

“The Stingaree”

Strolling down Fifth Street any evening, the ear is rasped by the notes from asthmatic pianos, discordant banjos and fiddles, and half-drunken voices that sing boisterous and ribald songs. The eye is pained to see one, two, or perhaps three men on each corner, so intoxicated that they can barely stand. . . the lower Fifth Street in San Diego is fully as bad, if not worse than the notorious “Barbary Coast” district of San Francisco.

--San Diego Union, November 3, 1887.

Ever city seemed to have one—a seamy section of downtown known as the “red light district.” From the “boom of 80s” to the early 1900s, San Diego’s red lights could be found in “the Stingaree,” a shabby triangle of city blocks, bordered by Market (H Street at the time), Sixth Street, and San Diego bay.

Saloons, gambling halls, dope peddling, and particularly prostitution, all flourished here. The close proximity to the waterfront made the Stingaree especially attractive to sailors. The booming traffic in sin—illegal, of course--was wide open and blatant. Police and civic officials were content with a “hands off” policy, as long as vice and “women of the lewd order” stayed within bounds below Market Street.

But public attitudes toward vice were changing rapidly in the early 1900s. Across the nation the growing Progressive Movement was spurring cities to close their red light districts. Chicago began the trend in 1910, following quickly by Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia, and others.

In San Diego, a Vice-Suppression Committee, better known as the “Purity League,” met with city officials on October 1, 1912, and urged the police to “slam the lid on the Stingaree.” The reformers were most troubled by the prostitutes, which worked out of boarding houses and tiny shacks and rooms called “cribs.”

The cribs, as described by a city health inspector, “resembled stalls . . . built in a long row facing a compound, with one opening leading to each a room from outside. A wash bowl and pitcher served as plumbing,” along with a “bed and a chair or two. Water was carried from a lone faucet that stood outside.” The women paid \$14 a week for the cribs.



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Police Chief Keno Wilson argued that closing the district would only scatter prostitution throughout the city. But the reformers were determined. A World's Fair was coming to San Diego in 1915 and it was time to clean up the town.

At 8 a.m. on Sunday, November 10, Chief Wilson and thirty patrolmen surrounded the Stingaree and began arresting the prostitutes. The raid caught 138 women who were brought to Police Headquarters at 732 Second Street (now Second Avenue). A representative of the Purity League appeared before the assembled women and explained that the arrests would only to bring happiness to their lives by helping them reform. The women listened respectfully and asked for breakfast. The police brought coffee and ham sandwiches.

Chief Wilson then interrogated each woman, one at a time. Nearly all were young, few admitted to being older than 30. Most claimed to be new to San Diego, having arrived in recent months. After questioning, the women were released and told to go home and pack their bags.

On Monday morning the fallen women presented themselves before the justice of the peace, George Puterbaugh. "Before him, the women were lined up in rows of five or ten. He heard their pleas, fined each \$100, and suspended the fine on condition they leave town forthwith and not return."

That afternoon most of the prostitutes boarded a train at the Santa Fe depot and headed to Los Angeles. One witness noticed that nearly all of them bought round-trip tickets.

The closure of the Stingaree district was greeted with less enthusiasm than the Purity League envisioned. Downtown businesses complained of declining trade. Bars and restaurants closed. The *Union* reported in May 1913 that sailors on U.S. warships were demanding San Francisco as their port for liberty, even though San Diego had once been the most popular liberty port on the West Coast.

And as Chief Wilson predicted, the prostitution did not end. Only days after the big roundup, a newspaper reporter noted the number of streetwalkers was growing. Arrests for prostitution would rise in 1913 and then double the following year.

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