

THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-EAU CLAIRE

From brothel to high-class resort:
The success of the famed Everleigh Club
Chicago: 1900-1911

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

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Introduction

At the turn of the 20th century Chicago was booming in many different areas. The population was on a continuous rise after the Chicago world's fair of 1893; malls catering to consumers were popping up all over the city, buildings were beginning to scrape the sky, and industry of all kinds was flourishing. This rapid urbanization process allowed one more thing to spread: vice. Vice was running rampant in the streets of Chicago. Thievery, gambling, drinking, and bribery were all common in the city.¹ One vice in particular, prostitution, became a fix in the city's seedy underground, also known as the Levee District. Although there were many brothels, flats, hotels, saloons, and street walkers in Chicago, only two women held the title of "Queens of the Levee district," Enter Ada and Minna Everleigh². Together, these sisters opened and operated one of the most renowned brothels in the world for over ten years.

The study of prostitution and vice is not new; what *has* changed about these studies are the types of questions being asked. One angle that historians take when writing about prostitution is one of oppression. Historian Anne Butler writes about the lives of prostitutes in her book *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery*. She focuses on the 19th and early 20th century prostitute. Butler writes in efforts to refute the

¹ Vice Commission of Chicago, *The Social Evil In Chicago: A Study of Existing Conditions*, (Chicago, 1911), 147.

² Karen Abbott, *Sin In The Second City* (New York: Random House, 2008), XX.

image of saloons as being a “cast of glittering “painted ladies” who move about a noisy, crowded bar dispensing earthy fun to a boisterous clientele.”³ To butler the story of prostitutes is filled with tragedy, specifically regarding the situations that force women into the business of prostitution. In these histories, women are displayed as victims in a system dominated by men. Although this argument can most certainly be made about many prostitutes, other historians are instead choosing to focus on a different type of woman; one who may have had a completely different experience as a prostitute or madam.

Indeed, the Everleigh sisters would fall into this “other” category. Some historians ask why some women turned to prostitution and what they gained from the profession. Were prostitutes victims of male violence, social control, and state suppression? Or did they retain in their everyday life a degree of personal agency that neutralized the impact of larger structural forces?⁴ One historian, Thaddeus Russell, argues that prostitutes were partially responsible for starting the women’s rights movement in his book *A Renegade History of the United States*. He writes that how prostitutes were wearing scandalous clothing, drinking, smoking, and being businesswomen long before other women were. Russell attempts to make a connection between prostitutes exploring the frontiers of social norms and the

³ Anne M. Butler, *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery: Prostitutes in the American west*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 16.

⁴ Timothy J. Gilfoyle, “Prostitutes in the Archives: Problems and Possibilities in Documenting the History of Sexuality,” *The American Archivist*, 57, no. 3 (Summer 1994): 514-527.

women's rights movement. He believes the prostitute has greatly influenced women's culture and the affects can still be seen today.⁵

Ada and Minna Everleigh have also been written about frequently in the recent years. The sisters have been the subject of many recent newspaper articles. Louisa Kearnan, of the Chicago Tribune, most recently did a write up on the sisters as a history feature for the newspaper. In the article she described the club as being "A 50-room mansion as the world's most richly furnished house of courtesans."⁶ The recent abundance of writing explains the high status and luxury of the Everleigh club, but does little in way of dispelling myth from fact and often ignores realities of prostitution.

Furthermore, the sisters are mentioned by Chicago historians who cite them for having one of the most successful businesses in the first decade of the 20th century. They remark on their business operations, and specifically the ways in which they treated the women, whom they employed. Karen Abbott, author of *Sin in the Second City*, writes extensively on their lives. In her book, Abbott discusses how the sisters were businesswomen who were very good at what they did. Abbott does not stop here though; she also argues that the sisters were instrumental in the development of women's health care, not because they themselves were savvy in creating new techniques or practices, but more so because of how they encouraged

⁵ Thaddeus Russell, *A Renegade history of the United States* (New York: Simon and Schuster 2010), 86.

⁶ Louisa Kearnan. "The Everleigh Club: Chicago's famed brothel," *The Chicago Tribune*, February 9, 2013, 12-13.

their female employees to practice safe habits.⁷ Abbott also details the social reform that swept through Chicago after the first decade and chronicles the lives of various characters associated with vice in Chicago and whose stories are entangled with that of the Everleigh sisters.

Many Chicago journalists in the past decade have written short essays or articles about the sisters. Most of these focus on the actual brothel that the sisters ran. Notable grand and elegant, the club was frequented by famous politicians, actors, and athletes. However, despite delving into the lives of the sisters, few of these essays and articles offer analysis on what factors made the Everleigh sisters so successful. The sisters ran their business at a time when women had many forces working against them; self-made women were, at best, far and few between. The Everleighs overcame societal limits and managed to retire with over one million dollars in cash.⁸

Publications thus far comment on the elegance of the Everleigh Club, and about the luxurious lifestyle of the sisters. I will acknowledge these elements of the Everleigh sisters, and their club, however I will also argue that these elements were created purposefully by the sisters, that everything they did, every mannerism they projected, was done with intentions of creating a perception of their club that allowed them to be the most profitable and successful madams in the history of Chicago.

⁷ Karen Abbott, *Sin In The Second City*, 54.

⁸ "Death of a White Haired Poetess Reveals Tenderloin Past". *Lima News*, September 17, 1948, 12.

To understand the success of the sisters, one must consider several different sets of circumstances. The first is the time and place that Ada and Minna Everleigh opened their brothel. The Everleigh sisters were not originally from Chicago; they picked Chicago as the place to open their club with specific reasons in mind. The changing landscape, culturally and politically, of Chicago was essential to the success of the Everleigh club. This changing landscape allowed the sisters to take advantage of “the system”. Political connections were very important to anyone in the business of vice, such as the Everleigh sisters. Corruption was all around the city; if one made the right connections it was not difficult to escape the prosecution of law. Ada and Minna were able to take advantage of this culture in Chicago and use the alderman of their district to help propel them to the forefront of the vice game.

Once the sisters found the right city and made the right connections, then they were ready to enact their business plan. Being in a business that came with many harsh realities, the sisters had to create a public perception that their club was cleaner, safer, and more luxurious than other similar clubs in Chicago. They did this by creating exclusivity through supply and demand and through holding patrons and employees to very high standards. Their business model put them on a higher level than other brothels, saloons, or flats in Chicago. This model created a unique experience at a time when people would pay good money for a unique product. All of these factors, along with the sociable and intelligent personalities of the sisters, went into making the Everleigh Club the most prominent, and notorious brothel in the world.

Before They Were Madams

The early years of the Everleigh sisters are murky at best. The sisters kept tight-lipped about things such as their hometown, their “real” names, their family life, and other personal aspects about their lives. In part, this was an effort to shield their family and friends from the life of vice that they led as the madams of the most luxurious and notorious brothel in the world. Another reason it is difficult to pinpoint the origins of the sisters is because they often told their clients false tales of where they came from. Although some of these stories are documented, they often conflict with each other. Even after the sisters were interviewed, well after their madam days, their upbringing is still blurry. This section will report what is known to be truth, although some gaps are inevitable.

Ada and Minna Everleigh were born two years apart; Ada in 1876, and Minna in 1878. In an 1934 interview with Charles Washburn, author of the book *Come Into My Parlor*, the sisters confirmed that they were born in Kentucky. However, they would not reveal the name of the town because their brother was still alive at the time. It has been reported on multiple occasions that the sisters’ hometown was actually Evansville, Indiana, and the 1910 census reports that they were born in Virginia.⁹

Clients often wondered how two beautiful women like the Everleighs ended up in the business of vice. The sisters, who must have been very good actresses, came up with this answer, “The farm in Evansville – we couldn’t stand it. The

⁹ United States Federal Census, Cook County, Chicago, Illinois, first ward, 1910.

mortgage, or, that mortgage, and the suffering, the hardships. We always liked nice things.”¹⁰ The sisters played the part of two girls who grew up poor and just wanted to make a life for themselves and escape their unhappy childhood. This is a logical and believable story. Ada and Minna were well rehearsed, and quite good at pulling off the act.

