SOCIOLOGISTS argue that deviance cannot exist apart from respectability. Behavior is never intrinsically deviant; the respectable world defines it as such. Moreover, a society’s deviance often mirrors its respectable values and institutions. Theocracies, for example, worry about heretics, totalitarian states concern themselves with dissidents, and so on. The underworld thus is never isolated completely from the upperworld, which provides it with victims, customers, bystanders, persecutors, and the like.

Prostitution in late 19th-century American cities exemplifies the inevitable links between deviance and respectability. In theory, vice was cut off from the respectable world. Urbanization led to spatial differentiation in the new industrial cities, so that vice had its own segregated niche—the “bright-light district” of brothels, bars, and gambling dens. This physical isolation was bolstered by ideological isolation: “the Victorians treated [sexuality] with suppression, euphemism, and silence.”

Recent studies of prostitution do little to challenge the notion that vice and virtue occupied separate spheres during the 19th century. Typically, this research focuses on either the views of antivice reformers or, less commonly, on the lives of the prostitutes themselves. By studying either group apart from the other, interconnections between vice and respectability can be overlooked.

In fact, many 19th-century cities experimented openly with methods for controlling prostitution. Following the lead of Dr. William W. Sanger, who declared that vice could not be eradicated, many officials sought to regulate the form prostitution took in their cities. The arrangement found in St. Paul from 1865 to 1883 was not uncommon. Once each month, the madams of St. Paul’s principal brothels openly appeared in the municipal court and paid fines. They were, in effect, being taxed rather than punished. In 1867 the Pioneer noted that Chicago and St. Louis were considering adopting regulatory systems and suggested, with a touch of civic pride, that: “Saint Paul was the first city to adopt the license system, and may find it wise also to add [registration and medical inspections].

Joel Best, professor and chairman of the sociology department at California State University-Fresno, is the author of a number of scholarly articles on deviance in society. He is a native Minnesotan.

Joel Best

SUMMARY

LOOKING EVIL
IN THE FACE

BEING AN EXAMINATION
OF VICE AND RESPECTABILITY
IN ST. PAUL AS SEEN IN
THE CITY’S PRESS, 1865-83

Joel Best

SOCIOLOGISTS argue that deviance cannot exist apart from respectability. Behavior is never intrinsically deviant; the respectable world defines it as such. Moreover, a society’s deviance often mirrors its respectable values and institutions. Theocracies, for example, worry about heretics, totalitarian states concern themselves with dissidents, and so on. The underworld thus is never isolated completely from the upperworld, which provides it with victims, customers, bystanders, persecutors, and the like.

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It is an evil that must be looked in the face, and not handled with kid gloves.”

In St. Paul and other cities there were multiple links connecting vice and the upperworld. The press had few reservations about covering prostitution; every citizen could read about vice and vice policy. Both in public and within the privacy of the brothels, prostitutes encountered respectable people. In turn, the latter were involved with vice—as customers, landlords, merchants, concerned citizens, reformers, and officials.

Press coverage of vice, a staple topic, was frequently ironic. The local news pages in St. Paul routinely noted the madams’ monthly courtroom appearances, in addition to covering deaths, fights, and other newsworthy events in the brothels. Editors used dozens of colorful circumlocutions for both brothels (houses of prostitution or ill fame, bagnios, bawdy or sporting houses, temples of vice, and domiciles de joie) and prostitutes (nymphs, social evils, demireps, courtesans, frail sisters, fallen angels, women of the town, soiled doves, strumpets, nymphs du pave, Cyprians, harlots, sporting women, Magdalens, and scarlet women). Of course, these terms reflect the elaborate language and entertaining style found in many 19th-century news reports. But the multiple synonyms also suggest that vice occupied an important place in the city’s culture.

The space the press devoted to the demimonde reveals vice’s importance, too. Just after the Civil War, St. Paul’s newspapers had four pages, of which local news might fill a column and a half. Yet editors found space for sensational stories about vice. Mary E. Robinson—a notorious madam—was a central figure in two trials: in 1870, she sued George Crummey for burning her brothel; in 1872, she was charged with assault and sued for damages by the wife of a prominent attorney. Each trial lasted four days; the Pioneer devoted almost seven columns to the first trial and ten columns to the second.

