

2021

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Recommended Citation

Marquess, Hollie. "The Frontier Demimonde: Prostitution in Early Hays City, 1867-1883." *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 43, no. 4 (Winter 2020-21): 216-233.

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The Frontier Demimonde: Prostitution in Early Hays City, 1867–1883

by Hollie Marquess

Hays City, founded in 1867, had a reputation rivaled by few in the American West. Noted for shoot-outs, hard drinking, gambling, gunslinging, lawlessness, and vice, Hays City possessed the Union Pacific Railroad, Eastern Division terminus (UPRR-ED) and was positioned about a mile from the military post Fort Hays. This proximity to the railroad and to soldiers looking to carouse on payday made Hays City a bustling western commercial center. A *Junction City Weekly Union* reporter remarked in 1871, “There is a row of saloons on the Kansas Pacific Railway called Hays City. Having visited the place, we should call it the Sodom of the plains. Its history has been written, but never believed. . . . Only a faint glimmering of its wickedness has been put on record.”¹

Much of Hays City’s economic life centered around the saloons, dance halls, gambling dens, and houses of prostitution. Often among the first arrivals to western towns, prostitutes—today called sex workers—played an integral role in early frontier life. Though prostitutes had little to no hope of joining “respectable society,” they represented a vital piece of the social and economic vitality of western towns that is often overlooked by historians. Prostitutes in Hays City, through paying fines, regularly helped fill the town’s coffers. They also bought and sold property of considerable value. The nightlife in Hays City drew soldiers from Fort Hays into town on paydays to spend their money on gambling, liquor, and female companionship. This commerce was crucial to the success of Hays City in its infancy until family farming began to replace it as the county’s primary source of income. Hays City prostitutes participated in the legal system, serving as witnesses in a variety of trials, often for the prosecution. Their testimony, considered reliable, contributed to the attempt to provide order amid general lawlessness. Prostitutes in Hays City frequently utilized the law when they had a grievance against one another or even against a member of law enforcement. By examining court records, newspaper articles, and other publications, one can see that citizens of Hays City viewed these sex workers, at least initially, as vital to the social and economic life of the town. Eventually, though, attitudes shifted as more Volga German Catholic families moved into the area and farming, rather than nightlife, became the economic center of Hays. Prostitution then became less visible,

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1. *Junction City (KS) Weekly Union*, July 8, 1871.

less profitable, and ultimately less accepted by the public, as demonstrated in local newspaper articles and in court records that reflect stiffer fines when prostitutes were arrested.²

Though prostitutes played an integral role in early Hays City, thanks to their contributions to the social and economic livelihood of the booming western town, historians have largely ignored these contributions. While research on a transient population of women who frequently used assumed names is daunting, it is crucial to remember their essential roles in community building in the American West. A wealth of material exists that sensationalizes or romanticizes prostitution in the West, often providing apocryphal stories based on only anecdotal evidence. Most academic works on prostitution in the United States in the late nineteenth century focus on large urban areas such as New York, Denver, and San Francisco. Historical works on prostitution in Kansas concentrate primarily on cattle towns such as Dodge City, Abilene, and Ellsworth and railroad towns such as Dodge City and Ellsworth. Others make references to military posts and “camp followers.”³ Though Hays City was a railroad town that participated

in cattle drives and was located next to a military post, when historians discuss Hays City, the focus is on the gunfighting, the gambling, and the notable men who once walked the streets. Early Hays City prostitutes, part of the frontier demimonde—a French term adapted to refer to women associated with vice districts—played a crucial role in the economic and social life of the town, and these contributions deserve academic exploration.⁴

Between September 1867 and July 1868, much of the nation’s east-to-west passenger and freight traffic flowed through the UPRR-ED, making Hays City an important stop for those traveling toward western gold and silver speculation. In June 1868, Hays City’s population reached approximately 1,200.⁵ Elizabeth Custer, wife of General George A. Custer, observed Hays City from the nearby military fort and called it a “typical Western place. The railroad having but just reached there, the ‘roughs’ who fly before civilization, had not yet taken their departure.”⁶ She and others at the fort could hear pistol shots ringing out from town. “The carousing and lawlessness of Hays City were incessant. Pistol-shots were heard so often it seemed a perpetual

2. Though male prostitution certainly existed in the West, there is no evidence in census records, newspaper coverage, or reported testimony regarding male prostitution in Hays City; therefore, the term “prostitute” as used in this paper refers to female prostitutes only.

3. For more on prostitution in Kansas cattle towns, see Jessica K. Smith, “Morality and Money: A Look at How the Respectable Community Battled the Sporting Community over Prostitution in the Kansas Cowtowns, 1867–1885” (master’s thesis, Kansas State University, 2013), which draws on an earlier work: Carol Leonard and Isidor Wallimann, “Prostitution and Changing Morality in the Frontier Cattle Towns of Kansas,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Plains* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1979): 34–53. Though prostitution is not the main focus, Robert Dykstra’s *The Cattle Towns* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968) does discuss prostitution in Kansas cattle towns. For an excellent overview of prostitution in the West, see Anne M. Butler, *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery: Prostitutes in the American West 1865–1890* (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 1987). For prostitution in the early twentieth century, including a discussion of the emergence of prostitution in the West prior to the twentieth century, see Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900–1918* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982). See also John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

4. The term “demimonde,” when used in nineteenth-century France, referred to “declassed women” and not prostitutes or those associated with vice districts, as the term came to mean in America. These declassed women, or demimondaines, included divorcees, women associated with scandal, or those abandoned by husbands or lovers. One could not choose to become a member of the demimonde, as one could choose to become a prostitute, but “the circumstances of life may mean that she arrives in it without appearing to have exercised any choice.” When the term “demimonde” appears in the historical record on the American frontier, however, it typically refers to prostitutes, saloon girls, or women associated with vice districts. Historian Virginia Rounding notes that in France, the demimondaine often copied high-society fashions and that society women sometimes copied the fashions of the demimondaine. She argues that while on the surface, these groups may appear “indistinguishable, there was nevertheless a chasm fixed between them. There was a bridge over this chasm, but it led in one direction only.” This bridge over the chasm between high society and the demimonde is applicable to the American frontier. One could choose prostitution for a variety of reasons, or one could “fall” from high society, but once a member of the demimonde, by choice or by circumstances, there was no prospect of returning to respectable society. Virginia Rounding, *Grandes Horizontales: The Lives and Legends of Four Nineteenth-Century Courtesans* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2003), 1–2.

5. James D. Drees, “The Hays City Vigilante Period, 1868–1869” (master’s thesis, Fort Hays State University, 1983), i, 4.

6. Elizabeth Custer, *Following the Guidon* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1890), 153.



Women associated with vice districts and houses of prostitution often used assumed names, typically in the form of a nickname. This studio photo shows "Squirrel Tooth Alice," a Dodge City, Kansas, dance hall girl, circa 1870 to 1880.

Fourth of July, only without the harmless of that pyrotechnic holiday."⁷

Among the early residents of Hays City were sex workers who catered to soldiers from the fort, the gunmen and gamblers who populated the emerging town, and fellow transients on their way westward. These early prostitutes included "Louzy Liz" and "Stinkfoot Mag," who both stayed in Hays City only as long as the railroad terminus did (1867–1869), and Dolores "Steamboat" Martinez, who arrived and left in 1868.⁸ Undoubtedly joined by others whose names do not appear in the historical record, these women

7. *Ibid.*, 154.

8. "Hays City Soiled Doves," n.d., n.p., in Hays Early Days clipping file, Ellis County Historical Society, Hays, Kansas.

were part of the frontier demimonde, or the crowd of people associated with the saloons, vice districts, and houses of prostitution in emerging western towns. As historian Ruth Rosen discusses in *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900–1918*, the process of westernization, "the transportation revolution, and growing militarization created all-male populations that could support large numbers of prostitutes" in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁹ Rosen asserts that many prostitutes chose to adopt assumed names, arguing that this naming ritual acted as an initiation or rite of passage. These names often excluded a surname, perhaps for reasons of anonymity or to protect families from shame. Rosen argues that this functioned to make "a new claim on the individual's loyalties to her past through the purposeful elimination of an older identity."¹⁰ These nicknames served advertisement purposes as well. In cattle towns, particularly during cattle drive seasons, names such as "Cattle Annie" and "Cattle Mary" frequently appear in the historical record. These names indicate the types of customers the women were trying to attract; the cattle drives brought cowboys with considerable amounts of cash into a town in a short period of time. Prostitutes in the West also used their nicknames to set themselves apart from the competition. Customers would likely remember someone with a unique name, though one might question the creative marketing genius of choosing names such as "Louzy Liz" and "Stinkfoot Mag."¹¹

By January 1869, the railroad terminus had moved further westward, and the population of Hays City shrank to around three hundred resi-

9. Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood*, 4.