In reality, the sisters confirmed to Washburn that their father was a prosperous lawyer. They were afforded finishing school, something reserved for the elites of society at the time. ““Born actresses”, he used to boast about his daughters according to Ada and Minna, which was a nearer summary of their talents than he might have suspected.¹¹ The sisters were always extremely close; their relationship relied on absolute devotion to each other. Even after their run as madams in Chicago ended, they lived together for the rest of their lives in New York. They were not, however, all that much alike. Washburn reflects on how he viewed the sisters’ different personalities. He claimed Minna, the younger sister, as the aggressor, and Ada, the defender.¹²

¹⁰ Charles Washburn, *Come Into My Parlor* (New York Knickerbocker Publishing, 1936), 12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹² Charles Washburn, *Come Into My Parlor*, 13.



Minna (left) and Ada Everleigh, circa 1900.¹³

Minna had great charm and wit; she instantly found herself in the center of any social gathering she attended. Washburn describes her character, “She was an unusual personality; vibrant, forceful character with reddish hair and grayish blue eyes.”¹ Minna read everything she could, always trying to increase her intelligence. She had a mind for business. Sex, relationships, love affairs, and matters of the heart were not an appealing topic for her; she explained to Washburn¹⁵ “I am absolutely a free-thinker,” Minna told the novelist Irving Wallace during a phone interview.¹⁶ she was independent from societal expectations of a woman. On the other hand, Ada was more reserved, but still possessed a simple charm. She was petite, with slightly

¹³ Chicago History Museum. Minna and Ada Everleigh (ICHi-34791).

¹ Charles Washburn, *Come Into My Parlor*, 13.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁶ Irving Wallace, *The Sunday Gentleman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), 56.

darker eyes than Minna. Playing the part of a sidekick, Ada allowed Minna to be the star that she was.

Both sisters played up their southern belle mentalities because they were proud to be southerners. Getting men was never an issue for the women. Ada and Minna both married young to two brothers. Both relationships turned abusive and the sisters promptly divorced their partners. The Everleigh's would never marry again, instead spending the rest of their lives side by side.¹⁷ Washburn speculates that this may be the source of their emotionless feelings towards men. It allowed the women to view the men who would be their patrons as just subjects of their business. They treated men well, not because they deeply cared for them as people, but rather because they knew they could make a great profit off of them.¹⁸ Irving Wallace quoted Minna saying to him during their phone conversation, "Men [are] gullible but not to be trusted; greedy but frivolous with money; predatory but easily trapped."¹⁹ The sisters had strong opinions about men.

After their dual divorces, Ada and Minna joined a traveling stock company that put on theatrical shows in different theaters around the country. The last show of the tour was in Omaha, Nebraska where they eventually became stranded.²⁰ The sisters told Washburn of a conversation they had with one of their cast mates after the final show. "My mother would be angry if she knew I was on the stage," their

¹⁷ "Woman who made \$1 Million with Chicago spot dies," *register Star-News*, September 17, 1948, Vol. 126. No. 121.

¹⁸ Charles Washburn, *Come Into My Parlor*, 19.

¹⁹ Irving Wallace, *The Sunday Gentleman*, 56.

²⁰ Karen Abbott, *Sin In The Second City*, 40.

castmate joked. “She thinks I’m in a den of iniquity.”²¹ Ada and Minna claim this to be the moment that they had the idea to start their business. Abbott recreates what the idea must have sounded like at the time, “What about a high-class resort? Men were brutes-let them pay to be made fools of.”²² The idea was born. The next detail that would need to be figure out is the best location for their new business

Why Chicago?

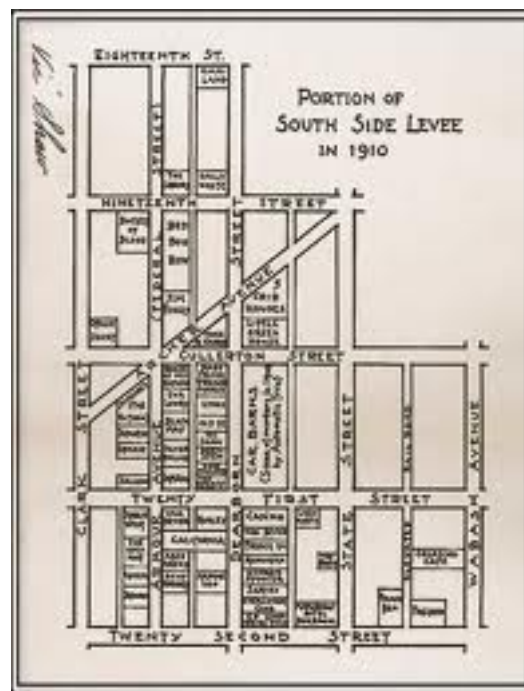


Figure 1 Chicago's Levee District. The Everleigh Club was at 2131S. Dearborn St.²³

Ada and Minna Everleigh could have opened their high-end brothel in any city around the country. What promise did the sisters see in the windy city in their

²¹ Charles Washburn, *Come Into My Parlor*, 16.

²² Karen Abbott, *Sin In The Second City*, 41.

²³ Chicago History Museum. South Levee District, circa 1907 (ICHi19294).

early 20s as a place to begin their business venture? The Everleigh sisters moved to Chicago in winter of 1899 at the recommendation of famed madam Cleo Maitland. Ada and Minna, while traveling the country to find the perfect city for their club, checked into a hotel in Washington D.C.. They phoned Madam Maitland, whom they had heard was an old timer and could offer them some advice.²⁴ They told the madam that they were looking for a city with wealthy men but no superior houses. Other cities already had their own queens of vice. New York had Madam Rosie Hertz, who had cornered the elite clientele and owned several sporting bars; Rose Hicks operated the Philadelphia vice districts; Lucky Warren had Cincinatti; and Belle Stew had Pittsburgh.²⁵ After hearing of the sister's aspirations, Maitland announced that Chicago would be the perfect city for them to start their new business.²⁶ Chicago was a booming city that had a large population of single men, as well as new millionaires who had more money than they knew what to do with. The red light district in Chicago, also known as the Levee District, was protected by local law enforcement via bribery, which the Chicago vice commission took note of during their investigation in 1910.²⁷ As long as the sisters made the right connections, there would be no threat of prosecution by the law. Maitland even told them about a building that she thought would be perfect for their business. Chicago's top madam owned the building at the time; however, she was set to retire and sold the property

²⁴ Charles Washburn, *Come Into My Parlor*, 23.

²⁵ Karen Abbott, *Sin In The Second City*, 43.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁷ Vice Commission of Chicago, *The Social Evil In Chicago: A Study of Existing Conditions*, (Chicago, 1911), 144.

to the Everleigh sisters.²⁸ This was the start of an extremely successful business venture.

Everything about the sisters was classy and grand; their clothes were fancy and elegant, they decorated their bodies with expensive diamonds from around the world, they ate only the finest dishes, they were educated, and always demonstrated the most proper manners.²⁹ Their personalities; and business scheme aligned perfectly with changing culture of the United States at the time. This was the era of the consumer in the United States and the sisters lost no time in taking advantage of the boom. Everything was catered to the consumer; they were, in a sense, royalty. If an individual wanted something, and they had the money, they could get it. The first department stores were beginning to open, such as the infamous Marshall Fields Company in Chicago.³⁰ Remedies for every ailment were being marketed and sold to consumers around the country. "The world, for the first time, was a market where every need could be met, every idea coaxed to fruition."³¹ Mass production of goods was the new norm. The Everleigh sisters knew, however, that a man would pay a rather large sum of money for a unique experience, and the opportunity to feel as though he was something greater.³² The Everleigh sisters used the culture of the United States, and specifically in the city of Chicago, to their advantage; they understood what the consumer wanted. Chicago was one of the only cities that

²⁸ Charles Washburn, *Come Into My Parlor*, 23.

