

The Lancaster Law and Order Society, 1912 - 1972

By Harry S. Cobey, Jr.

The Lancaster Law and Order Society was organized in 1912 by Dr. Clifford G. Twombly, rector of St. James's Episcopal Church, Lancaster, and other members of clergy, local college faculty, and leading citizens. As one of the outstanding organizations in the social history of Lancaster, its purpose was the suppression of vice in the community. A similar group called the "Law and Order Society of Lancaster" existed in 1889, but was ineffective and shortlived.¹

The first meeting of the Society was November 1912 and it was incorporated in 1915. The by-laws adopted in 1921 state:

The purpose of this Society shall be the suppression and elimination of unlawful, immoral and corrupting conditions and agencies in the community, and other benevolent undertakings along kindred lines.²

The New England Watch and Ward Society of Boston was used as a pattern by the founders of the Lancaster Law and Order Society. An agent was employed by the local group as an investigator to make a weekly report on vice activity in local bars and shows. Information collected on this illegal activity was then turned over to the local chief of police and/or the district attorney for recommended prosecution.³

At the turn of the century and the end of the Victorian Era, Lancaster was typical of many larger communities that tolerated prostitution and red-light districts. The largest and most notorious of these were the Barbary Coast in San Francisco and the Basin of New Orleans. The exploiters of prostitution were classified as owners who furnish capital, madames as resident managers of brothels, and procurers or traffickers who obtain the girls.⁴

The population of Lancaster in the 1900 census was 30,000 and Lancaster was known as a "wide open city." In 1912 there were 45 parlor houses of

prostitution. There were burlesque shows with nude scenes at the Fulton Opera House, and obscene dances on the midway at the county fair. There were 72 saloons, 50 beer clubs, and many dance halls where vice agents were seen plying their trade. Sixteen of the polling places were located in saloons. Gambling and cockfights were described in the local newspapers.⁵

Dr. Twombly became pastor of St. James's Episcopal Church in 1907. A New Englander, with a puritanical character, he was appalled to find Lancaster a "wide open" town and to find that a house of prostitution was located one block from his church. He was determined to drive vice from Lancaster; that was when he organized the Law and Order Society. He received personal threats when he opposed vice protected by persons in high authority in Lancaster.⁶

An investigation was ordered by the Society, which was conducted by George Kneeland of the American Vigilance Association and four assistants in the fall of 1913. During the one-month investigation 93 reports were concluded on 53 separate addresses with many of the reports under affidavit. There were 189 professional women reportedly engaged in soliciting men for parlor houses and hotels, and 25 case histories of prostitutes were obtained during the investigation. The 1913 report also described gambling, perversion, and beer and liquor consumption, but the major emphasis was prostitution. Some of the inspector's reports are as follows:⁷

On — 7, 1913, at 3:00 p.m. I called at ———'s furnished house. I was admitted by Mrs. —. She said: "You see I made enough right here in this business in 25 years to buy nine other houses. . . . Even the policemen come here with girls. The — boys from the — hotel send me trade." . . . While I was here one couple went out and three couples came in.⁸

On — 16, 1913, I visited — —'s \$2.00 and \$5.00 bawdy house at — North Prince Street. I was admitted by an inmate dressed in a fancy evening gown and shown to the front parlor. The parlor is furnished in most excellent taste and very expensively. The inmate who admitted me . . . called six other handsome girls dressed in evening gowns. Rieker's beer was served at \$2.00 a round. The girls pay \$6.00 a week board and their doctor's bills. Dr. — is their doctor. He comes once a week. E— urged me to go upstairs.⁹

On — 19, 1913, I visited —'s fifty cent bawdy house at No. — W— Mifflin Street. Men around the open door . . . looked on while another of the inmates . . . undressed and stood in the room . . . with no shades on the windows in more than a seminude condition. The language used was the vilest. Little children were playing about the house.¹⁰

On — 27, 1913, while seated in the dining room of the — Hotel, the head waiter and I . . . discussed current topics. He said, "I've travelled . . . but this town has more w—houses than any place I've ever been. The bunch from — put up here last night and somebody told them to go down to Mifflin Street. That'll be some football team I know hundreds of guys who got doused up down there."¹¹

The investigators stated that they never went upstairs with the girls, but

talked with them in the parlor. A "parlor house" is a building used for prostitution. The name comes from the custom of the girls receiving their guests in the parlor of the house.

