s – and thus the infamous Chicken Ranch got its name. The high cost of doing business cut heavily into income. Prostitutes working in brothels and hotels routinely turned over half or so of their earnings to madams and hotel managers or paid steep room and

board charges or some combination of the two. Pricier women felt compelled to invest in stylish clothes and beauty treatments to keep up with the competition. Pimps, who became far more common during the interwar years, also took a hefty cut. By providing customers, protection against unruly clients and the police, and emotional support, pimps carved out a role for themselves that many prostitutes had done without in the age of the semi-official segregated district. Despite these many hurdles, some prostitutes still made good money over short periods of time.³⁵

If prostitution provided mixed financial rewards for prostitutes, it was viewed by many political officials and prominent citizens as good for business generally. When Dallas realized that Fort Worth was siphoning off many tourists who might otherwise attend Dallas' Texas Centennial celebration in 1936, city leaders responded by converting Dallas into an "open city." Within a month the City Health Officer issued 2,400 "health cards" to purported prostitutes. Officials of many cities justified toleration with familiar arguments. It was the only practical way to cope with prostitution, claimed the police chiefs of Galveston, Corpus Christi, and El Paso. Cities and towns clamped down intermittently on prostitution when it became outwardly offensive or occurred outside a "Zone of Tolerance" or when its association with bootlegging and other criminal activities prompted police intervention or when anti-prostitution groups created a stir, but there was little Progressive era-type crusading to eliminate the "Social Evil." Some cities required regular venereal disease examinations and kept prostitution racially segregated, but even those policies were pursued erratically.³⁶

Late in the 1930s several Texas communities stepped up their efforts to deal with prostitution and venereal disease by opening municipal VD clinics and, in the case of El Paso and San Antonio, launching highly publicized anti-prostitution campaigns.³⁷ It took World War II, however, to generate a massive attack on prostitution, much as had World War I. Alarmed that venereal disease threatened the fitness of America's fighting forces, the War and Navy departments once again took dead aim at prostitution near military bases. So did the newly created Division of Social Protection, a civilian federal agency headed by crime-fighter Eliot Ness, while Congress did its part by making prostitution near military bases a federal offense.³⁸

When local base commanders asked Texas towns to crack down on prostitution, usually threatening to put uncooperative communities off limits, many towns acquiesced, including Austin, Beaumont, Corpus Christi, El Paso, Galveston, and San Antonio. Austin permanently shut down its hotel system for Anglo prostitutes, while prostitution in San Antonio was "cut to a very low ebb," according to a series of studies made during the war. Nevertheless, prostitutes endured in Texas cities, finding as the war progressed that local officials were unable or unwilling to put them out of business entirely. Galveston's anti-prostitution efforts proved especially erratic. Despite frequent police roundups of prostitutes, the town had eleven "lavish" houses of prostitution in 1943 and a "myriad of less pretentious ones," observed the

Galveston *Daily News*. Amarillo officials even persuaded the Army to let them keep the town's brothels open and handle the VD problem through regulation.³⁹

The end of World War II brought a resurgence of prostitution in many Texas communities, but the imprint of its nineteenth century past became more faint than ever during the decade from 1945 to 1955. Openly tolerated red-light districts virtually disappeared. So did cribs, while traditional bawdy houses, another mainstay of the segregated district, grew increasingly atypical even while persisting longer in Texas than in most other parts of the country. Many Texas prostitutes operated in hotels (especially "second-rate" hotels), motels, tourist courts, massage parlors, cafes, taverns, and barrooms. Pimps played a dominant role in the lives of many prostitutes, while hotel porters, bellhops, and taxicab drivers conducted a brisk business procuring customers. As had long been the case, Texas prostitutes were frequently on the move, often driven out of towns by police crackdowns. Word spread rapidly about which towns were closed and which open.⁴⁰ When city officials sought to close San Antonio and Houston in 1952, pimps made the rounds of other Texas cities looking for soft spots. Some pimps and madams rotated prostitutes among Texas cities in order to have fresh recruits.⁴¹

