

Filthy Publicity:

Jennie Lee and the Exotic Dancers League

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On July 18th, 1955, nine burlesque queens met in a stuffy back room to form The Exotic Dancers League (EDL).¹ Dressed symbolically in topcoats, despite the warm temperature, the women led, by Jennie Lee, “pouted publicly,” threatening a “cover up” strike if their demands were unmet.² In the *Los Angeles Times*, the meeting was described as “colorful but well-balanced” consisting of “three redheads, three blonds, three brunettes.”³ The *Long Beach Press-Telegram* described the meeting as “Strippers Grind Out Pay Protest.”⁴ The same newspaper would go on to describe Jennie Lee as “The Bazoom Girl”, disclosing her measurements as 42-30-36.⁵ Thus was the Exotic Dancers League introduced to the world.

The EDL's demands were numerous. Their primary demand was to raise the minimum wage of strippers from \$85 a week, which was the lowest pay for any large city for striptease.⁶ But that was not their only concern. The *Los Angeles Herald Express* reported: "

A quite personable blonde, Jennie Lee is the founder and president of the group...She told her sister dancers that dressing rooms are too crowded, there is no suitable place to spend time between shows, and that owners of some clubs expect the girls to mingle with patrons between shows to promote bar business. That, she said, is kaput.⁷

In addition, many of the strippers spoke out against a common practice in cheaper clubs "which get waitresses and other untrained girls, lead them to the wings and shout: 'Now,

¹ Sometimes called the "Exotique Dancers League" and the "League of Exotic Dancers."

²"L.A. Strippers Protest Their Low Take-off Pay; Burlesque Queens, in Organization Meeting, Threaten 'Cover Up' Strike Over Grievances," *Los Angeles Times*, July 19, 1955.

³ *Los Angeles Times*, July 19, 1955.

⁴ "Stripteasers Grind Out Pay Protest," *The Long Beach Press-Telegram* (Long Beach, CA), July 18, 1955.

⁵ "Girls Demand Pay Raise or No Stripping," *The Long Beach Press-Telegram*, July 19, 1955.

⁶ *Los Angeles Times*, July 19, 1955.

⁷ "Strippers Stage 'Cover Up' Strike," *Los Angeles Herald Express*, July 19, 1955.

go!""⁸ These girls were paid far less than the \$85 minimum. The EDL wanted special training and apprenticeships for feature burlesque dancers.⁹

The Exotic Dancers League was not by definition a union. Missing from documented EDL history are the strikes, picketing, and negotiations that normal unions forge and strengthen themselves by. Instead the EDL is simply credited with bringing striptease artists together and establishing long bonds of friendship through its membership. Jennie Lee herself is usually credited with having a mastery of publicity, a seemingly trivial talent when compared to the great labor leaders to which we are accustomed. Decades after the league's formation, Vice President Rosie "Novita" Mitchell writes: "The EDL was formed only because Jennie Lee enjoyed publicity and our 'ploy' was getting higher wages."¹⁰

Instead of large public protests and meaningful picketing, the EDL's protests consisted of calling newspapers to meetings and Jennie Lee making appearances in court cases and legislative hearings. It is easy to overlook the real impact of the EDL on striptease when publicity was its chief asset and weapon of choice. It was through the use of publicity, however, that the EDL ultimately succeeded in its goals. Publicity allowed the EDL to evolve over the years, from a group of attention-seeking strippers, to a force of change, improving striptease's public image and ultimately, their working conditions. Using the Exotic Dancers League, and the publicity it received, Jennie Lee enacted positive change in the world of striptease by drawing attention to much-needed reforms and showcasing striptease and its dancers in a positive light.

⁸ *Los Angeles Herald Express*, July 19, 1955.

⁹ *Los Angeles Times*, July 19, 1955.

¹⁰ "Interview with EDL Vice President Rosie Mitchell Aka "Novita"" e-mail interview by author, February 20, 2011.

Historiography and Historical Context

What serves as the body of burlesque and striptease historiography consists of works written by an eclectic group of scholars, with backgrounds in theater, visual culture and American Culture Studies. Their focus ranges from an overall history of burlesque to the cultural motivations and meanings of burlesque and striptease itself. Of these scholars, only one has written about Jennie Lee and the Exotic Dancers League.

There is little to nothing written about the Exotic Dancers League in history. Much of the information written on the EDL is incidental, consisting of a few sentences written when describing the life of Jennie Lee. Jennie Lee also has very little written on her. Though she is known, what is written about her are often small snippets found in compiled books on the lives of great burlesque dancers of the time. The lack of history written about Jennie Lee and the EDL is indicative of the work done on the history of striptease. Kirsten Pullen of the University of Calgary writes:

While there's certainly no shortage of first-person accounts of working in striptease and burlesque...they offer little critical analysis or historical context...Despite the overwhelming numbers of primary sources, burlesque historians and striptease scholars have few secondary critical texts with which to engage.¹¹

One of the foremost historians on the subject of burlesque is Robert C. Allen. Allen received his Masters and PhD from the University of Iowa. He is currently a professor of American Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Allen's chief contribution to burlesque history is his book *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and*

¹¹ Kirsten Pullen, "Book Review: Striptease: The Untold History of The Girlie Show," *Theater Journal* 58, no. 2 (2006): 381.

American Culture, in which Allen covers the period of time from the beginning of burlesque, up until the 1930s and the rise of striptease.

Allen writes that it was in the mid-1920s that striptease, burlesque's lasting icon, became a standard feature.¹² The first striptease is attributed to Mae Dix, who removed her collar at the end of a number before she was completely off stage. An audience member demanded an encore, and she reemerged, removing her cuffs. Morton Minsky, of the famous Minsky brothers of New York, remembers: "Between the heat and the applause, Mae lost her head, went back for a short chorus, and unbuttoned her bodice as she left the stage again."¹³

Striptease saw a sharp rise in popularity in the 1930s despite the difficult times of the Great Depression. People were looking for "cheaper" forms of entertainment. Entrepreneurs who were running "lower forms" of entertainment, like burlesque, took advantage of the failing forms of entertainment, such as vaudeville. Using the decline in popularity of failing forms of entertainment, entrepreneurs of burlesque were able to bolster their ranks with higher class performers who were without work, and to acquire bigger and better theaters. Thus, by 1932, there were 150 strippers employed in burlesque, and by 1936, burlesque had the lowest unemployment rate in entertainment, "with virtually no first-class burlesque talent out of work."¹⁴

According to Allen, burlesque's death, at least in New York, began in 1937. Mayor Fiorello La Guardia and his commissioner of licenses Paul Moss, had waged a war against burlesque for years. Their efforts culminated on May 2nd, 1937 when Moss

¹² Robert Clyde Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 243.

¹³ Allen, 248.

¹⁴ Allen, 250.

refused renewals and issuances of licenses for all burlesque theaters in New York.

Despite the Minsky's appeals to the state supreme court regarding Moss' refusal, they subsequently lost the appeal. Moss was so effective that he barred the word "burlesque" and "Minsky" from use, threatening that no one would be issued licenses if these words were used.¹⁵

Allen writes that the essence of burlesque can be seen in the women of burlesque. Early in burlesque history, women embodied "the transgressive power of the union of charismatic female sexuality and inversive insubordination."¹⁶ The display of the uncovered female body changed all this. "Once the 'cootch' dance and striptease were introduced into the burlesque program, the aggressive insubordination of earlier decades dropped away, and performers became objects of erotic display only."¹⁷ Women who were once powerful figures of the stage, smart, bawdy and funny, were reduced to silent sexual objects once their bodies became the focus of their performance.

Striptease did not save burlesque. Allen argues that ultimately striptease had a negative effect on burlesque, and subsequently was burlesque's last dying breath. He sums it up as follows:

The true strip was burlesque's last-ditch and ultimately unsuccessful strategy to stay alive. It represents not the symbol for burlesque's golden age - although it is remembered as such - but rather its ultimate failure to sustain a performance medium sufficiently distinct in its appeal from other forms to draw an audience. The completely revealed female form was twentieth-century burlesque's only trump card. When it was finally played, authorities in New York City moved to close down the game. Even where strip-oriented burlesque evaded closure, it merely briefly forestalled rather than prevented the form's institutional demise.¹⁸

¹⁵ Allen, 257.

¹⁶ Allen, 281

¹⁷ Harvey Green, "Review: Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture by Robert C. Allen," *The New England Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (March 1992): 148.

¹⁸ Allen, 244.

Another scholar who has done a vast amount of work on the subject of striptease is Rachel Shteir. Shteir is an Associate Professor at DePaul University. She has taught at Yale, Carnegie Mellon University, New York University, and the Columbia University School of the Arts. She received her MFA and DFA in Dramaturgy and Dramatic Criticism from the Yale School of Drama. Her contribution to the history of striptease is her 2004 book *Striptease: The Untold History of the Girlie Show*.¹⁹

Shteir writes that the nude aspect of striptease ultimately hindered the strength of its union during the 1930s. Thus, it was unable to receive protection from the New Deal legislation dealing with industrial regulation. Strippers suffered heavily without this protection. While successful strippers made about \$60 a week,

Most performers made much less, and the work week lasted as long as 70 or 80 hours. Days off did not exist. The performers rarely received extra money for the midnight shows the management called upon them to do. Managers were required neither to notify performers of the show's closing nor to pay for the transportation. Sometime, if money was short, the performer's pay envelope would include an IOU instead of the money owed to her, and for the most part she accepted this treatment for fear of being blacklisted.²⁰

At first, the burlesque performers sought protection under the wing of larger unions. Thomas Phillips, the president of the Burlesque Artists' Association (BAA) wanted more autonomy to establish a minimum wage. The goal was \$17.50 a week for stock performances and \$20.00 for work on the road. After the BAA was unable join a larger union, it received its own charter, bylaws and union in 1934. BAA attempted to control the burlesque industry with the hopes of cleaning it up and preventing outside

¹⁹ Rachel Shteir, *Striptease: the Untold History of the Girlie Show* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004)

²⁰ Shteir, 158.

intervention and eventual shutdown of burlesque theaters.²¹ This ended in failure, as La Guardia banned burlesque from New York in 1937.

Shteir argues that unionization on the west coast had a detrimental effect on burlesque theaters. The striptease dancers had difficulty getting representation because unions were hesitant to represent them. During the later 1930's, the BAA operated under the Associated Actors and Artistes of America (AAA). However in 1957, the AAA revoked the BAA's charter, reasoning that the field was "insufficiently organized."²²

The American Guild of Variety Artists (AGVA) stepped in to fill the gap that the BAA left in 1957 by creating a specific branch in the guild for burlesque comics and strippers. AGVA succeeded in winning higher wages for burlesque strippers, but, ironically, this "crippled" burlesque in California. Shteir argues that the increased wages to strippers were too much for the burlesque theaters to pay and subsequently put them out of business. She writes: "The executive director of the AGVA, Manny Tyler said, 'Strippers represent our minority but they're bringing home 95% of the bacon.' The following year, a group of strippers in Los Angeles demanded a raise, which put many burlesque theaters out of business."²³

The BAA also sought to counter anti-burlesque prejudice during the 1930s, which was difficult considering the increase of obscenity trials and arrests. This was exacerbated during the 1950s, when an increase in police raids and the recession made it difficult for striptease. Strippers were portrayed in newspapers as greedy, doll-like "gold diggers" after shiny ornaments. This was exacerbated by strippers themselves playing into the stereotype, giving interviews where they said "I won't marry a poor schnook for

²¹ Shteir. 159.

²² Shteir, 294.

²³ Shteir, 294.

the love...I love dough."²⁴ Striptease continued to be seen by the public as filth, practiced by immoral women.