²⁹ Charles Washburn, *Come Into My Parlor*, 59.

³⁰ Robert Twyman, *History of Marshall Field & Co. 1852-1906* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1954), 38-42.

³¹ Karen Abbott, *Sin In the Second City*, 5.

³² Charles Washburn, *Come Into My Parlor*, 21.

could have handled the Everleigh sisters. If they brought their city to a smaller and perhaps less developed city, the men likely would not have been able to afford a night in the club, or at least as many men as in Chicago, and the club would have ultimately failed.

Just as skyscrapers were being erected in a flurry, each reaching higher to the sky than its neighbor, the Everleighs set out to create the best club in the city. A man who could afford a night in the Everleigh club should be able to boast to his neighbor that he was wealthy enough to rub shoulders with wealthiest Chicagoans, politicians, athletes, and social elites; he did not have to spend an evening with the women of Vic Shaw's knock off brand brothel where his friends might have to go. The city of Chicago truly was one of the only cities in America that was ready to handle Ada and Minna Everleigh. The city itself was just as much a contributor to their success as was all the hard work they put into their business.

Social Evil in Chicago 1900-1910

During the first decade of the 20th century in Chicago, social reformers began gaining steam in their campaigns against vice. The city was ridden with crime and vice, and gender roles began to take on a liberal shift that allowed women more freedom. One of the most common vices that social reformers adamantly took on was the business of prostitution and operations of brothels. In 1909 Jane Addams published her article *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets*. Addams began describing a new culture gripping American cities, and Chicago in particular. Addams wrote,

“Never before in civilization have such numbers of young girls been suddenly released from the protection of the home and permitted to walk unattended upon the city streets and to work under alien roofs....We see thousands of girls walking up and down the streets on a pleasant evening with no chance to catch a sight of pleasure even through a lighted window, save as these lurid places provide it. Apparently the modern city sees in these girls only two possibilities, both of them commercial: first, a chance to utilize by day their new and tender labor power in its factories and shops, and then another chance in the evening to extract from them their petty wages by pandering to their love of pleasure.”³³

Addams calls society out on its exploitation of young women. Prostitution in Chicago, and assumingly in all cities across the United States, was just that, exploitation of women. Women of almost all ages, race, and socioeconomic standing were being exploited by a system aimed at turning a profit regardless of morality. The culmination of social reform in Chicago during the first decade of the 20th century was the publishing of the Vice commission report in 1910. This 398 page report, appropriately titled “Social Evil in Chicago”, detailed every social evil taking place in the city; including police force corruption, excess drinking, theft, gambling, and prostitution, among other topics. Prostitution, seen as one of the biggest threats to society, holds a prominent place in the report. A special municipal body appointed by the mayor of Chicago completed the report. The report listed some

³³ Jane Addams, *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets* (New York: Macmillan, 1909; Boondocks Net Edition, 2001).

truly eye-opening statistics in regards to the extent of prostitution in the city of Chicago.

In 1910, the vice commission listed in their report, that there were 374 places of prostitution. These locations were spread out over seven different precincts in the city. The 374 addresses were houses, flats, and hotels, and they did not include saloons and dance halls where prostitutes frequented, of which there were another 275. The report concluded that there were at least a total of 1,825 women involved in the business of prostitution.³⁴

According to the report, the average age of a Chicago prostitutes was twenty three and a half years old. Their jobs before turning to prostitution ranged from waitresses and dressmakers, to saleswomen and factory workers. The most commonly expressed reasoning for turning to prostitution was primarily due to a lack of funds, but other reasons were forced entry and alcoholism.³⁵ Carrie Watson, a prominent madam in the Levee district in the late 19th century, explained to William Stead, a well-known journalist and leading social reformer, "if a woman has youth, health, and good looks they can realize these assets at a higher price down Clark street, or on fourth Avenue than at any other place in the city."³⁶ The way that the system was set up, women could make more money as a prostitute than doing almost any other job available to women at the time. It was not a matter of being

³⁴ Vice Commission of Chicago, *The Social Evil In Chicago: A Study of Existing Conditions*, (Chicago, 1911), 147.

³⁵ Ibid.,169.

³⁶ William Stead, *If Christ Came To Chicago: A plea for the union of all who love in the service of all who suffer* (Originally published 1894; New York: Living Books, INC, 1964), 251.

addicted to the culture, but rather the women entered the profession out of necessity.

The white slave trade, where young women are lured to the city with the promise of well-paying jobs and then kidnapped and sold into prostitution, was becoming a prevalent crime in Chicago.³⁷ William Stead first noted the dire problem in his publishing of *If Christ Came to Chicago* in 1893 after he visited the city. Missionaries and reformers made ending the white slave trade a top priority of theirs. Reverend Ernest Bell wrote in the *Chicago Tribune* in 1909, "The undeniable truth is established beyond dispute that a prodigious and appalling commerce in girls is a part of the colossal business enterprise of our great modern cities....The red light districts, like a lake of fire, are constantly engulfing unwary and unprotected girls. The fires of these burning maelstroms, the illegal vice districts, are kept up in an enterprising and systematic way by the business ability of the monstrous men who keep the houses of shame."³⁸ The white slave trade was very prevalent in Chicago, and was feeding the brothels in the Levee district.

The average wage that a prostitute made in Chicago was roughly \$5.00 per week. This number varied depending on several different circumstances such as perceived quality of the brothel, location, and madam or owner. Brothels operated in different ways. Some prostitutes got a fixed wage paid by the madam. Other brothel wages were reliant on the number of customers. The report explained that generally a brothel charged \$1.00, \$1.50, or \$5.00 for entry. The client then chose

³⁷ William Stead, *If Christ Came to Chicago*, 254.

³⁸ Ernest A. Bell, "The Black Traffic in White Girls," *The Chicago Tribune*, October 17, 1909, 5.

which women he would like to spend the evening with. The madam's took a certain percentage of the fee paid by the client and the prostitute received the rest.³⁹

The ways that brothels and other places of prostitution operated in Chicago were generally pretty standard with a few exceptions. Some places focused on turning the maximum profit in the shortest amount of time. Prostitutes were instructed to rush the man in and then get him out as quickly as possible to allow the prostitute to see another client as soon as she could. The idea was the more customers that a woman saw, the more profit they could turn. This business mold was in direct contrast to that of the Everleigh club.

No matter what safeguards a madam or prostitute attempted to put in place, the fact is that the business of prostitution was one that came with many risks. Prostitutes were at risk for contracting many sexually transmitted venereal diseases and with birth control being not nearly as accessible or reliable as it is today, they could easily become pregnant. Moreover, the type of men that commonly engaged themselves in the prostitution business made prostitutes susceptible to violent acts such as being robbed, beaten, or mugged, among other things. The life of a prostitute in Chicago's vice districts was one that came with many dangers. Although some women were able to support themselves through prostitution, it often times was a profession that they turned to out of desperation. Stead painted a bleak picture for prostitutes in Chicago. Stead admits that a prostitute in Chicago is capable of making more money than a woman of any other profession in America, but he also noted:

³⁹ Vice Commission of Chicago, *The Social Evil In Chicago: A Study of Existing Conditions*, (Chicago, 1911), 147-174.

