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ORGANIZED CRIME IN THE FIELD OF PROSTITUTION

ROBERT Y. THORNTON .

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Attorney General Thornton is a veteran of World War II and has served as Director of Veterans' Housing Authority and Chamber of Commerce; as President of the Junior Chamber of Commerce; as Commander of the American Legion, and is active in numerous other civic and religious groups.

In 1954 and 1955 the author was on the staff of visiting lecturers in the Northwestern University Short Course for Prosecuting Attorneys. He has established a similar course of instruction in his own state.—EDITOR.

Prostitution is a type of criminal activity which is "made to order" for syndicate organization and operation. Organized prostitution traffic resembles nothing so much as the old-time road show circuit with its parade of talent troupes moving progressively from one city to another over the entire circuit.

Early in 1953 West Coast residents were surprised to discover that a sizeable underground traffic in prostitutes was operating in the coastal states. While the traffic was extremely well concealed, it nonetheless was in regular operation. Address books confiscated from prostitutes and pimps arrested as far south as Stockton and Sacramento, California, listed the names, addresses and telephone numbers of brothels by the dozens in Washington, Oregon, Idaho and California. The lists also included houses of prostitution in the Territory of Alaska.

Other circuits are reputed to exist. One circuit reportedly runs on eastward from Southern California, moving around the states of Arizona, New Mexico, Texas and as far east as New Orleans.

Contrary to general expectation, most "circuits" apparently are loosely organized confederations rather than tight syndicates run by a single vice overlord. Generally speaking, the circuits seem to be a sort of informal, cooperative working arrangement between brothel-keepers, panderers and prostitutes. However, they maintain extensive contact with one another in regulating the flow of prostitutes from brothel to brothel, city to city and state to state, and are prime long distance customers of the telephone companies.

This is not to say, however, that in the larger population centers of the country, mobster-type of syndicate organization and operation does not take place. It does, according to the Kefauver Committee findings. Racketeers seemingly thrive in this climate and may move in whenever and wherever big profits can be tapped.

In February of 1954, special agents of the FBI cracked down on a prostitution circuit that operated out of New Iberia, Louisiana, and reached into eight states.

Citizens of the area were astounded to learn that a number of the girls being shuttled around the circuit were virtually held as prisoners of the syndicate until liberated by the FBI agents.

Harold G. Robinson, Deputy Director of the Criminal Law and Enforcement Division in the office of California Attorney General Edmund G. Brown, in cooperation with local enforcement officials, is now waging a successful battle to break up what appeared to be a state-wide prostitution ring in the Golden State.

Last fall FBI agents in the State of Washington arrested a number of white slavery suspects. Some of the names mentioned were well-known pimps and underworld figures linked with the prostitution picture in Oregon and California in recent years. The Government's prosecution hit an unexpected snag when the case went to trial in Seattle early in 1954. The Government's first witness refused to testify.

How does the organized prostitution racket resemble a road show circuit? In the first place, investigation of the racket will disclose that prostitutes move from city to city at regular intervals, usually every three weeks. Clientele likes variety and demands a regular change of scenery, it is explained. The girls and their pimps then move on to the next town, generally for another three-week "stand".

Contrary to the name, a pimp is not an unhandsome character with a rash or breaking-out on his face. The modern pimp or panderer seldom "propositions" customers. Rather, this parasite works indirectly with brothel-keepers, bell hops, taxi or syndicate operators, large or small. He (female pimps are rare) manages his girl or girls and their business transactions just as a race horse owner does a stable of race horses.

The dope peddler and the "trick suit" traveling salesman fit into the circuit, both leeching off the unfortunate girls caught in the sordid racket.

An estimated 10 to 25 percent of all prostitutes at some stage of their careers become addicted to the use of narcotics and as such form a profitable market for the dope "pusher". Once a prostitute or her pimp becomes definitely addicted to the use of narcotics, she is forced to stay in the racket in order to obtain the \$30 to \$50 a day necessary to satisfy her or his dope craving. So far as is known on the West Coast, the underworld characters trafficking in the sale of young girls' bodies—even though dope users themselves—generally will steer clear of dope pushing. "Too risky", they all claim. The "trick suit" merchant—he sells seductive clothing to the girls—knows the circuit, travels from brothel to brothel and from state to state with his wares, which he sells at handsome prices to his luckless clientele.

Open commercialized prostitution can exist only with police protection, active or passive. Protection may be classed as active when the authorities are taking a pay-off from the brothel-keeper to allow her to operate and will arrest drunks, trouble-makers, as well as any interloping madams who seek to become established as competitors in the town. But the fact that prostitution is tolerated in the community does not always indicate that the police are crooked. In some communities the police department is under instructions from the mayor and council to let the brothels operate and in fact is ordered to give them police protection. Witness an incident that occurred in one Oregon community where police were called to a brothel one morning in 1954 where two hold-up men were in the act of sticking-up the establishment and

robbing the girls. The policeman shot and killed one of the stick-ups right inside the establishment. The incident touched off a wave of public indignation over the fact that a policeman was called upon to risk his life under these circumstances. The result was that the citizenry, spearheaded by the ministerial association, forced the closure of every house of prostitution in the entire city.

In the course of a state-wide clean-up campaign in Oregon the Attorney General's office was astounded at the number of sincere people—good substantial citizens and public officials—who opposed the clean-up and argued that prostitution should be legalized, claiming that it prevented sexual attacks on innocent women and children, that it prevented the spread of venereal disease and a whole host of other oft-repeated shibboleths which have been proven absolutely false by scientific studies by social hygiene and medical associations. See "The Myth of Controlled Prostitution", *Journal of Social Hygiene*, March 1954, for a discussion of these old, oft-repeated falsehoods.

