

Scratching the Itch:
The role of Venereal Disease during the settling of the American
Frontier

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HIST 586

Abstract: For many, the frontier conjures up pictures of cowboys and shootouts. However, for those who lived through the frontier period, the picture was painted with a much bleaker brush. The constant threat of venereal disease played a major role in shaping the frontier. Whether it be through its drain on the military, its widespread effect on the national social fabric, or its rapid decimation of communities, sexually transmitted diseases were major factors in how people made decisions and where they settled. Venereal diseases can also be used to isolate and then extrapolate the changing moral landscape of both the frontier and America at the change of the 20th century. In the broad spectrum, the study of venereal diseases can be used a tool to expand our knowledge of not only the medical field, but can also develop our understanding of how modern attitudes regarding sexually transmitted infections were influenced by the past

Key Words: Venereal-Morality-Prostitution-Military-Frontier

On a cold, wet October morning, the courthouse of Emporia Kansas was roused from its usual quiet routine and hurled into the national spotlight. The person to blame was Ms. Minnie Wallace Walkup. Blessed with great beauty, and a brash attitude to match, Ms. Wallace hailed from a poor New Orleans family of Creole decent. She quickly learned how to use her looks and charm to not only survive, but also thrive. Men clamored to be with her, and she took full advantage to gain social status and wealth.¹

In 1884, Emporia, Kansas was a thriving Midwestern town steeped in tradition but eager for continued growth. In the same year, the town elected Mr. James R. Walkup as its mayor on a platform of conservative values. In this regard, James Walkup was as contradictory as they come. 52 years old, the man was a serial philanderer. By the time he was elected mayor in 1884 he had outlived two wives, fathered multiple children, possibly more illegitimately, and kept several mistresses. Walkup also frequented prostitutes regularly.² In 1884, James Walkup traveled to New Orleans to officially witness the World Fair, and unofficially visit many of the city's famous brothels. While there, he met Miss Minnie Wallace. He was instantly infatuated, in spite of the fact she was only 16 and 36 years his junior. James proposed marriage at the earliest opportunity. Never turning down a chance to rise the social ladder, Minnie accepted. Two months to the day after meeting, the two wed in Emporia. In a strange twist of fate, James Walkup was dead within the month. The cause of death was determined to be acute arsenic poisoning, and Minnie was immediately blamed as the usurping widow out to take the family wealth.³

¹ Robert Wilhelm' *The Bloody Century: True Tales of Murder in 19th Century America*. Boston: Night Stick Press, 2014.

² Virginia McConnell, "*The Adventuress: Murder, Blackmail, and Confidence Games in the Gilded Age.*" Kent: Kent State University Press, 2010.

³ *Walkup: Astounding Developments*. Emporia Weekly News (Emporia), December 24, 1885, 28th vol.

That arsenic killed James Walkup was undeniable. What needed to be determined was why it was in his system in the first place. In her defense, the lawyers for Miss Walkup concluded it was not Minnie who killed him, but rather his unfaithful tendencies. As was widely known, James Walkup was a frequenter of brothels and prostitutes, so much so that he reportedly contracted a severe case of syphilis. Although known to be poisonous at the time, arsenic was also a known cure for venereal disease, especially the kind of syphilis that James Walkup was suspected having.⁴ The lawyer representing Minnie stated it best, “Mr. Walkup was a man who was habitually given to practices which corrupted his body and damned his soul. It now rests with the jury to...prove the character of J.R. Walkup.”⁵ The Walkup trial was a notorious, yet surprisingly common example of how venereal disease played a quiet yet crucial role in the formation of American frontier society.

During the American frontier era, venereal diseases served as a useful barometer to measure the changing attitudes towards morals, sexual behaviors, domestic life, and the general role of both men and women. In the initial settling of the frontier from 1850-1890, the areas west of the Mississippi River were remote, distant from civilization, and not subject to moral regulations of the Victorian era. These factors led to the creation a dichotomy in which venereal disease became something of an accepted nuisance which was not acknowledged as the burden it was. As the American population moved west, the frontier areas formerly lacking in organization began to centralize and consolidate around the shared principles of development and domesticity which in turn demonstrated both the power of the American belief in progress and the desire to bring civilization to the frontier.⁶

⁴ *Doctors Disagree: Testimony in the Minnie Walkup trial. Topeka Daily Capital Journal*, October 22, 1885. Accessed February 23, 2017. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/63991578/?terms=syphilis>.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Definition for frontier can be found on page 5

Inevitably, the frontier ceased to exist in the contiguous U.S. by the end of the nineteenth century. During this time, the approach to venereal disease paralleled with the changing American mindset. As the approach to treating venereal disease improved, and the moral stigma shifted from one of silent acknowledgement to one of total antipathy and disgrace. Morality and its interaction with venereal disease played a critical role in the shaping of the social integrity that defined the American frontier and acted as a major weight upon the ethical fabric that defined the American mindset.⁷ Yet despite the significant effect venereal disease had in shaping the frontier, it often existed as an unheeded burden. Given these circumstances, why were sexually transmitted infections, which were so prevalent on the frontier, not confronted as a public health issue until so late in the era of the frontier? Perhaps this can be traced to the overarching norms that defined America at the time, and how these norms changed with modernization. There is a rich scholarship focused on venereal diseases. However, few historical studies of venereal disease are situated in the context of the American frontier and its changing moral landscape. Such a story helps us to embrace and understand the atmosphere of morality that emerged in the second half of the 19th century. Moreover, the story of venereal disease in the frontier helps frame contemporary attitudes and responses to sexually transmitted disease as an overarching social stigma that is reflective of a person's morality.

