

112-year-old mystery solved? Indiana madam may have inspired famous song

[Domenica Bongiovanni](#) Updated 6:23 p.m. ET May 15, 2019

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At the crux of the mystery is a woman named Sal. Or, at least, that's the professional name of the woman immortalized in the famous 1905 song that was later turned into the movie "My Gal Sal."

What historians believe is that she was [Indiana songwriter Paul Dresser's](#) lover in Evansville. She ran a successful brothel in her late 20s and heaped food and clothes upon his poverty-stricken family. And — as described by Dresser's younger brother, the [renowned novelist Theodore Dreiser](#) — she was lovely, with a curvy figure and dark hair and eyes that offset a pale complexion.

But more than a century after Dresser wrote the song, researchers have not been able to confirm the real identity of a woman who, likely long after her death, hit the pop culture jackpot when [she was portrayed by Rita Hayworth](#) in the [1942 Dresser biopic "My Gal Sal."](#) And so she has remained a fascinating enigma, one that New York Times Magazine writer John Jeremiah Sullivan has long worked to decipher.

Now, it's quite possible that he has. Through his research that centers on music in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Sullivan has found a real identity for Sal that matches up with Dreiser's description of her.

For his part, Sullivan is confident it's her.

"The character, the personage, that Sal person, she already existed and had a real enigmatic power, and so that was very cool to be able to put a name to that," Sullivan said.

Her professional name was Sallie Davis. Her real name likely was Annie Swonner. She was a madam of a fancy brothel in Evansville, she had a penchant for wild men and she led quite the adventurous life.

'My Gal Sal,' a pop culture giant



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Terre Haute-born Paul Dresser made his name as a traveling entertainer and a ladies' man who spent lavishly. (Photo: Photo provided/Martin Coll., Ind. Historical Society)

Dresser was the first to introduce the complex Sal to the general public. "My Gal Sal" was his last hit, one that came a year before his death in 1906, at a time when he had lost the popularity and wealth that had defined his entertainment career.

While Dresser has now faded into obscurity for many Hoosiers, he was one of Indiana's favorite sons. The songwriter was born in Terre Haute to a superstitious mother who thought she had visions and a demanding Catholic father whose personality was made more severe after an accident where a heavy piece of wood fell on his head, Dreiser wrote. The deaths of the first three children stung their parents, but they had 10 more, of whom Paul was the oldest.

Dresser was sent to seminary school as a young teen and left shortly thereafter for unknown reasons, wrote Dresser biographer Clayton Henderson in ["On the Banks of the Wabash: The Life and Music of Paul Dresser."](#) Eventually, he began traveling the vaudeville circuit and found fame as a songwriter, comic actor and singer, playing Evansville, Indianapolis, Chicago, Cincinnati, New York, Boston, Philadelphia and Louisville, Ky. He became known for his extreme generosity, 300-pound frame and love of women, some of whom probably used him, said Marylee Hagan, executive director of the [Vigo County Historical Society and Museum](#).

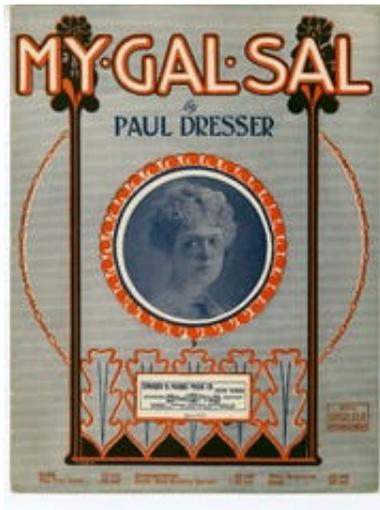
Jelly Roll Morton - My Gal Sal



"He was good to women, he liked women and he spent his money lavishly," Hagan said.