For decades the many army posts in Texas had provided an abundant supply of customers for prostitutes. World War II, followed by the onset of the Cold War, vastly expanded the U.S. military presence in Texas. In addition to sizable army installations such as Fort Bliss, Fort Sam Houston, and Fort Hood, Texas had twenty-seven major Air Force bases and five naval air stations by 1953, the majority of which dated from the 1940s.⁴² Growing numbers of military personnel contributed significantly to the persistence of prostitution in many Texas communities. Such was not the case in Texas cities on the Mexican border, however, despite the fact that soldiers at Fort Bliss traditionally accounted for much of El Paso's flourishing trade in prostitution. Military personnel stationed as far away as San Antonio and Corpus Christi continued to head for the border during the 1940s and 1950s, but military and civilian customers alike flocked to the flourishing red-light districts across the Rio Grande – in Ciudad Juarez, Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa, and Matamoros – making it an easier task to curtail prostitution in El Paso, Laredo, and Brownsville.⁴³

Elsewhere in Texas during the decade from 1945 to 1955 the extent of prostitution varied from town to town and fluctuated markedly within individual communities. While Dallas officials tolerated prostitution at a moderate level, Houston authorities successfully instituted a policy of repression during the early 1950s. So did officials in Corpus Christi, Harlingen, Amarillo, and Lubbock between 1951 and 1954, the latter two towns reversing long-term policies condoning prostitution. Some cities, such as Port Arthur, played a "hide and seek" game with anti-prostitution critics, cleaning up during periods of bad publicity but relaxing their vigilance as soon as interest subsided – "accordion cities," they were called.⁴⁴

By far the two most infamous centers of prostitution in Texas during the post-war years were San Antonio and Galveston. The American Social

Hygiene Association, a national anti-prostitution organization that conducted regular covert investigations of prostitution in U.S. communities and privately lobbied local officials to back repression, grew so disgusted with the “wide-open scale” of prostitution in San Antonio that in 1949 it went public with its survey results – to no avail. The next year a national magazine, drawing on the association’s findings, singled out San Antonio, Galveston, and Canton, Ohio, as “particularly notorious” exceptions to the nation-wide decline of the “old-fashioned brothel.” Nonetheless, the 1950s saw a shift toward repression in San Antonio, climaxed in 1955 by the election of a slate of “good government” officials who vigorously enforced the laws against prostitution.⁴⁵

Cleaning up Galveston proved a good deal more difficult. “If God couldn’t stop prostitution, why should I?” declared Galveston’s mayor, who held the post from 1947 to 1955. The mayor wanted Galveston wide open, and so did his allies and supporters, among them the city’s powerful racketeers, the graft-ridden police department, and much of the citizenry, who believed that Galveston’s economy depended on maintaining its reputation for wide-open gambling, drinking, and prostitution. “To be respectable in Galveston you have to support prostitution,” remarked one religious leader. The mayor put it more crudely: some 2,000 seamen visited the city daily, he stated, and they did not come to town to go to church. Local anti-prostitution activists found it difficult to build the kind of support needed to dislodge the “web of corruption” that controlled the town. While a citizens’ committee achieved some modest gains, even managing to get the decades-old Post Office Street district closed for a while, in 1955 a representative of the American Social Hygiene Association branded Galveston the “worst spot in the nation as far as prostitution is concerned.”⁴⁶

Galveston presented anti-prostitution forces with their most difficult challenge in Texas during the post-war years, but in few Texas towns was their job an easy one. Travis County’s district attorney patiently explained to one anti-prostitution lobbyist in 1949 that efforts to close two popular brothels near Austin would inevitably prove futile given the “high position” of the customers; furthermore, the state capital that did not offer such entertainment to visiting politicians and other dignitaries was not measuring up to the hospitality that was a long-established Texas tradition. Police chiefs and other city officials across Texas offered a variety of reasons for not attacking prostitution more effectively when pressured by civic and religious leaders, newspaper editors, representatives from nearby military bases, and the American Social Hygiene Association. The most common explanation was a shortage of policemen, a problem aggravated in some towns by rapid expansion. Some chiefs pleaded difficulty getting convictions or complained of weak county law enforcement, resulting in unchecked vice operations just beyond the city limits. Often underlying ineffective law enforcement were strong political pressures to go easy on vice, payoffs to policemen by vice interests, and faint public support for repression.⁴⁷

