

“A Wide-Open City:”

Prostitution in Progressive Era Lancaster

Philip Jenkins

The Pennsylvania State University

Between 1913 and 1915, the city of Lancaster experienced a searching inquiry into the prevalence of prostitution and organized vice. Though such case-studies were far from uncommon in the Progressive era, the Lancaster study was unusually thorough in nature, and was untypical in the extent to which the measures demanded by reformers actually were carried out. It is therefore likely that the surviving reports give a reasonably accurate portrait of vice conditions in a middle-sized Pennsylvania city in these years. The results are surprising: Lancaster, with a population of some fifty thousand, was providing employment for two hundred full-time prostitutes, whose activities were generating annual revenues of at least several hundred thousand dollars, perhaps a million or more. Vice establishments were attracting some four or five thousand customers weekly. Though this activity should be counted as one of the major economic activities in the urban economy, its illegal nature means that it features little in either social or economic histories of communities at this time. Moreover, prostitution operated under the generous tolerance of civic authorities and police, with virtually no pretense of even token measures for suppression. This situation had existed for several decades, perhaps since time immemorial. The *de facto* legalization of vice in such a homogeneous and politically tranquil city is illuminating evidence for the way in which government conceived its moral mission in the later nineteenth century, and for the radical shift in standards inspired by the Progressive movement.

Apart from its relevance to the history of this one city, the Lancaster evidence is also suggestive for the development of other comparable small and mid-sized communities in the early decades of this century. If, as seems likely, Lancaster was not unusual among Pennsylvania cities in the scale and overtness of its vice operations, this could have intriguing implications for the response of police forces and local authorities to the onset of Prohibition of a few years afterwards. If city governments in Lancaster and elsewhere were so well used to tolerating consensual vice and victimless crime, they would have had little difficulty in extending this benevolence into the new world of bootlegging and illicit drinking. This closely observed case-study therefore illuminates the ancient dilemma of the gap between the legislation of morality and its actual enforcement.

Prostitution and the Progressives

Prostitution, the “Social Evil,” was a matter of pressing concern for reformers in the Progressive era. Moralistic attacks on prostitution date back at least to the early middle ages, but from the late nineteenth century, such campaigns attracted a variety of new and powerful constituencies.¹ The suppression of vice was of course a major issue for evangelical Christians, who were often motivated by one of the religious revivals of the era. They now had the support of medical and social reformers, who were appalled by the extremely high rates of venereal diseases which they were discovering, especially in the large cities. Rates of infection were highlighted by the inquiries of charitable investigators and settlement workers, and the new social work professions which emerged at the start of the century. Findings about sexually transmitted “social diseases” were a particular nightmare for the eugenic movement which emerged in the 1880s, and which feared the long-term consequences for racial progress.² Reformers’ watchwords included both “social purity”—eliminating vice—and “social hygiene,” suppressing the diseases which were a menace to the health of the race. Social hygiene also became a prominent issue for the feminist movement which gained such influence between 1890 and 1920, and for whom the slogan of “Votes for Women” was occasionally followed by “and Chastity for Men.” In addition, the blatantly public nature of much vice activity was spectacular testimony to the corruption of law enforcement, and to the close alliances which existed between political machines and organized criminal syndicates. Exposing prostitution thus became a regular weapon in the hands of groups advocating political reform and clean government. Finally, anti-vice campaigns were facilitated by new media attitudes to what was deemed proper to print: immorality was blazoned by the mass media, and especially the Hearst and Pulitzer newspapers. From the 1890s, these exemplars of “yellow journalism” used sensational coverage to achieve unprecedented sales.

Though prostitution was clearly illegal, campaigners were anxious to avoid any charge that they were trying to suppress behavior that was merely personal, consensual, and ultimately harmless. This was achieved by stressing the harm to the innocent and non-consenting, especially through the diseases transmitted to the innocent wives and children of errant men, but also through the exploitation of naive girls too young to give truly informed consent. The anti-vice campaign was used to justify the general raising of the age of sexual consent in most American jurisdictions between about 1885 and 1910 (prior to the 1880s, the age for girls had usually stood at ten years).³ Rhetorically, the reformers achieved their greatest success by emphasizing the allegedly involuntary nature of much prostitution, claiming that many girls had in fact been abducted or coerced as “white slaves.” The interlinked movements against forced prostitution, white slavery, and venereal disease culminated in the Mann Act of 1910, a pioneering measure which effectively began the history of federal law enforcement in the United States.⁴

In these years, the intensity of the public campaign against vice was indicated by the frequency of coverage in major Progressive magazines like *Charities and the Commons* or *Survey*. Many articles also appeared in the publications of specialized movements like the American Purity Alliance (later renamed the American Vigilance Association), with its journals *The Philanthropist* and *Vigilance*; and the American Federation for Sex Hygiene.⁵ In 1914, the main activist groups merged into the new American Social Hygiene Association. For forty years, its journal *Social Hygiene* would provide an invaluable historical resource for changing attitudes to social and sexual hygiene, sex education, and above all, the ongoing anti-prostitution campaign.