Scant literature exists on the role of venereal disease in the American West. Most of the research on venereal disease in American history takes a broad-brush approach highlighting the overarching effect of venereal disease on the social dynamics of the time. The defining literature on the subject is Allan M. Brandt's work *No Magic Bullet*.⁸ In his work, Brandt asks the

⁷ Linda Gordon, *The moral property of women*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002. 72-86; American Morality is defined on page 7

⁸ Brandt, Allan M. *No magic bullet: a social history of venereal disease in the United States since 1880*. New York: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1987.

question: if society have been so successful fighting infectious diseases, why is venereal disease still such a major public health issue? To answer this question, he proposes that instead of looking at the medical context, there must be an examination the issue from the perspective of how the disease engaged the social and moral attitudes. From this standpoint, Brandt presumes, it is important to consider how a society tackles medical issues because such practices are inherently tied to moral suppositions. Therefore, by tracing the social beliefs, one can also map the development of a disease in a societal context.

A Frontier Culture of Sex

The American frontier is a notoriously difficult thing to define due to differing and often vague cultural and government demarcations. Therefore, the frontier must be defined in order to understand how both the frontier and venereal diseases are intertwined and how they played such a pivotal role in defining the moral standards at the time. One of the most famous interpretations of the frontier is found in the oft-cited thesis of historian Frederick Jackson Turner. While he on one hand provides a rather ambiguous, over-arching definition: “The frontier is the outer edge of the wave the meeting point between savagery and civilization,”⁹ he also provides a more concrete measure for determining the frontier using the preferred census measurement of the frontier point being were at density reached at least two people per mile.¹⁰ Historian Earl Pomeroy offered an alternative to Turner’s thesis in his 1955 work *Toward a Reorientation of Western History: Continuity and Environment*. In his work, Pomeroy contends the frontier was not a solely American concept as Turner supposed. Instead, he proposes the idea that the frontier is a kind of escapist phenomena that is universal to all cultures; in the American context, the idea

⁹ Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." Thesis. 1894

¹⁰ Ibid

of the frontier was simply a rehashing of a common story. According to Pomeroy, the West was created by a need to imitate the East. Thus, the idea of the American frontier was not innovation and discovery, but rather one strongly based in conservative ideals. Many theories have been proposed since Pomeroy originally presented his argument. However, most are tangential to his original theory and either build off or propose a radical rethink that are not always grounded in solid argumentation. As such, this paper will build upon Pomeroy's theory that the frontier was not a driving engine of progress steaming west, but rather a constant attempt by those on the fringes of society to establish their own communities based on the footprint of an already established system. Even in using the Pomeroy thesis, the frontier is still not fully defined. For a more structured idea, this paper will rely on the census definition that the frontier was the point at which population density reached below two people per square mile.¹¹ However, no matter what definition of frontier is preferred, ultimately the people and their collected opinions and beliefs who populate the area provide the flesh of the story.

In historical studies, it is often said that public opinion of a society towards a certain subject is shaped and manipulated by numerous voices representing a multitude of backgrounds and influences that sway public opinion toward a collective congruence. The opinion on venereal diseases on the frontier was no stranger to these collectivizing forces. The moral opinion of sex, the transient economy, and the generally fractured nature of the time were integral factors that shaped public reaction to sexually transmitted diseases. However, ultimately it was the variety of people from all groups in society who formed the core of the original frontier that most shaped consensus on the issue and composed a foundation upon which radicals would later bring their

¹¹ Ibid

crusade of morals.¹² It is important that these foundational populations be explored to best understand the morality of venereal disease today.

The census of 1890 was radical in many ways. It was the first to use an electronic tabulating system, the forerunner of the modern computer. It was also the first census to ask about race; among the choices for one's race were Japanese, Chinese, mulatto, quadroon, and octoroon.¹³ Despite these advancements, the results of the census are known for a much starker statement. In his remarks, Robert P. Porter, the director of the 1890 census, officially declared the frontier dead, and the westward migration of Americans would no longer be tracked.

This statement stands as a lonely epithet to the great push westward that defined the American character and flow of progress that dominated for so long. However, the closing of the frontier did not mean that the engine of progress had seized in the West. In fact, it is during this time that the West developed its own sense of identity that mixed frontier ruggedness with a desire to retain eastern values.¹⁴ To understand the role venereal disease played, it is critical to understand the moral background of the time.

To Americans, the morality of the time was based on a strict dichotomy between men and women. For a Victorian era male living in the United States, his life was by an all-encompassing need to exude his masculine qualities in all aspects of his life. This display of masculinity was extended to sexual attitudes of men at the time. Women on the other hand were expected to rise above the sexual proclivities of men. In a morality pamphlet, Sara Josepha Hale wrote "yet women's nature has never sunk to the brute sensuality of man's; this comparative purity has kept

¹² Davis, William C. *The American frontier: pioneers, settlers & cowboys, 1800-1899*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010.