A Report on Vice Conditions in the City of Lancaster, PA dated 1913 was published. The report, in book form, is 95 pages long and includes many of the reports of vice written by the agents. The report was signed by five leading citizens: Dr. Clifford G. Twombly, William H. Hager, M. T. Garvin, Edwin M. Hartman, and John J. Evans. Seventy-two other well-known men and women from the community gave their names in support of this report. The names of those people involved in prostitution in Lancaster were deleted from the report.¹²

The local authorities confronted with these reports in Lancaster City chose to ignore them. Dr. Twombly then confronted them with affidavits containing the names of prominent men of Lancaster who visited the houses of prostitution including the time entered and the time departed from the houses. The Law and Order Society threatened to make public the full reports of the agents including names. Among the patrons were police officials, judges, college professors, college students, and other leading citizens.¹³

The action of the Law and Order Society now received the full attention of the Mayor and of those in authority and prosecution of vice began. Lancaster was soon to proceed from an "open vice city" to a "clean city."

Dr. Twombly stated that women working for low wages around dangerous, unguarded machinery were prey to temptation. In an article in 1913, he states: "What about our women tobacco strippers in Lancaster; our girls in the silk mill; and our children in the cotton mills?" Young girls and widows often drifted into prostitution in this period for economic reasons as a method to support their families.¹⁴

"The girls in our mill," declared one of the foremen in a large factory in the city, . . . "are worked to the limit of physical endurance. One of my foremen friends married one of the girls several years ago and they had one sickly child who died. He married eight years too late. Few men can bring up a healthy family who marry girls who have been eight years in our mill."¹⁵

According to the Lancaster Law and Order Report of 1915 the 45 parlor houses of prostitution in Lancaster were closed. Mayor F. B. McClain on February 23, 1914, notified the Chief of Police to close the parlor houses. At the end of one year of suppression of parlor houses seven raids had been conducted by police and five owners or keepers sent to jail. Jail sentences were three to five months each. Thirty-two of the madames had moved or left Lancaster and 75% of the girls or inmates of the parlor houses had left the city.¹⁶

By 1922, the local Law and Order Society reported that there were no houses of prostitution; burlesque shows had been suppressed; obscene dancing shows at fairs and carnivals had been stopped; and there was no organized

gambling. In 1926 and 1927, the Society objected to nudes on stage in the burlesque shows "Music Box Revue" and "Earl Carroll Vanities" presented at the Fulton Opera House.¹⁷

Dr. Twombly's farewell sermon to St. James's Episcopal Church on April 30, 1939, states:

The forces of the underworld are beaten in this city today and they know it, for they call Lancaster a "Sunday School Town." That this is still true is confirmed by the recent report of a Survey of Commercialized Prostitution Conditions made by the American Social Hygiene Association. A long-time resident of the city, in a good position to know, was the first to say: "Been in Lancaster for 39 years. . . . Know this town inside and out. . . . Sure did have whorehouses. . . . That's about twenty years ago. I used to deliver papers in the houses. . . . The girls used to ask me to send them customers. . . . That's all gone for many years. . . . Churches and the Law and Order Society don't allow anything like that now."¹⁸

A survey conducted in April 1945 by the American Social Hygiene Association stated that Lancaster attracted large numbers of sailors from Bainbridge Naval Training Station in Maryland, and also sailors attending a local college. Sailors and servicemen considered Lancaster a "clean town." It was noted that bartenders and cabdrivers were not hustlers.¹⁹

Agent A. H. Francis was succeeded in 1957 by Calvin E. Snyder, a retired police lieutenant.²⁰

In 1951, Dr. Charles D. Spotts, president of the Society and head of the department of religion at Franklin and Marshall College, stated that the 150-odd members of the Law and Order Society represented many occupations and were outstanding citizens of Lancaster. Most of the membership was composed of prominent citizens including businessmen, doctors, lawyers, and ministers.²¹

In 1961 the movie, "The Immoral Mr. Teas," playing at the Fulton Opera House was discontinued at the request of the Society and pressure from City Chief of Police William B. Hershner and District Attorney Alfred C. Alspach. At this time the Law and Order Society agent declared that gambling and vice were under control.²²

There were strong rumors, in 1961, that the Mafia and organized crime had moved into Lancaster. At that time I was asked to join the Society by its president, Rev. Robert C. Batchelder, rector of St. James's Episcopal Church, because I was chairman of a parallel project conducted by the Lancaster Junior Chamber of Commerce.²³

The meetings were mostly concerned with the written and verbal reports of the Law and Order Society agent on vice in Lancaster. The agent covered the agenda of prostitution, obscene movies, night club skin shows, gambling, and carnivals.²⁴