During the latter part of the 19th century, Dresser — who shrugged off the family name for an easier-to-pronounce, show-business version — wrote hit after hit in the sentimental, comforting style that wowed crowds. In 1897, he composed [what would become the Indiana state song](#), "On the Banks of the Wabash, Far Away."

"He was a storyteller," Hagan said. "The music that he wrote ... you could visualize what he was talking about."



Paul Dresser wrote "My Gal Sal" the year before his death in 1906. The song became a hit even though he was struggling at the end of his career. (Photo: Photo provided/Ind. Historical Society)

The lyrics of the catchy, waltzy "My Gal Sal" paint a bright-eyed woman who was wild and generous — and who had just died.

"Paul was trying to hold on to a tradition that was rapidly fading, and I don't know whether he realized that or not," Henderson said. "His style was passé when he was writing 'My Gal Sal,' but it just took off with the public."

Louise Dresser, a singer who took Paul Dresser's surname as a stage name, popularized it, and through the decades, [musicians — including Jelly Roll Morton, Fletcher Henderson and the Everly Brothers — played renditions of it.](#)

According to Henderson's biography, Dresser never revealed the source behind his final hit.

Who was Sallie Davis?

Dresser's novelist-brother Dreiser, however, had plenty to say about Sal. In his book "Dawn," Dreiser identified her as Annie Brace, a madam whose

working name was Sallie Walker. And the novelist writes that Brace was the subject of "My Gal Sal."



Paul Dresser moved his mother and siblings to a house on East Franklin Street in Evansville, where he and his lover Sal took care of the impoverished family, according to Dresser's brother, Theodore Dreiser. (Photo: Photo provided/University Archives at University of Southern Indiana)

The Sal of Dresser's song likely was an intense romance he'd experienced more than 20 years before in Evansville, Henderson wrote. But the names Dreiser gave don't match up to newspaper stories mentioning arrests for prostitution or to city directories of women in the area, Henderson wrote. Dreiser, however, was known to change names to hide identities, according to the biographer.

While reading newspapers — before they were digitized — Henderson said he didn't find a sure fit for Sal's real identity. He concluded that Sal could be

a combination of women. But he hadn't come across Davis.

Writer and researcher Sullivan, who grew up in New Albany, was particularly interested in music history during the time period Dresser worked, and the mystery of Sal's identity intrigued him. He began to read about Indiana's late 19th-century demimonde.

As a rapidly growing city on the Ohio River, Evansville had a brothel scene that was normal for a town its size, Vanderburgh County historian Stan Schmitt said. Bagnios, as they were called, were scattered around until the late 1800s, when the city began corralling them into an industrial district near the river, he said. Sullivan counted petty criminals and politicians among the clients.

"I ended up staying up several nights reading about these bagnios ... and all these terrible, very vividly described murders that would happen there, suicides, failed abortions, you know, romantic affairs falling apart in very violent ways," Sullivan said.