10. *Ibid.*, 102. Melissa Ditmore also discusses this naming practice and offers it as an opportunity for self-invention in *Prostitution and Sex Work* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2010), 50. Though most of the prostitutes in Rosen's research maintained nicknames that did not include surnames, the same was not true in Hays City after 1868. While their names may have differed from their birth names, they were not outrageous or unusual and included surnames.

11. For a fascinating list of "creative professional names" used by prostitutes in the West, see Michael Rutter, *Upstairs Girls: Prostitution in the American West* (Helena, MT: Farcountry Press, 2005), 203.

dents. The saloons and houses of prostitution became almost entirely dependent on the nearby soldiers at Fort Hays for commerce.¹² This capital was enough to support several drinking establishments, gambling halls, and prostitutes. In 1870, the first board of county commissioners in Ellis County granted thirty-seven liquor licenses, primarily to businesses located on North Main and South Main Streets, which ran along the railroad tracks.¹³ In May 1869, a reporter for the *Junction City Weekly Union* noted that there “are probably eight or ten respectable men in Hays City. . . . Gamblers, pimps, prostitutes, and dead beats, run the town, and the most unblushing defiance of everything that is decent is the prevailing sentiment. One year ago . . . they elected a prostitute as one of the School Board, and another Street Commissioner.”¹⁴

The 1870 federal census recorded at least eight prostitutes in Hays City. Though the census enumerator listed no occupations for any of them, the names correspond with those found in court dockets and newspaper articles. Exact numbers of prostitutes in western towns at any given time are difficult to establish. Dewitt Clinton “D. C.” Nellis, Ellis County attorney in early Hays City, estimated that sex workers in Hays City numbered “anywhere from ten to fifty or more” and “dwelt in hasty constructed palaces or ‘shacks’ located on either side of north and south Main street.”¹⁵ Many census enumerators did not list occupations for prostitutes, though this

12. Drees, “Hays City Vigilante Period,” 4; Ryan M. Kennedy, “Drunk and Disorderly: The Origins and Consequences of Alcoholism at Old Fort Hays” (master’s thesis, Fort Hays State University, 2012), 54.

13. Ellis County Historical Society, *At Home in Ellis County, Kansas 1867–1992*, vol. 1 (Hays, KS: History Book Committee, Ellis County Historical Society, 1991), 45; “Early Days in Ellis: Wild and Woolly Times When Lives Were Cheap and Justice Was Loosely Administered,” *Abilene (KS) Weekly Chronicle*, August 3, 1894, 1. The article from Abilene provides a look back at the early days in Ellis County and provides further details on liquor licenses. Liquor licenses cost fifty dollars per year, and “every saloon was a gambling place and many of them dance halls with bawdy house attachment.” North and South Main Streets are now Ninth and Tenth Streets.

14. *Junction City (KS) Weekly Union*, May 8, 1869, 2.

15. D. C. Nellis, “Hays City in 1867,” *The Republican* (Hays, KS), September 7, 1907, Hays City Newspaper Articles clipping file, Ellis County Historical Society, Hays, Kansas.

practice varied by location. The transient nature of prostitution also contributed to the difficulty in capturing accurate numbers for prostitutes in western towns, as many prostitutes moved from place to place so frequently that they were not counted in the census or appeared in multiple census records for one year.

Transience allowed sex workers to increase their earning potential because the longer they remained in one area, the less exciting their presence was to their clientele. A madam familiar with this concept and an early arrival in Hays City was Mattie Silks. On her way west to Denver, Silks stopped with her “working girls” in towns such as Kansas City, Abilene, Hays City, and Dodge City.¹⁶ Max Miller, who interviewed women who worked for Silks at her infamous resort in Denver for his book *Holladay Street*, asserts that she worked in the rowdiest parts of the prairie, often in new railroad towns or towns that had cattle drives because she knew that at the end of the trail, the cattle drivers received their pay. He calls her time in western Kansas “a training school for madameship” because it afforded her the “fundamentals of how to handle rough and eager customers while keeping them in their place and simultaneously convincing them they were getting more than their money’s worth.”¹⁷

A reporter from the *Manhattan Standard* described his encounter with Silks in an article called “Hays City by Moonlight” from May 8, 1869. He began by stating that in Hays City, “almost every other building is a liquor saloon or a house of ill fame.”¹⁸ While walking down the streets, he and a companion noticed “a dilapidated looking building” with a “large sign informing all beholders that ‘General Outfitting’ could be obtained by enquiring within.”¹⁹ He noted that they were of “inquiring mind,” so they entered,

16. Courtney Ann Culp, “Annie Chambers: Painted Ladies, Parlor Houses, and Prostitution in Kansas City, Missouri (1869–1923)” (master’s thesis, Emporia State University, 2009), 40.

17. Max Miller and Fred Mazzulla, *Holladay Street* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1962), 22.

18. “Hays City by Moonlight,” *Manhattan (KS) Standard*, May 8, 1869, in *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 9, no. 1 (February 1940): 103.

19. *Ibid.*

but instead of the general outfitting goods they expected, the goods were feminine. "Seeing that we had got into the 'wrong pew,' and being rather bashful, in spite of the fascinating appearance of the aforesaid young ladies, we disappeared."²⁰ He had discovered the establishment of Mattie Silks.²¹ Silks did not remain in Hays City long, moving westward with her prostitutes and eventually settling in Denver. While the exact dates of her arrival in and departure from Hays City are unclear, she does not appear in the 1870 census, so she had moved on at some point before June of that year.²²

The Hays City 1870 census, dated June 25, lists prostitutes Emma Bowen, Mollie Metcalf, Lena Rivers, Carrie Howard, Annie Ayers, Pauline Fillmore, Ida Harkicker, and Lizzie Goddard. These eight women occupied three residences. All of them were white, native-born, and between the ages of twenty and twenty-eight. None of them had an occupation listed on the census. A ninth woman, Carrie Gale, rumored to have been a prostitute as well, listed "seamstress" as her occupation.²³ Gale resided with the saloon keeper Cy Goddard, owner

20. *Ibid.*

21. James D. Drees, "Hickok among Those Who Served as Marshal for Hays City in 1869," *Hays (KS) Daily News*, April 11, 1999, A1, Hays City Early Days: A Violent Year clipping file, Ellis County Historical Society, Hays, Kansas.

22. For more on Mattie Silks, see "Mattie Silks: The Queen of the Denver Red Light District," chapter 13 in Rutter's *Upstairs Girls*; Miller and Mazzulla's *Holladay Street*; and Clark Secrest, *Hell's Belles: Denver's Brides of the Multitude: With Attention to Various Gamblers, Scoundrels, and Mountebanks and a Biography of Sam Howe, Frontier Lawman* (Aurora, CO: Hindsight Historical Publications, 1996). The most thorough of these is *Holladay Street*, which includes interviews by the authors with women who once worked under Silks. All three of these touch on an interesting story regarding her time in Denver and a fight she reportedly engaged in with a rival madam over a philandering lover in 1877. The story has worked its way into the collective memory in Denver that the two madams had a shoot-out, and one of their bullets glanced off the neck of their shared lover, "Cort" Thompson. Two paintings depict this incident, and in both, the women are topless. These works point out, quite aptly, that there was no newspaper coverage of this incident at the time, and one could reasonably suspect that if two topless madams shot at each other in the streets, it would make the news. Additionally, it is quite chilly in April in Denver, so it is unlikely that the two women removed their blouses before engaging in a gunfight.

