

“Some Honest Women:” Gender and Morality in Gold Rush San Francisco

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Abstract

From 1848 until the mid-1850s, during the early years of the Gold Rush, San Francisco was a boomtown with a large male population where violent crime and lawlessness ran rampant. Generally, historians have understood the increasing immigration of “respectable” middle class women to the city during the 1850s as a catalyst to an eventual crackdown on vice and violence. In order to accomplish this, they have drawn on Victorian gender ideals that describe middle class white women as perfect wives and mothers, individuals who differed from both the men and sex worker women who populated early San Francisco. However, by evaluating the writings of middle class women living in the city in its earliest years, we discover that a simple explanation of traditional femininity that rests mostly on the idea of “good” women’s innate civilizing natures is insufficient to describe San Francisco’s small early community of Victorian ladies. In investigating the stated desires and motivations of these women, we see that San Francisco’s earliest middle class ladies were industrious, economically-motivated individuals, as well as Victorian wives and mothers. More importantly, in examining the lives and work of this minority population, we learn more about the resilience and drive necessary to make it in the west, traits that were not specific to any gender.

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In 1854, English poet and literary critic Coventry Patmore first published his famed poem “The Angel in the House.” An ode to the virtuous character and behavior of his beloved wife Emily, the narrative described an ideal woman that was completely dedicated and submissive to her husband. According to Patmore, “Dearly devoted to his arms; She loves with a love that cannot tire; And when, ah woe, she loves alone, Through passionate duty love springs higher, As grass grows taller round a stone.”¹ In hundreds of lines of poetic verse, Patmore’s angel was the image of feminine perfection: patient, obedient, and loyal. She was also the embodiment of the model Victorian wife and mother, an amalgamation of all of the most desirable traits of womanhood from the white middle class.

Although the Victorian cult of modesty would truly gain steam in the second half of the 1800s, both British and American society embraced Patmore’s cultural ideals beginning in the early nineteenth century. In the fashionable east coast cities of Boston and New York, well-to-do men and women observed the rules of propriety as they navigated through ballrooms and opera halls. Women were feminine creatures whose domain was in the home; the affairs of money and politics were left to their men, the rightful proprietors of the outside world.² Of course, there were female entrepreneurs and leaders across the United States throughout the Victorian era, and society’s guidelines did not usually apply to its lowest classes. Yet even if frequent exceptions to the rule existed on every socioeconomic level, Victorian images of ideal masculinity and femininity played a significant role in the way that nineteenth century men and women understood themselves, their role in society, and the world around them, even in America’s wildest places.

¹ “The Angel in the House,” http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/novel_19c/thackeray/angel.html.

² Lynn Abrams, “The Ideals of Womanhood in Victorian England,” *BBC*, August 9, 2001, http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/victorian_britain/women_home/ideals_womanhood_01.shtml.

The Victorian era was also the age of Manifest Destiny, a moment in history in which Americans pushed west through the plains and past the rivers charted by Lewis and Clark, all the way to the shining Pacific coast. On the farms of the frontier, homesteaders toiled to build a prosperous new future. In California's gold mines, thousands of men broke their backs panning, sluicing, and dredging in search of fortune. Life was physically tough and emotionally draining in ways both similar and different to the experiences of farmers and factory workers in the east. One difference that was especially apparent was a dramatic shift in gender dynamics. For many men coming west without wives or daughters, the hunt for adventure involved a good deal of cooking and cleaning, women's tasks. For the women that made their new homes on the farms of the frontier, pulling out a living from the soil required the physical contribution of the entire family, even the fairer sex. And for the women who entertained in the taverns and gambling houses of the Wild West, economic independence was sometimes worth the workplace hazards.³ Yet, even in this untamed new world, Victorian ideas of gender still held sway.

Gold Rush San Francisco is a perfect setting to investigate the interaction of traditional gender ideals and the new communities of the growing west. A site of massive immigration following the discovery of gold in 1848, San Francisco was the definition of a mining boomtown. From the arrival of its first Argonauts, the city was characterized by an overwhelming large male population and a small number of females, primarily sex workers. During the first few years of the city's development, vice and violence were common problems. Men gambled, drank, fought, and slept with "loose" women, until the mid-1850s when a significant change began to take place. At the time, middle class women began to arrive in

³ Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson, ed., *The Women's West* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 3-7.

greater and greater numbers, becoming a catalyst in the city's transformation from sinful town to bustling, important metropolis.

Years before, some of San Francisco's citizens predicted this change. In the letters, diaries, and journals that were written in the first years of the Gold Rush, San Francisco's Argonauts lamented and wondered over a lack of women. While women in general were scarce in early San Francisco, prostitutes were plentiful; it seemed to be understood that the arrival of "respectable" middle class women would also usher in the arrival of all things feminine, most importantly civility, modesty, and humility—traits that stood in contrast to the strength and power of men and the brazen vulgarity of female sex workers. This characterization is especially valuable and important to understanding how contemporary San Franciscans understood gender norms and the role that they played in the development of their city. However, in many ways, this characterization is often problematic.

Although a great deal of work has been done on San Francisco's early Argonauts, including scholarship on their motivations, successes, and illegal activities in the early mining boomtown, the large majority of that work has focused on San Francisco's overwhelmingly large male population. When the city's minority female population has been discussed, it has mostly been analyzed for its role in the sex trade. Non-sex worker female pioneers have most often been characterized as a civilizing force; they were generally understood by their male contemporaries as examples of morality and appropriate feminine behavior without consideration of their stated motivations and desires. In a majority of scholarship on San Francisco's early years and its young boomtown community, the roles of non-sex worker women have not been adequately investigated. Rather, in keeping with contemporary ideas about the civilizing effect of middle-class Victorian women on an unregulated society, many historians have focused on the moral

lives of female non-sex workers, without great exploration of their practical lives as early adventurers and pioneers.

In the letters and diaries left behind by a small community of middle class women who arrived in San Francisco in its earliest years of development, there is evidence for complex, varied ideas of femininity that did not rely solely on the expression of morality or submission to male authority. Rather, San Francisco's first middle class female settlers were interested in a variety of pursuits, most importantly making money and making the most out of their western adventure before returning home. Although San Francisco's early "respectable" female population may have differed from San Francisco's men and San Francisco's prostitutes through their "civilizing" relationship with vice and violence, their stated motivations and desires were not very different from the rest of the city's Argonaut community. In evaluating the writings of "respectable" San Franciscan women, we see that San Francisco's earliest middle class ladies were industrious, economically-motivated individuals, as well as Victorian wives and mothers. More importantly, in examining the lives and work of this minority population, we learn more about the resilience and drive necessary to make it in the west, traits that were not specific to any gender.

San Francisco, 1848-1856: "The very citadel of his Satanic Majesty"⁴

On July 7, 1846, when Commodore John Drake Sloat of the United States Navy took possession of the region of California containing Yerba Buena there were an estimated 1,000 non-natives in residence.⁵ By the end of 1849, a year after President James Polk's December

⁴ William Benemann, ed., *A Year of Mud and Gold: San Francisco in Letters and Diaries, 1849-1850* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 88.

⁵ The Virtual Museum of the City of San Francisco, "San Francisco Gold Rush Chronology," <http://www.sfmuseum.org/hist/chron1.html>.

State of the Union Address publicizing the discovery of gold in California, the population of the recently renamed San Francisco had reached thirty thousand souls, mostly young males eager to make their fortune in the territory's young mining community.⁶ Although they had come from five different continents and a variety of different socioeconomic backgrounds,⁷ San Francisco's first Argonauts generally subscribed to a similar goal: they wanted to get rich fast and then leave the untamed West, returning home to their families and friends as profitable entrepreneurs. The temporary nature of the settlers' venture not only helped to define the economic, social, and political life of the young city, but it also had a significant effect on San Franciscans' Victorian notions of morality, specifically the way in which they engaged with violent crime and amoral behaviors.