The Lancaster Survey

The exposé of Lancaster conditions must be placed in its historical context. Throughout the first two decades of the century, vice surveys of particular cities were a familiar genre of social exploration, and were regularly summarized in the pages of *Vigilance* and *Social Hygiene*. In Pennsylvania, Philadelphia conditions were regularly reported in despairing terms, while Pittsburgh prostitution was examined in great detail in the celebrated *Pittsburgh Survey* of urban problems.⁶ In 1906, the state founded its own "Society for the Prevention of Social Disease."⁷ Moreover, Pennsylvania in these years had a vigorous tradition of both Progressive politics and grass-roots activism, which could be mobilized against social abuses, which along with political and financial misdeeds were also exposed in the writings of Ida Tarbell and Lincoln Steffens.

Reform politics in the state reached dramatic heights between 1911 and 1914.⁸ Pittsburgh reformed its civic government, Gifford Pinchot led a reformist insurgency in the state's Republican party, and in the 1912 presidential election, Pennsylvania was a stronghold of Theodore Roosevelt's Progressivism.⁹ In 1911, Philadelphia elected an honest Progressive mayor in Rudolph Blankenburg, who in 1913 received a sweeping report from his Vice Commission on the scale of prostitution activity in that city and the necessity to clean up the police.¹⁰ The Commission found that Philadelphians spent six million dollars a year on prostitution, and that the city had more brothels than New York City.¹¹ In response to these findings, the state legislature in 1913 passed an "abatement and injunction law" providing for the closure of premises used "for the purposes of fornication, lewdness, assignation or prostitution." In 1914, the Mayor of Pittsburgh appointed a Bureau of Public Morals to investigate and suppress the open brothel activity in the downtown area.¹²

The movement to clean up Lancaster thus occurred at the height of these statewide events. Since the 1880s, Lancaster had experienced rapid progress in terms of industrial and commercial growth. After long decades as a backwater, it was finally experiencing the dramatic population growth which characterized nearby cities like Harrisburg and Reading.¹³ By 1909, it was the fourth most

important city in Pennsylvania in terms of manufacturing, following behind Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Reading: some three hundred concerns employed ten thousand workers in making "umbrellas and canes, tobacco, confectionery, cottons, and iron and steel."¹⁴ Lancaster also maintained its role as a service and market center for the surrounding towns and farm country, at a time when the area was the wealthiest in the nation in agricultural production. The dual boom in manufacturing and farming brought prosperity to the city's merchants and professionals and, less obviously, to its vice facilities, which flourished unquestioned and unabashed. The Lancaster *New Era* commented in 1913 how vice had been "aggravated by our present development."¹⁵ By this point, prostitution was so established, and so blatant, that it was only a matter of time before it would become the target of a moralist backlash under the leadership of the city's active Law and Order Society. The publicity accorded the Philadelphia exposé provided the final incentive to reform.

In 1913, an *ad hoc* Vice Committee was formed in the city under the leadership of the Rev. Clifford Gray Twombly, the minister of St. James' Episcopal church, supported by some seventy other activists, who provided a typical cross-section of such Progressive campaigns. The group indeed included representatives of some of the most distinguished local families, including William H. Hager, a local department store magnate.¹⁶ There was a predictably strong clerical element, with twenty supporters citing their titles as "Reverend." Other respectable professions were well represented, with at least six lawyers, doctors, and college professors. One-third of the named supporters were women.

Once formed, the committee's first step was to seek the assistance of a national organization to undertake the inquiry. The American Vigilance Association was invited to send its senior investigator, George J. Kneeland, who had previously led vice purges in New York City, Chicago, Philadelphia, Syracuse and elsewhere.¹⁷ Kneeland directed a small staff of investigators, who posed as visitors from New York who were in the vice trade themselves, and possibly in the market to invest in the business in Lancaster. This effective ruse allowed them to discuss financial circumstances quite freely with both madames and prostitutes, and to gain an insight into the business far superior to what might have been obtained by merely observing premises. Nor, of course, did the Vigilance Association's representatives have to compromise themselves sexually by becoming customers: we are assured that "the investigators never went upstairs with the girls, but talked with them in the parlor, buying rounds of drinks, or discussing the business with the madames."¹⁸ Also, a prolonged clandestine inquiry ensured that vice would be seen operating in its normal form, avoiding the danger that operators would "lie low" until a well-publicized official purge had passed by.

Of course, the partisan origins of the inquiry should make us suspicious about specific claims made. For example, investigators were anxious to convince readers that the vice business was not merely widespread but also dangerous to public health, and there would be a tendency to exaggerate the number of sexual contacts, and hence the risk of disease. In keeping with the "white slave" concept, the authors regularly chose terms which stressed the coercive nature of prostitution. For example, girls working in brothels are "inmates." Also, the fact that investigators hoped to shock a mainstream audience may explain the frequent reference to Black or "colored" customers, suggesting that the brothels were encouraging interracial sex. While investigators reported nothing that is inherently implausible, the situation depicted should not necessarily be accepted as typical. Equal caution should be taken with claims about the financial turnover of the business, for Kneeland had every interest in making commercialized vice seem a thriving competitor to legitimate business. Moreover, if investigators were posing as prospective investors, it was likely that madames would tend to present the most optimistic view of their economic success. Having said this, the reports are convincing in their specific detail, and their avoidance of sweeping generalization or hyperbole. Though the documents were attacked for sensationalism on their first appearance, most details were subsequently verified by police and courts, so that the broad picture given can be accepted as reliable.

