*With Good Reason* Radio Show Transcript

Heather Branstetter interviewed by Sarah McConnell and produced by Kelley Libby

“The Madam Next Door”

The town of Wallace, Idaho is like a lot of other mining towns in the West. It’s small, with old brick buildings and a beautiful mountain backdrop. But there’s something that makes Wallace a little different from other towns. Until 1991, prostitution was practiced openly and even embraced by the townspeople. I’m Sarah McConnell and this is *With Good Reason*.

SM: Today, Wallace, Idaho is home to a bordello museum which is housed in a former brothel. Heather Branstetter grew up in Wallace, where until 1991 prostitution was effectively decriminalized. She’s now a professor of English, Rhetoric, and Humanistic Studies at Virginia Military Institute and she’s been interviewing townspeople in Wallace uncovering what it was about that community that made it so accepting of its madams. Heather, tell me about the tiny town of Wallace, Idaho. It was a mining town, was it silver?

HB: Yeah, silver and lead and zinc. And there’s still a lot of silver there, but it’s just a matter of it being economical to extract.

SM: And you grew up in that area.

HB: I did, I was born and raised there. I graduated high school in 1999. And while I was growing up, the town was about a thousand people and now it’s dropped down in size to about seven or eight hundred.

SM: The amazing thing about Wallace is that the brothels and the whole culture of brothels in this tiny, mountain, beautiful turn of the century town, the brothels were embraced and even sort of regulated by the town.

HB: Yeah, that’s right. So Wallace wasn’t unusual in that it had brothels because most mining camps did, especially up through World War I or so. At that point in time the War Department decided to try and shut down all the red light districts, and many red light districts across the country didn’t make it through the time. The War Department was very concerned that the red light districts were spreading venereal disease and during that time Wallace did shut down for a little while or at least operated more quietly.

SM: What were the names of some of the most well known brothels?

HB: Well, the most well known brothel was called the Lux and that brothel was run by a madam called Dolores Arnold and she’s the one who everybody talks about. She was very beloved and she later expanded into another house called the Luxette. And there was also the Jade Rooms, the U&I Rooms, the Arment Rooms, and those were around for a long time.

SM: You were a very small girl before the brothels were finally shut down, but your father and grandmother had also lived in Wallace.

HB: Yeah, that’s right, my grandma was born and raised there. Dad lived most of his life and graduated from there. We had a lot of other family, too, in the area as well.

SM: What do you think they thought of the brothels?

HB: For most of the people growing up in Wallace it wasn’t any, we didn’t really recognize that we were any different than anybody else, basically.

SM: You were just a nice, small mining town.

HB: Yeah and it wasn’t as though the houses were like operating out in the open. It wasn’t as though the women were out soliciting on the streets or, you know, hanging out in the bars a bunch. It was just kind of like, you knew where to go, and we kids, you know, when I was a kid we definitely gossiped about it. I remember going to the city pool and someone would point at a window on the way there and be like, “that’s where so and so house is.” The kids had a fascination with it in the same way, I think, as some of the adults did, who weren’t actually involved.

But during the [19]70s and [19]80s there were a good deal of people from around town, like high school people, who would go hang out, especially at the U&I Rooms. They were pretty good friends with some of the women who worked up there. And Lee was the madam that ran that house and she had this idea that the way you keep your employees happy is to help them have a social life and not feel isolated from the rest of the community. But it was just sort of something that you came to understand was a part of the town and then what a lot of people told me was that they didn’t realize our town was any different until later. Of course, my friends and I, my generation, we realized it when we were about ten or eleven, because that was when the FBI came in and there was a big deal, it was a big deal.

SM: Do you remember the time the FBI came in, was it one big raid?

HB: It was one big raid, it was actually the biggest raid in the Rocky Mountain region, ever. So I don’t remember the raid itself. I remember the protests afterward. People took to the streets to protest the FBI’s presence and thought that it was really overkill the way that they’d come in. And this was around the same time as Ruby Ridge, and Waco, I believe, so it was kind of all wrapped up together.

SM: And what happened with the raid? This was when the brothels were completely shut down. Presumably, there were no brothels after that?

HB: Well, so I should say, most people in Wallace don’t believe that the FBI raid was actually responsible for shutting down the sex work and the sex industry there. Basically most of the houses were shut down before. I think that they shut down in connection with the FBI actually arriving in town and they were in an undercover sort of way surveiling. But Dolores’s houses shut down because she had Alzheimer’s, and Ginger and the women from the Oasis left around the same time and that was in 1988. So there was really only one house in operation; it was the U&I Rooms, and that one continued until just a couple of weeks before the raid.

SM: So why did Wallace embrace the sex industry for so long? Why was it any different than any other tiny, successful mining town?

HB: Well, I think that’s it’s the power of small talk and gossip and storytelling with a moral component. So people were repeating phrases over and over again until they sort of stuck. So some examples of those are, “oh well, live and let live, we’re an old West mining town,” or “the houses prevent rapes and they serve a community need because we can’t have these miners with their needs unmet running around town and we need to keep the quote good girls safe.” Things like that would circulate around town and it cultivated pretty widespread acceptance of the girls and their business.

After World War II, you see the madams really pretty proactively connecting themselves to civic values and to philanthropy and then you hear phrases like, “oh they gave a lot back to the community,” or “they take care of the kids.” You hear people repeat that they gave money for band uniforms. What you don’t hear as much and what I think was really important was that Dolores also gave food baskets to the families of the miners who died in a mining accident during the [19]70s. People really liked the idea that the madams were giving back to the community and taking care of the kids in ways that women traditionally do.