Like most other mining boomtowns whose populations had exploded virtually overnight, early San Francisco saw its fair share of shootings and stabbings, incidents typically coupled with an excess of alcohol consumed by one or both parties.⁸ Although the majority of such crimes were usually minor in scale, San Francisco gained a reputation for its homicides and suicides, respectively numbering 4,200 and 1,200 in 1854.⁹ The latter were fueled by an environment of disease, poor weather, and hopelessness. According to historian Roger Lotchin, by 1849, many eager young miners began to realize that claiming a stake in California's growing economic prosperity was not as easy as advertised. After months of difficult travel and weeks of discomfort without luck in a dangerous new city, "what remained was the anger that men entertain when their hopes have been dashed rather than the enthusiasm of original

⁶ Benemann, *A Year of Mud and Gold*, xv.

⁷ Karen Clay and Randall Jones, "Migrating to Riches? Evidence of the California Gold Rush," *The Journal of Economic History* 68, no.4 (2008), doi: 10.1017/s002205070800079x.

⁸ Benemann, *A Year of Mud and Gold*, 81.

⁹ George Martin, *Verdi at the Golden Gate: Opera and San Francisco in the Gold Rush Years* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 91.

aspirations.”¹⁰ In the numerous diaries, journals, and letters left behind by hundreds of San Francisco’s first settlers, this anger was rendered primarily as a kind of detachment, as both men and women detailed frozen bodies and quick lynchings in frequent occurrence, either for the benefit of their correspondents or for their own recollection. San Franciscan E.A. Upton, in a journal entry dated November 29, 1849, matter-of-factly recounted the large numbers of settlers taking their own lives, writing, “Suicides are now frequent in the city, committed by those who have lost all by gambling or being disappointed in their expectations in reference to the mines.”¹¹ In a letter to his brother, written on February 24, 1850, entrepreneur Henry Didier Lammot echoed Upton’s tone, recounting, “There was a man found dead a night or two [ago] here just below us, who was in the habit of getting drunk and sleeping among some house frames, and the other night there was a hard frost, and he was found dead next morning.”¹² This hardened mindset was probably most accurately epitomized in a July 22, 1849 diary entry, of one William J. Towne, likely a miner. It read, in its entirety, “Cooked some fritters for the first time. A man shot himself.”¹³

It would be false, however, to paint a picture of early San Francisco that reflects only high mortality rates and apathy in the face of crushed dreams and harsh realities. While depression and violence were very real dangers for San Francisco’s young community, they were also coupled with a ruckus party atmosphere, in which gambling houses, saloons, and brothels became fixtures of society, acknowledged in a manner that would have seemed impossible in the great Victorian cities of the east. According to an analysis of the 1850 and 1852 California censuses compiled by economists Karen Clay and Randall Jones, while many gold rush miners

¹⁰ Roger W. Lotchin, *San Francisco: 1846-1856* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), xix.

¹¹ Benemann, *A Year of Mud and Gold*, 97.

¹² Benemann, *A Year of Mud and Gold*, 104.

¹³ Benemann, *A Year of Mud and Gold*, 89.

struggled to turn a profit, those “49ers” who had followed the influx of settlers to the territory and went into business serving the needs of the mining communities were far more likely to strike it big.¹⁴ Not only boardinghouses and grocery stores, San Francisco’s newest inhabitants needed entertainment and found little reason not to indulge. By the end of 1850, about 3.1% of all native-born males between the ages of 20-24 had migrated to California, contributing to a community of men which made up 94% of the territory’s total population.¹⁵ In a transitory environment, often under the influence of alcohol and without the watchful eyes of parents, friends, or societal acquaintances, many of San Francisco’s young men took part in the risky fun of the gambling halls and saloons.¹⁶ In his discussion on new conceptions of masculinity in early San Francisco, historian Christopher Herbert explained, “The lack of social restraints in the form of family, churches, and, most importantly, white women, meant that many who in the East had apparently behaved in a socially acceptable manner now engaged in activities such as drinking, swearing, prostitution, interracial sex, and gambling.”¹⁷ Those businesspeople best able to fulfill the hedonistic needs of hundreds of young men without family or friends in a strange new land grew wealthy even while most of their customers failed to make gold.

While most of San Francisco’s newest residents refused to admit to visiting brothels or saloons in letters to their families or even their private diary entries, they could not avoid at least commenting on the sights and spectacles of the rowdy young city. In a letter to his brother dated September 27, 1849, San Franciscan C. C. Hyde described the town and its vices with wonder, writing, “But this *town is a town of itself not one of the towns*, a person can form no idea of it until they come here and see for themselves. It is jammed full of people from all parts of the

¹⁴ Clay and Jones, “Migrating to Riches?”

¹⁵ Clay and Jones, “Migrating to Riches?”

¹⁶ Benemann, *A Year of Mud and Gold*, 81-85.

¹⁷ Christopher Herbert, “‘Life’s Prizes are by Labor Got’: Risk, Reward, and White Manliness during the California Gold Rush,” *Pacific Historical Review* 80, no.3 (2011): 339-368, doi: 10.1525/phr.2011.80.3.339, 357.

world, and all classes, loafers, gamblers, gentlemen and labourers...Gambling houses here pay the best rent, it is astonishing to see how much of that business is carried on here.”¹⁸ While T. Warwick Brooke detailed for his mother his “disgust” with the “naughty town,”¹⁹ French traveler Ernest De Massey recounted with surprise an episode in which several men were wounded in a horrific boiler accident in the city’s bay as the gaiety of the gambling halls continued in the distance.²⁰ In a journal entry dated April 7, 1850, an awed Samuel C. Lewis wrote that while most normal San Franciscan businesses observed the Sabbath as they did “at home,” gambling houses and saloons knew “no Sunday,” operating audibly throughout the day of rest.²¹ He hoped the city would soon become organized, so that the authorities could regulate such a nuisance. E. A. Upton, on the other hand, was happy to leave the city in December of 1849, reflecting, “Glad I am to get out of San Francisco once more, for it is literally a pandemonium on earth—murders, suicides, gambling, drunkenness—and in fact the whole catalogue of the blackest vices riot in San Francisco.”²²

One of San Francisco’s “blackest vices” was a thriving sex industry housed famously in the city’s Barbary Coast, a region akin to Denver’s Red Light District or New Orleans’ French Quarter. In 1849, the ratio of men to women in the town averaged fifty to one.²³ Of the forty thousands immigrants who had arrived by sea that year only seven hundred were female, and the majority of those seven hundred were Latin American prostitutes.²⁴ A tangible shortage of

¹⁸ Beneman, *A Year of Mud and Gold*, 91.

¹⁹ Benemann, *A Year of Mud and Gold*, 104.

²⁰ Ernest De Massey, *A Frenchman in the Gold Rush*, trans. Marguerite Eyer Wilbur (San Francisco: California Historical Society, 1927), 162.

²¹ Benemann, *A Year of Mud and Gold*, 106.

²² Benemann, *A Year of Mud and Gold*, 107.

²³ Jacqueline Baker Barnhart, *The Fair but Frail: Prostitution in San Francisco 1849-1900* (Reno: University of Nevada, 1986), 50.

²⁴ Benemann, *A Year of Mud and Gold*, 85.

women not only forced men to engage in household duties,²⁵ it also created an atmosphere in which sex work became a recognized and increasingly lucrative business. Pimps, madams, brothel and saloon owners, and even prostitutes themselves encountered a sellers' market ripe for the taking upon arrival in 1848 and 1849. Enterprising women who had subsisted as common streetwalkers in New York or Paris found that they could earn \$200 to \$500 a night as an admired *fille de joie* on Pacific or Kearney Street.²⁶ In a city where it was not odd for a man to shout out "G-ds there's a *woman*! As true as the world!"²⁷ at the passing of a female, San Franciscan "prostitutes were not viewed as deviants from the norm, because there was no norm."²⁸ Instead, San Francisco's most famed courtesans, primarily professional white women who had come to the territory on their accord, went to the opera, attended dinner parties, and walked the fashionable promenade, both to advertise their services and enjoy San Francisco society.²⁹ The less celebrated "fair but frail," mostly Mexican and Chinese women who had been brought to the city to work the more common gambling houses and cantinas of the strip, occupied a lower, but still highly demanded place in the complicated racial and social hierarchy that defined San Francisco's booming prostitution business.³⁰

Unfortunately for San Francisco's free wheedling madams, high stakes gamblers, and unscrupulous saloonkeepers, the good times were not destined to last. With its strategic coastal location and expanding population, it was almost inevitable that San Francisco would outgrow its mining roots and become an important economic and social center in the territory. In a column published in the *New York Daily Times* on September 24, 1851, an Eastern observer asserted,

²⁵ Barbara Berglund, *Making San Francisco American: Cultural Frontiers in the Urban West, 1846-1906* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 28.