¹³ ¼ and 1/8 black respectively. Definition found in Merriam Webster Online Dictionary. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/octoroon>

¹⁴ Brandt. 47

her mind, as regard morality, above the standard which even the most Christian men fix for their own sex.”¹⁵ This guardianship of morals evolved over time into what is known as the “cult of true womanhood.” This concept institutionalized into society the idea that a woman’s best use of her fitness lay in the protection of the moral fiber of society.¹⁶ In terms of venereal disease, this prevailing framework played the defining role in how the issue was perceived. However, attitudes towards the issue were much different in the West due to underlying and fundamental differences found in the moral fiber and character of the population

Initially communities on the frontier did not have the benefit of being allowed the chance to develop a full-fledged moral framework like those developed in the East. This can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the population demographics led to a major imbalance in the gender distribution. During the initial settling beyond the Mississippi River in the 1860s, populations as skewed as 23 men to 1 woman in California and 34 to 1 existed in Colorado. By 1880 these numbers ranged from 8 to 1 in Idaho to 4 to 1 in Arizona.¹⁷ These sorts of distributions made the traditional moral stations of genders impossible to maintain. Life on the frontier was extremely taxing, and initially nobody could afford to maintain the strict separation of sexes.

Secondly, sheer variety of the people streaming westward ensured that a common morality was near impossible to synthesize. When the first settlers crossed the Mississippi, they encountered an already entrenched system of beliefs established by the Spanish colonizers centuries before. This system of catholic domination had created a culture of authority over the

¹⁵ Sarah Josepha Hale, *Woman’s Record; or Sketches of All Distinguished Women, from the Creation to A.D. 1854*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1855; repr. New York: Source Book Press, 1970)

¹⁶ Lori D Ginzberg, *Women and the work of benevolence: morality, politics, and class in the nineteenth-century United States*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2010.

¹⁷ T.A. Larson, “*Women’s Role in The American West*,” *Montana, The Magazine of Western History*, XXIC (Summer 1974), 4.

Native Americans while encouraging the growth of Spanish-style settlements throughout the West. These previously established settlements served as a focal point for growth of a distinctive Southwestern culture that blended Protestant and Catholic beliefs with a distinct American desire for progress.¹⁸ In other parts of the frontier, a wide range of immigrants brought their own beliefs. Whether Swedes in Nebraska, Mormons in Utah, or Germans in Oklahoma, the frontier was a patchwork of different moral systems held together by a mutual desire to civilize their corner of the world.¹⁹

Thirdly, the very nature of the frontier precluded it from forming a morality in line with the more developed East. The American frontier is unique in that from the beginning it had existed as a sort of safety valve for discontented populations. When the East became crowded and opportunities became scarce, the frontier beckoned daring citizens to settle far beyond the reach of civilization. The frontier engrained itself in the American mind as a mythos of opportunity. Such ideas led to the growth of a semi-transient population rarely staying in one place for long.²⁰ This transitory population consisted of mainly young men who worked short stints and then moved on led to the growth of an economy of transience that impeded the growth of an established moral framework.

This initial lack of a moral framework on the frontier was a prime influence on how communities and individuals approached cases of venereal disease. In fact, sexually transmitted infections were not treated as they were in the East. In the East, venereal diseases were considered the very scourge of the family itself. Social reformers saw these diseases as

¹⁸ John Parascandola, *Sex, Sin, and Science: A history of Syphilis in America*. Westport: Preager Publishers, 2008.

¹⁹ Newell, Quincy D. "Religion and the American West." *Religion Compass* 6, no. 11 (November 2012): 488-99. Accessed March 21, 2017. Wiley Online Library.

²⁰ Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own*. Norman: University of Oklahoma University Press, 1991.

symptomatic of a general decline in morals, and began a public health crusade to wipe out “the devils disease.”²¹ Venereal disease can be considered one of the most prolific and widespread maladies in the United States at the turn of the 20th century.²² Official reports estimated that as many as 80 out of 100 men in New York City had some manner of gonorrhea at some point in their lives.²³ U.S. military documents report infection rates as high as twenty percent in some units.²⁴ In major eastern cities, the fight against venereal infections took on monumental proportions.

While the East fought voraciously against the scourge of venereal disease, the frontier took a much more indifferent tone towards the health crisis. Venereal disease during the initial settling of the frontier was not so much treated as public health crisis, but rather as an accepted nuisance that accompanied the transient lifestyles of its populations. To best understand why this is, it is critical to understand how venereal disease was diffused throughout frontier communities. In the transitory economy of the American West, the spread of venereal disease occurred from the congruence of two vectors of transmission: the stationary axis in the form of brothels coupled with other quasi-sanctioned forms of prostitution, and the migratory population that flowed around them.

Considered a pretty and demure woman of 28 years, Kitty LeRoy was a popular prostitute of Deadwood, South Dakota. She lived a transient life, moving all along the frontier with lovers of all sorts, working for a variety of brothels and saloons. After a time, she began an affair with a man named Curly, one of the wealthiest and most respected men in Deadwood. The

²¹ Brandt. 20

²² Parascandola. 30-45

²³ Prince A. Morrow, “Report of the Committee of Seven of the Medical Society of the county of New York on the prophylaxis of Venereal Disease in New York City,” NYMJ 74 (December 21, 1901): 1146.

²⁴ Report of the Surgeon General for the United States Army, 1910(Washington D.C. 1911): 539

fact that she worked as a prostitute made many members of community uncomfortable, so the two were unofficially married, which was uncommon due to her profession. Unfazed by her nature, Curly took many trips and she was left alone for long periods of time. However, on December 3, 1877 Curly got word that Kitty had fallen in with a former lover, and Curly rushed back from to Denver to challenge this usurper for her hand. The usurper declined his invitation, so instead Curly shot and killed Kitty, after which he turned the gun on himself.²⁵ Stories like this are common, and represent the challenges faced by prostitutes and their customers. However, violence was not the main threat to prostitutes. That distinction belongs to sexually transmitted diseases.

