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# Insightful and Evocative “Working Girls” Photos Discovered in the Bay Area

BY RACHEL RALPH ([HTTPS://WWW.SFSTATION.COM/AUTHOR/RKRALPH/](https://www.sfstation.com/author/rkralph/)) | NOVEMBER 10, 2018, 11:09 AM

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On November 15th, Serge Sorokko Gallery will open *Working Girls: An American Brothel Circa 1892*, an exhibition of photographs from an upscale brothel in Reading, Pennsylvania taken by American photographer William I. Goldman. In conjunction with the release of the book of the same title by Robert Flynn Johnson, the gallery has chosen works from over two hundred vintage photographs in a presentation seeking to highlight the culture, sociology, and fashion of the period.

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with no exact historical references as to the identities of their inhabitants, these photographs provide a glimpse into the intimate lives of these women. They are not overtly erotic, but rather, the images capture daily activities; at rest or play. I was fortunate to be able to ask Johnson and the owner of the gallery, Serge Sorokko, a few questions about the formation of the exhibition and how they were able to make such critical photo selections.



**You originally found these images here in the Bay Area, in Concord, but they depict an upscale brothel in Pennsylvania. Do you know how they made their way west sometime in the last century?**

**Robert Flynn Johnson:** The woman I purchased the images from mentioned that her husband had acquired them at a gun show in Cincinnati, Ohio the previous year. Sadly, her husband died shortly after, leaving her to dispose of the collection. Apart from that, the journey of the images from Reading, Pennsylvania to Cincinnati, Ohio remains unknown.

**You commented on the need to find out the story behind these images, the story of who these people actually were and how they actually lived. Were you able to find any**

**particularly interesting histories while doing this research?**

None of the women in the photographs have been identified; not their backgrounds, family histories, hopes or fears. We can speculate that these women were trying to get by as best as they could. With limited educational opportunities and the expectancy of stability through marriage and children, lower-class women of the times were presented with inherently limited options.



**There is a long history of sex work in the Bay Area, which is still a contentious topic to this day. Do you feel that there is any difference for sex workers because of their locale? Is there anything particularly unique about the experience of the workers in these photographs? Do you think any of these particularities still exist today?**

There are most certainly differences that exist due to diverse locales. From poverty-stricken areas to societies where women are treated poorly, these factors can lead women to resort to such work out of desperation and survival. Similarly, in the Bay Area today, some women use it as a means to pay rent or because there's lucrative opportunity as an escort. The women in the images resemble farm girls or immigrant women who had limited options. They could work ten hours a day in a factory, restaurant or hotel for \$1 and be sexually harassed or assaulted by their bosses, or they could work as a prostitute with a female boss, be protected, wear nice

their bosses, or they could work as a prostitute with a female boss, be protected, wear nice clothing and be decently paid. Is this unique to the women in to photographs? No. Many of these particularities still exist today, especially in poor countries – it all comes down to economics.



### **Who was William Goldman?**

William (Billy) Goldman (1856-1922) was a distinguished Reading, Pennsylvania photographer. I connected with a Reading historian who collected this information from a self-portrait included in the images. In 1876, Goldman became an apprentice in photography, and worked for several Reading photographers over the next fifteen years before creating his own business in the city that he maintained until his death. From serving as treasurer of the Photographer's Association of the Middle Atlantic States, a 32-degree Mason, a Shriner and a member of the Elks and an Odd Fellow, Goldman was a pillar of society and adored by many. From the collection of photographs, Goldman's everyday contradiction is clear. He desired to artistically explore the female form in a thoroughly repressed society that would've been scandalized by his images.





**How did you go about selecting the images for this show?**

**Serge Sorokko:** I wanted the photographs in the exhibition to include some of the most ravishing images that expressed sensuality, emotionality, elegance and a sense of fashion. These striking images are not erotic, but rather insightful and evocative. William Goldman loved and celebrated his subjects and I attempted to select images that best reflected his artistic vision.

**What is your interest in these photographs? I know your wife, Tatiana, has a long history in fashion, is that where your interest was piqued?**

I immediately recognized the photograph's esthetic and historical significance, as well as their extraordinary rarity. Tatiana has co-curated the exhibition, and, indeed, the fashion aspect of the photographs both intrigued and impressed her. She has selected images that depict women in various stages of undress, often using clothing as a powerful instrument of seduction.

**Working Girls: An American Brothel Circa 1892, Photographs by William Goldman**  
(<https://www.sorokko.com/exhibitions>)

November 15th – December 9th, 2018

at Serge Sorokko Gallery (<https://goo.gl/maps/1bHh6ZJJbP2>), 345 Sutter Street, San Francisco

Open Monday – Saturday, 10am – 6pm

TAG: Serge Sorokko Gallery (<https://www.sfstation.com/tag/serge-sorokko-gallery/>), working girls  
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