

Virginia Brooks: The Controversial Life and Works of a Turn of the Twentieth Century Chicago  
Anti-Vice Activist and Author

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*Abstract***Virginia Brooks: The Controversial Life and Works of a Turn of the Twentieth Century Chicago Anti-Vice Activist and Author**

Virginia Brooks' investigative anti-vice work has had a long-standing legacy in turn of the 20th century US prostitution scholarship. Her book, *My Battles with Vice*, offers an uniquely forward thinking theory that low wages were the primary driver of young girls to prostitution, and not sin. However, there are doubts about the true authorship of her works and her beliefs. Using a biographical approach, I both fact checked the few, biased accounts of Brooks' life, and gave historical context to her ideology and actions. Brooks was a minor celebrity, but she disappeared from public memory in the decades after her death due to the manipulation of her ex-husband while her play, *Little Lost Sister*, became a classic and toured the country for decades after her death. Brooks' character on the historical record is not accurate, and my original research offers the start to correcting it.

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## Introduction

The first production of the play *Little Lost Sister*, by Virginia Brooks, premiered at the beginning of the 1913-1914 season at the Lyceum Theater in Detroit. It was a great commercial success, due in large part to the opening of the third scene.<sup>1</sup> In this scene, saloon owners and pimps sit around an empty, backroom cabaret in the middle of Chicago's red light district. "The Levee," as the area was called, was known internationally since Chicago's Columbian Exposition of 1893 when visitors from all over the world saw its gambling, drinking, and houses of prostitution.<sup>2</sup> The antagonists of the play discussed their plan for protecting their den of sin: which policemen to bribe, and where to station security. Then, off-stage, a girl screams. The audience hears the crack of a whip.

"What's he doing to the gal, Martin?"

"He's beatin' her and he's goin' to keep beatin' her until she gives in to him," hissed another.

Again, the crack of a whip, followed by the loudest scream yet.<sup>3</sup>

The show cost \$3,000 to produce and the first run at the Lyceum made \$6,800, with every performance sold out.<sup>4</sup> The story, told in five acts, followed the tropes of the "white slave" narrative popular at the time: a white girl comes to the big city alone, tries to support herself with

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Washburn, *Come Into My Parlor: A Biography of the Aristocratic Everleigh Sisters of Chicago* (New York: National Library Press, 1934), 226

<sup>2</sup> "The origin of term 'levee' for vice areas in Chicago may hark back to the early period when the brothels bordered the river and Chicago was a "port town," or it may be borrowed from the river cities, especially on the lower Mississippi, where the levee districts were always vice areas." Walter Cade Reckless, "The Natural History of Vice Areas in Chicago" PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1925, 48

<sup>3</sup> Washburn, *Come Into My Parlor: A Biography of the Aristocratic Everleigh Sisters of Chicago*, 227

<sup>4</sup> Washburn, *Come Into My Parlor: A Biography of the Aristocratic Everleigh Sisters of Chicago*, 226

traditional employment, gets drawn into prostitution, and is then rescued by a church mission or country sweetheart, cured of all diseases, and is sent back home.<sup>5</sup>

But the production's drama extended outside the theater. The play was adapted from Brooks' 1913 serial of the same name in the *Chicago American*, which was eventually compiled into the 1915 book, *My Battles with Vice*. Each chapter of the serial detailed her experiences going undercover in the low-waged, unskilled labor market of young girls trying to support themselves or their families in turn of the twentieth-century Chicago. The narrative of the book explicitly connected the reality of young girls' low wages to the likelihood that they would supplement that meager income with sex work, or turn wholly to prostitution.

Virginia Brooks started her career as an anti-vice activist just a few years prior in West Hammond, Illinois, an Illinois-Indiana border town. She campaigned against its government which, she claimed, turned a blind eye to saloon owners and mercilessly taxed the village's Polish residents.<sup>6</sup> Brooks drew national press to West Hammond for her displays of protest against vice of any kind. She soon took her message to Chicago, where she joined the like-minded tradition of Protestant reformers from which she emerged, while they tried to shut down the Levee.<sup>7</sup>

After the serial concluded, it was adapted into a play that toured around the Midwest, feeding into the "white slavery" hysteria sweeping the region. According to her ex-husband, Brooks followed the play everywhere it went. She would set up a soapbox in the middle of every town to which it travelled, decrying the vice she saw in that very town. The racy portrayals of

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<sup>5</sup> Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 123

<sup>6</sup> Joseph C. Bigott, *From Cottage to Bungalow* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 174

<sup>7</sup> Bigott, *From Cottage to Bungalow*, 173

city life emphasized in the show's advertisements sometimes lured a police presence to the theater, and with it, a higher box office.<sup>8</sup>

However, Brooks did not actually engage in this act of immersive publicity; it was a PR stunt in rumor only.<sup>9</sup> And Brooks did not in fact write *My Battles with Vice*. Brooks' ex-husband later claimed that Brooks could not write.<sup>10</sup> Instead, a hired journalist, Arthur James Pegler of the *Chicago American*, ghost wrote the serial and claims that he only based it on Brooks' experiences investigating vice.<sup>11</sup> He took many liberties with facts and may have inserted his own beliefs on prostitution into the narrative, which differed from Brooks' in fundamental ways.

While audiences loved the spectacle of *Little Lost Sister*, Brooks' friends in the anti-vice community dismissed it as sentimental. Doubts about her general authorship came up in early reviews of the play. One Indianapolis critic wrote, "if Virginia Brooks wrote, as it is alleged, 'Little Lost Sister,' ... she should be ashamed of herself."<sup>12</sup>

As her character now stands on the public record, Virginia Brooks was an exploitative activist. According to this narrative, she struck deals with newspaper men and publishers in ventures that they would all greatly profit off of, using her national-name recognition as an activist. She expanded her national brand by aligning herself with other high-profile women such as Ida B. Wells. She delegated the investigative work and writing she is best known for to others and made a spectacle of other women's suffering in the harsh economic market of Chicago, for her own profit.

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<sup>8</sup> Washburn, *Come Into My Parlor: A Biography of the Aristocratic Everleigh Sisters of Chicago*, 242-43

<sup>9</sup> Charles Washburn, "On 'Little Lost Sister,'" *New York Times*, November 19th, 1939.

<sup>10</sup> Washburn, *Come Into My Parlor: A Biography of the Aristocratic Everleigh Sisters of Chicago*, 225

<sup>11</sup> Pegler, Arthur James, "Autobiography," James Westbrook Pegler Papers, 1845-1969, [Box 51, Folder 4], Herbert Hoover Presidential Library.

<sup>12</sup> "Indianapolis Papers Flay Virginia Brooks," *Lake County News*, September, 1913.

However, the problems with the current analysis of her life are numerous. Her PR stunts (or lack thereof) for the tour of *Little Lost Sister* are emblematic of her entire life: it is almost impossible to determine what she did or did not do or say; what is or is not fact. The moment Virginia Brooks made a national name for herself, the control over the narrative of her life was shared by the newspaper men and theater promoters she became inseparably entwined with, even marrying one of them. The only primary sources we have on Brooks are articles about her activism that are filled with obvious fallacies that call into question the veracity of the rest of their content, and one account of her professional life that was written by an ex-husband who, in his account, does not admit that he was ever married to her or had a son with her, only that he “was managing [her] as a sideline.”<sup>13</sup>

What will we gain from looking further into her life that existing accounts don't tell us? Even if Brooks did not write *My Battles with Vice*, or was not even involved in its reporting, her activism and fame are still the root cause of it getting published. This holds significance because it may or may not contain some of the rarest interviews we have with prostitutes from this time and place in American history. At the very least, the book tells stories about prostitutes' experiences that include details of historical value, such as typical wages and hours at various jobs available to women. It certainly contains analysis of different levels of sex work as economic transactions, which differs greatly from both the more sentimental and religiously focused anti-vice books of the time, and from the more objective government investigations available to historians. The book is also cited in most scholarship concerning prostitution in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century.

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<sup>13</sup> Charles Washburn, “On “Little Lost Sister,”” *New York Times*, November 19th, 1939.

What is plain on the historical record is that Brooks treated the vice issue fiercely in-line with her fellow Protestants. Even after the play caused her to fall out of favor with that crowd, she continued her activism without the help of paid writers.<sup>14</sup> Her staunch Protestant principles, which painted prostitutes as victims of a morally corrupt world, shone through, although with less practiced prose. Towards the end of her life, she wrote cheap paperbacks about vice that did not put enough money on the table to support her aging mother and young son, so she supplemented her income by working in department stores as a saleswoman till her death.<sup>15</sup> At the end of the day, although she was initially more economically advantaged than the women written about in her book, she was a woman without the support of a father or husband attempting financial independence to care for her family through unskilled labor. Her beliefs were a product of her Protestantism and the contemporary activist scene in Chicago, but her life and works more generally exemplify the struggles of financially independent white women in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century.

To fully explore the way Brooks' life and her works are intertwined, I have used a biographical approach. Through the process of fact checking the only account of her life (from her ex-husband) and the interpretive work done in the sole piece of secondary scholarship that analyzes it, I have utilized census records, historical newspapers, and personal papers. Beyond mere fact checking, these sources have enabled me to fill in the many gaps in her life, narratively

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<sup>14</sup> Virginia Brooks, *Tilly from Tillamook* (Portland: A.E. Kern & Co.)

<sup>15</sup> "U.S., Find A Grave Index, 1600s-Current - AncestryLibrary.Com." Accessed April 3, 2019. [https://search-ancestrylibrary-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/sse.dll?qh=m2yUmLXKciWf8cc0lcdlYA%3d%3d&gss=angs-g&new=1&rank=1&msT=1&gsfn=Virginia&gsfn\\_x=0&gsln=Washburne&gsln\\_x=0&msypn\\_ftp=Portland%2c+Multnomah%2c+Oregon%2c+USA&msypn=62720&msbdy\\_x=1&msbdy=1886&msydy=1929&catbucket=rstp&MSAV=1&uidh=qxl&pcat=ROOT\\_CATEGORY&h=6894531&dbid=60525&indiv=1&ml\\_rpos=1](https://search-ancestrylibrary-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/sse.dll?qh=m2yUmLXKciWf8cc0lcdlYA%3d%3d&gss=angs-g&new=1&rank=1&msT=1&gsfn=Virginia&gsfn_x=0&gsln=Washburne&gsln_x=0&msypn_ftp=Portland%2c+Multnomah%2c+Oregon%2c+USA&msypn=62720&msbdy_x=1&msbdy=1886&msydy=1929&catbucket=rstp&MSAV=1&uidh=qxl&pcat=ROOT_CATEGORY&h=6894531&dbid=60525&indiv=1&ml_rpos=1); "Oregon Death Index 1903-98 - AncestryLibrary.com." Accessed April 3, 2019 <https://www-ancestrylibrary-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/family-tree/person/tree/3397557/person/2068314691/facts>

speaking, and allowed me to create a fuller picture of her life and give context to her actions using sources no one else has examined.