Shteir's assertion that striptease was an emancipatory practice for women is the source of much disagreement from her reviewers. Victoria Olwell, a professor of English literature at the University of Virginia writes that Shteir uses the idea of Victorian era social and sexual repression fueling the need for expression through striptease. Olwell writes: "[Shteir's] eagerness to avoid the by now conventional portrait of striptease as a degradation for women leads to an opposite and even less nuanced depiction of it as a triumph for women in a sexist world."²⁵ She reasons: "To speak of conventions governing women is, moreover, is to forget that there were different conventions for different women."²⁶ Despite this, Olwell writes that: "'Striptease' offers a richly detailed survey of strip acts, performers and managers from the 1920s through the 1960s, tracing the changes in performance style and cultural reception and documenting striptease's influence on Broadway, film and popular music."²⁷

Ben Urish is the only scholar to have written about Jennie Lee and the Exotic Dancers League. He was in contact with Jennie Lee in the final years of her life. Dr. Urish is a professor of cultural studies at Michigan State University. He has a Master's Degree in Cultural Anthropology and a PhD in American Cultural Studies from Bowling Green State University. Urish writes that striptease rose in popularity after World War II as burlesque declined. Thus, though striptease dancers were once in a supporting role in

²⁴ Shteir, 263.

²⁵ Victoria Olwell, "Conceptual Bust; Book's View of Striptease as Feminist Triumph Ignores Convention--and History," *Chicago Tribune*, December 26, 2004.

²⁶ Olwell, 2004.

²⁷ Olwell, 2004.

burlesque, they rose in power and eminence after burlesque and vaudeville sank in popularity.²⁸

According to Urish, the decline of burlesque, though initially beneficial to striptease, ultimately separated striptease from the “support networks the burlesque circuits and booking agencies had provided.”²⁹ He continues: “This coupled with the bias against striptease kept them from being treated like other cabaret entertainers, even though they signed contracts through the American Guild of Variety Artists Union.”³⁰

Regarding the Exotic Dancers League and Jennie Lee, Urish writes: “The struggles of the Exotic Dancers League are relevant because they show the practitioners of striptease actively empowering themselves in 'real life,' while in some instances, their concurrent performances were narratives of self-empowerment as well.”³¹ These struggles stemmed from a belief by the performers that they were being taken advantage of. To combat the exploitation, Jennie Lee formed the Exotic Dancers League, which, according to Urish, fought and won a series of battles involving higher salaries, box office percentages, and improvements in working conditions.³² With the decline of striptease, the EDL’s power declined as well and Urish writes: “The EDL was then transformed into a sort of nostalgic club for retired performers.”

Urish’s account of Jennie Lee and the EDL raises several questions. Sections of his information are based on conversations and interviews with Jennie Lee and Dixie Evans. These sections are difficult to substantiate, as much of Urish’s EDL related

²⁸ Ben Urish, “Narrative Striptease in the Nightclub Era,” *The Journal of American Culture* 27, no. 2 (June 2004): 158.

²⁹ Ben Urish, “The Exotic Dancers League – Burlesque Hall of Fame,” Burlesque Hall of Fame, accessed April 04, 2011, <http://burlesquehall.com/2010/11/the-exotic-dancers-league/>.

³⁰ Ben Urish, “The Exotic Dancers League – Burlesque Hall of Fame,” Burlesque Hall of Fame, accessed April 04, 2011, <http://burlesquehall.com/2010/11/the-exotic-dancers-league/>.

³¹ Urish, 159.

³² Urish, 159-160

information lacks references and notation. In addition, a certain amount of bias must be taken into account, as the founder of the EDL was recounting the EDL's glory days and victories. Thus, though Urish's information on the EDL and Jennie Lee is extremely interesting, because of the lack of evidentiary material, other research must be done to verify his scholarship regarding the successes of Jennie Lee and the EDL.

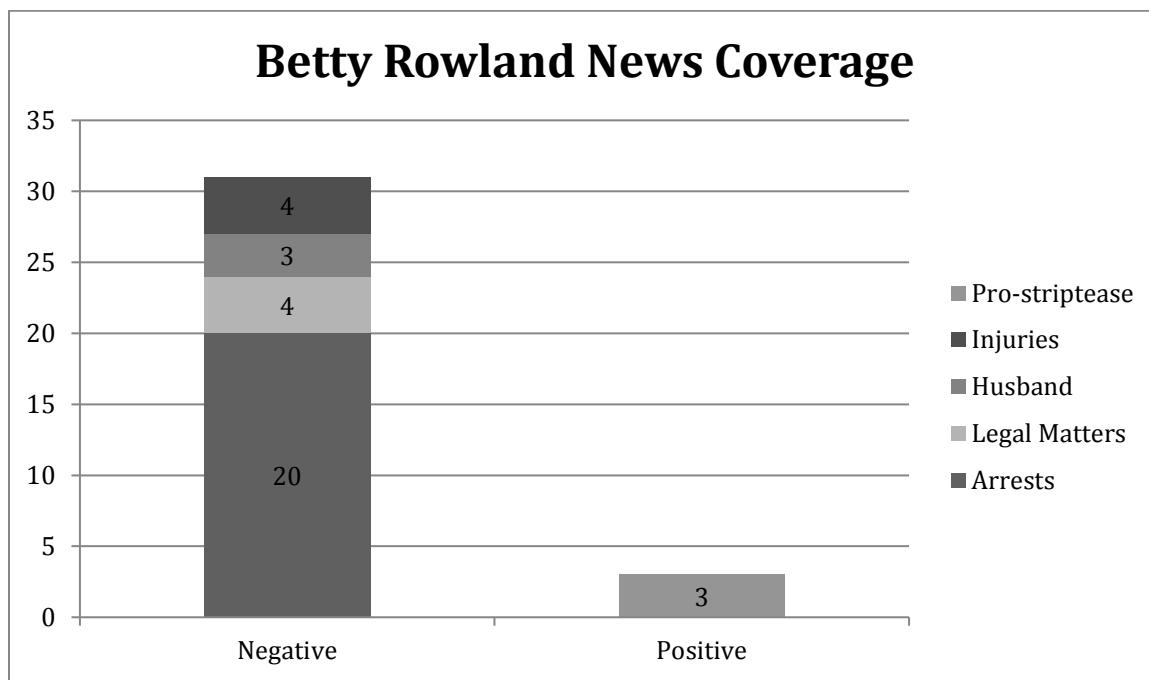
Betty Rowland and Bad Publicity

Striptease's negative stigma can be traced through the newspaper articles written. Before Jennie Lee and the EDL, a vast majority of the articles dealt with negative aspects of striptease. Arrests, assault, and lawsuits were commonplace in newspaper headlines regarding striptease artists. This is evident in the publicity that stripper Betty Rowland received in the years before the formation of the EDL. An overwhelming number of the articles about Betty Rowland were negative. She is portrayed as a person of poor character, an aging stripper, and was described as being arrested and involved in bad and scandalous relationships. The publicity that Betty Rowland received is representative of the negative stigma attached to striptease as a whole.

There are several ways to gauge the type of publicity Betty Rowland, and striptease in general, received. Analyzing the nature of the articles written about Betty Rowland shows that many of the articles dealt with negative issues. A majority of the newspaper articles covered her arrests. In 34 newspaper articles related to her, 20 of the articles (59%) dealt with her arrests.³³ Four related to other legal matters, including her

³³ *Los Angeles Times*, July 16, 1946; *Oakland Tribune*, July 17, 1946; *The Bakersfield Californian*, December 6th, 1952; *Los Angeles Times*, July 17, 1953; *Los Angeles Times*, December, 5, 1952; *The*

involvement in a divorce, failure to receive payment, and her failure to pay back rent (12%). She was also mentioned in relation to her husband, Gus Schilling. In one instance, her husband was arrested for a DUI and in the other instance, her husband beat her and she filed charges (9%). A small percentage of the articles dealt with injuries she incurred while performing and unfavorable reviews of her legitimate performances (12%). The percentage of positive news stories about Betty Rowland was only at 9%, with 3 articles out of 34.



The articles dealing with Rowland's arrests span several decades. One of the first news stories mentioning Betty Rowland came out in 1939. A group of burlesque

Bakersfield Californian, May 6, 1952; *Oakland Tribune*, November 24, 1952; *Los Angeles Times*, January 14, 1952; *Los Angeles Times*, April 5th, 1952; *The Bakersfield Californian*, November 15, 1952; *The Independent*, May 6, 1952; *Los Angeles Times*, November 15, 1952; *The Independent*, July 16, 1946; *Los Angeles Times*, November 28, 1939; *Oakland Tribune*, December 1, 1939; *Los Angeles Times*, November 29, 1939; *Los Angeles Times*, November 22, 1939; *Los Angeles Times*, November 24, 1939; *Los Angeles Times*, November 21, 1939; *Los Angeles Times*, November 30, 1939.

performers, a majority of them strippers, were arrested and charged with performing an indecent show. There are several negative aspects of the news coverage covering this arrest and trial. First, all of the strippers and comedians had their full names and ages listed in the articles. This allowed those arrested to be identified as a form of public stigma. The accused were identified in a majority of articles in this matter. And in all the articles, Betty Rowland was mentioned by name and age, and she was sometimes interviewed.

The stripteasers were vilified in the newspapers. In an article run by the *Oakland Tribune* covering this arrest, the dancers "threw honeyed smiles at the three men on the municipal court jury" during the trial.³⁴ The jurors responded to the attention and "fidgeted, just as they had done the past week..."³⁵ Betty Rowland herself was quoted in several newspapers. Described as "pretty Betty Rowland," she defended her costume, stating "That's a costume -- my costume... that's what I dance in and I consider it perfectly adequate."³⁶ In contrast, the costume is described as "two patches of cloth and a gilded rope."³⁷

Rowland's most dramatic and notable arrest occurred in 1952. This arrest was notable because it was a highly publicized arrest and trial. Nine of the articles regarding to her arrests deal specifically with this incident, with a tenth article being published in 1953 regarding the 1952 arrest and conviction. Out of these ten articles, six mention Rowland 's full name in the headline. This is interesting because it indicates that at this point Betty Rowland was a well-known public figure, considering only thirteen years

³⁴ "Strip Tease Girls Convicted in L.A.," *The Oakland Tribune*, December 1, 1939.

³⁵ *Oakland Tribune*, 1939.

³⁶ *Oakland Tribune*, 1939.

³⁷ *Oakland Tribune*, 1939.

earlier her name was on a list of miscellaneous strippers who were arrested. In addition, the headlines did not portray Rowland in a positive light, reading: "Betty Rowland Gets 120-Day Jail Sentence,"³⁸ "Betty Rowland, Stripper, Convicted,"³⁹ and "Betty Rowland in Tears as She Gets Jail Term."⁴⁰

Another interesting facet of these articles is that Betty Rowland's age, once again, becomes a topic of discussion. Nine of the ten articles regarding her arrest state her age as 35-37, a continuing trend from the articles written about her first arrest in 1939. Her age plays a more important role in this arrest, however, because Rowland uses her age to plead leniency for her sentencing. Her attorney, Jerome May, argued that Rowland "is physically unable to do variety any more – she's 36 years old...and anyway, she doesn't want to. She wants to go into the perfume business in Los Angeles with her sister."⁴¹ This plea was mentioned in the newspaper, possibly to highlight how pathetic Rowland's situation was, or perhaps to draw attention to Rowland being an aging stripper.

