

# From Regulated to Celebrated Sexuality

## Can-Can Girls and Gold Diggers of the Klondike 1898-Present

by Bay Ryley

*Cet article trace le portrait des femmes qui sont déménagées au Yukon pendant la ruée vers l'or du Klondike afin de trouver du travail.*

*L'auteure examine comment la perception publique des rôles sexuels changent avec le temps.*

*I have read something about this dance-hall in*

*magazines.... Evidently it was run during the gold rush by a wealthy American called Arizona Charlie who was in pursuit of more wealth by providing the boys with liquor, gambling, and other diversions for a price.... There are accounts of painted dancers and other ladies who were present as an adjunct to such an establishment...and now this dance hall, or theatre as the Minister prefers to call it, has been declared an historical site, a shrine, or a monument and I want to know why.... (House of Commons debates, 22 March 1962; Opposition MP MacMillan's question regarding the proposed reconstruction of the Palace Grand Theatre to attract tourists to Dawson City).*

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dered their gold poke on gambling and dance-hall girls.

The reconstruction of the Palace Grand Theatre in 1962 was the first of several elaborate federal government initiatives. Today, Dawson City is a full-scale tourist town, which invites tourists to "relive those brash exciting times" of the gold rush. The Palace Grand offers a vaudeville-style Gaslight Follies "reminiscent of the turn of the century shows that early Dawsonites saw." Likewise, visitors can gamble and "enjoy the same kind of honky tonk entertainment with can-can girls and elaborately costumed chanteuses" at Diamond Tooth Gertie's Gambling Hall (Dawson City Attraction and Service Guide).

Since tourism often depends on creating or at least enriching an "authentic" past, it is useful to interrogate the images projected from particular regions about historical events. The prominence of the gold rush in the presentation of Yukon history has had the effect of leaving the histories of First Nations peoples on the periphery, as it suggests that history began when white people entered the region in search of material prosperity. Further, the corollary of this enticing adventure story of brave men battling the Yukon wilderness, striking gold claims, drinking, gambling, and taming brazen dance-hall girls is a distinct sexual reputation of the gold rush. Can-can girls, are, of course, the representatives of this wantonness.

There seems to exist some confusion over the reality of the sordid aspects of the gold rush, however. Can-can girls have been mistaken for the dance-hall girls who danced with men and were paid commission on the drinks sold in each establishment. Without meaning to sabotage local lore, there is much doubt as to whether the can-can was ever actually part of

the line-up in the Klondike entertainment scene. It has been suggested that these dancers did not take to the stage until the early 1960s, when plans for developing tourism by highlighting the Yukon's exciting gold rush past were initiated.

Many Yukoners today are searching for an antidote to the prominence of the can-can girl in the presentation of Yukon history. In terms of documenting non-Native migration to the Yukon, the work of some women historians strives to include the voices of Klondike women whose experience may have been "banal rather than scandalous" (Kelcey 202). Despite the importance of broadening the historical perception of women's participation in the gold rush by divulging the disappointing (or reassuring) news that not all the women who came to the Klondike in 1898 were dance-hall girls or prostitutes, this strategy has its limitations. What seems to result is a plethora of accounts of the lives of "respectable" white, middle-class women such as Martha Louise Black and Laura Berton. Before we strike all women of ill-repute from the historical record, or boo the can-can girls off the stage, I think it is worth investigating their eminence further. One ambition of this article is to offer a profile of the actual women who "mined the miners" and who are subsequently a mainstay of gold rush myth. In the process, the manner in which conceptions of public sexuality in the hub of the Klondike gold fields changed over time will be examined. As a predominantly male-populated, northern frontier-mining community, Dawson City struggled with its rough and rowdy status before settling into a calmer post-rush phase by 1902. Nearly one hundred years later, contemporary Dawson capitalizes on this reputation to allure visitors.