There are events that I know Brooks attended, and I have done my best to approximate what happened at said events and what she likely witnessed, even if she was not a direct participant. I do not know what Brooks did or where she lived between 1901 and 1910. I also do not know about her activism prior to moving to West Hammond from Chicago in 1910, but I do know about events she might have attended, speakers she might have heard, and on what issues. By delving into what ideas Brooks was possibly exposed to, I can at the very least create a sense of the Chicago she was living in during these gaps in the narrative of her life, if I am not able to confirm her actual experiences.

*From Cottage to Bungalow* (2001) by Joseph C. Bigott is the only piece of scholarship that examines Brooks as a historical figure. It is an academic text that examines the working class architecture of the Midwest at the turn of the twentieth century. West Hammond (present-day Calumet City) serves as a significant case study in this work and, for that reason, prominently features Brooks' activism and her father's property holdings there. Brooks' father was the manager of the original West Hammond syndicate of investors that started the first developments in the area in 1890, before it became an incorporated village in 1893.<sup>16</sup> Bigott does not pass much judgment on Brooks' father, only noting that his syndicate decided to target their developments at Polish immigrants.<sup>17</sup> Bigott explores the political repercussions of that decision on the further evolution of the village and, eventually, city. His claims about Brooks, however, are stronger. He claims that Brooks' activism was not preempted by her worries for the townspeople of West Hammond, but out of anger at the village's board of trustees for charging

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<sup>16</sup> Bigott, *From Cottage to Bungalow*, 164

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 151

fees on her late father's property.<sup>18</sup> He frames Brooks as a disgruntled young woman who decided to wreak havoc on the handful of politicians responsible by ruining their reputations in the community and beyond by accusing them of corruption and sex trafficking. Bigott then claims that, while Brooks' campaigns against these men ultimately failed, they were successful enough in getting media attention that she was able to strike a deal with Chicago newspaper men to orchestrate more newsworthy drama which she then used to launch a national career as an anti-vice activist and suffragist.<sup>19</sup>

Bigott draws from two main sources. The first being Charles Washburn's 1934 book, *Come into my Parlor*, which is a biographical portrait of the Everleigh Sisters and their infamous invite-only brothel in Chicago. Despite the focus, the last chapter focuses on Brooks' activism and subsequent downfall due to the bad critical reception of *Little Lost Sister*. The account is biased because he withheld two crucial details from the reader. First, that he was married to Brooks from 1913 to 1917, and second, that he was publically regarded as both a co-author of *My Battles with Vice* and *Little Lost Sister*. The most significant part of Washburn's account are his claims that Arthur James Pegler wrote *My Battles with Vice* and Brooks did not. Bigott takes the claim of dishonesty on Brooks' part and uses it to interpret her actions in West Hammond through Washburn's judgment and condemnation of her character. However, Bigott does not show evidence that he made any effort to corroborate these particular claims coming from Washburn.

The second main source Bigott draws from is the *Lake County News* archive. Here, Bigott found articles that chronicled Brooks' activism in West Hammond. Bigott proved that the articles were unreliable by fact checking their claims against government statistics on West

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<sup>18</sup> Bigott, *From Cottage to Bungalow*, 169

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 173

Hammond, and drew the conclusion that Brooks' activism was not as effective as newspapers reported. For example, many articles claimed that Brooks was empowering the Polish immigrant population to participate in democracy, but Bigott's original research showed that the Polish immigrant population had dominated West Hammond's political scene since the town became incorporated into a village in 1893.<sup>20</sup> However, Bigott also used this archive to interpret quotes attributed to Brooks' as self-righteous in tone in order to support his claim that Brooks used her media attention for personal monetary gain, rather than to further any specific activist cause.<sup>21</sup> I argue that this last claim is weak, because he trusted quotes from articles that contained many factual errors and that, he also claimed, were mostly written by journalists in Chicago who did not travel to West Hammond for their reporting and did not interview Brooks in person.

The accuracy of Brooks' life story is crucial for determining the validity of Brooks' publications as historical record. If Brooks was in fact more of a pure activist than Washburn or Bigott would have a reader believe, any input or reporting she contributed to the publications attributed to her could have ramifications for their use as primary texts in the future. While definitively determining Brooks' contributions may be out of reach, analyzing *My Battles with Vice* through comparison to contemporaneous testimony from sex workers and employers within the framework of existing scholarship written on women's labor and sex work in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century.

*My Battles with Vice* is cited in most of said scholarship concerning turn of the twentieth century prostitution in the United States, although it is hardly referenced directly to support substantial claims. The book characterizes itself as in depth, investigative reporting on the working conditions of young, working class, financially independent women in Chicago and

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 172

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 169

claims to include interviews with women working in department stores, factories, offices, lunch counters, and mail order rooms while detailing their wages, costs of living, and their methods of supplementing their incomes with sex work.<sup>22</sup> *Little Lost Sister*, while hardly resembling its source material, was a dramatization of those stories and is also widely cited because it toured the Midwest for decades as the first of the “white slave plays,” defining a genre of drama that told the stories of young, white women trafficked in urban centers across the United States.<sup>23</sup>

One reason Brooks’ texts are cited so often is that scholars in this subject find Chicago to be a particularly rich source of vice and anti-vice activity compared to other major US cities. The anti-vice activism in Chicago was particularly strong and known of nationwide, especially in the decades following the Columbian Exposition of 1893.<sup>24</sup> The “Wicked City,” (the Levee) was almost as much of a spectacle to visitors as the ticketed White City of the exposition.<sup>25</sup> In 1894, English journalist W.T. Stead published *If Christ Came to Chicago*, a novel that imagined Christ walking through Chicago’s red light districts, while also detailing the geography of the Levee. Most editions of the book contained maps.<sup>26</sup> The book was criticised by anti-vice activists for drawing attention to the Levee and essentially handing the public a tour guide to navigate the Levee and partake in its offerings.<sup>27</sup>

One prominent text that utilizes Brooks’ publication as fact is *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930* (1988) by Joanne J. Meyerowitz. *Women Adrift* is a representative example of the secondary works that cite Brooks’ publications with no indication

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<sup>22</sup> Virginia Brooks, *My Battles with Vice* (New York: Macaulay Co., 1915)

<sup>23</sup> Washburn, *Come into My Parlor: A Biography of the Aristocratic Everleigh Sisters of Chicago*, 226

<sup>24</sup> W.T. Stead, *If Christ Came to Chicago! A Plea for the Union of All Who Love in the Service of All Who Suffer* (London: Review of Reviews, 1894)

<sup>25</sup> Reckless, *The Natural History of Vice Areas in Chicago*, 44

<sup>26</sup> Stead, *If Christ Came to Chicago! A Plea for the Union of All Who Love in the Service of All Who Suffer*, i

<sup>27</sup> Austyn Granville, *If the Devil Came to Chicago: A Plea for the Misrepresented By One Who Knows What It Is to Be Misrepresented Himself* (Chicago: The Bow-Knot Pub. Co., 1894), 3

that they know the true authorship of the works. Meyerowitz cites Brooks in a chapter about supplementing low wages by dating men in order to get as many gifts and as much money off them as possible.<sup>28</sup> This topic is a cornerstone of *My Battles with Vice*, which was unique among contemporary fear-mongering books on sex trafficking because of its economic thesis that low wages were the primary driver of young girls into sex work, and not a moral or religious failing.

A prominent text that cites Brooks but does not deal with her work directly is *Sin in the Second City: Madams, Ministers, Playboys, and the Battles for America's Soul* (2007) by Karen Abbott. This text focuses exclusively on Chicago's Levee and lacks the analysis of a traditional academic text. Instead, it is structured much like the hysteria inducing pamphlets on prostitution from the era it covers, every chapter an episode of sin unto itself. It tells the story of a girl lured into a fake marriage at her clerkship at ribbon counter in a department store, and how she was rescued. She is saved because she managed to throw a piece of paper out of the window of her brothel that said, "I am a white slave."<sup>29</sup> It uses historical characters and events, but it dramatizes each episode with little citation. Many of the plot points in the stories could have been lifted from events in *My Battles with Vice*, although they follow archetypes of the white slavery genre so closely that it is likely just coincidence.

A source that helped to define the "white slave trade" is Cordasco and Pitkins', *White Slave Trade and the Immigrants: A Chapter in American Social History* (1981). The text analyzes sex trafficking statistics from many US states while identifying various sex trafficking rings. They approximate that half of all "white slaves" were foreign born, if not immigrants

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<sup>28</sup> Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 103

<sup>29</sup> Karen Abbott, *Sin in the Second City: Madams, Ministers, Playboys, and the Battle for America's Soul* (New York: Random House, 2007), 122

trafficked from overseas, mostly from European rings.<sup>30</sup> This cycle of sex trafficking operation picked up around the 1870s and was consistent in its activity and growth through the “white slavery” hysteria of the first two decades of the twentieth century.<sup>31</sup> It is not surprising that these immigrant women were given the label of “white slavery” despite not fitting into the popular “white slavery” narrative; they were mostly white, and the trafficking operations they came from contributed to a significant percentage of the prostitutes that dominated cities’ red light districts. Primary source texts examined estimate that there were anywhere from 5,000 to 20,000 prostitutes in Chicago at the height of the Levee, but Cordasco and Pitkins estimate that the number was really somewhere around 10,000.<sup>32</sup> They also claim that many of these prostitutes may have just been passing through Chicago to other destinations in the West as part of foreign sex trafficking rings.<sup>33</sup> The Mann Act of 1910 was passed in Federal courts in an attempt to prevent such trafficking by making inter-state transportation of women for the purposes of prostitution a felony.<sup>34</sup> It is also difficult to be confident in that number because Cordasco and Pitkins note that mortality rates for prostitutes were likely both under and over exaggerated in the primary source texts they examined.<sup>35</sup>

At the turn of the twentieth century, Chicago was in a period of rapid industrialization and women were entering the workforce, and at younger ages. A book that significantly shaped my understanding of cultural perspectives of gender, labor, and prostitution was *No Constitutional Right to be Ladies* (1998) by Linda Kerber. In it, Kerber traces the understanding

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<sup>30</sup> Francesco Cordasco, Thomas M. Pitkin, and United States Immigrant Commission, *The White Slave Trade and the Immigrants: A Chapter in American Social History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 8

<sup>31</sup> Cordasco and Pitkin, *The White Slave Trade and the Immigrants: A Chapter in American Social History*, 9

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 18

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Mark Thomas Connelly, *The Response to Prostitution in the Progressive Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 149

<sup>35</sup> Reckless, *The Natural History of Vice Areas in Chicago*, 44

of women's citizenship in the United States from the revolution to the turn of the twenty-first century. Kerber attributes the limits of women's citizenship and rights (or lack thereof) that came with citizenship through the course of American history to gendered perspectives of labor that transcend the Constitution and the establishment of the United States. The claim that is most crucial to my analysis of Brooks' beliefs and the beliefs conveyed in *My Battles with Vice* is the idea that, in the wake of the industrial revolution, social commentators criticized women's waged labor with language that implied or explicitly referenced prostitution. Any work outside of the home, even absent of sex work, was considered prostitution in the sense that the woman was taking away labor from the home and selling it externally out of the context of her family unit.<sup>36</sup> A woman worker would be producing labor physically outside the home, and consequently she would also be failing to maintain the home the way she once did, to the disbenefit of her husband and children. The legacy of this cultural attitude towards working women is seen in contemporary and later labor and wage policy (such as the New Deal) that were based on the rationale that a man should be able to provide for his whole family with solely his income.<sup>37</sup> Kerber's text gives great context to the culturally influenced attitudes towards prostitution and women's labor at large from a legal standpoint, which deviates in reasoning from the many primary sources that tackle sex work from a religious standpoint.

*Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn of the Century* New York (1986) by Kathy Peiss discusses the options young, women, waged laborers had to pay for entertainment with their independently earned wages in New York within my same

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<sup>36</sup> Kerber, Linda K. *No Constitutional Right to Be Ladies: Women and the Obligations of Citizenship*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1998. 66, 72

<sup>37</sup> Kerber, Linda K. *No Constitutional Right to Be Ladies: Women and the Obligations of Citizenship*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1998. 72-3

periodization. She discusses nickelodeons, fashion and ready-made clothing, and dance halls.<sup>38</sup> While Chicago focused texts tend to emphasize these dance halls as potential locations for sex work, Peiss discusses young women's social relationship in connection to cheap entertainment offerings.<sup>39</sup> Some offerings, like trendy clothes and the theater, required extra money which some would acquire through sex work. Chicago anti-vice activists, such as Jane Addams of Hull House, saw these as overly tempting and representative of a materialist moment that was corrupting young people, and leading them to prostitution.

The central text for understanding how to approach the topic of turn of the twentieth century prostitution is Christina Stansell's *City of Women* (1986). Stansell's descriptions of sex trafficking in New York from 1789-1860, which resemble later accounts of "white slavery," and the transactional nature of companionship and sex work in halfway houses and clubs in New York City helped to identify the same in Chicago a few decades later. Stansell's contemporaneous description of New York have guided the search for sources and how to interpret them. I found many pamphlets and stories about the white slave trade written from a novelistic, exaggerated point of view by religious social workers. Reading these accounts against the grain of Stansell's work and my previous research about Chicago was helpful because Stansell's work provided key terms to guide research, such as 'dance halls'.<sup>40</sup> Stansell provides objective accounts of Antebellum "white slavery," which provides a good model for doing the same with Chicago-specific issues in which "white slavery" could occur within city limits with

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<sup>38</sup> Peiss, Kathy Lee. *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-century New York*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986. 103

<sup>39</sup> Peiss, Kathy Lee. *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-century New York*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986. 11-33

<sup>40</sup> Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York: Knopf : Distributed by Random House, 1986), 187

women plucked from their place of traditional employment rather than being led away from their hometowns to the city.<sup>41</sup>

The results of the 1913 Illinois Vice Commission, published in 1915, concluded that low wages were the number one factor driving women to sex work in Chicago.<sup>42</sup> This was a departure from the typical talking points of the anti-vice activists. They wrote books with urgent, often voyeuristic language such as, “God’s Sake, Do Something!” as seen on the cover of *Fighting the Traffic in Young Girls* (1910) by Ernest A. Bell.<sup>43</sup> Or, “Startling Revelations, Graphically Told.” Others, like *Miracles in the Slums* (1905) by Seth Cook Rees, featured allegories with heavy religious undertones, rather than real stories of sex workers.<sup>44</sup> All morals and proposals for solutions to the vice problems in these books revolved around sin: girls who fell into prostitution did so because of a moral failing and therefore a moral education was necessary. Those who wanted to leave a life of prostitution could only be properly rescued by church missions and doctors, with the unspoken assumption that the church would bring them back to their families to be a part of a traditional familial economic unit, and no longer strive to make enough money just to support themselves.

So, when published in 1913, *My Battles with Vice* stood out from the others. Each chapter focused on a different, low-skilled job available to most English speaking, white women. While maintaining the urgent tone and melodramatic dialogue of the “white slavery” genre, each chapter methodologically broke down each job’s (department store clerk, mail order room clerk,

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<sup>41</sup> Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860*, 171;189

<sup>42</sup> Illinois. General Assembly. Senate. Vice Committee, and Barratt O’Hara. *Report of the Senate Vice Committee: Created Under the Authority of the Senate of the Forty-ninth General Assembly As a Continuation of the Committee Under of the Authority of the Senate of the Forty-eighth General Assembly, State of Illinois*. [Chicago, 1916.], 25

<sup>43</sup> Ernest A. Bell, *Fighting the Traffic in Young Girls, Or, War On the White Slave Trade* (Chicago?: L.H. Walter, 1910)

<sup>44</sup> Seth Cook Rees, *Miracles in the Slums: Or, Thrilling Stories of Those Rescued From the Cesspools of Iniquity, and Touching Incidents in the Lives of the Unfortunate* (Chicago: S.C. Rees, 1905)

factory worker, secretary, waitress) particular pitfalls into vice, and the economic and social vulnerabilities faced by the women who held them. Each story, allegorical or not, essayed towards the findings of the Illinois Vice Commission, which were yet to be published: the lack of opportunity for women to support themselves financially necessitated higher wages, and possibly public sex education. Brooks' ghost writer, Arthur James Pegler, who had been covering the vice beat for a daily newspaper, the *Chicago American*, held these beliefs.<sup>45</sup> But Brooks did not. How did she end up publishing a book that argued for this comparatively progressive perspective of women's labor?

#### Before My Battles with Vice: Two Years of Activism in West Hammond



Figure 1. Virginia Brooks, taken prior to 1910. "Women of Calumet City." Calumet City Historical Society and Museum. Accessed April 5, 2019. <https://www.calumetcityhistoricalsociety.org/women-of-calumet-city.html>.

Brooks was twenty-four years old in 1910 when she moved to West Hammond, IL with her mother.<sup>46</sup> Before that, she lived with her parents, Oliver and Flora Brooks, in various

<sup>45</sup> Pegler, Arthur James, "Autobiography," James Westbrook Pegler Papers, 1845-1969, [Box 51], Herbert Hoover Presidential Library.

<sup>46</sup> "1910 United States Federal Census - AncestryLibrary.Com." Accessed April 3, 2019. Year: 1910; Census Place: *Chicago Ward 6, Cook, Illinois*; Roll: T624\_245; Page: 8B; Enumeration District: 0331; FHL microfilm: 1374258

boarding houses in Chicago.<sup>47</sup> The son of an Ohio baker, Oliver Brooks married Flora after he returned from fighting in the Civil War.<sup>48</sup> They moved to Chicago to enter the real estate business. When Brooks was born in 1886, her father was starting to make progress in his career. Her father also managed property syndicates outside of Chicago. At the time of her father's death in 1901, Brooks was a teenager and attended school on the South Side.<sup>49</sup> But before and after his death, the family had requested funds from his veterans' pension, suggesting that their financial position may have been precarious, or, at the very least, they needed assistance covering the treatment of his end of life illnesses.<sup>50</sup>

Therefore, by 1910, the move to West Hammond was possibly out of necessity. Mr. Brooks had had property holdings there because he had been one of the original property developers of the village. In September of 1890, Mr. Brooks established a syndicate of investors to purchase 320 acres of land south of Chicago, in West Hammond, IL.<sup>51</sup> It was on the Illinois side of the Illinois-Indiana border, but it was effectively a suburb of Hammond, Indiana. The two towns shared State Line Road and were about one mile south of the G.H. Hammond Slaughterhouse, where a large percentage of West Hammond residents were employed.<sup>52</sup>

West Hammond was located about ten miles south of Chicago's southern city limits and had undergone rapid expansion in the decade between Brooks' father's death and when she

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<sup>47</sup> "1900 United States Federal Census - AncestryLibrary.Com." Accessed April 3, 2019. Year: 1900; Census Place: *Chicago Ward 32, Cook, Illinois*; Page: 1; Enumeration District: 1021; FHL microfilm: 1240286

<sup>48</sup> "Frank S Washburn - Facts." Accessed April 5, 2019. [https://www-ancestrylibrary-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/family-tree/person/tree/109372117/person/430073000464/facts?ssrc=&ml\\_rpos=3](https://www-ancestrylibrary-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/family-tree/person/tree/109372117/person/430073000464/facts?ssrc=&ml_rpos=3).

<sup>49</sup> "1900 United States Federal Census - AncestryLibrary.Com." Accessed April 3, 2019. Year: 1900; Census Place: *Chicago Ward 32, Cook, Illinois*; Page: 1; Enumeration District: 1021; FHL microfilm: 1240286

<sup>50</sup> "Oliver H Brooks - Facts." Accessed April 5, 2019. <https://www-ancestrylibrary-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/family-tree/person/tree/3397557/person/-1189337562/facts>.

<sup>51</sup> Bigott, *From Cottage to Bungalow*, 151

<sup>52</sup> Bigott, *From Cottage to Bungalow*, 172

moved there. The population had grown 68%, from around 3,000 in 1900 to almost 5,000 in 1910.<sup>53</sup> However, the area was almost exclusively residential, save the main street at the heart of the development, where stores and saloons operated. The property Brooks and her mother moved into was just one block south of the main street, on 155th street, in a simple wood-frame, bungalow style single family home that looked just like all the other buildings on the block.<sup>54</sup>

When Brooks moved in, West Hammond was in the midst of a campaign to change the status of the village to that of a city.<sup>55</sup> Mr. Brooks had owned approximately 112 lots of property in West Hammond, and when Brooks arrived she learned that the local government had levied \$20,000 in special assessments against those properties.<sup>56</sup> In the Hammond-West Hammond town directory, Brooks' mother is listed as the head of household, but Brooks and her mother would have each inherited half of her father's properties.<sup>57</sup>

According to Bigott, Brooks decided to campaign against incorporating into a city as an act of rebellion, in order to avoid further fees and taxes on her late father's properties. She went door to door in her neighborhood with her campaign. The neighborhood was filled with detached bungalows and workers' cottages, all with Polish residents. At the beginning, the village residents were very responsive to Brooks' canvassing. Perhaps her father was a well respected figure in the town; or, her campaign had struck a nerve with citizens who feared higher taxes. One night, Brooks held a town hall that hundreds of men attended in a community center. The

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<sup>53</sup> Bigott, *From Cottage to Bungalow*, 158

<sup>54</sup> "Virginia Brooks - Facts." Accessed April 5, 2019. <https://www-ancestrylibrary-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/family-tree/person/tree/3397557/person/2068314691/facts>.

