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# Love for Sale: Prostitution and the Building of Buffalo, New York, 1820-1910

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***Love for Sale: Prostitution and the Building of Buffalo, New York, 1820-1910***

On July 4, 1881, one well-dressed woman stood alone in front of a large and unruly crowd, her feet square in the center of a small pedestal as the sounds of men fighting elsewhere in the room filled up every inch of the packed saloon. Twenty-six years old and five feet tall, she was Kitty O'Neil, a woman known across the country as "the best female jig dancer in the world,"<sup>1</sup> and she was about to perform the dance she was famous for in front of her waiting admirers – only this time, with an unexpected twist. As the music began to play, O'Neil – already a fine sight with her delicate features and her long black hair left loose – slowly began to strip off her dress to the delighted surprise of the mostly male audience before her. For eighty minutes O'Neil had her viewers hypnotized into submission, effectively shutting down the barroom brawl that had threatened to spill outside onto the street only moments before the fiddler took up his bow; several men passed out cold from a combination of the view and the intense heat of the room, their bodies kept standing only by the impressive crowd that had filled the tavern once word of O'Neil's dance had spread.<sup>2</sup>

Kitty O'Neil was a waitress and a dancer, not a prostitute, but to certain members of society there was no difference. Prostitution is, by definition, a difficult subject to fully understand: payment in exchange for sexual intercourse, regardless of the legal issues and moral implications surrounding it, was a topic that was nearly inescapable in the early days of Buffalo, New York. Known far and wide for its great love of alcohol, as well as the closest thing to a "frontier town" on the east coast, bars and taverns boomed along Buffalo's waterfront in an

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<sup>1</sup> *The Washington Post*, April 17, 1893.

<sup>2</sup> Dan Murphy, *Nickel City Drafts: A Drinking History of Buffalo, NY* (Buffalo: Buffalo Books, 2010), 39.

effort to match the growing population's level of consumption. And as in all such places, with this particular brand of building boom came an increase in the traditional tavern clientele: gamblers, drunks, and working girls. By the time the Erie Canal opened itself to the public in 1825, Buffalo's Canal Street had quickly gained a national reputation as being the "wickedest street in the world" – a moniker which has stuck to the city proper for the next sixty years.<sup>3</sup> But what of the people who walked that "wicked" street? The wild denizens of Canal Street put Buffalo on the map in the early half of the nineteenth century, and even as one century bled into the next these dangerous characters continued to play a key role in Buffalo's rising development as a major city.

To start understanding what made prostitution so key to Buffalo's growth as a city, one must first look at the reasons a woman would turn to sex work in the first place. In the United States, most women entered prostitution as a means of supporting their families, or to supplement a meager income from factory or domestic work.<sup>4</sup> Women working in the sewing trades could spend up to eighteen hours a day stitching piecework together, and still often made less than ten cents a day. Tradeswomen also risked suffering from the devious tricks played by factory owners; in certain cases, when job openings were scarce, women lined up outside the gates and the owners had them work for free, to "show their skill" at a particular task. Many of these women were never chosen for the offered job, and fewer still were paid for their time. Sexual harassment and forced sexual activity was also prevalent at many factory and domestic jobs, and many women of the time felt that if they were already risking being harassed and

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<sup>3</sup> Murphy, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 59-62.

attacked, at least by finding work in a tavern or brothel they could “be paid a decent wage for it.”<sup>5</sup>

Many women were relatively young when they entered the world of prostitution – most began in their late teens and early twenties, but this did not necessarily mean that they were unattached romantically. A significantly high percentage of women were – and remained – married throughout their tenure as “soiled doves,” choosing to sell themselves to supplement their spouses’ income and help support their families.<sup>6</sup> Men could sometimes even be found working as the more “physical” half of a husband-and wife team, more often than not working in the background as “security” while the wife took on the financial responsibility within their operation.<sup>7</sup> Ethnicity also played a significant part in a woman’s entrance into the “underworld”: in Buffalo, many of the girls who worked as prostitutes during this time period were Irish immigrants, or the wives and daughters of immigrants, who had come to America in the years surrounding the Great Famine. The Italian immigrants who arrived closer to the end of the century, while similar in some respects to the Irish in their Catholicism and difficulty connecting with the native-born Americans of the area, did not turn to prostitution to make ends’ meet as many of the Irish did.<sup>8</sup> Throughout all of it, there was a small contingent of African-American women who worked and profited from this business, but just as the Irishwomen did not stray far

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 70.