Nevertheless proponents of repression made headway during the 1950s. They publicized flagrant conditions, generated public concern, and joined forces with cooperative political and law enforcement officials, including a number of police chiefs who backed repression. Their most glaring failure was Galveston, but in 1957 the newly-elected state attorney general, Will Wilson, the former crime-busting district attorney of Dallas County, took up their cause. Using private investigators, court injunctions, search warrants, and indictments, the attorney general's office broke the back of Galveston's racketeers. Legal and media pressure forced many brothels to close and set the volume of prostitution on a downward course that continued into the 1960s.⁴⁸ Wilson's office also pressed local law enforcement officials into curbing prostitution in Big Spring, Quero, Texarkana, and Victoria. Even the Travis County brothels that the district attorney had declined to take on in 1949 were closed, but LaGrange's venerable Chicken Ranch proved untouchable. In 1960 the Texas legislature stole some of Wilson's thunder when Speaker of the House Waggoner Carr, Wilson's major opponent in his re-election bid in 1960, appointed a House General Investigating Committee that itself launched an investigation into vice and organized crime in Texas. Jefferson County and its two leading cities, Beaumont and Port Arthur, became primary targets. Televised hearings revealed that gambling, prostitution, liquor law violations, and narcotics traffic operated openly and with immunity from law enforcement. A thorough house cleaning ensued.⁴⁹

Amarillo's chief of police commented in 1951 that he favored repression but that the job would never be done. The head of the Houston Police Department's Morals Division compared prostitution to weeds springing up first one place and then another and requiring constant attention. Prostitution remained a seemingly never-ending law enforcement problem for police officials at the opening of the 1960s, yet the fact that it was such a problem reflected an increased commitment to curbing it, not an increase in prostitution itself. The volume of prostitution in 1960 was lower than it had been in 1950 and was substantially below the level of the interwar years. "Flagrant prostitution" – to use a term employed by the American Social Hygiene Association – had become comparatively uncommon.⁵⁰ Few city officials contended any longer that segregated districts were an acceptable way to deal with prostitution and venereal disease.

Yet prostitution was far from moribund. During the 1960s and 1970s city officials hardly expected to extinguish it, given their limited legal tools, scarce resources, and escalating burden of other crime. Instead they sought to keep prostitution in check, focusing on its publicly offensive dimensions and its ties to other criminal activity. Sometimes, as in Dallas in the mid-1970s, the police resources committed to fighting prostitution were so inadequate and prostitutes themselves so aggressive that prostitution flourished on a scale reminiscent of an earlier age. Public demand for repression remained erratic. While brazen streetwalkers on downtown streets and massage parlors located near residential areas generated calls for repression on the part of those affected, sustained and widespread anti-prostitution sentiment was rare.⁵¹

Prostitution thus remained an integral if less pronounced and less openly accepted part of the Texas social landscape.

By the 1960s prostitution in Texas had undergone many changes since the 1830s, yet also had retained marked continuity with its nineteenth century past. In this and other respects, its evolution in Texas paralleled the historical development of prostitution nationally. Anti-prostitution movements in Texas, for example, grew for the most part out of national anti-prostitution campaigns – among them those of the Progressives, the Federal government in the first and second world wars, and the American Social Hygiene Association during the 1950s. Similarly, the targets of their attacks, such as the semi-official segregated district, reflected national patterns in the organization of prostitution. Yet, prostitution in Texas was hardly without its regional variations. The red-light district, with its traditional bawdy houses, for instance, seems to have become more deeply entrenched and more resistant to attack in Texas than in many other parts of the country, as reflected in its legalization in several Texas cities and especially in the extent to which it survived the Progressive era. By the 1950s the vice districts in San Antonio and Galveston had become rare relics of a bygone age. Nor was prostitution's development in Texas unaffected by many of those features that have given Texas history a distinctive flavor – the cattle kingdom of the nineteenth century, the oil booms of the twentieth century, the continuous presence of military troops and bases, and long-standing racial and ethnic divisions among the citizenry. From the 1830s to the 1960s the history of prostitution in Texas thus provides testimony not only to the substantial changes prostitution has undergone while persisting as a seemingly irremedial public policy issue but also to the blend of national and the regional strains in Texas life.

