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# Exposure of Prostitution in Western Massachusetts: 1911

Karen A. Terrell

Perhaps the most perplexing problem that the law enforcement agencies have had to solve has been the "social evil" of prostitution. This is true not only in Massachusetts but also in nearly every American city. In most states in the early 1900's there were laws making it a crime to conduct "places of ill repute."<sup>1</sup> Starting in 1911 the Federal Department of Justice undertook an enumeration of women in houses of prostitution, for the purpose of preventing exploitation in the so-called "White Slave Traffic." This registration covered 310 cities, in twenty-six states in the eastern part of the country. Those places included forty-five percent of the population in all cities of over five thousand inhabitants. This partial census showed 31,689 "inmates." Applying this figure as an index to the urban population of the country for this time gives an estimate of nearly 100,000 women in brothels. When one includes the large numbers of street walkers and other types of clandestine prostitutes the total was closer to 200,000. The findings of the vice commissions in eight American cities confirmed such estimates.<sup>2</sup>

One element that profited greatly by the conduct of these "resorts" were the liquor dealers who furnished wine and beer to the houses. The amount consumed at the house varied depending on the number of inmates and visitors. A case of 24 one-pint bottles was sold to the house for a dollar and retailed to visitors for a dollar a bottle. It was estimated that the houses in large cities averaged approximately \$5,000 per year on the sale of wine and beer.<sup>3</sup>

How actively the police enforced the laws reflects the attitude of the city administration toward the suppression of vice. If a mayor was under political obligation to interests controlling vice he was not likely to investigate or sanction attacks on them. As long as houses of prostitution and individual prostitutes were made to pay money for protection and freedom from arrest, police interference was merely a matter of expediency. Keepers of houses have told of paying thousands of dollars to the police for the privilege of opening "resorts" and for subsequent protection. These sums varied according to the

number of inmates in the house and the prices charged. A former police captain in New York City confessed that officers in his district had exacted revenue from hotels and houses in which he had shared the proceeds.<sup>4</sup> Police officials felt that controlling prostitution furnished a means for catching underworld criminals. Leaders of the underworld frequented these "resorts" and under the influence of liquor revealed to the women their schemes and exploits. In such circumstances a shrewd woman gained valuable information for the police. In fact, some prostitutes acted as "stool pigeons" for the police in return for protection by the authorities.<sup>5</sup>

The vice reports betrayed political interference in police administration. Graft collecting was usually delegated to lawyers who received and distributed the tribute. Sometimes the protection money was presented directly to the mayor, chief-of-police, and other officials. In one year a collector received and divided with a police official \$15,000.<sup>6</sup>

The problems that prostitution created in western Massachusetts were not unique to this area. Every major city in the United States experienced the same problems. In 1911, while the national scene focused on Taft's Trust Busting and the approach of what was to be one of the most exciting presidential elections, the *Chicopee News* attempted to expose prostitution in western Massachusetts. The *Chicopee News* sent undercover reporters to Carrie Pratt's "house of ill repute" in Holyoke, who gathered testimony from taxi drivers, and other witnesses. The reporters also wrote of Prudy, whose brothel was in West Springfield, and Cora, of Holyoke.

For more than twenty years Carrie Pratt was so well-known throughout the region that for generations it was common to say "more business than Carrie Pratt." It was said that businessmen of Springfield and Holyoke knew it well because some of them had visited Carrie Pratt's "farmhouse" as young men "sowing their wild oats." Carrie was in the business longer than either Prudy or Cora; in fact, she had been doing business so long that she was regarded as a fixture and the police never bothered her. Carrie's establishment was a farmhouse at the intersection of Homestead Avenue and Lower Westfield Road. Taking a left from Holyoke Road, then going past Cora's place, the road to Carrie's led to the right up a very steep incline. The undercover reporters described Carrie Pratt's house as good-sized, very neat in appearance and to the casual observer it resembled the quiet dwelling of a respectable New England farmer. A driveway led by the house to the rear and the reporters drove along this until they reached the rear of the house. They found an automobile and taxi shed that could accommodate three vehicles. Next to this shed they found another one for horses and carriages, with one rig in it at the time.<sup>8</sup>

