

PRESENT:

TRAFFICKING AND SEX INDUSTRY

One of Portland's favorite stories to tell is likely a dramatized myth more than the full truth, but there is some background to it: The Shanghai Tunnels. In the 1970s talk and tours began to pop up describing secret tunnels beneath Portland's waterfront area that once carried away drugged men to waiting ships where they would awaken once far out to sea. Although there were tunnels that ran between buildings and under the streets as far as NW 23rd Ave and potentially along the East Bank, there is no real evidence of how men were abducted. Even so, it is said that at least 1500 men were abducted a year to be used as laborers on the ships or in lands across the Pacific. The tunnels were also said to be used to kidnap women, forcing them into prostitution.

The Oregon Encyclopedia describes Shanghaiing in this way:

Shanghaiing describes the practice of kidnapping a man for service aboard a sailing ship. A shanghaied sailor, usually drunk or incapacitated by knockout drops, was delivered by a "crimp" to a ship's captain shortly before sailing time, for which the crimp collected a fee, often known as blood money. The practice arose out of the web of international maritime law and practices in the nineteenth century, when a captain ruled his crew through a labor contract. Sea captains could be desperate to replenish their crew strength if sailors found that "jumping ship" and abandoning their contract while in port was an escape from continued servitude. During the first flush of the California gold rush in 1849, crews often deserted en masse in San Francisco, where the lures of fortune and climate gave rise to a port that became infamous for shanghaiing.

Portland's development as a major Pacific Coast port came late in the nineteenth century, as wheat became a lucrative export crop. The wheat arrived by riverboat and rail from the **Columbia River** basin, and a fleet of sailing vessels arrived in late summer. The ships took on wheat for Liverpool, England, and for ports in Asia and Europe. By the time a ship had arrived in Portland, the arduous sail across the Atlantic and around Cape Horn from Europe or across the Pacific often induced disaffection among the crew. Soliciting crews for the return voyage was the responsibility of a ship's captain, and in Portland, as in many other West Coast ports, a captain could use a crimp to fill his roster.

The extent of Shanghaaiing in Portland is unknowable, but data compiled by seamen's protective organizations, such as the Sailors' **Union** of the Pacific, indicate that it was primarily a problem on ships in trans-Pacific trade and that it was common in West Coast ports on Puget Sound, the Columbia River, and especially San Francisco Bay. The development of large, steam-powered ships that required trained crews to operate and that were financed, built, and managed by international corporations, hastened the demise of sailing ships, as did reforms in international maritime law and its enforcement.

Historians have confirmed that Shanghaaiing did occur in Portland's Old Town district. The tunnels seem to have been used more as gambling dens, bootlegging locations, and home to other nefarious activities. Even as late as the 1990s stories have been told of black market exchanges, drug deals, and other crimes that have taken place below our city streets.

As a frontier town, Portland attracted many young men who were unmarried who often lived seasonally in boarding houses along the waterfront and near the labor district. The ships brought sailors looking

for nighttime activity and pleasure. Much of what was built up in the Old Town area gave way for lawlessness and nearly anything was allowed. This included prostitution. Whether by choice due to a lack of options, or by force, women lived in brothels sometimes performing as many as 50 tricks a night.

Today Portland remains a hub for sex trafficking. It is often cited as the city with the highest rate of juvenile sex trafficking in the country. Prior to the revitalization of the area now known as the Pearl District and as well as the completion of Pioneer Courthouse Square, young women and men could be found on street corners or lined up near parking lots waiting for the next pick up. Now most activity is along 82nd Ave, although it can still be found throughout the Old Town area as well.

Portland stands along the I-5 corridor, giving easy access between the major cities of Seattle, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. Traffickers come to Portland to prey on vulnerable youth and young women to coerce, groom, or simply force into sex work. Once in a different city than their own, these women (and young men) are isolated and trapped. The train station is a common place for traffickers to watch. They easily recognize newcomers and offer a welcome that seems hard to resist to young, vulnerable women. Malls are also an area traffickers target, leading teenagers to believe a modeling job or other such promise is waiting for them.

Portland also has had the highest number of strip clubs per capita than any other city in America for years. While women may choose to participate in this activity rather than being forced to do so, some clubs

do act as a front to trafficking. The acceptance of the sex industry as a part of culture can lead to an open door for exploitation and a denial of the depths of the problem.

Sex trafficking is perhaps one of the most hidden crimes, increasingly so with the internet now providing a way for girls to be picked up through the press of a button rather than a drive down the street. Girls and women being trafficked may be out in public, attending school, or even at a child's soccer game.

Read more about Sex Trafficking in the Portland Region in these articles.

<https://www.oregonlive.com/entertainment/2024/08 hookers-porn-and-strip-clubs-the-seedy-side-of-portland-in-the-70s-80s-and-90s.html>

<https://www.opb.org/article/2023/12/04/pacific-northwest-sex-trafficking/>

Learn about some of the agencies working with victims, and bringing awareness

<https://morrisonkids.org/what-we-do/services-for-victims-of-sex-trafficking/>

<https://sarcoregon.org/>

<https://www.ijm.org/>

<https://exoduscry.com/>

PRAYER POINTS:

1. Pray for protection for young vulnerable girls and for intervention before being trafficked
2. Pray for authorities to locate and free those who are being trafficked
3. Pray for a reduction in demand, for recovery for men who are addicted to sex
4. Pray for more trauma informed safe homes to become available for those who are rescued out of trafficking
5. Pray for awareness and prevention strategies that can make an impact and reduce the rate of women being brought into the sex industry