In the end, the plea did little to aid Rowland's case with the judge. The judge handed down his ruling after giving Rowland and the courtroom a 20-minute lecture:

Psychiatrists say burlesque and peep shows increase perversion... Young boys, perverts and sexual maniacs come into a theater to see such performances which arouse erotic feelings and lead to lascivious conduct. Human scum go to these places. These people knew what they were doing – Miss Rowland has been at it for 35 years and earns \$1000 a month at it.⁴²

Thus, this was the court's view of striptease and burlesque at the time, namely that it was a major source of public filth and perversion.

³⁸ "Betty Rowland Gets 120-Day Jail Sentence," *The Bakersfield Californian*, May 6, 1952.

³⁹ "Betty Rowland, Stripper, Convicted," *Los Angeles Times*, April 5, 1952.

⁴⁰ "Betty Rowland in Tears as She Gets Jail Term," *Los Angeles Times*, November 15, 1952.

⁴¹ *Los Angeles Times*, November 15, 1952.

⁴² "Betty Rowland Gets 120-Day Jail Sentence," *The Bakersfield Californian*, May 6, 1952.

Further examination of other articles written about Rowland yield much of the same result, that striptease was considered filthy and that Rowland was portrayed as a person of poor character. The themes present in the articles dealing with her arrest continue on in other articles written about her.

In the articles dealing with Rowland's marital problems and scandalous relationships, a stark bias is shown in how she is portrayed. When Rowland's husband, Gus Schilling, was arrested for driving while intoxicated, the headline in the *L.A. Times* read: "Betty Rowland's Mate Arrested."⁴³ Thus, despite Rowland's only connection to arrest being one of association, her full name still appeared in the headline. In fact, despite the fact that her name was mentioned in the headline, the only mention of Rowland is her association with Schilling and her confirmation that it was in fact her husband who was arrested.⁴⁴

When newspapers wrote about Rowland's husband assaulting her in a dressing room, the headlines read: "L.A. Burlesque Queen on Wrong End of 'Bump'"⁴⁵ and "Betty Rowland 'Bumped' in Eye: Blames Husband."⁴⁶ These headlines poke fun at Rowland's striptease career, using a 'play on words' to tie in the assault with the "bumps" in her striptease routine. *The Independent* wrote that Rowland refused to give back a cameo ring given to her by Schilling. When she reported it to the police, Rowland was not reporting or claiming. She was complaining: "She complained [to the police that] when she refused Schilling socked her and left her "screaming in agony..."⁴⁷ In the *Los*

⁴³ "Betty Rowland's Mate Arrested," *Los Angeles Times*, April 9, 1944.

⁴⁴ *Los Angeles Times*, April 9, 1944.

⁴⁵ "L.A. Burlesque Queen on Wrong End of 'Bump'" *The Independent* (Long Beach, CA), December 31, 1951.

⁴⁶ "Betty Rowland 'Bumped' in Eye: Blames Husband," *Los Angeles Times*, December 31, 1951.

⁴⁷ *The Independent* (Long Beach, CA), December 31, 1951.

Angeles Times, Rowland's full name is once again in the headline, and her age is again mentioned in the article. Rowland reportedly "had a meeting with her husband, Gus Schilling, early yesterday morning but police said his fist met her eye and she was unhappy enough about it to want him caught and prosecuted."⁴⁸ Thus, Rowland's assault was treated with humor by the newspaper and her decision to press charges was because she was "unhappy."

Also interesting are the articles dealing with her injuries. Two out of the three articles make note that her dances caused the injury, one paper writing "Betty Rowland put so much heart into her work that she bumped one of her swivel hips against a wall and took off to a hospital."⁴⁹ In *The Oakland Tribune*, Rowland was doing an "ambitious dance routine" when she was injured, implying that perhaps she herself caused her injury by pushing herself too hard on a dance.⁵⁰ In the *Los Angeles Times*, in an article titled "Betty Rowland Stricken During Her Dance Act," the paper reports that her husband "told reporters that his wife complained of her right arm being stiff after her first appearance at the club...but that she insisted on appearing in the second show."⁵¹ The article implies that, despite being hurt, Rowland continued to perform anyway, exacerbating the injury, implying that it was her fault and that she should have stopped.

Betty Rowland's full name was also used in several other headlines dealing with other scandalous situations. In December of 1954, Rowland is mentioned in a divorce contest between Owen and Ethel Dalton. Though a majority of the article does not pertain to Rowland, her name still appears in full in the headline. And when she is mentioned, it

⁴⁸ "Betty Rowland 'Bumped' in Eye: Blames Husband," *Los Angeles Times*, December 31, 1951.

⁴⁹ Paul Jones, "The Wackiest Things Happen These Days!," *The Independent* (Long Beach), December 10, 1944.

⁵⁰ "Dancer Is Injured," *Oakland Tribune*, March 3, 1944.

⁵¹ "Betty Rowland Stricken During Her Dance Act," *Los Angeles Times*, March 3, 1944.

is because she was involved with Owen Dalton, living with him as a "permanent guest."⁵² In addition, Rowland had a prior relationship with Owen Dalton, who apparently kept an apartment for her, and which she herself "conceded in a telephone conversation."⁵³ Once again, her age was also mentioned.

Perhaps the most telling of the articles is the one written on June 8, 1955 wherein Rowland is said to have been "stiffed" on payment for a performance. The headline reads: "Strip Teaser Catches Cold; Now She's All Fired Mad," 'poking fun' at the fact that someone who takes her clothes off for a living catches a cold.⁵⁴ The headline makes a point that someone who spends most of her time naked should not be upset when she catches cold. However, the headline does not refer to the main topic of the article, which is that Rowland did a show for the Burbank Junior Chamber of Commerce and was not paid. In fact, the article mentions, Rowland was so upset that she filed a complaint with the AGVA.⁵⁵

The article goes on to take on a condescending tone, giving Rowland advice on how to prevent this from happening in the future. The reporter writes: "Miss Rowland should borrow a page from the book of another great artist, one Sarah Bernhardt, who made it a practice of collecting her fee in gold before each performance just in order to avoid such contretemps."⁵⁶ Thus, instead of condemning the Chamber of Commerce for failing to pay Rowland, the author instead writes that Rowland should have collected the

⁵² "Betty Rowland Named Anew in Dalton Contest," *Los Angeles Times*, December 14, 1954.

⁵³ *Los Angeles Times*, December 14, 1954.

⁵⁴ Wood Soanes, "Curtain Calls: Strip Teaser Catches Cold; Now She's All-Fired Mad," *The Oakland Tribune* (Oakland, CA), June 8, 1955.

⁵⁵ Soanes, 1955.

⁵⁶ Soanes, 1955.

money upfront, as if alluding to the fact that she should have seen this coming, or should have been smarter about collecting the money.

The few positive articles about Rowland are only slightly positive. In an article written by Virginia MacPherson titled: "Tough on Teasers: Undue Ads Outstrip Burly," Rowland complains that models and movie stars are keeping people from going to see striptease shows. Rowland claims: "Those girls show more than we do...The worst ones are the lingerie models. Honestly, it's embarrassing. There's one corset ad that shows a girl with absolutely nothing on except a girdle."⁵⁷ Rowland continues to protest the difference in treatment between striptease dancers and the other professions, claiming: "People just naturally look down on you when they find out you're a strip-tease entertainer...but not those models who pose practically naked."⁵⁸

This article is only positive because it calls attention the stigma that stripteasers had in society. They were treated differently and were subject to a different set of laws than women in modeling or acting careers. This was inherently unfair because while they did similar things and had similar goals, striptease artists faced tougher punishment for stricter rules, while models and actresses could get away with it because they were considered "upper strata."⁵⁹

Despite Rowland's success in bringing this issue to light, much of her argument is lost in the article. She is portrayed as a stripper who was threatened by towel ads and television, seemingly innocent mediums. Her attempts to "air [her] complaint" and defend "the bump-and-grind" on the "Dollar a Minute" show came off as laughable, as

⁵⁷ Virginia MacPherson, "Tough on Teasers: Undie Ads Outstrip Burly," *The Independent* (Long Beach, CA), February 16, 1951.

⁵⁸ Virginia MacPherson, February 16, 1951

⁵⁹ Virginia MacPherson, February 16, 1951

she had to pay in order to get anyone to listen.⁶⁰ Thus, the "Dollar a Minute" show was not a soapbox upon which someone fight for striptease, but an entertaining public forum which anyone with money had access to.

Jennie Lee during the Early Years

Jennie Lee was much more successful at publicity than Betty Rowland. Even before the formation of the EDL, Lee was in papers in positive news stories, a stark contrast to the portrayal of Betty Rowland. Her arrests and interviews were publicized in much the same way as Rowland's had been. Despite the fact that Lee's coverage contained undertones of ridicule, much of the publicity she enjoyed lacked the degree of derision reserved for Rowland. In fact, the ridicule directed towards Lee in articles written about her only served to make her more popular and more likeable.

Lee enjoyed publicity on two fronts. Not only did she gain coverage for her own career, she was also the figurehead for the EDL. Hence, the EDL benefited from the good publicity that Jennie Lee acquired for herself. Coverage of the EDL and Jennie Lee served two purposes during this time. The articles written about Jennie Lee made a positive change in the public perception of strippers and striptease. The articles about the EDL served to inform the public of the problems strippers faced, allowing the public to identify with them and sympathize with their plight.

The articles written about Jennie Lee are more difficult to quantify than those of Betty Rowland. The analysis of her publicity is difficult to break down by statistics. This is because the articles written about Jennie Lee and the EDL need to be viewed

⁶⁰ Virginia MacPherson, February 16, 1951

collectively. There are only a handful of articles written about Jennie Lee herself, whereas the EDL-related articles are numerous, spanning several decades. Thus, while the number of articles written about Lee and the EDL can be used to analyze the amount of coverage they received, breaking down the articles into positive or negative categories is a bit more complicated. Articles about Jennie Lee and EDL contain a mixture of ridicule and striptease-related issues, and they sometimes refer to the need for reform. Because of this, the articles are difficult to place in a positive or negative group, because they are both. Analysis of these articles must be measured by their ability to convey the message of striptease conditions, by the number of articles, and by the topics of the articles.

The articles that mention Jennie Lee during the 50s contain a few common characteristics in the same way that Betty Rowland's coverage had specific characteristics. The most easily comparable type of articles that Lee and Rowland both received were those regarding their arrests. Of the five articles dealing with Jennie Lee's arrests for striptease, all of them are positive.⁶¹ This is because there were no articles covering Lee's actual arrests, the only coverage being the end results of her trials. Also, Lee never received jail time for her arrests, as both of her arrests ended in acquittals and rulings in her favor. Thus while Rowland received negative coverage for her arrests, her pleas for leniency, and her subsequent jail time, Lee, received positive coverage for her acquittals and victories in court.

⁶¹ "Acquittal Won by Strip-Tease Circuit Figure," *Los Angeles Times*, February 26, 1952. "42-Inch Bust Gal Up for Movie 'Censorship' Trial," *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, February 21, 1952.

"Topless Suit Trial Halted," *The San Diego Union*, October 6, 1964. "Accidental Strip Act Ruled as 'Not Lewd'" *Los Angeles Times*, October 6, 1964. "Pure Art," *Los Angeles Examiner*, February 26, 1952.

In addition, Lee's full name is not mentioned in any of the headlines, possibly because she was not well known at the time, or perhaps the articles were considered different from those concerning Rowland's arrests because there was no need to publicly stigmatize Lee. Her age is mentioned in four of the five articles, and her bust size is mentioned in two of the articles, both in positive ways. In keeping with the media perception that "younger women are better than older women," Lee's age is mentioned as 23, in comparison to Rowland's reported age of 35. Lee is portrayed as victorious, and somewhat innocent in terms of the charges against her, and as a young stripper, while Rowland is portrayed as a losing, aging, stripper. This, coupled with the reports of Lee's bust size, shows that Lee's coverage was much more positive than Rowland's.