23. U.S. Census Bureau, Schedule 1, Inhabitants of Hays City, in Ellis County, Kansas, 1870. For more on typical ages of prostitutes in the West, or for the racial backgrounds of western sex workers, see Butler, *Daughters of Joy*, chapter 1.

of Cy Goddard's Dance Hall. While it is unknown whether Lizzie and Cy Goddard were legally married, Lizzie was using his last name when she came to Hays in 1870. Their son, Cyrus, is also listed on the 1870 census as a three-year-old white male living with his mother and Ida Harkicker.²⁴ Cy Goddard's relationship with his son is unknown, but newspaper accounts mentioned little Cyrus as the pet of the town. He frequently played along Tenth Street and, unfortunately, got caught in a bullet's path. The bullet struck him in the head, killing him on June 17, 1872. Because he was beloved in the town, rather than being buried in the "Boot Hill" cemetery, Cyrus Goddard, Jr., who had no connection to anyone at Fort Hays, was interred at the post cemetery. This military post interment suggests that the people of Hays City considered the prostitutes and saloon keepers vital to the social fabric of the town. Following his burial, Lizzie Goddard left Hays City.²⁵

Emma Bowen, listed on the 1870 census as a twenty-four-year-old white woman, owned and operated a small house of prostitution adjacent to a saloon on North Main Street. On July 16, 1871, a gunfight that occurred in the adjacent saloon resulted in the deaths of two men and the injuries of several others. The sheriff at the time, Peter Lanahan, known as "Rattlesnake Pete" for his habit of wearing rattlesnake skins as a fashion accessory, was at Bowen's brothel when he heard gunshots coming from "Old Man Kelly's" saloon. When he stepped outside, Charles Harris, a bartender at Tommy Drum's Saloon, shot him in the stomach. Bowen rushed outside and handed the wounded sheriff two six-shooters, with which he shot and killed Harris. After the ensuing melee, several onlookers carried Lanahan into the home

24. U.S. Census Bureau, Schedule 1, Inhabitants of Hays City, in Ellis County, Kansas, 1870.

25. Ellis County Historical Society, *At Home in Ellis County*, 106; Record of Interments in the National Cemetery at Fort Hays Post, U.S. Burial Registers, Military Posts, and National Cemeteries, 1862-1960, Ancestry.com. Some accounts suggest that Cyrus was on the street when a bullet struck him in the head; others suggest that upon hearing gunfire, he went into White's Barber Shop to take refuge, but the bullet went through the thin wall and struck him in the head.

of Bowen, who attempted to tend his wounds.²⁶ The *Saline County Journal* reported on July 20, 1871, that “a large party of ruffians had assembled in a bagnio, whither the sheriff of the county had gone, and, by . . . plan, succeeded in decoying the latter outside, when he was shot down in cold blood.”²⁷ Similar versions of the story ran in local newspapers, with one adding that the post surgeon had attended Lanahan’s wounds while he rested in Bowen’s brothel.²⁸ Though the Hays City prostitutes violated the ordinances against prostitution, they often contributed to general attempts at law and order. Sociologist Marion S. Goldman notes that as frontier prostitutes were often the only women in town, they assumed “integral roles in community life,” such as “nursing the sick.”²⁹

Following the death of Sheriff Lanahan, Bowen stayed in Hays City one more year. She sold her house to saloon owner Henry Kelly on July 26, 1872, and departed, though there is no record of her next destination.³⁰ Prostitutes were constantly moving in and out of Hays City, as the nature of their profession lent itself to transience. One prostitute who came to Hays City in late 1871 or early 1872 appeared on two different census records for 1870 in Kansas locations. Nettie Baldwin, a white woman born around 1847 in Illinois, first appeared in the historical record in January 1870 in Ellsworth, Kansas, where she worked as a prostitute. In the early hours of January 13, 1870, after the house’s occupants had retired for the evening, gunmen entered the house and fired. Baldwin got



Vice districts brought together potentially volatile combinations of guns, liquor, gambling, and men and women looking for company. Sometimes the result was a shootout. Pictured here is the aftermath of one that left two soldiers dead, with several onlookers in the background, in front of a Hays City, Kansas, saloon on September 6, 1873. Courtesy of the Ellis County Historical Society.

out of her bed, which she was sharing with William McClellan, who eventually became a resident of Hays City, and was shot by the intruders. The *Weekly Commonwealth* in Topeka, Kansas, ran a story stating that a “party of rowdies came into the house” and shot Baldwin in the chest and arm. The *Junction City Weekly Union* described the event as “a terrible shooting affair,” which began as an attempt of one man to rob another but ended in two men dead, Nettie Baldwin wounded, and another prostitute, Fanny Collins, dead.³¹

Baldwin recovered from her wounds and appeared in the historical record again in Ellsworth for the 1870 census, enumerated July 2 of that year. Generally, census enumerators left blank the occupation for prostitutes, as they did in Hays City. Ellsworth, Kansas, listed more colorful occupations for the residents of a home owned by George Palmer. This entry listed Palmer as “farmer” and his wife, Elizabeth’s, occupation as “keeping

26. Ellis County Historical Society, *At Home in Ellis County*, 104; “Ellis County’s Record: Stories of Blood during the Early Days on the Prairies,” *Hutchinson (KS) News*, April 22, 1904, 7.

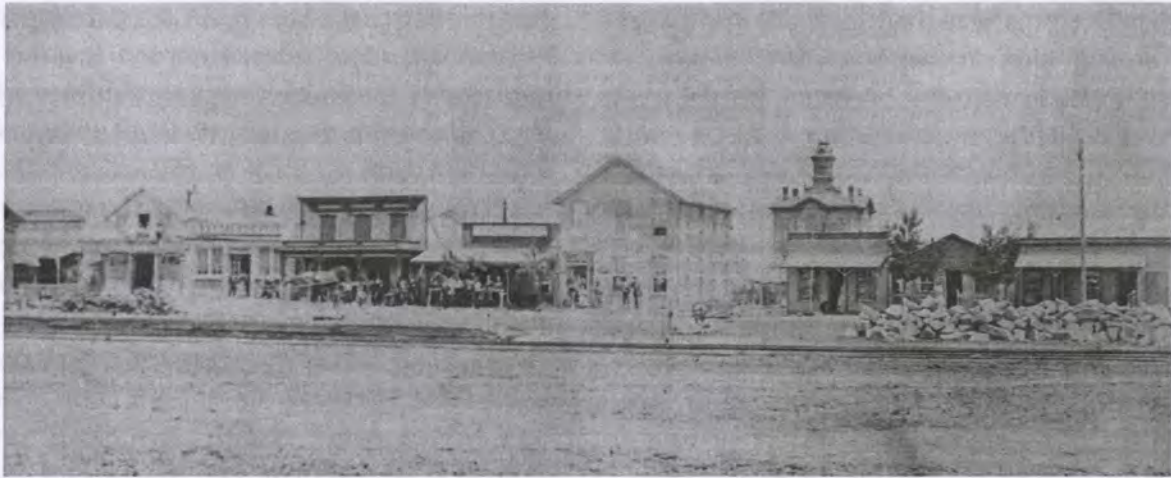
27. *Saline County (KS) Journal*, July 20, 1871, 3.

28. “A Big Fight at Hays City,” *Leavenworth (KS) Daily Commercial*, July 19, 1871, 3.

29. Marion S. Goldman, “Gold Diggers and Silver Miners: Prostitution and the Fabric of Social Life on the Comstock Lode” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1977), 2. This dissertation explores the gap between legend and reality in the study of frontier prostitution and argues that for a brief time, prostitutes represented the only “whole” women in the sense that they occupied “the good woman’s kindness and sacrifice, with the bad woman’s sexuality and vigor” during the Victorian era. See also Fitzpatrick, “Women of Ill Fame: Discourses of Prostitution and the American Dream in California, 1850–1890” (PhD diss., Bowling Green State University, 2013).

30. Ellis County Historical Society, *At Home in Ellis County*, 107.

31. *Junction City Weekly Union*, January 15, 1870, 3. Shots were fired at a third prostitute named Emma, but she was unharmed. *Weekly Commonwealth* (Topeka, KS), January 19, 1870, 2.



This undated photo of North Main (now 10th Street) in Hays City, Kansas, shows some of the commercial buildings and men along the front. They include (from the left) Groceries, Bardsley House, Tommy Drum's Saloon (with false front), Judge Joyce's Court (in front of the larger courthouse building), and Sheriff Alexander Ramsey's house. Western figures such as Buffalo Bill and Gen. George Custer and his men reportedly frequented the town. Courtesy of the Ellis County Historical Society.

house." Off to the side of the entry, the enumerator wrote, "House of 'ill-fame.'" Aside from Elizabeth Palmer, four other women lived in this residence. Eighteen-year-old Libby Thompson's occupation is "Diddles," Harriet Parmenter's "Does Horizontal Work," and Lizzie Harris's "'Ogles' fools." Nettie Baldwin, listed as "Ettie Baldwin," has the creative occupation of "'squirms' in the dark." Interestingly, no occupations were listed for other "houses of ill fame" in Ellsworth visited by the same census enumerator in 1870.³²

By February 16, 1871, Baldwin had moved on from Ellsworth to Junction City, Kansas, as evidenced by her presence on the 1870 census enumerated on that date. Here, she is listed again as "Ettie" Baldwin, but with a slightly different birth date. She gave the enumerator the age of twenty, as it was common for prostitutes to lie about their age to appear younger, especially in a new town. William McClellan, who was in Baldwin's bed on the night of the Ellsworth shooting, was listed in the Junction City census as a twenty-three-year-old white male barkeeper. Also listed on this census were Joseph "Rowdy Joe" Lowe, a saloon and brothel owner, and his common-law wife, Kate.³³

32. U.S. Census Bureau, Schedule 1, Inhabitants of Ellsworth in Ellsworth County, Kansas, 1870. Harriet Parmenter's name is difficult to decipher based on the handwriting on this record, so the spelling may be inaccurate here.