Parlor Houses and Bed Houses

Investigators had no difficulty finding abundant evidence of commercialized prostitution in this "wide-open" city. They reported on 53 residences associated with the trade, including a remarkable 27 specialized brothels or "parlor" houses, so-called because clients gathered in a parlor to meet women clad in a variety of scanty and provocative clothing, including 'blue-silk wrappers, kimonos, red silk chemises, flimsy garments, yellow satin dresses and evening gowns.' Couples would then proceed to bedrooms on the premises. The number of brothels was "large even for a 'wide-open' city of the size of Lancaster, and even if there were no more such houses than the number visited": and investigators made no claim that their survey was comprehensive.¹⁹ As one hotel waiter observed, though he had traveled widely, Lancaster and one other unnamed Pennsylvania city seemed to "have got more whorehouses than any place I've ever been in."²⁰ In comparison, a metropolis like Pittsburgh claimed only 54 open brothels about this time, a little more than double the number of houses in a downtown serving a far more populous region than Lancaster.²¹

Lancaster's numerous brothels were spread throughout the center city. They could be found "on W. Mifflin, N. Water, N. Market, N. Prince, W. Lemon, Locust, North and Washington Streets, Howard Avenue, and Quade's

Court.” Between them, the known parlor houses employed roughly 123 women, or an average of four or five women per house. The operations were reasonably open about their activities, and girls solicited widely throughout the city for trade. Vice could easily be found by any visitor by asking a hotel clerk or messenger boy about the whereabouts of a “sporting house.” One madame boasted that a contact at one hotel “sends me hundreds of people.”²²

Conditions in the parlor houses varied enormously according to the segment of the market to which they catered. A few establishments had high, even elite aspirations, and resembled the “fancy houses” familiar from the romantic stereotypes in fictional treatments like the film *Pretty Baby*. Lancaster’s best house stood on North Prince Street: it charged between two and five dollars, for which patrons were received by “refined” girls in a parlor “furnished in the most excellent taste and very expensively. The floor is covered with thick Brussels carpet, and small rugs were scattered about.... Expensive couches, rockers, Morris chairs, paintings and pictures completed the furnishings...” The highest prices were also paid for perverse activities, though the investigators were cautious not to specify the range of sexual options available at the various houses.²³ The most detail we hear about such matters concerns the keeper of a disorderly house on East Fulton Street which traded in younger teenaged girls: in addition, “she rents two couples in one bed, and circus business like that.”²⁴

The luxurious conditions of North Prince Street were exceptional, and prices were far higher than the average. In seven establishments, the price ranged from one to two dollars, but the average price for services was one dollar, and five or six charged fifty cents, seeking the lowest class of trade. These cheap houses could be horrendous in terms of their hygiene as much as their morality: they are described in typical accounts as “the filthiest resort I have ever entered. The entire street is an incubator for disease. No toilets or bathrooms are in any of the houses; the slops are poured in a sink which has an outlet into the street, the stench of which is noticeable upon entering the block.” In another instance, “the place is filthy rotten dirty and has a bad odor.” West Mifflin Street was notorious for its “dirty low dumps.” Unlike the girls of North Prince Street with their elegant gowns, the less fortunate prostitutes here advertised their wares by standing in doorways wearing scanty kimonos.²⁵ However, even this degree of polarization was less extreme than that found in Pittsburgh, where the plushiest brothels charged ten or fifteen dollars and offered French girls, while the very poorest African-American establishments ran at a mere 25 cents.²⁶

Lancaster’s parlor houses catered to a broad segment of the community. Customers “came from all classes of society, and included patrons from automobiles and cabs (which often stood before the front door of the house), people described as well-known business men, college boys, traveling men and salesmen, shop-workers, wage earners, day laborers, railroad men, poolroom

frequenters, hotel guests, musicians, farmers, and men from the outlying districts and towns round Lancaster.”²⁷ Students from Franklin and Marshall College were said to be particularly frequent clients.²⁸ Naturally, the amount of trade described could scarcely have been maintained from city residents themselves, but also drew heavily on the transients visiting or passing through this crucial communications hub. Business obviously fluctuated, but during special events like Fair Week, madames would import extra staff, “corn-fed girls from Harrisburg, York, and around.”²⁹

Though the number of customers is not known, there are anecdotal accounts of girls servicing ten or more men in a single night, twenty in some cases. More reliable evidence of the volume of trade comes from the earnings of the girls themselves, whose weekly income might average twenty dollars: this would imply receiving sixty to eighty men each week, an average of ten a day. These conditions obviously created an enormous public health danger, which was duly emphasized in the final *Report* of the investigation. Mifflin Street especially was blamed as having “put more guys on their back than any place I know. I know hundreds of guys that got dosed up down there. Ask any of the boys: they’ll tell you.”³⁰

Not all prostitutes worked the parlor houses. Though the brothels at their worst might keep girls in a state of semi-slavery, their working conditions were perhaps preferable to those of the women who solicited men on the street and in various public settings, like railroad stations and theaters. Some 54 prostitutes were observed in this category. Like all major cities, Lancaster had its well-known streets where women were easily found, “E. King and Christian, W. King and Water, E. King and Duke, W. King near Prince, Locust and Duke, Orange and Duke, Prince and Vine, Queen, Prince and Penn Square.”³¹ Prostitutes also drummed up business through social settings, including the dance halls where “nothing but suggestive and immoral dances can be seen,” and where women committed acts which by the standards of the day proved them utterly immoral: “The women were smoking cigarettes and dancing upon the tables with their dresses raised above their knees.” In one hall, “they got kids there fifteen and sixteen years old doing hoochy-koochy half naked.”³² A network of bars and cafes served as well-known hangouts for meeting prostitutes.