A stark contrast can also be seen in the photographs of Lee and Rowland that accompany the articles pertaining to their arrests. A majority of Rowland's photos show her being accompanied by police officers after her arrests.⁶² Lee's arrest photos are all pictures of her smiling and shaking hands with her lawyer.⁶³ There are no pictures of her actually getting arrested or in police custody. This may be because Rowland was much more well-known than Lee and therefore her arrests made news, whereas Lee only received news coverage after her acquittals. However, the fact remains that the public was exposed to Rowland's arrest photos and Lee's smiling acquittal photos.

One of the interesting characteristics of Lee's coverage involved the attention her breasts received in the articles. In nearly every article written about Lee, her bust size, or some allusion to her large breasts, is included. In an interview given weeks before the public formation of the EDL, the journalist interviewing Lee writes: "This new star on

⁶² See Appendix Figure A1 & A2.

⁶³ See Appendix Figure A3, A4 & A5.

the bump-and-grind circuit is a size 42. Jennie, billed as 'The Bazoom Girl,' wears three tassels. They twirl clockwise and then counterclockwise."⁶⁴ In another article regarding her visit to Asia, the reporter writes: "Jennie Lee, the blond striptease dancer whose endowments have earned her professional billing as the Bazoom Girl, returned to town yesterday after a six month strip of the Far East."⁶⁵

Another interesting facet about her press coverage is how well she interacted with the reporters. Mosey writes: "Strippers usually are generous. Jennie presented to me two of her 'pasties,' all she wears above the waist. They are decorated with sequins and tassels and make dandy little ashtrays."⁶⁶ Thus, Jennie was making an effort to be liked by the press by being both charming and generous while giving them interviews.

In fact, a certain amount of chauvinism is present in some of the articles covering Jennie Lee and the EDL. Reporters often sexualized Jennie Lee and this was reflected in their articles. While this may be viewed as sexist or a form of ridicule, it often worked to Lee's benefit; she used the attention to get her message across. In an article written a few days after the first EDL meeting, a reporter did a follow up article on Lee herself. Jack Geyer, the author, writes:

In an effort to ascertain the bare facts behind the organization's [EDL] formation, I interviewed a Miss Jennie Lee, president of the league. My idea was to get Miss Lee's views on the subject. Also a view of my own. In the interest of thorough reporting I learned her measurements are 42-26-40, all of which are round numbers.⁶⁷

⁶⁴Aline Mosey, "Burlesque Star Jennie Lee Makes Bump and Grind Pay," *The San Mateo Times* (San Mateo, CA), July 2, 1955.

⁶⁵"Bazoom Girl Returns From Oriental Strip," *Los Angeles Times*, May 31, 1956.

⁶⁶Mosey, July 2, 1955.

⁶⁷ Jack Geyer, "Some Bare Facts," *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles), July 26, 1955.

This excerpt exemplifies the typical coverage Lee received regarding her body.

Oftentimes, articles contained her measurements and the reporter's (normally male) opinion of her body.

The combination of these factors resulted in good publicity for Jennie Lee. Lee was good at getting publicity because she was able to control, to some extent, the information that was written about her. Her success in court ultimately showed that she was innocent in the eyes of the court, and consequently, the eyes of the public. Most importantly, reporters liked her for a number of reasons, whether it was because of her generosity, her personality, her beauty, or her bust size. She was interesting and charismatic, and thus people liked her and wanted to read about her. Because she was well liked, she got good publicity, a great deal of attention, and great success in getting her message out.

The Exotic Dancers League

The EDL enjoyed a great deal of good coverage because of Jennie Lee's abilities. Rosie Mitchell, also known as "Novita", when asked what role the media and "exposure" played for the EDL, wrote: "Being the EDL, whenever there was a reason for the media to know about us, they would be called...for instance, the ball game in Griffith Park, which I missed, reason I can't remember, just know I wasn't in the newspaper picture and article that came out. Jennie was very good at getting publicity." ⁶⁸

⁶⁸ "Interview with EDL Vice President Rosie Mitchell Aka "Novita"" e-mail interview by author, February 20, 2011.

The EDL's ball game in Griffith Park was one of the few "fluff pieces" written about the EDL. Jennie Lee called the press to cover a staged softball game in a poorly veiled attempt to acquire good publicity.⁶⁹ The humor and chauvinism present in the Lee interviews carried over into the EDL coverage, and in some ways, was magnified. Coverage of the softball game epitomized this type of coverage and is the perfect example of how the EDL was represented in the newspapers.

The first few lines of the article set the mood for the entire article's feel. The writer reports: "the League of Exotic Dancers -- strip-teasers to you-- had tryouts yesterday for their softball team...each one figuring, of course, that's the best thing she does-- throw curves."⁷⁰ This is, of course, a reference to the curvy body of the strippers, creating a pun that is prevalent throughout the article. The striptease humor continues: "Only seven [girls] showed up. So all they had was infield. No outfielders. But who ever heard of a stripper having to play the field, anyway?"⁷¹ This is another pun, creating a play on words for the term used to refer to dating several people. A few bits of chauvinism are dispersed throughout the article. This is evidenced by the writer reporting: "With their short line-up (the fullest short line-up you ever saw), the gals got up a little scrub game. None of them could hit very well, but they look awfully good swinging."⁷² This "fluff piece" shows the general view of striptease by the newspapers, most of the striptease news filled with puns, humor, chauvinism, and condescension.

Despite this, Jennie Lee succeeded. Using publicity, Lee was able to get the message she wanted out to the public regarding striptease and striptease dancers. The

⁶⁹ See Appendix Figure A.6

⁷⁰ "Strippers Find Softball Is Quite a Grind, Too," *Los Angeles Times*, August 23, 1955.

⁷¹ "Strippers Find Softball Is Quite a Grind, Too," *Los Angeles Times*, August 23, 1955.

⁷² "Strippers Find Softball Is Quite a Grind, Too," *Los Angeles Times*, August 23, 1955.

EDL's first meeting in July 18, 1955 received coverage from at least nine California newspapers, with countless other newspapers covering the story across the nation, with some American newspapers covering the story in places like Japan.⁷³ Of course, these articles contained a good amount of humor, with creative headlines like: "Stripteasers Grind Out Pay Protest,"⁷⁴ "L.A. Strippers Demand More for Peeling,"⁷⁵ "L.A. Strippers Protest Their Low Take-off Pay."⁷⁶

In a *Los Angeles Times* article covering the first meeting, the reporter writes: "'When the minimum wage is raised, then we'll take them [the overcoats] off,' said one of the redheads in a speech."⁷⁷ It is notable that the women are identified by their hair color, not their names. The subheading following this quote was: "Good Speakers, Too." The article continued: "Some of the girls showed that they are pretty good impromptu speakers. Some of them demonstrated while talking about what they said is the big difference between striptease dancing and exhibitionism."⁷⁸ The article suggests that the reporter was surprised at the EDL members' public speaking skills, despite the fact that the EDL called a press conference to voice their purpose to the press. The quote also has a hint of condescension, as the women danced to demonstrate the difference between

⁷³ "L.A. Strippers Protest Their Low Take-off Pay; Burlesque Queens, in Organization Meeting, Threaten 'Cover Up' Strike Over Grievances," *Los Angeles Times*, July 19, 1955. "Strippers Stage 'Cover Up' Strike," *Los Angeles Herald Express*, July 19, 1955. "Exotic' Dancers Protest Wages," *The Daily Review* (Hayward, California), July 18, 1955. "Stripteasers Grind Out Pay Protest," *The Long Beach Press-Telegram*, July 18, 1955. "LA Strippers Demand More for Peeling," *The San Mateo Times*, July 19, 1955. "Strippers Planning Ways for More Pay," *The Bakersfield Californian*, July 18, 1955. "Girls Demand Pay Raise or No Stripping," *The Long Beach Press-Telegram*, July 19, 1955. "Strippers Want Extra Money, Not Clothing," *The Bakersfield Californian*, July 18, 1955. "LA Strippers Seek More Cash," *The Humboldt Standard*, June 19, 1955.

⁷⁴ "Stripteasers Grind Out Pay Protest," *The Long Beach Press-Telegram*, July 18, 1955.

⁷⁵ "LA Strippers Demand More for Peeling," *The San Mateo Times*, July 19, 1955.

⁷⁶ "L.A. Strippers Protest Their Low Take-off Pay; Burlesque Queens, in Organization Meeting, Threaten 'Cover Up' Strike Over Grievances," *Los Angeles Times*, July 19, 1955.

⁷⁷ "Strippers Stage 'Cover Up' Strike," *Los Angeles Herald Express*, July 19, 1955.

⁷⁸ "Strippers Stage 'Cover Up' Strike," *Los Angeles Herald Express*, July 19, 1955.

professional strippers and amateur strippers, all the while talking, as if it was a surprise to the writer himself that they could do both at the same time.

Jennie Lee's deft handling of publicity is evident in these articles. Despite the chauvinism that exists in the news articles, a vast amount of important information about the EDL also found its way into the article. The articles served to first attract readers with the striptease sections in order to convey much needed reforms in striptease. In the nine articles covering the EDL's formation, all of the articles had specific messages that the EDL wanted to communicate. In fact the formation of the EDL, more than any other event in EDL history, ably communicated the most about the needs of the EDL members and striptease dancers in general.

All of the nine articles by California newspapers about the formation of the EDL mention that the average pay for striptease dancers in Los Angeles was the lowest in the country in comparison to other cities.⁷⁹ Eight of the nine articles mention the fact that Los Angeles strippers averaged \$85 a week, much lower than the standard \$125 a week strippers received in New York.⁸⁰ Six of the articles make mention of the EDL falling directly under the protection of the AGVA.⁸¹ Three of the six mentioned that the AGVA was not receptive to the needs of the EDL members.⁸²

⁷⁹ *Los Angeles Times*, July 19, 1955. *Los Angeles Herald Express*, July 19, 1955. *The Daily Review* (Hayward, California), July 18, 1955. *The Long Beach Press-Telegram*, July 18, 1955. *The San Mateo Times*, July 19, 1955. *The Bakersfield Californian*, July 18, 1955. *The Long Beach Press-Telegram*, July 19, 1955. *The Bakersfield Californian*, July 18, 1955. *The Humboldt Standard*, June 19, 1955.

⁸⁰ *Los Angeles Times*, July 19, 1955. *Los Angeles Herald Express*, July 19, 1955. *The Daily Review* (Hayward, California), July 18, 1955. *The Long Beach Press-Telegram*, July 18, 1955. *The San Mateo Times*, July 19, 1955. *The Bakersfield Californian*, July 18, 1955. *The Long Beach Press-Telegram*, July 19, 1955. *The Humboldt Standard*, June 19, 1955.

⁸¹ *Los Angeles Times*, July 19, 1955. *Los Angeles Herald Express*, July 19, 1955. *The San Mateo Times*, July 19, 1955. *The Bakersfield Californian*, July 19, 1955. *The Humboldt Standard*, June 19, 1955. *The Long Beach Press-Telegram*, July 19, 1955.

⁸² *The Bakersfield Californian*, July 19, 1955. *The Long Beach Press-Telegram*, July 19, 1955. *The Humboldt Standard*, June 19, 1955.