<sup>55</sup> Bigott, *From Cottage to Bungalow*, 169

<sup>56</sup> Bigott, *From Cottage to Bungalow*, 171; 169

<sup>57</sup> Kerber, *No Constitutional Right to be Ladies*, 123

only woman in the room, Brooks stood up on a table, urging the men to vote “no” to turning West Hammond into a city.<sup>58</sup>

Brooks’ campaign had little success: it did not prevent the village from becoming a city, and she did not turn over any positions in the local government.<sup>59</sup> But Brooks’ activism had just started. Her efforts in West Hammond were covered in the Chicago papers and she became an overnight sensation. Bigott claims that she began to receive funding from Chicago newspapers to continue doing news-worthy acts of activism, but he inaccurately cites Washburn; Washburn made no such claim in his book.<sup>60</sup> Arthur James Pegler, the journalist who ghost wrote *My Battles with Vice*, claims that it was around this time that Brooks started to receive financial backing for campaigns from Mrs. Louise de Koven Bowen.<sup>61</sup> With Bowen’s support, Brooks ran for president of the school board and won.<sup>62</sup> Pegler says that Brooks was the protege of many wealthy, progressive Chicago women like Bowen, so Brooks’ beliefs on the campaign trail were in line with the typical Chicagoan anti-vice tradition shared by Bowen and others. It is possible that Brooks started to form these protogerial relationships before moving to West Hammond, when she grew up and lived in the neighborhood of Hyde Park on the South Side. Within weeks Brooks had gained national attention as well through profiles in papers and journals such as the *Women’s Home Companion*. One paper characterized Brooks as the Jane Addams of West Hammond and claimed that she learned Polish to teach the immigrant population their voting rights and planned to open a settlement house a la Addams.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Bigott, *From Cottage to Bungalow*, 170

<sup>59</sup> Bigott, *From Cottage to Bungalow*, 171

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Pegler, Arthur James, "Autobiography," James Westbrook Pegler Papers, 1845-1969, [Box 51, Folder 4], Herbert Hoover Presidential Library.

<sup>62</sup> "Virginia Brooks: 20th century Joan of Arc". *Chautauqua Brochure*. 1913. Retrieved November 14, 2016 – via Special Collections Dept. at The University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa Digital Library.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

Jane Addams, founder of Hull House, a successful settlement house in Chicago, happened to be a very close and personal friend of Bowen, who also founded Hull House and took over Hull House operations when Jane Addams died. They shared nearly identical political beliefs, and, if Bowen was funding Brooks' campaigns, we can consider the likelihood that Brooks' values were very close to theirs as well. In 1912, Addams started to be publically vocal about her views on prostitution with the publication of her book, *A New Consciousness and an Ancient Evil* (1912). She was very well respected in Protestant circles in Chicago, and many Protestant ministers trained with her and worked at Hull House.<sup>64</sup> Addams was a Protestant, but her views in her book (and Bowen's views) on prostitution diverged from the pre-1910 anti-vice crusaders.

Previous to 1910, the anti-vice community relied exclusively on rhetoric that victimized sex workers: they had fallen into prostitution because the world was morally corrupt and failing its daughters; in their eyes, no girl "chose" to be a sex worker.<sup>65</sup> The lack of religious education and breaking up of the traditional family unit due to the industrial revolution was to blame.<sup>66</sup> Addams and Bowen diverged from this point of view because, through their observations in their work and research, they anticipated the results of the 1913 Illinois Vice Commission, which would show that, while "white slavery" existed, the majority of sex workers in Chicago chose to enter sex work to supplement their wages.<sup>67</sup> Knowing this, Addams and Bowen adjusted the Protestant rhetoric to compensate for these observations: they still victimized sex workers, but they were a victim of capitalism and, as a result, materialism that both pushed young girls out of a patriarchal economic unit and tempted girls to make extra money through sex work in order to

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<sup>64</sup> Clifford Barnes Papers Box 1 Folder 1, 74:62 Unpublished autobiography pages 18-21

<sup>65</sup> Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 137

<sup>66</sup> Hamington 139

<sup>67</sup> Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918*, 137

pay for things like entertainment (theater, nickelodeons) and trendy, ready-made clothing.<sup>68</sup> In *A New Conscience and Ancient Evil*, Addams called for the public to not “judge these girls too harshly,” but goes on to say that “they are not lost after one weak moment.... Save girls from overwhelming temptation,” the temptation being material goods.<sup>69</sup> Addams saw these girls as a group that needed to be controlled and given guidance.<sup>70</sup> Addams also believed that the services she provided at Hull House (food, clothes, sometimes a roof over their heads) were a substitute for a stable family economic unit, not a way to compensate for unjustly low wages.<sup>71</sup>

On the national stage, Bowen supported policies to reign in what they perceived to be delinquency among young girls, another factor they believed contributed to the high rates of prostitution. In a report by The Juvenile Protective Association of Chicago in 1916 authored by Bowen entitled, *The Road to Destruction Made Easy in Chicago*, Bowen observed 1,156 theaters and entertainment venues and issued 216 violations, determined on the judgement that the shows belonged on a binary of “good” versus “bad,” referring to the morality displayed in the content of the shows.<sup>72</sup> Bowen and Addams felt that vulnerable girls such as immigrants and those living on their own were being negatively influenced by a certain class of entertainment, and so they fought for laws that would censor media that the general public had access to. They saw the law as an appropriate avenue through which to control, or, parent, so to speak, children who may not have had individual parental guidance. Again, their work was meant to substitute parental guidance and care, with the hope that parental guidance would one day return if the evil of materialism went away and the familial economic unit would go back to its patriarchal normal.

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<sup>68</sup> Hamington 137; 139

<sup>69</sup> Addams, *A New Conscience and an Ancient Evil*, 65-6

<sup>70</sup> Hamington 127

<sup>71</sup> Hamington 127

<sup>72</sup> Bowen, Louise de Koven, and Juvenile Protective Association of Chicago. *The Road to Destruction Made Easy in Chicago*, 5

Whether or not the claims that Brooks meant to open a settlement home were accurate, the fact that Bowen began to fund Brooks' campaigns showed that Brooks was fairly close ideologically to Bowen and Addams. Perhaps Brooks' views were even influenced by Bowen's financial support. However, other claims in that article proved to be inaccurate, such as the assumption that the majority of the Polish population did not speak English, and that they did not know how to participate in American democracy. In late 1890, when Mr. Brooks and his syndicate began to sell properties in the area, they decided to target their development to Polish immigrants. This strategy was motivated by the idea that the Polish community valued "residential separation from others."<sup>73</sup> The syndicate believed that maintaining this de facto segregation was the key to success in West Hammond. The Polish community did come, and in strong numbers. It was then the Polish community that led the charge to incorporate West Hammond into the Village of West Hammond in 1893.<sup>74</sup> In downtown West Hammond, saloons were flourishing and drawing customers from all over the area, especially Hammond, Indiana. Hammond police did not hold jurisdiction over the state border and the area was getting out of control with vice and outsiders. Incorporation enabled a governing body to tax these saloons and subject them to a local police presence.<sup>75</sup> By 1910, Polish residents held all spots on the village board of trustees.<sup>76</sup>

One of Brooks' more extreme acts of reported activism was when she organized a group of women to sit with her on a pile of bricks to protest paying for the paving of a road. Brooks claimed that the company contracted to do the road work by the local government, using taxpayer money, was affiliated with corrupt officials. According to an article entitled, "Virginia

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<sup>73</sup> Bigott, *From Cottage to Bungalow*, 163

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Bigott, *From Cottage to Bungalow*, 164

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.; 163

Brooks: 20th Century Joan of Arc,” this act of civil disobedience turned violent when policemen attempted to physically remove her.<sup>77</sup> She slapped one officer and was arrested and thrown in jail. In the papers the next week she was quoted saying, “Nihilists in Russia are treated with as much consideration as I was. The policeman grabbed me by the throat, struck me on the side and threw me back and forth in the street on the way to the jail. He dragged me part of the way by the wrist.”<sup>78</sup>

Bigott interpreted this quote, not from a local paper but from a national profile of Brooks, as fact. It would be wiser to treat quotes like this with caution because this the point of time in her activism at which press agents took control of Brooks’ story. This quote makes Brooks sound like a radical, revolutionary figure. But, with the information Bigott has with regards to her father’s property holdings, the dramatic tone of this quote helped Bigott frame Brooks more as an attention seeker trying to get out of paying her property taxes than a true activist. In his concluding remarks on Brooks, Bigott states, “Her brief moments of fame are remembered for their comic quality, a modest contribution to the popular culture of the Progressive era. Despite her lambasting of local officials and business owners and her colorful demonstrations, Brooks was never actually responsible for reforms in West Hammond. She was the product of an implausible, fanciful literature, a reform fiction that employed stereotypes of immigrants as foils to the heroism of an educated, Protestant middle class...”<sup>79</sup> How can we know that this quote was not fabricated, the same way her publicity tour around *Little Lost Sister* later was?

By 1912, Brooks’ neighbors in West Hammond started to tire of her campaigns. Many began to think that she was exaggerating the amount of political corruption in the city, after

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<sup>77</sup> "Virginia Brooks: 20th century Joan of Arc". *Chautauqua Brochure*. 1913. Retrieved November 14, 2016 – via Special Collections Dept. at The University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa Digital Library.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Bigott, *From Cottage to Bungalow*, 177

reading the inaccurate news articles she was featured in. They also didn't like that she kept putting a spotlight on its vice and poverty. When Brooks arrived in Hammond, it was already known for its main street prostitutes. The *Times* reported that in the spring of 1910, you could see "scantly clad prostitutes display[ing] themselves from windows, smoking cigarettes and calling to passersby."<sup>80</sup>

Brooks also used her national platform to highlight West Hammond's poverty. She told an audience in Indianapolis, "The Polish people in West Hammond were earning on average about \$10 a week. Most of them were supporting five or six children, and paying out their money on every conceivable form of taxation. They started in living on potato soup. They were soon forced to come down to bread and coffee, and before the epidemic of graft was over, hundreds of children went to Hammond daily where they stole three meals a day out of garbage cans."<sup>81</sup>

Brooks escalated her anti-vice activism in 1912 when she published the names of the men who owned the most notorious saloons in the village. She then addressed the Hammond Women's Club and asked members to expel "any woman whose husband profited from gambling and prostitution."<sup>82</sup> It is impossible to know Brooks' motivations at this point. Was she using her political clout to fight for issues that she cared about? Or was this adoption of anti-vice rhetoric a result of influences from her benefactors in Chicago, using her as a mouthpiece to draw attention to their views?