Street girls were equally dependent on the vice organization in that their trade depended on another and inferior class of premises apart from the brothels, namely the “furnished room houses of assignation, or bed houses.” These were also owned by madames, who took for themselves a substantial share of the dollar or two price. Fifteen bed-houses were identified in the city, but there might well have been several more.³³ They were also well distributed throughout the center city, and were found on “N. Lime, N. Cherry, E. Fulton, W. King, W. Lemon, S. Queen, S. Water, N. Queen, N. Water, W. Walnut and W.

Mifflin Street, Landis Court, and New Holland Avenue.”³⁴ Again, the volume of trade is hard to assess, but observers reported about three couples per hour entering one property on North Lime Street on an average evening. The lowest class of premises were the eleven “disorderly hotels,” establishments which rented a room for a dollar in addition to the two or three dollars charged by the streetwalker. These rooms were often found close to the bar-rooms in the major hotels of the center city. Though not as strictly controlled as the parlor houses, vice operations in these hotels could not have been carried out without the knowledge of the owners. The proprietor of a large hotel on Prince Street boasted that he ran “the biggest whorehouse in Lancaster.”³⁵

The Economics of the Trade

Prostitution could be highly profitable, especially in the brothels where activities were so tightly regulated by the madames and the pimps with whom they worked. Each girl received half of the price for sex, but out of that half, the remainder, they had to pay for board and (overpriced) clothing, as well as medical inspections. Most therefore found themselves in semi-permanent debt to the house. In addition, brothels made a large profit selling liquor and beer illegally, and at exorbitant prices: one madame was, however, proud of her reputation as running the only Temperance-oriented brothel in the city, which presumably attracted a more respectable, if not puritanical, clientele.³⁶ The weekly proceeds of a house might range anywhere from two to seven hundred dollars. One madame in a house on North Water Street was frank about the economics of her trade: “I got only two girls. They pay me four dollars a week for board. There is nothing to brag about, but I guess I got 150 men a week calling here. Besides, the drinks bring me from thirty to forty dollars a week.”³⁷

Though much about these figures is uncertain, they do permit a rough guess about the importance of prostitution in the city’s economy. If we assume, conservatively, that each of the 27 parlor houses brought in an average of four hundred dollars a week, including drink sales, that would mean a total revenue of \$560,000 a year. We are on dubious ground with the more transient trade of the bed-houses and hotels, but these could also be profitable for the owners. One bed-house madame boasted that she “made enough right here in this business in 25 years to buy nine other houses beside this.” She claimed to be worth some eighty or ninety thousand dollars.³⁸ Assuming that these other properties generated about the same income as the parlor houses, then the city-wide proceeds from prostitution would amount to over a million dollars each year. This money would be tax-free, though some of it would perhaps have been dedicated to paying police and officials for the unofficial licenses to operate (see below). To put this in perspective, in 1914, Lancaster City reported 304 manufacturing establishments producing goods with a total value of twenty million dollars, or an average of \$66,000 each.³⁹ In 1917, the receipts and

expenditures for running the Lancaster city government ran at about \$470,000 a year, and the permanent debt was \$700,000.⁴⁰ If the vice investigation was even approximately accurate in its figure for prostitution earnings, then these would have constituted a significant share of the city's economy, to say nothing of its employment profile.

The number of active prostitutes in Lancaster is uncertain. Estimates are inflated by the inclusion of "non-professional, amateur or so-called charity girl prostitutes," estimated to be a "very large" number: however, as this category was characterized by their refusal to take money for sexual relations, it is difficult to understand why they are included in a study of prostitution.⁴¹ Presumably, revulsion at commercialized vice was being used to mobilize public hostility against the supposedly loose morals of ordinary young women, who were perhaps using a relative economic freedom to indulge in sexual experimentation of the sort previously thought appropriate only for men. But even if we set aside the "charity girls," Kneeland's men admitted frankly that their statistics for paid vice activity were incomplete, and that an unknown number of parlor houses and bed houses were certainly excluded. Where we do have solid evidence is in the number of individual women seen working the recognized establishments. Assuming that the streetwalkers counted did not in fact overlap with the brothel residents, that would mean that the city had an absolute minimum of 180 working prostitutes, not counting an unknown number of semi-professionals. Investigators also indicate that female prostitution was only part of the illicit activity in progress in the city, but the moral scruples of the Vigilance Association prevented them from being more explicit about activities by "men perverts or fairies," about whose numbers we can only guess.⁴² It is uncertain whether this account refers to consensual homosexual cruising, male prostitution, or both activities together.

