

# madam



*Inside  
a Nevada  
Brothel*

Lora  
Shaner

# **Madam**

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*Lora Shaner*

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## Foreword

Prostitution, in one form or another, has been around forever. In our society it's generally looked upon as an aberration, deserving of study by sociologists, psychologists, behaviorists, even the clergy.

Dozens of scholarly tomes have been written about prostitution, offering theories and analyses based on socioeconomic, psychological, or cultural motivation and the social significance of the practice.

This book is not one of them. *Madam* tells the story of prostitution as practiced in a legal, regulated, tax-paying brothel where I talked the talk and walked the walk for five years. I speak from an insider's point of view.

I metaphorically fling open the doors of Sheri's Brothel in southern Nevada and invite the public in to witness incidents that occur daily.

The stories related here are strange, funny, sad, fascinating, disturbing, and sometimes grim. I use the language of the prostitutes and their clients. I tell it like it is with no attempt to clean it up or dumb it down.

My purpose is to tell the truth simply, without trying to analyze or interpret. I don't believe all of life's anomalies can be explained away. They simply exist. Whether they serve a purpose is a matter for each individual to determine.

Those of you who are interested in learning more about

what might be a strange and mysterious lifestyle: Welcome to Sheri's Ranch. You will leave with either a new understanding and compassion or renewed condemnation of the world's oldest profession. Either way, you will have been enlightened.

The events, people and practices depicted in the main body of this work existed at Sheri's Ranch during the period of, and for a few years following, my service there as madam. As it was, the brothel had become a Nevada institution. We, the Sheri's family, closely knit and protective, believed it would never change. And then it did.

Sheri's Ranch was sold in January 2001 and within a few months, its structure and modus operandi took a 180-degree turn. Nothing of the former brothel remained—except its heart. The real stuff of life in a brothel, as everywhere else, exists in its people: the prostitutes, the men who pay for their services, and the vicissitudes that often influence personal choices. These don't change with structural remodeling or policy and procedural revisions. The basic humanity of the people whose stories and points of view are presented in "Part I," remain relevant.

My life as a brothel madam, a fascinating chapter in the story of my long and checkered career, had ended by the time Sheri's Ranch was sold. Although I was a frequent visitor to the new remodeled brothel, I did not take part in its daily operation.

The contents of "Part II—The Way It Is," describing the new facility, was born of close personal observation and many interviews with management personnel and working girls. It reflects the function and fun of the expanded beautified Resort at Sheri's Ranch.

Lora Shaner  
Pahrump, NV

## **A Note to the Reader**

Although my enthusiasm for Sheri's Ranch shows throughout this book, I didn't intend it to be a personal endorsement of this one particular brothel. There are 29 legal brothels operating in Nevada in 2003. I'm not qualified, nor would I want, to critique or compare them. Each has its particular ambience and charm and its own amenities, special perks, and ability to provide customer satisfaction.

# **Part I**

## **The Way It Was**

## A Night in a Brothel

**R**ip and Slash race toward me, their growls as ominous as the rumbling of an earthquake, neck-fur bristling, menacing me with rapier teeth. I stand perfectly still and wait for them to draw close enough to get my scent. They'll recognize me, I hope.

It's almost eleven o'clock and dark in the stretch of Nevada desert in back of Sheri's Ranch. The dim security lights cast spooky shadows. I stash my car in back this night to leave as many spaces as possible in the well-lit guest parking area in front of the brothel. It's Saturday, November 9, 1996. Boxer Mike Tyson has just lost his World Heavyweight Championship Title to Evander Holyfield, a 20-to-1 underdog. I know that the brothel, sixty-four miles northwest of Las Vegas and its casino sports books, is preparing to provide solace-through-sex to the incredulous losers and elaborate celebration parties for the newly flush winners. It promises to be a busy night, a lucrative night for the girls, a highly profitable night for the house, and a non-stop energy-sapping night for the madam – me.

I gird my loins. Figuratively, of course – my actual loins

are never involved. While I wait, motionless, for Rip and Slash to have their sniff and let me pass, I picture triumphant winners with wads of money in every pocket, chomping at the bit to exchange their cash for an hour or two of no-holds-barred carnality.

(Having been married to and impoverished by a compulsive gambler, I don't personally indulge in wagering. But tonight I feel a twinge of regret that I didn't lay down a few hundred on Holyfield.)

I take a deep breath and slowly – very slowly – extend the back of my hand for the dogs to sniff.

“Good puppies,” I say in the sing-song tone one idiotically uses with infants. “Oh, yes, you are, you're such good puppies,” I lie. These dogs are not Muffie and Fifi. At this moment, they're Cujo, and if they don't recognize me, I'm hamburger.

