

MADAM *Belle*

New book explores Belle Brezing's ties to the expanding Bluegrass horse business of the 1890s and early 1900s

By Maryjean Wall

Autumn in Lexington was high season for the trots and Thoroughbred racing during the Gay Nineties, and the woman named Belle Brezing loved going to the track. A pair of perfectly matched chestnuts drew her sporty phaeton, the Ferrari of its day. When Brezing's liveried driver pulled the horses to a halt at the gate and she alighted, heads turned. She could have been any society figure, given her polished manners and rich appearance. But she did not represent acceptable society. Everyone in this small city knew who she was: proprietor of a notorious house of ill repute, perhaps the most infamous brothel in the South. For all her fashionable clothes purchased in New York, Brezing could not hide this fact.

Decades later Brezing would transition at author Margaret Mitchell's hand into the fictional Belle Watling in *Gone With the Wind*. But from 1881 into World War I, Brezing operated as a real-life madam whose mansion for men stood at the heart of Bluegrass horse culture. More so than any racetrack, Brezing's mansion was a favorite gathering spot for a wide range of wealthy men, from capitalists to political power brokers, all drawn to Lexington for its horses.

As far away as Argentina, men spoke about her house. Interviewed in 1956, a Lexington man named Joe Keith recalled that decades earlier he had heard Brezing mentioned in Buenos Aires. He had taken a load of horses to South America for Elmendorf Farm owner James Ben Ali Haggin and was surprised by what he heard.



Lexington's movers and shakers attended the grand opening of Brezing's 59 Megowan Street in 1891.

A formal studio portrait shows Belle Brezing in her customary stylish attire.



“We were sitting in a hotel lobby in Buenos Aires talking about Lexington,” said Keith, manager of a cocktail lounge. “Directly a fellow came over and in as plain English as we ever heard said, ‘What do you keep popping off about Lexington for? There is nothing there but the Phoenix Hotel, Garret Wilson’s livery stable, and Belle Brezing’s house.’ ”

Brezing built her excellent reputation on the high standards she demanded from employees and patrons. Gentlemen dressed for an upscale evening. Her prostitutes descended the stairs wearing evening gowns. In the euphemism of the era, Brezing’s mansion was a \$5 house situated among \$2 houses in the neighborhood. The largest and most elegant among brothels in the city’s red-light district, Brezing’s house was more like a private gentlemen’s club where no gentleman dared exhibit uncivilized behavior.



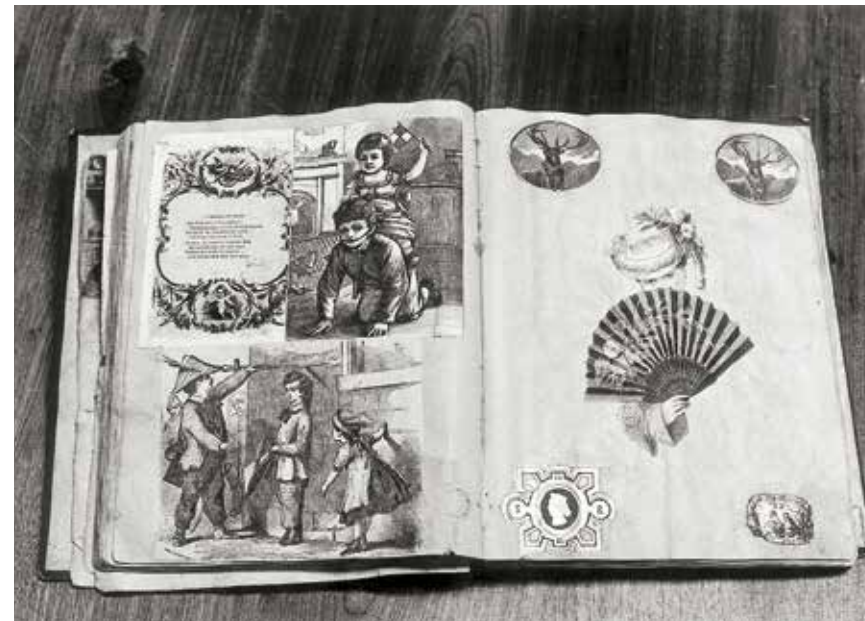
Top, Brezing worked for Jennie Hill in the former Mary Todd Lincoln House. Above, Belle at approximately age 8