<sup>6</sup> Marilyn Wood Hill, *Their Sister’s Keepers: Prostitution in New York City, 1830-1870* (Los Angeles, California: University of California Press), 74-89.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 94.

<sup>8</sup> While part of that difference comes from a decisive shift in moral values, most of it truthfully comes from the physical changes of Canal Street occurring at this time – Canal Street was built to be a more family-oriented area as it turned into Dante Place, and there were no longer places for women of that caliber to languish.

from Canal Street, African-American women kept their business close to their own segregated neighborhoods, living and working in the block that stretched between Commercial and Canal.<sup>9</sup>

For all the differences between them, the main cause for dissention between different groups of working women was not racial or religious; truly, the main source of argument that had women fighting on street corners was that some served lakeshore men, and other preferred the company of canal workers. Girls who catered to lakeshore men were known across town as women of “high-class [and] sophistication,” while those who walked the towpath and offered themselves to canalmen were looked down upon as “common whores.”<sup>10</sup> The animosity grew first between the canallers and lakemen themselves, rather than the women: the lakemen resented the canal workers, seeing them as “ragamuffin unskilled laborers loading and unloading rafts pulled by smelly animals,” while they thought of their own work as that of “professional sailors.”<sup>11</sup> Canallers, it can also be said, were reportedly more violent than their lakeshore counterparts: many of the crimes noted in *America’s Crossroads* were committed by canalmen, and several national newspapers reported on murders committed by those who worked on the Canal.<sup>12</sup> Between the near-constant bloodshed between them that came from long nights of drinking and brawling, it was inevitable that those who associated with certain groups “picking sides,” as it were, and instill those common negative stereotypes onto the opposing groups.

Like the women under their control, the madams running the bordellos in the area were not immune to the divisive attitudes of their clientele, and this was found most interestingly in the cases of Mother Cary and Pug-Nose Cora. Mother Cary, whose full name has unfortunately been lost to time, ran a notorious dance hall on Canal Street, while Pug-Nose Cora had her girls

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<sup>9</sup> Michael N. Vogel, Edward J. Patton, and Paul F. Redding, *America’s Crossroads: Buffalo’s Canal Street/Dante Place – The Making of a City* (Buffalo: Heritage Press, 1993), 138-140.

<sup>10</sup> Murphy, 21.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>12</sup> Vogel, et al, 162.

working out of a boardinghouse she kept on Myrtle Street.<sup>13</sup> Over the course of their time working as rival madams, Cary and Cora had hired out some 400 girls between them, “sending them to canalmen and lakemen by day or night” under the guise of employing them as laundresses, cooks, and seamstresses.<sup>14</sup> Cora, who was known best for her no-nonsense attitude and long, clean hair, catered mainly to the men who worked on the Canal, leaving her live-in girls to languish about in loose-fitting kimonos known as “Mother Hubbards” while they waited for their customers to arrive.<sup>15</sup> Mother Cary, on the other hand, offered hers and her girls’ services to the dockworkers and lakeshore men. While Pug-Nose Cora could be described as brash and pugnacious, what little is known about Mother Cary paints a sinister picture: the implication lingers that the young girls she took in and sent out disguised as washerwomen were dangerously underage. In addition to that, her Canal Street dance hall was one of the wildest on the block; home to the most potent liquors, nightly bar fights, and, according to legend, a trap door underneath the floor of the bar to roll drunks and dead men into the Canal through.<sup>16</sup> Cary was also known to be an incredibly violent woman; when a police officer tried to extort her for “protection money,” Cary’s response was to not only viciously attack him, but to bite off one of his ears.<sup>17</sup>

Canal Street itself was a dangerous place to be: informally known amongst Buffalonians as “Maiden Lane,” by the 1880s roughly 60% of the houses lining Canal Street, from Erie to Commercial, were reported to be known houses of prostitution.<sup>18</sup> Murder and mayhem reigned supreme, with rumors of trapdoors underneath barroom floors to roll dead men into the Erie

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<sup>13</sup> *The New York Tribune*, December 30, 1853.