But, luckily, somewhere in their limbic brains, my scent is familiar. They deposit nose prints on my jacket sleeve before trotting back to where they stand guard.

I hear familiar noises the moment I enter the building – deep masculine laughter mixed with girlish giggles, footsteps rushing through hallways back and forth from parlor to bedrooms, and porno-movie sex sounds blaring from television speakers.

“It's been pretty crazy,” Helen, the swing shift madam, says as she hands me her shift reports, “and it looks like it's going to get worse.” She rolls her eyes. I sigh.

Much of the time, running a shift in a brothel is fun and games – rainbows, lollipops, gaiety, laughter, flowing champagne, and Screaming Orgasms (that's a drink, folks). Brothels aren't called “pleasure palaces” for nothing.

Now and then, though, the ghoulies, ghosties, and long-legged beasties go on the prowl (especially after a heavy dose of blood sport) and the house enters a state of perpetual motion that borders on bedlam. This is particularly true during

the aptly named graveyard shift when everything seems to go bump in the night (no pun intended).

How those of us on the receiving end endure the chaos vacillates between genuine good cheer and barely concealed hostility, depending on the mood of the house. And that mood swings – from despondent, when a poisonous miasma plunges all the workers into a blue funk, to ecstatic, when fairy dust seems to float in the air.

The catalysts vary. Money usually sets the girls' moods. On a good day when they've all broken four figures, the brothel is indeed a House of Joy. The girls joke and laugh, a rosy flush tinges their faces, and their eyes widen and sparkle. It is then, at the height of greed fulfillment, that they are the most beautiful.

Looking around the crowded brothel at the beginning of my shift after the Holyfield victory, I see that the girls are very beautiful indeed.

One at a time or in small groups, customers come and go, so to speak, mostly without hassle despite wall-to-wall men impatient for action. I glance into the parlor and see immediately that the situation is reaching critical mass. Soon there'll be a roomful of customers and not enough girls to go around.

The doorbell rings. A limo chauffeur drops off a few passengers in the parlor and disappears into the bar to wait. I'll have to find him later, among the other drivers, to pay his commission. Limo and taxi drivers get a third of the amount their passengers spend. This chauffeur, for example, brings four men to Sheri's Ranch. One chooses Daisy; the second, Gwen; the third, Lucy; and the fourth, Page. The impromptu pairs retire to the girls' rooms, where they negotiate services and price.

Gwen is first to deliver a fistful of money to the office. She hands me four hundred dollars. Since a third of this (rounded off for simplicity) is the driver's commission, Gwen registers two hundred and eighty dollars in the account book. I note

the rest on the driver's commission slip. I'll find him in the bar and pay him as soon as I can.

The bell rings again. I jump up and hurry to the front door. I'm just about to open it when I notice Daisy and Lucy walking through the parlor toward the office with money to be booked into their accounts. I wait until the girls are out of sight, let in two customers and their taxi driver, and seat the guests on a sofa, explaining that I'll be back to attend to them shortly. The driver disappears into the bar. I'll have to find him later, too.

Daisy and Lucy are waiting in the office with their fees. Page is still negotiating. I watch the girls record two-thirds of their money in the receipts register. Again, I must enter the other third on the commission slip, but before I can even reach for the form, the doorbell rings again. Another customer and his driver are waiting to be let in. Page shows up with her customer's credit card and driver's license. I need to compare them and run the card through the machine.

Paid-up customers are impatiently waiting alone in bedrooms while I work feverishly to finish the business and get the girls back to their rooms, but the phone rings and it's some professional athlete who wants to bring up his whole basketball team, but we don't have enough girls to go around so he says okay, never mind, maybe next time and just then Millie sticks her head out of her bedroom door and yells for me to bring a drink to her customer but money is mounting up in the office waiting for me to count and divvy up for drivers' commissions while they wait expectantly for their cash but there are four or five of them in the bar who all look alike so I have to concentrate to determine which driver brought which men and which girls they were with and for how much money and what was a third of the total sum due each driver and did I remember to record his Taxi Authority ID and Social Security numbers so the house can send out 1099 income tax forms at the end of the year but I only have

hundred-dollar bills and the drivers can't (or won't) make change while the customers in the parlor are still waiting for a line-up of girls from whom they can choose a partner but all the girls are already occupied so even if I do call a line-up no one will show up but I can't let the men leave and take their business to the brothel next door so I sweet-talk them into waiting a little bit longer and I should listen to negotiations via the intercom between the girls' rooms and the office but the front door and bar doorbells both ring signaling more customers and more drivers and right now I could use ten more girls and I glance at my watch and, my God, it's only twenty after eleven!

No question — our girls, driven by greed, work hard for their pay. What drives an underpaid madam is a mystery.