²⁶ Barnhart, *The Fair but Frail*, 19.

²⁷ Benemann, *A Year of Mud and Gold*, 146.

²⁸ Barnhart, *The Fair but Frail*, 1.

²⁹ Barnhart, *The Fair but Frail*, 29.

³⁰ Barnhart, *The Fair but Frail*, 45.

“Society in the New Pacific State is gradually improving, and keeps pace with the progress of that remarkable region in all things.”³¹ Although the writer acknowledged that the area had not had “proper time to shape itself definitely,” he maintained every “confidence to believe that she will yet prove a pattern of industry and good government, and so become a worthy member of a great and sound Confederation.”³² California had been admitted to the Union just over a year before, on September 9, 1850, and the “naughty town” of San Francisco was one of the most recognizable cities within the developing state.

In July 1847, the existing citizens mandated an early town council,³³ and by 1850 San Francisco’s business quarter had expanded notably with beautiful and well-made buildings.³⁴ In a journal entry dated October 9, 1849, San Franciscan Thomas Reid described the flurry of activity, writing, “The city is crowded with new edifices in a state of construction and the beach each side of the city is crowded with tents, and the valleys about the city are the same.”³⁵ Additionally, with the establishment of proper courts in 1850³⁶ and the convening and reconvening of the San Francisco Committee of Vigilance in 1851 and 1856, citizens and lawmakers alike began to curb the excesses of San Francisco society, driving its opium dealers, prostitutes, and gambling tycoons underground, if not completely putting them out of business. These changes, however, were not taking place within a societal vacuum dominated by single young men with their sights set on fortune and adventure; San Francisco’s population was both growing and changing in one significant way.

³¹ “Society in California,” *The New York Times*, September 24, 1851, accessed November 14, 2011, <http://search.proquest.com.proxyau.wrlc.org/docview/95774726?accountid=8285>.

³² “Society in California.”

³³ Mary Floyd Williams, *A History of the San Francisco Committee of Vigilance of 1851* (New York: De Capo Press, 1969), 97.

³⁴ James A. B. Scherer, “*The Lion of the Vigilantes:*” *William T. Coleman* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1939), 95.

³⁵ Benemann, *A Year of Mud and Gold*, 166.

³⁶ Benemann, *A Year of Mud and Gold*, 181.

Once San Francisco's male miners and entrepreneurs decided to make the city their permanent home, abandoning speculation and turning to more traditional occupations, they had sent for their wives and daughters. By the mid-1850s, the number of "respectable" women in San Francisco surpassed the once-dominant prostitution population,³⁷ and by the 1860s, women occupied nearly 40% of the total population.³⁸ As families unloaded on the docks of the Barbary Coast in ever-growing numbers and gambling dens and brothels retreated into the darkness of the night, it was evident that a Victorian sensibility was taking hold alongside the city's developing political and judicial apparatuses.³⁹

"There are some honest women in San Francisco, but not very many"⁴⁰

In surveying the journals and letters of San Francisco's first male Argonauts, we detect a distinct longing for the comforts of respectable female society, both female relations left back at home and unknown ladies who could serve as potential wives and mothers. In a February 26, 1850 letter to his sister, Charles F. Dunlany explained, "I came to the conclusion that my habits in California had so taught me the domestic occupations of life, that I *thought* I could do without a wife...But when I think of my loved, but distant home, the smiles of women there—the tears of *sisterly* affection—which oft will flow when the absent are thought of, all—banish such—must I term them—unholy thoughts."⁴¹ In reading Dunlany's "unholy thoughts," it is easy to detect a welling of emotion for the family, specifically womenfolk, who were left behind. William Smith Jewett was similarly anxious to return to the company of potential middle class brides.

Discussing a mutual acquaintance with his sister in a letter dated January 28, 1850, Jewett wrote,

³⁷ Barnhart, *The Fair but Frail*, 73.

³⁸ Berglund, *Making San Francisco American*, 5.

³⁹ Barnhart, *The Fair but Frail*, 1.

⁴⁰ Barnhart, *The Fair but Frail*, 82.

⁴¹ Benemann, *A Year of Mud and Gold*, 146.

“I am very anxious to go and see him, and shall do so the first thing after getting home, save marrying a wife—that is, if I can find anyone worthy of my *gold* (of my self there are plenty).”⁴²

In addition to the problem of very few women, especially middle class women, being present in San Francisco, there was also the issue, according to men and women of the time, of the suitability of the young city as a home for Victorian ladies. In a letter to his sister dated December 21, 1849, San Franciscan John McCracken wrote of the young city, “This is no place for ladies, however, and I should think it a great risk to expose any of our ladies to this uncharitable climate. South of this at San Jose or Monterey, it is delightful all the year round.”⁴³

Despite the unwillingness of some to expose the fairer sex to San Francisco’s windy mornings and damp afternoons, many longed for the civilizing influence of the Victorian era’s respectable wives and daughters. In a letter written on December 29, 1849, Jonathan F. Locke pined for the familiar presence of his wife as he battled illness and San Francisco’s sinful enticements, musing, “George and I have perfect health. Yes, perhaps better than if we staid at home. But we are beset by many temptations and exposed to sickness. Oh how I wish you and the children were here, but then you or they might be sick and that would [be] bad.”⁴⁴ Although Locke remained unsure about whether or not to expose his wife to the harsh elements of life in San Francisco, he seemed certain that her presence would have a positive effect on his western adventure, especially in saving him from his less virtuous desires. John McCracken discussed this role of women from a more universal perspective in an April 14, 1850 letter to his sister, Mary. Although his statements are surely rooted in a deep love for his sister, the sentiments that he expressed were compatible with Victorian ideas of feminine modesty and the angelic natures of well-bred ladies. He elevated San Francisco’s middle class women to saviors, writing:

⁴² Benemann, *A Year of Mud and Gold*, 149.

⁴³ Benemann, *A Year of Mud and Gold*, 146.

⁴⁴ Benemann, *A Year of Mud and Gold*, 154.

And now, dear sister, when we find that here amid this strange commingling of men from every clime, of every nation, subjected to the worst possible influences, and perfectly unrestrained—I say, dear sister, when we find we are likely to enjoy at last what we have so much needed, the sweet, the gentle, the saving influence of woman. (I fear, my dear Mary, few appreciate, and some never knew the holy influence of a Mother, or a sister, with such good angels to guard, to care for us, we feel that in this life there is much worth living for). When we see these things, we cannot but feel ‘that the darkness is past, and the true light now shineth.’⁴⁵

Many agreed with McCracken’s sentiments, although they did not always possess his talent for poetic turn of phrase. In 1851, Albert Bernard de Russailh described San Francisco’s situation in bleak terms, stating, “There are...some honest women in San Francisco but not very many.”⁴⁶ William S. McCollum recognized the complications of this problem in 1849, writing, “One great cause of a loose state of morals in San Francisco is the absence of female society and female influence. There are not over fifty American women, and but a few others in a population of 30,000.”⁴⁷ Although McCollum’s figures may have been subject to hyperbole, his reasoning was soundly rooted in popular contemporary ideas about the civilizing, good natures of Victorian women. It was inevitable that the arrival of middle class white women would bring about the regulation of vice, including prostitution, and the saving of San Francisco’s male souls.

“Housewives and Harlots”

Historians of the American West have approached the question of gender from a variety of different angles through a century’s worth of scholarship and investigation. For historians of San Francisco’s Gold Rush era, gender plays an important role in understanding the city’s young population and how San Franciscan society developed in the early years. In her book *Making San Francisco American*, Barbara Berglund summarizes San Francisco’s character and growth,

⁴⁵ Benemann, *A Year of Mud and Gold*, 158.