Scandal sold newspapers, and circulation was important in a small city with three major daily papers. Each editor denied dwelling on scandals, even as he accused his competitors of pandering to their readers.

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THE OFFICES of two St. Paul newspapers, as shown in the 1874 Andreas Atlas
During one feud the *Pioneer* labeled the *Dispatch* “the acknowledged and undisputed organ of [the brothels]” and “a receptacle of filth,” “indulging in habitual vulgarity, lewd slang, and obscenity.” The *Dispatch* retaliated by attacking the “bawdy” morning paper and hinting that the *Pioneer’s* staff attended brothel housewarmings. In fact, both papers observed the same taboos (against describing sexual activity or giving customers’ names), while actively covering newsworthy events involving prostitutes.

Irony let editors avoid taking a stand on the moral and legal issues raised by regulation. The *Pioneer*, for example, reported that “Mrs. Mary E. Robinson . . . made herself interesting to Judge Malmros, at the Police Court, yesterday morning, by depositing with him $67.50, for the use and benefit of the city of St. Paul. Her benefactions are made with such regularity once each month; and are of such a character and size as to cause her to be held high in the estimation of the christian people of this city.” Such reportage served several ends: it gave readers facts while entertaining them; it acknowledged the apparent contradiction between regulation and morality; and it did not take sides in this debate.

The newspapers were ambivalent toward regulation. On one hand, they acknowledged the policy’s practical advantages—if vice could not be eradicated, it could at least be controlled, “looked in the face.” On the other hand, many stories included editorial asides that chided the hypocrisy of tolerating vice: “Such things can’t be allowed in St. Paul—not much.” These conflicting stances did not represent changes in the editors’ attitudes; contradictory comments appeared in news stories throughout regulation’s operation. Perhaps editors saw prostitution policy as a minor issue that had the potential to raise passions and carve a serious split in the respectable community. Humor could diffuse this tension; in particular, irony placed distance between the commentator and the issue, implying that the matter should not be taken too seriously. By alternating sides and adopting an ironic posture, editors avoided making enemies over a potentially divisive issue.

Reporters sometimes tempered their irony with cynicism about the realities of vice. The *Press* published a lengthy story on August 17, 1873, about a young girl who was tricked into leaving her widowed mother and then “induced to sell her virtue.” Two days later, the *Pioneer* gleefully debunked this “sensational Sunday romance,” exposing the woman as an experienced prostitute who had successfully conned the *Press* reporter with her sad tale. Romanticized stories about vice were the exception; most reporters understood the facts of brothel life. Reformers’ tracts might portray a world of cruel abductors and desperate escapes from brothels, but the newspapers showed prostitutes who, faced with admittedly unattractive choices, deliberately picked vice. Self-serving stories about abduction often merited—and received—cynical examination.

The press, then, followed the lead of others. When reformers attacked vice, the newspapers spoke approvingly of their campaigns and were quick to declare the battle won. Although one well-publicized reform campaign suffered a defeat, the *Pioneer Press* acted as though vice had been eradicated: “Now that the social evil has been set at rest, the subject should be allowed to drop out of the public gaze. Now let the reformer take a whack at the gambling houses and give them a dose of reform.” Similarly, when officials defended regulation, the newspapers acknowledged the system’s virtues, but they qualified their endorsement by insisting that vice be restrained.

While St. Paul newspapers provided the principal forum for debating the city’s vice policy, editors avoided taking sides. Coverage of respectable people—both regulation’s critics and its defenders—was invariably sympathetic; the papers expressed support for each position in turn. But the press continually nudged the debaters toward more moderate positions that...
might offer a consensus. The artful use of irony further obscured the differences among reformers, officials, and the press. If the press had a clear position, it was that vice policy should not become an issue over which the community split.