With a lantern glowing brightly against one of the posts of the shed it was easy for the reporters to find their way around. There were two back doors, and in the upper panels of one door was a square opening which was screened with wire on the outside. On the inside was a peephole with an iron or brass

flapper, which could be swung from side to side. Carrie led the reporters down the hallway into a guest parlor to the left. The room was carpeted, and to the left near a window was a large upholstered sofa with a bolster at one end. There were three or four easy chairs in the room and on the wall were two or three pictures of landscapes and one picture of a pretty girl standing on the shore of a river beckoning to a ferryman who was steering his craft across the stream. The parlor was connected to a second one which was used when Carrie had a sudden rush of business. In this second sitting room was a piano, chairs, and more pictures on the wall. Just beyond this sitting room there was a small pantry where Carrie kept the liquor, for which she charged a dollar a drink.<sup>9</sup>

When the three reporters entered the first receiving parlor they found two young girls reclining on a large sofa. They wore bright kimonos and greeted the new arrivals with flashing smiles and a "Hello kiddo, come in out of the cold." Carrie sat in a stuffed-back chair near the door of the first sitting room while her girls "entertained" the guests. Carrie took the orders, served the drinks, and handled the money in a business-like manner. Carrie's four girls were "Bubbles," Irene, Grace, and Maud. "Bubbles," considered by patrons as the "Queen of the Farms," was a tall, well-proportioned brunette whose startling beauty was not marred by the fact that she always seemed to be chewing gum. Irene was a chatterbox who spent all night telling of an Amherst College student who wined and dined her every Saturday.<sup>10</sup> Grace and Maud used a lot of make-up and all the girls wore bright colored kimonos with matching slippers. Carrie was a short, plump brunette with a number of gold teeth. Few people knew Carrie's age but everyone admitted that she was remarkably well-preserved. She could have easily passed for forty but in 1911 she must have been close to sixty. She had a nervous affliction — whether sitting or standing she would suddenly start shivering as if she had a sudden chill. Her body shook and her face twitched strangely. In these nervous moments she was unable to control herself.<sup>11</sup>

Hanging around the house was a man who Carrie frequently addressed as "Hobbs." Several times she said to him in her quick nervous way: "Are the lanterns all right, Hobbs?" He would grumble some inarticulate reply and scramble out of the room. The reporters assumed that Hobbs cultivated the land, giving it the appearance of a typical, and well-kept farm.<sup>12</sup>

When the orders for drinks stopped, Carrie had a way of letting her guests know that the money was not coming fast enough. Finally, on Carrie's signal, the girls excused themselves and filed out of the room and into their respective bedrooms to await their guests. Presumably at this point Carrie asked them to select their favorite prostitute, collected the money and showed them to the bedrooms. Pretty girls in bright kimonos, "lurid" sights and a "hilarious time" was what the three reporters experienced the night they visited the resort of Miss Carrie Pratt which for more than a decade had been notorious up and down the Connecticut River Valley as a "sporting-house" of quality.<sup>13</sup>

The reporters said that when girls went into places like Carrie's, Prudy's, and Cora's they soon found that they were so deeply in debt to the proprietors that they had to stay and work off the debts. Carrie, Cora, and Prudy charged the girls outrageous prices for their gowns, liquor, and cheap cigarettes. They soon had young women so tightly in their clutches that there was little hope of them breaking away.<sup>14</sup>

Evidence that Carrie Pratt's was of ancient origin was given by the testimony of a Chicopee man who had visited Carrie's more than twenty years earlier under very exciting circumstances. The gentleman had been working in Orange with two men who were infatuated with two young women, Stella and Alice, both of Hartford. The two men could not get out of work so this particular gentleman went to Hartford to bring the two women back to Orange. When he arrived in Hartford he found that Carrie and the young women had moved to the "Farms" in Chicopee. He went there where he was told by Carrie that the Hartford police had been making trouble so she had to set up a new place. He was able to speak to Stella and Alice and he told them that the two young men wanted them to return with him to Orange. They explained that they could not go because they were in debt to Carrie for clothes, liquor, and cigarettes. One owed \$40 and the other \$30. At that time Carrie was charging \$10 for cheap kimonos, \$1.50 for a bottle of wine and \$.25 for cheap cigarettes. Since he was unable to help the girls with their debts he returned to Orange without them. As he was leaving he witnessed a strange sight in the parlor. A young man from Holyoke who had become infatuated with one of Carrie's girls was paying off her debt and was taking her away to marry him. When he arrived back in Orange and told the two young men that he was unable to get Stella and Alice, the two men left for Chicopee. They rescued the girls from the house but only after fighting with Carrie. In describing the battle, they reported that Carrie opened fire on them with a pistol, but none of the party was hit, though a bullet passed through one fellow's hat.<sup>15</sup>