SM: Is it true that the police actually sort of regulated, as opposed to police the brothels?

HB: Oh yeah, that’s right. They supported the industry. So basically, when the women came into town to work in Wallace they had to go to the Sheriff’s Office to get fingerprinted and have a background check run, and they had their photos taken. And so I have copies of those files from 1952 until 1973. So you can see they made notations of the women’s appearance. They made notations of their history and their background, who they were associated with. They wanted to make sure: a) that they weren’t associated with organized crime; b) that they were over twenty-one. They also wanted to find out if according to their rap sheet, whether or not they’d run into some sort of trouble. It was also to communicate with other police departments across the country, too, in case there was some kind of case they could assist on.

SM: Wasn’t there an FBI background check on some of them?

HB: Yeah, that’s right. Most of them were corroborated by the FBI, they would take the files and they would send a copy into the FBI and I think also to immigration as well.

SM: Isn’t that crazy?

HB: Yeah, yeah, so Hoover’s stamp is actually on these files, I mean it wasn’t as though—it was very openly operated—it wasn’t as though anyone was pretending that it didn’t exist.

SM: And what do you think the Sheriff’s Office got out of this, favors in exchange for this sort of cooperation with the brothels, or money, or what?

HB: Throughout time you can really document the way that the madams and the houses interacted with the other civic organizations and government around town, right, so in the very beginning in the mining camp days, the saloonkeepers were sort of supervisors and they served that protective role, to some extent, and then they were also directories for people coming into town. Then after you had more regulation, after people got scared, after there was a moral panic about trafficking, and after there were fears about venereal disease, then it shifted a little bit so that the town’s health and sanitation committee was really more involved with the brothels. And at that point, the women were paying to say, pave the streets and create a sewer system. So basically there was a reciprocal exchange all throughout history.

SM: You’re saying the madams were big businesswomen in the small town.

HB: Yes, and they especially rose into power post-WWII, so previous to WWII, the madams had limited power, but after WWII when Dolores Arnold and Luoma DelMonte (she ran the Jade), when they came on the scene they were able to really become united with the city government. And it wasn’t the case that bribery needed to happen. That was the federal government’s allegation in 1991, that basically the women and also the bartenders and bar owners who were running gambling out of the back rooms were bribing the sheriff, but that would be a misunderstanding of the case. Basically, the sheriff wouldn’t get elected unless they were able to say, “no I’m not going to shut down the houses.” The mayors wouldn’t be elected unless they said, “yeah, we’re going to let the houses continue to run the way they have been.”

SM: Are many of the women still alive?

HB: Yeah, yeah. The women who were the last madams are around 70 years old. Grandmothers, basically. Then some of the other women are still rather, you know, still rather young.

SM: Where did they go? What jobs did they find?

HB: In the service industry, mostly, so, like food service. Some of them moved to Nevada, because as you know brothels are still legal in most counties in Nevada, or many counties in Nevada. But yeah some of them, I think, retired, too. So... But others of them have had hard lives. I know one woman was in and out of jail afterwards and I know another woman has suffered from some addiction. So there’s that, too.

SM: Who were the women? Were they local?

HB: No, Wallace didn’t like the idea that local girls would become sex workers. So even though people talk about it like, “it was a business like any other,” the reality is, it was mostly women from out of town who were on what was called “the circuit.” The miners during the [19]50s, 60s, 70s, into the 80s, were more transient, traveling from town to town doing their specialty jobs. And the women did that too. They would travel from town to town depending on where business was booming more.

SM: And what about the men, these were mostly miners working fairly nearby, or did they come from far and wide, many states over, other than the transient miners?

HB: It was both the local men as well as truckers, men from Canada, some universities from around the area, so it was really a wide variety of people.

SM: Was there violence, and was there violence toward the women?

HB: Sometimes. The fact that the police were regulating meant that they did have some level of protection, but it also doesn’t mean that things didn’t happen sometimes. One of the women I talked to, she was a maid up in the houses and she spoke about the madam’s husband or boyfriend coming in and he pushed her down the stairs trying to get at the money that was in the lock boxes. And she was pregnant at the time. She ended up in the hospital as a result. And so there were definitely incidents that happened.

SM: So now that you’ve learned from a grown-up’s perspective and done all the oral history recordings and research, what’s your take on this tiny town where you grew up?

HB: I think there was really a reciprocal relationship and I think that the situation in Wallace was much better than in many areas. On the other hand, I also believe that there were lots of women who came from really rough backgrounds and who were probably coerced into sex work or were perhaps made vulnerable to a pimp, by running away from home, and ended up in Wallace in that way. So some of the girls had pimps who were in other cities, which doesn’t make any sense. If you’ve got a madam then you don’t need protection from a pimp. So I have a lot of, I just have really mixed feelings about it, I guess. I don’t think that freely choosing to engage in sex work is a moral failing, and I think that most of the town would agree with me on that.

I think that what I really noticed was: if we want to answer this larger question about how we create culture and how we change culture and how we negotiate our values, then we should really take a look at these seemingly insignificant things that we say to each other in passing, or little stories that we tell each other that have this moral content to it. One thing that you’ll notice if you spend any time in Wallace is that people are great storytellers there. It’s the way that the town transmitted—and continues to transmit—information about who we are and how it is that we come to a collective sense of ourselves.