NOTES

¹Antonio Martinez's list of expatriated women, Aug. 24, 1817, microfilm frame #0338, General Archives Series, Bexar Archives (Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin; cited hereafter as CAH); Jose Francisco de la Barreda y Cos to Antonio Martinez, Sept. 6, 1817, microfilm frame #0500, *ibid*; Anne M. Butler, *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery: Prostitutes in the American West, 1865-1900* (Chicago, 1985), p. 4; Anne M. Butler, "The Frontier Press and Prostitution: A Study of San Antonio, Tombstone, Cheyenne" (M.A. thesis, Univ. of Maryland, 1975), p. 22.

²David G. McComb, *Galveston: A History* (Austin, 1986), p. 151; David G. McComb, *Houston: A History* (Austin, 1981), p. 47; Geoffrey Gay, "No Passion for Prudery: Morals Enforcement In Nineteenth Century Houston" (M.A. thesis, Rice Univ., 1977), pp. 48-49.

³Bill Walraven, *Corpus Christi: The History of a Texas Seaport* (Woodland Hills, Cal., 1982), pp. 42-43; New Orleans *Daily True Delta*, Aug. 6, 1850, quoted in Caleb Coker, ed., *The News from Brownsville: Helen Chapman's Letters from the Texas Military Frontier, 1848-1852* (Austin, 1992), p. 376; Fred Tarpley, *Jefferson: Riverport to the Southwest* (Austin, 1983), p. 65; Brownson Malsch, *Indianola: The Mother of Western Texas* (Austin, 1988), p. 95.

⁴This generalization is based on an extensive examination of town and country histories and other sources on antebellum Texas.

⁵David C. Humphrey, "Prostitution and Public Policy in Austin, Texas, 1870-1915," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* (cited hereafter as *SHQ*), LXXXVI (April 1983), pp. 473-497; William L. McDonald, *Dallas Rediscovered: A Photographic Chronicle of Urban Expansion*,

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¹⁴Humphrey, "Prostitution," pp. 488-491; Selcer, "Fort Worth," pp. 55-57; Mackey, *Red Lights*, pp. 339, 375-376, 386n45; F. Ray Tatum, *Conquest or Failure? A Biography of J. Frank Norris* (Dallas, 1966), p. 126; Sonnichsen, *Pass of North*, p. 375; Frost, *Gentlemen's Club*, pp. 35-36, 176; San Antonio Closes its District," p. 630; *Texas Christian Advocate* (Dallas), Nov. 6, 1913; Mark Thomas Connelly, *The Response to Prostitution in the Progressive Era* (Chapel Hill, 1980), pp. 17-22.

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¹⁶Butler, *Daughters*, pp. 4-5, 142; *Blue Book*, p. 27; Exner, "Prostitution on Mexican Border," pp. 208-211; U. S. Twelfth Census (1900), El Paso County, Texas, Population Schedules, El Paso, Ward #2, Supervisor's District #5, Enumeration District #19, Sheets #21, #22, #25, #27, #30 (cited hereafter as El Paso Population Schedules, 1900) (microfilm; CAH); Green, *Dancing*, pp. 62, 71; Arnoldo De Leon, *They Called Them Greasers: Anglo Attitudes Toward Mexicans in Texas, 1821-1900* (Austin, 1983), pp. 45-48.