<sup>14</sup> Vogel, et al, 162.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 163.

<sup>16</sup> Vogel, et al, 83-84.

<sup>17</sup> Murphy, 32.

<sup>18</sup> Vogel, et al, 162.

Canal, while other taverns built secret underground rooms to hold gouging matches, cockfights, and dogfights. Bare-knuckle brawls were a nightly occurrence, and the locals did not take kindly to any officers of the law who arrived to break up the fights. Bottles and bricks were thrown, and eventually many policemen refused to set foot on Canal Street, leaving the people to police themselves. When they did, police often patrolled in groups of three when the streets were at their busiest: two to actually walk their assigned beat, and one to stay by the call box and arrange for help as it was needed.<sup>19</sup> When called to the area for other reasons – to break up fights, to locate corpses that had washed ashore, etcetera – they too went in threes, finding safety in numbers when faced with the wild denizens of Canal Street. The term “copper” to refer to a policeman actually derives from slang created around the time of the building of the Erie Canal: because the area was so dangerous, lawmen often wore hard copper helmets to protect themselves from any stray object a potential suspect, or even nearby civilian, might throw at their heads.<sup>20</sup>

However, in spite of the brassy, rough-and-tumble attitude these women took on, they were no less susceptible to the significant drawbacks which came from living and working in this kind of lifestyle. Many women found themselves homeless for long periods of time; in 1856, when the number of prostitutes in Buffalo “increased to an almost incredible extent,” women slept wherever they could find a place to lay their heads, be it empty canal boats, alleyways, or even outhouses.<sup>21</sup> Disease was rampant among Canal Street at this time, the least of which being the venereal variety. Respiratory diseases and persistent infections were omnipresent, brought on by the cold Buffalo weather, as were the common illnesses of the day: diphtheria, scarlet fever,

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 173.

<sup>20</sup> Vogel, et al, 129.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 73.

whooping cough, and the flu.<sup>22</sup> Poverty and unwholesome conditions took a toll on the “Infected District” in varying ways; Syphilis and Chlamydia struck these women just as hard as meningitis, malnutrition, and consumption. Pneumonia was actually the leading cause of death among women and children from the years 1890 through 1900 – numbers which reflected the “crowded, drafty, and dirty living conditions in much of the waterfront area.”<sup>23</sup> Depression was also as serious a problem then as it is today: Lizzie Bennett, a 38-year-old prostitute from New York City was saved from multiple suicide attempts after swallowing large amounts of a poison known as “Paris green.” Although she had made quite a name for herself in New York and had even started her own successful boardinghouse closer to the Erie Canal, when asked for an explanation her only response was to “say, with a weary air, that she was tired of life.”<sup>24</sup>

The unrelenting rowdiness of the Buffalo bar crowd also meant arguments started within a tavern’s walls were inevitably settled with fists: take, for instance, the case of Frederick Logren and his mistress, local prostitute Lizzie Lake. A 38-year-old boilermaker, Logren took such offense at a potential client who aimed to abuse his sweetheart that he beat him to death with his bare hands, and all in the middle of an average, unruly night at Paddy Moran’s saloon.<sup>25</sup> On another particular evening at Diebold’s Canal Street saloon, two men were arrested after an argument over their recently-purchased dates came to an unseemly end: one bet the other “a dollar and a round of drinks that he could blacken his girl’s eye a deeper color than the other could his gal’s.”<sup>26</sup> This level of unadulterated violence was not only brought on by the townspeople – working girls could be just as vicious, if not worse, than the men they catered to.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 221.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 221.

<sup>24</sup> *The New York Times*, March 6, 1871. No mention was given of whether or not Bennett’s attempt was made as a direct result of the work she did, or if it was the outcome of the any number of other problems which could have occurred in her life.

<sup>25</sup> Vogel, et al, 162.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 161.