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<sup>80</sup> "There is No Lid in West Hammond," *Lake County Times*, August 30, 1911.

<sup>81</sup> "Miss Virginia Brooks of West Hammond Takes Lead at Indiana Convention," *Lake County News*, April 11, 1912

<sup>82</sup> *Lake County Times*: "Women Attack Miss Brooks," January 17, 1913; "Owners to be Posted on Streets," November 15, 1911.

But by this time Brooks was already planning to leave West Hammond for Chicago. Supposedly she was in contact with editors at *The Chicago American* about a series of investigative pieces on Chicago's Levee district.<sup>83</sup>

When Brooks moved back to Chicago she was joining a strong, and large anti-vice community made up of Protestant ministers and social workers. While inflammatory pamphlets about white slavery, featuring allegorical tales of women who had been victims and eventually found their way home with the help of Chicago citizens of faith, were numerous and circulated well, there were many other mediums through which the anti-vice community spread their messages. They published sociological surveys, like Bowen; they held free events and masses in central locations, such as Chicago's Orchestra Hall<sup>84</sup>; they also published several editorials and investigative articles in dailies such as the anti-vice-leaning *Inter-Ocean* newspaper.

In 1910, the year Brooks made national headlines for her work in West Hammond, Chicago newspapers were closely following the Illinois Vice Commission and the resulting "closure" of the Levee district. Everyday, there was another article detailing the corruption of policemen, or describing a saloon owner arrested for running a brothel out of a backroom. Eventually, most of the brothels and saloons were shut down and the owners apprehended, for a short while, before new saloons popped up to replace them, slightly more discrete in appearance.

In the years leading up to 1910, the more extreme of the anti-vice crusaders committed a number of bombings and arson in bars, clubs, and saloons.<sup>85</sup> The anti-vice crusaders

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<sup>83</sup> Bigott, *From Cottage to Bungalow*, 171

<sup>84</sup> Clifford Barnes Papers Box 1 Folder 1, 74:62 Unpublished autobiography, 18-21

<sup>85</sup> Perhaps inspired by Carrie Nation, a nationally-known temperance activist who claimed to have received instructions from God to go on a rampage in the throughout midwestern towns starting in 1900. She destroyed bars and saloons with her hatchet while singing hymns and was arrested over 30 times. Carry Amelia Nation, *The Use and Need of the Life of Carry A. Nation*. Rev. ed. Twenty-five thousand. (Topeka: F.M. Steves & Sons, 1905)

momentarily appeared to be effective in 1910 when they first tried to close down the Levee. A major win for this project were the arrests of Aldermen “Bathhouse” John Coughlin and Michael “Hinky Dink” Kenna of the first ward, the district containing the Levee. From 1896 to 1908, they hosted the annual First Ward Ball, a fundraiser for their political campaigns.<sup>86</sup> It became notorious for the citizens of the first ward that attended: prostitutes, saloon owners, bartenders, and gamblers, mixed with the policemen they interacted with daily (and often paid bribes to) while wearing masks (over time it became a masquerade).<sup>87</sup>

Areas of vice began to sprout up in Chicago in the eighteen-fifties when the city transitioned from a large Midwestern trading post to a fast-growing town full of land speculators. The sudden influx of capital and the population’s gender inequality gave rise to small areas of vice such as “The Sands,” contained on the north bank of the Chicago River and the beaches of Lake Michigan.<sup>88</sup> After the Chicago Fire of 1871, these fleeting areas of vice vanished, but were rebuilt with the rest of the city. Post fire, Chicago’s population passed the million mark, second only to New York and followed by Philadelphia.<sup>89</sup> Chicago rebuilt while its economy of prostitution was forming and being defined, which allowed areas of vice to define themselves within the geography of the newly designed city.<sup>90</sup>

The state of Illinois set up a Vice Commission in 1913 to study the rampant prostitution in Chicago. Witnesses at the hearings included prostitutes, as well as employers of women. One worker for Sears, Roebuck, and Company recalled how the job environment often made employees feel that their jobs were unstable as well. The chairman asked, “Would you blame a

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<sup>86</sup> Abbott, *Sin in the Second City: Madams, Ministers, Playboys, and the Battle for America's Soul*, 161-74

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Reckless, *The Natural History of Vice Areas in Chicago*, 15

<sup>89</sup> Reckless, *The Natural History of Vice Areas in Chicago*, 39-40

<sup>90</sup> Reckless, *The Natural History of Vice Areas in Chicago*, 31

girl who was making \$5.00 to \$7.00 a week and was being scolded, would you blame the girl if she left?,” and the girl replied, “No.”<sup>91</sup> Also, immigrant women were often underpaid. Two immigrant women working at Rosenwald & Weil’s factory at Jefferson and Twelfth Place as coat cleaners were paid less than four dollars a week for full time work.<sup>92</sup>

Girls who lived on their own and supported themselves lived in boarding houses, often maintained by older women.<sup>93</sup> Many boarding houses were respectable, but some girls could not afford the rent on their salaries alone and turned to houses of assignation. In some instances, their landladies pimped them right out of their boarding houses if they owed rent.<sup>94</sup> Men associated with brothels often persistently courted women at their places of legitimate work. These men would simply ask a starving a working girl out for lunch on his dime, or sometimes keep up the ruse of actual romantic interest in the girl, offer marriage, and then drop her off at a brothel where she would be stripped of street clothes and become essentially imprisoned.<sup>95</sup>

The testimony in the vice commission tended to stick to the questioning of dates, places, and people responsible for the predicament of white slavery upon the testifier. The leading questions employed by the chairman and senators assumed the innocence of the victims and placed blame on low wages and the men who employed them, such as Julius Rosenwald of Sears, Roebuck, and Company. However, some of the answers they received did not fit so neatly into this narrative. Mrs. Alice Phillips Aldrich, a Chicago reformer who worked with prostitutes

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<sup>91</sup> Illinois. General Assembly. Senate. Vice Committee, and Barratt O'Hara. *Report of the Senate Vice Committee: Created Under the Authority of the Senate of the Forty-ninth General Assembly As a Continuation of the Committee Under the Authority of the Senate of the Forty-eighth General Assembly, State of Illinois*, 189-90

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 386

<sup>93</sup> Reitman, *The Second Oldest Profession: A Study of the Prostitute's "Business Manager"*, 229; Brooks, *My Battles with Vice*, 68-69

<sup>94</sup> Reitman, *The Second Oldest Profession: A Study of the Prostitute's "Business Manager"*, 229-30

<sup>95</sup> Abbott, *Sin in the Second City: Madams, Ministers, Playboys, and the Battle for America's Soul*, 126

for twenty-three years was asked by Senator Juul what she thought the chief root of evil was in the case of prostitution. She responded,

I think one of the causes of the evil is young girls who want to wear diamonds and wear fine clothes from the standpoint of dress, and more than she has to do it with. The poor working girl wants to dress the same as the millionaire's daughter, and wants fine clothes; and so if a man comes up to her and says, as I have heard them say in stores, "How much are you getting for a week here?" The man will talk to her and she will stand and listen to him if she liked his address; if she does not she will say, "That is none of your business," and shut him off. I have heard them talk to good looking girls, and tell them .... persistent, keep coming back and then girls drink and don't know how to get out.<sup>96</sup>  
(Illinois. General Assembly. Senate. Vice Committee, 1916)

This testimony reflects the fears of materialism that Addams and Bowen expressed in publications within the same year of the vice commission. Addams, Bowen, and Mrs. Aldrich alike observed young girls who were fixated on fashion and felt the need to make more money in order to buy clothes to keep up with the trends of what the literature at the time called the, "newly rich."<sup>97</sup> This term referred to an emerging middle class that had self-made, not general wealth.<sup>98</sup> Writer Samuel Paynter Wilson, author of *Chicago and Its Cess-Pools of Infamy* (1915) described this new class as "known by their coarse appearances, and still coarser manners, their loud style and ostentatious display of wealth."<sup>99</sup> Mrs. Aldrich would likely agree that the newly rich were a bad influence on young girls for their fashion alone. Wilson also implies that women of the "newly rich" class became consumers who were so greedy that they would cheat on their husbands and prostitute themselves for more shopping money, despite living comfortably already. Wilson writes, "She sells her honor for filthy lucre; she finds a love with a free purse, and willing to pay for the favors."<sup>100</sup> Criticisms like the one above express a fear not only in

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<sup>96</sup> Illinois. General Assembly. Senate. Vice Committee, and Barratt O'Hara. *Report of the Senate Vice Committee: Created Under the Authority of the Senate of the Forty-ninth General Assembly As a Continuation of the Committee Under the Authority of the Senate of the Forty-eighth General Assembly, State of Illinois*, 144

<sup>97</sup> Wilson, Samuel Paynter. *Chicago and Its Cess-pools of Infamy*. [5th ed.]. Chicago, 1910. 25

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.; 31

women using their sexuality in a transactional nature, but also social mobility in the wake of the industrial revolution.

When the Illinois Senators pressed Julius Rosenwald, president of Sears, Roebuck, and Company and a member of the Chicago Committee of Fifteen<sup>101</sup>, on the morality of the matter as related to wages, he said that he did not believe his business had any responsibility for preventing the resort to prostitution for his workers. “I say the question of wages isn’t a moral question. It ought to be treated on an entirely different basis. I wouldn’t combine the question of prostitution with wages. I say in my opinion there is no connection between the two.”<sup>102</sup>

Before the articles came out, her last large scale activist demonstration happened in September of 1912, for which she led a parade of 5,000 men, women, and children through the Levee district as a band played “Onward Christian Soldiers.”<sup>103</sup>

When Brooks moved back to Chicago in 1913 she was invited to speak at Orchestra Hall, home of the Chicago Sunday Evening Club, which the Chicago Committee of Fifteen (anti-vice group) organized a church program everyone Sunday open to all with the purpose of saving those in the Levee just a few blocks away from a life of sin.<sup>104</sup> Brooks was back home and ready launch herself into Chicago vice and politics.