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Midnight. One a.m. Two a.m. The men keep coming and coming, more and more of them, all on a bender, a non-stop, no-sleep, booze-fueled bacchanal between the casinos and the brothel. The doorbell rings again. I open it to three more pairs of bloodshot eyes and stubbled chins — and shudder.

Batten down the hatches, girls, rough seas ahead. These three sixty-somethings are all wearing soiled Stetsons, fringed shirts, oversized silver belt buckles, intricately tooled boots, mustaches out to here, and, to top it off, they reek of body odor. I can't read them. They may be wealthy ranchers or reluctantly aging city-dwelling cowboy wannabes.

My girls are tired but I call a full line-up. Two of the men stare at the line of limp ladies and, perhaps fearing the condition is contagious, decline to choose. The third picks Marlene.

I don my earphones in time to hear the man gasp and splutter when Marlene tells him the minimum (a hundred dollars) will buy him a hand job, blow job, or straight lay, period. No cuddling, no touching of body parts (except

condom-covered penis to vagina) and, of course, no kissing.

"Shit," the customer complains. "I never paid more 'n ten bucks for it before!"

Now it's Marlene's turn to gasp and splutter. "Hey, get real," she says. "Does this look like some two-bit, back-street, fuck-'n'-suck, Mexican crib joint?" Then, under her breath, directly into the concealed intercom microphone: "Can you believe this dumb shithead?" Marlene is offended. But the man obviously doesn't have a clue how things work in a legal Nevada brothel where, except for all-night, elaborate, exotic parties that run to Roman-orgy abandon and four figures (cash, not necessarily bodies), what these girls do can be compared with piecework. Every act, except for routine intercourse and fellatio, is separate and individually priced. Minimum payment gets minimum service. Everything additional costs more.

"You want to play with my tits? That's an extra fifty. Suck my nipples? Seventy-five more. Nibble on my toes? Forty bucks. Rub my ass? Fifty. Look at my pussy? Another fifty. Play with it? That'll cost an extra hundred."

Speechless, Marlene's customer stumbles out of her room, his face the picture of disbelief, disappointment, anger, and embarrassment. I open the front door and, without a word, he and his waiting companions walk out.

I'm less than halfway across the parlor before the bell rings again. Two drunks shoulder their way past me, stagger around the parlor bumping into furniture, and begin yelling, "BRING ON THE WHORES!"

This one is easy. I shout over my shoulder, "Bruno! Let in the guard dogs," and open the door wide. "Get out quick!" I yell at the drunks. "The dogs are trained to go for the crotch!" The men stumble out and I lock the door.

I glance toward the bar. Travis, the bartender, having heard my call for "Bruno," a code for trouble, leans against the doorjamb, grinning, "I like your style," he says.

Travis brings his right hand out from behind his back where he'd been concealing a .357 Smith & Wesson. I'm always mesmerized by the sight of the lethal coldly beautiful weapon. Travis pops the cylinder and spills the cartridges into his other hand. It's done quickly, with exquisite efficiency, then he's back behind the bar and the handgun is out of sight.

I let out my breath. "I like *your* style too," I murmur, feeling a twinge of admiration for the man's coolness under pressure, mixed with a certain horror of the weapon's deadly potential.

Three a.m. I'm in the office counting cash, making sure it equals the total of the girls' recorded receipts, when Dorrie waddles in, legs apart like a little girl with wet sand in her bathing suit. Her shoulders slump and her hands press her lower belly. I recognize the body language. The girl's in pain.

She's had thirteen "straight lay" customers in as many hours. She's booked close to three thousand dollars. But by the time her last customer withdraws, she's exhausted and sore. She's had what the girls call a "non-stop cram-jam." The girls take the top position whenever they can, to control the force and depth of the thrusting. But some men refuse to give a girl control; they think maintaining it themselves is more macho. Such a man uses his penis like a ramrod, a weapon, sometimes more to hurt the girl than to experience pleasure. But more often it's because some guys believe the harder they thrust, the more pleasure they bestow upon the lucky recipient of their manly gifts. These men know little or nothing about female anatomy.

Dorrie's final customer of the night has brought his own condom, although the girls usually supply them. Dorrie looks at the package; it's sealed and she recognizes the brand name. She lets him put it on. Within seconds, he's shoved her onto her back and plunged into her. She yelps in pain, wriggles out from beneath him, and stares at the condom. It's covered with hard rubber studs. Her vaginal tissues, already irritated

by thirteen hours of pounding, scream, "No more!"

If a customer is unreasonable, I have to step in and defuse the situation. Luckily, this guy is understanding, so Dorrie manages to convince him how happy she can make him with her "magic mouth" (about which she frequently brags).

