



DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKERS Annmarie Lanese, left, and Penny Lane first learned about Troy madame Mame Faye (sometimes spelled Mayme Fay or Mame Fay) in 2002, when they were students at RPI.

# A legend remade

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STAFF WRITER

Film pieces together elusive life of Troy's famed Mame Faye

**H**ow do you keep a once-famous person from being forgotten? How do you put a face on someone for whom there are no known photographs and just barely an official record?

Filmakers Penny Lane and Anne Marie Lanese found out while making their new film, "Sittin' on a Million," which explores the reality and myth of brothel-owner madame Mame Faye, who was once nationally known and Troy's most famous proprietor. Now she is but a legend remembered by dozens of the city's aging residents.

According to their tales, Mame Faye ran her well-furnished brothel in downtown Troy from 1906 to 1941. The clients who visited included politicians, factory workers and military men stopping through Troy. And, in those days, if you traveled anywhere in the country and told someone you were from Troy, they'd reply, "Oh, that's where Mame Faye is from, right?" "She was really famous, but then not any-

more, and there weren't really reasons," said Lane, 30. "I thought it would be interesting to make a film about someone about whom there is no historical record."

In the opening moments of the film, quick shots show a series of several different actresses sitting on an antique couch, each proclaiming they are the famous madame.

"There are a lot of variations of what people described her as, so this was a way to deal with that," said Lanese, 28.

Lanese first learned about Mame Faye from a customer when she was working at the Ale House while attending Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute's iEar program in 2002. She told Lane, also then a student in the program. The pair decided to make the film, but put it on the back burner until 2006.

When Lane and Lanese advertised seeking people who knew about Mame Faye, they got hundreds of responses, mostly from members of the World War II generation, who were



IN THIS IMAGE FROM "Sittin' on a Million," Geri De Seve performs one of the many versions of Mame Faye. No known photo of her exists.

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## LEGEND: Troy residents dig out memories of Mame Faye for film

CONTINUED FROM E1

children in Mame Faye's heyday. No one interviewed in the film admitted to having worked for or having been a patron of Mame Faye's, although the filmmakers suspect some did.

"We were disappointed to not find those people, but it really is too late. If someone was a prostitute in Mame Faye's house in the 1920s, she was born in about 1905," said Lane. "The living voice of this history is gone or going fast."

That makes the film even more important, Lane believes.

"She was a force in this city. She spent a lot of money and gave money to politicians," Lane said. "Way before Uncle Sam became Troy, Mame Faye was the face of Troy, New York."

### Options limited

Mame Faye was very different from the modern stereotype of a prostitute as impoverished, drug-addicted and under the thumb of a pimp.

"The streets of Troy are filled with prostitutes today. They have such a different struggle than women who were working at the turn of the century," said Lanese. "Back then, police protected them."

Lane said a film about Mame Faye was way past due.

"If we can have several books about 'Legs' Diamond, who killed people, we can have a half-hour movie about a woman who was a prostitute," said Lane. "We tried to see her as a human being and understand what life was like for this woman, who grew up the daughter of Irish immigrants and whose options were limited. To try to look at her choices through today's societal values is a little bit off. You have to look at how moral values change over time."



"SITTING ON A MILLION" uses oral history, speaking to people in Troy who knew Mame Faye. Here, Marty Mahar describes being Mame's paperboy.

Kathy Sheehan, registrar and historian at the Rensselaer County Historical Society, believes "Sittin' on a Million" is important because it provides a new way of looking at

old Troy. "A lot of people get that twinkle in their eye when they talk about Mame Faye," Sheehan said. "The movie encourages oral history and encourages a dialogue among people who were around at that time."

Like Lane's previous film, "The Abortion Diaries," "Sittin' on a Million" gives a glimpse into an aspect of women's lives that is rarely discussed. But this film tries to do so in a historical context. "Women's lives changed so dramatically during the time Mame Faye was around," said Lane. "Halfway through her time of

### Where to watch

**SCREENINGS**  
Two Saturday screenings of "Sittin' on a Million" at the Sanctuary for Independent Media have sold out. A Sunday matinee has been added.  
■ **When:** 1 p.m. Sunday  
■ **Where:** Sanctuary for Independent Media, 3361 Sixth Ave., Troy  
■ **Cost:** \$10 suggested donation; \$5 for students  
■ **Info:** 331-2831 or <http://www.MameFaye.com>

### ON TV

The film will also be shown on WMBH Ch. 17 as a part of its new local film series, TvFilm:  
■ **When:** 10 p.m. Thursday, July 17; midnight Saturday, July 19

being a madame, she got the right to vote."

### Balancing act

A big challenge in the filmmaking process was to balance folklore and reality.

"Neither one of us wanted to make it just one or the other," Lane said.

An early cut of the film featured plenty of text about Mame Faye, whose real name was Mary A. Fahey Bortor, the history of prostitution in America and the life of women in Troy. But Lane and Lanese decided it was cumbersome and removed much of it. They put the removed text onto a paper insert in the DVD package. "We did so much research and we felt people needed to get the information," Lane said.

Now that the film is completed, Lane and Lanese are sending it to various film festivals. It will also play locally on WMBH Ch. 17 in July.

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