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Filmmakers focus on Troy madam

Two friends making documentary on the history of Mame Fay

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TROY -- Mame Fay may have been a madam, but two young women think her story is worth remembering.

Annmarie Lanese and Penny Lane are filming a documentary about life on The Line, when Troy was known for the houses of ill repute along Sixth Avenue, including Mame Fay's most famous one.

"I've grown up in Troy. I've lived her most of my life, and I'd never heard of Mame Fay," Lanese said.

She was working as a waitress when a 75-year-old man told her about Troy's famous madam, whose illegal but nationally known business flourished in the 1920s and 1930s.

Lanese asked her grandmother, then 82.

"She knew all about Mame Fay since when she was a child," Lanese said. "She knew The Line was down there, all those houses, and that she was not allowed to go there. It was a no-no."

Lanese and Lane attended graduate school together at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and decided to make a documentary about Mame Fay. Today, Lane -- and, yes, that's her real name -- teaches film at Hampshire College in Amherst, Mass. Lanese works part-time teaching a video and imaging class at RPI and full-time at an architectural and engineering firm she'd rather not name.

The two friends put an ad in the local Pennysaver asking for people to tell what they remembered and so far they have taped more than 20 people.

"We sort of figured there was this amazing little story from Troy's past," Lane said. "When people talk about it, they always smile. We were trying to figure out how someone so famous could be forgotten."

Mary Alice Fahey died in 1943. At the time, her estate was worth \$275,000, which would be the equivalent of about \$3 million today.

"She was an entrepreneur and a businesswoman at the time," Lanese said. "At that time, women didn't have much choice but to work in the collar factories."

"It was a very different place in Troy during the Depression," Lane added. While modern society might frown on Mame Fay's operation, she said, older residents see it as a product of its times.

"They associate her with the Wild West mythology of Troy," she said.

None of the people they have interviewed claim to have been patrons of the madam's home. Her customers are likely all dead, but older residents remember hearing stories of her as they grew up or were children when Fay was alive.

"We're not trying to uncover anyone's secrets," Lanese said. "We know all these stories about Legs Diamond and about Prohibition. We don't hear any of the women's stories from that era."

Mame Fay's house was located along the train tracks to Troy, at the time one of the nation's wealthiest industrial cities. That prime location made it easily accessible to out-of-towners and probably helped spread her fame.

"She was a major economic force in the city," Lane said. "She and her girls spent a lot of money in those stores."

She also had a reputation for generosity, the two filmmakers have learned.

They are still hoping more people will share their stories, and they can be reached at 527-9521. The two also have set up a Web site at <http://www.p-lane.com/mamefaye.html>.

They hope to complete filming interviews this winter, and the Uncle Sam Chorus has agreed to sing romantic songs of the era for their film. Their plans call for releasing the film next year, showing it locally and submitting it to festivals.

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