Three of the nine articles went into greater depth regarding the issues that striptease dancers were facing and what the aim of the EDL was. In the *Long Beach Press-Telegram*, Jennie declares: "Some clubs put a costume on a cocktail waitress and say go! Waitresses don't know how to dance. They aren't strip-teasers, they're exhibitionists. We think stripping is an art and we must protect it."⁸³ Here, Lee was able to call attention to the use of bogus, untrained talent, like waitresses, as striptease dancers for entertainment in clubs.

The practice of using waitresses as strippers was problematic for several reasons. Waitresses billed as "strippers" debased the art of striptease, as women were performing striptease without any training. In addition, club owners took advantage of these waitresses, paying them less than they would professional striptease dancers for doing, what club owners thought, was the same performance, despite the differences in training. More popular than other newspapers, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Los Angeles Herald Express* cover this, and other issues as well.⁸⁴

In greater detail, the *Los Angeles Herald Express* reports: "[Lee] told her sister dancers that dressing rooms are too crowded, there is no suitable place to spend time between shows, and that owners of some clubs expect the girls to mingle with patrons between shows to promote bar business."⁸⁵ Another issue is addressed by the *Los Angeles Times*, which reported: "Doreen Gray and Pat Flannery wired regrets because they were

⁸³ "Girls Demand Pay Raise or No Stripping," *The Long Beach Press-Telegram*, July 19, 1955.

⁸⁴ "L.A. Strippers Protest Their Low Take-off Pay; Burlesque Queens, in Organization Meeting, Threaten 'Cover Up' Strike Over Grievances," *Los Angeles Times*, July 19, 1955. "Strippers Stage 'Cover Up' Strike," *Los Angeles Herald Express*, July 19, 1955.

⁸⁵ "Strippers Stage 'Cover Up' Strike," *Los Angeles Herald Express*, July 19, 1955.

working. And Misty Aires and Caprice also were unable to attend because, as they wired, 'they were too busy rehearsing – without pay.' (Applause)."⁸⁶

Lee was able to inform the public of several other issues. She cited problems with poor facilities; including small dressing rooms, and lack of proper break rooms between shows. Another issue she mentioned was the fact that striptease practices were unpaid, despite the fact that they were often necessary in order to perform. Perhaps the most important problem Lee brought attention to was the requirement of some clubs that striptease dancers promote bar business by selling drinks.

Despite the condescending and chauvinistic tone of the news articles covering the EDL's first meeting, Lee was successful in getting the message across. Entwined with the striptease and the hair color references was important striptease related information about low pay, lack of facilities, and unfair, illegal and underhanded practices by bar owners towards waitresses and striptease dancers. Hence, the articles covering the EDL's first meeting had an important message regarding striptease reform packaged in a seemingly innocent article regarding a strippers meeting.

These type of reports about the EDL continued for several years, well into the 60s. Every year, the EDL had their annual meeting, which normally received press coverage, though at a much smaller scale than their first meeting. Their annual meeting in 1957 saw an improvement in working conditions for striptease dancers. The *Los Angeles Times* reported: "Then President Jennie announced that some of last year's grievances have been alleviated. The girls, she said, have been policing themselves with support from the AGVA on the matter of mixing with patrons in night-club strip joints. And the

⁸⁶ "L.A. Strippers Protest Their Low Take-off Pay; Burlesque Queens, in Organization Meeting, Threaten 'Cover Up' Strike Over Grievances," *Los Angeles Times*, July 19, 1955.

minimum take-home for the take-off has been bumped from \$85 to \$100 a week. End of progress report."⁸⁷

Nearly two years after its formation, the EDL had begun to see some small successes. This, despite the fact that the EDL was not a "union" in typical sense. In Rosie Mitchell's own words, she explains the difference:

I didn't join the EDL - I and Jennie Lee formed it...there was no EDL: until one day, picture in the paper, (Jennie alerted the media that the "strippers" were forming their own union - league -and would meet the next day at a particular night club in Hollywood,) it never became a 'union'; ' separated from AGVA - which everyone working in clubs or theatre's had to belong to and pay their dues regularly to keep working.⁸⁸

According to Mitchell, EDL's formation was 'spur-the-moment', involving a call to the media and a designated meeting place.

The EDL was not an official union like the AGVA. Membership in the AGVA was a requirement in order to work and this membership that was paid for in dues. The EDL did not require any of these things from its members. Instead, it asked members to attend publicity stunts, such as the Barecats softball game, in order to get its demands heard. This only worked to help the EDL succeed, however, as the EDL was still able to increase the weekly minimum rate for striptease dancers and prevent strippers from mingling with bar customers to sell alcohol. Thus, instead of using the normal plan of action that many unions utilize, such as strikes and picketing and negotiation, the EDL instead used publicity to achieve the change it sought.

Riding on its new-found success, the EDL sought new goals during their annual meeting in 1957, which was covered by both the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Los Angeles*

⁸⁷"Motions Too: Stripteasers Meet and Bare Grievances," *Los Angeles Times*, April 30, 1957.

⁸⁸ "Interview with EDL Vice President Rosie Mitchell Aka "Novita"" e-mail interview by author, February 20, 2011.

Herald Express. The *Los Angeles Times* reported "Crowded, crummy dressing rooms without heaters was the first complaint. Among other things they got off their chests was limiting their performances to three numbers a night."⁸⁹ The EDL had problems with poor dressing room conditions and long work hours when performing artistic dances.

The *Los Angeles Herald Express* wrote that members of the EDL were "tossing around the idea of staging a strip-tease marathon before the police vice squad members and their wives."⁹⁰ The article goes on to list several of the resolutions that the EDL adopted, which were as follows:

1. To urge housewives to use the exotic dancer's art to assure longer marriages;
2. To urge costumers and fashion designers to create more imaginative "clothes" for strippers (not necessarily more clothes, but more imagination).
3. To protest, forcefully, against unsanitary dressing rooms in night clubs and against being compelled to "hustle" drinks.
4. To urge all strippers not to pose for "girlie" magazines, which tend to reflect unfavorably on the take-it-off profession.⁹¹

The first two of these resolutions cannot be taken seriously. These resolutions seem to play to the strippers' role in society, with somewhat trivial goals to improve. More telling are the last two resolutions, which get to the heart of what the EDL was actually after.

The first two resolutions were for the press. They make the story and strippers interesting and worth reading about. The last two encompass the message that Jennie Lee was trying to get across to the public, that nightclubs often asked dancers to "hustle" for alcoholic beverages and that magazines often portrayed striptease in a poor light.

Of course, the articles covering the annual meeting still contained the humor and chauvinism present in all of the articles covering the EDL. In regards to poor dressing

⁸⁹"Motions Too: Stripteasers Meet and Bare Grievances," *Los Angeles Times*, April 30, 1957.

⁹⁰"Would Strut for Vice Squadders: Strippers Weigh Marathon," *Los Angeles Herald Express*, April 30, 1957.

⁹¹"Would Strut for Vice Squadders: Strippers Weigh Marathon," *Los Angeles Herald Express*, April 30, 1957.

rooms, the *Los Angeles Times* wrote: "If there's anything a bump dancer doesn't want to show up in, it's goose bumps."⁹² When describing Rosie Mitchell, the newspaper writes: "Minutes of the last meeting were approved as read by Novita, a trim little brunette in a gray knit dress, who was secretary."⁹³ Note how Rosie Mitchell's name is not mentioned, though her physical features are described in great detail. Hence, important striptease news and reform was wrapped in puns and chauvinism.

The EDL was a very important publicity tool for Jennie Lee. It served as a vehicle that allowed her to get across the message of the existence of poor working conditions and needed reforms in the realm of striptease. In calling attention to the EDL, she was able to call attention to the problems strippers faced, enacting positive change in some areas of striptease. In addition, she was able to do all this despite not being taken seriously by newspapers. She was able to use the overall feel of newspapers towards striptease (chauvinism, condescension and ridicule) and turn it into a positive. Because of Jennie Lee and the EDL, strippers in general came to be viewed as attractive, fun and somewhat ditzy, though entirely driven and successful women. While this was how Jennie Lee and the EDL operated initially, their goals and techniques changed drastically in the coming years.

The Failures of the AGVA

In June of 1962, some of the allegations made by Jennie Lee and the EDL about striptease and the treatment of strippers were finally substantiated. Senator John

⁹² "Motions Too: Stripteasers Meet and Bare Grievances," *Los Angeles Times*, April 30, 1957.

⁹³ "Motions Too: Stripteasers Meet and Bare Grievances," *Los Angeles Times*, April 30, 1957.

McClellan led a probe to investigate allegations "that singers, dancers and B-girls were used by a well-organized crime syndicate to attract suckers to hoodlum-operated night clubs in the Chicago area."⁹⁴ What began as an investigation into organized crime quickly turned its attention to the failures of the AGVA, the union in charge of these artists. The AGVA came under fire for several issues, including collecting dues without a screening process and failing to protect its members.

Bargirls, known as "B-girls" are women who work in nightclubs and bars. Largely banned from the U.S., the practice of using B-girls still exists overseas. Though seemingly similar, there is a huge difference between B-girls and hostesses. While hostesses are in charge of serving drinks, the main goal of B-girls is to sell drinks to patrons from the bar at the exorbitant prices that the owners charge. Sometimes, B-girls make commission off the drinks that they sell. Thus, the more the patrons drink, the more money the bar makes and the more commission the B-girls make. It is very easy for B-girls who engage in striptease dances and make money from selling alcohol to make money through prostitution. This is how organized crime, prostitution, and B-girls came to be associated with striptease during the McClellan Commission hearings of 1962.

Subsequent testimony from many of the victims shed light on the harrowing experience. Most notable of the testimony came from a dancer named Anita Lopushok. Lopushok testified that "a Chicago bartender ripped off her clothes and shoved her on a night club stage when she balked at disrobing early in her career."⁹⁵ This practice was brought to light by Jennie Lee during the EDL's formation, when she argued that

⁹⁴ "B-Girls Used by Hoodlums to Lure Patrons Into Clubs, Probers Told," *Los Angeles Times*, June 14, 1962.

⁹⁵ "Sen. McClellan Assails Strippers' Union for Not Protecting Dancers," *Los Angeles Times*, June 16, 1962.

"chiseling agents get waitresses and other untrained gals, bill them as stripteasers, put them in costumes and command, 'Now, go!' There should be special training courses and apprenticeships for feature burlesque dancers."⁹⁶ However, the major difference was that Lopushok's experience was quite a bit more frightening than what Lee described.

Another allegation was the rampant use of B-girls by a crime syndicate in Chicago, the B-girls paying AGVA dues. *The Bakersfield Californian* explained: "In most states, entertainers are forbidden by law to fraternize with patrons for the purpose of pushing drinks on which the girls collect commissions. But the B-girl racket is said to flourish widely."⁹⁷ This was another EDL issue addressed in 1955. One of Lee's chief issues was "that owners of some clubs expect the girls to mingle with patrons between shows to promote bar business. That, she said, is kaput."⁹⁸ Once again, an issue that the EDL had raised was finally addressed in an official fashion.

Though the practice of B-girls was seemingly innocent, the problem with B-girls became apparent in the Senate probe. In the report published following the probe, testimony by Mr. Shelton Kemp, a Florida Beverage Department district supervisor showed that B-Drinking often led to prostitution. Kemp testified: "conditions in these clubs in the Miami area are very lewd and insidious. There have been much solicitation of prostitution and solicitation of drinks. AGVA girls participate in the 'B drinking' and, in soliciting drinks, they made improper advances with their hand and by conversation."⁹⁹ In addition, there was testimony that B-drinking:

⁹⁶ "L.A. Strippers Protest Their Low Take-off Pay; Burlesque Queens, in Organization Meeting, Threaten 'Cover Up' Strike Over Grievances," *Los Angeles Times*, July 19, 1955.

