

How Writing *The White Devil's Daughters* Led Me to Modern-Day Abolitionists

BY JULIA FLYNN SILER

It was a crime hiding in plain sight. For several years, I'd park near a transit center in my leafy suburban county to pick up my high schooler from his afternoon bus. Before long, I began noticing men streaming in and out of a nearby Asian "health spa." I didn't realize it at the time, but I now know it fit the pattern of what law enforcement and anti-trafficking groups call "an illicit massage business"—a place where human trafficking often takes place. In 2015, authorities of the city cracked down on dozens of nearby brothels posing as massage parlors. The area became known as a human trafficking hub.

At the time, I was so immersed in the past that I didn't see the signs of present-day trafficking right in front of me. I was researching a pioneering, 19th-century "safe house" for survivors of sex trafficking, located about a half hour's drive south from where I used to pick up our son from the bus. My focus was on a small band of Presbyterian women who founded a home for survivors of trafficking in San Francisco's Chinatown. (That home became known as the Presbyterian Mission House in Chinatown; it was later renamed the Occidental Mission Home and is now known as Cameron House.) The women provided food, shelter and the teachings of Christian faith to members of an embattled immigrant community, who faced discrimination and violence in San Francisco and across the Western United States. In an expression of female solidarity, they described their project as "Woman's Work for Woman."

The resulting book, *The White Devil's Daughters: The Women Who Fought Slavery in San Francisco's Chinatown*, led me into the world of modern-day abolitionists. Through the activists I met, I learned about the battle still being waged against human trafficking today, which enslaves an estimated 40 million people worldwide,¹ mostly girls and women.² The experience of meeting the contemporary counterparts to the characters in my book gave me a profound gift: It not only helped me finally

understand what I'd seen on those afternoons in my parked car, but it also showed me how the past can reverberate in so many unexpected ways.

Early Advocacy

I spent five years writing the history of the Presbyterian Mission Home, documenting both the women who started and ran it, and the remarkable stories of some of the up to 3,000 girls and women who passed through its doors between 1874 and the mid-1930s. The anti-trafficking pioneers I wrote about opened what may well have been the first "safe house" for survivors of trafficking in the United States. It became a sanctuary for Asian girls and women who'd been smuggled into the United States from China as child servants or sex slaves. Some of its residents became the home's trusted staffers—translating in courts and with immigration authorities and often being the first ones to communicate with trafficked girls and women during rescue attempts.

The home was involved in one of the highest profile anti-trafficking cases of the early 20th century. With the support of the women from the Mission Home, two key witnesses in the case, Jeung Gwai Ying and Wong So, testified against a major West Coast trafficker who was a member of a Chinese criminal tong or secret society. The press in the 1930s dubbed it the "Broken Blossoms" case: four people were tried and found guilty of what we would now call sex trafficking. At the time, the modern term "sex trafficking survivors" was not used. Instead, the girls and women who took refuge in the home were referred to as "slave girls." Newspapers and magazines at the time heralded the case as being pivotal. It achieved not only the first major conviction of a slave ring operating between China and the West Coast, but also a resounding validation of the home's mission.

Staffers at the home pioneered methods now widely used in the fight against trafficking. They testified before state legislators in 1901, and also arranged for young

residents of the home to tell their heartbreaking stories directly to the lawmakers. That testimony led to one of the first pieces of anti-trafficking legislation to be passed in California's history: lawmakers added a new section to the penal code, broadening the state's antislavery law for the first time to include penalties against human trafficking. They also employed savvy media campaigns, drawing attention to the "slave girl" trade through daring rescues (sometimes reenacting them for newspaper photographers.) They welcomed as visitors to the home presidential parties, wealthy philanthropists, society women and other VIPs.

A Community Fixture

The organization operated continuously as a rescue home for nearly 70 years in the shadow of Nob Hill, long one of San Francisco's most exclusive neighborhoods. The only exception was following San Francisco's earthquake and firestorms of 1906, which destroyed all of Chinatown—including the home. The organization moved elsewhere for about 18 months while rebuilding the home. Re-opened in 1908 at the same address—920 Sacramento Street—it sheltered as many as 70 girls, women and even a few boys, at any one time. Thousands of Chinese American families across the U.S. can trace the marriages of grandparents or great-grandparents to the Mission Home, which for decades served as a de facto marriage bureau. Available brides, some of whom had converted to Christianity while living there, were matched up with grooms, ideally also Christians.

Eventually renamed Cameron House, in honor of its long-serving superintendent Donaldina Cameron, it still today operates as a key social

service agency in Chinatown. It has a long history of providing food, education and aid to recent Asian immigrants, opening its doors more than a decade before the world's first settlement house, Toynbee Hall in London's East End, and 15 years before Jane Addams co-founded Hull House to offer aid to Chicago's immigrants. As the nation was gripped by the unfolding coronavirus pandemic in the spring of 2020, Cameron House continued offering its weekly food pantry to serve low-income seniors and other residents of the Chinatown community.

Cameron House was designated a city landmark in 1971. There have been recent discussions to erect a statue in the city in honor of the *mui tsai*, or child servants, who passed through its doors. Perhaps the best known of those was Tien Fuh Wu, Cameron's longtime aide.

Abolitionists of Yesterday and Today

Since the book came out, I've learned a lot about the fight against modern trafficking. Soon after the book was published in the spring of 2019, the CEO of Polaris, one of the country's most influential anti-trafficking non-governmental organizations, invited me to speak at a conference of law enforcement officials and anti-trafficking officials from 25 states. Now based in Washington, D.C., Polaris was founded by two Brown University students who became aware of the trafficking of East Asian women near campus.