The Pratt name became involved in politics from time to time. A story retold from generation to generation in Holyoke has it that a mayoral candidate once came upon Madame Pratt while making his customary Sunday drive through the Ashley Ponds area. Carrie's rig had lost a wheel, so the story goes, and the gentleman offered her a ride home. No sooner did the politician hoist her onto his rig when a cameraman popped out of the bushes and snapped a shot for the local newspaper.<sup>16</sup> Although the story does not reveal who won the election, it seems clear that Carrie and the photographer were waiting to discredit the candidate, who may have been a reformer and a threat to Carrie's business.

On another occasion, a grocer and his wife took a Sunday carriage ride, and the husband, believing Sunday to be a day of rest, dozed off behind the reins. Perhaps a creature of habit, the horse carried the man and wife to the backyard of Carrie Pratt and peaceably came to a halt. The grocer awoke and urged the horse on, but she would not budge for at least a half an hour. It was

rumored that the grocer's wife urged her husband to make some changes in his delivery route. Although one might not escape a wife's wrath, the local police looked the other way when they passed Carrie Pratt's. Old-timers say that when they did make a raid they started their sirens two and a half miles away.<sup>17</sup>

Turning from Holyoke to West Springfield, Prudy's place was also well-known. Clad in her kimono and with bare feet Prudy and three other prostitutes created a sensation in a certain South Main Street restaurant. Prudy and her companions had stopped at the Springfield lunchroom for something to eat while on one of their joyrides to Hartford. The man behind the counter was polishing the marble top of the counter when a big automobile pulled up to the door and four women in their bare feet and kimonos dashed into the eating place. The lunchroom was practically deserted with the exception of Prudy, her girls, and the man behind the counter. A number of pedestrians gathered outside the lunchroom and peered inside the window to witness one of the strangest sights ever in the "City of Homes." The eyes of the clerk bulged with amazement at the unusual spectacle. One of the girls bought some doughnuts and earned the delightful applause of her companions by twirling one of the doughnuts around her toe, while singing "Bells On My Fingers and Doughnuts On My Toes." The others instantly joined in. There they all sat twirling doughnuts on their toes and singing Blanche Ring's famous song while their kimonos opened more and more in the front. After about an hour the frolicking Prudy and her scantily attired girls whirled off in their automobile on their trip to Hartford for presumably a different kind of frolicking.<sup>18</sup>

An irate neighbor who lived a mile from Cora's place sent a letter to the editor of the *Chicopee News* about what had been going on there. Ever since Maud, a new prostitute, arrived from Boston in 1910 a rivalry between Cora's queen, Bessie, and Maud created friction and soon Bessie left Maud the victor. In 1911, Maud's mother and seven-year-old daughter joined her. The writer of the letter stated that Cora's was more immoral than Prudy's, because of the presence of the child. The title of the article was "Seven Year Old Baby Kidnapped," but nowhere in the article was there any mention of a kidnapping. The title was meant to be sensational, to draw attention to what was going on at a time when no other newspaper was exposing prostitution.<sup>19</sup>

While under the influence of liquor Cora was known to delight in bragging about her police record for fighting and for prostitution.<sup>20</sup> Even though Cora's and Carrie's were located in close proximity there did not appear to be any real competition, probably indicating that there was sufficient business for both of them.