Baldwin, McClellan, and the Lowes had all moved to the railroad boomtown of Newton by late August or early September 1871, where Baldwin worked in a crib adjacent to Lowe's saloon.³⁴ Like Ellsworth, Newton was notorious for its violent reputation, but none surpassed the reputation for lawlessness of Hays City, where Baldwin and McClellan had moved by late 1871 or early 1872.

Prostitutes in Hays City generally worked in small brothels, or cribs, which were small structures, usually close together and typically near saloons or dance halls as part of a "tenderloin" or "red-light district."³⁵ Anne M. Butler, author of *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery: Prostitutes in the American West*, notes that prostitutes typically worked in one of four styles,

33. U.S. Census Bureau, Schedule 1, Inhabitants in Junction City, in Davis County, Kansas, 1870. All of the women residing at a brothel called the "Stone Cottage by the Sea" on the outskirts of Junction City were listed as "courtezans."

34. Joseph G. Rosa and Waldo E. Koop, *Rowdy Joe Lowe: Gambler with a Gun* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), 39. McClellan worked in Rowdy Joe's saloon and dance hall, and Baldwin worked in the adjacent crib in a "flourishing brothel district known as 'Hide Park.'"

35. Anne Seagraves, *Soiled Doves: Prostitution in the Early West* (Hayden, ID: Wesanne Publications, 1994), 28. According to Seagraves, the "term 'red light' is said to have originated in Dodge City, Kansas . . . a major stop for railroads and a convenient place for the train crews to visit the ladies of negotiable virtue. When these men entered the brothels . . . they would leave their red lanterns outside. . . . The madams soon realized that a red light was an excellent way to advertise, and the custom spread."

ranked in order from the highest status to the lowest. Brothels housed the prostitutes with the highest status. The brothel category was broad. It included high-class establishments that entertained clientele with liquor and music as well as much smaller-scale operations. Saloon or dance-hall workers who engaged in prostitution represent the next of the four styles. Crib workers, further down the status ladder, operated in smaller homes that were less associated with fine liquors and entertaining in the parlor and were more about the volume of customers. These were often flimsy shacks and lacked the protection that working in a brothel under a madam could provide. Streetwalkers had the lowest status. Variations of these groupings existed, which makes it difficult to assign simple categories, and it "was not uncommon for a woman to work the saloons of a town, as well as maintain a rented house where she entertained customers."³⁶ Further complicating the effort to assign prostitutes on the frontier to simple categories, newspapers and records refer to dwellings and prostitutes with interchangeable terms.³⁷

Similarly, terms for prostitutes varied by location and were often interchangeable and not necessarily accurate. In Hays City and similar western Kansas towns, newspapers, court dockets, and personal recollections referred to prostitutes typically as "prostitute," "inmate in a house of ill fame," "keeper of a house of ill fame," "fair but frail," "frail sister," "soiled dove," "nymph du pave," "member of the demi-monde," "sporting woman," and "loose woman," among others. A "keeper of a house of ill fame" might refer to a madam but might also refer to a prostitute who owned a small brothel or crib in which one or more other prostitutes worked alongside her.³⁸ A prostitute named LaVerne, who once worked for Mattie Silks, reflected in an interview

36. Butler, *Daughters of Joy*, xvii.

37. For more on the intricacies of these groupings and their rankings in status in the American West, see Butler, *Daughters of Joy*, and Ditmore, *Prostitution*, 62–63.

38. "House of ill fame" is a common law term that refers to the reputation of the house, but "inmate in a house of ill fame" attacks the reputation of the woman. "Nymphs du pave" is a play on the French for streetwalker but typically did not actually refer to a streetwalker in the West; rather, it referred generally to prostitutes. On the western frontier, this term sometimes shifted to "nymphs du prairie." For more on these naming practices, see Butler, *Daughters of Joy*, or Rutter, *Upstairs Girls*, which has an index listing names for prostitutes and names for brothels.

about these labels. When asked how she felt about the terms "soiled doves" or "frail sisters," she replied that it became "downright tiresome—or as if we wanted sympathy or something like that. For we weren't *frail*, heaven knows."³⁹ She continued, "And as for being doves to begin with—well, that would've been quite impossible. . . . We were whores—and we knew we were whores, and so that word suited us in our business. Another word we preferred was prostitute."⁴⁰

Prostitutes on the western frontier had little to no hope for joining (or rejoining) respectable society but contributed to the social and economic life of their communities. Though Western fiction, film, and folklore popularize tropes of the "hooker with a heart of gold" or a woman down on her luck who is waiting for a rich gentleman to marry her and raise her out of the life of prostitution, these figures simply do not hold up. Frontier employment was largely closed to women. Women in the American West filled what few jobs they could, but often these occupations, including but not limited to prostitution, did not meet late-nineteenth-century standards of respectability. Butler argues that for many of these women who were first-generation, native-born Americans, "generations of social malaise" had conditioned them to make excellent prostitutes because they came from cultures where "the pre-industrial experience produced women generally accustomed to hard work, few comforts, and a life from birth to death that remained exactly the same. . . . Experience deadened the notions of economic relief, administrative justice, or an alternate way of life."⁴¹

Though fiction and folklore often portray frontier prostitutes as glamorous adventurers, academia has long painted them as victims or practitioners of an inherently harmful system.⁴² However, sex-positive feminist theory maintains that prostitution was a viable and often empowering

39. Miller and Mazzulla, *Holladay Street*, 44.

40. *Ibid.*

41. Butler, *Daughters of Joy*, 2–3, 11, 14.

42. See Fitzpatrick, "Women of Ill Fame," for a discussion of how newspaper reporting of prostitution and the locale of the frontier West combined to create this mythic figure akin to an adventurer.

way to earn money. As frontier employment opportunities for women were limited, prostitution allowed a measure of independence and economic freedom. When William Sanger interviewed two thousand New York prostitutes between 1856 and 1857, over one-quarter of them listed "inclination" as their reason for prostitution, and another quarter listed "destitution."⁴³ The former indicates a choice on the part of the prostitute, and the latter speaks to the lack of employment opportunities. Sex-positive feminists such as Annie Sprinkle, Scarlot Harlot, and Virginie Despentes, all former sex workers, discuss the empowering nature of sex work and insist that prostitution was and is a legitimate occupation. They understand the stigma surrounding the profession but speak frankly about their experiences. The Ellsworth prostitutes who listed occupations such as "squirms in the dark" and "ogles fools" and LaVerne, the prostitute who insisted that she preferred the term "whore," display this sex-positive view of prostitution.⁴⁴ In *The Lost Sisterhood*, Rosen alludes to prostitutes displaying this sex-positive attitude as well. She notes that the subculture of prostitution afforded not only protection in the red-light districts but also validation. She argues that prostitutes held an "attitude of defensive superiority toward 'respectable' women and derided both the "'charity girls,' who freely gave away sexual favors" and the wives of their

43. William W. Sanger, *The History of Prostitution: Its Extent, Causes, and Effects throughout the World* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1858), 488. Sanger explains that he understood "inclination" to mean that prostitutes entered the profession to satisfy their own sexual appetites but provides lengthy reasoning for why he cannot believe this to be true and argues instead that there must have been other factors or influences related to their "fall."

44. For more on prostitution and sex-positive feminism, see Virginie Despentes, *King Kong Theory*, trans. Stéphanie Benson (New York: Feminist Press, 2010); and Carol Leigh, *Unrepentant Whore: Collected Works of Scarlot Harlot* (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 2004). Carol Leigh, aka Scarlot Harlot, coined the term "sex work" and has been an activist for sex workers' rights since the 1980s and a pioneer of the sex-positive feminist movement. See also David Henry Sterry and R. J. Martin, Jr., eds., *Hos, Hookers, Call Girls, and Rent Boys: Professionals Writing on Life, Love, Money, and Sex* (Brooklyn: Soft Skull Press, 2009), especially essays by Nina Hartley and by Annie Sprinkle, who argues that sex workers come from all backgrounds and pursue sex work for a variety of reasons. In the first essay in the collection, "40 Reasons Why Whores Are My Heroes," Sprinkle encapsulates the sex-positive viewpoint on prostitution.

clientele.⁴⁵ Feminist historian Linda Gordon argues that through prostitution, men conducted "sexual philandering," which permitted sexual intercourse to take place regularly without the risk of impregnating "respectable" women. "Accordingly, prostitution, far from being a threat to the family system, was . . . an important support of it."⁴⁶ Clearly, the motivations for engaging in sex work were complicated, but considering these complications helps us better understand these women's experiences in western towns.