“but as life’s enchanted cup but sparkles near the brim so the profits of that life are of very short duration. When the bloom is off the rose, a very rapid process of degradation sets in which ends in the lock of hospital, the jail or the drunkard’s grave. Prostitution is an easy, lazy way of making a living, and once they are started either by force, fraud, or ill-luck there is no way of getting back. They have to go through with it to the bitter end.”⁴⁰

These women were being exploited by men who were paying for their company, as well as by the madam’s and saloon owners who used their bodies to turn a profit. Prostitution, according to Stead, ruined a young lady’s life; it degraded them and made them susceptible to a life of hardships, despite some short term benefits.

The life of a madam and prostitute is considerably different, and should not be considered one in the same. Madams are not exposed to nearly the same risks and dangers as the prostitute, yet the madam is the one who gains financially and socially. Ada and Minna Everleigh talk at length in an interview with Charles Washburn about their standard that they have for the women who work as prostitutes in their club, as well as the standards that they have for their clientele. These standards, they claim, are aimed to protect the women and create a safe, and comfortable environment for them to work in. Even the women working at the Everleigh club, who Ada and Minna argued were not put in these positions, were undoubtedly victims to some of, if not all, of the troubling conditions that the average prostitute was susceptible to. The sisters created the perception of safe,

⁴⁰ William Stead, *If Christ Came To Chicago*, 251.

clean, honest conditions in their club, but the reality is that the prostitution business inherently catered to such conditions and most of them could not be avoided.

The Municipal code of Chicago, passed on March 20, 1905 included some laws regarding the legality of prostitution. Section 146 states, “No person shall keep or maintain a house of ill-fame...or a place for the practice of fornication or prostitution.”⁴¹ Section 1460 states “All prostitutes, solicitors to prostitution, and all persons of evil fame or report, plying their vocations upon the streets, alleys or public places in the city, are hereby declared to be common nuisances.”⁴² These crimes were misdemeanors, and held fines of \$100 to \$200. Although laws in Chicago regarding prostitution were straight forward, they were often not enforced to their full extent. The vice commission report found that “When the present General Superintendent of Police was appointed, he found that there were certain so-called restricted districts, where the operation of the law had been nullified by custom and precedent.”⁴³ There was a general tolerance and indifference towards the law in Chicago, not just regarding prostitution, but vice and crime in general. If someone was wealthy enough, they could easily cover up their involvement in vice businesses. This was true for the Everleigh sisters. For years people did not question corruption of officers, and did not speak out against the growing vice in the city (prostitution being only one of the many growing vices). This made Chicago a city

⁴¹ *The Revised Municipal Code of Chicago: 1905*. Section 1456. Passed March 20, 1905. Chicago: The Lawyers’ co-operative Publishing Company, 1905.

⁴² *The Revised Municipal Code of Chicago: 1905*. Section 1460. Passed March 20, 1905. Chicago: The Lawyers’ co-operative Publishing Company, 1905.

⁴³ Vice Commission of Chicago, *The Social Evil In Chicago: A Study of Existing Conditions*, (Chicago, 1911), 145.

that was susceptible to vices such as prostitution, become a booming business. After the publishing of the Vice Commission's report in 1911, new laws and regulations were put into place to curb vice in the city. This was the beginning of the end of houses of prostitution.

"Perceived" standards of the Everleigh Club

A key part of the sister's business model was their clear standards for everyone involved in their club. From the employees to the clients, Ada and Minna wanted to make their expectations known. The club belonged to Ada and Minna; they were the ones running their club. The sisters would not fall victims to the countless predators that roved the Levee district searching for prey. They intended to elude this fate by holding everyone to very high standards. This was a key aspect to their business model, and what helped propel the Everleigh Club to the top of the Levee District. The sisters controlled every aspect of their club. Frank Carson, a reporter with *the Chicago Inter-Ocean* newspaper, of the Chicago Inter-Ocean news, explained after an investigation into the club, "I saw precisely what the Everleighs wished for me to see, and knew exactly what they wished for me to know"⁴⁴ The club belonged to them, and people were aware of this fact. They kept a close eye on the perception of their club.

The women that Ada and Minna Everleigh employed appeared to be different than other prostitutes around the city. There was a waitlist just to be interviewed

⁴⁴ Charles Washburn, *Come Into My Parlor*, 84.

by the sisters for a chance to work in their club. "I talk with each applicant myself." Ada told a writer, explaining the process she used to select her staff. "She must have worked somewhere else before coming here. We do not like amateurs. Inexperienced girls and young widows are too prone to accept offers of marriage and leave. We always have a waiting list. To get in a woman must have a pretty face and figure, had to be in perfect health, must look well in evening clothes. If she is addicted to drugs or to drink, we do not want her."⁴⁵ The women that the Everleigh sisters hired must be at least 18 years of age, something unique to their club.³¹ The 1910 US Census shows that at the address of the Everleigh Club, there were 21 women living there including Ada and Minna. The oldest courtesan, which the census calls a roommate, was 34 years of age, and the youngest was 20 years of age. The average age of the courtesans was 24.5 years old.⁴⁶ All of the women were over 18 years of age. Minna described what it took just to be offered an interview in her club, "A prospective Everleigh courtesan must prove she's eighteen in order to earn an interview, understand exactly what the job entailed, and know she's free to leave anytime, for any reason, without penalty."⁴⁷ The sisters always tried to stay true to these standards.

Ada conducted the first round of interviews, and made sure all the women were physically up to standards; Minna would then begin giving the women lessons.

⁴⁵ Charles Washburn, *Come Into My Parlor*, 110.

³¹ Many of the people running prostitution rings in the Levee district did not have an age requirement, and would treat their prostitutes as if they were slaves. The horrors of the white slave trade, and mistreatment of women in other clubs was already discussed at length.

⁴⁶ United States Federal Census, Cook County, Chicago, Illinois, first ward, 1910.

⁴⁷ Karen Abbott, *Sin In The Second City*, 12.

The lessons Minna discussed had to do with how to treat the men that would frequent the club, how to dress, and how to resist urges. In Ada's words, "Gluttony was opium to a courtesan."⁴⁸ Many prostitutes come from lower classes, and bleak situations. It was common for a prostitute to attempt to gain financially from their clients, often by way of vice. This type of thing was strictly prohibited in the Everleigh Club. "Prostitutes would cower before the rich and closely watch their tastes in order to make vices of them and exploit them."⁴⁹ This often took the form of drugging men and then stealing from them. Vice of this nature was seen as immoral and unacceptable to the sisters; they offered better pay than other courtesans in Chicago got; this type of behavior was simply not necessary. Minna told her employees; "Honesty is its own reward. Never have any black mark on your record. What would your future husband say if he heard you had mistreated a man? Keep on being good girls, even if it hurts."⁵⁰ In one instance, Ada squandered a plan of one of their courtesans. Daisy, as Minna recalled, snuck into the club a notorious bank robber. She had intended to drug him and then run off with his satchels filled with stolen money. Daisy used the intercom to ask a servant to fetch the bags of the man. The servant suspected foul play and informed Minna. She promptly went into the bedroom and caught Daisy taking out a white powder from her boudoir. Minna calmly excused Daisy and told her to get rid of the man. "No knockout powders in this house, you know that. I'll give you ten minutes to get your friend off the

⁴⁸ Charles Washburn, *Come Into My Parlor*, 31.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 74.

premises. We do not cater to his kind.”⁵¹ The sisters requested complete loyalty from their girls. They achieved this partially through replacing drugs and dissipation with silks and satins.⁵² The sisters took care of their employees. They believed it was not asking too much that they follow the rules, and if they did they would receive very fair treatment. Prostitutes came and went, it was a part of the business that Ada and Minna understood.⁵³ Minna made sure that every girl that worked for them felt like an important part of the team; they would be spoiled and never degraded.⁵⁴ The women that worked at the Everleigh club were like sisters and daughters to Ada and Minna, and they even referred to them as their “butterflies”. Minna expressed her affection for them, “We loved our butterflies, every one of them. Where would we have been without them?”⁵⁵ Ada and Minna dedicated their Sunday nights to the romance of the women employed by them. The sisters recalled, “We dedicated our Sunday nights to old-fashioned romance. We made Sunday “Beau night”, permitting our girls to see their sweethearts as they would have seen them had they lived in homes. It was a glorious sight to see them holding hands and gushing terms of endearment.”⁵⁶

Furthermore, if the women of the club wanted to get out of the life of vice, the sisters supported them and would not try to inhibit them from leaving. In 1911 Jack

⁵¹ Charles Washburn, *Come Into My Parlor*, 75.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵³ Walter Reckless, *Vice In Chicago*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1933). 137.