Of the women described, the majority were aged between 18 and 26, and were mainly recruited within the local community: "A few of the girls seem to have come from New York or Philadelphia, but the majority apparently are natives of Lancaster County, or of some other town in Pennsylvania. Lancaster in many instances would seem to be a source of supply for the larger cities."⁴³ The number of women willing to work in these often appalling conditions reflected the difficulty of finding adequate employment in legitimate industry. Although Lancaster's industries were thriving, women's jobs were notoriously badly paid, especially in tobacco concerns, and the city had an unsavory reputation as "a child-labor town."⁴⁴

The Open Secret

Prostitution activity was carried on quite overtly. The trade proceeded with the knowledge or cooperation of members of the mainstream business and professional establishment, including major figures in real estate, the owners

of hotels and inns, and the wholesale suppliers of liquor and beer. Premises used as parlor houses were rented from "respectable" owners, who nevertheless charged double rent given the profitable nature of the trade. Brothels employed at least six known doctors to provide regular medical checks for girls, and some doctors provided abortion services."⁴⁵ Four lawyers were identified as "managing the legal business of these traffickers in women's bodies," for example in arranging property transactions.⁴⁶ In addition, the houses (or at least the better ones) boasted of their clientele among the substantial members of Lancaster society: "the cream of the city come here, big ones from all over."⁴⁷

It is impossible to believe that either police or authorities could have failed to know the nature of the business carried on, especially in the indiscreet fifty-cent hovels. In one West Mifflin Street establishment, "Colored men were hanging around the open door, and looked on while another of the inmates who had just come in, undressed and stood in the room with the door open, with no shades on the window, in more than semi-nude condition.... I make oath that two little boys saw this woman in this condition. Such vileness and filth I never saw."⁴⁸ Of course, the police did know perfectly well what was going on, and never intervened. Kneeland's men often found police officers in the brothels, talking freely with the girls, and using their sexual services. When one investigator expressed nervousness about the presence of one officer near a brothel, a girl assured him that "If you stay here long enough, you'll see him sit inside eating with us... he has lunch with us every once in a while."⁴⁹ Other officers were in close proximity when streetwalkers solicited men and ignored the behavior. The Lancaster Chief of Police freely admitted that he had "a list of all the houses of ill-fame in the city."⁵⁰

The madames interviewed boasted freely of their impunity, and were adamant that authorities would never interfere with a "quiet" house. One woman who operated a twelve-room bed-house declared that she had never been raided in a career of 33 years. Others made clear that existing conditions had prevailed more or less undisturbed throughout their time in the city, which in some cases dated back to the late 1880s.⁵¹ Anecdotal accounts of different houses suggested that they had been brothels for twenty or thirty years. One operator of a bed-house on North Line Street reported that "The police know I am here, know I keep a quiet house, no fighting, only sell drinks to my regular trade, never ask anyone a question. Too many business men come here for them to touch me." As a result, she was not worried about intervention: "This White Slave business and Vice Commission will never hit Lancaster in your time. It is fifty years behind any city in them respects, you are safe here." She also argued that certain unnamed figures of prominence supported the houses because they wanted the votes: "you are safe here until you die."⁵²

Police determined who operated freely, and at what premises. The suggestion that a new house might be opened was dismissed immediately

"because they [the police] won't let you." Good locations were precious, and had to be rationed among operators with access to official favor: in the words of a man known as "the whores' lawyer," "a good stand is as valuable in this town as a hotel."⁵³ An entrepreneur could not therefore set up a new property, though he might be permitted to buy out an existing concern. The issue then arises of why exactly the police were exercising this benevolence. They might well have determined that enforcing the laws against prostitution would do more harm than good, winning little political reward while standing little chance of achieving a real reduction of the behavior itself. In this view, it would have been better to have the activity regulated. On the other hand, it is difficult to believe that so profitable an enterprise did not present a serious temptation to charge a virtual license fee in order to operate, in the form of extorting unofficial "taxes" and bribes from madames. The *Report* is ambiguous about this matter, and finds it sufficiently shocking that *de facto* legalization was granted, without speculating about possible payoffs in Lancaster, though it does discuss the general danger of police graft.⁵⁴ Whatever the real motivation of police and civic authorities, there is no doubt that commercial vice activity was highly organized and structured, and that the organization was in the hands not of some imaginary crime syndicate or mafia, but of the police themselves.

Cleaning Up Lancaster

The vice investigation was publicized in February 1914, revealing "the vice conditions in the city which are such a cancerous growth in its very midst, and such a dark blot on its moral life."⁵⁵ The *Report* made an enormous impact, far greater than the periodic and wearily predictable revelations of unchecked vice and corruption in a metropolis like New York or Philadelphia, where the typical corruption/reform cycle recurred every decade or so.⁵⁶ In 1941, a local historian declared the exposé of "such unbelievable rottenness" in Lancaster to be "one of the outstanding landmarks in the social history of the city and country." The issue immediately became the primary focus of local politics.⁵⁷ The degree of shock is surprising, and might attract some skepticism. Rev. Twombly asserted that, hitherto, "Many of our best citizens were almost entirely ignorant as to the alarming extent of commercialized vice in Lancaster; others, suspecting it, did not see how it would be possible to change the situation," although it is difficult to understand how anyone could have neglected the ostentatious activities portrayed in the exposé.⁵⁸ We might suggest a cynical explanation for the apparently unanimous reaction to the *Report*: once it was released, no respectable man could refuse to join in the general condemnation without attracting suspicion of being one of the substantial businessmen reported as having frequented the houses.