Territorial spats were common on Canal Street, with various madams and prostitutes fighting each other in crowded bars and the middle of the street over men, money, and the right to stand on a particular corner.<sup>27</sup> One instance of this involved ex-prostitute Carrie Brown, who viciously set her roommate on fire during a fight over money and straight-facedly blamed it on a “mysterious man” who crept in through an open window.<sup>28</sup>

Murder, as mentioned, was a common occurrence on Canal Street: men who frequented the bars were more often than not the subject of robbery, be it from their fellow patrons or women taking advantage of their inebriated state, and many resorted to killing in the hopes of getting even. In one case, Frannie Smith, a woman accused by her neighbors of prostituting herself and of living in “the retreat of the vilest kinds of harlots and thieves, and criminals in general,”<sup>29</sup> was killed by 24-year-old canal worker Thomas Chose after he accused her of trying to rob him and a friend. Frannie was found the next morning in her room, dead from a blow to the head so severe that it had fractured her skull. Chose and his friend, who called himself “John Smith” when approached by the police, also attacked Frannie’s neighbor Kitty Lavery, who had tried to intervene, and knocked her unconscious. In the two latter cases, although charges were levied against the men in question, deliberate police interference led to a lack of convictions in both crimes.<sup>30</sup>

Another popular Buffalo legend tells of an event in the days surrounding the Pan-American Exposition of 1901, one that is admittedly overshadowed by the regrettable assassination of President William McKinley: shortly before the Exposition was due to open, prostitutes from New York City reportedly saw opportunity in the high numbers of people

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 165-168.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 159.

<sup>29</sup> *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 4, 1880.

<sup>30</sup> Vogel, et al, 209.

flooding into Western New York. In an effort to gain more business for themselves, some 200 women gathered up their possessions and journeyed out to the Queen City, planning on ousting these uncouth “Buffalo Gals” from their own territory with their “worldliness and high fashion.”<sup>31</sup> When word of their endeavor got out, Buffalo’s night women temporarily set aside their differences in an effort to fight back: armed with clubs, knives, and stiletto heels, at the end of it all, not only were the pride and bodies of the invading women severely wounded, but they were personally escorted by police back to New York City on packet boats and trains. It took the police a total of eight hours to round up all the offending natives, and 32 trips between Canal Street and the local jailhouse to deposit them all.<sup>32</sup>

But for as much as these women struggled between themselves, the outside world was even harsher upon them: the 1862 Concert Saloon Bill, a state law designed to suppress “flagrant displays of public immorality in the Broadway music halls,” went so far as to accuse concert halls of being the “lowest form of prostitution,” forcing many to close their doors and change their venues to avoid prosecution.<sup>33</sup> Others did away with performances completely, and turned away all of those who had worked or applied for work as waitresses. Some, like popular dancer Kitty O’Neil, challenged the bill despite facing arrest and incarceration, insisting they had broken no laws and done nothing wrong, only to fail in the higher courts. As vaudeville historian Douglas Gilbert notes, “although the nature of their work made for looseness, few of the actresses and wine-room maidens were promiscuous. Ladies of the evening had their own racket, picking up where the wine-room girls left off.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Murphy, 33.

<sup>32</sup> Murphy, 34-35.

<sup>33</sup> Don Meade, “Kitty O’Neil and Her ‘Champion Jig’: A Forgotten Irish-American Variety Theater Star,” Blarney Star Productions. <http://blarneystar.com/Kitty6.4.11.pdf> (accessed November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2013), 3.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 4.

Women's Christian Temperance Union President Frances Willard was quoted in an 1897 *Los Angeles Times* article as saying how much she "abhors regulated vice," and how "prostitution regulated by law is barbarism." Willard addressed the twenty-fourth convention of the WCTU not only on the dangers of liquor and gambling, but on how the regulation of prostitution would render society as "morally bankrupt."<sup>35</sup> Willard argued that "[they] could not check an immoral disease by measures which recognize this sin as something to be regulated rather than prohibited...we believe that the moral injury to the soldier, resulting from any provision for the dishonor that he works upon himself, and a poor ignorant and debased woman, is unworthy [of] that Christian empire whose queen declares that the Bible is the foundation of her government."<sup>36</sup> Regulation of prostitution, to Willard and her followers, was in no way an answer to such a "sinful vice," and as history has shown, it was not an issue that could be quickly resolved.