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²⁰Davis, "Harlots," pp. 87-92; Johnson, "Prostitution in Waco," pp. 67-78; Waco bawdy house register (Texas Collection, Baylor University); J. T. Upchurch, *Traps for Girls and Those Who Set Them: An Address to Men Only* (3rd ed., Dallas, 1904), preface, p. 19; Upchurch, *Traps for Girls* (5th ed.), preface, pp. 11-12, 22-23, 45; Sanborn Map Collection, Waco: 1893, sheets #2

and #3, and 1899, sheets #2 and #3. See the third edition of Upchurch's *Traps for Girls* for evidence that Waco stopped licensing prostitutes by 1904 at the latest.

¹⁹Frost, *Gentlemen's Club*, pp. 76-80, 189-190.

²⁰Mackey, *Red Lights*, pp. 293-296, 320-321, 404-408; *The Code of the City of Dallas, Texas* (Dallas, 1911) pp. 183-184; McDonald, *Dallas*, p. 169.

²¹Butler, "Frontier Press," pp. 23-27; Selcer, "Fort Worth," p. 83; Selcer, *Hell's Half Acre*, pp. 203, 217; Frost, *Gentlemen's Club*, pp. 80, 88-89, 92-94, 117-119, 125-126, 145-150, 157-160; Isaac, "Moral Reform," pp. 414, 417, 424-426; Humphrey, "Prostitution," pp. 483-484, 501; Houston, *Chronicle*, March 6, 1908; Upchurch, *Traps for Girls*, 5th ed., *passim*; Enstam, "Frontier Woman," p. 23; John L. McCarty, *Maverick Town: The Story of Old Tascosa* (Norman, 1946), p. 100.

²²Harrison, *History of Greenville*, pp. 392-395; Holden, "Law and Lawlessness," pp. 200-201; Selcer, *Hell's Half Acre*, pp. 219-221; Elizabeth York Enstam, "Virginia K. Johnson: A Second Chance for the 'Wayward,'" *Heritage News* (Summer 1985), pp. 6-7; Donald E. Everett, *San Antonio: The Flavor of its Past, 1845-1898* (San Antonio, 1975), p. 103; *Baptist Standard* (Dallas), Oct. 16, 1913; Johnson, "Prostitution in Waco," p. 36.

²³Humphrey, "Prostitution," pp. 501-514; Connelly, *Response to Prostitution*, pp. 11-18; Tatum, *Conquest or Failure?* pp. 125-139; San Antonio *Light*, Nov. 3, 1913; Austin, *Church News*, Nov. 7, 1913; *Baptist Standard* (Dallas), Aug. 21, Sept. 25, 1913; *Texas Christian Advocate* (Dallas), Aug. 28, Oct. 9, Nov. 6, 1913; J. T. Upchurch, *The Unchained Demon, And, The Tribute Dallas, Texas, Pays to Vice* (Arlington, Tex., 1912), *passim*; *Dallas Morning News*, Sept. 22, Nov. 4, 1913; *Home and State* (Dallas), Aug. 2, Oct. 4, 1913; McDonald, *Dallas*, p. 169; Frost, *Gentlemen's Club*, pp. 174-192; Sonnichsen, *Pass of North*, pp. 375-377; *Houston Daily Post*, Nov. 20, 1913; *Daily Texan* (Austin), Nov. 22, 1913; Crudington, "Amarillo's 'Red Light' District"; "San Antonio Closes District," pp. 629-630; Mackey, *Red Lights*, pp. 301-309, 314-316; *Waco Times Herald*, Sept. 8, Oct. 12, 1913; De Leon, *San Angelenos*, pp. 43-44.