At the time that the town of

When the Diefenbaker government began prospecting for tourists to renew a fading Dawson City, Yukon of 1959, they chose to restore what must surely be the most lascivious of Canadian national historic sites—a dance-hall from the Klondike gold rush. For a brief, but tantalizingly exciting time, the Palace Grand is said to have echoed raucous laughter and the clink of poker chips and champagne glasses, as miners in from the creeks squan-

Dawson instantly emerged with the onset of the rush, the newspapers responded to this boomtown with exciting and descriptive accounts, attempting to familiarize their readers by comparing Dawson to other places or regions. According to the San Francisco *Examiner*, Dawson had surpassed all other North American mining camps:

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*The Commissioner regarded prostitution as being absolutely necessary under certain conditions.*



Dawson is gold, whisky, and women in a riotous whirl. Not Leadville in vermilion heyday, nor Tombstone with the lid off, nor San Francisco in the flush of '49, had more picturesqueness than this camp has today..." (qtd. in Guest 1985)

The more ambitious accounts (such as in *le Temps* of Paris) heralded a northern metropolis reaching international fame: "La nouvelle cité a pris la nocturne de Paris, la croissance spontanée et la fébrile activité de Chicago. Cosmopolite autant que Rome..." (qtd. in Guest 1978: 13). But although Dawson may have had a metropolitan air to it in 1898, in reality it was still a rapidly populating, frontier-mining town with cramped conditions, limited goods and services, and the lack of the moral regulating bodies of a highly established middle-class population or a consistent police force. Such circumstances surely determined both the visibility of vice in the community as well as its attitude towards regulating it. As Marion Goldman explains in her study of the Comstock Lode in Nevada, a "relative absence of structural constraints" in mining regions makes public the "private" matters of sexuality that become hidden in "more complex, ambiguous contexts" such as large cities (6)

Of the abundance of published memoirs, poetry, and novels about the Klondike gold rush, most convey

this impression that vice was rather immodestly displayed. According to Mary Lee Davis' fictional book *Sourdough Gold*:

...no facet of that myriad-cut life flashed more flauntingly in the public eye. A scarlet coat might serve the embodied Law, but scarlet women were the most notable accents of Dawson's sights and bright lights. A blind man could have sensed their common presence and their influence ... In a wide open town such as Dawson boasted itself, no man or woman or child but some time, in some way, must come in contact with 'the oldest profession'. (183)

Since most of the literature written about the Klondike remains focused on the climate of the initial rush, the nuances of evolving community attitudes over time toward regulating vice are disregarded. What may be considered exaggerated descriptions (for which Robert Service is famous<sup>1</sup>) are rooted in the fact that prostitution was initially tolerated by local authorities and the North West Mounted Police (NWMP), prior to the increasing ratio and political clout of middle-class residents.

In these early years (1898-1901), the existence of prostitution was somewhat accepted, as evidenced by the practices of fining (which came to be more like licensing), bi-weekly medical inspection of the women at a cost to them of \$5, and relegation to a designated "red light" section of town. These were all forms of administering, rather than suppressing prostitution. The Yukon Commissioner William Ogilvie regarded prostitution as being "...like many other evils, considered absolutely necessary under certain conditions" (Yukon Archives 12 September 1990), and resented the "outside" interference by the federal government of the South whom he considered as being out of touch with the realities of a northern mining community.

Not surprisingly, these compara-

tively "tolerant" measures came to the attention of southern moral reform agencies. The "profligate women" of Dawson were of grave concern to the Social Purity Department of the London, Ontario Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). "From a conversation with a lady just returned from the district," together with "reliable information received from other sources," Mrs. Kate Heaman was compelled to write to Minister of the Interior Clifford Sifton on behalf of the WCTU in June of 1900:

We have learned that there are many profligate women there, that are recognized by the authorities, who instead of arresting and punishing them, confine their residence to one portion of the town, which is known as the "lost woman's quarters" and that in the dance-halls, girls are paid commission on all drinks sold over the bar, and all night long induce men to drink.