Prostitution offered women on the frontier opportunities for income, independence, and economic freedom outside marriage.⁴⁷ This profession not only brought income to individual prostitutes but also sustained the town's coffers.⁴⁸ Western towns recognized that prostitutes generated considerable revenue, so rather than expel or jail the demimonde, local sheriffs imposed fines for prostitution. These fines paid salaries for sheriffs and justices of the peace. Near-monthly arrests and finings amounted to an informal license to operate.⁴⁹ In January 1872, Hays City elected a new sheriff, Alexander Ramsey. One of his first acts was to send Undersheriff Frank Shepherd to round

45. Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood*, 102. This derision toward marriage is evident in a needlepoint message in the receiving room of a San Francisco brothel in 1891 that read, "If every man was as true to his country as he is to his wife—God help the USA." Chris Enss, *Pistol Packin' Madams: True Stories of Notorious Women of the Old West* (Guilford, CT: TwoDot, 2006), xi.

46. Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women: A History of Birth Control Politics in America*, 3rd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 66. See also Jacqueline Shelton, "Evil Becomes Her: Prostitution's Transition from Necessary to Social Evil in 19th Century America" (master's thesis, East Tennessee State University, 2013). Shelton discusses how in the Victorian era, Americans initially viewed prostitution as a "necessary evil" because it allowed men "to release their irrepressible sexual energy without raping innocent women" and "guarded the virtue of wives" (p. 6).

47. This is not to suggest that married women did not participate in sex work. See Butler, *Daughters of Joy*.

48. "Ordinance: An Ordinance Relating to Misdemeanors," *Hays City (KS) Railway Advance*, June 23, 1868, 1.

49. Ditmore, *Prostitution*, 64. Ditmore notes that these fines often resulted in jail time for women who could not pay. Until the late 1870s and early 1880s, though, this was not the case for Hays City, as the prostitutes generally came up with the cash to pay the fines. For a discussion of how this fining process worked in a variety of Kansas cowtown settings, see Smith, "Morality and Money," and Dykstra, *Cattle Towns*.



Early western town scenes often depicted commercial spaces as dominated by men. However, women's economic contributions could be found in several venues including the vice district. This undated photo taken by N.A. Voss is of South Main (now 9th Street) in Hays City, Kansas. Courtesy of the Ellis County Historical Society.

up the prostitutes to raise revenue for the town's coffers. Shepherd arrested eight prostitutes that day: Sally Van Houton, Lillie Thompson, Mollie Whitecamp, Nettie Harwicker, Nellie Pool, Pauline Gibbs, Lizzie Goddard, and Nettie Baldwin. Charges against Pool and Gibbs, who both pleaded not guilty, were dropped. Van Houton, Thompson, Whitecamp, and Harwicker pleaded guilty to the charge of being an "inmate in a house of ill fame or bawdy house" and each paid fines of one dollar and costs. Both Goddard and Baldwin faced charges of being the "keeper of a brothel or bawdy house." Baldwin paid six dollars and costs, and Goddard paid a total of nine dollars.⁵⁰

Shepherd, much like "Rattlesnake Pete" before him, frequented the houses of prostitution. On February 21, 1872, Baldwin appeared before Sheriff Ramsey to bring charges against Shepherd. Ramsey swore her in, and she testified that Shepherd did "unlawfully and maliciously assault and beat" her

50. *State of Kansas v. Lizzie Goddard*, *State of Kansas v. Nettie Baldwin*, *State of Kansas v. Sally Van Houton*, *State of Kansas v. Lillie Thompson*, *State of Kansas v. Mollie Whitecamp*, *State of Kansas v. Nellie Pool*, *State of Kansas v. Nettie Harwicker*, *State of Kansas v. Pauline Gibbs* (1872), all on microfilm at Ellis County Historical Society, Hays, Kansas. The original criminal docket was stolen decades ago, but not before the microfilm was made. The microfilm is difficult to read and in some places illegible. A summary of the arrests and fines can be found in Ellis County Historical Society, *At Home in Ellis County*, 105.

"at her house."⁵¹ Earlier that week, Shepherd had paid a fine of one dollar and costs for a drunk and disorderly charge. On February 23, he stood before the court to plead not guilty in the case involving the assault on Baldwin. Witnesses for the state in the assault case included Baldwin, Whitecamp, Thompson, and Sheriff Ramsey. There were no witnesses for the defense. Ultimately, the court found Shepherd guilty and fined him five dollars and costs, which he could not pay. Shepherd remained locked up until May, when the fine was "worked off," a common practice at the time.⁵² The fact that Baldwin felt comfortable enough to bring charges against the undersheriff, and that the court found him guilty and imprisoned him for three months, demonstrates that prostitutes in Hays City were accepted members of the community. Though not considered "respectable ladies," these women's contributions to the town's economy through sexual commerce and paying fines were vital to the town's livelihood.

In addition to economic contributions, sex workers in Hays City cooperated with the legal system by providing testimony in a variety of cases. In May 1872, Baldwin again appeared before the court as a witness. This time she and Henry Kelly testified that they had witnessed a man named Frank Donovan assault another saloon owner, Robert Oderfeldt, by repeatedly striking Oderfeldt on the head with his fists. The justice found the defendant guilty, and Donovan paid fines and costs totaling seventeen dollars.⁵³ Still relatively new to town but no strangers to law enforcement, Baldwin and McClellan appeared before the court on June 11, 1872, on charges of assault brought by another member of the demimonde, Alice McKinsey. McKinsey testified that Baldwin "did strike said complainant with her fist" and that McClellan "did take hold of said complainant and did shake and strike her

51. *State of Kansas v. Frank Shepherd* (1872), Criminal Docket microfilm, Ellis County Historical Society, Hays, Kansas.

52. *Ibid.*; Ellis County Historical Society, *At Home in Ellis County*, 105. Prostitutes in early Hays City had the ready cash to pay for their regular fines, but the undersheriff did not.

53. *State of Kansas v. Frank Donovan* (1872), Criminal Docket microfilm, Ellis County Historical Society, Hays, Kansas.

and said 'you damn bitch you hush up or I will kill you.'"⁵⁴ Both Baldwin and McClellan pleaded not guilty but were fined and then dismissed by the court.⁵⁵ In July 1872, McKinsey faced charges of being drunk and disturbing the peace and the same week brought charges of assault after a fight with fellow prostitute Pauline Gibbs.⁵⁶ Historian Anne Butler argues that frontier prostitutes found in the legal system a dimension of society in which they could exercise control. They utilized the courts for protection, and the courts utilized them as credible witnesses. Combined with their regular arrests and finings, prostitutes found the law "the one frontier institution integral to the conduct of their battered lives."⁵⁷ By participating in the general attempt at law and order, they carved out a small space for themselves within the judicial system, which guaranteed them a place within the community.

Frontier prostitutes also made a place for themselves in the community and contributed economically through real estate sales. In July 1872, Bowen sold her frame house on Tenth Street to Henry Kelly for \$300. This particular home, known as the Sporting Palace, changed hands several times throughout early Hays City history. The first prostitute to own this home was Ida May, who had formerly owned a home on lot 35, purchased for \$500 in April 1869. She sold that home to her outlaw boyfriend, James Curry, the next month, taking a loss of \$150. Curry acquired a frame house on lot 29, which he purchased for \$44 on May 5, 1869, and sold to May for \$100 on June

54. *State of Kansas v. Nettie Baldwin and William McClellan* (1872), Criminal Docket microfilm, Ellis County Historical Society, Hays, Kansas.

55. *Ibid.* Much of this record is unreadable, including the amount of the fines.

56. *State of Kansas v Pauline Gibbs*, Criminal Docket microfilm, Ellis County Historical Society, Hays, Kansas. For these cases, nearly the entire record is illegible, including the finding of the court and the fines (if any) paid. Pauline Gibbs, like Alice McKinsey, appears a number of times in the 1872 criminal docket book for fighting, usually with other prostitutes. Though fighting between prostitutes on the frontier was common due to competition, prostitutes rallied together to bury dead associates and frequently made funeral arrangements for one another. "Pitted against one another in life, only in death did these women seem to catch a glimmer of their universal plight." Butler, *Daughters of Joy*, 45.