After Rubber Studs leaves, I take her off the floor, long enough to let her soak in a bath of Epsom salts.

"What's the matter with her?" asks John, the house manager, as Dorrie and I cross the family quarters toward a private bathroom.

"She's sore."

"Where?"

"Her vagina," I snap, irritated because he ought to know "where." She's had intercourse with thirteen men today."

"So what?" he asks, eyes wide with surprise. "They use all kinds of lubricants!"

I sigh. "We're not talking about a cylinder in an iron engine block," I say. "This is a flesh-and-blood human being and her 'cylinder' is overused and *sore*." As far as I'm concerned, the subject is closed. I take Dorrie into the bathroom and tell her to soak in the tub until she feels better.

John's okay with it. He's wise enough to leave the handling of the girls' personal problems to the madams. I return to the office and again take up my paperwork.

Four a.m. The girls are bone weary; it gets more and more difficult for them to stay awake between customers. They'll fall asleep, telling themselves – and me – that they'll be able to hear the bells and get right up. "Really, *really*, I swear I will. Cross my heart."

Some do. They force their sleepy eyes open and shuffle to the parlor to line up for a customer's inspection at the madam's signal. They sort of hang there, all loose and droopy like marionettes attached to invisible strings.

Others are impossible to wake. Knock on their doors, turn on their lights, call their names, and they merely growl and

pull the sheets over their heads.

It's a judgment call for the madam. If just one or two customers are waiting and I have enough girls awake to give the men a fair choice, I'll let the grumpy ones sleep. I learned early on not to touch them to get them up. Once, I shook a girl's shoulder when she didn't respond to anything else. She threw up an arm and hit me—hard—above my right eyebrow. She later apologized and said it was an accident. I was furious. I told her if that kind of "accident" happened again, I'd smack her right back with the S&M paddle.

Tonight, even a little past four, I still need a full line-up. I'm relentless. I get every one of the girls up and into the parlor. They glare at me from the line-up; I smile back.

Four-thirty a.m. I'm fading fast. I don't do a lot of graveyard shifts. They're killers. They screw up my circadian rhythms and strange things happen to me.

At five a.m., my energy plummets to zero. I'm cold and fuzzy-headed. Luckily, the house has finally quieted down a little, although it's not entirely empty of customers; there are still doorbells and line-ups and we get through them by rote. Half asleep, the girls want nothing more than to get the customers *off* so the madam can get them *out*.

Five-fifteen a.m. Betty turns a disgruntled customer over to me and hurries back to bed. My energy and tolerance levels have hit rock bottom and I don't need a pre-dawn hassle. I can hardly wait for this guy to go so I can wrap myself in a sweater and sit still. I open the front door for him and a gust of wind hurls icpick grains of sand at my face. I groan.

"Madam," the man says, refusing to step over the threshold, "I'm not satisfied."

Aw Christ, I think, not now! It's too damned late and I'm too damned tired.

"What's the problem, sir?" I ask, hoping it's just the standard post-coital grousing we hear every so often—mostly from married men who, now that the blood has returned

from their penises to their brains, don't know how they're going to tell their wives where the money went.

This one leans into my face and describes the source of his discontent as earnestly as a mugging victim would describe his ordeal to a cop.

"I paid that girl so I could suck her toes, okay?" he says.

I nod.

"I said I'd let her know when I'm ready to come, okay?"

I nod again.

"So I'm straddling her, see? I'm up on my elbows and knees, okay? And while I'm sucking her ... tuh ... toes ... she keeps playing with my cock, okay?" He's beginning to stammer and his voice is growing shrill.

"Sir," I sigh, "could you just, well, come to the point?"

He keeps shifting his weight from one foot to the other, tapping his toes nervously. I decide this guy has a major foot fetish.

"No, no, you gotta understand," he whines. "I keep telling her don't ... tuh, tuh, touch my cock ... okay?" His head is leaning in to me too closely, violating my personal space, and my patience is gone. I step backward.

"Okay, okay! The point! What's your point?"

"The point is, I kay ... kay ... *came* before I sucked her, uh, toes enough to *satisfy* me, okay? ... And she may ... may ... *made* me, uh ... get dressed ..." he takes a deep breath "... and kicked me out—okay?"

The man is red-faced and huffing.

"And you want ...?" I raise my eyebrows and gaze at him quizzically. My voice is low and controlled.

"I didn't get what I paid for. I want half my money back!" Period. Not a stutter or a stumble. Is he waiting for me to say, "Okay?"

"Wait a minute. Time out." I form the T-signal with my hands. "I want to make sure I understand the full extent of this problem. You paid the hundred-dollar minimum, you

were with a girl for at least half an hour, you played footsie, and you had an orgasm. Is that correct?"