⁴⁶ As quoted in Barnhart, *The Fair but Frail*, 82.

⁴⁷ As quoted in Curt Gentry, *The Madams of San Francisco: An Irreverent History of the City by the Golden Gate* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1964), 82.

writing, “Combining the characteristics of a city on the western frontier and a cosmopolitan port of entry, San Francisco emerged as a place where peoples pushed and pulled by multiple migratory trajectories encountered each other and established relations along a continuum ranging from conflict, coercion, and exploitation to friendship, sexual liaison, and marriage.”⁴⁸ In Berglund’s San Francisco, the city served as a frontier meeting plane in which early adventurers, men and women alike, came together to explore class, gender, and racial views while negotiating the processes of everyday life. Men without women took on household duties,⁴⁹ while sex commerce emerged as an important part of a rowdy, thriving culture of entertainment. Although Berglund does not focus on early middle class female Argonauts, she does address their foils, the fallen women who served as active participants in the city’s early forays into sin and vice. According to Berglund, sex workers living on the Barbary Coast were economically and racially diverse members of a cross-cultural society—not necessarily the typical soiled doves of dime novels and Western films.

In his 1964 text *The Madams of San Francisco*, Curt Gentry states that “Victorian morality had a rather limited spectrum: there were the virtuous women and there were the fallen.”⁵⁰ In the context of the Victorian nineteenth century, it is important to examine the characterization of non-sex worker female Argonauts as it stood in relation to the image of San Francisco’s prostitute community. In her book *The Fair but Frail: Prostitution in San Francisco 1849-1900*, historian Jacqueline Baker Barnhart investigates the make-up and development of the city’s prostitution industry with language very similar to Berglund, discussing prostitutes and other sex workers as entrepreneurs in an emerging market. In her text Barnhart also draws on the idea of the Victorian spectrum of respectability, specifically the notion of the societal gulf that

⁴⁸ Berglund, *Making San Francisco American*, 2.

⁴⁹ Berglund, *Making San Francisco American*, 28.

⁵⁰ Gentry, *The Madams of San Francisco*, 6.

existed between San Francisco's prostitutes and "respectable" middle class women. Although the city's early inhabitants primarily referred to its first sex workers with the coy and elevating epitaphs "fair but frail" or *fille de joie*, by 1853, the Barbary Coast's fallen women were increasingly described as harlots and whores. The primary reason for the change in status was that large numbers of middle class women and families arriving to San Francisco insisted on "exclusive rights to respectability."⁵¹ According to Barnhart, "Ladies were the civilizing influence on men. In contrast to them were the other women—the prostitutes."⁵² Emblematic of a harsh Victorian system which allowed little room for gray area, both men and women relied on a strict dichotomy that separated the good women from the bad, making "good" women the "custodians of society's morals" and the "bad" the perpetrators of their shame.⁵³ However, where Barnhart discusses prostitutes and madams as active working women, she characterizes middle class women somewhat differently, explaining, "Their ability and courage in facing the dangers and hardships of pioneering were magnificent, but their motivation was not adventure and possible riches; rather it was the support of men's need for adventure. They may have anticipated the possibility of wealth and what it would mean when they returned East, but their role in the quest for gold was passive."⁵⁴ Although middle class women may have had an interest in shaping San Francisco society and improving their family's economic prospects in Barnhart's rendering, they were mostly dutiful wives and mothers who had simply come along for the ride.

Many historians have applied this sort of passive interpretation of middle class women when discussing the role of ladies in civilizing San Francisco and eradicating vice. In his investigation of white masculinity and the Gold Rush, Christopher Herbert discusses the

⁵¹ Barnhart, *The Fair but Frail*, 30.

⁵² Barnhart, *The Fair but Frail*, 19.

⁵³ Barnhart, *The Fair but Frail*, 19.

⁵⁴ Barnhart, *The Fair but Frail*, 86.

relationship between the concepts of risk and reward and the guiding principles of traditional manliness in the context of early Gold Rush culture, highlighting and evaluating the miners' exploration of different risky behaviors. According to Herbert, an early shortage of white women and established institutions created an environment in which many men who had behaved appropriately in their eastern towns and cities turned to violence, drinking, gambling, and taboo sexual relationships.⁵⁵ In explaining the connection between white men and sex workers specifically, Herbert clarifies, "These relationships were understood as temporary arrangements until the arrival of white women in the West or the return of white men to the East."⁵⁶ When these early male adventurers did decide to remain in California, sending for their wives and sisters to join them, it became necessary to ensure that territory was a civilized place ready for inhabitation by white young ladies. Considering white masculinity's emphasis on independently caring for and protecting one's dependents and men's understanding of the goodness and kindness of their delicate Victorian ladies, it was only natural that the increasing arrival of "respectable" women from the East would facilitate a period of change in which California's wild ways were civilized and tamed. In Herbert's California, there was not only the understanding that Victorian ladies were a civilizing force, but also the understanding that the ideal Victorian gentlemen should be able to ensure that their women would live in a civilized society.

Historian Curt Gentry also views the presence of middle class women as the primary vehicle motivating the city's males toward clean-up efforts. In discussing the decision to stay and bring their families to San Francisco, he wrote, "Some decided early, some late, but once having committed himself, a man looked at the world around him in a different light. It caused no

⁵⁵ Herbert, "Life's Prizes are by Labor Got," 357.

⁵⁶ Herbert, "Life's Prizes are by Labor Got," 357.

fundamental change in character; it simply meant that many men, especially those who now decided to send for their families, found less than acceptable conditions which they had previously tolerated, even, in some instances, enjoyed.”⁵⁷ With the entrance of middle-class women in the mid-1850s, it became impossible to accept an open acknowledgement of the city’s lawlessness. The concept of San Francisco as a haven for vice and violence stood in stark contrast to both Victorian feminine sensibility and the aspirations of a developing city newly aware of its own political and social capabilities. In addressing the criminalization of prostitution in San Francisco Brenda Elaine Pillors echoes these notions, explaining that prostitution first became a problem in San Francisco because residents felt “threatened by its presence in the city.”⁵⁸ According to many Gold Rush historians, San Franciscans felt these sorts of threats more acutely as a result of the arrival of middle class women and families, a change in population that served as a catalyst for reform in the every-growing city.

While most scholars discussing the connection between middle class Victorian ladies and the eradication of vice have drawn upon contemporary ideas of feminine civility and a man’s responsibility in protecting the virtuous character of the fairer sex, historian Roger Lotchin characterizes the era’s domestic angels as a somewhat more vocal lot. In his 1974 study *San Francisco: 1846-1856: From Hamlet to City*, Lotchin postulated that the problems addressed during the “Vigilante Rise of 1856” were first brought up by San Francisco’s “ladies.”⁵⁹ In general, Lotchin understands early San Franciscans as people who “pondered their experience seriously, trying to think their way through problems as they went about homemaking,

⁵⁷ Gentry, *The Madams of San Francisco*, 85.

⁵⁸ Brenda Elaine Pillors, “The Criminalization of Prostitution in the United States: The Case of San Francisco, 1854-1919,” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkley, 1982), 39.

⁵⁹ Lotchin, *San Francisco*, 257.

entertaining, working, and worshipping,”⁶⁰ and the virtuous housewives who arrived on mass beginning in the early 1850s were no exception. In some ways, Lotchin imagined the fight for San Francisco’s soul, especially efforts to criminalize the sex industry, as a conflict between “housewives and harlots,” in which middle class ladies rose up to defend appropriate womanhood in a “feminist uprising.”⁶¹ Distinctly set apart from both men and “bad” women who operated within San Francisco’s seedy gambling, drug, and prostitution circles, “good” women thrust into the growing metropolis were determined to civilize the sleazy City by the Bay.