⁹⁷ "Probers Shift From Estes to B-Girls Union," *The Bakersfield Californian*, June 11, 1962

⁹⁸ "Strippers Stage 'Cover Up' Strike," *Los Angeles Herald Express*, July 19, 1955.

⁹⁹ Senate, Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on Government Operations, *American Guild of Variety Artists*, 88 Cong., 1st sess., S. Rept. 310 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1963), pg. 18.

often perpetrates abuses which the police would have never tolerated in the oldtime houses of prostitution; the cheating of customers, padding of bills, robbery of patrons, substitution of drinks, and vicious exploitation of customers who have been made senselessly intoxicated under a relentless system of solicitation of drinks.¹⁰⁰

Thus, prostitution was not the only issue. Although B-drinking certainly "greased the wheels" of prostitution propositions, it also established a system of excessive drinking, opening the door to drugging, robbery, and other forms of misconduct, all under the guise of a legitimate business.

The AGVA ultimately came under fire for their failure to protect its members, all the while continuing to collect dues. Senator McClellan characterized the AGVA as "a big entertainers union [that] looks the other way while its dues-paying strip tease dancers are subjected to terrorism by vice ring night club owners who live off 'their flesh and blood.'"¹⁰¹ This issue was also addressed by Jennie Lee years earlier during the EDL's formation. The AGVA's failure to attend to issues with striptease had been a key motivation for the EDL's formation. "The American Guild of Variety Artists represents the dancers in contract negotiations with employers. Miss [Lee]...said, however, that the guild did not pay enough attention to stripteasers' problems or needs. 'We have special problems,' she said. 'That's why I organized the league in New York three months ago.'"¹⁰²

The conclusions of the Senate Subcommittee hearings were very damaging to the AGVA. The allegations that Jennie Lee and the EDL made years before were the tip of

¹⁰⁰ Senate, Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on Government Operations, *American Guild of Variety Artists*, 88 Cong., 1st sess., S. Rept. 310 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1963), pg. 17.

¹⁰¹ "Sen. McClellan Assails Strippers' Union for Not Protecting Dancers," *Los Angeles Times*, June 16, 1962.

¹⁰² "LA Strippers Seek More Cash," *The Humboldt Standard*, "June 19, 1955.

the larger, more alarming iceberg. The subcommittee found that the AGVA was economically dependent on Bar-girl membership in order to continue to operate:

Without the revenue contributed by these [B-girls] members in the form of initiation fees and membership dues, the union would be compelled to close all but a few of its branch offices, to reduce substantially its staff of paid employees, to cut the salaries of its remaining employees, and sharply reduce expenditures, in general. For revenue contributed by these [B-girls] members, the AGVA has paid a price which no labor organization can afford, or should even contemplate.¹⁰³

Because economics were the chief motivating factor, the unions subsequently failed to screen new union members for talent, opening the door for illegitimate performers to achieve legitimacy for the \$25 union due.¹⁰⁴ And because the AGVA's chief source of income were exotic dancers' membership and union dues (some estimate as high as 85% of the income of some branches) any reduction of membership due to stricter membership standards, enforcement of union regulations or enforcement of the law was grossly ignored by union officials.¹⁰⁵ Enforcement would have led to a drop in union dues and thus lower income coming into the AGVA.

The Senate probe into the AGVA proved that Lee and the EDL had been truthful in their claims of corruption and neglect. AGVA was indeed ignoring the plight of its striptease members. Clubs and bars were indeed employing untrained women as striptease dancers, taking advantage of the women's innocence and lack of experience and lowering the standard of striptease with unskilled and untrained dancers. Clubs and bars were also in the habit of using these women to sell alcohol by asking them to mingle with

¹⁰³ Senate, Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on Government Operations, *American Guild of Variety Artists*, 88 Cong., 1st sess., S. Rept. 310 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1963), pg. 57.

¹⁰⁴ Senate, Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on Government Operations, *American Guild of Variety Artists*, 88 Cong., 1st sess., S. Rept. 310 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1963), pg. 4.

¹⁰⁵ Senate, Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on Government Operations, *American Guild of Variety Artists*, 88 Cong., 1st sess., S. Rept. 310 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1963), pg. 2.

patrons in order to get them to buy drinks. While B-Girls seemed innocent enough, using women to sell drinks could lead to prostitution and other forms of vice and misconduct, as women are being paid to get patrons intoxicated quickly and excessively.

The Senate probe spurred the AGVA into action. Jackie Bright, the administrative secretary of the AGVA promised that the "'AGVA will use downright force' to clean up some situations," though he widely denied much of the testimony against the AGVA.¹⁰⁶ Bright argued that "the testimony has consisted of lies and half-truths 'blown up out of all normal proportions.'"¹⁰⁷ However, despite his continued denial of the severity of the situation, under his leadership the AGVA began to work to support its exotic dancer membership. Naturally, they enlisted the help of striptease reform's most vocal and charismatic proponent, Jennie Lee.

Jennie Lee to the Rescue

The McClellan Committee hearings had a damaging effect on striptease as a whole. The failings of the AGVA and the mistreatment and abuses to strippers under their protection became a reflection on the union and the striptease profession as a whole. "The result of the [McClellan] hearings was to discredit AGVA and make striptease synonymous with prostitution."¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ "Union Will Use Force to Clean Up Situation, Variety Guild Boss Says," *Los Angeles Times*, June 26, 1962.

¹⁰⁷ "Union Will Use Force to Clean Up Situation, Variety Guild Boss Says," *Los Angeles Times*, June 26, 1962.

¹⁰⁸ Rachel Shteir, *Striptease: the Untold History of the Girlie Show* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 311.

The AGVA's first reaction was to come out on the offensive, blaming law enforcement for their failure to police the B-girls and the McClellan commission for blaming the AGVA. This is apparent in the issue of their newsletter that was published after the McClellan Committee hearings. The front page of the July 1962 issue of AGVA News hailed Joey Adams, the President of the AGVA, for defending the guild against Senator McClellan who was "heaping blame on the union for failure of federal, state and local police to do their law enforcement jobs."¹⁰⁹

The theme of defending the guild and blaming the local authorities continued through the entire issue. Another article in the issue, written by Hy Gardner, stated it plainly:

To begin with, if there have been violations regarding the presence of B-Girls in Philadelphia and Chicago saloons (and there always will be -- in every community), that's a local problem supposed to be policed by local authorities and state liquor boards. We don't elect congressmen to clean up joints. They don't know enough about the booze business, and if they do we ought to have another Congressional committee organized to find out how they learned so much.¹¹⁰

Here, Gardner argues that local law enforcement and state liquor boards were to blame for the B-Girl problem in clubs. He also believed that B-Girls would always be a problem, despite the fact that he insisted it was a law enforcement problem, implying that even if the law enforcement were doing their job, it would not be enough to stop the use of B-girls in clubs. Gardner also insinuates that the McClellan commission knew nothing about how clubs were run and how liquor laws were enforced because it was not their job. Any knowledge in this matter would be suspect, implying that the McClellan Commission members had personal experience being in such clubs.

¹⁰⁹ "Adams Defends Union: Tells True AGVA Story to McClellan Committee," *AGVA News* XII (July 1962): 1.

¹¹⁰ Hy Gardner, "B Girls and Congress," *AGVA News* XII (July 1962): 5.

Even worse, the AGVA began to blame the B-Girls themselves, accusing them of joining the AGVA fraudulently. Gardner writes:

The B-Girl, to the untrained, has no talent. She can't sing, dance, do acrobatics, play a musical instrument, tell funny (clean) stories or emcee a show. A B-Girl's chief stock in trade is obvious. The only way she makes a vicarious living is by flaunting her assets and giving the impression, real or false, that she's willing to liquidate those assets for a price.¹¹¹

Gardner blames the AGVA's poor public image on the victims of the situation, arguing that they did not belong to the AGVA in the first place. Also notice how his description of a B-Girl seems to be a description of a prostitute, implying that they are synonymous. It is also interesting to note that Gardner implies that B-girls brought this upon themselves by choosing to draw in customers and provide them with sex.

The next issue of the *AGVA News* however, has a starkly different tone. Instead of being on the offensive, the AGVA began a campaign to enact the much-needed change that the McClellan Committee brought to light. The headline on the front page of the August issue of *AGVA News* read: "National Board Acts on Senate Hearing Information."¹¹² Outlined in the article were the major changes the AGVA enacted as a result of the McClellan Committee, which included:

- Investigation of AGVA franchised agents and their methods of booking AGVA members.
- Devising of a system for screening applications of prospective members
- Appointment of a National Grievance Committee of AGVA employees.¹¹³

This was quite a change from the content of the earlier newsletter, showing that either the AGVA realized the error of their ways, or they realized how damaging the McClellan Committee hearings were to their reputation and that they needed to change it drastically.

¹¹¹ Hy Gardner, "B Girls and Congress," *AGVA News* XII (July 1962): 5.

¹¹² "National Board Acts on Senate Hearing Information," *AGVA News* XII (August 1962): 1.

¹¹³ "National Board Acts on Senate Hearing Information," *AGVA News* XII (August 1962): 1.

The importance of good publicity to the AGVA at this time was addressed a few months later with the involvement of Jennie Lee. In the September-October 1962 issue of the *AGVA News*, the Los Angeles representative of the AGVA covered an annual meeting of the EDL. For the AGVA, the EDL epitomized "good" striptease members. They were talented, unionized, and stood for "good clean" striptease, as opposed to the troublesome, talentless B-girls. The article was written with the very specific purpose of informing and impressing the readers of the newsletter. In essence, it conveyed that Los Angeles, Jennie Lee, and the EDL were working to improve the AGVA's reputation. It did this in several ways.

The very first line of the article states: "The Exotique Dancers League of America, who are a good percentage of AGVA members, held their fifth annual meeting and party September 6th."¹¹⁴ The article clearly relates the EDL's membership to the AGVA. The AGVA was taking ownership of the EDL, implying that the AGVA was largely responsible for the EDL, despite Lee's claims years earlier that the AGVA was not receptive to their needs.¹¹⁵

The article continues, documenting the amount of press coverage the annual meeting received. Because this was a positive reflection upon the AGVA, press coverage was important. More coverage meant more people reading about the positive actions of the AGVA. Gray writes: "The meeting was attended by an overflow crowd, although not all the guests were dancers. About fourteen photographers were present, three TV

¹¹⁴ Jimmy Val Gray, "Los Angeles," *AGVA News* XII (September/October 1962)

¹¹⁵ *The Humboldt Standard*, June 19, 1955.

stations, channels 2, 4, and 9, filmed the proceedings, and many well-known newspaper reporters and correspondents were there to cover the event."¹¹⁶

After a lengthy listing of the reporters and news outlets that were present, Lee took the center stage. It was no wonder that the AGVA chose her to be their public representative and champion for striptease. Gray writes:

At the meeting, many problems of exotic dancers were discussed...Working conditions were also discussed, as well as plans to improve them. Jennie mentioned the McClellan Committee had investigated the clubs in the Los Angeles area and had found nothing wrong with the treatment of exotics. She believes this is partly due to the firm stand the west coast dancers have taken against any B-girl activities. The three TV stations taped quite a bit of the meeting and AGVA certainly got some good publicity out of it.¹¹⁷

Jennie Lee shines in this section of the article. Not only is she actively seeking to improve striptease working conditions, she also shows that the women involved in the McClellan Committee did not represent the entirety of the AGVA. Lee and the EDL were the "good" strippers, successfully eliminating B-girl activity in Los Angeles due to their "firm stand" against B-girls. What is even more telling is the blatant reference to how good the AGVA looked because of the amount of coverage that Lee and the EDL received.

