*Scandals and Gossip in Joseon Korea*

Robert Neff

Throughout the 1880s and well into the 1890s, the small Western community in Seoul had, for the most part, a relatively quiet social life. Socializing was simple: church services on Sunday, tea parties at the Seoul Union throughout the week, holiday galas held at the legations, and picnics in the surrounding countryside.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The few visitors who came to the city were forced to stay with friends or at their own legations because the city had no hotels deemed suitable for Westerners.[[2]](#footnote-2) Unlike the port city of Chemulpo, there was no real transient population in Seoul—the legation guards. The sailors and marines summoned by the various foreign representatives to act as legation guards provided not only protection but also a welcome influx of new people to socialize with. Their arrival allowed sporting events such as baseball, cricket and soccer to be organized, impromptu concerts held, and the tea parties were abuzz with news from around the Far East.

There was something else that the Western community enjoyed—gossip. While Americans were not the only ones to gossip, they were, apparently unlike their European peers, willing to repeat it in letters, diaries, books and newspaper articles. While much of this gossip has little or no historical or political relevance, it does provide us with a peek of the social life in the Western communities in Korea at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries.

One of the most prolific gossipers was undoubtedly Horace N. Allen. Allen first came to Korea in 1884 as a missionary doctor but eventually gave up evangelism and medicine for the role of diplomat. Fortunately for us, Allen tended to be very undiplomatic in his personal correspondence.

Allen described the foreign communities in the Far East as being the same as they were in the United States. Many of the residents were God-fearing men, successful and with families, but there were also men who were relatively young and easily swayed by the actions of their elder associates. [[3]](#footnote-3)

Allen was especially critical of missionaries. As a missionary, he was notoriously cantankerous, easily offended and argued continuously with his missionary peers. As a diplomat, his rhetoric was somewhat toned down but he was still very patronizing and, to some degree, fairly astute.

He noted that some missionaries remained aloof in an effort to keep themselves uncontaminated by the depraved behavior of the rest of the community. Allen claimed that their “austerity ostracized” them and made them “an object of ridicule” of their own countrymen.[[4]](#footnote-4) In turn, the missionary pariahs often wrote letters home—and in many cases to the newspapers and government officials—complaining of the depravities they had witnessed amongst the members of their small community.

**RELATIONSHIPS AND INFIDELITIES**

What were some of these depravities? The missionaries with their Victorian morality were naturally offended by the perceived sexual depravity going on around them. Not only were they offended by the loose morals of their Korean hosts—kisaeng and concubines—but also by their fellow Westerners.

One such incident concerned the alleged sexual activities of the German representative, Ferdinand Krien. In the winter of 1888 the wife of Owen Denny, an American advisor to the Korean government, began spreading rumors among the handful of American missionary women that Krien was orchestrating orgies in the German legation. Krien was subsequently made a pariah of the community. After Krien became aware of the rumors, he threatened to sue Mrs. Denny for slander and was only placated after she apologized and disavowed the veracity of the rumors. It was only later learned that the origin of the rumors was Mrs. Weber, the Russian representative’s wife, who apparently did not like Krien.[[5]](#footnote-5) It is interesting to note that shortly afterwards the German Club, the first gentleman’s club, was established in Seoul and, undoubtedly, missionaries were not members.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Of course, there were other incidents of sexual indiscretion. The scandalous conduct of Clare Hillier, wife of the English representative to Korea, undoubtedly set the community abuzz with gossip but, for the most part, went unrecorded. Clare was a beautiful woman and was the center of attention and seemed to be ill-suited for Walter, her husband, who was too preoccupied with his studies to lavish much attention upon her. According to one of Walter’s contemporaries, “She was fond of gaiety and pleasure while he was subject to fits of morose temper and was too much occupied with Chinese to be much with her.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

She did, however, make up for it by finding other males to provide her company. One such young man was Harry S. Saunderson, a member of the Korean Customs Department in Seoul. Their relationship apparently began shortly after he arrived in Seoul in 1892 and climaxed when they ran away to England, forcing Walter to divorce her.

But the British were not the only ones prone to this type of scandalous behavior. The second wife of American businessman H. Collbran vied with her step-daughter for the attention of Count Ugo Francesetti di Malgra, the Italian representative to Korea. According to Allen, the Collbran marriage was a “queer thing” and despite his wife’s dalliance with others, Collbran remained forgiving and “completely infatuated” with her.[[8]](#footnote-8) She, on the other hand, was far from forgiving.