I have on my incredulous are-you-insane-or-just-stupid mask. His face flushes and he starts stuttering again.

"Yeah. For that ... that ... that kinda money I shoulda been able to suck her tuh ... tuh ... toes ... well ... uh ... until I was ready. Buh ... buh ... but ..."

He heaves a great sigh and stops. His voice doesn't trail off. His words just stop.

He must be crazy to think he's going to get his money back from a brothel after he's been with a girl for half an hour – and I can't deal with a nut case right now.

"Sir, I'll tell you what," I say, all icy voice and don't-mess-with-me eyes. "Our complaint department is open from nine a.m. to five p.m. Put all this in writing and submit it, in triplicate, between those hours on any weekday. Include your name, address, Social Security, driver's license, and telephone numbers and our complaint manager will schedule you to appear before the Board of Review ..."

His mouth is hanging open.

"... within the next thirty days."

The man stares at me. I stare back, frozen-faced.

"You're putting me on," he says.

"Not at all."

The staring contest lasts another five or six seconds. Then he sighs, shakes his head, and steps over the threshold into the parking lot.

I plod back to the office to wait for some restorative sunshine.



Six a.m. The bar closes. By that time, men who come to the brothel have usually had enough to drink and bar business is slow. If a customer asks for a drink between six a.m.

and the reopening of the bar at two p.m., the madam pours it for him, as long as he's not already drunk.

I sit quietly, looking out the office window toward the east, waiting for the morning magic to begin. By degrees, like stage lights coming up slowly from black to brilliant, dawn peels layers of darkness from the earth. The light pours through my eyes to the pineal gland deep in my brain, stimulating the production of serotonin. All my sluggish neurotransmitters wake up and begin to hum and spark and sizzle again. By the time my graveyard shift ends at seven a.m., my aching body is screaming to be put to bed, but my mind is revitalized. (A quick game of chess this morning, Mr. Kasparov?)

And therein lies the problem. Sleep is out of the question when the brain is filled with Mexican jumping beans.

"Drink camomile tea," I'm told.

"Have a shot of brandy."

"Smoke some pot."

"Take some 'ludes."

Trouble is, I don't drink tea; I can't handle alcohol in the morning; I tried pot, inhaled, and didn't like its effect; and I wouldn't know a Quaalude from a cough drop.

This particular night, after the amazing Tyson-Holyfield upset and being bombarded by a great unwashed band of boxing Bozos, I know it might take me hours to get to sleep. When I get home, I'll have to reread the part of *Remembrance of Things Past* in which Proust takes a week to describe the veins in a leaf. (Yawn.) Then I'll put on my tightest eyeshade to foil the sun and fool the brain and try to doze off.

Right now, though, in my mind, I play a rerun of our nonstop night. I dispatched the few creeps and weirdos without much ado. The money's been great for the house, the majority of customers polite and generous, and the girls happy, satisfied, and asleep. In addition, they got an unex-

pected bonus tonight: Convicted-rapist Mike Tyson finally got his comeuppance.

It's a different story seven months later when Tyson chews off a chunk of Holyfield's ear during the third round of the rematch and the fight is stopped. On this night, Sheri's customers are sparse and subdued by brothel standards. The girls, stunned along with the rest of the public, know that the mood will curb the flow of celebratory cash. And it does.

But talk of Tyson having sabotaged his career gives the girls—so many of them victims of childhood rape—some comfort. In the immediate aftermath of that strange and shocking incident, their hatred for rapists shimmers with a primitive and terrible intensity.

## How Long Has This Been Going On?

**S**exual bartering has been going on since the first cave woman hefted a hunk of woolly mammoth meat, nodded “okay” to the waiting hunter, and bent over to offer payment for his goods with her services. It was a beautifully simple, clean, and uncomplicated transaction.

The practice of bartering for goods and services has been commercially successful for eons:

Israelite to neighbor: “You covet my ass? I’ll swap it for a cow and two lambs.”

King Saul to David: “Wanna marry my daughter? Bring me a hundred Philistine foreskins and you can honeymoon in the Moses bedroom.”

But there’s always someone who can’t leave well enough alone. Around three thousand years ago, some nerd in a think tank in Lydia, near Greece, came up with the idea that it would be terrific for the world economy (and create millions of jobs, from café cashiers to financiers) if goods and services were paid for with a commodity called money. So in 700 B.C., the Lydians began minting gold coins. All hell broke loose and nothing’s been the same since.

Money, as we know, became the root cause of most of

the problems in the world. But it also became the engine that turns the wheels of commerce—in the caverns of the Stock Exchange, the casinos of Las Vegas, and the cathouses of Pahrump.