Genuinely or otherwise, the “best citizens” now discovered the scale of the vice problem, and launched a war. Mayor F. B. McClain immediately held a meeting of a hundred concerned citizens in the YMCA building, where it was agreed to order the closure of all the premises mentioned. Raids and arrests duly followed, and madames were either jailed or forced to leave town. By September, “the Lancaster, Pennsylvania, vice district was closed.... Lancaster is forever free of the nasty red light.”⁵⁹ At first, the obvious assumption was that official vigilance would be short-lived, and would soon “blow over” on the model of major cities, so that operations would soon resume. However, a second inquiry followed from the fall of 1914 into early 1915, under the auspices of the American Social Hygiene Association. This ensured that the suppression was lasting.⁶⁰ By 1915, some 75 percent of the girls working the parlor houses had left the city, “some to go to their homes, some to enter legitimate business, and some (the larger part) to quarters known and unknown in other cities and towns.”⁶¹ The stringent policy was enforced by the new mayor, H. L. Trout. By 1915 the vice commission was declaring victory. The estimated number of weekly customers was said to have fallen from four or five thousand to perhaps one or two hundred, and the surviving houses were smaller and far more discreet. By 1915, only “three parlor houses and three bed-houses are still running secretly or intermittently for a small number of ‘vouched for’ customers, but cannot (with one or two exceptions) continue to exist for another six months, we believe, on the very limited amount of business they are now doing.”⁶²

With the brothels largely closed, the second investigation could focus on the less blatant business of the hotels and “side-rooms” to bars, which permitted casual assignations with prostitutes and streetwalkers.⁶³ Attention also turned to the scenes of casual and usually non-commercial sex, low dance-halls, “road houses and hotels outside the city, and Sunday beer clubs and drinking clubs.”⁶⁴ In 1915, the license court revoked the licenses of several saloons and hotels, and ordered the closure of “side-rooms” throughout the country.⁶⁵ As so often in the Progressive campaigns of these years, movements against crime and corruption easily spilled over into sternly intrusive efforts to regulate personal moral conduct.

For the reformers, victory was near complete, and was trumpeted in the national press as evidence that vice genuinely could be driven out of a community. In 1941, Frederic S. Klein’s history of Lancaster county asserted that the “crusade . . . exposed and achieved such phenomenal results that it became a program which received recognition and imitation all over the nation.” Twombly described the triumph in the pages of *Social Hygiene* in an article on “The City That Has Followed Up On Its Report on Vice Conditions.” The American Social Hygiene Association was fulsome: “We wish we could report in every city the same intelligent effort.”⁶⁶ Though optimism might have seemed premature, the old conditions never returned to any significant degree.

Klein declared that the pre-1914 situation had not been allowed to recur, so that vice authentically was eliminated, or at least driven far underground.⁶⁷

The enduring success of the anti-vice movement is very striking, all the more so in contrast to the larger cities. The change requires explanation. Before 1914, prostitution operated in a more or less free market characterized by very high and persistent demand, which presumably did not cease immediately due to the change of law-enforcement policy. As was remarked of the Pittsburgh region in just these years, there was "an unnatural proportion of single men in mills and mines. Hundreds of footloose wage-earners from all parts of the industrial district look to the city when bent on having a good time, making it, in the phrase of an old sporting man, 'one big Saturday night town.'" ⁶⁸ By their nature, urban and industrial regions offered rich opportunities for vice. Prostitution soon rebounded in major cities after the most apparently severe purges: the demand for illicit services still lured suppliers to operate in the new and harsher environment, bribing officials and politicians for the privilege, so that vice conditions returned to normal within a few years, albeit at a higher price. That this did not happen in Lancaster suggests that the crackdown here coincided with other factors in the equation of supply and demand. Technology might have played a role here, especially the arrival of the car and the telephone.

The impact of the car on vice organization is apparent. The concentrated geography of prostitution in the city presupposed a walking community, where customers frequented a parlor house close to their normal places of work or recreation. But already, some clients were arriving in automobiles, and a few entrepreneurs were seeking easier conditions and lower rents out of town. Some business was shifting to the road houses and hotels: "these places are reached by trolley cars and taxicabs from the city, and one of the worst of them is over fifteen miles away." ⁶⁹ This trend would have continued anyway with the proliferation of private car ownership over the next decade, but it was accelerated by the purges of 1914-15.

New out-of-town locations had many advantages. They were subject to the more relaxed jurisdiction of rural or suburban law enforcement and code enforcement agencies, rather than the city agencies now galvanized by the Vice Commission. Customers could also reasonably hope to avoid being seen by acquaintances or neighbors. This is in fact a common pattern in modern prostitution, in which "massage parlors" are located on main roads outside the boundaries of major cities, often in neighboring townships or unincorporated areas. In the downtown, meanwhile, travelers still found prostitutes through contacts in the hotels, while the growing popularity of telephones made it possible to find women without the need to pay a personal visit to premises: thus, the "call-girl" was invented. By the 1920s, the telephone was critical for carrying on several forms of illicit activity, including bootlegging and betting as well as prostitution. By this decade also, more relaxed moral standards and

the spread of contraceptive knowledge certainly reduced demand for prostitution, by making it more likely that men would find sex from willing partners. The Lancaster purges may have contributed to ending overt prostitution in the historic downtown, but the phenomenon might not have lasted much longer in any case.