William Franklin Sands was a young American bachelor who came to Korea in 1898 as the secretary of the American legation and later (1899) served as an advisor to the Korean government. In 1902 he had a young Japanese girlfriend known as Miss Butterfly. Sands, like a great many other young men, was infatuated with her and paid her more than just attention. Miss Butterfly, however, was interested in Gordon Paddock, who also worked in the American legation. One day she had a servant take a package to Gordon but the servant misunderstood the name and instead took it to the Collbran residence, where Mrs. Collbran opened it. Mrs. Collbran was livid to discover a beautiful kimono and a card from “Miss Butterfly” professing her love and promptly took her wrath out upon her bewildered husband. According to Allen, Collbran “was under the doctor’s care for three days.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

There were other relationships that were looked down upon by more polite society. Percival Lowell, an American who stayed in Korea during the winter of 1883/1884, was alleged to have impregnated his Korean mistress. What became of her is unknown. The French representative to Korea, Collin de Plancy, reportedly took a Korean palace woman with him back to France in the early 1890s. She supposedly became so homesick that she returned to Seoul but found little happiness. Her relationship with the Frenchman had poisoned her social standing and, unable to endure it, she committed suicide. The daughter of Jonathon Hunt, the British Commissioner of Customs at Pusan, is said to have had a secret relationship with one of the Korean staff. After she became pregnant, Hunt, unable to endure the shame the birth would bring, gave up his position and moved to Hong Kong. What became of the baby, if there ever was one, is unclear.[[10]](#footnote-10)

One particularly sad incident involved Charles F. Chase, an American gold miner employed by the Seoul Mining Company, and his Japanese mistress, a woman named Kimeno. Like many of the gold miners, Chase lived with his mistress at the mine but at some point they became estranged and she left him, possibly finding companionship with another Western gold miner. Kimeno later denied she had another lover and claimed that the only reason she had left Chase was because he was unable to give her all the money she wanted.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Unfortunately for Chase and Kimeno, it was soon discovered that she was pregnant. In April 1908, at the Palace Hotel in Seoul, she gave birth to a fair-haired, blue-eyed daughter named Ethel.[[12]](#footnote-12) There were problems almost immediately. Because of their estranged relationship, Kimeno was unable to care for the baby by herself and Chase apparently waffled between giving Ethel up for adoption to his friend, John Kavanaugh, and trying to make things work between himself and Kimeno and possibly marrying her. Kimeno’s family wanted her to return to Japan where they had already chosen a Japanese man for her to marry.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Like Chase, Kimeno was confused as to what to do. She threatened to go to the Japanese and American consuls and have them do what they could to solve the problem—an act that Kavanaugh, who had his own personal agenda, encouraged her not to do. Kavanaugh was under the impression that it would cause trouble for all.[[14]](#footnote-14) Apparently Kimeno was unwilling to give up her daughter and was trying to pressure Chase into marrying her, which he was reluctant to do.[[15]](#footnote-15)

In early December 1908, Kimeno returned to Hiroshima, Japan with her daughter. Her homecoming was greeted with little enthusiasm. Judging from Kavanaugh’s accounts, Kimeno was thrown out by her family and no one would marry her due to all the talk of the light-haired Ethel.[[16]](#footnote-16) Making matters worse, Kimeno was soon hospitalized and it was feared that she would lose one of her legs. Fortunately, she recovered.[[17]](#footnote-17)

In January 1910, Kimeno and Ethel returned to Korea and took up residence with Chase at the gold mine. In a letter to Kavanaugh, Chase wrote: “Yes the girl and baby are with me now and I am happy it is so. The baby is big and handsome and very smart. Thinks the world of me. Kimie is also happy and contented.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Their happiness was short-lived. On January 30, 1910, following “a sudden attack of apoplexy,” Chase died. He was buried three days later.[[19]](#footnote-19) What became of Kimeno and Ethel is unknown.

Not all such relationships were sordid and filled with sorrow. The marriage between the German Minister to China, Maximilian von Brandt, and Helene Heard, the daughter of Augustine Heard, the American Minister to Korea, was the subject of gossip not only in Seoul but in China and Germany as well.

Brandt first met and fell in love with Heard while she and her family were visiting him in China in 1891. Helena was only 23 years old at the time and Brandt was about 56. The discrepancy in their ages did not matter to them, but Helena’s mother was dismayed and thought it “dreadful.” She eventually gave in and gave her blessing for the wedding.[[20]](#footnote-20)

German senior diplomats were required to obtain permission from the German emperor before they were allowed to marry. Augustine and Brandt agreed to keep the engagement a secret within the family until the emperor granted approval. In this way they hoped to prevent scandalous rumors and give Helena an opportunity to reconsider the marriage. Augustine failed. Helena never reconsidered and nothing could stop the rumors. “It has become town talk and I hardly dare put my nose out of the door,” Helene bitterly complained in a letter to her sister. Despite the gossip, most of the community seemed to look favorably upon the wedding.[[21]](#footnote-21)

The German emperor did not. Brandt’s request for permission to marry was denied, leaving him shocked and angry. He had faithfully served his government for 33 years, but he was determined to marry Helena regardless of what it might cost him. He therefore promptly resigned.[[22]](#footnote-22) The couple was married in Seoul in April 1893. The wedding ceremony took place at both the German and American legations and was a social success. It was also a romantic example of what a man is willing to give up in the name of love.