Although Lotchin’s understanding of the female ownership over early reform movements may be somewhat exaggerated, his perspective is important in creating an illustration of early San Francisco society that is not solely influenced by images of a mythologized West. In their feminist-influenced collection *The Women’s West*, Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson emphasize the important role that women played in creating Western identity. In seeking to correct what they saw as previous omissions in the historical record, Armitage and Jameson focus on the realities of the lives and contributions of the working and middle class women of the frontier, rather than their more sensationalized sisters—the prostitutes and madams of the Wild West. In discussing the majority of popular texts focused on the Gold Rush and American expansion into the west, historian Elliot West claims, “If women appear at all in these accounts, they typically match crudely drawn stereotypes, particularly that of a prostitute cavorting in a saloon or plush brothel of Dead Wood or Silver City.”⁶² In an effort to provide a more accurate depiction of gender and working women in the west, Armitage and Jameson discuss the ways in

⁶⁰ Lotchin, *San Francisco*, 342.

⁶¹ Lotchin, *San Francisco*, 257.

⁶² Elliot West in *The Women’s West*, ed. Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 179.

which “idealized eastern sex roles were changed in the west.”⁶³ According to Jameson, on the frontier, “A woman’s work multiplied as her family did, and women did not therefore make as sharp a separation between work and sexuality as the public culture implied.”⁶⁴ Working class women living as farmers and laundresses in the plains and cities of the emerging west made a hard living, and they also made an economically and politically significant living, many acting as the breadwinners of their families.

While many scholars of San Francisco’s history have focused on middle class women as a civilizing presence or even an active civilizing force in city’s process of eradicating vice, some historians focusing on the role of women in the development of the frontier’s cities have made efforts to discuss “respectable” women in the context of their greater political and economic interests, much like Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson. In looking particularly at the Gold Rush mining community and San Francisco, historians Joann Levy and Michelle Jolly present a narrative focusing more exclusively on the actual experience of middle class and working class women. Discussing the “hardihood of women pioneers”⁶⁵ in the compulsively readable *They Saw the Elephant*, Levy explains the unique flexibility of women adjusting to life in the west. Writing about the famed mining camps author Dame Shirley, Levy states, “That Louisa, in particular, might adapt to and even, prefer the rough, rude West suggests how underestimated has been women’s acceptance and enjoyment of frontier experiences.”⁶⁶

While narrating the development of the city of San Francisco in gendered terms, Michelle Jolly focuses on the avenues through which women made a significant impact on the City by the Bay, influencing its character and growth. Jolly imagines San Francisco as a place especially

⁶³ Armitage and Jameson, *The Women’s West*, 4.

⁶⁴ Elizabeth Jameson in *The Women’s West*, ed. Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 150.

⁶⁵ Joann Levy, *They Saw the Elephant: Women in the California* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1990), xxii.

⁶⁶ Levy, *They Saw the Elephant*, 53.

conscious of gender and the population dynamics that existed between men and women. In her richly detailed and researched text, Jolly depicts early non-sex worker women as interesting and dynamic characters who pursued interests beyond the home, but she also touches upon some more traditional understandings of the subdued, civilizing role of women in the city's early development.

According to Jolly, San Franciscans understood social depravity in their city as the natural outcome of men living in the wild without access to the stabilizing presence of home or familiar guiding institutions. At the time, both men and women were invested in preserving the "cult of true womanhood," a construct based on the Victorian feminine values of submission and obedience as well as republican ideas concerning the raising of patriotic, God-fearing American sons. Although she recognizes that non-sex worker women in early San Francisco had an important and varied role to play in the development of the city, Jolly is also conscious of popular ideas of gender and the impact they had on the city's young society. Explaining traditional imagery, she summarizes, "According to this ideology true women possessed four main qualities: purity, piety, submissiveness, and domesticity, which defined the limits of properly women behavior."⁶⁷ Specifically quantifying the affect that the arrival of middle class women had on the city, Jolly claims, "By 1855, this influx of women and children had begun to have a marked effect on the city as the school system expanded and Protestant and Catholic women organized church groups and benevolent associations."⁶⁸ Between 1852 and 1857, the civilized ladies of San Francisco formed a number of benevolent associations, many concerned with children's welfare.⁶⁹ They were also active supporting members of the Committee of

⁶⁷ Michelle Jolly, "Inventing the City: Gender and the Politics of Everyday Life in Gold-Rush San Francisco, 1848-1869," (PhD diss., University of California, San Diego, 1998), 85.

⁶⁸ Jolly, "Inventing the City," 230.

⁶⁹ Jolly, "Inventing the City," 190.

Vigilance of 1851, serving as witnesses in criminal trials, even though their position would be diminished during the vigilance movement of 1856.⁷⁰ According to Jolly, “Accustomed to observing the nature and needs of the community in which they lived, these women saw in San Francisco a city desperately in need of women’s intervention.”⁷¹ The author even suggests that middle class women emphasized their role as civilizers so as not to threaten traditional gender dynamics, either with their activism or with their forays into the working world.⁷² In short, early San Francisco was a city hyper-aware and uniquely shaped by women and gender.

“They Came to Work”

In Jolly’s San Francisco, elaborated on extensively with the support of contemporary newspapers, journals, and diaries, men and women alike “articulated their discomforts and their hopes for the future in gendered terms.”⁷³ Although the city was dominated by men early on, “respectable” women were present, even if they were “too busy or too modest to venture out in public.”⁷⁴ Sex workers, however, were extremely visible, and they stood in stark contrast to women of the middle class. A division also existed between working class women, the daughters of Irish and German immigrants from the East, and the ladies of the middle class, primarily small numbers of native-born, Protestant women.⁷⁵ This division stood parallel to the gulf of difference found between the “rowdy classes” and the high-born middle class men destined to help save San Francisco’s soul.⁷⁶ They all met, however, in wet, cold San Francisco, a ramshackle boomtown where a huge influx of new settlers were accommodated by tents and shacks, as

⁷⁰ Jolly, “Inventing the City,” 205-226.

⁷¹ Jolly, “Inventing the City,” 185.

⁷² Jolly, “Inventing the City,” 204.

⁷³ Jolly, “Inventing the City,” 20.

⁷⁴ Jolly, “Inventing the City,” 3.

⁷⁵ Jolly, “Inventing the City,” 178-183.

⁷⁶ Jolly, “Inventing the City,” 10.

enterprising businesspeople frantically built hotels and boarding houses in an effort to cash in on the population boom. Arriving in a city that was hardly comfortable for Victorian ladies, many of San Francisco's "respectable" women chose to remain aboard ships, living at sea while they waited for the city's conditions to improve or for their new home to be built or arrive portably from the east.⁷⁷ Yet, they still became involved in the social life of the growing City by the Bay. Some historians suggest that it was difficult for middle class women to associate with many members of their station,⁷⁸ but female Argonauts did make many social connections in their city, attending dances and the theater even if such practices were not always viewed as appropriate to the image of the Victorian woman.⁷⁹ Their chief occupation, however, seemed to be work.

Although San Franciscan men long deprived of the company of ladies generally discussed middle class women as delicate, angelic figures that stood elevated above the daily grind, these female pioneers actually had a significant role to play in San Francisco's routine and day-to-day occurrences. They may not have liked the weather or found themselves housed comfortably in the city's walls, but a remarkable number of the "fairer sex" participated actively in the development of San Francisco's economic life. According to Jolly, "Most of the women who migrated to San Francisco after the discovery of gold came there to work."⁸⁰ Although that group included prostitutes and working class house servants and laundresses, middle class ladies had an active interest in earning money as well and the income that they earned was important to the running of a household. Many successful businesswomen were small-scale entrepreneurs; they brought goods with them to sell in the new territory and they started their own businesses,

⁷⁷ Levy, *They Saw the Elephant*, 57.

⁷⁸ Jolly, "Inventing the City," 3-4.

⁷⁹ Jolly, "Inventing the City," 192-194.