After my talk, one of the attendees, a lawyer from California, took me aside and said she was surprised



Donaldina Cameron, superintendent of the Mission Home, with one of its younger residents.

Photo courtesy of Cameron House

by what I'd described. She'd thought the effort to combat trafficking had begun only a few decades ago; she was inspired to hear the stories and see the photos I shared of Victorian-era women who scrambled over rooftops and confronted criminal gang members and corrupt officials in their fight against slavery. From my conversations at the conference, I learned that the early pioneers and today's abolitionists, separated by a century, had much in common. They both were searching for techniques for identifying traffickers, drawing public attention to this abuse, and most compassionately helping survivors.

The conference drew me to the world of people fighting slavery today. I learned about technological advancements in the fight against human trafficking that the Victorian-era churchwomen I wrote about could never have imagined. Polaris



Photo courtesy of Cameron House



Louis J. Stellman, California State Library

Left: Donaldina Cameron (far left) and others reenact rescuing a young girl from being held in slavery. Top: Donaldina Cameron (dark dress with circular brooch) served as superintendent of Cameron House for almost 40 years. Her work to ensure safety for young girls and women earned her the pejorative nickname "White Devil" with the Chinese criminal tongs.

has a national hotline for reporting human trafficking, which can be texted at Be Free (233-733) or called at 888/373-7888. The coalition Seattle Against Slavery has experimented with decoy chatbots. When individuals search certain keywords trying to purchase sex online, they instead receive deterrence messages such as "You could be arrested for buying sex online."³ I also heard about a landmark legal case, dubbed "Bangkok Dark Nights," in which the U.S. Attorney's Office in Minneapolis, aided by the F.B.I.'s Minneapolis office, help prosecute people involved in an international sex trafficking ring spanning the Midwest to Los Angeles and Thailand. (After the conference, in part based on

extensive evidence of money laundering, a jury convicted 36 criminals in the case.⁴)

When I spoke last fall at the San Francisco Collaborative Against Human Trafficking's annual conference, I absorbed as much as I could from the other speakers involved with this 10-year-old public-private partnership, including the heart-wrenching tales of teenagers who'd survived terrible abuse as trafficking survivors. Sadly, one of the main things I've learned since the book's publication is that abuse, disease and addiction have been constants in the experience of trafficking victims from the 19th to the 21st centuries. When I appeared on a radio show in New Mexico with that

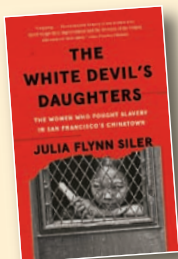
state's cochair of its human trafficking task force, Lynn Sanchez, I was shocked to learn that the average life expectancy of a victim of human trafficking in New Mexico today (five years) is about the same as it was in San Francisco's Chinatown in the late 19th century (four years).

The Mission Continues

But there have been some important advances in the fight against trafficking, too. Today, activists are using digital tools to disrupt the multibillion-dollar-a-year business of modern-day slavery. I had the opportunity to interview Rebecca Sorla Portnoff, who has used her computer sleuthing skills to track down and catch sex traffickers. Rebecca works for Thorn:



Learn More



The White Devil's Daughters: The Women Who Fought Slavery in San Francisco's Chinatown

By Julia Flynn Siler
New York: Vintage, 2020

Learn about the brave women who fought back against the trafficking of Asian women at the start of the 20th century in San Francisco.

Digital Defenders of Children, a group that uses technology to fight the sexual abuse of children. While the Victorian-era activists at the Chinatown mission home would barge into brothels to help vulnerable women and children, sometimes accompanied by police officers or hired detectives, Rebecca's raids take place from behind her laptop, often hundreds or thousands of miles away from traffickers. She creates computer codes that spot or identify similarities in traffickers' online ads and hunt down the Bitcoin accounts used to pay for the advertisements.

Anti-trafficking activists—now and then—used teamwork, recruited allies and deployed an array of organizational skills to carry out "Woman's Work for Woman." Both 19th-century anti-trafficking pioneers and Rebecca have been inspired by their religious faith. "I'm a Christian, and my choice to work in this space is directly derived from my understanding of the core tenets of the Christian faith: to love God, and to love my neighbor," Rebecca told me in an interview. She is now a manager of data science for her organization.

My writing about the past has opened up new possibilities for the future. Before the pandemic hit, I had been planning to join a delegation of women from the San Francisco Bay Area to the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women in New York, as a member of a panel to talk about efforts past and present to fight human trafficking. When the "shelter in place" orders are lifted in California and other states, I'll continue sharing the story of those pioneering Presbyterian women—Asian American and European American—from so long ago who displayed the courage, grit and resilience to help vulnerable women find their freedom, joining modern-day abolitionists with the same mission. 🍓

Julia Flynn Siler is a *New York Times* bestselling author and journalist. For more information, please visit www.juliaflynnsiler.com.

Notes

1. International Labour Organization, "40 Million in Modern Slavery and 152 Million in Child Labour Around the World," September 19, 2017; www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_574717/lang-en/index.htm.
2. International Labour Organization, *Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage Executive Summary*; www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_575540.pdf.
3. Hannah Devlin, "Trafficking Industry Hit as 'Sex Worker' Chatbots Fool Thousands," *The Guardian*, February 13, 2020; www.theguardian.com/society/2020/feb/13/sex-worker-chatbots-fool-thousands-to-hit-trafficking-industry.
4. "St Paul Federal Jury Convicts 36 in Thai Sex Trafficking Ring," *CBS Minnesota*, December 12, 2018; <https://minnesota.cbslocal.com/2018/12/12/st-paul-federal-jury-convicts-36-in-thai-sex-trafficking-ring>

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