Most items discussed during this period were not serious enough to require the action of the Law and Order Society. A list of titles of pornographic magazines was turned over to the Lancaster District Attorney and the magazines

were subsequently removed from the newsstands. The procedure was ineffective because the following month new pornographic magazines with new and different titles appeared on the newsstands.²⁵

A more serious item surfaced when there were strong rumors that the Mafia was involved in organized prostitution at a new motel in Lancaster City. The Law and Order Society decided to take action on the problem and an outside investigator was retained to make a survey of the prostitution problem.²⁶

The procedure used by the investigator was to talk to cabdrivers, bartenders, room clerks, etc., and ask the right questions such as "where the action was." The final report by the investigator absolved the motel and Lancaster City of any connection with organized prostitution or organized crime. The final report also stated that in the community there were occasional instances of individual solicitation, but no organized crime.²⁷

In 1966 there was no organized crime in Lancaster and the major emphasis of the Lancaster Law and Order Society was the censorship of sexually oriented movies; suppression of gambling, including bingo and other games of chance; and the suppression of sex magazines. There was disagreement among members of the Society as to its effectiveness and as to its justification for controlling freedom of speech in the community. The Lancaster Council of Churches withdrew its support and the agent was terminated.

On July 20, 1972, the Board of Directors of the Lancaster Law and Order Society moved to dissolve all activities. The balance in the treasury was turned over to the Lancaster Council of Churches. Thus ended an interesting era in Lancaster.²⁸

Few people realize how much the Law and Order Society has done to change the reputation of Lancaster. A survey done in June 1950 by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the American Hygiene Association stated that Lancaster was "one of the cleanest cities in America, judged by its freedom from vice and organized crime."²⁹

The Lancaster Law and Order Society during its existence improved the "quality of life" in Lancaster by reducing vice and crime and keeping organized crime out of Lancaster.

Endnotes

1. Klein, Frederic Shriver, *Lancaster County 1841-1941* (Lancaster, PA: Intelligencer Printing Co., 1941); Loose, John Ward Willson, *Heritage of Lancaster* (Woodland Hills, CA: Windsor Publishing Co., 1978).

2. Lancaster County Historical Society Manuscript Collection MG-62.

3. Ibid.

4. Johnson, Bascom. "Prostitution in the United States," *The American Social Hygiene Association*, Publication A-28 (1937); Kneeland, George J. "Report of New York Bureau of Social Hygiene (abstract)," 1926.

5. Twombly, Rev. Dr. Clifford G., et al, *A 2nd Report on Vice Conditions in the City of Lancaster, Pa.*, (1 March 1915); Wagner, Rev. Dr. James E., *Notes and Commentaries* (1942), Lancaster County Historical Society Manuscript Collection MG-62.

6. Klein, H. M. J., Ph.D., and Diller, William F. *The History of St. James' Church (Protestant Episcopal)* (Lancaster, PA, 1944) 221, 228-229.

7. Twombly, Rev. Dr. Clifford G., et al, *Report of Vice Conditions in the City of Lancaster, 1913*.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Betts, Peter J., "A History of the Lancaster Law and Order Society," *Journal of the Lancaster County Historical Society* 69 (Michaelmas 1969) 216-239; Lancaster County Historical Society Manuscript Collection MG-62.

14. Twombly, Rev. Dr. Clifford G., "Paper Presented Before First Methodist Church of Lancaster, 4 January 1913."

15. Ibid.

16. Twombly, *1915 Report*.

17. Lancaster County Historical Society Manuscript Collection MG-62.

18. Lancaster Law and Order Society, *Annual Report of 1948*.

19. Lancaster County Historical Society Manuscript Collection MG-62.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. *Lancaster New Era*, 8 April 1961, "Police Ban Fulton Film — Call it Lewd"; 30 January 1962, "Gambling Lowest in Two Years."

23. Cobey, Harry S., Jr. Notes from meetings of Lancaster Law and Order Society (1958-1963).

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Lancaster County Historical Society Manuscript Collection MG-62.

29. Betts, op. cit.; Hartman, William F. M.D., "From Wide Open to Tightly Closed," *Susquehanna Magazine* 5 (December 1980): 32-37.

Harry S. Cobey, Jr., a native of Albany, GA, lived in Lancaster from 1950-1965 and in the 1980s. A graduate of the University of Maryland, he served as an infantry officer in World War II. In his professional career he worked in management in the food industry with Kraft Foods, Consumers Packing Company, Hanover Foods, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. He is a past president of the Seaford (Delaware) Historical Society and has been active in numerous organizations in Lancaster.