⁸⁰ Jolly, "Inventing the City," 178.

such as boarding houses.⁸¹ Because of the gender imbalance in the young city and the overabundance of men, women offering domestic services were greatly in demand. Not only did wives living in large boarding houses have to take on the responsibility of caring for several single men,⁸² wages for domestic workers stood at an all time high. In San Francisco in the early 1850s, house servants were paid anywhere between \$60 and \$100 a month.⁸³ At the same time, women in New York City were paid \$10 for similar work.⁸⁴ Laundresses and washerwomen benefitted as well, being paid as much as a male day laborer.⁸⁵ Even so, it was really Civil War widows who would cash in heavily in the coming decades. Arriving with a significant resource base in the form of their husbands' pensions or estates, many southern and some northern ladies became the profitable owners of small businesses in San Francisco's rapidly expanding markets.⁸⁶

It is also worth noting that many women in early San Francisco were able to become wealthy by taking advantage of the city's significant gender imbalance and marrying well. According to historian William Benemann, "For the few unmarried women who came to San Francisco during the gold rush the city provided a unique opportunity for economic betterment. In the nineteenth century few professions were open to 'good' women, and those all paid extremely low wages. The single most effective means available to a woman raising her social or economic status was to marry well, and in San Francisco women encountered a seller's market."⁸⁷ Although Benemann's understanding may neglect the role of many middle class women as boarding house managers and shop owners, his assessment of a "seller's market" for

⁸¹ Jolly, "Inventing the City," 130-131.

⁸² Jolly, "Inventing the City," 137.

⁸³ Jolly, "Inventing the City," 124.

⁸⁴ Jolly, "Inventing the City," 126.

⁸⁵ Jolly, "Inventing the City," 127.

⁸⁶ Jolly, "Inventing the City," 132.

⁸⁷ Benemann, *A Year of Mud of Gold*, 142.

marriage is accurate. While some prominent east coast cities, such as Boston, New York, and Baltimore contained more men than women, by 1860, men in San Francisco still outnumbered women in a 3 to 2 ratio.⁸⁸ The scarcity of women may have been somewhat exaggerated by despairing men and supported by the fact that a Victorian lady's domain was the home, rather than the public sphere, but it also probably caused many men to idealize the fairer sex. In early San Francisco, a muddy city where men were desperate for domestic help and there existed many newly wealthy entrepreneurs, single women were highly courted for marriage, if not pressured into union.

“Arabian Nights”

On the one hand, there was society's common understanding of the Victorian lady as a delicate, submissive creature whose presence would have a civilizing effect on the men and lower class women around her. On the other hand, there were the economic and practical realities of life in early San Francisco, a city that demanded a certain level of flexibility and industriousness of its new citizens. In order to properly evaluate these two divergent ideas, it is necessary to explore the writings of San Francisco's first female Argonauts, the women who came out west when Gold Rush frenzy was at its peak. Fortunately, many of the stories of the Gold Rush, including some stories with female narrators, have been preserved and passed down to future generations in the form of diaries, journals, and letters. Although they may not have represented every middle class lady who sought her fortunes in the wild, exciting California territory, the women who committed their hopes and dreams to paper during the Gold Rush years are valuable resources for understanding the feminine experiences of early San Francisco and how they differed from those of the men in the mines or the prostitutes who worked the popular

⁸⁸ Jolly, “Inventing the City,” 29.

saloons and gambling houses. Moreover, according to Gentry, even “though this was the era of the personal journal, almost everyone wrote with some expectation of being read.”⁸⁹ Whether they were writing for their own pleasure or for the benefit of friends and family at home, in the long run, middle class women present in San Francisco during the Gold Rush were writing as a part of a greater historical narrative.

Some referred to the adventure of going out west during the Gold Rush as “seeing the elephant.” For a few of the middle class women who wrote from mining country, the experience was comparable to living in the “Arabian Nights,” a fantastical world where Victorian ladies had to contend with challenges and experiences that were foreign to their lives in America’s tamer places. Although from most contemporary male accounts it would seem that these challenges might have been entirely unexpected for the fairer sex, they were often anticipated. What is more, the stated reasons of middle class women for going to California often closely matched those of the thousands of men and hundreds of sex worker women who went to the territory to make their fortune. The majority of miners who headed to California following the discovery of gold in 1848 planned to make a pile of money and then return home to their family and friends in the east. Free prostitutes and madams also choose to go to San Francisco in the hope of getting rich, taking advantage of the large gender imbalance and the free-wheeling atmosphere that could elevate some sex workers to the status of revered courtesans. According to Barnhart, “Like the gamblers and speculators, they recognized that the real profits were to be made in San Francisco, where the miners came to spend their money.”⁹⁰ Although often in the company of husbands who controlled the financial decisions of their household, many middle class women

⁸⁹ Gentry, *The Madams of San Francisco*, 16.

⁹⁰ Barnhart, *The Fair but Frail*, 2.

went to San Francisco during the earliest years of the Gold Rush with a vested interest in making money, rather than civilizing society.

One such individual was Mary Jane Megquier. The wife of Dr. Thomas Lewis Megquier, she and her husband left their family and friends, including their children, in Winthrop, Maine and sailed for San Francisco in 1849. Over a little less than a decade in California, the fiery Megquier would write several letters to loved ones on the east coast, most of which focused on the daily occurrences of her life as a boardinghouse keeper and a middle class wife. In these incredibly valuable letters, Megquier revealed her reasons for going to the city, the reality of her life there, and her expectations for her future in California. In a letter to a friend Milton, written early on before her departure in February 1849, Megquier wrote, “When I found out how much the ladies were appreciated in the far west, be assured I was ready to start, (not only for their help, but for their good influence upon society. What think of that?).”⁹¹ Although Megquier was excited to go west to a land where she would be appreciated as a civilized Victorian lady, her stated objectives were rather more practical. In a letter written to her children from Panama shortly before her arrival in San Francisco, she teased about returning soon as a rich woman with piles of gold, writing, “In about one year you will see your Mother come trudging home with an apron full, but without joking, gold is very plenty and if I do not like we shall get it as fast as possible and start for home...”⁹² Earlier she had mused on the hard work and economic prospects that awaited her in San Francisco, explaining:

But womens help is so very scarce that I am in hopes to get a chance by hook or crook to pay my way, but some women that have gone there are coming home because they can get no servants to wait on them, but a woman that can work will make more money than a man, and I think now that I shall do that which will bring in the most change, for the quicker the money is made the sooner we shall meet, but I am very glad you are not here,

⁹¹ Mary Jane Megquier, *Apron Full of Gold*, ed. Robert Glass Cleland (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1949), 5.

⁹² Megquier, *Apron Full of Gold*, 17.

although it seems that I must see you, but it would be still harder to see you suffer for the comforts of life. I am not at all concerned for myself as I can endure almost any thing and enjoy it, as is the case here, some think it is hard fare, but I am getting fat, with but two meals a day no flour cooked in any way except in sour hard bread...⁹³

Although she believed that San Francisco's anticipated hardships would be too great for her eastern-born children to bear, she imagined that she was made from tougher stuff. Already growing large on the tough diet provided for the journey through the Isthmus, she speculated on the kind of money that a woman could earn in bustling San Francisco.

Anne Wilson Booth, a contemporary of Megquier and another middle class wife and mother, arrived with her husband in San Francisco in September 1849. Although she would not come to run a series of successful boarding houses like Megquier, she was industrious and astute in observing her surroundings, consciously evaluating the rowdy city for the opportunity-rich place that it was. Her main occupation in San Francisco was "housekeeping," the building of a home and a life that would be both economically and socially fulfilling even in the short term. Writing in her journal in October of 1849 she discussed her desire to "contribute my quota towards accumulating something."⁹⁴ In the same entry, she described herself as "ready and anxious to embark in almost anything that may be profitable."⁹⁵ In the coming months she would be greatly occupied with facilitating the quick realization of her and her husband's financial goals, in the hope of a swift return to the east. Constantly employing the refrain "when I return home," Booth looked fondly toward a reunion with family and friends, but she was determined to first make a useful stay in San Francisco.

Much like the enterprising miners and prostitutes that arrived in California in 1848 and 1849, many of these Victorian ladies saw San Francisco for its economic potential. Eliza

⁹³ Megquier, *Apron Full of Gold*, 16.

⁹⁴ Anne Wilson Booth in *A Year of Mud and Gold: San Francisco in Letters and Diaries, 1849-1850*, ed. William Benemann (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 116.

⁹⁵ Booth, *A Year of Mud and Gold*, 116.