Although some bartering still goes on (to the dismay of the IRS), it's a dying practice that has long since been absent from the brothel scene. (It continues to be part and parcel of the marital-sex arrangement, of course.)

Bartering used to be an accepted practice in the whorehouse business of the Old West. Farmers from remote settlements would stop by a brothel on their long trips to the metropolitan markets with their produce and farm animals. They'd barter their goods for sexual services and leave behind all sorts of large and small barnyard creatures to wander about the brothel grounds, sometimes outnumbering the human occupants. The story goes that customers began calling these brothels "ranches" as a joke and the name stuck. Now many brothels, including Sheri's, continue to tack "Ranch" onto their names—even though they never have, and never will, swap sex for chickens.

(Brothels now operate on a cash-only basis; fail-safe negotiable instruments like traveler's checks and credit cards are also accepted, with ID. The name Sheri's Ranch does not appear on the credit-card charge slips or bills. We're careful to protect our customers' anonymity.)

So sex, used as an instrument of barter once upon a time long long ago, was a simple transaction, free of rules, regulations, restrictions, recriminations, and divorce attorneys.

Then, as populations exploded and societies formed separate factions with different cultures and customs, it became necessary to institute control over individual actions and behavior. And that was good, because anarchy leads to mob rule, chaos, nihilism, and other nastiness.

The only trouble was (and still is) that government, mostly at the urging of religious interests, began to pry into

its citizens' private lives in an attempt to regulate "morality," however it might have been defined. And sex became the first human activity caught in and bogged down under the ever-widening umbrella of government-dictated morality. Marriage, which became the universal norm, was supposed to keep the pesky practice of sex under control and legitimize whatever offspring might result.

Volumes have been written by theologians, philosophers, and sociologists about sexual conduct and how it fits into categories such as "right," "wrong," "moral," "immoral," "good," "evil," and other dualities that have done far more to create and sustain guilt and fear than harmony and fulfillment. Thus sex, once employed as a perfectly natural and pleasurable means of exchange in and of itself, became less easily available and more expensive.

But it didn't happen overnight.

At first, it was necessary to classify the act itself: marital sex (legitimate) or extra-marital sex (immoral). The practice of the latter was decreed a sin against divine law, a vice in violation of earthly law, and when exchanged for ... (gasp!) ... (choke!) ... money, it became "prostitution" – an abomination to be condemned.

Still, this didn't sit well with everyone who had the power and influence to dictate societal morés. A few fat-cats of the time declared that extra-marital sex fulfilled some socially desirable purpose besides mere sexual gratification. For example, the tablets and inscriptions of the Sumerians, dating back to 4000 B.C., describe prostitutes as respected companions and even "temporary wives."

Ancient Greeks created the *hetaerae*, the high-class call girls of their time, distinguished from "common prostitutes" by their education in the arts, their availability only to rich and powerful men, and their capability to provide intellectual companionship as well as entertainment with or without their clothes on.

Demosthenes, the esteemed Athenian orator and statesman, went around the city (circa 300 B.C.) explaining that “man has the *hetaerae* for erotic enjoyments, concubines for daily use, and wives to bear and bring up children.” (Simply substitute today’s “call-girls” for *hetaerae* and “mistresses” for concubines.)

At about the same time, prostitutes were attached to the temples and used in religious and festive ceremonies attended by rulers and visiting priests. The money they earned was donated back to the temples – which made it all right.

In 16th and 17th century India, all the temples featured “dancing girls” – the kind who could perform vertically or horizontally at the whim of the priests.

And, of course, we all know of the Japanese geisha girls, not always open to outright prostitution, but ... available, in one fashion or another.

The American prostitute is a relatively new phenomenon and not much is recorded of the role of prostitutes in this country’s earliest days. Not surprising, really. The country was settled by straitlaced, uptight, prudish Puritans from England who went about pretending that their upper lips were the only part of them that ever got stiff.

But prostitution has always grown and spread in direct proportion to the size and complexity of the society in which it existed. So, as America grew, prostitution flourished. A strange paradox – the bigger and more powerful the social order, the more entrenched the institution it condemns.

Nowhere in the United States did prostitution blossom more fully and conduct itself more openly and lustily than on the American frontier. Hundreds of thousands of men pushed westward in pursuit of gold, silver, and land. They lived under the most primitive conditions in hostile country where whiskey flowed in more abundance than water. These men worked hard, drank hard, and fought hard. They missed the civilizing influence of women. They were also horny.

It followed that the first women, other than a few reluctant wives, to join these frontiersmen in the hostile and unsettled West were prostitutes seeking money.