### *My Battles with Vice*

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<sup>101</sup> Another anti-vice commission organized and comprised of private citizens. Barnes

<sup>102</sup> Illinois. General Assembly. Senate. Vice Committee, and Barratt O’Hara. *Report of the Senate Vice Committee: Created Under the Authority of the Senate of the Forty-ninth General Assembly As a Continuation of the Committee Under of the Authority of the Senate of the Forty-eighth General Assembly, State of Illinois*. [Chicago, 1916.], 181

<sup>103</sup> Bigott, *From Cottage to Bungalow*, 177

<sup>104</sup> Clifford Barnes Papers Box 1 Folder 1, 74:62 Unpublished autobiography, 18-21

Charles Washburn's claim that Brooks did not write either *My Battles with Vice* or *Little Lost Sister* conveniently characterized her as dishonest, which Bigott used to support his claim that Brooks' activism was not purely altruistic.<sup>105</sup> While Bigott found other evidence in the *Lake County News* archive to support his own view of Brooks, he did not verify Washburn's claim that *My Battles with Vice* and the first adaption of *Little Lost Sister* were written by Arthur James Pegler.<sup>106</sup>

According to Pegler's unpublished autobiography, he ghost wrote the serial that became *My Battles with Vice* at the beginning of 1913.<sup>107</sup> Pegler was earning twenty-five dollars per week at the very fast paced *Chicago American*, which was part of the *Chicago Tribune*, owned by William Randolph Hearst.<sup>108</sup> He arrived in Chicago from a paper in St. Paul, Minnesota where he established himself as a star reporter while he covered everything from mobsters to the coal industry.<sup>109</sup> The opportunity to work for Hearst in Chicago offered more money, but also a faster paced work life. He quickly learned to adjust to Hearst's daily news operation at the *American*, which put out ten editions per day. Glass panels hung from the ceiling above the editors' desks in the newsroom that read phrases inspired by Hearst, one of which Pegler recalled read, "Accuracy, accuracy, and again accuracy."<sup>110</sup>

"Reporters on the *American* gathered the news but seldom wrote it," Pegler remembered.<sup>111</sup> Instead, his job was to generate as much material as possible, which was then

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<sup>105</sup> Washburn, 225; Bigott, *From Cottage to Bungalow*, 169

<sup>106</sup> Washburn, *Come into my Parlor*, 225

<sup>107</sup> Pegler, Arthur James, "Autobiography," James Westbrook Pegler Papers, 1845-1969, [Box 51, Folder 4], Herbert Hoover Presidential Library.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

handed off to rewrite men. “There was one thing anyhow to be said for the *Chicago American*.... Nobody ever had a dull moment.”<sup>112</sup>

Pegler’s typical beat was crime. He followed mobsters and wrote exposes on bootleggers during prohibition, and, although he does not mention it explicitly, it is very likely that he encountered prostitution on this beat as well.<sup>113</sup> On the side, he also had literary aspirations. He published a handful of short stories with a publishing group called the Russell Syndicate, one of which was entitled, “My Wife’s Brass Bed.”<sup>114</sup>

Pegler wrote *My Battles with Vice* as a forty day, serial story for the *Chicago American*. Of the work, he said,

“It was based on the adventures of a young woman reformer named Virginia Brooks, whose investigations in Chicago slums and especially of vice conditions in Hammond, Ind., just over the state border, had won her more than local fame. Miss Brooks was the protege of several wealthy women, notably Mrs. Joseph Bowen, who gave her financial backing.... The serial featuring Miss Brooks proved so popular that we continued to run it long after the period originally planned had elapsed. Circulation was up to 100,000 on the story and our circulation department demanded its continuance.”<sup>115</sup>

Brooks was known for her work in West Hammond, Illinois, not Hammond, Indiana, but aside from that detail, this quote offers a different telling of Brooks’ involvement with the writing process than what Washburn conveyed in *Come into my Parlor*. The situation Pegler describes here sounds much more like a traditional ghostwriting job in which he wrote about events that actually took place in Brooks’ life. This is supported by a review of a Boston production of the dramatized version of the serial, *Little Lost Sister*, which praised a scene for its accuracy in portraying an event in which Brooks made national news for successfully shutting

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

down a particular cafe that was a hotbed for vice. The review read, “The scene of the Old Home Cafe is specially elaborate and said to be an exact copy of the doubtful cafe in Chicago that was closed on the strength of evidence gathered by Miss Virginia Brooks.”<sup>116</sup> However, it is not clear whether the evidence in a piece of the serial shut down the cafe, or if the shutdown happened before the serial was conceptualized.

Charles Washburn later claimed that he conceptualized the serial and that he co-wrote it with Pegler.<sup>117</sup> If he did write the serial with Pegler, he also would have been employed by the *Tribune*. While Pegler never stated that Washburn co-wrote the serial with him, or even had a co-writer at all, Pegler does not deny the existence of a co-writer. Washburn’s occupation is hard to confirm in this period. In the 1910 census, at age twenty, Washburn claimed to be a proprietor at a vaudeville booking agency, and in the 1920 census he claimed to be a manager in the theater industry.<sup>118</sup> However, in a 1917 World War I draft card, he claimed to be a journalist.<sup>119</sup> Also, in an article written in 1939, Washburn claimed that when he returned to Chicago from a Detroit production of *Little Lost Sister* in 1913, he was both returning to his job at a paper to cover the police beat, and to be Brooks’ manager.<sup>120</sup>

Another crucial detail in Pegler’s telling of events that should not be overlooked is that the paper’s circulation department demanded that he write additional chapters of the serial with no notice, on what ended up being a forty day-long series. Pegler must have had to compensate for a sudden need of material that was not in-coming from Brooks with reporting and stories of his own. Also, the fact that he claims the serial was “based on” Brooks’ adventure, leaves room

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<sup>116</sup> “Last Week of ‘Little Lost Sister’ at the Globe,” *Boston Daily Globe* 15 March 1914

<sup>117</sup> Washburn, “The Theaters: Cotton Blossom,” *New York Herald Tribune* 21 Aug 1927

<sup>118</sup> “Charles Shepard Washburne - Facts.” Accessed April 5, 2019. <https://www-ancestrylibrary-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/family-tree/person/tree/3397557/person/6976674024/facts>.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> WASHBURN, CHARLES. “On ‘Little Lost Sister.’” *New York Times*. 1939, sec. Drama, Music, Art.

for the possibility that he embellished events in Brooks' life and could have greatly influenced and shaped the stories he told with his imposed narratives. As a veteran reporter covering crime, he also likely had a trove of his own stories involving sex workers to draw from. *My Battles with Vice*, read similarly in tone to contemporary Protestant allegories. However, it is difficult to identify the fingerprints of Pegler versus Brooks on certain details and narrative decisions.

The overarching plot of *My Battles with Vice* follows the narrator's investigation to track down a Ms. Mary Holden.<sup>121</sup> The young girl moved to Chicago to find work, but her parents contacted the narrator because they had not heard from their daughter in some time and feared the worst. After about 200 pages of twists and turns, the narrator finds Mary and learns her story.

Mary was a clerk at a well-known department store (name withheld) where she was befriended by a young man who would occasionally take her out for lunch or dinner. Wages were low, and she often could not afford to feed herself. This was a common grooming tactic for "pickers," as they were called.<sup>122</sup> After he gained her trust, she became indebted to him and he forced her to marry a man named "Bull" Tevis.<sup>123</sup> Her plight then worsened when a strange man came into her room one night and sexually assaulted her.<sup>124</sup> At the discovery of this, Tevis became enraged and said he could not stay with Mary knowing that this had happened.<sup>125</sup>

"And this was his proposition!" Mary told the narrator. "I was to enter a vile place, and my earnings were to be turned over to him for a certain period, after which, as he suggested, I should be permitted to make money for myself. Then I began to sense the scheme. I accused Tevis of having plotted with the man who attacked me for the purpose of compelling me to enter

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<sup>121</sup> I will refer to the "narrator" here because the voice of the narrator is the ghost writer interpreting Brooks' voice

<sup>122</sup> Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918*,

<sup>123</sup> Brooks, *My Battles with Vice*, 230

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

a sinful life....”<sup>126</sup> The moment Mary entered that room she was not allowed to leave; her possessions and clothing were then taken from her and she was given a set of robes and slippers that would immediately betray her circumstance if she were to step outside the door.

The narrator of *My Battles with Vice* started her investigation working as a waitress at a lunch counter because she wanted to meet other girls who might have known Mary through jobs that an unskilled laborer such as Mary would have likely held. The narrator initially had great difficulty finding any position because she didn’t have letters of reference (for her fake, undercover identity) and, she suspects, because she wasn’t familiar with the street fashions of the time.<sup>127</sup> After many rejections, she asked an acquaintance to help her improve her prospects.

“‘The trouble with you, Kid,’ she confided, ‘is that you ain’t got no style to you. Look at the way you’ve got your hair on.’  
 ‘What’s the matter with it?’ I inquired with deep humility.  
 ‘Matter with it?’ she retorted in disgust. ‘Get some puff and doll yourself up.’  
 On reflection I decided that her advice about the puffs was sound from several points of view.”<sup>128</sup>

Hair puffs were a popular style at the time. See Figure 2 for an instructional panel in the December 1911 issue of the *Women’s Home Companion*.

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Brooks, *My Battles with Vice*, 38

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

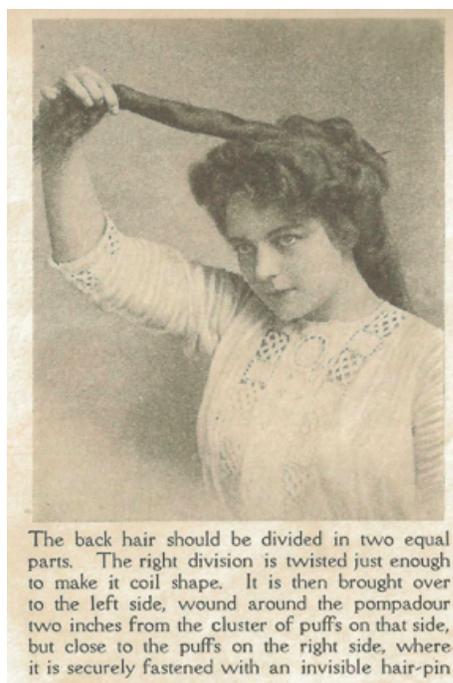


Figure 2. Women's Home Companion, 1911.

The narrator found a waitressing job very quickly after adopting this hairstyle.

While the narrator of *My Battles of Vice* does not have fashionable style, she does have very detailed knowledge of wages and working hours for various jobs, and gives unprecedented attention to them. At the lunch counter, she reports that she made \$4.50 a week plus 50¢ per late night worked.<sup>129</sup> Her lunch counter wages are accurate, according to testimony from the Illinois Vice Commission of 1913, the same year the serial was first published in the *American*. These wages amounted to about half the living wage described by Mr. Mandel of the Mandel Brothers, a large department store on State Street. In his vice commission testimony, Mr. Mandel estimated that girls would need to make at least \$9 a week to support themselves. Mr. Mandel only paid his female workers \$5 a week. “If they didn’t live at home, that would not be enough,”

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<sup>129</sup> Brooks, *My Battles with Vice*, 34

he told the commission.<sup>130</sup> When the narrator took on a job as a department store clerk after she quit the waitressing job, she earned \$6.00 per week.<sup>131</sup> This wage is consistent with testimony from other department store clerks in the vice commission testimony.