Farnham, women's rights activist, and author of the memoir *California, in-doors and out; or, How we farm, mine, and live generally in the Golden State*, looked favorably on the role that women could play in the development of the territory. Writing in 1856 about her early impressions and beliefs, she stated, "I fully believed at that time that a company of females could emigrate greatly to their own advantage and that of the country, and I still think so."⁹⁶ Although she chose to settle in Santa Cruz, she arrived to the territory first in San Francisco. Later she would come to hate San Francisco for its poor weather and crowded atmosphere, but upon landing in the city's bay, she was impressed by the emerging metropolis. Five years later, she acknowledged that she "thought of the wonderful country whose emporium laid out before me, like a young giant but half-conscious of his power."⁹⁷

"The constitution of six horses"

Although not all of San Francisco's Victorian ladies were so outspoken about their economic initiatives, they all seemed to share a certain adaptability and hardiness, or at least a desire to promote these traits in their writing. Megquier bragged that she had the "constitution of six horses,"⁹⁸ while Farnham brushed off her critics, stating, "I did not faint, for I am strong and resolute by nature."⁹⁹ One of the most difficult crosses to bear when coming out west was separation from one's family, especially one's children. Men and women, respectable and not, missed loved ones left behind and waited eagerly for the arrival of news or letters from family and friends. In October of 1849, Booth described "an unlooked-for but joyful treat" in the form

⁹⁶ Eliza Farnham, *California, In-Doors and Out* (New York: Dix, Edwards & Co., 1856), 24.

⁹⁷ Farnham, *California*, 21.

⁹⁸ Megquier, *Apron Full of Gold*, 16.

⁹⁹ Farnham, *California*, 15.

of “letters from home.”¹⁰⁰ She went on to write, “I cannot express the emotions of delight that fill my heart upon hearing from my loved Parents, sisters and child.”¹⁰¹

One woman who felt the loss of family especially acutely was the middle class housewife Margaret DeWitt. Dealing with the trials of settling in a foreign territory and the hardship of an oft-neglectful husband, DeWitt was keenly hopeful for the moment in which she would see her loved ones again, but she was unwavering in her determination to be happy in San Francisco. In a letter to her father-in-law written in November of 1849, she shared disappointment over her husband’s decision to remain longer on the west coast, writing, “Alfred talked some of going home in the spring, but has I believe given it up. I was a little disappointed, and was sorry I had heard anything about it, but now I feel very contented, and happy tho’ sometimes I am very lonely and feel the absence from my mother and sisters very much. However I am inclined to be as cheerful as possible and try to think of home as little as I can. Alfred is very kind and would, I know, feel bad if I should get homesick.”¹⁰² Although it is easy to read Margaret’s thoughts as evidence of peer pressure, rather than personal willpower, it is important to read them in the context of a year’s worth of joys and disappointments. Like any other early settler, even supposedly angelic Victorian ladies were susceptible to depression in the face of enormous daily struggles. They were also equally resolute in achieving their objectives and making the most out of their new lives. In a letter to her mother-in-law written in the same month DeWitt confessed, “I of course would be delighted to be home—but I have been happy and contented here, and shall always look back to the time spent here with pleasure.”¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Booth, *A Year of Mud and Gold*, 48.

¹⁰¹ Booth, *A Year of Mud and Gold*, 48.

¹⁰² Margaret DeWitt *A Year of Mud and Gold: San Francisco in Letters and Diaries, 1849-1850*, ed. William Benemann (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 198.

¹⁰³ DeWitt, *A Year of Mud and Gold*, 196.

It seems that the best method for curing homesickness was throwing oneself into work. Megquier operated a series of boarding houses during her years in San Francisco; she described one that housed sixteen boarders as “the most comfortable place in Cal.”¹⁰⁴ Talking of her incredibly busy days and her hefty workload in a letter written to her daughter in November of 1849, she claimed, “I do not go to bed until midnight and often until two o'clock.”¹⁰⁵ While her husband earned sizable profits as a doctor, Megquier’s work as a housekeeper supported most of the family’s needs, and seemed to agree with her personality, despite its physical demands. Her work also seemed to further develop her interest in business and finance. Writing of her interactions with her boarders in February of 1850, Megquier explained, “I have been with gentlemen so much that I can talk of nothing but the price of lumber, rail roads, and the Town Council, the fashions and the latest conquests has no charms for me.”¹⁰⁶ That’s not to say that Megquier was not concerned with the society of women. Although she was keenly interested in the affairs of her boarders, especially the great theater patron Dr. Robinson, she was also concerned with spending her free time well. Apart from cultivating valued friends, Megquier often attended plays and dances. She even wrote about her desire to see Lola Montez in her famed spider dance, despite the performance’s questionable morals.¹⁰⁷

Another one of her chief side occupations was speculating on the marriage prospects of young women. Writing to her children in July of 1852, Megquier looked towards a possible wedding with anticipation, explaining, “I think I wrote you in my last that we had a maiden lady boarding here, last Saturday eve I think she had a bite; but whether she will succeed in pulling him in, remains to be told but we are all looking forward with considerable anxiety. It would be

¹⁰⁴ Megquier, *Apron Full of Gold*, 33.

¹⁰⁵ Megquier, *Apron Full of Gold*, 33.

¹⁰⁶ Megquier, *Apron Full of Gold*, 36.

¹⁰⁷ Megquier, *Apron Full of Gold*, 80.

such a nice thing to have a wedding here...”¹⁰⁸ In a seller’s market for young women in search of husbands, weddings must have been frequent, but gossip-worthy interludes in an existence of hard work. In an October 1849 journal entry, Booth also decided to record a scene of marriage speculation. In discussing a visit to a friend’s home, she wrote, “We met two of our late passengers there, whom we call Mrs. Reed’s and Virginia’s beaux, as they have received a good deal of attention from these gentlemen. I do not know that there is anything serious in these affairs, but such is the general impression, and many suppose them actually engaged to be married. I hope they will both do well whenever they make this important change.”¹⁰⁹ It seemed that there was a surprising amount of society to comment on. According to Booth, “In the first place, we were led to believe that there were but few ladies, if any, in this place. On the contrary, we find that there are some three or four hundred, of a class too one would scarcely expect to meet with in this far off place. I have met with several ladies, myself, that would do credit to, and highly adorn, any society however fastidious its demands.”¹¹⁰

Indeed, San Francisco’s housewife authors were detailed and fastidious in their own recordkeeping, noting the particulars of their daily lives as well as a large scope of the city’s news and gossip. They even discussed the city’s amoral entertainments and more sinful behaviors, but their reactions were not always typical of a civilized Victorian lady. Many women, like the famed Dame Shirley who wrote about her experiences from California’s earliest mining camps, sympathized with the Victorian explanation of masculine misbehavior. In a letter composed in February of 1855, she wrote, “Imagine a company of enterprising and excitable young men, settle upon a sandy level about as large as a poor widow’s potato-patch, walled in by sky-kissing hills, absolutely compelled to remain on account of the weather...you can not

¹⁰⁸ Megquier, *Apron Full of Gold*, 62.

¹⁰⁹ Booth, *A Year of Mud and Gold*, 190.

¹¹⁰ Booth, *A Year of Mud and Gold*, 192.

wonder that even the most moral man should have become somewhat reckless.”¹¹¹ Caroline Stoddard, a respectable woman writing from San Francisco in December of 1850, revealed an expected disdain when recording her observations about San Francisco’s vices. She wrote, “In our walk this afternoon, passed the Eldorado, a very large building said to be the most famous Gambling house in the city. The streets in the evening are quite worthy a walk thro. They are brilliantly lighted (that is, the saloons) which are crowded to excess, and always accompanied with excellent music to toll the unguarded passers by into these horrible dens of iniquity.”¹¹² Yet, despite Stoddard’s ultimate condemnation of gambling houses and saloons, she also displayed fascination at their sights and wonders. Although she clearly disapproved of such places, she did not vow to fix them or eradicate them from San Francisco’s map. In a similar vein, Booth expressed “disappoint” that there was not more crime in San Francisco.¹¹³ She was both saddened and excited by the execution of five sailors for attempted murder in October of 1849,¹¹⁴ but she failed to express any desire to change the city’s wild ways.