A RECURRING THEME in the press coverage of vice was costume. The madams' monthly courtroom appearances always drew crowds of spectators. But if respectable people watched to reaffirm their moral superiority over the prostitutes, the women had their revenge. They used the trials as opportunities for conspicuous display, which the newspapers described in detail. Florence Campbell faced the court in "gorgeous style. Her white dress fluttered in the breeze like the main sail of the Great Eastern. Her delicate wrists were surrounded by immense gold chain bracelets, while depending from her graceful neck and falling over the front of a heavy black silk basque, was a monstrous gold chain." While the madams' clothes received the most attention, news stories occasionally described the outfits of ordinary brothel inmates: "from a jaunty black chip hat, adorned with feathers and ribbons, there depended a dotted gauzy veil... A neat green dress with a genteel black sack and neat fitting gloves, with high, brass heeled gaiters completed the toilet of this young lady."11

In part, spending their money on clothing reflected the realities of the migratory life most prostitutes led. Geographic mobility meant their possessions had to fit in a trunk and, as a consequence, the women bought clothing and jewelry—items they could carry with them. But there also must have been considerable satisfaction in public display. Expensive costumes gave proof that at least the wages of sin were high.

The detail with which the newspapers described prostitutes' outfits reveals the effectiveness of such displays. Proofs of material success from women who had violated the fundamental female responsibility to remain pure and subordinate outraged respectable people. No wonder that Mayor Edmund Rice responded to antivice reformers by ordering the police to arrest prostitutes who appeared in public "in gaudy or flagrantly striking apparel."12

Rice's order was consistent with other official measures to circumscribe prostitutes' behavior. A St. Paul ordinance forbade "any woman of evil name or fame, to ride in any buggy, carriage or other vehicle in the city of St. Paul, or voluntarily walk or appear in company with any person upon the streets of said city, or enter into any saloon, restaurant or eating house." Police frequently arrested prostitutes riding in carriages, but the newspapers still found it necessary to remind officers of their duty. After two inmates caused a

11 Pioneer, quoted, Aug. 5, 1870; see also May 2, 4, 1868, April 22, June 16, 1870, April 22, Oct. 4, 1871; Pioneer-Press, quoted, April 19, 1876; see also July 20, 1875, Dec. 21, 1878, April 2, June 2, 8, 1881.
12 Pioneer-Press, June 14, 1881.
drunken disturbance on the road to Lake Como, the Pioneer complained that prostitutes "go out in large numbers on Sunday and make the woods ring with their drunken, licentious revelry. It is time the offensive conduct was stopped."  

Such expressions of outrage indicate the importance respectable people placed on segregating vice. To be sure, prostitutes were not arrested every time they appeared on the street; most arrests involved women who were drunk or disorderly in public. But even orderly behavior was forbidden when it intruded too far into the respectable world. Prostitutes could attend performances at the opera house—if they sat in the rear. They could not, however, hide behind masks and mingle with respectable people at masquerade balls. The police explicitly outlined these rules. Such restrictions aimed at maintaining a physical, as well a symbolic, separation of vice from virtue. By dressing colorfully and invading public settings, the prostitutes demanded the attention that the respectable world sought to deny them.  

IF prostitutes were constrained in public, they had greater freedom inside the brothel. There the madams had further opportunities for conspicuous display. During Christmastime, they hosted housewarming parties, serving wine to guests, including selected members of the respectable community. When Emma Lee held a reception to celebrate reopening her brothel after she spent six months in prison, eight uniformed police officers attended. Forbidden from mixing at outside entertainments, prostitutes responded by inviting guests to their own gatherings.  

The luxurious brothel, furnished tastefully at great expense, is part of the myth of Victorian prostitution. Certainly, the furnishings in St. Paul's better brothels were costly. The drawing rooms at Maggie Morse's house were "more elegantly furnished than any private suite of apartments in the city, the velvet carpets, rich furniture, elegant curtains and other accessories, with-  

out the piano forte, costing upwards of $1,500." (During this time, the city's chief of police earned only $1,200 per year.) The newspapers pandered to their readers' eagerness to learn about the madams' extravagance. After Mary Robinson's brothel burned, the Pioneer and the Press took the extraordinary step of itemizing $8,961 worth of lost personal property that Robinson was claiming for her insurance.  

Trappings aside, brothels exist to sell sex, and sellers of illicit goods and service typically seek control over their customers. St. Paul's prostitutes controlled the setting of their sexual exchange; within the brothel, they could stage events to ensure the customers' cooperation. Maggie Morse explained that a successful brothel required disciplined, co-ordinated teamwork: "I never retire until all visitors are gone, and I can tell quickly the difference between men who desire to spend money and those who are only looking around. If I see that they do not intend to spend any money, I give the girls a wink and they leave the room. The fellows then soon become tired of me, and they leave, too."  