She had come so far from her early life, born in Lexington in 1860 to Sarah Cocks, whose paramour deserted her soon after the girl’s birth. The surname Brezing came to Belle from her mother’s marriage to George Brezing. The Brezings operated a saloon and later a grocery store on Lexington’s west end. But neighbors shunned the family. George and Sarah frightened their customers away because they engaged in numerous drunken brawls in the grocery. The union ended in divorce, with Sarah having a brief marriage to a carriage painter named William McMeekin. Brezing grew up with an expanding reputation for living the fast life. She had a child out of wedlock when she was 16. Upon her mother’s death soon after, Brezing turned to street prostitution.

Brezing began developing her popularity with horsemen, working for a madam named Jennie Hill in a house on West Main Street. The house had formerly belonged to Robert Todd, whose daughter, Mary Todd, eventually married Abraham Lincoln. Although a brothel, the house enjoyed a “respectable” reputation in its reincarnation from the Todd family home, and Brezing met a number of respectable men while working for Hill. When she departed Hill’s operation a year and a half later, Brezing had built a formidable client list.

Brezing first moved into a rented row house on North Upper Street — a house now owned by Transylvania University. Established businesses extended her credit to buy the beds, material for drapes, and other furnishings she needed to open her first enterprise. By 1883 Brezing had accumulated a big enough bankroll to buy her first house, also on North Upper but closer to Fourth Street. In this new location Brezing’s centrality to the community’s horse culture became obvious to all. Horsemen, in town for the horse sales or race meets, made a point of visiting Brezing.

The *Morning Lexington Transcript* public-



Clockwise from above, Brezing’s personal effects include a scrapbook, a journal in which she kept her accounts, and her bedroom at 59 Megowan Street, showing the bed gambler Riley Grannan might have purchased for her.



ly acknowledged Brezing’s role during the races. The newspaper published an item in 1883 beneath the headline, “Bal de Demi-Monde”:

“A ball at Miss Belle Brezing’s (sic), which will come off during the races, will probably be pretty breezy, and the proprietress will be the Belle of the ball. A large attendance is anticipated. Our reporter will be provided with a telephone and telescope and will take it in from the top of Morrison College [note: Transylvania University].”

Brezing’s economic value to Lexington, especially during equine events, was well understood in the community. Her operation worked in synergy with other sectors to enhance the local economy: Brezing patronized the bourbon and wine merchants who realized an appreciable income from the numbers of brothels in Lexington — 158 at one point. Brezing’s popularity augmented the horse-related attractions. Undoubtedly her business likewise supported business at the Phoenix Hotel on Main Street, a long established hostelry that billed itself as a horsemen’s headquarters. Brezing’s brothel boosted income for hansom cab drivers and for livery stables, and for the grocery and clothing merchants who supplied her operation. She paid property taxes and purchased a retail liquor license. She subscribed to the newspaper. Merchants gladly accepted her money.

The men she drew to her house brought real money into Lexington. Chief among these were the Singerly brothers from Philadelphia, with their family fortune having been made in street rail-

roads and other industries. The brothers George and William both fancied fast trotting horses and came to Lexington to buy horses and attend the trots. One or both of them befriended Brezing (the record is not precise as to which one). One or both gave Brezing a small financial windfall, enabling her to purchase a mansion on Megowan (now Eastern) Street.

The time was right in 1890 for Brezing to move from Upper to Megowan. Spurred on by a former minister who wanted to rid Lexington of brothels, horse racing, and liquor, her neighbors on North Upper and Fourth Street had mounted an effective campaign to run her out of the Upper Street neighborhood in 1889. His was a quixotic quest that realized results only in the case of Brezing and two other madams on North Upper. But with the Singerly money to back her new venture, Brezing went looking for a house on Megowan in what was developing into the city’s red-light district.