One of the main reasons why venereal disease was treated so inconspicuously in the West can be attributed to the nature of one of the frontiers most enduring professions, prostitution. For women on the frontier, the transient economy offered little in the way of what was considered respectable professions, which were limited to school teachers, laundresses, prostitution, and a handful of other menial jobs. A lack of opportunity, coupled with the fact that much of the population on the frontier was young, unmarried, and lonely men, made prostitution a viable career choice for many young women.²⁶ This created an environment in which prostitution became a legally sanctioned entity and one of the driving economic forces in the frontier transitory economy. Brothels were as common as saloons along the frontier line; it was in fact often a sign of whether a town had come of age if it had some manner of institutionalized prostitution. In larger communities, brothels were crowded into red-light districts, which often

²⁵ "All for love." Black Hills Weekly Times (Deadwood), December 04, 1877. Newspaper.com. Accessed 3/21/2017

²⁶ Anne M Butler, *Daughters of joy, sisters of misery: prostitutes in the American West, 1865-90*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987

became de facto town centers. In Salt Lake City, there were more than five brothels located within a block of the main temple complex, the holiest site in Mormonism.²⁷

However, despite their prominent role on society, prostitutes were exposed to a variety of venereal ailments. It is estimated that on a busy night, a single woman could provide services to up to 80 customers. Furthermore, engaging a prostitute for services was almost encouraged among men. Because of this, visiting a brothel was an almost weekly occurrence for men who could afford it on the frontier.²⁸ These two realities created a web of venereal disease in which it was near impossible for either the worker or the customer to avoid a sexually transmitted infection. In an 1858 study of venereal diseases by famed physician William Sanger, he found an infection rate of nearly forty percent among women who claimed to have worked in the sex industry. Because of limitations of his studies, including limiting his analysis to “street walkers” while excluding brothel workers, it is believed that the numbers are in fact much higher.²⁹ In the grand scheme of the frontier, prostitution served as a vehicle through which venereal disease was transmitted. However, brothels were stationary outlets in a transient economy; it took a mobile population to create the widespread outbreaks of venereal outbreaks that were common. A critical portion of this population consisted of perhaps the most temporary population on the frontier: soldiers.³⁰

The military and the frontier are so ubiquitously intertwined in the concept of the West that is difficult to define the former without referencing the latter in some form. From the

²⁷ Marilyn Reed Travis, “Social Stratification and the Dissolution of the City of Zion in Salt Lake City, 1847-1880” (Ph.D. diss., University of Utah, 1995). Chap 4.

²⁸ Angela C. Fitzpatrick, “Women of Ill Fame: Discourses of Prostitution and the American Dream in California, 1850-1890. PhD diss., Bowling Green State University, August 2013. Ann Arbor: Proquest, 2013. 72.

²⁹ William Sanger, *The History of Prostitution; its Extent, Causes, and Effects Throughout the World* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1858), 579

³⁰ Richard W Stewart, ed. *American Military History: the United States Army and the Forging of a Nation, 1775–1917*. 2nd ed. Vol. 1. Washington D.C.: Center of Military History, 2008.

beginning of the republic to the start of World War One, the army existed almost exclusively as a frontier enforcement mechanism. At the start of the Civil War the army had 18,000 men on payroll, of which 15,000 were stationed beyond Appalachia. Most of these men were stationed in semi-permanent forts, which were built at strategic points along the frontier. Serving as sentries and heading off incursions by Native Americans were the main purpose of the outposts.³¹ In addition, they also served civil duties such as providing engineering support and acting as waypoints in major routes going west. However, despite these many duties, the life of a soldier on the frontier was dull and monotonous. Captain John W. Phelps, later a general for the Union army in the Civil War, was a company commander at Camp Floyd, Utah. In a diary entry in 1859 he wrote: "I am suffocating, physically, morally, and intellectually-in every way. I am fairly gasping for fresh outside air, and feel as an officer said the other day, like begging to be taken out and hung for the sake of variety."³²

When the monotony and isolation of the frontier was coupled with the reality that the army at this time was almost entirely composed of young, usually lower-class men, an environment that fostered hyper-masculinity and sexual prowess was born.³³ Not to mention that army regulations at the time forbade enlisted men, excluding sergeants, from marrying. A common saying at the time was "If the army wanted you to have a wife, it would have issued you one."³⁴ Thus, whenever soldiers were granted liberty or passed through a town, visiting the local brothel was common. When this over-sexualized military life was combined with the

³¹ Robert Wooster, *The American military frontiers: the United States Army in the West, 1783-1900*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2013. 141

³² Wolcott Phelps, John. 1859. Box 1, Folder 21, John Wolcott Phelps papers 1833-1884. New York Public Library Archives and Manuscripts.