The madam gave over-all direction, but individual inmates devised their own methods for attracting the customer's notice. One experienced prostitute found the competition for customers at Kate Hutton's house intense: "being an old stager, she put on a short dress, painted and powdered, and appeared to play the innocent dodge." The brothel's profits depended on successfully manipulating its customers. However much money a man brought with him, the madams and inmates could find ways for him to spend it—drinks and sex cost money, servants and musicians needed tips, and so on. One railroad roustabout reported spending $22.50 during an evening at Henrietta Charles's house, and Mary Robinson boasted that her brothel earned $500 per night.
Customers had little to fear from St. Paul's newspapers. Most stories about prostitutes simply did not refer to the clients. When the story required mentioning them, as when a man created a scene in a brothel, occupations, rather than names, were given. The papers usually referred to lower-middle class or working-class men; railroad roustabouts, soldiers, and traveling salesmen appeared in several stories. In addition to being of modest status, these occupations most likely involved men who lived outside St. Paul. In stories presumably involving local residents, the descriptions became even vaguer—"young men" or "roughs"—depending on their class. The newspapers rarely named customers: predictably, most of the exceptions involved visitors to St. Paul. When a fight broke out in Mary Robinson's house between a group of customers from outside the city and another group from St. Paul, the newspapers identified only the leader of the first group, discreetly avoiding naming any of the local men. Unless a St. Paul resident provoked the attention of the press—for example, by suing a prostitute for stealing his clothes—his anonymity was nearly assured.¹⁹

The newspapers playfully admitted that they were being discreet. One article teased about "respectable females who keep houses where large numbers of single men, of good character, and occasionally a few married men, who also have certificates of good moral character, are accommodated with opportunities for the pursuit of happiness."

Such remarks hinted that the press knew more than it was telling, that it had the power knowledge brings, and that it might use that clout. When Carrie Morrison explained that a valuable ring in her possession was a gift from a married man, the Pioneer smirked: "An interesting question is raised as to who that man is, and how his name would look in print." But these were idle threats; editors sometimes denounced the double standard, but they upheld it.

The double standard was especially apparent when the customers were men of wealth and power. The newspapers occasionally mentioned such customers only as "a prominent ward politician," "one of the city or county officials," and "a well-known merchant." The Pioneer hinted that other customers were state officials, describing the city's madams as women "who dress the best and put on more and richer clothing while the Legislature is in session." These teasing references protected the men's anonymity, just as the authorities sometimes arranged matters to avoid embarrassing revelations about elite customers. "On Thursday night a disgraceful disturbance took place . . . at a low house of evil repute, resorted to by colored people and white promiscuously. It is impossible to obtain the facts of the case as every one that knows anything about them sings mum. It is intimated that two or three 'nice young men' were in the house at the time. They did not appear though yesterday, nor were their names mentioned publicly." The police occasionally threatened to expose the respectable men who caused disorders in brothels, but like the newspapers, the authorities walked a fine line, getting whatever advantage they could from their knowledge, rarely making what they knew public.²⁰

Focusing on customers who belonged to St. Paul's elite distorts the analysis of the brothels' clientele. The assumption that many were men of considerable wealth and power blends nicely with the myth of the Victorian brothel as an elegant salon. But most were respectable men who were outside the elite. Four Chicago prostitutes at Mary Robinson's—generally viewed as St. Paul's most exclusive brothel—left after a short stay; "They expressed supreme disgust with the way matters stand here. They say the place isn't aristocratic enough. In Chicago, they say, their companions were the best men in the city—merchants, bankers, capitalists, first class clerks, &c.—men who wear linen shirts and jewelry. Here, they do not find that class of men among the habitues of their boarding houses, but only a low set, who have plenty of money to be sure, but do not sport the ruffled shirts and jewelry of the class above mentioned."²²