Brezing announced her departure from North Upper by taking out an ad in the newspaper. She was installed in her new mansion by the time Riley won the Kentucky Derby in 1890. She oversaw remodeling and furnishing of the mansion and in 1891 held a grand opening for invited guests. Many of Lexington’s civic

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Left, a photo of Brezing c. 1890 shows her seated in her private apartment at 59 Megowan Street. Below, the original of this portrait reportedly stood in a gold leaf frame next to Brezing's bed.



leaders attended. The late William H. Townsend, an attorney and historian of considerable renown in Lexington, made a professional visit to the house in the late 1930s and caught sight of a photo inscribed, "My Opening Night, 1891." He wrote that he recognized quite a number of the city's social leaders in the photo, all of them men, of course. Many of these guests also were power brokers in the regional horse business, during an era when everyone from elected officials to governors to bankers and attorneys bred horses on the side.

It seems likely that many big-money horse deals went down in the Brezing mansion. With locals as well as outsiders gathering in her parlors to sip bourbon and talk horses, Brezing befriended men whose business was breeding and racing. One among them, Ernest Featherstone, became her close friend.

Featherstone was a trotting horse dealer who enjoyed an international clientele. He was fond of telling how Brezing and her housekeeper, Pearl Hughes, helped him broker an important deal at the trotting track. He needed to be at the track early one morning to show a horse. But the night before at the Brezing mansion, he had drunk too much and was not in fit condition to find his way home. Brezing and Hughes insisted he stay at the house rather than wander off into the city. Early the following morning Hughes had pressed his suit, prepared breakfast, and had a horse-drawn cab waiting outside so he could get to the track. He sold the horse to his client. He thanked Brezing and Hughes for their help.

Col. Phil Chinn, a legend among Thoroughbred horse dealers, told how his father sent him to Brezing's as a young man to be indoctrinated into the mys-

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teries of manhood. He never made it clear whether he turned that initial visit into a regular practice.

Another who befriended Brezing was the notorious gambler, Riley Grannan, a Kentuckian who was a contemporary of Diamond Jim Brady, Pittsburg “Phil” Smith, Mike Dwyer, and numerous other well-known “plungers” operating during the Gay Nineties. Grannan led a mercurial existence up and down and back again on the roller coaster of wealth. On one of his visits to Lexington, he reportedly purchased a bed that he gave to Brezing. She installed the bed in her private apartment on the second floor of the mansion, and it remained there until after her death in 1940.

Many a trotter as well as Thoroughbred



Maryjean Wall's biography of Belle Brezing will be available in October. Published by the University Press of Kentucky, *Madam Belle* retails for \$24.95.

racehorse was named for Brezing during her lifetime and afterward. This seemed quite fitting since Brezing loved to attend the races in Louisville, Lexington, and Cincinnati. She and her female companions would take their seats and keep to themselves, sending their wagers downstairs by messenger. It is not beyond imagination to

picture her also at Saratoga, for Brezing travelled frequently to New York.

When financial problems shuttered the Thoroughbred track in Lexington from 1898 to 1905, the fall trots held the most important place on the calendar. A bartender, John Coyne, recalled that “Miss Belle would have a ball during the trots.”

Brezing also liked the opera. She kept a box at Lexington's Opera House where she sometimes took her prostitutes. Their habit mirrored their behavior at the racecourses. They arrived dressed in the latest fashions, they kept to themselves, and they enjoyed the productions.

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Brezing attended the races at the Kentucky Association Track in downtown Lexington.

ness and the punter's betting world. She was attending the races in Cincinnati when some young men she knew from Lexington came over to tell her hello. She asked how they were doing; they told her they'd lost all their money earlier in the afternoon. Brezing gave them money to bet and told them they need not repay her unless they won money back.

With some of the best in the horse business to teach her the sport, Brezing developed a fondness for racing that enhanced her identity beyond belle of the demi-monde. On the autumn winds that rise in the mist of memories evoking the Gay Nineties, Brezing alights in the imagination from her phaeton at the track. She remains a bridge to Lexington's past, a storied character who has provided a window into the sport and business of racing as it existed a century earlier. **KM**

But nothing equaled the racetrack in Brezing's estimation. She understood both the big-money world of the larger horse busi-

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