⁵⁴ Karen Abbott, *Sin In The Second City*, 21.

⁵⁵ Charles Washburn, *Come Into My Parlor*, 40.

Minna had an obsession of sorts with butterflies. She often wore gaudy jewelry shaped and decorated like butterflies.

⁵⁶ Charles Washburn, *Come Into My Parlor* 187.

Johnson, an African-American champion boxer, was indicted and arrested for violating the Mann Act.⁵⁷ In 1910, Johnson met a woman at the Everleigh Club, and asked her to marry him. She left the club with the blessings of Ada and Minna and returned to Johnson's home in Pittsburgh. The *Broad Ax* paper printed an article detailing the case, "He is charged with bringing Belle Schreiber to this city, who resided at the Everleigh Sister's club. Johnson is accused of bringing this highly cultured and refined lady from Chicago to Pittsburgh to reside."⁵⁸ Belle was free to leave her post as a courtesan at the Everleigh Club to pursue her life with Jack Johnson.

The majority of the women recognized the unique conditions Ada and Minna were trying to provide for them and they stayed true to the sisters. On one occasion the sisters fired a courtesan, who they refer to as Katie in their interview with Charles Washburn, because she was abusing morphine in the club. Katie immediately found work in Vic Shaw's club. Fifteen hours later Katie called the sisters and told them that Vic Shaw was planning an extensive set up plan where a dead body would be dumped near their club in attempts to get the Everleigh Club shut down. "They're framing you," announced Katie, "They've got a dead body at Shaw's and they are going to plant it in your furnace. They've got it all fixed. You must stop them. It's a dirty trick and I won't let them do that to you."⁵⁹ The loyalty that the women working for Ada and Minna had to them was imperative to their

⁵⁷ The Mann act was created to prohibit white slavery and the interstate transport of females for immoral purposes.

⁵⁸ "Jack Johnson Indicted and Arrested for Violating the Mann Act", *Broad Ax*, November 9, 1909, 3.

⁵⁹ Charles Washburn, *Come Into My Parlor*, 92.

success. This loyalty allowed the Everleighs stay ahead in the Levee district, an area where everyone was out to make them fail. The loyalty they received also allowed the sisters to run their club exactly how they wanted to. They could tell the women they employed to do things a very specific way and the women would comply.

There were very few occasions when the women working for Ada and Minna went behind their back. Given the circumstances of many of the women who had taken to the life of prostitution, these things did sometimes happen. In 1905 Marshall Field Jr., son of Marshall Field, the business mogul, was fatally shot and killed. The official reports claimed that he accidentally shot himself in his home while cleaning his revolver. Rumors swirled that he was murdered. Due to the success of the Everleigh Club, the sisters had many enemies in the Levee district. Madams like Vic Shaw tried on multiple occasions to pin the murder on them. About a month after the murder two women employed at the Everleigh Club were phoned, Minna overheard the conversation. The man said to Nellie, the courtesan, "Come right over and the \$20,000 is yours."⁶⁰ Minna and Ada, concerned about the phone call, called the police immediately and asked them to accompany them to the meeting place. Upon arrival, the sisters realized that two of their courtesans, Nellie and Phyllis, were going to give a false testimony claiming that Marshall field Jr. was murdered in the Everleigh Club, and in return they would receive \$20,000 dollars. Upon seeing the sisters and realizing that their plan was spoiled Nellie, rushing to her employer, blurted out, "We didn't do anything, Miss Minna! Honestly, we didn't do anything. Pony said he would give us \$20,000 dollars if we said you did it. I'm

⁶⁰ Charles Washburn, *Come Into My Parlor*, 90.

sorry Miss Minna. Take us home, please take us home.”⁶¹ Both of the women were welcomed back into the club.⁶²

Minna trained the girls in how to talk to men. They had to be well read, like her, so they could carry intelligent conversations. How clients were treated had to be distinctly different than if they went to another brothel in the city. “Temper the instinct to rush a man, to exploit his baser fantasies. Flirtations and banter could begin in any of the parlors, but a girl must have a deft touch once she escorted a man upstairs,” Minna explained.⁶³ A man would never be rushed in the Everleigh Club; that is not what the experience was about. In the Everleigh Club the experience was about relaxing, being comfortable, and getting out of the experience what the client wanted. They were, after all, running their business in the city that coined the term “The customer is always right.”⁶⁴ The women at the club played a very important role in making sure that the client had his desired experience at the club. The

⁶¹ Charles Washburn, *Come Into My Parlor*, 91.

In 1913 a woman named Vera Scott was arrested in Los Angeles for “badger games”. She later confessed to killing Marshall Field Jr. in the Everleigh Club. According to a New York Times article, She claimed to be dating Marshall Field Jr. and after a night out at the Everleigh Club, she was offended by Field’s interactions with Minna and a courtesan of the club. She claims to have then shot Field. Minna supposedly called her a cab home, so not to draw attention to her club, and Marshall Field Sr. gave allegedly gave her \$20,000 to leave the country. Although this story has never been proved, and even fully dismissed by some, it is the biggest link between the murder of Marshall Field Jr. and the Everleigh Club.

Says She Killed Marshall Field Jr., *The New York Times*, November 23, 1913.

⁶² Karen Abbott, *Sin In the Second City*, 97.

A certain amount of leeway had to be offered to the women that worked at the Everleigh Club. They typically were coming from desperate situations. People will do desperate things in desperate situations. These women should hardly be faulted for doing things that they believed put them in the best position. Karen Abbott writes, “If they took a hard line on all club rules all the time, the Everleigh Butterfly would be an extinct species.” (97)

⁶³ Karen Abbott, *Sin In The Second City*, 19.

⁶⁴ Axel Madson, *The Marshall Fields* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2002), 94.

lessons that Minna taught set guidelines as to how to make sure the client was happy and not only in a sexual way. The lessons Minna put their women through were extensive. How the women were to dress was also addressed. Minna recalled how some brothels had their women wear “tawdry negligees” as uniforms.⁶⁵ “How would that look, after the girls had so judiciously studied the poetry of Arthur Symons, and Ernest Dowson and Longfellow? No, they would wear elegant, full-length evening gowns and all the jewelry they owned, as long as it wasn’t gaudy,” Minna explained.⁶⁶ Standards of behavior, and appearance helped the Everleigh Club live up to the hype that revolved around it. The perception was absolutely key to keeping high paying customers interested in returning. People from around the world knew of the Everleigh club. If a client came into the club for the first time and saw an average, cheaply garbed woman, they would not be impressed. The club had to set itself apart from all the other brothels in the city.