²⁴David J. Pivar, "Cleansing the Nation: The War on Prostitution, 1917-21," *Prologue*, XXVIII (Spring 1980), pp. 30-33; "Zones of Safety: Texas Cantonment Cities Made Safe for Health and Decency," *The Survey*, XXXVIII (July 14, 1917), pp. 349-350; Connelly, *Response to Prostitution*, pp. 136-150; Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue*, pp. 167, 176-181; Fosdick, *Chronicle*, pp. 145-147; Austin *American*, May 30, July 15, 1917; William E. Jary, Jr., ed., *Camp Bowie, Fort Worth, 1917-18: An Illustrated History of the 36th Division In The First World War* (Fort Worth, 1975), pp. 4, 19; Garna L. Christian, "Newton Baker's War on El Paso Vice," *RRVHR*, V (Spring 1980), pp. 55-67; Frost, *Gentlemen's Club*, pp. 194-196; Granville Price, "A Sociological Study of a Segregated District" (M.A. thesis, Univ. of Texas at Austin, 1930), pp. 63-70, 78; McComb, *Galveston*, pp. 152-155; Cartwright, *Galveston*, pp. 205-206; Mackey, *Red Lights*, pp. 353-379, 392; San Antonio *Express*, June 1, 3, 5, 6, 11, 12, 17, 18, 1917; Blackwelder, *Women of Depression*, p. 154; Davis, "Harlots," pp. 92-93; *Waco Times Herald*, June 11, Aug. 6, 10, 17, 1917.

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²⁶Linsley and Rienstra, *Beaumont*, p. 114; Whitcomb Allen, Report on Beaumont, Feb. 6-8, 1951, folder 110:3, ASHAR; Olien and Olien, *Life in Oil Fields*, p. 214; Bob Ramsdell, "Some Virtue and Some Vice Trailed Taylor's Troops," *Corpus Christi Caller Centennial Journey* (Corpus Christi, 1983), p. 102; Gerald Lynch, *Roughnecks, Drillers, and Tool Pushers: Thirty-*

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³⁵Price, "Sociological Study," pp. 12-13, 25-27, 37-38; Blackwelder, *Women of Depression*, pp. 153, 156; Frost, *Gentlemen's Club*, pp. 199-236; Robert B. Laws to D.C.H., June 5, 1980, interview; Olien and Olien, *Life in the Oil Fields*, pp. 213-219; Ward, "Establishing Law," pp. 39-46; Hutson, *Chicken Ranch*, pp. 54-55; Saxon and Summerville, "Chicken Ranch," pp. 36-37; Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue*, pp. 163-164; Rosen, *Lost Sisterhood*, p. 33; Charles Winick and Paul M. Kinsie, *The Lively Commerce: Prostitution in the United States* (Chicago, 1971), pp. 109-120.

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³⁸Winick and Kinsie, *Lively Commerce*, pp. 253-257.

³⁹Austin *American*, May 9, 1942; Austin *Statesman*, May 13, 1942; Robert B. Laws to D.C.H., June 5, 1980, interview; "Prostitution Almost Nil Within Austin," May 19, 1951, folder 110:3, ASHAR; Linsley and Rienstra, *Beaumont*, p. 114; Allen, Report on Beaumont, Feb. 6-8, 1951, folder 110:3, ASHAR; Ramsdell, "Some Virtue," p. 102; Allen, Report on Corpus Christi, Dec. 10, 1948, folder 109:11, ASHAR; Frost, *Gentlemen's Club*, pp. 239-253; McComb, *Galveston*, pp. 157-158; *Galveston Daily News*, Jan. 9, 1943; Rooney and Sweeney, Report on San Antonio, June 7, 1946, folder 109:11, ASHAR; Davenport, "The District," pp. 55; Albert Curtis, *Fabulous San Antonio* (San Antonio, 1955), p. 39; Allen, Report on Amarillo, Jan. 15-18, 1951, folder 110:3, ASHAR.

⁴⁰Allen, Report on Fort Worth, Mar. 27-28, 1953, folder 110:5, ASHAR; Frost, *Gentlemen's Club*, p. 261; Winick and Kinsie, *Lively Commerce*, pp. 162-163; Vaughn, "Professional Prostitution," pp. 137, 150-152, 157-158, 160, 164, 166. The statements in this and the next six paragraphs are based largely on a close examination of hundreds of field reports on Texas cities by representatives of the American Social Hygiene Association, 1946-1956. See folders 106:3, 109:10-109:11, and 110:1-110:8, ASHAR.