Curiously enough the most caustic criticism I ever received was from a "tolerant" city administration, some of whose members were profiting indirectly from the operation of the houses through rental of bawdy-house premises, sale of provisions and services, etc.

I am no professional public moralist. But the more I have learned about commercialized prostitution, the more firmly I am convinced that it is a vicious racket.

Too many people regard it as merely a moral problem. Moral issues aside, it brings to a community a train of pimps, a narcotics traffic and a tie-up with a whole host of major and minor lawbreakers that troop around with the pimps and prostitutes. Cities in which prostitution is tolerated almost invariably have the highest incidence of crime. It spreads venereal disease. Medical examinations of prostitutes are not medically effective, according to the American Medical Association. In discussing this aspect of the problem with Attorney General Edmund G. Brown of California a few months ago I learned that in tests made after a recent raid on a large brothel in northern California, everyone in the establishment—including the maid and the cook—was found to have syphilis. Not infrequently "tolerated prostitution" corrupts our police. If tolerated, it inevitably lowers the tone of all law enforcement.

Said District Attorney John J. Pickett, who spearheaded a successful clean-up in Coos County, Oregon:

Houses are constantly being used by criminals hiding from arrest, and tend generally to bring into the area the type of persons who constantly have trouble with the police. Blackmail is another common outgrowth of prostitution. This was practiced in Coos County until a short time ago by an operator who took secret pictures of his patrons and then threatened to expose them to their wives unless payment was made. The same operator doped a patron, kept him in this condition for three days, forced him to write checks totaling nearly \$1,000 and then threatened him with prosecution because the last check was returned NSF by the bank.

Who owns the brothels? In most instances the madam or brothel-keeper operates the location for some undisclosed higher-up. Frequently a single underworld figure may operate houses in several different cities. On the other hand, the brothel may be both owned and operated by a resident madam who "imports" her "talent" by contacting the procurer, panderer or syndicate representative in the larger popu-

lation centers. Prostitutes on the road frequently will remit money to panderers by means of telegraph.

The itineraries of the girls are arranged on a careful, business-like basis—much like the famous “under-ground railroad” which smuggled captured Union prisoners out of the South in the War between the States, or more recently the French underground that smuggled downed United States flyers back to England during World War II.

A successful brothel-keeper is a smart ruthless and efficient business woman. She may keep regular ledger sheets reflecting the number of “tricks” turned by each prostitute in the establishment, the customers, time in, time out, etc. This is necessary to account with not only the syndicate and the girl herself but the most relentless pursuers of all, the federal and state income tax collectors.

According to the American Social Hygiene Association:

“... The ‘prostitution dollar’ spent in a brothel is ultimately distributed about as follows:

	Percent
Resort-keeper's share from which she must pay someone for the privilege of operating.....	50
Pimp's share	20
Room and board paid to resort-keeper.....	8
Periodic VD examinations	2
Prostitute's share of her earnings	20

The “call girl” set-up has been the method of operation resorted to almost exclusively in the larger population centers where through public pressure the old-fashioned red light districts have been suppressed. A \$5 tip to a bell boy will bring a call girl to your room in many of the hotels in the larger cities. As a means of minimizing dangers of detection, syndicates and bell hops are reported to employ code numbers in ordering and dispatching call girls to hotels via telephone. The West Coast is noted for its excellent police departments and law enforcement officers, but an occasional dishonest official in the right place can be the corrupting influence which enables such a racket to operate.

In conclusion, to the courts, prosecuting attorneys, sheriffs, city and state police, city councils and citizens who share the responsibility for keeping the lid on organized prostitution, may I say this:

Pursuing and apprehending a vice overlord who operates a syndicate is a worthy objective, providing you have the time and money to do the thorough job in gathering the evidence necessary to obtain convictions. But those are difficult cases to make. I submit that the better approach in most cases is to eliminate the vice traffic by drying the source of its income—the local brothel district or the call girl racket.

The secret weapon, often overlooked entirely, of the prosecutor is to bring abatement proceedings against the premises.

To attack organized prostitution by occasional raids on these houses is like fighting a malaria epidemic by swatting mosquitoes instead of draining the swamps.

You will be truly amazed at how quickly the owners of the premises—often respected business men—will get rid of their bawdy house tenants when you tell them that you are going to bring abatement proceedings which will padlock their premises for one year. The irksome evasions, delays and technicalities utilized so successfully in criminal proceedings are of no avail in injunction and abatement proceedings.

But do not think that by a crusade against prostitution you will forever end the problem in your town. This will not eliminate the operators of this vicious racket. They will simply bide their time until public attention is focused in other directions and then will seek once more to fasten themselves onto the same community.

Is the over-all prostitution picture improving? Definitely yes, in all parts of the country. According to the American Social Hygiene Association, foremost authority in the Nation in this field, recent prostitution surveys show that the situation has vastly improved since 1948. In the past year out of 343 field investigations conducted by the association, only in 25% of the communities surveyed were the prostitution conditions found to be unsatisfactory. In 1948 the surveys were just the reverse, 75% of the communities were found to be unsatisfactory.

The most effective guard against vice and crime is a vigilant and aggressive citizenry. As former Governor Sprague of Oregon once remarked: "Law enforcement depends in a large measure upon local pressures. Like liberty it calls for eternal vigilance. Unless the public insists on strict law enforcement, officials are apt to grow lax and tolerant of violation."