If customers rarely risked exposure, brothel landlords were even safer. The newspapers never named them or even hinted at their identities. Some successful madams owned their buildings, but most rented their houses. Although city ordinance prohibited renting to prostitutes, and reformers occasionally urged that landlords be prosecuted, the police did not enforce that section of the ordinance. Two arguments justified ignoring the landlords: most used rental agents as buffers to separate themselves from their tenants and were not clearly linked to vice; penalizing landlords might be "discriminating in favor of those wealthy courtesans who happen to own the maisons du joie which they occupy." These obviously weak justifications provided a rationale for not implicating landlords who derived substantial profits from vice. In 1881, reformers noted that a madam would pay $1,500 a year to rent a house

²¹ Pioneer, quoted, Feb. 17, 1870; see also Nov. 29, 1865, April 8, 1869; Pioneer-Press, quoted, July 7, 1877; see also Aug. 3, 1876, Oct. 8, 1881, Jan. 19, 1883.
²² Pioneer, quoted, Sept. 4, 1867; see also Sept. 10, 1867, April 22, 1870; Pioneer-Press, Feb. 1, 1881. A manuscript arrest ledger for 1869-74 (kept in the office of St. Paul's chief of police) offers further confirmation that most customers were neither rich nor powerful; it suggests that brothels drew the bulk of their customers from the middle ranks of respectable society. See Joel Best, "Keeping the Peace in St. Paul: Crime, Vice, and Police Work, 1869-74," Minnesota History 47 (Summer, 1961): 242, 244.
which might otherwise earn $300. The high rents carried little risk; the press and the authorities rarely held landlords responsible for their part in the illicit marketplace. Prostitutes were deviant; landlords who profited from prostitution were not.¹³

Nor were landlords the only respectable figures who profited from vice. Brothel customers also patronized other establishments. Traveling salesmen and other visitors to the city stayed in hotels and traded with nearby merchants, in addition to visiting the brothels; even local men ate late dinners in night restaurants. Vice attracted visitors to the city and lubricated the dealings of otherwise respectable firms. “A large percentage of the buying orders of the small town merchant was closed in the saloons or houses of ill fame. This was due to the fact that the small town merchant was snowed in all winter and in the spring when he came to the city to buy his stock of merchandise, he was hungry for a good time.”¹⁴

Some merchants believed that salesmen extended their stays in St. Paul because prostitutes were easily available. One estimate indicated that brothel customers brought St. Paul's hotels an extra $100,000 each year, while other businesses made an additional $50,000. Another estimate put the total extra trade at $60,000 to $70,000 per month. The proprietors of hotels, night restaurants, and other businesses located near brothels acknowledged their vested interest in continued vice, and they spoke in favor of regulation and against prohibition. But, like the landlords, these merchants escaped the condemnation prostitutes received.

ABOVE ALL, brothels were houses in which women served men. Moralists might denounce both the prostitute and her customer but, in practice, the woman bore the burden of condemnation. The sexual ideology of the 19th century saw the prostitute as weak, fallen, deprived. In contrast, there was something natural and masculine—albeit amusing—about the male customer. One reporter recalled, “To be known as having a sporting girl stuck on you was quite a feather in one’s cap, and to have a landlady ‘sweet’ on you was almost as proud a distinction as being knighted by one of the kings of Europe.” Further, men benefited from their respectability, but the prostitute was already labeled as an outcast. The women understood this perfectly; one Washington, D.C., madam complained: “I don’t believe there is a woman living who loves the business. Think what it is, never to be free from fear; never to know at what hour of the day or night we may be dragged into the police court, followed by the rabble, hooting at us or calling us vile names, betrayed, insulted, judged, and convicted by the very men who have made us what we are.”¹⁵

It is difficult to know what St. Paul’s ordinary citizens thought about vice. There are no records of the inevitable everyday encounters in public places, but events in the city’s courts were reported. The police court always drew a crowd when the madams appeared to pay their fines. These spectators’ motives also remain unknown, but the decisions of the all-male juries are revealing. Madams occasionally faced felony vice charges in the District Court. Because vice cases were difficult to prove, these trials usually ended in acquittal—surprising verdicts in light of the madams’ notoriety. Prosecutors and newspapers criticized jurors for their reluctance to convict. The verdicts suggest that citizens viewed the regulatory system’s minor fines as reasonable and were unwilling to impose harsher penalties. This is an inference; jurors, like courtroom spectators, were not quoted in the press. The views of ordinary citizens appear in letters published in the newspapers.¹⁶