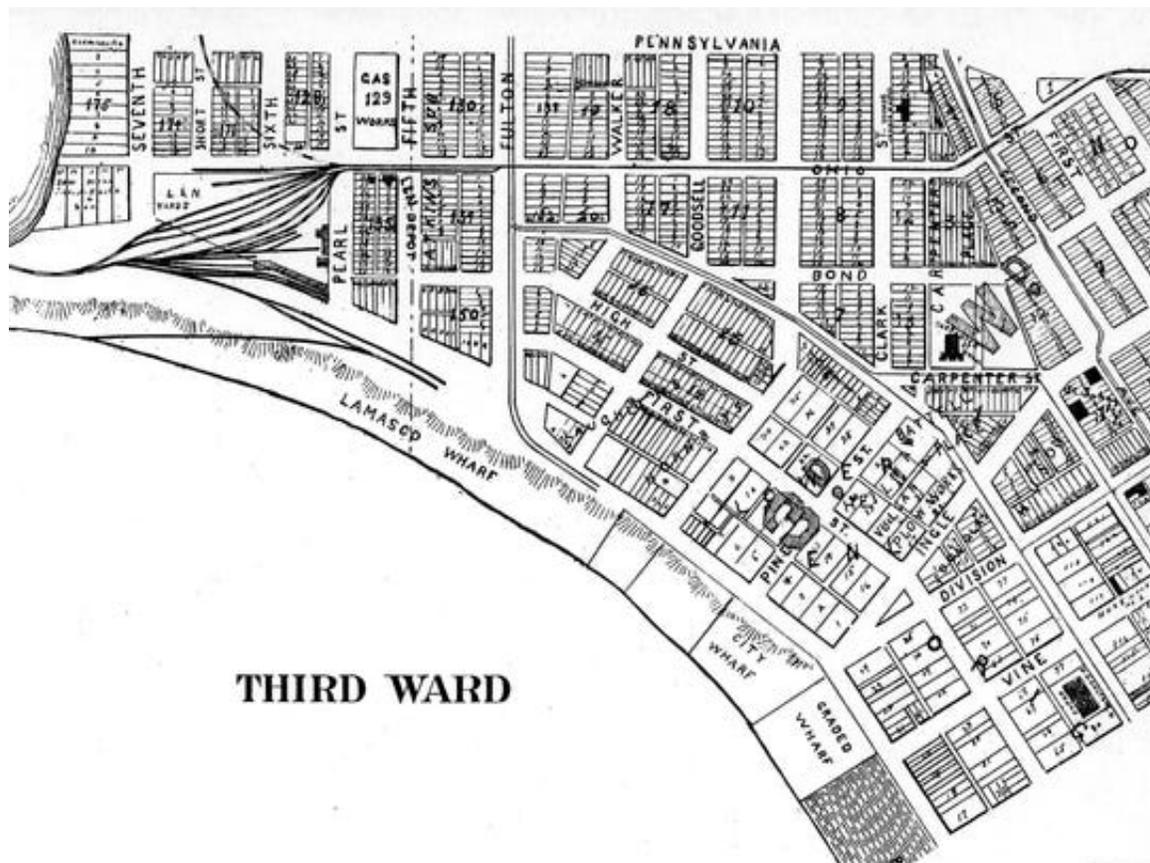
In the midst of these tales, Davis' name kept popping up. With help from his research assistant Joel Finsel, Sullivan searched vital records, the Evansville Courier & Press and other digitized newspaper databases.

In [an article Sullivan composed for the literary journal Sewanee Review](#), he mentions a few incidents. A thief was found and arrested in Sal's mansion on Division Street, where his mistress was. Another that Sullivan quotes from a newspaper: "A member of Sallie Davis' household tried to make a trip through the dark portals yesterday by the morphine route. Her baggage wasn't checked properly and her trip was consequently delayed."

And Sullivan recently dug up a story of a 15-year-old girl who ran away to Sal's brothel and refused to go. Sal joined a police officer in trying to

convince the teen to leave "before it was too late."

What's more, Sal's neighbors were fed up with her business and petitioned to have her leave. She moved and then they passed a permanent injunction against her, so she was forced to relocate again — this time across the street.



The industrial district, where many of the brothels were moved starting in the latter 19th century made up a good deal of the Third Ward by the river in Evansville. The map came from "An Illustrated Plat Book of Vanderburgh and Warrick Counties, Indiana" — Tillman & Fuller Publishing Co., Evansville, Indiana, 1899. (Photo: Photo provided/Courtesy of Willard Library)

But no matter where Sal was, her brothel had the reputation of being luxurious. A reporter who interviewed her in 1880 described her establishment as having expensive furnishings, fine carpet, birds singing in cages, music and flowers, according to Sullivan's article.

She "goes around in a sort of aura of scandal and social untouchability, but at the same time has almost a regal quality," Sullivan said.