³³ Clayton R Newell, *The regular army before the Civil War, 1845-1860*. Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 2014. 38

³⁴ U.S. Department of War, *Regulations for the Army of the United States, 1913 corrected to 1917* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1917)

impermanent existence of the soldier, it created an environment in which venereal disease became a stubborn reality.³⁵ Despite regulations stating soldiers ought to be punished for contracting a venereal infection, many commanding officers chose to ignore the problem rather than possibly upset the morale of their units.³⁶

A notable exception was if soldiers went absent without leave and contracted a venereal disease in the process they would be severely punished. At Fort Riley, Kansas five soldiers in 1890 were given dishonorable discharges, forced to forfeit all pay, and sentenced to hard labor after they went AWOL. After being caught and brought back to Fort Riley they were inspected and subsequently accused of having “new” gonorrhea, or venereal disease that had been contracted while they were on the run, mandating even harsher punishments. In a cruel twist of fate, one of the soldiers, Private Walter E. Mercer, had deserted after being refused permission to marry, and then received a venereal disease from the woman he had intended to make his wife before being caught.³⁷ Attempts to halt the spread of venereal disease among soldiers did not prove successful until after the Spanish-American War at the turn of the 19th into the 20th century.

The frontier populations and their often-difficult situations existed as a purgatory between the wilderness and civilization. The transitory culture they established was a fleeting result of a society constantly seeking motion westward. The very existence of a frontier culture

³⁵ John Andrew Byers. “The Sexual Economy of War: Regulation of Sexuality and the U.S. Army,” 1898-1940. PhD diss., Duke University, 2012. Ann Arbor: ProQuest, 2012.

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Court-martial records of Private John A. Harrington, Court-martial #209019, NARA II, RG 153, Entry 15B; Private Robert M. Hunter, Court-martial #203243, NARA II, RG 153, Entry 15B; Private Walter E. Mercer, Court-martial #188240, NARA II, RG 153, Entry 15B; Private Harold R. Shaffer, Court-martial #210086, NARA II, RG 153, Entry 15B; and Private Clarence R. Smith, Court-martial #210679, NARA II, RG 153, Entry 15B

predisposed itself to the creative destruction that accompanies the establishment of a permanency. As one culture retreated westward, a new one took its place.

Fixing the Frontier

As the American frontier pressed crushingly onward towards its own self-imposed demise during the 1880s and 1890s, attitudes began to shift and the previous moral system based more on regionalism and the transitive economy began to shift and buckle under the weight of civilizing expectations. New populations moved into previous frontier areas and brought with them an identity formulated on eastern progressivism girded with the moral absolutism of the American evangelical movement. This congealing of the formally fractured frontier moral system into a coherent identity had a profound impact on how venereal disease was dealt with. The original system of accepting sexually transmitted infections as a matter of course became untenable in the new system, as sexuality became increasingly objectified as an entity of regulated morality.

To best understand the changing attitudes towards venereal disease, it is necessary to grasp the epochal changes that were shaping the former frontier. In 1869, the transcontinental railroad, stretching from coast to coast, was completed. The railroad represented the ever-present desire of Americans to bring civilization and republican values to every corner of the land. In the 1899 graduation commencement speech at the Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, W.T. Harris offered a fitting summary of the American ideas on civilization at the time,

“I offer a definition for civilization...A people is civilized when it has formed institutions for itself which enable each individual to profit by the by the industry of all his fellow citizens; when it enables each individual to profit by the experience and wisdom, the observations and the thoughts of others...This definition can be put in another form, civilization enables man to conquer nature and make it his servant.”³⁸

³⁸ U.S. Cong. House. *Report of the Commissioner of Education*. By Henry Barnard. 58th Cong., 3d sess. Rept. 5. Vol. 1. Washington D.C.: Government printing office, 1905. 1129-131.

As the old system of transitivity was pushed into extinction, its place was taken by an agrarian economy based off stable exploitation of the land in the forms of farmsteads and resource extraction. These initial exploitative production units clustered around a central location, typically a town, through which their goods could be sent to large urban areas.³⁹ In addition to exporting goods, these centers also served as develop points for both goods and ideas. Thus, the old system of based on the impermanence of its mostly male population was replaced by a system whose very foundation was permanence and exploitation on a predictable basis.

Along with a permanent economy came the development of a common moral identity. As easterners streamed westward, they brought with them an already entrenched system of thought that aggregated an entitled sense of progressivism with a cocktail of Victorian prudery, a fiery religiosity born from the “Great awakening,” and an ever-present, if always slightly subdued, edge of pretentiousness. Historian Sidney Milkis explains the goal of the progressive movement well when he writes,

“Beyond mere order, Progressives were engaged in a quest for democracy on the grand scale, informed by the belief that the human spirit or conscience, guided by social science, could eventually create a vast and brotherly republic of public spirited citizens. That high ambition moved Progressives to humanize American life in any number of ways, but it also led them to endanger the foundations of their own virtues.”⁴⁰

These easterners came west seeking permanence and the fulfillment of the American ideal of a productive life. They were often the first ones to establish the towns around which the agrarian

³⁹ Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991. 180-270

⁴⁰ Sidney M Milkis, *Progressivism and the New Democracy*. Amherst : University of Massachusetts Press, 1999. 103

communities prospered.⁴¹ They also moved into previously established frontier communities, and immediately put their progressive ideas to work.⁴²

Venereal diseases had been a major public health concern in the eastern United States for quite some time by the turn of the 19th century. The social hygiene movement, which sought to eradicate diseases that were associated with “moral vice,” was reaching a zenith, and the progressive movement was becoming a societal imperative. Of the many issues that progressives aimed at, venereal disease was squarely in the cross-hairs. Medical progress in the 19th century had led to increased knowledge regarding venereal disease, especially syphilis and gonorrhea.⁴³ One of the most famous physicians at the time to study venereals was Dr. Prince Morrow of New York City. He was one of the first major figures to call for a general crusade against specifically gonorrhea and syphilis. In his book *Social diseases and marriage: social prophylaxis*, he writes:

“No disease has such a murderous influence upon the off-spring as syphilis; no disease has such a destructive influence upon the health and procreative function of woman as gonorrhea. Since the welfare of the human race is largely bound up in the health and productive capacity of the wife and mother, the sanitation of the marriage relation becomes the most essential condition of social preservation.”⁴⁴

As progressives flooded the borderlands, they brought their already established notions on venereal diseases with them. By the turn of the century, venereal diseases were no longer an acceptable nuisance borne out of a transient culture, but a societal ill to be cured.

Previously, attempts to cure venereal disease were sparse. Once a prostitute or customer caught a venereal disease, a cure would be near impossible to come by. Doctors were rare and in

⁴¹ White. 298-310

⁴² Milkis 110

⁴³ D'Emilio, John, and Estelle B. Freedman. *Intimate matters: a history of sexuality in America*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012.

⁴⁴ Morrow, Prince A. *Social diseases and marriage; social prophylaxis*. New York: Lea, 1904. 20

high demand. Even if a doctor willing to look after an infected patient was found, treatments ranged from ineffectual to potentially fatal. Mercury was the go-to treatment for venereal diseases. Medical manuals from the time prescribe that mercury be rubbed on the affected area, or that patient bathe in a bath mixed with mercury and other potentially caustic chemicals. The side effects of a mercury treatment were severe, including neuropathies, kidney failure, mouth ulcers and teeth loss if ingested orally, and potentially organ failure and death.⁴⁵ If mercury failed, other, more drastic measures were taken. Doctor Thomas Lowry described some of the treatments in his journal:

“Surgeon E.A. Tomkins of Fort Yamhill, Oregon, described an unfortunate soldier with syphilis who, over a period of four months, was treated with potassium iodide in sarsaparilla, corrosive sublimate, lunar caustic, calomel, black draught, emetics, blistering, iron, quinine, and external chloroform. At the end of the treatment, he was in severe pain, with one leg badly swollen and cold, barely able to walk.”⁴⁶

For prostitutes, even finding a doctor willing to treat them was a difficult task in itself. As such, sex workers were often forced to either self-medicate or rely on the services of less than reputable “snake-oil” salesmen peddling all manner of potentially dangerous concoctions.⁴⁷ An advertisement in the Leavenworth times hawked a cure known as “Samaritan Root and Herb Juice,” stating that “[it] is a positive cure for...all diseases of the blood and skin. As a remedy for syphilis it is positive.”⁴⁸ Thus, the reality of prostitute with venereal disease was bleak. They were often faced with the harsh choice of either suffering the disease in silence, or gambling on a treatment that had the potential

⁴⁵ Frith, John. "Syphilis – Its early history and Treatment until Penicillin and the Debate on its Origins." *Journal of Military and Veterans' Health* 20, no. 4 (November 2012). Accessed March 22, 2017. <http://jmvh.org/article/syphilis-its-early-history-and-treatment-until-penicillin-and-the-debate-on-its-origins/>.

⁴⁶ Thomas Power Lowry. *The Story the Soldiers Wouldn't Tell: Sex in the Civil War*. Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 1994. 104

⁴⁷ Butler. *Daughters of joy, sisters of misery: prostitutes in the American West, 1865-90*. 52

⁴⁸ Brown, R.J. . "Samaritans Root and Herb Juices." *The Leavenworth Times* (Leavenworth), May 4, 1869. Accessed February 22, 2017.

to do more harm than good. Faced with these bleak odds, reformers found that outright “curing” of venereal disease in their newly established communities would require a much different approach.

The failure of a civilly driven reform of venereal disease practices confounded believers of the power of progressive social reform. However, their failure did not dampen their enthusiasm, and they quickly identified another avenue for creating change. Instead of taking the issue on through grassroots methods, they would utilize overarching change through the one entity that could create systemic change through sheer force, which was the government.⁴⁹

Using the government to achieve social change was not a concept unique to the Progressive era. However, it was during the Progressive era that reformers used regulation so much to such a degree to merit consideration for the first time. A prime case study of this kind of government regulation of lewd behavior is the Kansas obscenity laws of the early 20th century. The moral experiments of Kansas demonstrate the shifting ideas of venereal disease, and the reaction of progressives in the face of a changing culture. However, many would consider the response of the progressive movement neither forward thinking nor effective.