St. Paul newspapers did not print many letters to the editor, and relatively few of them discussed vice policy. Those that were published displayed a range of opinions and concerns: many were signed only with initials or a pseudonym such as “St. Peter” making it impossible to know the writer’s sex. And most letters criticized city officials. (This reflects the nature of letters to newspaper editors.) The most common complaint was that the city’s vice policy applied a double standard. “What is sauce for the goose is not sauce for the gander in this case.” Letter writers coined new phrases to describe customers—“the frail brotherhood,” “he strumpserts,” and “fallen men”—revealing, in the process, that the double standard lay embedded in the culture.¹⁷

Just as the many synonyms for “prostitute” showed the women’s cultural visibility, the lack of widely used, invidious terms for customers emphasized their anonymity. Yet, writers to the newspapers charged, respectable men kept the brothels in business: “Hus-
Men make such laws, men violate them, men execute them—but only on women." Another writer asked why officials punished prostitutes while ignoring gamblers, then answered that the former, as women, could not vote. The double standard, then, could be attacked for several reasons: it ignored men's role in causing women to enter vice; it discriminated against women by punishing prostitutes while leaving their customers alone, and it perpetuated a system, staffed by men, which worked to their advantage.  

Additionally, some letter writers—particularly those associated with reform campaigns—attacked St. Paul's system of regulation. The president of Magdalen Home, founded in October, 1873, “for the reformation of fallen women,” appealed: “Christian women, did you know that the city of St. Paul licenses our sisters at ten dollars a month, payable in advance, to sell their souls and bodies to Satan, and if not paid promptly, they are liable to be shut up in the city prison?” In this view, regulation put the city on the level of pimps and madams by giving officials a vested economic interest in vice. Regulation did not just discriminate against women; it exploited them.  

The writers suggested a variety of solutions. People had to recognize the seriousness of the problem: “May our eyes be open to see our duty, and then do all we can to stay this great flood tide of evil.” Respectable people needed to “imitate the Savior” and forgive women trying to reform. At the same time, the letter writers argued that men who frequented brothels should be excluded from respectable society. Customers also needed to reform, and “Christian men” should dedicate themselves to the task, just as respectable women worked with the Magdalen Home’s inmates. Other letters pointed to a need for preventive measures. One thought women would not enter vice if they received higher wages for respectable work. Another argued that urban institutions tempted the young, denouncing a new “beer-hall with girls” as a “kindergarten of prostitution” and a “grammar-school of lust.” Finally, implicit in most letters was a call for stricter law enforcement, against both prostitutes and customers. The writers believed they understood the problem, and their analyses suggested solutions to help end the social evil.  

SOME CITIZENS fought for reform. Between 1870 and 1883, St. Paul was the scene of five crusades mounted by groups of private citizens and a few offi-
cials who found the city's policy morally unacceptable. Resistance to the reformers came from most city officials, the police, and the brothels. The history of these struggles reveals complex relationships between politics and morality, as well as policing and vice.

The first two attacks on regulation came in 1870 and 1874 and have been published in an earlier issue of this journal. One was initiated by Judge Thomas Howard, who presided over the St. Paul police court; the other reform effort was the result of city council action.32

In 1878, the Reverend William McKibbin, the pastor of Central Presbyterian Church, led a third attack on regulation, charging that it made "the community a virtual stockholder in these infamous institutions, increasing its revenues with their prosperity, and filling its treasury with money paid for the privilege of ensnaring the ignorant and the young, and waging war upon the holiest affections and highest interests of society." McKibbin organized some of the city's "most prominent citizens" into the Society for the Suppression of Vice. Its members presented their case before the city council, which appointed a committee to investigate vice policy. The committee's report generally supported the existing policy and emphasized the need to prohibit nonbrothel prostitution, but it ignored McKibbin's criticism that regulation made the city a partner in the vice industry.33

McKibbin's crusaders would not give up. With several reformers among its members, the grand jury heard testimony about the extent of vice in St. Paul. In May, 1879, the jury indicted seven madams and issued a report criticizing the policy of regulation and noting that brothels damaged property values. Judge Westcott Wilkin disappointed the reformers by ruling that, since the madams had already been convicted and punished, their convictions and Emma Lee, the only one of the five still in St. Paul, served six months in prison. Most of the other brothels remained open, but the madams were not subjected to monthly arrests while the city waited for the court decision. Once the verdicts were upheld, Mayor Rice formally announced that regulation made the city a partner in the vice industry.34