Further she concludes:

This matter is of deep interest to us all, because as many boys from all parts of Canada are in the mining regions, and make Dawson their permanent or temporary headquarters. For the sake

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of our Motherhood, for the sake of our wifhood, ...for our boyhood, we pray you to act speedily in this matter. (Yukon Archives 27 June 1900)


It is interesting that the WCTU focused on the activities of women "inducing men" to drink, since they usually emphasized male vice when

campaigning against immorality (Strange 261, see also Valverde). Perhaps this change in approach was due to the supposedly distinct nature of the women of the Dawson demi-monde.

While there was no one universal depiction of the Klondike prostitute or dance-hall girl, she was definitely regarded as being of a more assertive nature than her urban sisters. Writing about Toronto at the turn of the

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century, Carolyn Strange describes that "big cities reportedly lured innocents from the stability of their villages into the chaos of urban vice and depravity" (255). In the case of the Klondike,

however, rather than having been unsuspectingly lured to northern Canada, these women appeared to have made a concerted and calculated effort to get there, knowing full well of the occupational opportunities available to them in Dawson City.<sup>2</sup> Just as many men who came to the Klondike had been following other gold and mineral rushes in the Western United States and Cariboo or Cassiar regions in Northern British Columbia, so too had many women. Kitty Henry's (arrested on March 29, 1902) occupation was listed in the police jail record as "following mining camps," in Colorado, Cripple Creek, "etc." (RCMP 29 March 1902). As the police jail records relate, numerous women were prostitutes "by occupation," who as transients, also plied their trade in whichever urban centres they may have found themselves. Maggie Johnson, for instance, had been "maintaining herself at different periods by prostitution" over the time she had lived in Minnesota, Vancouver, Seattle, and, for the four or five years prior to her arrest in February, 1903, Dawson City.

Indeed, these women had come from far and wide. While it is difficult to obtain exact numbers, it is evident that the population in the

Klondike was far from being entirely white, as gold rush myth would have it. The Census of 1901 reveals that the population was quite diverse, in terms of the origins of the people (Census of Canada 1901). Surely, then, the prostitutes reflected this heterogeneous community. Referring to a May 1, 1901 NWMP order for all prostitutes to leave the city limits, the *Nugget* warned, "No dilly-dallying will be tolerated by the police as all must get out—whites, niggers and Japs, the colour line not being recognized in the order."<sup>3</sup> Absent, though, from newspaper reports or any other form of documentation are references to Native women being prostitutes. Yukon historians Ken Coates and William Morrison suggest that there were Native prostitutes before the rush, but that they were "put out of work by the numerous white prostitutes who swarmed to the north after 1897" (110).<sup>4</sup>

Individual incomes must also have varied, although it is difficult to discern the extent to which other courtroom descriptions of "a great show of furs and the rustle of silks" were embellished to fit the construct of gold mining community prostitutes as crafty and capitalizing women. But for Marcelle Martin, Luceille Martin, and Louise Coragod—the denizens of the infamous Bartlett house—this was not just a construct. A 1903 newspaper advertisement situated next to the article about them being sentenced to two months of hard labour announces an auction of the contents of the house. Included in the list of items were "parlour sets of the latest style from Paris," "decorated chamber sets," an "assortment of gold jewellery and diamond rings," and "numerous other fancy articles" (*Klondike Nugget* 14 May 1903). The women raised enough money to pay the \$3,000 bail for John Roberts who was charged with living off the avails of the occupants of the Bartlett house.

On the other end of the scale, the *Nugget* opined in their covering of the case of Frank Salas (charged with living off the avails of Marie Chiviex), that both Marie and his wife ap-

peared in court, "each looking as though her bicycle pathway through life was strewn with carpet tacks" (*Klondike Nugget* 14 May 1903). In many instances, this may well have been the case, as the prostitutes of the Klondike would have faced unwanted pregnancy, physical abuse, alcohol dependency, and other such occupational hazards.