November of 1925 was a typically cold and blustery Kansas day at the Kansas State Industrial Farm for Women, also known as the WIF. For many women, the WIF represented the result of a long chain of unfortunate events that many felt were beyond their control. When Lilian was admitted on 28th of that same month, she was no exception

⁴⁹ McGerr, Michael E. *A fierce discontent: the rise and fall of the Progressive movement in America, 1870-1920*. New York: Oxford university Press, 2005. 71-85

to these feelings of bitter betrayal.⁵⁰ Accused of violating chapter 205, or the Kansas law which allowed the quarantine of those accused of lewd and lascivious behavior, she had been sentenced to hard labor at the WIF for an indefinite amount of time. Her intake letter reports that⁵¹

“My husband gave me this disease and when I found it out I “beat upon him” and I was then arrested for disturbing the peace. Husbands partner Jack Cook turned me in to officers, although I was doctoring at the time I was sent here. I became despondent and drank Lysol at the Wichita jail. Don’t care much for living now.”⁵²

The arrest of women like Lilian who had venereal diseases represented the idea that institutionalization could rid society “impure” diseases.⁵³

Chapter 205 was culmination of two decades of continued shifts on the former frontier. Most significant was the changing role of women as the new leaders of the progressive movement. A key tenet of progressivism for many was the enfranchisement of women and their liberation from the shackles of forced domesticity, resulting in the women’s rights movement gaining momentum in the first decade of the twentieth century. Women quickly took up the mantle of progressivism in the name of temperance and liberation from what they felt were moral ills that plagued society.⁵⁴ For the burgeoning temperance movement, venereal diseases represented the very worst of these moral ills. To the temperance movement, venereal disease represented licentiousness, vice, and the failure of society to treat women equally. To many within

⁵⁰ WIF inmate names have redacted for privacy.

⁵¹ Society, Kansas State Historical. "Records of the Kansas State Industrial Farm for Women. 5th Biennial Report (1924-1926)."

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Nicole Perry. "Diseased Bodies and ruined reputations: Venereal disease and the construction of women's respectability in early 20th century Kansas." PhD diss., University of Kansas, 2015. 127-135

⁵⁴ Barbara Ryan. *Feminism and the Women's Movement: Dynamics of Change in Social Movement Ideology, and Activism*. London, 2013: Routledge. 35

the movement, women with venereal disease were not violators, but instead victims of a society that did not account for women who had been left behind or had suffered violence at the hands of a patriarchal society.⁵⁵

To this end, several government initiatives were established at the behest of numerous powerful temperance organizations, the most powerful of which was the Kansas Council of Women, or KCW. The KCW was a collection of politically connected women and organizations throughout the state that saw temporary incarceration as a useful tool for “solving” unchastity. To this end, one of their first goals was the establishment of the WIF. Although the contribution of the KCW and other women’s groups was significant in the establishment of the WIF, ultimately more practical matters came into play as well.⁵⁶

By 1916 the First World War was raging in Europe, and an American intervention became more likely by the day. In response, the government set about rebuilding the military after decades of neglect. The issue of venereal disease in the armed forces had always been treated with disregard due to the nature of the American military at the time. However, with the rise of the social hygiene movement and the realization that venereal disease could be a severe detriment to the fitness of an army, the military took drastic steps to thwart the spread of sexually transmitted infections.⁵⁷ After weighing their options, top military doctors decided that the best way to counteract venereal disease was to temporarily “confine” woman considered lewd and lascivious in an attempt to ensure they did not spread any disease to the soldiers. Thus, after several years of lobbying by

⁵⁵ Alonso, Harriet. *Peace as a Women's Issue: A history of the U.S. movement for world peace and women's rights*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993. 21

⁵⁶ Perry. 138

⁵⁷ Brandt. 96

both temperance groups and the federal government, the WIF was established and received its first intake of women in 1917.⁵⁸

The WIF was the tangible result in a shift in thinking along the old frontier. The old economy of transience had allowed for venereal disease because of the very nature of the frontier system. When the frontier moved west and eventually ceased to exist entirely, venereal disease took on the shape of a societal ill that needed to be cured under the guise of altruistic humanism. When this failed to solve the issue, reformers turned to regulation and quarantine of those with venereal disease. Ultimately, quarantine proved to be less effective in solving the “impurity” problem than was hoped, driving social reformers to even more desperate attempts at “curing” venereal disease in the form of social eugenics.⁵⁹

Social eugenics was the decisive mating between the nascent field of social sciences and the dynamic energy of the American Progressive movement. Born out of the ideas of Francis Galton, social eugenics emphasized using scientific means to cull the human gene pool of undesirable traits.⁶⁰ In his book *Inquiries into human faculty and its development*, Galton states that,

“The conditions that direct the order of the whole of the living world around us, are marked by their persistence in improving the birthright of successive generations. They determine, at much cost of individual comfort, that each plant and animal shall, on the general average, be endowed at its birth with more suitable natural faculties than those of its representative in the preceding generation.”⁶¹

⁵⁸ Perry. 133-134

⁵⁹ Cohen, Adam. *Imbeciles: the Supreme Court, American eugenics, and the sterilization of Carrie Buck*. NY, NY: Penguin Books, 2017. 15

⁶⁰ Leonard, Thomas C. "Retrospectives: Eugenics and Economics in the Progressive Era." *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 19, no. 4 (Autumn 2005): 207-15. Accessed April 25, 2017. Jstor.