It seemed appropriate for the *Chicopee News* to include an article representing the religious views on prostitution. In the absence of the regular pastor of the Methodist Church in Chicopee the service was led by Deacon Arthur E. Snow and the subject of the evening was temperance. A. Eugene Hill, a

Willimansett contractor, was the first speaker. A short time before the service, he prepared for his temperance speech by stopping at a "licensed place," a barroom which attracted women as well as men. The outside door was guarded by a man who sat in the hallway. Hill had no difficulty getting in to look around. After witnessing that scene, Hill felt competent to talk on temperance. While in what he called "this house of prostitution" he saw nine girls all under the age of twenty. Hill startled the audience with facts of the "immorality" of Chicopee and Hampden County. Hill stated that personal investigation had proved to him that in Chicopee alone there were 200 women who earned their living by prostitution. Hill felt that the prostitution racket was supported by the chief-of-police, Mayor John Fletcher, the Hampden Brewery, and the "whole rotten system." Hill stated that in spite of this, the candidate for mayor who was running on the reform platform, withdrew because of lack of support from the church and from citizens who were interested in a cleaner city. Another mayoral candidate, Ernest Dalton, had previously stated that he intended to continue the policy adopted by Mayor Fletcher. Hill also felt that prostitution was supported by the local brewery and that election of dishonest officials encouraged the system to continue.<sup>21</sup>

One of the members of the Methodist Church in Chicopee acted as a go-between between the brewery interests and the Republican Club. The pastor of the church told the parish when he first arrived from Palmer that he would lead an attack on the liquor license law. Within a short time he changed his mind and Hill wondered if the minister was afraid of losing his job. Hill stated that until then the pastor had not done anything to help despite his frequent boasts of being a champion of temperance work. He promised to help them in every way possible but had not provided any assistance. Hill concluded: "If this pastor is disgusted with our fight why doesn't he make one of his own? In Chicopee the field for reform and temperance is a wide one."<sup>22</sup> The temperance sermon was planned for a time when the regular pastor was away, which indicated the frustration of the parish.

The *Chicopee News* interviewed taxi drivers, who told of racing back and forth until the early hours with their "tipsy burdens." They told of the steep incline to Carrie Pratt's up which taxis from Springfield and Holyoke could barely crawl and they had to go at full throttle to get there at all. Frequently the patrons had to get out and walk. Said the taxi driver in his boastful and ignorant way: "The *Chicopee News* will have to go some to stop these houses from running."

Having exposed prostitution, the *Chicopee News* set out to destroy it by terrifying the patrons who visited the houses of ill repute in the area. The November 25, 1911 issue of the *News* included a warning that within the next week or two expert "flashlight photographers" would be posted on the roads leading to Prudy's, Cora's, and Carrie's, and that patrons of these resorts who wanted to have "flashlight examples of their mugs in the *News*" were advised to "come early in their taxi cabs and automobiles and avoid the rush."<sup>24</sup> This was to be the last warning from the *Chicopee News*.

On the afternoon of November 28, Harry J. Buxton of Springfield, an employee of the *Chicopee News*, was arrested at the newspaper office by Deputy Sheriff Richard F. Lawton. The editor and proprietor, Frank Fuhrmann, was arrested on November 29 in front of the waiting room of the Western Massachusetts Street Railway at 9:30 a.m. while on his way to Buxton's arraignment. An arrest warrant had already been issued for Fuhrmann but his surprise appearance in Westfield for Buxton's arraignment saved Lawton a trip. Buxton was arraigned in the Westfield Court on eight counts and Fuhrmann on five counts for selling obscene materials, the *Chicopee News*, to minors in Westfield on Sunday, November 18 and 25.

Judge Willie S. Kellogg of the District Court continued both cases to Wednesday, December 6 and each defendant was ordered to provide bail in the sum of \$500 on each count. Fuhrmann was ordered to furnish \$2500 in bail and Buxton a total of \$1500.<sup>25</sup> Before Judge Kellogg would consent to have the case continued to the following week he insisted that the newspaper not be sold in Westfield on the following Saturday and Sunday. After conferring with his attorney, James H. Mulcare of Springfield, Fuhrmann agreed to this proposition so that Westfield would be unable to obtain copies of the paper, even if it was published. A. Eugene Hill, the Willimansett contractor who had given the temperance speech at the Methodist Church, furnished a \$500 bond for Buxton the night before his arraignment but was unable to produce the \$4000 bonds in order to release Buxton and Fuhrmann after the arraignment.<sup>26</sup> The prisoners were locked in a cell in the police station while awaiting bond. At 12:45 p.m. they were released with bonds from Hill and from Mrs. Frank Fuhrmann.