The official sentiment that prostitution was a "necessary" part of the gold rush landscape later shifted to the detriment of those women engaged in the "oldest profession." By 1902, an organized reform movement had taken hold to crack down on the women who had defied a 1901 decree to move out of the town limits and who were either streetwalking or occupying cigar stores or laundry places used as subterfuges for houses of ill-fame. In 1902, conviction rates increased substantially and the *Klondike Nugget* expanded its reportage on the "soiled doves" of Dawson. It is significant that these are amongst the first reports which discussed the presence of women and children—whose absence had shaped the discourse surrounding the regulation of prostitution up to this point. The presentation of "South end interests" to the police committee and Council members reveals that perceptions of public space are clearly determined by gender, race, and class. According to the report, "the women of whom the complaint is made have crowded among the homes without any respect to the decency of their surroundings by their carousals, vile language, and unseemly conduct." Consequently, "Ladies and children are constantly exposed to sights not intended for their eyes" (*Klondike Nugget* 21 October 1902).

The year 1902 marked the purging of those disreputables from Dawson City who had not already left. After 1898, rapid de-population occurred as weary travellers returned home or enthusiasts joined the exodus to other gold strikes—Nome, Alaska in 1901 and the Tanana River (Fairbanks) in 1903. Almost as soon as it started, Dawson was settling down from the

chaotic days of the gold rush. Dawson was still a miner's town, but the increasing ratio of families to single men, as well as the continued presence of an established police force were signs of a more matured community—at least in social, since not in economic respects.

However, as a sense of composure came over Dawson itself at this time, its reputation from the early days persisted in the novels, poems, mem-

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oirs, and travel brochures which were published in the decades following the event. Surely the civic boosters who were so active in the post-rush period would be horrified to witness the

Dawson of the present actually celebrating the vices of gamblers and painted ladies in their plan of economic development. This points to an interesting question—how does the passage of time allow for a commemoration (of sorts) of apparently unconstrained sexuality? In the case of Dawson, the sexual atmosphere of the past is now a tourist attraction. The fame of the Klondike is benign “family fun,” since the gold rush was a short-lived event that is safely tucked away in the past, unlikely to ever actually re-surface in a northern town with a population of two thousand people. Meanwhile, in her efforts to titillate tourists, the can-can girl (the official symbol of Dawson City) subtly kicks up the dirt from the past of what once was a booming, northern frontier mining-town.

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<sup>1</sup>Known as the “bard of the Yukon,” Robert Service is famous for his poems “The Shooting of Dan McGrew,” and “The Cremation of Sam McGee,” among many others. The heartiness of the men and the “regime of the

dance-hall girl” in Dawson are recurring themes.

<sup>2</sup>The police gaol record listed complexion or peculiarities accordingly. For example, Amanda Manson was “ruddy,” Maggie Johnson “rough and badly kept,” Stella Hunter, “stout” and “determined looking,” and Jennie Mack (a prostitute and dance-hall woman, who was convicted of stealing \$600 in currency from a man at the Gold Bottom Hotel), “a dangerous and unscrupulous woman. PA, RCMP RG 18, D4, v.1, Police Gaol Record 1900-1902 (inconsistent).

<sup>3</sup>Hal Guest writes that the police gaol records reveal “coloured” prostitutes received a month at hard labour in addition to their fines. From my own examination of the records, it appears that many women were sentenced to periods of hard labour, regardless of their colour. This is not to say, however, that there was not discrimination within the prostitute community. Some studies of mining communities in the American West indicate that there was racial stratification, manifested in segregation of (in particular) Black or Chinese prostitutes (see Goldman; Petrak; Butler). <sup>4</sup>This differs from the Cariboo, in which as Sylvia Van Kirk suggests, Native women outnumbered white women as prostitutes. In her estimation, the fact that there were so many Native prostitutes precluded the presence of white prostitutes, whereas Coates and Morrison imply quite the opposite. Part of the answer may lie in Mariana Valverde's contention that “the ‘civilising influence’ of white women settlers [to the West] brought about a lower status for Native women and encouraged their ghettoization in prostitution” (86). It seems that there were more (or at least a higher ratio) of middle-class white women in the Cariboo than in Dawson (at least at the time of the Klondike gold rush). This is an issue which commands further study.

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