The decision was appealed. It took a year for the Minnesota supreme court to rule that the indictments were legitimate. McKibbin had already left St. Paul for a congregation in Pittsburgh, but the madams remained in the city. The Pioneer Press heralded a new era: "It can now be considered settled that St. Paul is to have no more houses of prostitution." But less than two weeks later, the same paper printed a short item: "The madames who manage the houses of ill-fame were hauled up as usual . . . to make their regular contributions to the exchequer of the city." After 30 months, the reformers had won their battle, but they were apparently too exhausted and, without McKibbin's leadership, too disorganized to pursue the further indictments needed to win the war.35

The fourth attack on regulation reflected economic interests rather than moral conviction. St. Paul's principal vice district stood between downtown and the respectable residential neighborhood growing around Irving Park, southwest of the city. In July, 1881, a committee of property holders, reportedly owning over $400,000 worth of real estate in the area, campaigned to rid their district of vice. The committee, which included at least three lawyers, emphasized that it was not trying to prohibit prostitution; it just wanted the houses driven away from that particular neighborhood. When the city government failed to respond, the Irving Park committee turned to the grand jury for another investigation of vice. In October, 13 madams were indicted "for the crime of keeping houses of ill-fame."36

The new trials got off to a promising start when juries quickly convicted Emma Lee and Nellie Otis. The next three hearings went less well: Kitty Smith was convicted, but only after lengthy deliberations, Carrie McCarthy's trial ended in a hung jury; and Kitty France was acquitted. The prosecutor began the next case against Ray Lawrence but gave up in the middle of the trial, complaining that the reluctance of witnesses to testify and the difficulty of obtaining jurors made further trials impossible. The remaining cases were dropped, and the three convicted madams appealed. Eventually, the state supreme court upheld their convictions and Emma Lee, the only one of the three still in St. Paul, served six months in prison. Most of the other brothels remained open, but the madams were not subjected to monthly arrests while the city waited for the court decision. Once the verdicts were upheld, Mayor Rice formally announced that regulation would resume, and in January, 1883, the madams returned to the municipal court.37

The fifth attack on regulation was led by Christopher D. O'Brien, St. Paul's mayor from 1883 to 1885. O'Brien, who ran for office with the support of reform leaders, was elected without opposition after a quiet campaign. His first actions as mayor, however, were controversial: he announced that he would strictly enforce the city ordinances dealing with liquor, gambling, and prostitution. O'Brien ordered the brothels closed.38
O'Brien's reforms met stiff opposition. Juries resisted convicting prostitutes on felony charges. More important, some merchants objected to the new enforcement, complaining of substantial losses. The city council debated O'Brien's policy only two months after it took effect. Opponents of reform charged that, in addition to damaging trade, prohibition had scattered prostitutes throughout the city to work out of private rooms or as streetwalkers, had increased the incidence of venereal disease by making the women afraid to consult physicians, and had corrupted young men who "would blush to be seen entering such a house, but were readily drawn into rooms."

The mayor and his supporters argued that prohibition was effective. There was no evidence of widespread activity by streetwalkers or roomers, they claimed, and venereal disease did not appear to be increasing. The efforts to re-establish regulation through the city council failed, and O'Brien's reform remained in effect throughout his two years in office.

Under O'Brien, the police visibly struggled to keep the town "closed." O'Brien did not run for re-election in 1885, but vice policy became a central issue in the campaign. Former mayor Edmund Rice, an advocate of regulation, won the election, receiving 62.1 percent of the vote citywide, and 70.6 percent in those election districts which had contained regulated brothels before O'Brien took office. Rice's decision to reinstate a policy of regulation for the brothels did not meet loud opposition. Once more the familiar names of Pauline Bell, Ray Lawrence, Emma Lee, and Alice Percy reappeared monthly on the court docket, charged with keeping houses of ill fame. All had been madams before O'Brien's election, and presumably they had managed to operate their brothels throughout his term of office. Thus, even the fifth and most successful reform campaign failed to disrupt permanently St. Paul's illicit marketplace for vice.