A large downturn in Buffalo's prostitution came in near the end of the century, when the newly-built railroads widely surpassed the Erie Canal in terms of speed, power, and the ability to transport goods over great distances. In 1895, a project to deepen and shorten the Canal was begun, hoping that by widening the canal, larger vessels could travel through the waterway.<sup>37</sup> But as the waterway began to change, Canal Street itself ever-so-slowly began to shut down. Saloons were torn down or converted and tenements were raised in their place, and as families poured in the quiet social restrictions that kept girls in the area seemed to be lifted. Many moved on from prostitution, finding their own families and "respectable work," while others took their business uptown, searching for a wealthier, higher-class clientele. As drunken sailors and working women moved on and low-income immigrant Italian families moved in, Canal Street

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<sup>35</sup> *The Los Angeles Times*, October 30, 1897.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Murphy, 35.

soon became better known as “Dante Place,” and the street’s sordid past began to fade into memory.<sup>38</sup>

Most of Buffalo’s “criminal” history remained in the form of local lore and legend. Kathleen “Kitty” O’Neil was a waitress, early vaudeville actress, and burlesque dancer from New York City, who near the end of her life moved to Buffalo and earned local acclaim for her charm, wit, and incredible dancing skills. Born in 1852 to Irish parents, O’Neil was likely the daughter of a theatre family: Billy O’Neil was a well-known comedian and clog dancer of the time, and she once appeared in a variety show with a woman named Hattie O’Neil, who may have been a cousin or a sister.<sup>39</sup> O’Neil made her Broadway debut in Canterbury Music Hall on St. Patrick’s Day in 1862, and her career was nearly cut short by the passage of the Concert Saloon Bill. She managed to survive, however, by working with Robert Butler, the proprietor of the American Theatre and one of the few who attempted to publically contest the Concert Saloon Bill. A writer and singer, O’Neil traveled extensively, performing in theatres as far away as San Francisco before turning around and returning to New York. Songs such as “No Irish Need Apply” and “Sweet Mary Ann” made her the “idol of the newsboys in the gallery,” and Kitty found great success in New York’s variety theatres for many years.<sup>40</sup>

Her entrance into Buffalo history is a surprising one. In the late 1870s – shortly after divorcing her first husband, comedian Harry Kernell – O’Neil found herself living in Buffalo, where in 1892 she married restaurateur and saloon owner Alfred Pettie. Little is known about the true depth of their relationship, save for the fact that they had divorced less than a year before her death,<sup>41</sup> but the implication stands that it was inside his popular local bar where she performed

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 35-36.

<sup>39</sup> Meade, 3.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 5-7.

<sup>41</sup> *The Washington Post*, April 17, 1893.

her infamous nude dance. On July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1881, O’Neil reportedly stripped naked and climbed atop a small Grecian pedestal in the middle of a Canal Street tavern, where she performed the jig she had become famous for in New York City and held a growing audience “transfixed” for nearly 80 minutes.<sup>42</sup> How much truth lies in this story is unknown: after her death in 1893, and even while she was alive, Kitty O’Neil had many imitators to contend with.<sup>43</sup> One of most infamous imposters was a woman named Catherine Connolly, who made the Brooklyn newspapers multiple times while claiming to be the “real Kitty O’Neil” and was continually brought before the local magistrate on charges of larceny, assault, and public intoxication – one of which she earned attempting to recreate her “champion jig” in the middle of the Brooklyn Bridge.<sup>44</sup>

In light of the allegations made against them and movements to shut them down, it would be easy to dismiss those women who chose prostitution as being low-class and amoral, with little regard for the law and a great deal of contempt for those in positions of power. Women who worked with their bodies rather than their brains were, and often still are, looked at as examples of immoral behavior, and thought to be uneducated, sexually promiscuous, and generally inferior to those who find work in legal, reputable occupations. It would be easy to say all these things, but it would be wrong. The historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich once wrote that “well-behaved women never make history,” and this oft-misquoted phrase has never been more applicable than now: living and working in an ultimately unglamorous position, these women helped to shape Buffalo in its early years, raking in notoriety all across the country for their antics and attitudes – some in life, and others, unfortunately, only through death. They struggled with poverty and harassment, violence and disease, but they still survived. They did not let their occupations become the sole definition of their character, nor should we let it diminish their importance; their

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<sup>42</sup> Murphy , 39.

<sup>43</sup> *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 18, 1893

<sup>44</sup> Meade, 10.

bodies were commodities to be used as they liked – they were women of extremely limited means who dug deep, who used all the resources available to them in a time where others of their gender had none, and it is for that fact alone that they deserve more than just a passing notice.

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