

The Purity League

There are men and women, boys and girls, steadily, but surely, patrolling the path that leads to eternal ruin. It is for us to rescue them.

--Mrs. R. A. Rood, vice-president, Purity League of San Diego

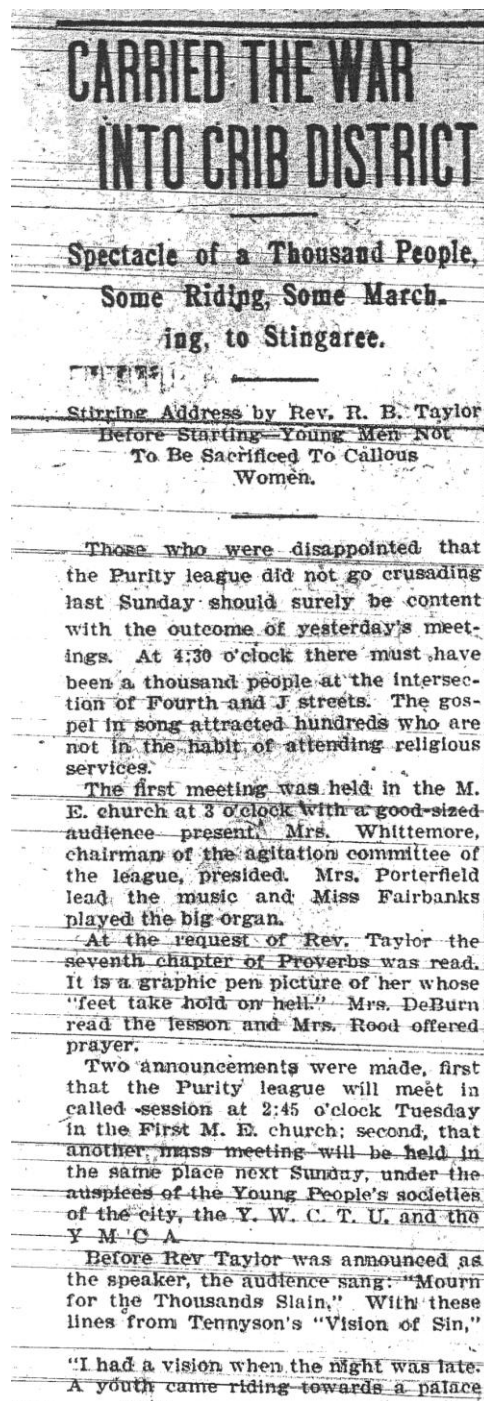
On Friday afternoon, August 7, 1903, forty gravely concerned San Diego women went to church. Meeting at the First Methodist Episcopal Church on the corner of D (Broadway) and Fourth Street, the ladies discussed the growing moral peril found in city's notorious Stingaree District—home to “houses of impurity” and unfortunate women “caught in the toils.”

To fight prostitution—a word which was rarely uttered and never appeared in print--the women voted to organize “The Purity League of San Diego.” The League's goals were to investigate conditions in the Stingaree District (several blocks below today's Market Street), encourage enforcement of local ordinances against “places of vice,” promote “healthier public sentiment” on the question, and “lend a helping hand to those unfortunates who desire to lead a clean life.” Every woman in San Diego and vicinity was encouraged to join the dues-free organization.

For a model of what the women hoped to accomplish, they looked to Los Angeles, where reformers claimed great success in stamping out that city's red-light district. Rev. Sidney C. Kendall, a Long Beach minister considered instrumental in closing brothels in Los Angeles, came to San Diego in January 1904 to help launch a local crusade against vice.

“The cribs of Los Angeles are closed,” Rev. Kendall told San Diegans in a Purity League gathering at the Methodist Episcopal Church. “I have twice had the district photographed and the only living things seen in the district were a couple of dogs.” Kendall credited the law and the gospel for eradicating the “cribs”—the small boarding house rooms used by prostitutes. But the police, he said, had hindered his effort by insisting that closing the district would only “scatter the girls.” Instead, Kendall claimed, two-thirds of the girls had left Los Angeles.

After a brief tour of San Diego's Stingaree district Brother Kendall expressed some surprise at the small extent of the area. Just “a little wisp of nastiness,” he found. But he was alarmed by the number of saloons and advised their closure. “I have never seen the relation of the saloon and the



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brothel so undisguised as it is here. Never did I see so plainly the Devil and his headquarters in a saloon and his hindquarters in a brothel.”

On Sunday afternoon, January 10, a meeting at the First M. E. Church brought together pastors from several congregations to speak to hundreds of San Diegans who favored the closure of the Stingaree. The ministers railed against the cribs as violations against God, humanity, and the city ordinances of San Diego. They also charged that their fellow citizens were apathetic; particularly city officials who seemed content with prostitution confined to a small area of town.

The following Sunday, the Purity League held a second mass meeting at the M. E. Church. After a rousing sermon by Rev. Robert Taylor of the First Presbyterian Church (reprinted the next day in the *San Diego Union*) the people were told: “we will finish this service on lower Fourth street, and you will all go with us.”

Outside the church, the crowd found a “gospel wagon” with thirty seats and an organ. Speakers and choir singers mounted the wagon and led a boisterous procession down Fourth as hundreds of marchers followed singing “Onward Christian Soldiers” and “Anywhere with Jesus.”

At Fourth and I the procession paused to listen to Friends church minister Rev. John Douglass deliver a prayer, asking God to “give His people courage to stand against evil and close up the many dens of iniquity, open for the feet of the young, unwary and weak.” More hymns were sung before the marchers moved on to J Street, where they stopped for another round of brief sermons and singing.

As so it went, block by block through the Stingaree, the marchers passing quiet saloons and cribs without an “erring sister” in sight. The Purity League was delighted with their march and convinced that with the public now fully attentive to the issue the closure of the red-light district was assured.

But when they approached the city council the next day to request official action on closing known sites of prostitution, the politicians seemed uninterested. Citing a full agenda, the council decided to defer any action, even refusing a symbolic resolution that endorsed the League’s attempt to “wipe out the evil of the red-light district.”

Frustrated by City Hall, the League changed tactics and now pushed for prosecution of landlords for unlawful renting of spaces used for “immoral purposes. They also decided that the “fallen women” should be prosecuted as vagrants. But the new strategy had little impact. The prostitutes shut their doors, rich landlords hired attorneys, and life in the vice-infected Stingaree continued as before.

The Purity League would wait for nearly a decade to achieve their goal. In 1912, with politicians motivated by the coming Exposition planned for Balboa Park, the time to clean up the Stingaree finally arrived. On Sunday morning, November 10, the police surrounded the infamous district and rounded up 138 prostitutes.

After a stern lecture from a Purity League representative, the women were ordered by a judge to “leave town forthwith and not return.” The prostitutes boarded a train at the Santa Fe depot and headed to Los Angeles. Most would return within the week and begin new careers as streetwalkers outside the Stingaree.

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