On December 5, Fuhrmann was arrested again, this time by the Chicopee police. He pleaded not guilty in Police Court to the charge of publishing and selling to minors a paper alleged to contain literature of an obscene nature. The warrant for the arrest of Fuhrmann was to have been served on him the next morning when he appeared to be tried on several similar charges in Westfield. He had not been seen since the previous Wednesday.<sup>27</sup>

Attracted by one of the most sensational cases that had ever come before the courts of Hampden County, curious spectators crowded the courtroom on December 6, while the corridors were filled with men and women anxious to hear the proceedings. Not less interesting than the actual court proceedings was the appearance in the courtroom of an attractive, heavy veiled woman. The woman was Prudy Williams, the alleged proprietor of a house of ill repute in West Springfield. Prudy had been summoned to the defense of Fuhrmann and Buxton and would be the star witness. Prudy had not volunteered to come forth. Her testimony would have proved that what the *Chicopee News* had printed about the collaboration between the police and local prostitutes was true.

The witnesses for the Commonwealth in the morning session were news-boys, all under the age of fifteen. The boys testified that they sold newspapers



on the streets and they identified the defendants as the men who sold them copies of the *Chicopee* paper.<sup>28</sup>

Prudy never got to testify because the court did not convene at 1:30 after the morning break. A compromise had been reached. The deal called for a plea of guilty on one count for Fuhrmann and a fine of \$100; the charges against Buxton were dismissed. Fuhrmann agreed not to send any more copies of the newspaper into Westfield.

All appeals by Fuhrmann were withdrawn on December 9. Westfield was the first to take the initiative in having the owner and his employee brought before a court to determine the right to sue such a paper as the *Chicopee News*.<sup>29</sup> The newspaper agreed to publish no more "obscene" material relating to prostitution.

It appears that the *Chicopee News* was seen by local officials as a threat when it publicized prostitution in the area and when it described how local officials ignored and thus supported vice. Fuhrmann was courageous in daring to expose vice in the area, but when it became clear that he had no support in his crusade, he agreed to abandon it. It is interesting that while other area newspapers did not dare to expose prostitution they gave front page coverage to Fuhrmann's arrest and trial.

Fuhrmann may well have been committed to the reform of prostitution in the Springfield area. Nevertheless, he cannot have been displeased by the phenomenal rise in the circulation of his newspaper. In the three weeks that it had published exposes on area prostitution, the *Chicopee News*' circulation increased from one hundred the first week, to 12 thousand the second week, and finally to 15 thousand in the third week.<sup>30</sup> The effect of the court case was to effectively censor any further attempts by investigative reporters to inform the public of the crime and graft associated with prostitution in western Massachusetts.

#### NOTES

1. Clifford G. Roe, *Panders and Their White Slaves* (New York, 1910), p. 180.
2. Howard B. Woolston, *Prostitution in the United States* (New Jersey, 1921), p. 38.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
4. Maude E. Miner, *Slavery of Prostitution* (New York, 1916), p. 133-135. See also Jane Adams, *A New Conscience and An Ancient Evil* (New York, 1912), p. 45.
5. Woolston, *Prostitution in the United States*, p. 109.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 219-220.

7. *Springfield Union*, March 18, 1974, p. 1, col. 3.
8. *Chicopee News*, November 25, 1911, p. 1, col. 5.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 1, col. 5.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 3, col. 3.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, p. 3, col. 5.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 3, col. 2.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 3, col. 4.
16. *Springfield Union*, March 18, 1974, p. 1, col. 3.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 1, col. 3.
18. *Chicopee News*, November 25, 1911, p. 2, col. 3.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 3, col. 4.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*, p. 2, col. 6
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*, p. 4, col. 3
24. *Springfield Daily News*, November 29, 1911, p. 1, col. 6.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 1, col. 6.
26. *Ibid.*, December 6, 1911, p. 9, col. 7.
27. *Ibid.*, December 9, 1911, p. 1, col. 4.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 1, col. 4.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 1, col. 4.
30. *Chicopee News*, November 25, 1911, p. 2, col. 5. In 1974, Carrie Pratt's farmhouse was considered to be Holyoke's 168th Historical site, but it was turned down by the Holyoke Planning Board. The farmhouse was demolished and the new Elks Lodge was erected on part of the land.