The prostitution business is one that came with many risks. Sexually transmitted diseases ran rampant in vice districts, pregnancies were common, and women were exposed to dangerous men who thrived on vice. Ada and Minna made it a duty of theirs to keep their courtesans as safe as possible. They preached precautionary measures such as encouraging the courtesans to perform orally as much as possible; it was deemed as safer, and there was more money involved.⁶⁷ Prostitutes became quite good at diagnosing certain sexually transmitted diseases. A prominent madam of the time explained, “I think the girls could diagnose clap

⁶⁵ Cynthia Blaire, *I've got to make my livin'* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 73.

⁶⁶ Karen Abbott, *Sin In The Second City*, 19.

⁶⁷ *IBID*, 46

better than the doctors at the time. She'd have a way of squeezing it that, if there was anything in there, she'd find it. Then she'd clean it off with a wash cloth."⁶⁸ The sisters offered their employees medical attention far more than other madams. "The esteemed Dr. Maurice Rosenberg agreed to perform regular medical examinations on the girls; a practice often forged or skipped altogether in lesser houses."⁶⁹ The Everleigh courtesans appeared to the clientele to be the cleanest prostitutes in Chicago. "I knew they ran a clean place with clean girls", Frank Carson recalled to Charles Washburn, "Their house doctor never forged the reports."⁷⁰ Although there were obvious threats that came along with the job, the Everleigh sisters tried to be as proactive as possible, and protected their courtesans as well as they possibly could.

These high standards helped ensure that the Everleigh girls appeared to be the best courtesans in the city. To the customers, they seemed to be well read, well dressed, well mannered, and clean. It would be worth paying extra money to enter the Everleigh club because you knew what you would be getting. How might it look for a married man to visit a low-end brothel and then take a sexually transmitted disease home to his wife? Although this type of thing certainly could have occurred at the Everleigh club, men knew that Ada and Minna were doing their part to help make sure the environment at their club was safe and discreet. The Everleigh club was not a cheap place to visit, but based on the success of the club, wealthy men were willing to spend the extra money. The safety of the club, and high standard of

⁶⁸ Ruth Rosen, *The Lost sisterhood* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1982), 96-97.

⁶⁹ "Dr. Maurice Rosenberg" *Chicago Tribune*, March 6, 1925.

⁷⁰ Charles Washburn, *Come Into My Parlor*, 84.

the women employed by Ada and Minna, made the choice to go to the Everleigh club instead of Vic Shaw's or other brothels an easy one. Vic Shaw, the Everleigh's biggest rival, knew, "no matter how fine her girls' faces or trim their figures, how elaborate their gowns or skilled their technique, the harlots in her house would never be the best"⁷¹. Ada and Minna operated differently from other madams, and this distinction is one of the key components to what made the sisters far more successful than any other madams in the history of Chicago, and perhaps even the world.

The men that frequented the Everleigh club were held to just as high of standards as the employees. You must be of certain social standing to enter the club. There was a strict dress code. If the sisters did not believe that a man could afford to be in the club, they would not let him enter. Having these standards kept the club's perception of being elegant and classy. It was a place for the elite to go for their pleasures and business, not the "nobodies" of society. The club hosted elite athletes such as Jack Johnson, a German Kaiser and his posse, and a plethora of business men swimming in new money.⁷²

In early March, 1902, Kaiser William II arrived in New York for a tour of the United States. It was reported that upon his arrival he asked to see the Everleigh club, for he had heard wonders about it.⁷³ "Quietly, there was a celebration in his

⁷¹ Karen Abbott, *Sin In The Second City*, 97.

⁷² If Marshall Field Jr. did indeed visit the club the night that he died, then he too would be included on the list of wealthy and famous men who were guests at the club.

⁷³ Charles Washburn, *Come Into My Parlor*, 77.

behalf given at the Everleigh Club, an orgy that brought about the greatest symbol of unrestrained gayety.”⁷⁴

In the club, men could display no violence. Other brothels around the city were notorious for being places prone to violent outbreaks. There were murders, theft, and gambling all occurring in other brothels around the city. These are all reasons that caused the closing of the Levee district in 1911.⁷⁵ None of this was acceptable in the Everleigh club. The sisters had this standard for multiple reasons. For one, if there were murders, or other vices occurring at the club, it would draw unwanted attention from police forces. The sisters already had people falsely accuse them of murders, they had to try to avoid violent vice actually occurring in their club. Although the sisters had their connections and protections against this type of prosecution, there was no reason to tolerate violence and invite investigations into their club. A gun-fight once almost broke out at the Everleigh club. Minna quickly cut off all of the lights. Then men stopped in their tracks, and knew instantly that this would not be an acceptable action in the club. The men withdrew their weapons, and there were no more issues that night.⁷⁶

The sisters discuss what their expectations were for their employees and clients at length in their interview with Charles Washburn, which took place roughly fifteen years after the closing of the Everleigh Club. The Everleigh Club was a place of vice, and undoubtedly was not able to escape all of the realities that stood alongside the business of prostitution, of which were discussed earlier. Even if all of the

⁷⁴ Charles Washburn, *Come Into My Parlor*, 77.

⁷⁵ Vice Commission of Chicago, *The Social Evil In Chicago: A Study of Existing Conditions*, (Chicago, 1911), 147-174.

⁷⁶ Karen Abbott, *Sin In The Second City*, 78.

standards of which the sisters claim were upheld did exist in reality, the club still revolved around the business of prostitution which by nature is ridden with dangers and risks.

Minna makes it seem as if the women that for them were like daughters to them and that they cared deeply for them, inferring that they were in some ways motherly figures to these women. I would like to critique this by asking how any motherly figure could push their daughters towards a profession of prostitution. It seems like a hollow claim.

Just because Ada and Minna describe their club in a certain way does not mean that it was in fact this way. The sisters, after being run out of Chicago by a social morality movement, might talk about their club in this way to attempt to allude that their club was unfairly shut down. Even if the club appeared to outsiders as a place of high moral standing, it does not mean that the realities were exactly as the sisters claimed, or even as they appeared to the reporter.

To gain a more clear perspective on the precise conditions of the club for the courtesans working there, we would need to hear the voices from the courtesans, which are very difficult to find. In this section I quote alleged words from several different courtesans of the Everleigh Club, but the Everleigh sisters are re quoting them some 15-20 years later. Although it is very possible that these quotes are accurate, this assumption should not indefinitely be made.

More important than the actual conditions under which the courtesans in the club worked, is the fact that Ada and Minna were able to create a perception of their club that alluded to a clean, safe, glamorous atmosphere. Evidence of this perception

is in the way that the club has been written about in the time since its closure. The club has been written about with a sense of “the glory days.” It is as if people are reminiscing. Even in the sisters obituaries, they refer to how lavish the club had been. “With her sister Ada, she once ran the world famous Everleigh Club,” read Minna’s obituary, “the country’s most lavish bordello where restless men could relax with everything from a good book to a beautiful, cultured companion.”⁷⁷

A column on the club written in 1976 in the suburbs of Chicago details the club as being “Chicago’s most famous attraction which catered to royalty and everyone else who had money to spend... Minna and Ada sold the idea of exclusiveness and had a waiting list of both customers and employees. European royalty considered it the in place to visit. Legislators and alderman got special rates and nothing was too good for the gentleman of the press. Some think of Minna as the godmother of public relations.”⁷⁸ Ada and Minna Everleigh were so good at creating a positive perception of their club, that even today it is still viewed in such a way. Without creating this perception, it is unlikely that they would have been able to get the clientele in their club that would be able to afford what they the sisters charged.

Knowing the right people

Vice in Chicago was a booming industry during the first decade of the 20th century. There were great profits to be made if one played the right hand. However,

⁷⁷ “Woman Who Made \$1 Million in 1900 With Chicago Spot Dies”, *The Sandusky Register Star-News*, September 17, 1948.