The annual meeting was indeed successful in getting Lee's positive view of striptease to the public. The *Los Angeles Herald Examiner* coverage of the article, though short, has two important pieces of striptease-related information. Amidst the awards given to Joanne Woodward and Walter Winchell, and the "Ten Best Undressed for 1962", Lee managed to address the findings of the McClellan Commission: "Miss Lee noted that 'in spite of all the bad publicity about girls in our profession as it applies to clubs in the

¹¹⁶ Jimmy Val Gray, "Los Angeles," *AGVA News XII* (September/October 1962)

¹¹⁷ Jimmy Val Gray, "Los Angeles," *AGVA News XII* (September/October 1962)

East--Los Angeles is an example of high standards."¹¹⁸ Thus, Lee separated the EDL and herself, and strippers in Los Angeles, from the bad publicity of the East.

In fact, Lee went a step further. To combat the idea of strippers operating illegally, Lee proclaimed: "We are no longer independent operators and 'control' is the answer. We pay our taxes and the Government gets its cut--and in the long run it will be a good thing."¹¹⁹ In essence, Lee was speaking for all strippers, stating that they were cooperating fully with the government, obeying all its laws and paying taxes lawfully. Moreover, as strippers, they realized the importance of following the law and knew that following it would be beneficial for them as well.

Ben Urish writes about a different event in which the AGVA ultimately realized the importance of the EDL. He writes: "Soon after their [the EDL's] formation a 'make or break' situation presented itself when several performers were hired by a club to appear underwater as mermaids."¹²⁰ Unfortunately, while performing, the "pasties" that the strippers wore for their performance, as required by the law, washed off. The performers were arrested for indecent exposure and the club they worked for subsequently fired them. Suddenly, Urish writes, the women "were fired, and in jail, facing hefty legal bills and unemployment."¹²¹

According to Urish, the EDL fought back, calling for a boycott and a work stoppage until the club paid for the strippers' legal fees and hired them back. Lee and the EDL subsequently won this battle, as the club owners reinstated the strippers and paid for

¹¹⁸"Winchell Wins Tribute: Strippers Honor Joanne-for Strip," *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, September 7, 1962.

¹¹⁹"Winchell Wins Tribute: Strippers Honor Joanne-for Strip," *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, September 7, 1962.

¹²⁰ Ben Urish, "The Exotic Dancers League – Burlesque Hall of Fame," Burlesque Hall of Fame, section goes here, accessed April 04, 2011, <http://burlesquehall.com/2010/11/the-exotic-dancers-league/>.

¹²¹ Ben Urish, "The Exotic Dancers League – Burlesque Hall of Fame," Burlesque Hall of Fame, section goes here, accessed April 04, 2011, <http://burlesquehall.com/2010/11/the-exotic-dancers-league/>.

their legal fees, facing public backlash if they did not. He writes: "The EDL emerged as a viable organization with industry clout and respect. The American Guild of Variety Artists recognized their previous oversight and approached the EDL to join them while retaining a semi-autonomous status. The EDL accepted."¹²²

Unfortunately, this story is very difficult to verify. Much of Urish's research is based on his interactions with Jennie Lee. There are no newspaper articles covering the work stoppage or strike in this incident. There is an article covering the trial of an "Accidental Strip Act" performed by Jennie Lee in which during an underwater mermaid ballet in which "essential parts of Miss Lee's minimum costume were either removed or fell off. Miss Lee insisted it was an accident."¹²³ Note how the "strippers" in Urish's event was actually just Jennie Lee herself, as she is the only person named in the article and there are no other strippers listed in the case.¹²⁴ In addition, in both of the articles, there is no mention of either a strike or work stoppage, or a mention of the EDL at all.

When asked about the incident reported by Urish, Rosie Mitchell, EDL Vice President responded:

You know, Jennie and I did an underwater show type thing for Eastman? Color Film..I think..no, that doesn't sound right..but I don't remember any pastie falling off..you know, I think a lot of these things were just made up or maybe there was some other under water scene I didn't know about...gosh, it's a mystery at this point...I do know that Jennie was very good at getting publicity...she had a knack for it, and loved it.. .like I told you..the baseball game in the park..that kind of thing she would cook up, just to get her pic in the paper..¹²⁵

¹²² Ben Urish, "The Exotic Dancers League – Burlesque Hall of Fame," Burlesque Hall of Fame, section goes here, accessed April 04, 2011, <http://burlesquehall.com/2010/11/the-exotic-dancers-league/>.

¹²³ *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles), "Accidental Strip Act Ruled as 'Not Lewd'" October 6, 1964.

¹²⁴ "Accidental Strip Act Ruled as 'Not Lewd'" *Los Angeles Times*, October 6, 1964. "Topless Suit Trial Halted," *The San Diego Union*, October 6, 1964.

¹²⁵ "Interview with EDL Vice President Rosie Mitchell Aka "Novita"" e-mail interview by author, February 20, 2011.

Rosie Mitchell has no recollection of the EDL work stoppage or the strike Urish wrote about. This may be, she reasons, because she did not know about it, or that it may have been "just made up." This would tie into the theory that the arrest for the underwater striptease show was just of Jennie Lee herself, and did not involve other strippers or EDL members. It would explain why Mitchell would not remember such an incident occurring, because the incident was outside of the EDL activities. However, even if this was the case, there is still no record of the work stoppage, strike, bad publicity and public pressure that Urish mentions in his article.

Because Urish's event is difficult to verify, it is more likely that the AGVA's utilization of the EDL in an official capacity was due to the negative effect of the McClellan commission on the image of striptease and the AGVA itself. Jennie Lee took it upon herself to become the spokesperson for strippers in Los Angeles, and quite possibly, for strippers in general. She was the perfect representative, charming and charismatic, with a keen grasp of publicity and the drive to improve the striptease realm.

Suddenly, the AGVA realized that its goals coincided with the goals of the EDL and Jennie Lee. The EDL and Lee were just what the AGVA needed to improve the image of striptease and their image as representatives of striptease dancers. They threw Lee the support she had been requesting for almost a decade, giving her a new way to fight for striptease reform in a much more official capacity. While initially, the EDL operated outside the AGVA, though many of the EDL were also members of the AGVA, now the EDL operated with the blessing of the AGVA and with its full support.

Jennie Lee and Political Activism

Jennie Lee had already begun to shift her focus from publicity to political activism. Ironically enough, around the same time of the McClellan Committee hearings, Lee attended a trial to support strippers who were owed wages after a nightclub called "Strip City" went bankrupt. The strippers were considered by the bankruptcy court as independent contractors, and thus ineligible to the wage claims that the women sought. The judge however, ruled in favor of the women: "Walker ruled the stripteasers were employees and granted wage claims sought by three performers: Tangerine, \$326; Baby Doll, \$185, and Pandora, \$185."¹²⁶

Despite the lack of a direct connection, Lee was present during the trial, getting a fair amount of coverage considering her lack of connection to the case. "Presence of Jennie Lee, known informally as 'The Bazoom Girl,' was intended to see that the girls get a 'fair shake,' She stated that the girls should be employed, thereby entitling them to the protection of Social Security."¹²⁷ In fact, Lee is the subject of main photo in the article, taking the spotlight off the actual women connected to the case.¹²⁸ It is interesting to note that Lee's knack for publicity still shines through in the article, as she took the focus off the strippers who were seeking wages. Instead of the softball games and annual meetings, the EDL now appeared in newspapers in a much more official capacity, resembling a union more than it had before.

¹²⁶ "Court Calls Them Employees: Says Strip-Tease 'Gift to Theater'", *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, June 15, 1962.

¹²⁷ "Court Calls Them Employees: Says Strip-Tease 'Gift to Theater'" *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, June 15, 1962.

¹²⁸ See Appendix A.11

When the EDL incorporated in November of 1963, its new, more official, goal was outlined in the article covering the incorporation. The article writes: "The Exotique Dancers League...are incorporating 'to improve the image of the striptease as an art form."¹²⁹ Leland Zeman, legal counsel for the EDL explained: "incorporation would lend 'prestige and dignity' to stripping and help fight hostile legislation."¹³⁰ Herein was the new goal of the EDL. While it still continued to fight for stripper's rights, the EDL's focus now shifted to the importance of a positive public image and fighting anti-striptease legislation.

It is difficult to ascertain when anti-striptease legislation emerged. In the press, there is a direct correlation between coverage of the McClellan Commission and the emergence of anti-striptease legislation coverage.¹³¹ This can be explained in two ways. First, it could be directly correlated, that is, the McClellan Commission increased public awareness regarding the evils of striptease, and subsequently, many cities sought to pass anti-striptease legislation. However, it is difficult to believe that cities did not seek to pass legislation like this before 1962, and that there was no anti-striptease legislation before the McClellan Committee findings. It is more likely that the involvement of Jennie Lee at these anti-striptease legislation meetings brought the press along with it. This may be because Lee drew the press to the meetings because of her presence, or because she in fact called them herself in order to utilize them as a tool to get her message out. It is without question, however, that in almost every article covering anti-striptease legislation

¹²⁹ "Strip-Tease Exponents Say It's Art," *The Pasadena Star-News*, November 13, 1963.

¹³⁰ "Strip-Tease Exponents Say It's Art," *The Pasadena Star-News*, November 13, 1963.

¹³¹ Coverage of Anti-striptease legislation is after the McClellan Commission coverage. For example, Jordan, Phil. "Dancer Shows to Reveal Views But Council Doesn't." *Valley Times* (San Fernando Valley), December 31, 1964. follows "B-Girls Used by Hoodlums to Lure Patrons Into Clubs, Probers Told." *Los Angeles Times*, June 14, 1962.

after the McClellan Commission findings, Jennie Lee was in some way mentioned. Either way, Lee's mere presence in these legislative meetings brought attention to the legislation and the issues they addressed.

Of course, the trademark "Jennie Lee" type coverage still applied. When Jennie Lee arrived at a City Council meeting to speak out against an ordinance banning striptease in the city, "She sat through the brief council session in the front row, clad in a low cut green sheath with a shocking red coat draped carelessly over her shoulders."¹³² Another reporter took it a step further, writing an article that read like fiction. Phil Jordan, of the City Hall Bureau of the *San Fernando Valley Times*, wrote that Jennie Lee had mixed up the times which the City Council normally met. He writes: "Miss Lee was notified by members of the City Hall press corps, who figured they deserved a look at anything good enough for the council."¹³³ As in previous coverage, Jennie Lee's appearance is described and becomes an important piece of information in the article. So important, in fact, that Jordan relates how the City Hall press corps informed her of her mistake, ensuring that she would be present at the meeting in order to be able to see her.

When the issue of the ordinance banning striptease failed to reach a quorum, Jordan describes a scene that seems to be taken straight out of a romance novel. He writes:

The reporters zeroed in on Miss Lee. This reporter, a sneaky type, got there first and sat next to her. The dress looked -- if possible--even lower. "Miss Lee..." I began. My mouth seemed dry for some reason. It took several starts. "Miss Lee, will you come back for tomorrow's council session?" She turned her back on me, looked over her shoulder and asked, "Will you fix the back of my dress? Is it

¹³² "Calls on Council: Jennie Lee Up Early to Fight for Strippers," *Los Angeles Times*, December 31, 1964.