Towards Prohibition

The purges ended a period of at least a quarter of a century in which organized vice was run with the full consent and permission of the law enforcement bureaucracy. Such a finding would occasion little surprise in a larger American city, but what is striking here is both the setting, Lancaster, and the period, before Prohibition. The vast bulk of writing about civic corruption in this era focuses on great cities like New York and Chicago. The criminality involved is often associated with immigrants and new ethnic groups, including the Irish, Jews, and Italians. This fact has given rise to a scholarly literature which explains how the corruption of the political machine arose to accommodate these new populations who otherwise had few legitimate means of access to American society. However, the Lancaster study shows that similar conditions prevailed in one of the most homogeneous old-stock cities of the nation, and one with a reputation for sober conservatism even by late Victorian standards. In the newspapers, for example, the slightest sign of public impropriety or a risqué theatrical performance was greeted with hostile editorials demanding the enforcement of strict moral standards. Yet readers must have known about the excesses being perpetrated only a few blocks away.⁷⁰

Moreover, these conditions prevailed before the Volstead Act and the vastly increased disrespect for law and order caused by Prohibition in the Roaring Twenties. In the upsurge of scholarly research on political corruption in the 1960s, by far the best study of a middle-sized city appropriately focused on another Pennsylvania community, namely Reading, which under the thin disguise of "Wincanton" provided John A. Gardiner with the foundation of his classic account of *The Politics of Corruption*.⁷¹ Gardiner shows that Prohibition made Reading the center of a sizable organized crime empire, in which racketeers closely allied with police and city authorities made and sold beer to Philadelphia, New York, and other major East Coast cities. This bootlegging trade established a tradition of political corruption which prevailed in Reading into the 1960s, and which resulted in the tolerance of widespread gambling and prostitution. The earlier findings from Lancaster show how older attitudes to vice would have laid the ground for such a situation in a comparable urban setting. Lancaster's police were wholeheartedly in the business of tolerating illegality a decade before there were any beer barons with sufficient funds to buy politicians and officeholders, and to take over whole cities. The Lancaster case-study shows how easily law enforcement agencies would have

adapted to the new environment of Prohibition, and how existing structures of municipal corruption would have responded to the vast new opportunities for profit-making. Reading may have been far from atypical in its encounter with organized vice and crime.

Conclusion: The Evidence of Things Not Seen

But how representative were conditions in Lancaster? Answering this question raises fundamental issues about the nature of historical evidence in this era. The Lancaster findings make us conscious that even large-scale illicit activity will often evade the attention of historians. Briefly, we only know about conditions in Lancaster through a chance occurrence that had nothing necessarily to do with the phenomenon of prostitution itself. The town's elite demonstrated the leadership and organized ability to fight the "social evil," and it happened to find an investigator with the expertise to carry out a thorough inquiry. In consequence, we are extremely well informed about Lancaster conditions about 1913, and we can extrapolate backwards to suggest what conditions might have been like a decade or so previously. We are thus as well informed about Lancaster vice as we are about the situation in much larger cities like Philadelphia or Pittsburgh.

However, if this inquiry had not occurred, we would have absolutely no sense that prostitution was anything like as significant as it was in economic terms, or that it existed in a state of *de facto* toleration. As the police did not pursue the crime, next to no evidence survives of arrest records or prosecutions. In fact, the very rarity of arrests paradoxically gives us the best indication that police were exercising forbearance in enforcing the laws. Nor would the newspapers be of much assistance. The existence of brothels and street prostitution was too commonplace a fact to merit reporting. An exposé would have been considered indecent and sensationalistic: it might also have embarrassed powerful local figures in business and real estate. The lack of media records and police materials might lead a naive historian to conclude that Lancaster lacked organized vice, while in reality the town was well-known to be "wide-open."

The question then arises of conditions in other broadly comparable towns in the early twentieth century, communities with similarly thriving industrial and commercial foundations, which were regional transportation hubs, and which served a rural hinterland, cities like Erie, Johnstown, Altoona, Williamsport, Reading, York, Harrisburg, Allentown, Scranton, Hazleton, and others. Unlike Lancaster, these do not occur in the Progressive literature with damning case-studies of their flourishing vice-trades. They will not be found by database searches under keywords like "prostitution" and "Pennsylvania." However, the lack of coverage is purely a comment on the relative weakness of Progressive organization in such communities, and says nothing whatever about

the state of illicit activity. Indeed, the parallels between the markets for sexual services in Lancaster and the other communities may suggest that Lancaster was typical in its “wide-open” crime patterns, and unusual only in having been uncovered so spectacularly. We might for example argue that conditions were similar or even more extreme in other cities like (say) Harrisburg, Reading, or Altoona, but these cities simply had the good fortune to evade investigation. Alternatively, perhaps Lancaster genuinely was the uniquely flagrant den of vice portrayed by its moral crusaders. From the nature of the sources, the issue is difficult to determine, but as social historians, we need to be aware that the records we customarily employ can omit large and significant areas of human behavior.