Women of the 1800s had little choice but to depend on men for support. Spinsters were provided for by fathers and brothers who could afford to take care of them; married women relied on the earning ability of their husbands. In the poorer classes, women worked hard at household chores, bore many children, scrimped, saved, sacrificed, and died young. It was the rare woman, at that time, who had the education and skill to support herself in any respectable occupation.

Although some unmarried women lived comfortably on inherited money, many single women who found themselves on their own drifted into prostitution in order to survive.

For a while, the prostitutes (who put their own interpretation on the clarion call, Westward Ho!) lived among the men in these frontier towns, entertaining them (and often caring for them when they were sick or wounded) in simple shacks or "cribs." Some worked in saloons and accommodated their customers in rooms upstairs.

But then, the "good" women began to appear. They came in caravans of covered wagons, enduring tremendous hardships along the way and, once arrived (followed closely by the clergy), they demanded that the prostitutes be run out of town. Since the respectable women were either wives of the married frontiersmen or marriage material for the bachelors, the very men who had enjoyed the services of prostitutes complied with the ladies' demands.

"Red-light districts" were now relegated to distant areas out of sight of decent townsfolk and kept there by lawmen who made frequent trips to the edge of town to make sure its official limits remained unsullied. Sometimes it was a long dusty horseback ride back to the new brothel enclaves and the lawmen had to stay a day or two to recover and ready

themselves for the long ride home.

This was pretty much the story in the fledgling state of Nevada in the late 1800s; an uneasy, but relatively peaceful, coexistence prevailed among the townsfolk and the whorehouses. As long as the women of the latter stayed out of sight, they were tolerated by the former. As towns grew and populations increased, the houses, too, flourished.

At the beginning of the 20th century, red-light districts were common in Nevada. When Las Vegas was founded in 1905, prostitution, along with drinking and gambling, flourished in a small sanctioned area known as Block 16, with a line of cribs facing a downtown street. "The Line" was as much a magnet for male visitors as the saloons and faro tables. Neither the gambling nor the girls were totally legal, but neither were they strictly illegal.

Block 16 outlasted the state's 1911 ban on gambling. It also survived the years of Prohibition and the Great Depression.

Ironically, the re-legalization of gambling in 1931 foreshadowed an end to the Line, as casino operators were, in general, opposed to blatant prostitution that took money away from the tables. But what finally killed Block 16 was World War II.

The War Department wanted to do away with prostitution in order to protect the fighting men from crippling venereal diseases. What's more, the wives of men assigned to bases near Las Vegas and Reno were screaming to their congressmen to banish supply-side sex and keep their husbands pure. Block 16 fell, but prostitution itself simply went underground (and soldiers kept getting sexually transmitted diseases). When penicillin was made available after its successful 1941-42 trials, the men, their commanders, and the prostitutes they patronized all heaved great sighs of relief.

After the war, Block 16 remained a part of the past. Prostitution, of course, was alive and well and living in the closet – still neither legal nor illegal. Meanwhile, behind the

scenes, a growing moral faction in Nevada, supported by political forces in Washington, was pecking away at local politicians to wipe out the sin of prostitution and banish brothels through tough enforceable laws. But it would take another thirty years to settle the question once and for all.

## **Sin Cities Sans Sex and The Burgeoning of Brothels**

For about a century, Nevada's prostitution laws were a quagmire of vagary, written by state legislators who really didn't give a damn. In the casinos, high rollers could (and often did) toss the cost of a new Cadillac across a crap table without so much as a sigh, but 90 percent of gambling revenue came from ordinary men, making one- or two-dollar bets at a time. These men had simple desires: a little gambling, a few drinks, an hour or so of cocktail-lounge entertainment, preferably with a "lady of easy virtue" at their side and, later, her company in bed. She could be provided with no fuss and little bother by men who ran their own little hooker rings: pit bosses, bellmen, and bartenders. Their bosses, who had to be publicly opposed to prostitution (which they were afraid would threaten the casino industry), looked the other way.

But then, the aura and magnetism of the gambling centers of Las Vegas and Reno began to draw millions of visitors, including a number of nuclear families, and the gaming establishment recognized the possibilities of a whole new lucrative market—a customer base that included mom, grandma, grandpa, and the kiddies. With that wide-open market beckoning, the powers-that-be couldn't help but wonder whether their cities' laissez-faire attitude toward prostitution would adversely affect the bottom line.

The PR people took polls and surveys and determined

that the presence of hookers tarnished the gaming cities' appeal for families; long-faced accountants announced that the noticeable presence of prostitutes could indeed cut into the industry's profits.

Thus, the powerful casino owners became as adamantly opposed to prostitution as any Stone-the-Whores-of-Babylon fundamentalist.