The narrator also describes the working culture of the department store. Hours were long, and workers were not allowed to leave the floor for any reason unless given a pass by a floor manager.<sup>132</sup> It was a revolving door; there were new faces everyday. Sometimes girls quit, but often they were fired for very small infractions. The girls in these positions lacked a sense of job security, and their wages barely kept them alive, so attention and food from a picker like “Bull” Tevis, could offer a sense of comfort and inspire hope for a departure from their current circumstances, especially if the picker also leading them on romantically.

The narrator of *My Battles with Vice* illustrated the reasons young women were tempted to take pickers up on their offers of food, against their better judgement, through the story of Nellie.<sup>133</sup> Nellie, a mailroom clerk, had to spend her entire \$5 weekly wage on food and board. She tried to stretch her meal ticket to last two weeks instead of one, and wound up starving herself for days. “Bull” Tevis, the same man Mary Holden had a sham marriage with, offered to take Nellie out for dinner. She would’ve gone, if not for her kindly landlady who discovered the situation and gave her a free meal out of pity.<sup>134</sup>

Nellie, and girls like her, had other required expenses beyond room and board. Just like the narrator had to wear her hair in a certain way, girls also had to dress the part for their jobs. A hole or run in stockings could spell a docking of pay or even warrant a firing. With the wages

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<sup>130</sup> Illinois. General Assembly. Senate. Vice Committee, and Barratt O’Hara. *Report of the Senate Vice Committee: Created Under the Authority of the Senate of the Forty-ninth General Assembly As a Continuation of the Committee Under of the Authority of the Senate of the Forty-eighth General Assembly, State of Illinois*. [Chicago, 1916.], 198

<sup>131</sup> Brooks, *My Battles with Vice*, 94

<sup>132</sup> Brooks, *My Battles with Vice*, 46

<sup>133</sup> Brooks, *My Battles with Vice*, 68

<sup>134</sup> Brooks, *My Battles with Vice*, 69

these girls were receiving, they had to buy the cheapest stockings and buy them often, rather than be able to invest in a better quality pair that would last longer.

One of the narrator's colleagues at the department store gamed the system through sex work. She showed off her "near-silk" stockings and revealed that she received them as a gift from a male acquaintance from a saloons.<sup>135</sup> It is stories like these that make *My Battles with Vice* unique. On the surface, the book is just like others of the time because, through the story of Mary Holden, it sticks to the typical "white slavery" tropes, which completely victimize the prostitute: she was young, naive, and vulnerable to what was more akin to kidnapping than anything else. But Sadie is an example of a sex worker who strategically chose to engage in sex work while still holding down a traditional job, to make ends meet. Sadie then offered to show the narrator how to negotiate freelance sex work at saloons and dance halls, and she accepted, collecting information to give the reader an observed report of how typical transactions between men and women occurred in public spaces.



Figure 3.

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<sup>135</sup> Brooks, *My Battles with Vice*, 54

Figure 3 is a picture of a dancer from the 1910s, wearing an outfit very similar to what the narrator described herself to be wearing when she went to a dance hall with Sadie to be shown the ropes. She was most embarrassed by the extravagant plumage on the hat.<sup>136</sup> The narrator spends a lot of time talking about her embarrassment for her immodest appearance here, and this comes up in many other sections of the book as well. This could be an attempt at humor, highlighting the narrator's innocence and prudishness against the harsh backdrop of Chicago's red light district. Or, it could be an attempt by Pegler, as the ghost writer, to convincingly adopt Brooks' voice despite being almost twenty years her senior, and characterize the narrator in a believable way, in relation to Brooks' public reputation.

The narrator reported that men would dance with women and then ask them if they would like to go to an apartment or second location with the understanding that money would be exchanged. Bowen wrote many pamphlets explaining the process of these transactions herself, based on her own reporting. But in *My Battles with Vice*, the undercover narrator educated the audience on these transactions through personal experience. The narrator rebuffed one of her dance partners, and he was shocked that she did not take him up on his proposition, implying that it was common knowledge that asking for a dance had larger implications than just dancing.<sup>137</sup> The narrator expresses equal shock at the proposition, and at the age of the young men, many under 18, seeking sex at the dance hall.<sup>138</sup> Bowen's work may have told readers the percentage of corrupted dance halls in the city of Chicago, but the first person, investigative point of view offered by *My Battles with Vice* gave the reader details that such objective reporting could not.

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<sup>136</sup> Brooks, *My Battles with Vice*, 184

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

We can not draw any definitive conclusions on the authorship of *My Battles with Vice*. It reeks of influences from many sources and people, but we do not have Brooks' telling of events, so we will never know.

There is still the question of whether we can treat the quotes from girls like Sadie and Mary as fact. It is impossible to confirm whether girls said these things to either Brooks or Pegler, but they do have historical value as being, as I have evaluated, representative of real circumstances faced by young, working girls.

*After My Battles with Vice*



Figure 4. "Virginia Brooks: 20th century Joan of Arc". *Chautauqua Brochure*. 1913. Retrieved November 14, 2016 – via Special Collections Dept. at The University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa Digital Library.

In the March of 1913, just a few months before the first of the serial chapters were published on the front page of the *Chicago American*, Brooks made national headlines all on her own. She attended and marched in the 1913 Women's Suffrage March on the Capitol in D.C., along with at least a quarter of a million fellow suffragists and allies. The parade was held the day before President Woodrow Wilson's inauguration, which gave participants a built in audience of people gathered in town for that ceremony. Delegations were led by marchers

dressed as famous women or symbolic female figures. One woman in white led her group riding a white horse like Lady Godiva, and another led dressed as a nurse. The crowds that were gathering for the inauguration were not all peaceful; around one hundred marchers were hospitalized after being assaulted by angry, male spectators.<sup>139</sup>

There were political tensions within the march as well, and particularly within the Illinois delegation of which Brooks was a part. Brooks attended the march with Belle Squire, and the famous journalist and anti-lynching activist, Ida B. Wells.<sup>140</sup> A few months prior, the three women had teamed up to start the Alpha Suffrage Club, a women's club whose goal was to encourage black women to become suffragists and encourage political engagement.<sup>141</sup>

It is possible that Brooks knew Ida B. Wells through Bowen and Addams. Addams worked with Wells on anti-segregation campaigns, and one of Brooks profiles written while she was in West Hammond reported that Brooks also held anti-segregation beliefs. Perhaps Brooks was influenced by Addams or Wells before she even left Hyde Park for West Hammond. Many Progressive, women anti-vice crusaders were also suffragists, and Bowen, Addams, Brooks, and Wells were representative of that.

When they arrived to march with the Illinois delegation Ida B. Wells was refused a spot in the Illinois delegation with Brooks. Wells said, ““Either I go with you or not at all. I am not taking this stand because I personally wish for recognition. I am doing it for the future benefit of my whole race,” before walking away.<sup>142</sup> A few moments later, Wells appeared in the Illinois delegation, pulled in and protected by Brooks and Squire. Despite efforts from organizers, Wells

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<sup>139</sup> Spruill, Marjorie Julian. *One Woman, One Vote: Rediscovering the Woman Suffrage Movement*. Troutdale, OR: NewSage, 1995. Print.

<sup>140</sup> Rouff, Ruth A. (2010). *Ida B. Wells: A Woman of Courage*. West Berlin, New Jersey: Townsend Press. pp. Chapter 20.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Spruill, Marjorie Julian. *One Woman, One Vote: Rediscovering the Woman Suffrage Movement*. Troutdale, OR: NewSage, 1995. Print.

desegregated the Illinois delegation. Afterwards, Brooks told the papers she believed that, “to exclude Ms. Wells on the basis of race would be undemocratic.”<sup>143</sup>

Racial tensions loomed over the march at large. A compromise was struck with delegations from a handful of southern states that resulted in many groups of black women, including two student groups from Howard University, being forced to march in the back. Alice Paul, one of the march’s organizers believed that her mission was to further the status of white women, not all women. Paul was very close in age to Brooks, but their differences on race issues exemplified tensions within the suffragist movement. Bowen was also anti-segregation, yet when Paul split off from the original party she was upset because Bowen believed that they needed to be unified to be successful.<sup>144</sup> Bowen was willing to swallow her opposite views on race to avoid conflict and promote unification within the suffragist movement to further the suffragist cause.

The march in D.C. was Brooks’ last public appearance before she married Charles Washburne on April 3rd, 1913.<sup>145</sup> The closest Washburne ever comes to defining their relationship after this point is that he “managed her affairs as a sideline.”<sup>146</sup> He was involved in her professional dealings, because just a week or two after the serial started being published in the *Chicago American*, and on its 40th and last day Washburne witnessed the negotiation of the deal with Pegler to adapt it into a play.

A Mr. Sherman found Pegler at Stillson’s, a saloon across the street from the Dearborn Street editorial office of The Chicago Tribune, the night of Pegler’s final deadline for the serial

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<sup>143</sup> Rouff, Ruth A. (2010). *Ida B. Wells: A Woman of Courage*. West Berlin, New Jersey: Townsend Press. pp. Chapter 20.

<sup>144</sup> Louise de Koven Bowen, and Maureen A. Flanagan, *Growing Up With a City* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002, xx

<sup>145</sup> “Virginia Brooks - Facts.” Accessed April 5, 2019. <https://www-ancestrylibrary-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/family-tree/person/tree/3397557/person/2068314691/facts>.

<sup>146</sup> WASHBURN, CHARLES. “On ‘Little Lost Sister.’” *New York Times*. 1939, sec. Drama, Music, Art.

and demanded to speak with him.<sup>147</sup> “Me and my outfit, we got a theatrical company all ready to start rehearsals,” Mr. Sherman said. “We want a five act melodrama on ‘Little Lost Sister.’ Give you a hundred dollars to kick out Act I tonight so we can start rehearsals in the morning.”<sup>148</sup>

Pegler told him that it was not possible because Hearst owned the copyright to the serial, and directed him towards Charles Michelson, the managing editor of the *American* and the person who had the authority to negotiate copyrights. As it turns out, this was all Michelson’s idea. Earlier that day, Michelson transferred the copyright of the serial to Brooks, in exchange for the use of her name on the play. Mr. Sherman repeated his offer to Pegler, adding that he wanted five acts, one a day for one hundred dollars each over the course of the next five days, so that they could open the following week.<sup>149</sup>

“Well, \$500 was money,” Pegler wrote of the deal, and so he accepted the job.<sup>150</sup>

Washburn later remarked that Pegler walked out of Stillson’s with the first hundred dollar bill Pegler had ever seen.<sup>151</sup> According to Pegler’s son, he was motivated to take the job not only to supplement his meager twenty-five dollar a week paycheck at the *American*, but also because they had a sick family member to care for.<sup>152</sup>

A week later, the first production of *Little Lost Sister* premiered in Detroit. According to Washburn, many things went wrong. Firstly, the actor who played the lead villain could not pay his Chicago hotel bill, so they replaced him with the stage carpenter.<sup>153</sup> Secondly, a press agent had told the local press that Brooks was going to release a damning investigation of vice in

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Pegler, Arthur James, "Autobiography," James Westbrook Pegler Papers, 1845-1969, [Box 51, Folder 4], Herbert Hoover Presidential Library.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> WASHBURN, CHARLES. “On ‘Little Lost Sister.’” *New York Times*. 1939, sec. Drama, Music, Art.