Notes

1. John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, New York: Harper and Row, 1988; Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1982; Mark Thomas Connelly, *The Response to Prostitution in the Progressive Era*, Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1980; David J. Pivar, *Purity Crusade*, Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1973.
2. Allan M. Brandt, *No Magic Bullet*, New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985.
3. Martin J. Costello, *Hating the Sin, Loving the Sinner*, New York: Garland, 1991.
4. David J. Langum, *Crossing Over the Line*, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1994.
5. The journal *The Philanthropist* ran from 1886 to 1909, when it changed its name to *Vigilance*. In 1914, this journal merged into *Social Hygiene*. *Social Hygiene* was renamed the *Journal of Social Hygiene* in 1921, under which name it survived until 1954. See Philip Jenkins, *Moral Panic*, Yale University Press, 1998.
6. James Forbes, "Prostitution," in Paul U. Kellogg, ed. *The Pittsburgh Survey*. New York, Charities Publication Committee, vol. vi, 1914, 348-365; Maurine W. Greenwald and Margo Anderson, eds., *Pittsburgh Surveyed: Social Science and Social Reform in the Early Twentieth Century*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996.
7. *Report and Prospectus of the Pennsylvania Society for the Prevention of Social Disease*, Philadelphia, 1911.
8. Philip S. Klein and Ari Hoogenboom, *A History of Pennsylvania*, second edition, University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 1980.
9. Amos Pinchot, *History of the Progressive Party 1912-1916*, New York: New York University Press, 1958.
10. *A Report on Existing Conditions with Recommendations to the Honorable Rudolph Blankenburg, Mayor of Philadelphia, The Vice Commission*, Philadelphia, 1913.
11. "The Vice Problem in Philadelphia," *Survey*, May 24, 1913, 259.
12. "Note and Comment," *Social Hygiene* 1 (1914-15), 498-99.
13. Frederic Shriver Klein, *Lancaster County 1841-1941*, Lancaster: Lancaster National Bank, 1941, 113-162.
14. Klein and Hoogenboom, *A History of Pennsylvania*, 343. For the industrial growth of Lancaster, see for example Thomas R. Winpenny, *Industrial Progress and Human Welfare: The Rise of the Factory System in Nineteenth Century Lancaster*, Washington DC: University Press of America, 1982; *Resources and Industries of the City of Lancaster*, Lancaster Board of Trade, 1887.
15. *A Report on Vice Conditions in the City of Lancaster, PA*, Lancaster, PA: 1913, hereafter cited as *Report*, at p. 88.
16. H. M. J. Klein, *Lancaster's Golden Century 1821-1921*, Lancaster, PA: Hager and Bro., 1921.
17. For Kneeland's earlier inquiries, see *The Social Evil in New York City: A Study of Law Enforcement, by the Research Committee of the Committee of Fourteen*, New York: Andrew H. Kellogg Co., 1910; George J. Kneeland, *Commercialized Prostitution in New York City*, New York: Century, 1914.
18. *Report*, 18.
19. *Ibid.*, 17-18.
20. *Ibid.*, 22.
21. "Note and Comment," *Social Hygiene* 1 (1914-15), 498.
22. *Report*, 38, 55-57.
23. *Ibid.*, 19, 25-26.
24. *Ibid.*, 39.
25. *Ibid.*, 20-22.
26. Forbes, "Prostitution," 351.
27. *Report*, 19.
28. *Ibid.*, 24-25.
29. *Ibid.*, 29.
30. *Ibid.*, 21-24.
31. *Ibid.*, 43.
32. *Ibid.*, 45, 50-51.
33. *Ibid.*, 17, 30.
34. *Ibid.*, 30.
35. *Ibid.*, 40.
36. *Ibid.*, 29.
37. *Ibid.*, 22-23.
38. *Ibid.*, 38.
39. Klein, *Lancaster County*, 151.
40. William Riddle, *The Story of Lancaster*, Lancaster: privately printed, 1917, 275.
41. Ruth M. Alexander, *The "Girl Problem"* Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1995; Regina

- G. Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls*, New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1993.
42. *Report*, 44.
43. *Ibid.*, 44.
44. Riddle, *The Story of Lancaster*, 203.
45. *Report*, 26-27.
46. *Ibid.*, 20.
47. *Ibid.*, 38.
48. *Ibid.*, 20-21.
49. *Ibid.*, 27.
50. *Ibid.*, 73.
51. *Ibid.*, 33.
52. *Ibid.*, 38.
53. *Ibid.*, 23-24.
54. *Ibid.*, 73.
55. *Ibid.*, 6.
56. Russell F. Weigley, et al., *A Three Hundred Year History*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1982.
57. Klein, *Lancaster County*, 144.
58. Clifford Gray Twombly, "The City That Has Followed Up Its Report on Vice Conditions," *Social Hygiene* 1 (1914-15), 388-389.
59. "Report of the Committee on Social Hygiene," *Social Hygiene* 1 (1914-15), 518-19.
60. *A Second Report on Vice Conditions in the City of Lancaster, PA, Commissioned by a Lancaster Citizen's Committee*, Lancaster, PA: 1915.
61. Twombly, "The City That Has Followed Up Its Report on Vice Conditions," 390-91.
62. *Ibid.*, 390.
63. *Ibid.*, 391-3.
64. *Ibid.*, 392; *Report* 46-51.
65. "Report of the Committee on Social Hygiene," 518-9.
66. *Ibid.*, 519.
67. Klein, *Lancaster County*, 144.
68. Forbes, "Prostitution," 349.
69. Twombly, "The City That Has Followed Up Its Report on Vice Conditions," 393. According to John O'Hara's 1934 novel *Appointment in Samarra*, the main acknowledged brothel for the Pottsville area in the late 1920s was located a short drive away from the city.
70. Klein, *Lancaster County*, 89-90.
71. John A. Gardiner, *The Politics of Corruption: Organized Crime in an American City*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1970.