When and how Dresser found his way from Terre Haute to Evansville is unknown, Henderson wrote. At some point, likely as he built his career in the city's entertainment venues, he fell for Sal. Dresser, who was in his early 20s at the time, lived with Sal for stints, Henderson wrote, and even moved his family to Evansville.

In "Dawn," Dreiser suspects his brother's relationship with Sal was a reason for his family's relocation. Dreiser wrote that she generously gave to his family and was especially warm to his mother.

Dresser was close to his mother, who was the all-forgiving protector against their father's strict rules, but who also held them emotionally hostage if they disobeyed her, Henderson wrote. The songwriter composed during an era of songs focused on mother and home, and he contributed his share to the genre, including titles like, "I Believe It, For My Mother Told Me So" and "Your Mother Wants You Home, Boy, And She Wants You Mighty Bad."

As lovers, Dresser and Sal didn't last. In 1884, Henderson wrote, the couple broke up when he began seeing another woman.

A bitter end

After Sal, Dresser is rumored to have had an intense relationship — and maybe even a child who later died — with singer and burlesque queen May Howard. Historians don't know if she is the woman he left Sal for, but accounts after Dresser's death say Howard deserted him for someone else.

Sal later married Charles Hildebrand, who was a criminal before becoming known as the temperance-supporting "Reformed Outlaw," according to

Sullivan. Whether Hildebrand was actually dedicated to his new life is debatable — especially since he had never divorced his first wife when he wed Sal, Sullivan said. Nonetheless, the former outlaw toured the country with his new bride giving lectures about prison reform and alcohol abstinence.

"This toughness in her, I started seeing early on, this refusal to give in to the will of the disapproving townspeople and ... just to insist on her own social validity that she, too, had a place in that town, that the bagnio had a place," Sullivan said.

"There was definitely a boldness in her ... she falls in love with this huge, dashing, successful songwriter and then she next falls in love with another showman of a sort."

Byron G. Harlan - My Gal Sal (1907)



According to her death certificate, Sal — then going by Annie Hildebrand — died in Troy N.Y. in 1886 and was buried in Bellville, Ohio. "Hemaplegia," which is defined as paralysis caused by a brain injury or disease, is listed as the reason. Charles Hildebrand's obituary mentioned the time and place of her death, and it was the document that tied together several details, Sullivan said.

Absolute proof that Annie Swonner, a.k.a. Sallie Davis, was the famous Sal doesn't exist. But, that doesn't stem the fun of piecing together clues into a highly plausible narrative. The world that drew in Sullivan, with its smart and sometimes tragic businesswomen, remains a vibrant one for those who spend time studying it.

"I think it's the glamour that's associated — even though it's kind of a twisted glamour — of these beautiful bordellos that were created by these women," Hagan said.

Call IndyStar reporter Domenica Bongiovanni at 317-444-7339. Follow her on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

"My Gal Sal" or "They Called Her Frivolous Sal"

By Paul Dresser

Verse 1:

Ev'rything is over and I'm feeling bad,
I lost the best pal that I ever had;
'Tis but a fort-night, since she was here,
Seems like she's gone though for twenty year
Oh, how I miss her my old pal,
Oh how I'd kiss her my gal Sal;
Face not so handsome, but eyes don't you know

That shone just as bright, as they did years ago.

Chorus:

They called her frivolous Sal,
A peculiar sort of a gal,
With a heart that was mellow,
An all'round good fellow,
Was my old pal;
Your troubles sorrows and care,
She was always willing to share,
A wild sort of devil,
But dead on the level,
Was my gal Sal.

Verse 2:

Brought her little dainties just afore she died,
Promised she would meet me, on the other side;
Told her how I loved her, she said: "I know Jim,"
Just do your best, leave the rest to Him;
Gently I pressed her to my breast,
Soon she would take her last long rest,
She looked at me and murmured "Pal,"
And softly I whispered, "Good-bye, Sal."

— *From a reproduction of the score, (c) 1905 by The Paul Dresser Pub Co.,
51 W. 28th St., N.Y.*