**ALCOHOL**

Despite the large number of missionaries in Korea, alcohol was often served at many social gatherings. The elderly Elizabeth Greathouse was known for her passion of bourbon and her son, Clarence R. Greathouse, the American legal advisor to the Korean government, often performed his duties drunk. According to Sands, “He was a first-rate lawyer, rarely sober, but a remarkable man. The drunker he got the more lucid he became. Nothing he drank ever muddled his brain, though it might paralyse his body.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

While Greathouse was capable of functioning well when drunk, others were not. William H. Parker, the American representative to Korea in 1886, was a notorious alcoholic who was quickly removed from his post both for his incompetence and the embarrassment that he caused the United States government. In fact, many of the American legation’s employees were alcoholics—including the constables. One early resident of the American legation’s jail was able to walk out of his cell and escape, possibly due to the drunken state of his guard.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Those typically employed as legation guards—sailors and marines summoned during political unrest—were also guilty of drunken indiscretions. During the winter of 1894-95, the American warship *USS Baltimore* provided the guard for the American legation and quickly found itself in hot water, both in Korea and in Washington DC. One sailor deserted his post, sold his rifle to a Japanese merchant for ten dollars and went on a twelve-day-drinking-spree before returning to the legation. For his “irresistible urge for drink” he was sentenced to five years imprisonment.[[25]](#footnote-25)

At about the same time a letter was received in Washington DC in which an unnamed missionary wrote, “We have to blush for our American soldiers and some of the officers from the Baltimore. They get beastly drunk and carouse about the streets in a most disgraceful manner, frightening and surprising the [Japanese] and Koreans.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

The American Minister to Korea, John Sill, investigated the matter and discovered that it was Rose Moore, the wife of Rev. Samuel Moore, who had written the letter. Rev. Moore, who has been described as being “sometimes more zealous than wise”, defended his wife’s claims but, unable to provide evidence, was forced to recant the charges.[[27]](#footnote-27) Sill in his personal correspondence denounced Moore as a “holy liar.”[[28]](#footnote-28)

**GAMBLING**

Gambling was also a problem among the non-missionary males. The Cercle Diplomatique et Consulaire Club, the successor of the German Club and predecessor of the Seoul Club, was the ideal location for men to gather, smoke, drink and play poker. According to Sands, “At five o’clock the juniors and most of the bachelor elders gathered at the club, for billiards, cocktails and our one card game, poker. Our poker games were continuous. In fact it was innocuous as long as it remained among ourselves. We signed small notes for the amounts lost and once a month sent them through the clearing house. If one of us had notes that seemed too large, we held back and waited till his winnings helped to balance, and cashed the little ones.”[[29]](#footnote-29)

Even though they were friendly games, sometimes friends as well as money were lost. Raymond Krumm, a young hothead from Ohio working as an engineer for the Korean government, accused Chemulpo-based American businessman David Deshler—also from Ohio—of concealing an ace up his sleeve during one of their poker games. Their friendship ended in death threats and the intervention of the American legation.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Losses sometimes quickly added up until they were nearly impossible to pay off, as was the case with Sands. In his book *Undiplomatic Memories*, Sands glossed over his own heavy losses by merely declaring them as “small notes,” but in truth he had racked up thousands of dollars of gambling debts. In December 1902, Allen calculated that Sands was over 30,000 yen (about 15,000 dollars) in debt, including the thousands he owed in poker chits. He was so far in the hole that people stopped playing cards with him, believing he would never be able to back his losses. At the time he was working for the Korean government as an advisor with a monthly salary of 300 yen, but he also had a Japanese mistress, “Miss Butterfly,” who demanded 700 yen a month in support.[[31]](#footnote-31) The stress of his debts became so severe for Sands that some fellow Westerners feared he might commit suicide and even “kill off several others first just for company.”[[32]](#footnote-32)

**MISSIONARIES**

Missionaries also had their problems in Korea. During the Baby Riots of 1888, Horace N. Allen, then serving as the Secretary to the Korean Legation in the United States, claimed that “the Koreans firmly believe that the young boys at Underwood’s house are for purposes unnatural.”[[33]](#footnote-33) It is interesting to note that one of the boys at the institute had been dismissed after being caught in an act of sodomy with one of the servants, which may have given rise to the rumors. Allen suggested that all missionaries assigned to Korea should be married so as to alleviate any speculation as to their morals.