57. Butler, *Daughters of Joy*, 114.

12, 1869. May owned the Sporting Palace house for just under a month, selling it to Joseph Perkins for \$300 in July. Perkins sold the house to Bowen for \$250 in September 1869. In May 1870, Bowen sold the house for \$350 to A. J. Peacock, who sold it back to Bowen for \$250 that August. This is just an example of one house in Hays City, indicating that prostitutes contributed to the economic livelihood of the town by purchasing and selling property of considerable value. In Hays City, prostitutes secured mortgages on properties even though the lienholders knew that the properties in question served illegal functions, which speaks to the tacit acceptance of prostitution as a necessary, if not socially accepted, profession in emerging western towns.⁵⁸

When Bowen sold the property to Kelly in July 1872, Baldwin took over as the madam of that brothel. The following day, Baldwin took out a mortgage on the contents of the house for \$200 because she was behind on two sums of \$74, likely rent, to either Bowen or Kelly. The deed record book listed the contents mortgaged in the transaction as "2 sofas, 6 glass lamps, 35 yards of carpet, 5 bedsteads, 7 washstands, 1 bureau with a mirror, 8 common chairs, 2 mirrors, 1 sofa rocking chair, 4 window curtains and fixtures, 1 center table, 6 mattresses [sic], 1 spring bed, 1 water cooler, 1 cupboard, 2 ladies' trunks and contents, 1 kitchen stove and 1 kitchen safe."⁵⁹ This house had more than one room, sitting-room furniture, and enough beds and washstands for several prostitutes, indicating that it was a brothel rather than a crib. However, its meager furnishings suggest that it was not a high-class establishment.

Less than a month after this mortgage transaction, Baldwin and McClellan appeared before the court again, this time in a manslaughter case. On the night of August 16, 1872, a fight broke out

58. Register of Deeds, Ellis County, Deed Record Book, block no. 7.

59. Register of Deeds Office, Deed Record Book C, 96-98 under "Baldwin, Nettie," Ellis County Courthouse, Hays, KS; and Notes of James D. Drees clipping file, Ellis County Historical Society, Hays, Kansas.

between McClellan and John A. "Jack" Wright in Tommy Drum's saloon. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, Wright went into "one of the low doggeries with which Hays City abounds" and met McClellan, "known as the 'wickedest' man in the State. Both parties had been drinking and both were stimulated to jealousy by the presence of a frail if not fair one, in the person of Nettie O'Baldwin."⁶⁰ After an argument, McClellan threatened to kill Wright. Both men drew pistols, "and their short, sharp crack announced that murder was being done. McClellan's [sic] first shot pierced Wright's stomach and he fell to the ground mortally wounded."⁶¹ Before he died, Wright fired at McClellan and hit him in at least two places, but his wounds were not fatal.⁶² A reporter for the *Junction City Weekly Union* who spent a week in Hays City covering this case asserted that the fight had arisen over Baldwin.⁶³

Mcclellan was arrested and appeared in court on August 22, 1872, where he pleaded not guilty. Baldwin served as a witness for the defense. The court set the charge of second-degree manslaughter and set bail at \$1,500, which McClellan could not pay, so he was remanded to the Ellis County Jail and chained to a post. A Hays correspondent recounted this trial in an article that the *Junction City Weekly Union* ran on August 31, 1872.⁶⁴ He called it "the richest

60. "Tragedy at Hays City, Kan.: A Man Murdered in a Saloon—His Murderer and Horse Thief Chained to a Post in Jail and Shot by a Mob," *Chicago Tribune*, August 30, 1872, 6. A few of the newspaper articles from this time period perpetuate the surname "O'Baldwin," but on every census record in which she appeared, the name was written "Baldwin," so it is unclear why "O'Baldwin" was reported.

61. *Ibid.*

62. The newspaper coverage of this incident included a variety of misspellings of McClellan's name. The newspaper coverage also disagreed on where McClellan was hit. The *Chicago Tribune* stated that Wright's bullets struck McClellan in the head, left hand, and stomach. The *Junction City Weekly Union* stated that his wounds were in the hand and thigh. See S. S. Peters, "Letter from Hays City," *Junction City Weekly Union*, August 31, 1872, 1.

63. *Ibid.*, 1.

64. Ellis County Historical Society, *At Home in Ellis County*, 107; *State of Kansas v. William McClellan* (1872), Criminal Docket microfilm, Ellis County Historical Society, Hays, KS; *State of Kansas v. William McClellan* (1872), Appearance Docket A, 71–81, Ellis County Courthouse, Hays, KS; *State of Kansas v. William McClellan* (1872), Trial Docket A-1871–1880, Ellis County Courthouse, Hays, Kansas.

scene that ever disgraced a Kansas courtroom."⁶⁵ According to this correspondent, when Tom Drum took the stand to give testimony, he told the court that "things looked damn dry" and said that "a little whisky would 'liven things up. His 'honor' made no objection, and in a few minutes a decanter well filled with benzine was set upon the table just in front of the judge." Everyone present, including the prisoner, drank from it, each witness tipping back a drink and nodding to the court before taking his or her sworn oath.⁶⁶

Later that night, parties unknown fired into the window of the jail, killing inmate John "Pony" Donovan, a horse thief associated with McClellan and Baldwin. McClellan was uninjured and moved to the Fort Hays guardhouse for protection against another attack of mob violence. S. S. Peters, a reporter for the *Junction City Weekly Union*, interviewed McClellan while he was at the fort and stated that he was "almost effeminate in his cast of features yet possessing an eye that at once establishes his character as a dangerously passionate man."⁶⁷ Ultimately, the court granted McClellan a change of venue to Ellsworth County, where the district attorney refused to prosecute the case, so McClellan avoided any legal repercussions for shooting Wright.⁶⁸

Baldwin served as a witness in a second murder trial the following year. Shortly after 2:00 a.m. on May 7, 1873, Baldwin

65. S.S. Peters, "Letter From Hays City," *Junction City Weekly Union*, August 31, 1872, 4.

66. *Ibid.* The same article addressed an earlier court hearing in which a heifer was brought into the courtroom and caused a scene.

67. Peters, "Letter from Hays City," 1. Other newspaper articles at the time falsely reported that both men were shot. Some even wrote about the death in detail. "By the tossing light of their torches could be seen, crouching against the post to which they were chained, the two desperadoes, the graver criminal McClelland swathed in bandages. . . . In a moment the glistening barrels of a dozen guns were thrust through the windows. . . . McClellan, a man of iron frame, was shuddering and moaning in an agony from which death soon relived him." See "Incidents of Real Life: Lynching in Kansas," *Vermont Journal* (Windsor, VT), September 14, 1872, 1, and "Judge Lynch—Sunstrokes" *Progress-Index* (Petersburg, VA), August 29, 1872, 6. The testimony given by Nettie Baldwin and other witnesses was transferred to Ellsworth during the change of venue, but those records were lost to a courthouse fire at that location. There is no other known record of her testimony.

68. Ellis County Historical Society, *At Home in Ellis County*, 108.

accompanied Thomas Hine, a Sixth Cavalry soldier, into Cy Goddard's Dance Hall.⁶⁹ Private Frank Glissman of the Third Infantry was already inside, accompanied by prostitute Vinnie May. Hine went to the bar for a drink, and when Glissman accidentally touched him while reaching for his glass, Hine drew his revolver, shooting Glissman in the chest. Glissman sank to the floor dead, his head resting in May's lap by the time the officers of the law entered the saloon. Hine stepped over the body and out into the street.⁷⁰ In its coverage of the shooting, the *Daily Commonwealth* of Topeka remarked that Hays City contained "seven saloons, two dance houses, three cribs containing five women of easy virtue, and several other institutions of like character, all on one street, within a space of two blocks." The correspondent continued, "You may well imagine that times are lively here. The dance house is open every night, and six nymphs du pave to take part, with lots of soldiers from the fort and the 6th cavalry camp to kick up a row."⁷²

At daylight, the sheriff held an inquest in the dance hall, swore in a jury, and proceeded with an examination. A correspondent remarked, "It would have made a fine picture to represent western frontier justice; a dirty dance hall, room full of bleary-eyed creatures, and a couple of painted courtezans, and a saloon-keeper waiting on customers in the rear; witness called up, gave testimony, then marched to the rear and treated."⁷³ Sheriff Ramsey apprehended Hine the following day for murder in the first degree. At the examination, Baldwin provided witness testimony for the defense, and May served as a witness for the prosecution. Hine, who pleaded not guilty, said that he would not have shot Glissman had he realized Glissman was an infantryman; Hine was interested in killing a

69. Court records used both "Hine" and "Hind" as his last name. Newspaper coverage included both of these as well as "Hines" and "Hend."

70. Ellis County Historical Society, *At Home in Ellis County*, 110.

71. "From Hays City: Dance Houses—Soiled Doves—Shooting Scrape—A Frontier Incident," *Daily Commonwealth* (Topeka, KS), May 13, 1873, 4.