⁴¹Allen, Report on Amarillo, April 23-25, 1952, folder 110:4, ASHAR; Robert B. Laws to D.C.H., June 5, 1980, interview; Robert B. Laws and Anna Belle Laws to Janet G. Humphrey, March 13, 1991, interview.

⁴²*Texas Almanac, 1954-1955: The Encyclopedia of Texas* (Dallas, 1953), pp. 279-82.

⁴³Folder (L15:2.) "International Activities, Mexican Border Cities, 1947-51," *passim*. ASHAR; Raymond Sanford, Report on Brownsville, Feb. 4-March 19, 1952, and Report on Laredo, March 20-April 7, 1952, folder 110:4, ASHAR; Slutes, Report on El Paso, Aug. 1949, folder 110:1, ASHAR; Allen, Report on El Paso, Mar. 12-14, 1951, folder 110:3, ASHAR; Allen, Report on San Antonio, June 20, 1952, folder 110:4, ASHAR; Allen, Report on El Paso, Jan. 6-7-9, 1953, folder 110:5, ASHAR; Frost, *Gentlemen's Club*, pp. 260-261, 268-269, 288-289.

⁴⁴W. Allen and R.D. Warfield, Report on Port Arthur, Dec. 13, 1951, folder 110:3, and Allen and Warfield, Report on Dallas, Dec. 9-10, 1951, folder 110:3, ASHAR. See also note 40.

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⁴⁶Cartwright, *Galveston*, pp. 246-247, 249-255; McComb, *Galveston*, p. 158; Sanford, Reports on Galveston, Feb. 2, 5-6, 6, 23, 1949, folder 110:1, ASHAR; Allen, Report on Galveston, June 20-29, 1950, folder 110:2, ASHAR; Allen, Report on Galveston, June 21-22, 1951, folder 110:3, ASHAR; Allen, Report on Galveston, Feb. 7-8, Mar. 13, 1952, folder 110:4, ASHAR; Slutes, Report on Galveston, July 1-9, 1953, folder 110:5, ASHA (see folder 110:5 for Slutes' frequent, detailed, very informative field reports on Galveston during 1953); Slutes, Filed Report on Galveston, Jan. 21-22, June 30-July 1, 1954, folder 110:6; Fort Worth *Evening Star Telegram*, May 25, 1955, folder 110:8, ASHAR; Slutes, Report on Galveston, Mar. 5-6, 1956, folder 110:8, ASHAR.

⁴⁷Slutes, Report on Southern Region, Dec. 1-2, 6-8, 1949, folder 110:1 ASHAR. See also note 40.

⁴⁸Cartwright, *Galveston*, pp. 255-61; Austin *American*, May 1, 1958, "Wilson, Will," Vertical File (CAH); Slutes, Reports on Galveston, Dec. 14, 1956, Oct. 23-30, 1957, Mar. 24, 1960, News Release, Aug. 8, 1957, folder 110:8, ASHAR; Slutes, Report on Texas, Nov. 6-Dec. 23, 1959, folder 110:7, ASHAR. See also note 40.

⁴⁹Slutes, Reports on Texas, Nov. 25, Dec. 19, 1958, Nov. 6-Dec. 23, 1959, folder 110:7, ASHAR; Slutes, Reports on Galveston, Mar. 24, Apr. 14, 1960, folder 106:8, ASHAR; Austin *American-Statesman*, Jan. 23, 1961; "James, Rep. Tom," Vertical File (CAH); Linsley and Rienstra, *Beaumont*, pp. 114-117.

⁵⁰Allen, Report on Amarillo, Aug. 10, 1951, folder 110:3, ASHAR; Allen, Report on Southern Region, April 15-28, 1949, folder 110:1, ASHAR; "For AM Release," ca. Nov. 1955, folder 110:8, ASHAR.

⁵¹See, for example, Dallas *Morning News*, June 23, 1974; Austin *American-Statesman*, Nov. 23, 24, 25, 1975, April 9, Sept. 9, 23, 1980, July 5, 1981, Sept. 20, 1984, Mar. 25, 30, 1985; *River City Sun*, Sept. 1, 1978.