⁷⁸ “Everleigh’s Were Ladies of Status”, *Daily Republican Register*, February 26, 1976.

some dangers did exist. Reform aimed at ending “social evil” in Chicago put saloons, brothels, and flats at risk for being shut down permanently; something that did end up happening in 1912. Chicago politicians, police chiefs, clergy, and social justice advocates all had hands in the happenings of vice in the city. Without knowing the right people, a business of vice would never have been successful in Chicago. There were ways that one could protect one’s own title as a vice lord in the Levee district, such as bribery, operation fees, or blackmail.

The protection system that was established in the Levee was tiered in a way; each person in the district had a certain amount of pull in the political sphere of Chicago. This system was generally set up as the basic owners of the brothels and saloons, whose ability to establish a place in the hierarchy determined their ultimate demise or success; then there were the higher-end madams and brothel-keepers such as the Everleigh sisters and Vic Shaw; the next step up was Ike Bloom and Jim Colismo, a dance hall owner and brothel keeper who established going rates for operation fees; and finally the top of the system belonged to alderman of the first ward, Bathhouse John Coughlin and Michael “Hinky Dink” Kenna, who were most concerned with keeping the Chicago democratic political machine running smoothly, and most importantly, lucratively.⁷⁹ The only way to move up in the system was to pay your dues and make nice with the right people, something Ada and Minna had no trouble doing at all.

The Levee district from the outside looked like a slum with no rules or regulations. Quite the contrary was true. The Levee was actually a well-oiled

⁷⁹ Lloyd Wendt and Herman Kogan, *Lords of the Levee* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1943), 58.

machine that had its own rule, regulations, and guidelines that must be followed at all times. The rules were often unwritten, but everyone knew of the game; only some knew how to play correctly. “There was, it seemed, always a grand jury investigating something or other,” one of the Levee lords reflected, “There was always a crackdown or a raid in the works, always a reform group shouting from the sidelines about liquor licenses and closing laws. Yet such distractions remained peripheral as long as you knew where the boundaries were drawn and, more important, who ensured they stayed in place.”⁸⁰

Ike Bloom was a big shot in the Levee district. Bloom owned the infamous Friedman dance hall, which he advertised as a dance academy in efforts to keep out reformers.⁸¹ Ike ran his business in a less than honest way. His drinks were filled with colored water to save money on booze; before the men realized what was happening, the dancers of the club would lure the men to a hotel room at \$5 per room, most of which was kicked back to Bloom.⁸² Bloom became a wealthy business- man, and slowly rose in ranks as a leader in the Levee district. Herbert Asbury described in his book how arrangements were made in the Levee district, “Every time a new police captain rose through the ranks or was ushered in with a new mayoral administration, Bloom called him to make arrangements for protection

⁸⁰ Karen Abbott, *Sin In The Second City*, 52.

⁸¹ IBID, 53.

⁸² Lloyd Wendt and Herman Kogan, *Lords of the Levee* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1943), 211.

payments, a request invariably taken in stride.”⁸³ Together, with the police, Bloom determined the price of operation for places of vice.⁸⁴

Massage parlors and assignation houses	\$25 weekly
Larger houses of ill fame	\$50-\$100 weekly, \$25 additional if drinks are sold
Saloons allowed to stay open after hours	\$50 per month
Sale of liquor in apartment houses without licenses	\$15 per month
Poker and Craps	\$25 per week for each table

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Places of vice could pay these fees and in return would not be prosecuted by the law. The money from these fees did not go to the city, it went into the pockets of the police force.⁸⁶

Ike Bloom was with the “in crowd”, creating a safe haven for him and his allies. Getting on the wrong side of Ike would be disastrous as an entrepreneur of vice. His contacts with the police made Bloom a powerful man in the Levee district.

⁸³ Herbert Asbury, *The Gangs of Chicago: The story of bathhouse John and Hinky Dink* (New York: Knopf, 1940), 276.

⁸⁴ Wendt, *Lords of the Levee*, 322.

⁸⁵ Vice Commission of Chicago, *The Social Evil In Chicago: A Study of Existing Conditions*, (Chicago, 1911), 147-174.

Massage parlors were disguised as innocent businesses, but often times doubled as a place a vice that employed prostitutes. An assignation house is a rendezvous place; it was a predetermined place for a male client to meet with a prostitute. The term “assignation house” can sometimes also be used to refer to a brothel. A saloon is a bar, prostitutes often could be found near or even in saloons seeking clients.

⁸⁶ Vice Commission of Chicago, *The Social Evil In Chicago: A Study of Existing Conditions*, (Chicago, 1911), 147-174.

Another vice lord was the notorious Big Jim Colismo. It is often noted that quotes are never needed around Big Jim's name, he was always known as that. His name was not "big" Jim Colismo; it was Big Jim Colismo.⁸⁷ Colismo was big not only in his stature, but also in the sense that he had a tremendous amount of power in the Chicago political landscape. Colismo ran a saloon, and like Bloom, he was one of the most powerful men in the Levee district. Wendt and Kogan actually refer to him as the predecessor to Al Capone, and one of the fathers of organized crime in Chicago. Colismo was a part of the white slave trade, which lured women from rural farms of the Midwest with promises of good work and lively life.⁸⁸ "A shameful arrangement," concluded Ada, "One we could never understand or condone."⁸⁹ The sisters decided however, not to breach the subject of white slavery in their interactions with Colismo. Even though the sisters did not agree with the ways in which Big Jim Colismo conducted business, they knew that he would be an important ally to have in the Levee district. The sisters were able to put aside their moral judgments of Colismo in order to create a productive business relationship. The club, after all, was always the most important thing. Big Jim was someone who they confided in, and went to when they needed help. "Draw up chairs", Minna remembered Jim saying. "Ike Bloom been bothering you again?" He'd ask rhetorically. "What's eating Ike anyways, I always said he goes too far."⁹⁰ Colismo had his hands in all kinds of vice including white slavery, prostitution, gambling,

⁸⁷ Wendt, *Lords of the Levee*, 55.

⁸⁸ Leona Groetzlinger, *The city's Perils* (Chicago: N.P., 1910) 26.

⁸⁹ Karen Abbott, *Sin In The Second City*, 57

⁹⁰ Charles Washburn, *Come Into My Parlor*, 60-61.

money laundering, mob work, etc.⁹¹ He may not have had an in with the police like Ike did, but he always knew what advice to give the sisters to survive in the Levee district. One can suspect that Colismo found some sort of satisfaction in the fact that two women such as Ada and Minna Everleigh sought his advice.

In the later years of the Everleigh club, when social reform was gripping the city of Chicago, and particularly the Levee district, the sisters were concerned about a huge hike in operation fees. The sisters went straight to Big Jim, and he told them to put off paying as long as possible. This advice ended up saving the sisters thousands of dollars. Although later that year, all the brothels in Chicago would be closed due to reform, the sisters never did pay their fees for that year. The protection of Colismo allowed that to happen.⁹²

Ike Bloom, and Jim Colismo were big dogs in the Levee, but the sisters knew that the real lords of the Levee district were the alderman. Abbot writes, "Ike Bloom and Big Jim Colismo might have operated the factory line, but John Coughlin and Michael Kenna owned the factory."⁹³ Kenna and Coughlin were important figures in the streets of the Levee district; they were the big dogs. Amongst all the club and saloon owners they were top tiered. Having a sound relationship with them, as the sisters did, ensured that the fees the Everleigh's paid were fair. A friend of Colismo and Bloom was a friend of the police force. These two, however, did not actually represent the law. For this reason some issues that originated outside of the Levee district could not be immediately resolved by them. Especially in the later years of

⁹¹ Herbert Asbury, *The Gangs of Chicago* (Chicago: Random House, 2003), 278.

⁹² Charles Washburn, *Come Into My Parlor*, 62.