<sup>152</sup> Pegler, Westbrook. “Fair Enough: My Old Man.” *The Washington Post (1923-1954); Washington, D.C.* August 27, 1938.

<sup>153</sup> WASHBURN, CHARLES. “On ‘Little Lost Sister.’” *New York Times*. 1939, sec. Drama, Music, Art.

Detroit on opening night as part of the play. In order to save face, Brooks rushed to Detroit to assure the police chief that she did not intend to do so. Washburn made a show of firing that press agent, but it was a calculated ruse; the stunt gave the show so much publicity that they sold out every performance.<sup>154</sup>

When the play transferred to Chicago soon after, it received very harsh reviews. Tribune critic Percy Hammond, who witnessed the writing of the play in the newsroom, gave it the harshest of all. “Percy Hammond wrote that the show was a good acting piece, but expressed hope that when next I decided to write a play I would devote at least two night to an act,” remembered Pegler.<sup>155</sup>

Within those first weeks the play underwent substantial rewrites, mostly done by one of the actors, Edward E. Rose, who gets the most credit for the script.<sup>156</sup> Brooks, however, was the person receiving royalties, and Washburn may have been receiving a cut as well.

According to Pegler, Washburn was thought of publicly as the co-author of the play. He recalled, “The Washburn’s were reported drawing large royalties on their copyright but I never made close inquiries.”<sup>157</sup>

While Pegler talks about this affair in a very light and amused tone in his autobiography, his son later wrote that attempts to cloud his credit for the play was, “the only pang [he] ever felt over a loss,” in a 1938 *Washington Post* article in which he argued that his father should get a cut of the royalties. It was still making substantial money on the road.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Pegler, Arthur James, "Autobiography," James Westbrook Pegler Papers, 1845-1969, [Box 51, Folder 4], Herbert Hoover Presidential Library.

<sup>156</sup> Washburn, “The Theaters: Cotton Blossom,” *New York Herald Tribune* 21 Aug 1927

<sup>157</sup> Pegler, Arthur James, "Autobiography," James Westbrook Pegler Papers, 1845-1969, [Box 51, Folder 4], Herbert Hoover Presidential Library.

<sup>158</sup> Pegler, Westbrook. “Fair Enough: My Old Man.” *The Washington Post (1923-1954); Washington, D.C.* August 27, 1938.

A review in 1931 called the play a “museum piece of the road” and reported, “The play was never presented, so it is said, on Broadway.... The authors were Edward E. Rose and Virginia Brooks, the latter a pen name used by Charles Washburn.”<sup>159</sup> Either this last statement was a mistake, or it is possible that this was a lie Washburn was spreading in order to receive royalties that would otherwise go to his ex-wife. After all, he did “manage her affairs.”

Brooks’ marriage to Washburn is the most mystifying part of her life. Washburne claims that he co-wrote the serial, and he negotiated \$500 from the *American* to get Brooks to agree to have her name on it.<sup>160</sup> Maybe this transaction and persuasion was how they met, if Washburne truly was a journalist. And maybe, although Washburne claims co-authorship, he was just the middle man between Pegler and Brooks. But he had enough power and control to single-handedly define each person’s part in the events of 1913 in the media and on the historical record, and, perhaps, profit off of others’ confusion.

Brooks filed for divorce on October 19th, 1915, on the day their son turned nine months old. In a spread in the *Tribune*, Brooks told the reporter, "Charlie is a splendid fellow. But it was a case of incompatibility, and there was nothing else for us to do. We both realized that there was no other way out and so the suit will be filed tomorrow. I think it is the best thing for both of us."<sup>161</sup>

### Conclusion

After Brooks left West Hammond, its reputation was slow to recover. Due to Brooks’ headlines, it was known nationally to be a cesspool of vice to rival that of Chicago’s red light

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<sup>159</sup> “Display Ad 37 -- No Title.” *Boston Daily Globe (1872-1922)*; *Boston, Mass.* March 10, 1914.

<sup>160</sup> Cotton Blossom

<sup>161</sup> “CRUSADER WILL SEEK DIVORCE: Virginia Brooks Washburne of West Hammond Fame Files Bill Today. - ProQuest.” Accessed April 3, 2019. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/173960919?accountid=14657>.

districts.<sup>162</sup> In 1924, the city decided to rename itself Calumet City to distance itself from the devastating image that Brooks helped established.<sup>163</sup>

This is not the narrative presented at the present day Calumet City Historical Society and Museum. Calumet City is now known more for being the fictional birthplace of the Blues Brothers, and the water towers you can see from the highway that say “Have a Nice Day.” In an article entitled, “Women from Calumet City’s Past and Present, “ the museum says only that Brooks was a great anti-vice crusader who, “led a successful campaign that brought about closing the doors of many dens of gambling and disorderly establishments....”<sup>164</sup> It does not mention her media campaign that contributed to the destruction of the city’s reputation, the fact that she ran for and became president of the school board, nor her connection with Ida B. Wells.

It would not be accurate to say that Brooks retired from public life after the disastrously received yet profitable *Little Lost Sister*, like her ex-husband would like you to believe. But she did leave the Chicago activism scene for good. In Volume 1, Issue 1 of the *Alpha Suffrage Record*, a publication put out by the Alpha Suffrage Club in 1914, Brooks was not listed as a founding member.<sup>165</sup> Perhaps her relationship with Ida B. Wells was over, or her reputation as a failed playwright would hurt the organization just by association. Maybe she could no longer bring the organization financial backing, if she had promised it.

Brooks divorced her husband in 1915.<sup>166</sup> They moved out of their apartment in the Uptown neighborhood of Chicago; her husband dropped the “e” from the end of “Washburne” and moved to the West Side of Chicago where, according to the 1920 census, he was back to

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<sup>162</sup> Bigott, *From Cottage to Bungalow*, 177

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> “Women of Calumet City.” Calumet City Historical Society and Museum. Accessed April 5, 2019. <https://www.calumetcityhistoricalsociety.org/women-of-calumet-city.html>.

<sup>165</sup> *Alpha Suffrage Record*, Volume 1, Issue 1, 1913

<sup>166</sup> “Virginia Brooks - Facts.” Accessed April 5, 2019. <https://www.ancestrylibrary-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/family-tree/person/tree/3397557/person/2068314691/facts>.

working as a “Manager” in the “Theatrical” industry.<sup>167</sup> Just like West Hammond, Brooks’ ex-husband likely changed its name to distance himself from her and her actions.

Brooks told the 1920 census taker in Washington state that her name was Virginia Washburne, she was a widow, the head of the household, and a manager of a fruit ranch.<sup>168</sup> A few years later, she established a home for herself, her mother, and son in Portland, Oregon where she began to publish books again.<sup>169</sup> This time, perhaps, from solely her own pen.

*Tilly from Tillamook: Her Temptation and Triumph* by Virginia Brooks was published in 1925 by the A.E. Kearns & Co. Press on Fourth and Salmon Streets in Portland, Oregon. The first in a series of fictional paperbacks sold for 50 cents each, it is not clear who the target audience was.<sup>170</sup> The forward begins, “This book is expressly intended as an expose of law enforcement conditions in Oregon and especially in Portland.”<sup>171</sup> Yet the story follows the familiar pattern of the “white slave” narrative: a country girl from the south of Portland takes a train to the big city to earn extra money for her cash-strapped family. In her car she sits next to a young girl who persuades her to go to her boarding house instead of the reputable Y.W. and from there she is drawn into prostitution.

Thankfully, Tilly is rescued by a mission and finds honest work with a friend named Mitzie who subsequently commits suicide because her employer at a Greek restaurant violates her.<sup>172</sup> At the morgue, Tilly strikes up a conversation with a Y.W. case worker and they talk

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Brooks, *Tilly from Tillamook: Her Temptation and Triumph* (Portland: A.E. Kearns & Co., 1925)

<sup>171</sup> Brooks, *Tilly from Tillamook*, i

<sup>172</sup> Brooks, *Tilly from Tillamook*, 119

about the good work Colorado is doing by starting vocational schools for girls so that they can be prepared for working life and avoid exploitation.<sup>173</sup>

Tilly's childhood sweetheart, Olaf, comes to the city to surprise her.

"I didn't know you'd be so glad to see me, Tilly-- that'd you'd cry. If I'd known that I'd been up sooner," Olaf said, with no suspicion as to the cause of Tilly's tears.

"And, Tilly"-- shyly-- "When do you want to go back home?" Like sunlight after the storm, she looked up and smiled-- the smile of sudden resolve, as she answered:

"I want to go home--now! Tell me Olaf, when does the next stage leave for Tillamook?"<sup>174</sup>

Bad writing? There is one section in which a policeman has an unprompted, three-page monologue about the state of the girls he sees on the streets, but perhaps that is just the byproduct of a theatrical past. Meant for the educated elite? A fictional novel hardly resembles a legitimate, fact-filled expose and takedown of a corrupt police force. Sidelined for its particularly harsh treatment of the Greek ethnicity and culture? Likely not. Sidelined for its stance on an increase in women's vocational training? Perhaps, but not a strong argument, considering the closing lines:

"And so with Tilly-- the chill pall of her heartaches, her wretchedness dissolved with the warmth of Olaf's love-- his proprietorship."

Once again, just as in *Little Lost Sister*, the young girl adrift in a sea of vice is saved by the promise of a financially supportive husband.

Despite all my efforts to piece together the story of Brooks' life, her voice is still almost completely absent. Even if she did some or all of the reporting for *My Battles with Vice*, she did not write the words we can now read on the page. While her activism in West Hammond did not yield politically successful results, she drew a lot of attention to her causes in her short career in

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 124

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 126-7

the public eye. The story her ex-husband told the world of her life, after she was gone and could not defend herself, was very simple, but it turns out the truth was much more complicated. It is possible that Washburn took credit-- and royalties—for Brooks' works until after her death. However, as the true author of *Tilly from Tillamook*, we can see that till the end of her life, she believed in a patriarchal family unit and her story embodied the values of her Protestant mentors.

Brooks serves as an interesting case study in women activists at the turn of the twentieth century and how their public image was controlled. If Brooks' story teaches us anything, it is that she was never fully in control of the narrative of her life.

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