REFORM LEADERS like Judge Howard and Mayor O'Brien were exceptions; most St. Paul officials defended the system of regulation. It offered a middle path, a practical way of avoiding the problems posed by both laissez faire and aggressive enforcement. As police detective John B. Bresett replied to a question from a grand juror about streetwalking, "There is some, but not half nor a quarter as much as there would be if the regular houses were broken up. Then it would be forced into nooks and corners. There is no doubt the best way is to manage to cage the evil up in some location in the city where it would least disturb people and where the legal authorities could exercise a controlling influence over it."

Reformers denounced regulation for tolerating immorality, but officials countered that, by giving the police a practical method of controlling vice, regulation offered morality its best protection. Reformers complained that regulation violated the intent of state and local statutes aimed at prohibiting vice, but the officials interpreted the policy as consistent with the law. For instance, officials carefully distinguished between regulation and licensed prostitution. They had no legal power to (and did not) license illicit enterprises; regulation, however, involved their legal powers to arrest and sanction offenders. If most acts of prostitution did not lead to arrests, that reflected the paucity of sworn complaints against the brothels. Whenever a citizen swore a complaint, the police made an arrest. Critics who demanded that the police make more arrests on their own initiative were unreasonable; the po-

MAYOR Christopher D. O'Brien, 1884

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lice had other duties and could not devote all their time to vice. Officials also warned that aggressive law enforcement might invite abuses of police power. When Judge Howard urged that the police make daily vice arrests, Mayor William Lee warned against placing "these unfortunate women . . . entirely at the mercy of . . . the police force." On still other occasions, police officers hindered efforts to obtain felony vice indictments. When testifying before grand juries, some officers gave evasive answers, claiming ignorance about activities in the brothels. In contrast, police routinely testified about the brothels during the monthly trials in the municipal court. Officials, then, interpreted the law so as to maintain the system of regulation and block reform efforts.

Reformers sometimes charged that officials regulated vice as a source of income. While money did flow into the city's treasury, the madams' fines represented only a tiny fraction of St. Paul's revenue. Moreover, the officials who repeatedly defended regulation on several grounds never mentioned its value as a money source. Overall, the evidence supports the conclusion that officials regulated vice largely because they found it an effective means of social control.

Exposes of 19th-century urban life contrasted the sunlit, respectable upperworld with a shadowy, deviant underworld. But in St. Paul, vice was never completely hidden from view. Respectable citizens had various links to the city's brothels, and the issue of how to respond to vice was repeatedly a focus of public debate.

The continued tension between respectable people who benefited from vice and those who demanded that vice be eradicated was managed in three ways. First, the police had the responsibility, authority, and expertise to deal with vice. To them, prostitution posed practical—not economic or moral—problems such as violence, theft, and other sorts of disorder. So they chose regulation as a practical solution to their practical problem. They were not sympathetic to reformers' demands that prostitution be prohibited, yet the reformers' proposals inevitably made the police responsible for eliminating vice.

Second, the press, which provided a common forum for discussing public issues, used irony to minimize the threat vice posed for civic harmony. By treating vice and vice policy as humorous, the press made differences seem less serious and turned a moral issue into part of the human comedy.

Finally, 19th-century sexual ideology focused attention on particular aspects of prostitution. Reformers occasionally may have denounced the double standard, but most people continued to define prostitution as an offense committed by women. The police ordinarily did not arrest customers or landlords, the newspapers did not report their names, and reformers—for all their talk—took no concrete steps toward embarrassing these men. On the other hand, prostitutes found themselves outside the boundaries of respectability. They were ruined, soiled, fallen, deviant. Public degradation is one of the standard mechanisms by which respectability is reaffirmed, and spectators turned out to watch the women's appearances in St. Paul's courtrooms. Occasional declarations of sisterhood aside, respectable women also kept their distance from the women who worked in brothels. The threat of contamination through contact with deviants hampered calls for reform. Basic assumptions about femininity, purity, and decency provided the context within which vice met respectability.

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\[\text{Pioneer, quoted, July 30, 1870; see also April 22, July 28, 1870; Pioneer-Press, Mar. 6, 10, 1878, May 14, 1879, July 23, 1881.}\]