72. *Ibid.*

73. *Ibid.*



Sarah "Sadie" Ratzell was part of the frontier demimonde in Kansas. She was born in Pennsylvania and raised on a Kansas farm. For reasons unknown, she became a prostitute and was living with a Dodge City dance hall owner by the age of eighteen. Photo is circa 1885 to 1890.

cavalryman instead. According to the *Leavenworth Daily Commercial*, Hine had been discharged from the regiment at Hays the prior fall "on account of some loathsome disease," likely a venereal disease associated with his frequent visits to prostitutes.⁷⁴ When the case went to trial in 1874, Hine was found guilty and sentenced to two years of hard labor at the state penitentiary in Leavenworth.⁷⁵

Though Hays City prostitutes violated the law by nature of their profession, prostitutes "crossed to the side of the law when the occasion demanded that they be accepted as reliable witnesses and supporters of the legal system."⁷⁶ This is evident in the cases in which Baldwin and other prostitutes provided witness testimony. The ordinances against prostitution, set out as early as 1868 in Hays City, allowed the city to fine anyone who kept or maintained a house of

74. "Hays—Murder—News—Buffalo," *Leavenworth Daily Commercial*, May 20, 1873, 3.

75. *State of Kansas v. Thomas Hind* (1874), Journal A—1868–1879, 82–83, Ellis County Courthouse, Hays, Kansas.

76. Anne M. Butler, *Daughters of Joy*, 106–07.

ill fame, anyone who was an “inmate or resident of a house of ill fame or prostitution,” or anyone who visited a prostitute.⁷⁷ This policy was on the books but not necessarily upheld. In other Kansas towns such as Leavenworth and Caldwell, the clientele faced the same fines as the prostitutes, but the same was not true in Hays City.⁷⁸ As historian Anne Butler argues, the statutes regarding prostitution served as instruments to tax vice and increase revenue rather than as instruments to uphold morality and drive prostitution out of the western boomtowns. Sex workers were fined rather than jailed, indicating Hays City’s tolerance of their profession or even the tacit understanding that working prostitutes brought needed income to the city. Butler argues that courts on the frontier regularly accepted fines paid for one prostitute by another, and prostitutes who could not produce enough cash were sometimes allowed to leave to earn the money needed to pay the fine and then return to settle up with the court.⁷⁹

Carol Leonard and Isidor Wallimann argue that rather than viewing prostitutes with “righteous moral indignation,” citizens of towns such as Hays City initially adopted an attitude of “amused tolerance.”⁸⁰ Newspaper coverage of the demimonde’s antics provided grist for entertainment for readers,

77. “Ordinance: An Ordinance Relating to Misdemeanors,” 1.

78. Culp, “Morality and Money,” 57; and “Police Court,” *Leavenworth Daily Commercial*, March 27, 1876, 4.

79. Butler, *Daughters of Joy*, 100–03. See also Rosen, *Lost Sisterhood*, chapter 1, “From Necessary to Social Evil.” Rosen notes that in urban areas, reformers often published lists of men who frequented brothels and urged the public to shun those on the list. In Hays City, this was not the case, particularly early in the town’s history. As evidenced by Lanahan and Shepherd, even law enforcement officers frequented the brothels.

80. Leonard and Wallimann, *Prostitution and Changing Morality*, 40. This book notes on page 41 that, like Hays City, citizens of Dodge City treated prostitutes with amused tolerance and “several of them in fact lived with prominent city officials, including the mayor of Dodge from 1877–1880.” The mayor they reference is James “Hound Dog” Kelly, who moved to Dodge City from Hays City. Kelly, once a saloon owner in Hays City, operated the Alhambra Saloon in Dodge City and became the mayor. One evening, his girlfriend and dance-hall entertainer Dora Hand, also known as Fannie Keenan, spent the night at Kelly’s house while Kelly was in the hospital for an illness. A man named James Kennedy shot through the flimsy door of the house, intending to kill Kelly, but instead the bullets struck Dora Hand, killing her. Kennedy faced no legal repercussions for this homicide, as his high-priced lawyer, bought with Texas cattle money, argued that Kennedy intended to kill Kelly, not Hand, so her death was accidental. For more on this, see “Midnight Assassin,” *Dodge City (KS) Globe*, October 8, 1878, 2.

which undoubtedly contributed to this attitude. Jimmy O’Brien, a druggist in early Hays City, went beyond the level of amused tolerance. In 1926, C. W. Miller, who owned a hardware store in early Hays City, recalled O’Brien walking into the store and asking to borrow a gun. When Miller inquired about O’Brien’s intentions, O’Brien replied, “Why, Miller, what do you think? They’ve got nine of our ‘town girls’ in jail! What will the boys do without their ladies? I’m going over and shoot the hinges off the doors of that blankety-blank jail.”⁸¹ According to Miller, after O’Brien obtained the gun, he “opened fire without further ado. He shattered the hinges and out came the girls.”⁸² When asked if the sheriff herded the prostitutes back into captivity, he replied, “Certainly not. The sheriff had done his duty the first time and he felt there was no need of inviting further complications.”⁸³

Despite the amusing stories recalled by early residents, Hays City prostitutes and their peers faced miserable living conditions, often exacerbated by unstable cash flow and the constant threat of venereal disease. Disease prevention was rudimentary, if not dangerous, in the frontier West. Prostitutes often washed their customers’ genitals before and after a visit to prevent an afflicted man from blaming a venereal disease on their house. They used douches made with mixtures and tinctures of a variety of items procured from the local druggist, including laudanum, mercury chloride, carbolic acid, and potassium permanganate.⁸⁴ While bouts of venereal

81. “Recalls Day When ‘Jimmy’ O’Brien Shoots Hinges Off Jail Doors,” *Ellis County (KS) News*, July 15, 1926, in Hays City Early Days Personal Recollections clipping file, Ellis County Historical Society, Hays, Kansas.

82. *Ibid.*

83. *Ibid.*

84. Miller and Mazzulla, *Holladay Street*, 59–60. *Holladay Street*, Secrest’s *Helle’s Belles*, and Rosen’s *The Lost Sisterhood* all include testimony from former sex workers on their procedures when dealing with clientele regarding STI prevention and ways that they determined whether a client might be suffering from a venereal disease. One client quoted in Rosen stated, “I think the girls could diagnose clap better than the doctors at that time.” Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood*, 96. For more on STI treatments, particularly among soldiers, see Ritter’s *Upstairs Girls*, which describes the use of mercury pellets inserted into the anus or penis of an afflicted man to attempt to cure disease or the “Mercury sweats,” which involved painting mercury on a person and then wrapping him or her in aluminum until he or she began to drool. He states that the old cliché was “A night with Venus means a lifetime with Mercury.” Rutter, *Upstairs Girls*, 79.

disease occasionally had the "benefit" of rendering a prostitute sterile, pregnancy prevention was also crucial to maintaining income. There were no advertisements for abortifacients in early Hays City newspapers. However, those advertisements appeared in surrounding towns, suggesting that Hays City prostitutes had access to these methods either through the mail or through the local druggist, Jimmy O'Brien. Perhaps the commerce generated by douching agents purchased by the prostitutes was O'Brien's motivation for freeing the "town girls" from their captivity.⁸⁵

Frontier sex workers, seeking to numb their bleak existence, often turned to drug and alcohol addiction, as evidenced by numerous court records indicating drunk and disorderly prostitutes. Butler argues that suicide "emerged as the most commonly employed means to retire from prostitution," as prostitutes could not join respectable society after they aged out of the profession. Prostitutes often completed suicide through overdose, especially of laudanum.⁸⁶ One Hays City prostitute, Lou Sherwood, completed suicide by a rather unusual method in February 1874. She walked into a dance hall and stabbed herself in the chest nine times, saying, "It's all for you, Fred!" before sinking to the ground and bleeding to death. Though it is unclear who "Fred" was, reporter S. S. Peters stated, "there are other 'Fred's' guilty of other suicides by other fallen ones—Blame them not altogether."⁸⁷ Sherwood, a former employee at Cy Goddard's Dance Hall, left an estate valued at \$33.62 and is reported to be the last person buried at Boot Hill. Her body joined another prostitute's, a Black dance hall worker named Mary Kidd, who froze to death walking home one evening.⁸⁸

Around the same time as Sherwood's suicide, in early 1874, Baldwin and McClellan appeared again before the court. This time it was on the charge that McClellan

had brutally beaten Baldwin. When the justice fined McClellan one hundred dollars for this assault, McClellan jumped to his feet and yelled, "That's more'n it used to cost to kill a man!"⁸⁹ McClellan was taken into custody but later released when the court discovered that it had mixed up its dates and accidentally set his trial for a Sunday.⁹⁰ Shortly afterward, McClellan left Hays City, but Baldwin remained.⁹¹ The last record of Baldwin's time in Hays City is from September 1877, when she faced charges for calling prostitute Jennie Williams "nasty names." The *Sentinel* reported that "contrition perched upon the brow of Miss Nettie . . . though that calm demeanor . . . poorly hid the shining light of a determination to make it sultry for the other female in the unfathomable future."⁹² Baldwin left Hays City sometime in late 1877, though her next destination is unknown. A buffalo hunter who frequented Hays City remembered her later as a woman whose "kindly ministrations to persons ill and needing help" he would never forget. He stated that she "still retained some of the tenderness and kindness of real women. No Sister of Charity could be kinder or more helpful in cases of sickness and distress than one especially . . . Netty Baldwin. She had been very handsome and retained many of those precious womanly virtues."⁹³

Baldwin left Hays City as attitudes toward prostitution were beginning to shift. As Volga Germans settled in Ellis County in the mid- to late 1870s, family farming replaced saloons and houses of prostitution as the driving economic force in Hays City.⁹⁴ As this happened, newspaper articles

89. "Court Mixed on the Calendar," *Chicago Tribune*, October 18, 1897, 8.