⁶¹ Galton, Francis. *Inquiries into human faculty and its development*. London: J.M. Dent, 1908. 221

The idea of social eugenics was massively appealing to progressive reformers. In the name of human advancement, they could justify almost any action otherwise considered contrary to the democratic goals of the Progressive movement, or even cruel. Almost immediately, one of the first targets for advocates in social eugenics were those with venereal disease. Serving as the fertile breeding ground for progressive era experiments, the reaction in Kansas reached an extreme when authorities enacted forced reproductive sterilizations on those they felt could not be cured of their immoral behavior.⁶²

Initially, a stay at WIF was supposed to be temporary stop in a woman's journey to "moral reform." However, starting in the 1920s, a trend began to emerge at the WIF. A startling number of women were being transferred to the Lansing Correctional facility from the WIF. The women being transferred shared several things in common. Firstly, they all were in violation of chapter 205, and secondly, they were quickly returned to the WIF, after which they were quickly released. By comparing intake WIF records with board meeting minutes from the Lansing Correctional facility, it can be ascertained that women were being sent from the WIF to be sterilized at Lansing in return for a quick release. It is believed that hundreds of women were sterilized at Lansing during the first quarter of the 20th century.⁶³ Sterilizations like this became the norm throughout the United States in response to venereal disease.⁶⁴

The swing from ignoring venereal disease to curing it was a dramatic one. In the course of a generation, attitudes embarked on a monumental phase shift that resulted in

⁶² Kansas State Board of Health. 1924. 12th Biennial Report (1922-1924). KSHS

⁶³ Heather McCrea, unpublished paper "Love, Money, and Bad Company: Fixing "At Risk" Females in Kansas with Sterilization and Isolation, 1890-1945", cited with permission of author April 27, 2017.

⁶⁴ Paul A. Lombardo, *Medicine, Eugenics, and the Supreme Court: From Coercive Sterilization to Reproductive Freedom*, 13 J. Contemp. Health L. & Pol'y 1 (1997).

the forced sterilization of hundreds of women and the development of a groupthink mentality based around the castigation of those who did not follow the quasi-puritanical moral code of the temperance era. Why did this occur in such a short period of time? There are several contributing factors to why such a major shift occurred so quickly. Firstly, the closing of the frontier created an environment that incubated reform minded individuals who were well placed in a progressive historical context that encouraged ambitious restructuring of societal norms. Secondly, the changing relationship between the state government and federal government, in which the latter gained ever more regulatory influence over the former, gave these reformers the tools and will power to enforce single-minded objectives in the name of progressive humanism. And thirdly, the changing role of the United States in the international system and its entry into the First World War necessitated the stigmatization of venereal disease for practical purposes. When these factors are observed in the context of an American society that was about-facing from the laissez faire pretentiousness of the Victorian Era to a more liberal conviction, it can be determined why such a dramatic shift occurred.⁶⁵

Conclusion

The study of venereal diseases in the context of the American frontier is critical to understanding why sexually transmitted diseases hold such a stigma in our own modern culture. According to the U.S. Center for Disease Control, as many as twenty million new cases of sexually transmitted infections are reported each year. This number does not include unreported cases meaning the number of new infections is in fact much higher.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Ryan. 50

⁶⁶ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Sexually Transmitted Disease Surveillance 2015. Atlanta: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; 2016.

Yet in spite of high numbers of infections, studies have shown that the stigma of having venereal diseases is highly prevalent among the American population. In fact, a study by the National Institute of Health has shown that the stigma surrounding sexually transmitted infections is so acute; it serves as a major deterrent to teen pregnancy.⁶⁷

When observing these modern ideas, one does not need to look hard to observe the parallels between the development of the venereal disease stigma in the early part of the 20th century, and the stigma surrounding the disease today. The frontier was initially established on an economy of transience. The populations that existed on the frontier was temporary and mobile, which precluded any systematic response to the prevalence of venereal disease. However, as the frontier closed, the population organized and coalesced around a shared identity of Eastern progressivism, which they used to build an ideal society of enlightened humanism. In their attempts to fight venereal disease as a social ill, the reformers turned to increasingly regulatory methods, culminating in the establishment of quarantine zones and sterilization. These attitudes have changed little in modern times.

The idea that venereal diseases represent immoral and scrupulous behavior still exists in our moral identity. In addition, the results of the scientific exploration of venereal disease during the social hygiene has led to better prevention and cures that ensure sexually transmitted diseases are not the threat they were in the past. By exploring how past generations have encountered and dealt with venereal disease, we as a modern

⁶⁷ Cunningham, Shayna D. et al. "Relationships Between Perceived STD-Related Stigma, STD-Related Shame and STD Screening Among a Household Sample of Adolescents." *Perspectives on sexual and reproductive health* 41.4 (2009): 225–230. PMC. Web. 27 Apr. 2017.

population can choose to react to venereal disease in a way that does not repeat the mistakes of the past, but instead learns from it.⁶⁸

Ultimately, Minnie Wallace Walkup was found not guilty of killing James Walkup via arsenic poisoning. It was determined that he had taken several spoonful's of the drug the day before his death, according to witness reports. After the trial, Minnie was married several more times. Her later husbands always had two things in common: they were rich, and they all died under mysterious circumstances shortly after they married her.⁶⁹ The development of America is intertwined with moral confliction. This confliction has defined our democratic systems and the republican values that lay enshrined in our culture. Few issues have truly helped shed such a bright light on our own moral contingencies than the ageless struggle against sexually transmitted diseases.

⁶⁸ Fox, Maggie. "Sexually Transmitted Disease Cases Hit New High in U.S." NBC News, October 19, 2016. Accessed March 7, 2017. <http://www.nbcnews.com/health/sexual-health/sexually-transmitted-disease-cases-hit-new-high-u-s-n669051>.

⁶⁹ "Mrs. Minnie Wallace Walkup Ketcham's own pathetic story of her exciting career ." The Sunday Chicago Tribune (Chicago), December 26, 1897. <http://archives.chicagotribune.com/1897/12/26/page/33/article/mrs-minnie-wallace-walkup-ketchams-own-pathetic-story-of-her-exciting-career>

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