But updating the hundred-year-old, casually constructed, loosely interpreted-and-applied brothel criteria to meet changing circumstances was no simple matter. The regulation of prostitution in the state of Nevada was much too convoluted to fix quickly and quietly. Only in counties that contained population centers of 250,000 or more could the strictures against prostitution be tightened. It is now illegal in Clark, Washoe, Douglas, and Lincoln counties where Las Vegas, Reno, Carson City, and Lake Tahoe are situated.

And so today, prostitutes are a little harder to come by in the cities and resorts. Hotel-affiliated procurers have more or less gone underground. Street hookers are much less visible. The five-dollar bettor looking for love in Nevada these days usually can't afford the high-priced call girls who advertise in the Yellow Pages. What does he do? He heads for a legal brothel in a nearby rural county.

The same is true for the girls. The middle-of-the-road prostitute, unwanted by the big hotels, unwilling to turn tricks on the street, and deeply concerned about safety, health, and arrest, prefers to practice her profession within the solid structure and convenience of a legal brothel.

There are twenty-nine legal tax-paying brothels in the state of Nevada, from the very large houses with several dozen girls to the isolated one-girl stopovers that cater to the occasional weary traveler needing some carnal TLC. The brothels provide a service for which there is always a demand, they contribute financially to their counties and

communities, and they offer safety, security, and large financial rewards to the prostitutes who “man” them.

## The Brothels of Nye County

Not long ago, in Nye County (where Sheri’s Ranch operates), the politics of regulating brothels were blackened by corruption and saturated with personal biases, hatreds, and acts of violence. Up until fairly recently, the Nye County power structure was a closed corporation, headed by a single godfather and his capos pretending to be Good Ol’ Boy “hunerd percent ‘Muricans.”

In her fascinating book, *The Nye County Brothel Wars*, Jeanie Kasindorf tells a compelling story of the struggle of an “outsider” to bring a brothel to Pahrump Valley, without the blessing (and requisite payment of tribute) to the power brokers.

Briefly, what happened was that one day in 1976, Walter Plankinton, a paunchy ex-trucker in cowboy boots and Western togs, rode into Nevada determined to open a whorehouse in Pahrump Valley. He crashed headlong into a reinforced concrete wall wrapped in electrified barbed wire topped with poison-tipped razor-sharp slivers of broken glass. Or so it seemed, once the rulers of the roost closed ranks on this interloper.

The knock-down drag-out that followed is a tale of outrageous intrigue, crime, and corruption, related fully in Kasindorf’s book.

When the dust settled, the courts had decreed that reasonable and non-prejudicial terms and conditions would be established for the ownership and operation of legal brothels in the state of Nevada.

The idea was intrinsically good. Each county commis-

sion in the state was given the responsibility to write the rules within its jurisdiction. But who among these ordinary people – farmers, ranchers, miners, merchants, housewives, shopkeepers, and the like – was qualified to establish order from a century's worth of chaos?

In the late 1970s, one group of Nye County commissioners tackled the issue. The document they passed into law is longwinded and sprinkled with bad grammar. It contains three times the number of words used to establish the Constitution of the United States.

It's astonishing. The commissioners are responsible for an ordinance regulating a Western county with fewer people than pass through a New York subway car every day. Yet they believe that the rules and regulations providing how, where, and under what circumstances a man or woman may use his or her body require more detailed provisions than does the functioning of a nation. The only elements of prostitution that should reasonably be of public concern are disease prevention and public safety. All other official interference in the practice exists today to appease the self-righteous and to reap large financial gains for the local bureaucracy.

Legal prostitution is a cash cow. What with application fees and licenses that must be renewed quarterly, county authorization to run a brothel costs from \$6,000 to \$100,000 a year, based on the number of prostitutes the house accommodates. And that doesn't include the personal registration fee of \$250 a year for each and every prostitute and employee working in a brothel (including cooks, bartenders, maintenance personnel, and so forth).

After pages of gobbledygook (including detailed specifications for the size and wordage of brothel signs and other such minutiae), the ordinance finally gets down to the health department-mandated stuff that really matters, such as physical and medical exams for the prostitutes, the qualifications of health providers involved, which testing methods are re-

quired to determine the presence or absence of what diseases, the frequency of testing and clinical exams, how extensive they must be, and so on. It also mandates the use of condoms.

If the reader hasn't guessed by now, I perceive the ordinance on prostitution in Nye County to be turgid, self-serving, and largely arrogant. But, like it or not, I followed, with meticulous care, each and every tenet, every chapter and verse, so to speak, within the scope of my responsibilities at Sheri's Ranch—without rocking the boat.

This boat's been afloat for tens of thousands of years in history, and around 130 years in Nevada. And even though the ranchers and shopkeepers and housewives have overloaded it with all kinds of regulations, it's as sturdy as ever.