Dr. Charles W. Power arrived in Korea in November 1888 and was warmly welcomed by the small foreign community despite the rumors that he partook of alcohol and gambled while on the steamship from the United States. But he was good-natured and a hard worker and these idle rumors were quickly dismissed—until six months later when it was alleged that he had “broken the Sabbath and had had ‘criminal intercourse with women.’”[[34]](#footnote-34) Power eventually admitted that he had shared two quarts of beer while on a fishing trip with Korean friends but denied breaking the Sabbath and offered no explanation to the serious charge of “criminal intercourse with women.” He was promptly recalled from Korea.

Perhaps one of the most infamous was Charles H. Irvin, a missionary doctor who arrived in Korea in 1893 and was later assigned to Pusan, where he established one of the best medical facilities in Korea. Irvin’s excellent work in Korea cannot be disputed nor can it be marred with his faults. Among these faults were his snake-oil peddling, his greed and his infidelity to his wife. When their son was of school age, she accompanied him to the United States and then returned to Korea where “she found herself literally locked out of the house. Irvin married his Korean sweetheart and resigned from the mission. He stayed on in Korea for many years in private practice, becoming a wealthy man.”[[35]](#footnote-35)

**CLOSING**

For the most part, the aforementioned individuals were all successful and important personalities, pillars of the Western community in Korea, whose names and accomplishments can be found in the numerous publications of the period. It was not the intention of this article to disparage these people *per se* but merely to show that every man has a past—one that he doesn’t always show to his friends.

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1. An earlier version of this article, entitled “Jeongdong in the 1900s: The Great Han Empire Meets the World,” was presented at an international conference in the Seoul History Museum, Oct. 13, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. An early hotel was established in Seoul by the Korean government in 1884 but was only in operation for a short time. Robert Neff, “Foreigners’ Records of Seoul’s First Hotel in the 1880s,” *Korea Times*, Sept. 9, 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Horace N. Allen, *Things Korean* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1909), 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Robert D. Neff and Sunghwa Cheong, *Korea Through Western Eyes* (Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 2009), 203-208. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Robert Neff, “First Gentlemen’s Club in Seoul Established in 1889,” *Korea Times*, Oct. 20, 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Sir Charles Addis to Mr. Mills, Oct. 21, 1896, PPMS 14 67/122 (Box 8), SOAS Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Horace H. Allen to Edwin V. Morgan, Oct. 5, 1902, Allen Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. It should be noted that the three incidents cannot be verified. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. John Kavanaugh to Charles F. Chase, Jan. 7, 1910, Chase Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. John Kavanaugh to Charles F. Chase, April 24, 1908, Chase Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. John Kavanaugh to Charles F. Chase, May 23, 1908, Chase Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. John Kavanaugh to Charles F. Chase, July 27, 1908, Chase Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. John Kavanaugh to Charles F. Chase, Sept. 6, 1908, Chase Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. John Kavanaugh to Charles F. Chase, July 5, 1909, Chase Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. John Kavanaugh to Charles F. Chase, Jan. 14, 1909, Chase Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. John Kavanaugh to Charles F. Chase, Jan. 7, 1910, Chase Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Seoul Press,* Feb. 3, 1910, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Augustine Heard to his daughter Amy, July 19, 1892, Robert Grey Collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Helene (Max) Heard to Augustine Heard, July 13, 1892, Robert Grey Collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Augustine Heard to his daughter Amy, Aug. 10 and Sept. 16, 1892, Robert Grey Collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. William Franklin Sands, *Undiplomatic Memories* (London: John Hamilton, 1930), 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *Ibid*., 82-83. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Sallie Beaumont Sill to Joseph Sill, Dec. 16, 1894, Sill Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Jeffery Dorwart, *The Pigtail War* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1975), 63-64. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Martha Huntley, *To Start a Work* (Seoul: Publishing House Presbyterian Church of Korea, 1987), 217. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. John Sill to Joseph Sill, Feb. 10, 1895,Sill Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Sands, 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Neff and Cheong, 172. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Horace N. Allen to Edwin V. Morgan, Oct. 5 and Dec. 2, 1902; Horace N. Allen to Harry Bostwick, Feb. 4, 1903, Allen Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Horace N. Allen to Edwin V. Morgan, May 1, 1903, Allen Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Neff and Cheong, 114; Huntley, 132-133. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Huntley, 150-151. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. *Ibid*., 391. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)