90. *Ibid.*

91. James D. Drees, *Gunfighters of Ellis County* (Hays, KS: Hays Daily News, 1996), 22.

92. "Local Squibs," *Hays City (KS) Sentinel*, September 7, 1877, 3. Baldwin was fined \$12.50 and costs for this offense.

93. Joe Hutt, "Pioneer Plainsman Breaks Long Silence," in "Baldwin, Nettie": Notes of James D. Drees clipping file, Ellis County Historical Society, Hays, Kansas.

94. At first, the newcomers were met with hostility. There are a number of articles from Hays City newspapers noting that while they were hard workers, they smelled terrible. One even noted that druggist Jimmy O'Brien poured a pint of "chlorid of lime" on one of the Volga Germans, typically referred to as "the Russians" in the paper. See "The New Comers," *Hays City Sentinel*, August 16, 1876, 3; and "Items about the Russians," *Hays City Sentinel*, August 16, 1876, 3.

85. *Lawrence (KS) Daily Journal*, February 21, 1869, 4; "Sir Jas. Clark's Female Pills," *Atchison (KS) Daily Champion*, April 27, 1872, 2.

86. Butler, *Daughters of Joy*, 67–68.

87. "Suicide at Hays," *Ellsworth (KS) Reporter*, February 26, 1874, 3; "All for Fred," *Head Light*, Thayer, KS, March 11, 1874, 3.

88. Ellis County Historical Society, *At Home in Ellis County*, 115; and "A Partial Directory," *Hays Daily News*, December 12, 1971, 13.

began to call for more discreet locations for the brothels. Citizens wrote editorials suggesting that they did not want to raise children “where prostitution predominates” and suggested that patrons of prostitutes would benefit from moving brothels to a secluded location, out of sight of respectable townfolk.⁹⁵ In 1877, a Dodge City editorial stated that Hays City officials only “wink at violations of the law” and that houses of prostitution carry on openly and “cater to the wants of wicked pleasure-hunting immoralists.”⁹⁶ The article suggested that Hays City businessmen and corrupt officials resisted calls for the removal of prostitution because it would hurt business in the saloons.

Perhaps more distressing to the prostitutes than shifting attitudes, fines that were once \$1–\$6 became \$100, \$250, or higher. In November 1878, the court released Jennie Williams after an admirer paid her fine of \$100 and costs.⁹⁷ In 1880, Ann Riley, charged with keeping a house of ill fame, bonded out for \$250.⁹⁸ These increased fines and a crackdown on prostitution indicated that the public’s attitudes had shifted from tacit acceptance to intolerance. Newspaper articles still used prostitutes as entertainment for readers, but the tone shifted from amusement to phrases such as “another prostitute was yanked into the iron embrace of our county jail.”⁹⁹ The *Hays City Sentinel* and the *Ellis County Star* acknowledged a regime change and a new era in Hays City in which prostitutes faced convictions rather than fines and

95. “Our Correspondents,” *Ellis County (KS) Star*, July 20, 1876, 4; *Ellis County Star*, June 8, 1876, 4. While much of the coverage of prostitution from 1877 on was negative, newspaper editors occasionally harkened back to the era of amused tolerance. For example, the *Sentinel* reported in March 1878 that a “crowd of rowdies” moved the sign for the rival newspaper, the *Ellis County Star*, to a brothel. The next morning, the prostitutes protested against the “uncalled for attack against the reputation of their house,” and the *Star* had it removed. Similarly, in April 1878, the *Sentinel* reported that someone had put a temperance banner on a saloon and the post office sign on a Main Street brothel. See “Knicknacks,” *Hays City Sentinel*, April 27, 1878, 3; *Hays City Sentinel*, March 23, 1878, 3.

96. “Echoes from Ellis County,” *Dodge City (KS) Times*, June 2, 1877, 8.

97. *Hays City Sentinel*, November 16, 1878, 3.

98. “Litigating Citizens,” *Hays City Sentinel*, January 9, 1880, 3.

99. “District Court,” *Hays City Sentinel*, July 27, 1878, 3.



Shown here is a subpoena for several Heiss women to appear in an Ellis County court on June 8, 1873. Courtesy of the Ellis County Historical Society.

liberation from those convictions on the promise to leave town.¹⁰⁰ This new era coincided directly with the arrival of Volga Germans in Ellis County.

The Volga Germans settled in Catholic farming communities in Ellis County. The arrival of wives and children meant that sex workers were no longer almost the only female inhabitants of the county. Though church services of various denominations had taken place through itinerant preaching, in gatherings in homes, at the fort, in a schoolhouse, and in Tommy Drum’s Saloon, the first resident Catholic priest arrived with the Volga Germans in 1876.¹⁰¹ In 1880, Pope Leo XIII published his encyclical “On Christian Marriage.” Priests in parishes routinely incorporated the encyclicals’ messages into their homilies. Pope Leo’s encyclical discussed the bonds of marriage and family and addressed prostitution through admonishing the “licentiousness” of husbands “who run headlong with impunity into lust, unbridled and unrestrained, in houses of ill-fame.”¹⁰² These messages, combined with the presence of “respectable women” and children in

100. “Knicknacks,” *Hays City Sentinel*, August 10, 1878, 3; *Hays City Sentinel*, November 2, 1878, 3; and “Local,” *Ellis County Star*, April 29, 1880, 8. The *Star*’s article read, “One of the ‘soiled doves’ who flourished under the ancient regime of Hays was in town last week. Tho not improved in morals, she was in flesh—she was fat.”

101. The service in the saloon took place in 1873 with a sheet placed over the bar in Tommy Drum’s Saloon. “C.W. Miller, Pioneer, Gives Impressions of Days When Hays Was Frontier Town,” *Hays Daily News*, June 20, 1931, Hays City Early Days Personal Recollections clipping file, Ellis County Historical Society, Hays, KS. For more on church services and the building dates for individual churches in Ellis County, see “Believers, Preachers, and Pastors,” in Ellis County Historical Society, *At Home in Ellis County*.

102. Leo XII, “On Christian Marriage,” encyclical letter, February 10, 1880, <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/leo13/113cmr.htm>.

Ellis County and the shift toward family farming as the primary source of revenue contributed to the shifting attitude toward prostitution in Hays City.

In 1883, Hays City's newspapers made it clear that prostitution was no longer acceptable in their coverage of the case of the Heiss women. Susan Heiss faced charges of keeping a bawdy house, and two of her daughters faced prostitution charges. Instead of amused tolerance or simply reporting their arrest, as was standard prior to the late 1870s, newspaper coverage stated that Hays City had been cursed with the Heiss women for more than four years and that a worse trio could not be imagined. Articles discussed the need to drive the women out of the community, indicating a shift in the community's willingness to accept visible prostitution.¹⁰³

As the social and economic contributions to the community on the part of the prostitutes were no longer valued, having been replaced by family

farming, attitudes shifted, and Hays City prostitution dwindled. Initially, the relationship between the prostitutes and citizens of Hays City was mutually beneficial. Prostitutes drew men into the town's nightlife and fueled the town's economic vitality through money spent on vice, property ownership, and fines related to prostitution. Once family farming took the place of nightlife as the economic center of the county, and once women deemed "respectable" populated the area, this relationship was no longer mutually beneficial, and thus, prostitution became less tolerated. Despite this shift in attitude, these early Hays City prostitutes deserve a place in the historical record for their early contributions to the town's social and economic livelihood. [KH]

103. "Pen, Paste and Scissors," *Hays (KS) Free Press*, March 14, 1883, 1; "Local," *Hays City Sentinel*, June 14, 1883, 4; "Local," *Hays City Sentinel*, August 9, 1883, 4. Tucked inside the trial docket book from the 1883 term located at the Ellis County Historical Society was a barely legible three pages of handwritten testimony presented at the Heiss trial. This docket book had survived a fire, and the pages were not in protective sheets, so much of it is unreadable, but it stated that the witness had seen "parties going in and out, soldiers and all kinds of folks."