¹³³ Phil Jordan, "Dancer Shows to Reveal Views But Council Doesn't," *Valley Times* (San Fernando Valley), December 31, 1964.

unhooked?" It sure was, but I couldn't help. I fumble even when I light a cigarette.¹³⁴

This article showcases Jennie Lee at her finest. And, even better, the reporter plays to it when writing the article. Lee is portrayed in the article as being so desirable and so stunning that she made the reporter nervous. And his anxiety was exacerbated by her request for him to help her with her dress. It is not surprising that the article this reporter wrote is quite a long one, with more time devoted describing his interaction with Lee than the actual issue at hand.

But of course, in true form, Lee managed to get her message out about the anti-striptease legislation. In response to Jordan's clumsy question, Lee stated: "I'll try to make it here tomorrow,' she said. 'This law isn't fair. Things are rough enough in burlesque as it is. Why do they pick on us while there are places with near-nude waitresses and phoney lingerie shows--right within reach of the customers? It's unfair to professionals."¹³⁵ Here, Lee states very plainly the problem with the legislation. It allowed women to interact with customers in very little clothing. Strippers who were held to a strict standard were banned, while other professions who were similar in practice were able to continue. Effectively, strippers were being discriminated against and singled out, while other professions were allowed to continue because they were not stripping.

As a representative for the AGVA, Lee argued that the legislation would "allow for continuation of so-called fashion shows or bikinied waitresses serving drinks. If these lingerie shows are to go [on], they will be much harder to police. These girls don't even

¹³⁴ Phil Jordan, "Dancer Shows to Reveal Views But Council Doesn't," *Valley Times* (San Fernando Valley), December 31, 1964.

¹³⁵ Phil Jordan, "Dancer Shows to Reveal Views But Council Doesn't," *Valley Times* (San Fernando Valley), December 31, 1964.

belong to a union."¹³⁶ This ties directly in to the McClellan Commission findings on B-Girl activity. Women in very little clothing serving alcohol opened the door to abuses by club owners and other employers. It allowed both the women serving the drinks and the customers buying the drinks to be taken advantage of, and paved the way for more B-girls in different professions.

The partnership between the AGVA, Jennie Lee and the EDL continued later that year, when they came out to endorse a bill that would ban topless fashion shows at restaurants. Lee cited the same issues as in the previous anti-striptease legislation, arguing: "'Nudity should be kept on the stage, not serving patrons. Waitresses should be covered.' Miss Lee complained that topless entertainers and waitresses can drink and dance with patrons, and 'this is just a sneaky way of getting around no-fraternizing ordinances.'"¹³⁷

Like the other articles before it, the articles contain the same chauvinism and ridicule. Reporter Jim McCauley mentions "Jennie Lee, president of the Exotique Dancers League of North America (who was fully dressed at the hearing)."¹³⁸ Another article writes: "Miss Lee, a shapely blond who displays a picture of herself in a plunging neckline on the letterhead of her business-letter, called for a 'decent dress law.'"¹³⁹ Here, Lee's personal appearance is described at length. The reporter pokes fun at her coming to the meeting "fully dressed" despite being a stripper. McCauley also pokes fun at her racy photo in her official letterhead, a seeming contradiction to her call for a "decent dress law."

¹³⁶ "Strip-Tease Dancing in Bars Faces Ban by City," *The Valley News* (Van Nuys, CA), January 5, 1965.

¹³⁷ Jack Welter, "Assembly Shelves 'Topless' Curbs," *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, May 5, 1965.

¹³⁸ Jim McCauley, "Critics Bombard Bare-Bosom Ban," *The Independent* (Long Beach, CA), May 5, 1965.

¹³⁹ Jim McCauley, "Strippers Seeking to Ban Bare-Bosom Waitresses," *Independent Press-Telegram* (Long Beach, CA), February 21, 1965.

Ultimately, Lee's efforts came to fruition. The AGVA touted Jennie Lee's success. They were proud of it. The powers that be in the Guild used her name to get themselves reelected. In a campaign ad in *AGVA News*, President Jack Haley advertised: "Exotics: Through ours and Jennie Lee's efforts, the California Liquor Commission has abolished Topless Waitresses, Barmaids and Hat Check Girls, by refusing service of liquor where topless girls work."¹⁴⁰ In an effort to get reelected, Haley used Lee's efforts to show that they had made progress in the field of exotic dancing. Note how the AGVA once again took credit for Lee's work. Her success became the AGVA's success.

You Gotta Get a Gimmick

Jennie Lee was masterful at publicity. While her striptease gimmick was her large breasts and her tassels, her gimmick when it came to publicity was using the stripper stereotype to her advantage. However, the question remains, to what end did Jennie Lee use publicity? For instance, a well-known story about Jennie Lee is one regarding a strike at the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*. Photos of the strike are sold as postcards at the Burlesque Hall of Fame in Las Vegas, a museum that was begun by Jennie Lee herself after the "death of burlesque."¹⁴¹

The strike, according to public knowledge, was because of a press blackout initiated by the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*. Allegedly, the newspaper refused to print burlesque advertisements in their paper. Jennie Lee and the EDL picketed the *Los*

¹⁴⁰ "Jack Haley and His Slate," *AGVA News* XII (July/August 1965).

¹⁴¹ See Appendix Figure A.7

Angeles Herald Examiner building in downtown LA in protest.¹⁴² However, this well-known story has many problems.

The most immediate issue is that there is no record of this strike aside from the photographs. There were no newspaper articles covering the story. The lack of newspaper coverage can be easily explained. Perhaps because a newspaper was being picketed, it is possible that no other newspaper decided to cover it in a show of solidarity and support. However, EDL Vice President Rosie Mitchell has a different story for the Herald Examiner strike.

When asked to confirm the cause of the strike, namely that the newspaper had refused to run Burlesque ads, Mitchell could not confirm the story. She responded:

yes, the pic of Jenny in front of the Examiner was taken the same time as mine w/doggie. And no, I never heard of any 'banning of ads' going on...never..where did you hear or get that one? I'd like to hear about that..... Our picketing was just for publicity...Jennie's idea.. I miss Jennie, and if she were alive, I'd call her and we'd get the answers..straighten this thing out..but unfortunately, she's gone now..But again, I never heard of burlesque ads being banned from any paper...in fact, the people who worked on our ads at the paper, use to send me a copy of my pic whenever it was in. Very nice people.¹⁴³

This response begs the question: Did Jennie Lee do this, and other things, just for the sake of publicity?

Rosie Mitchell is one of the few remaining EDL members alive, and by far she is the most cogent. Her memory of the incident puts into question the common story behind the Herald Examiner strike. However, if Mitchell is correct, then Lee herself picketed the newspaper without just cause, merely for the opportunity to gain publicity. The Herald

¹⁴² "Interview with Laura Herbert, Acting Director of the Burlesque Hall of Fame," interview by author, April 3, 2011.

¹⁴³ "Interview with EDL Vice President Rosie Mitchell Aka "Novita"" e-mail interview by author, February 20, 2011. See Appendix Figure A.8.

Examiner strike, in addition to the underwater striptease work stoppage story, are a few of the stories about Jennie Lee that cannot be substantiated.

Nevertheless, even if these two strikes are disregarded due to lack of evidence, Jennie Lee still left an indelible mark in the world of striptease. She was accomplished at calling attention to important striptease issues while at the same time playing to the stereotype of strippers. In essence, she played to the reporters, and the public, manipulating them to get the press coverage she wanted. The reporters received interesting news stories and reader interest, and in return, Jennie Lee got her publicity. And once she got her publicity, she fueled it into helping other strippers, improving strippers' working conditions, and fighting anti-striptease legislation.

When asked what the EDL's contribution to the world of striptease was, Mitchell writes: "I think it gave a sense of belonging together. Today, it still has a 'life of its own' - that's what [the] EDL contributed... The group that gathers at the re-unions - are all happy that there is a 'Special League' that they belong to. The girls bond, just like in the old days."¹⁴⁴ However, the EDL contributed much more than that. Though not a "real union" in the classic sense, the Exotic Dancers League still achieved a great deal of success in what they set out to do.

Of course, Lee's motivations still come into question. Mitchell writes, "The EDL was formed only because Jennie Lee enjoyed publicity and our 'ploy' was getting higher wages."¹⁴⁵ Yet even if this is the case, if Lee formed the EDL as a publicity stunt, what began as a publicity stunt evolved to a strong force, a vehicle that allowed Jennie Lee to

¹⁴⁴ "Interview with EDL Vice President Rosie Mitchell Aka "Novita"" e-mail interview by author, February 20, 2011.

¹⁴⁵ "Interview with EDL Vice President Rosie Mitchell Aka "Novita"" e-mail interview by author, February 20, 2011.

improve striptease working conditions for all strippers. Though her motivations are unclear, her accomplishments and success are unquestionable.

Appendix

Betty Rowland in Tears as She Gets Jail Term: Four-Month Sentence for Burlesque
Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File); Nov 15, 1952.
Digital Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times (1881-1987)
pg. A5



CLEMENCY REFUSED—Weeping, Burlesque Queen Betty (Bull of Fire) Rowland is escorted by Policewoman June Howard after Miss Rowland was sentenced to four months in the City Jail on charges of lewd dancing. Times photo

Figure A.1

Los Angeles Times Photo
of Betty Rowland arrested



Figure A.2

Los Angeles Times Photo
of Betty Rowland arrested
circa, 1952



CLEARED. — Jennie Lee, known to stage as Miss Bazoom, acquitted by jury in indecent show case.

Times photo

Acquittal Won by Strip-Tease Circuit Figure

Jennie Lee, 23, Miss Bazoom of the strip-tease circuit, yesterday was acquitted by a jury of five women and six men of participating in an indecent show. One woman juror had retired after testimony began, due to illness.

The jury returned the verdict of acquittal in Municipal Judge Lewis Drucker's court in 70 minutes.

Miss Lee was accused of dancing two numbers in the studio



PURE ART defense of Strip Tease Dancer Jennie Lee won her an acquittal here yesterday on charges of performing indecent dance for film. She's giving "thank-you" handshake to Attorney Bentley Harris. Miss Lee was arrested last August 22 after film reels of her dance were confiscated at a North Hollywood photography studio. Dancer, noted for her chest dimensions—42 in.—said film went to piano arcade.

Figure A.3

Los Angeles Times Photo
of Jennie Lee's acquittal

Figure A.4

Los Angeles Examiner Photo
of Jennie Lee's acquittal



JENNIE LEE—BUST MEASUREMENT: 42 INCHES! Voluptuous Blonde Is Accused of Acting in Obscene and Indecent Movies; Attorney Calls it 'Pure Art'

Figure A.5

Los Angeles Herald Examiner Photo of Jennie Lee's acquittal



Figure A.6
Photo of Exotic Dancers League Softball Team "Barecats"
From the Burlesque Hall of Fame, circa 1955.



Figure A.7
Photo of Jennie Lee and EDL at
Herald-Examiner Pickett
From the Burlesque Hall of Fame



Figure A.8
Photo of Rosie Mitchell and EDL at
Herald-Examiner Pickett
From Rosie Mitchell's private photos



Figure A.9
Photo of first EDL meeting
Los Angeles Herald Examiner, 1955.



Figure A.10
Photo of first EDL meeting with
Rosie Mitchell demonstrating professional striptease
From Rosie Mitchell's personal photos, 1955.



Figure A.11
Photo and Article of Jennie Lee showing support for strippers in bankruptcy case



Figure A.12
Associated Press photo of Jennie Lee speaking at legislative meeting against striptease ban.

Figure A.13

Photo of Jennie Lee welcoming the Dodgers to Los Angeles in her Barecats uniform
From Burlesque Hall of Fame Archives, circa 1958.



Figure A.14

Publicity photo of Rosie "Novita" Mitchell, Vice President of EDL
From Burlesque Hall of Fame, date unknown.

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