The ever-independent Megquier also failed to address any personal desires to civilize San Francisco. This was perhaps because she saw herself as a handful. Writing to her daughter in 1849, she explained her husband’s traditional reasons for not wanting to bring their children out west. She claimed, “I would very much like to have you here but your father thinks it is no place for you. I suppose he is afraid you will be led astray, he has his hands full to keep me straight...”¹¹⁵ Although she recorded moments of sounds of gunfire and cries for help in the

¹¹¹ Dame Shirley, *The Shirley Letters from the California Mines, 1851-1852* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1949), 165-167.

¹¹² Caroline Stoddard in *A Year of Mud and Gold: San Francisco in Letters and Diaries, 1849-1850*, ed. William Benemann (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 107.

¹¹³ Booth, *A Year of Mud and Gold*, 93.

¹¹⁴ Booth, *A Year of Mud and Gold*, 95.

¹¹⁵ Megquier, *Apron Full of Gold*, 32.

night,¹¹⁶ she generally displayed a cavalier attitude toward the dangers and distractions of San Francisco life. Discussing a beloved, yet kooky family member who frequently appeared in her boardinghouse and in her letters, Megquier commented, Uncle Horace “says he is in hopes enough to buy powder to blow out his brains.”¹¹⁷ It remains unclear how much Megquier’s outlook was the result of her natural, spitfire personality and how much was influenced by a transformative experience in the Wild West. Either way, she had no stated interest in cleaning up the rough city.

“Never in my life did I live as free as now”

One point that seems to emerge from these early letters and journals was that gender and class did not predetermine one’s ability to adapt to life in San Francisco or one’s desire to civilize the city. In the words of Megquier, “This country depends entirely on circumstance.”¹¹⁸ While middle class ladies mucked out a living in wild and ruckus San Francisco, many young males found the disappointment of the mines too much, turning to the drink, returning home, or taking their own lives. In discussing one such man, disappointed in his aspirations, Booth expressed a similar philosophy to Megquier, writing, “It is said he had not reaped the golden harvest that he anticipated before leaving home, and hence his dissatisfaction. So prone is mankind to allow external circumstances to take the hue, whether lively or somber, of their own luck or their own thoughts.”¹¹⁹ It seemed that those who would succeed in San Francisco had to have the determination to ride out the momentary depressions and the flexibility to adapt in the face of major challenges.

¹¹⁶ Megquier, *Apron Full of Gold*, 34.

¹¹⁷ Megquier, *Apron Full of Gold*, 66.

¹¹⁸ Megquier, *Apron Full of Gold*, 70.

¹¹⁹ Booth, *A Year of Mud and Gold*, 68.

As it turned out, Dr. Thomas Lewis Megquier was not such a person. While his wife socialized with boarders and attended dances, Dr. Megquier was “quite unwell and very low spirited.”¹²⁰ Most likely as a result of his impetus, the couple would return to Winthrop, Maine after two years in San Francisco. However, by that time, Mary had already determined that she could not “bear the idea of being obliged to earn a living in the states.”¹²¹ She would return to city alone within a few years time and continue her life as a working woman in “the good city of San Francisco.”¹²² Although she struggled with her decision to live apart from her dying husband and her eastern relations, she eventually determined that life in San Francisco was the most appealing for her. Writing to her daughter in March of 1856, she explained, “California life suits me, there is not a day I do not receive kind words and wishes of friends which are so very unlike what I will meet at home, excepting my children.”¹²³ Ultimately, the independent-minded Megquier had no desire to return to her home in the east. In the last of Megquier’s collected letters, written to her daughter in June of 1856, she explained her happiness in San Francisco, stating, “Never in my life did I live as free as now.”¹²⁴

Anne Wilson Booth felt a similar pull to San Francisco, adapting quickly and learning to love the City by the Bay. Living on a ship for months while her home was built, she felt herself in her native element and looked with regret on the moment when she would have to settle on land.¹²⁵ Discussing her late-night efforts at searching out housekeeping supplies in the ship, she joked about how her friends and acquaintances at home would regard her new activity and her determined attitude, writing, “How they would laugh at home to see me prowling about the

¹²⁰ Megquier, *Apron Full of Gold*, 40.

¹²¹ Megquier, *Apron Full of Gold*, 78.

¹²² Megquier, *Apron Full of Gold*, 82.

¹²³ Megquier, *Apron Full of Gold*, 90.

¹²⁴ Megquier, *Apron Full of Gold*, 98.

¹²⁵ Booth, *A Year of Mud and Gold*, 192.

ship's hold, in search of prey until nearly midnight."¹²⁶ Her level of comfort with the city, however, was best expressed in journal entry from October of 1849. Offering confusion at a friend's decision to leave San Francisco for the country, she described the resolution as "very nonsensical," writing, "For who could expect to find a second paradise in California?"¹²⁷ Perhaps more telling of a middle class woman's ability to find herself at home in the wilds of California are the words of the more reluctant pioneer Margaret DeWitt, who stated simply of her move to California, "I have never regretted it."¹²⁸

"I'm bound to buy a copy"

Although there is little evidence that San Francisco's earliest American female pioneers fit the exact model of the civilizing, dainty Victorian woman, it is well known that some such ladies arriving to the territory in the following few years would make an impact in the city's reform efforts. Following the execution of the famed gambler and murderer Charles Cora in 1856, a group of "virtuous women" sent an open letter to his mistress, the revered prostitute and madam Belle Cora, asking her to leave the city.¹²⁹ She would ultimately decline their request, but, over time, the city's population would grow to include many more middle class ladies, while sex workers would be driven permanently underground. The point is that one could not predict the changes that would take place by looking at the writings of San Francisco's first female Argonauts. Although all of these women seemed to share some sense of independence, women writing in 1849 and 1850 did not always share their successors concern with eradicating vice and violence. From the writings that they left behind, they seemed much more similar to the female

¹²⁶ Booth, *A Year of Mud and Gold*, 193.

¹²⁷ Booth, *A Year of Mud and Gold*, 66.

¹²⁸ DeWitt, *A Year of Mud and Gold*, 195.

¹²⁹ Levy, *They Saw the Elephant*, 222.

doctors and businesswomen who would make their city home in later decades. Indeed, the city would begin to attract a variety of independent women, notably Mary Ellen Pleasant, an African American entrepreneur and activist in the underground railroad.¹³⁰ These later women are also dynamic subjects who influenced San Francisco in a variety of ways. More scholarship on their motivations and desires in coming to the city would shed greater light on the women who had come before them, including the earliest female settlers. The same could be said of the women who were identified as reformers in the mid-1850s. The story of San Francisco's development has filled many books, and all of its players are interconnected and influential in different ways.

For the time being, this story ends with the writings of the San Francisco's middle class ladies, a group of women who were not only civilizers. Nor did they wilt in the face of challenge and hardship. Rather, they generally came to San Francisco to take money and learned how to adapt to harsh weather, hard work, and vice and violence. A few even made San Francisco their permanent home, cherishing the city's atmosphere of independence. Fortunately, some of these women were able to find the time to record their thoughts and observations. These documents are an invaluable, if limited look into a chaotic world that has, in some ways, been mythologized beyond recognition. They are also pieces of a readable, lively story narrated by risk-takers and thrill-seekers, like Anne Wilson Booth. Looking beyond the scope of her own personal satisfaction, Mrs. Booth may have intended to publish her thoughts at a later date. In her journal, she wrote about an episode in which a "Black Jim" asked her about her book. After Black Jim asked whether or not the book was going to be printed, Mrs. Booth responded, "Not exactly, Jim," to which he countered, "Well I 'spect it does get printed...and if it does, I'm bound to

¹³⁰ Levy, *They Saw the Elephant*, 233.

buy a copy.”¹³¹ When all was said and done, the middle class Victorian women of the earliest years of the Gold Rush were just one group of masterful storytellers and important witnesses observing the life of a uniquely significant and uniquely sinful city.

¹³¹ Booth, *A Year of Mud and Gold*, 166.

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