⁹³ Karen Abbott, *Sin In The Second City*, 57.

the Everleigh club, when social reform was being pushed harder from the outside, the sisters had to climb higher with their connections. The next level of power was the aldermen who oversaw the Levee district.

“Bathhouse” John Coughlin, and Michael “Hinky Dink” Kenna were partners, and together ruled over the first ward in Chicago which included the down town loop where all the financial businesses were located, all the political offices, and also extended all the way down to the south side at Dearborn street where the Levee district and the Everleigh club were located. These two men held the most power over the Levee district. The Levee district was perhaps their most lucrative neighborhood as well. They took in a percentage of every dollar generated in the Levee district. They were especially close to the mayor.⁹⁴

The inhabitants of the Levee saw “Bathhouse” John Coughlin as the final word. Ada and Minna were told to refer to him with any issues that they had.⁹⁵ John was approachable and honest. Coughlin was the speaking partner between himself and Kenna, just as Minna was to Ada. They developed a uniquely close relationship. John knew that the sisters would be good for the Levee district; this is why he would help them out. The sisters’ elite club would be lucrative and bring wealthy people into the alderman’s district. Helping the sisters would help him. Shortly after the sisters arrived at their address on Dearborn street, they received an invitation to John Coughlin’s first-ward ball. Everyone who was “anyone” in the Levee district was invited. When they arrived John took them arm-in-arm all around the ball,

⁹⁴ Wendt, *Lords of the Levee*, 285.

⁹⁵ Charles Washburn, *Come Into My Parlor*, 53.

passing by every lesser pimp, madam, cadet, harlot, and hanger-on.⁹⁶ John did not even need to say a word, this action alone crowned Ada and Minna the new queens of the Levee district. The Everleighs now had the immunity they needed for their business to really take off. “We didn’t need anyone to confirm our status,” Minna confidently explained as she recalled their first ball, “But we appreciated the gesture.” They accepted the honor, and knew then that John Coughlin would protect them from enemies both in the Levee, and outside the Levee.⁹⁷

The Everleigh sisters played their cards right all the time. They knew exactly when to talk to Ike Bloom or Big Jim about operating fees, or sketchy people in the Levee who had it out for them; they knew when to express their concerns about social reformers knocking on their doors to “Bathhouse” John Coughlin and Michael “Hinky Dink” Kenna. The relationships they were able to form both with the elite of the Levee, and the elite in the political machine of Chicago were absolutely essential to the success of the club. These connections allowed them to elude prosecution of the law for over ten years due to protection from Colismo and Bloom in the district. The publicity from the first ward ball and friendship of the alderman propelled them to Chicago socialite status. This connection too gave them amnesty to the law, but also allowed them to connect with prominent and wealthy Chicagoans: prospective clients. Without having the ability to forge these connections the Everleigh club surely would have been a failure within a few years.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Herbert Asbury, *The Gangs of Chicago*, 261.

⁹⁷ Karen Abbott, *Sin In The Second City*, 60.

⁹⁸ The protection that the Everleigh’s received from the rulers of the Levee was primarily from outside forces such as the police force and social reformers. Their connections did give them high standing within the district, but it did not give them

In conclusion

It was not by chance that the Everleigh sisters were the most successful madams in the history of Chicago. Operating the club to the standards of the sisters required persistence and hard work. Everything had to be meticulously planned out, and then executed for the sisters to succeed in the brothel business. The club had to have a perception of wealth, grandeur, and cleanliness for them to draw in their desired client base.

Furthermore, a series of conditions that happened to play out greatly helped the sisters be as successful as they were. First, when their marriages failed simultaneously it allowed them to pack their things and set out into the world as the entrepreneurs they were. At this point, the sisters were not tied down to any particular city. They were free to go where life took them. Their short marriages also gave them insight into the minds of men, which helped them shape their business model into one specifically aimed at reeling in men to spend money.

Second, the sisters decided to leave Omaha at the perfect time as well. Their visit to Washington D.C. to see Cleo Maitland uncovered great advice and even ended up helping the sisters uncover the perfect city and building to start their business. If these events did not occur precisely when they did, the Everleigh club

amnesty from other prominent club owners such as Vic Shaw. Given the general success of Vic Shaw's club, and the success of several other Levee district club owners, I would imagine that they too had some sort of relationships with the aldermen. Although these relationships may not have been totally unique to the Everleigh sisters, they were essential to their success because without them the club would have quickly succumbed to outside forces.

likely would have never come to fruition, at least not to the extent and grandeur that it eventually would.

Third, Chicago, as a growing industrious city, was the perfect home for the Everleigh club. The city was ridden with crime and corruption. The population was steadily growing, and single men with new money were flooding the loop. The top madam throughout the end of the 19th century in the Levee district was set to retire, setting the stage for the Everleigh sisters to take over the reign of the Levee district. Other cities that were at different stages of their history likely would not have been as conducive to the success of the Everleigh club. Other cities further west were also home to vice districts, but many of them already had madams who ran the vice districts, such as Lou Graham in Seattle and Jennie Rogers in Denver.

Fourth, when the sisters arrived in Chicago, they had a business plan that they knew would work. Their plan required high standards and patience, but they knew it would pay off if they did not stray from the path. The plan stemmed from their fondness of elegance and luxury items, as well as from the lessons they had learned about men in their marriages. The Everleighs knew that creating a club that was perceived to be the best in the city and catered the desires of men had to be successful. The sisters employed only the best, most honest, prettiest, and loyal women in Chicago. They promoted the safest environments and hygienic habits available at the time and created a family atmosphere that let their employees know that they were cared for. When men came to the club, they truly believed that what they were getting, and the standards that Ada and Minna held their employees to,

completely justified the price that men would have to pay to spend an evening at the club.

In addition, the club could not be like other clubs in the city; it had to be a place that offered a unique experience that could not be had anywhere else in Chicago. The patrons that came to the club had to be held to high standards, just as the women of the club did. Violence or sleazy behavior could not be tolerated. The hood rats of society could visit any other brothel, flat, or saloon in Chicago, but only the wealthy and elite of Chicago could afford a night at the Everleigh club. The sisters tried out a new business model that limited supply, thus created a greater demand. A high demand and low supply meant skyrocketing prices. High prices meant great profits for the sisters.

Finally, the bubbly and sociable personalities of the sisters allowed them to make all the right connections in Chicago. At a time when corruption was booming, and law was hardly enforced, knowing the right people could mean the world for the success of a business of vice such as the Everleigh Club. The politicians of the city knew that the sisters' club was great for the city; it was world-renowned. The alderman of the first ward cashed in off the sisters, but the relationships that Ada and Minna established with the people of power in the first ward were absolutely essential to their success. It allowed them to avoid police forces and social activists for over 10 years. Although social reform would eventually take the city of Chicago by storm after the first decade of the 20th century, the sisters still were able to enjoy great success for over 10 years. Ada and Minna were able to retire in 1911 with a great fortune to their name. They lived comfortably and out of the limelight for the

rest of their lives in New York City.⁹⁹ Outside forces finally got to the mayor's office in 1911, and on October 24, 1911 Mayor Carter Harrison ordered the club to close its doors. On the final night of the club, Minna famously said, "If the Mayor says we must close, that settles it. I'll close up shop and walk out with a smile on my face."¹⁰⁰

Ada and Minna Everleigh went down in history as the most successful madams in the history of Chicago, and perhaps even the world. They were businesswomen who were serious about their craft. They knew what they want and they went and got it. They had a vision for their business, and despite it being hard work, they did not stray from their plan. The sisters were truly incredible women, and owe their success to nobody but themselves.

⁹⁹ Charles Washburn, *Come Into My Parlor*, 97.

¹⁰⁰ "Starts vice War; Mayor in Fight to Clean Up City". *Chicago Tribune*. 1911-10-25.

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