

CHARACTERISTICS OF CONSUMERS AT
A LITTLE HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE

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Could retail merchants benefit from a purchasing spill-over effect generated by a local house of prostitution? Yes, according to this study, many customers of the house would patronize surrounding businesses. Also included are statistics on the type of purchase made plus some detailed information on the customers themselves.

The effects of certain local attractions upon neighboring retail establishments would seem to be direct and strong. State fairs and amusement parks, for example, obviously act as draws which increase hotel, service station and restaurant sales in surrounding areas. The purpose of this study was to measure the extent of the influence of an attraction on retail sales within a close geographical proximity. The attraction chosen was a house of prostitution and the retailers studied were in the small town near which the house was located.

The town was in a rural area. The house was located on the city limits and had the outside appearance of a large farm house. The term "Chicken Ranch" was used to describe the house and it was known by that name throughout the region. The closest city of more than 15,000 was 60 miles away and had a population of over 100,000. Two other, larger cities were located approximately 100 miles away.

The object of the study was to determine how many of the people who were drawn to the town by the Chicken Ranch also made purchases from local retailers.

Two weeks before the full study was scheduled, a reconnaissance was made of the town and house. Locations and operating hours of retail establishments were noted and placed on a large map. An aircraft was used to find potential observation posts at the house. All critical points in the town and at the house were plotted and position assignments were made to team members.

The data were collected during a two day period--one day during the week and the other on a weekend. A team of 30 people was used. Two people were stationed on each block in the downtown area and the remaining individuals covered establishments on the entry roads. With few exceptions, every retail outlet within five miles of the house was under observation.

The house operated from noon until 3 A.M. The team was deployed at 11:30 in the morning and the posts were covered until the retailers in that area closed or 3:30 A.M., whichever was later.

Purchase activity was measured in various ways. It was obvious from a distance if gasoline were being purchased by observing the connection of a hose. In other cases the carrying of a paperbag from a store was an indicator. At the restaurants and bars it was assumed that if the person remained inside for more than ten minutes a purchase had been made. Thus it was possible for one team to observe several places from one position.

A person was stationed inside the drugstore to watch for pocket-sized purchases.

Cover letters were given to all observers in the town to show to police or questioning merchants. Although many were curious there was no trouble.

Observations at the Chicken Ranch were made surreptitiously. Couples were posted in the bushes outside the house (but not on private property). They had binoculars and picnic lunches and were told to claim they were hungry bird watchers if questioned. These observers did not have cover letters to be sure no one made a connection between the people at the house and those in the town.

The license numbers of vehicles whose occupants entered the house and the license number of every vehicle with a male occupant who made a retail purchase in the town were recorded. The two lists were compared and a third list of both house and town patrons was compiled. The names and addresses of the vehicle owners were obtained by submitting the license numbers to the state highway department.

Questionnaires were sent to all persons of the Chicken Ranch list and they were asked to give the form to the male who usually drove the car with the license number in question. This was necessary since: 1. a minor child or someone else might be the usual driver of a car not registered in his name and 2. twenty-five percent of the vehicles were registered to females. The respondents were asked to give their names and addresses

only if they were not the same person to whom the letter had been sent. The questionnaires were numbered for reference.

During the two day study, there were 154 vehicles at the house and of this number, 68 occupants also made a purchase in the town. Of the 154 questionnaires mailed, 81 were returned for a response rate of 53%. Within the group of 81 respondents, 38 were from people who had made a purchase in the town. Two of the 38 lived in the same town in which the house was located. These people were eliminated from the remainder of this analysis because the object of the study was to investigate buying behavior of people drawn to the town by the house. Residents of the town would not fall into this group.

Of the 68 persons who made a purchase in the town the following times and categories were recorded.

	purchase made before visiting the house	purchase made after visiting the house
Gasoline	28	13
Food	3	10
Beer	18	2

Six persons made more than one purchase. Most of the beer and gasoline purchases were made before visiting the house and most of the restaurant purchases were made after visiting the house. The people buying beer often bought a six-pack to go and sat outside the house in the parking lot drinking for a time before going in. In most cases these were the younger men. The only purchase recorded for other than beer, gasoline or food was by two men who spent one night in a local motel.

The respondents were each asked where they usually shopped and where they occasionally shopped. Only two said they did any shopping in the town studied. Of 19 who bought gasoline, 10 purchased a brand different from the one they usually buy although in every case the preferred brand had a station in the town. One possible explanation is that, for some, the real reason for stopping was to ask directions to the house. It is not easy for the first-timer to find the house and therefore many persons ask at service stations. (In fact, at least five of the team members were asked directions sometime during the two day period.) The person who asked about the house usually ordered a small amount of gas and then asked the attendant for directions. It is conceivable that many of the gas purchases provided a convenient excuse to ask a local resident about the house.

Additional information about the persons who visited the house was obtained from the returned questionnaires. The occupational groups of the respondents were:

students	8%
farmers/ranchers	9%
blue collar	27%
white collar	36%
unemployed or no response	20%

The findings did not support the local folklore that the usual customer is from one of two universities in the area.

The respondent's marital status was:	single	32%
	married	50%
	separated	2%

divorced	5%
widowed	3%
reconciled	2%
remarried	6%

Of those married, the range of number of years married was 2 through 46 with a mean of 17 years.

The number of children ranged from 0 through 6 with a mode of 2.

The highest level of education completed was:	junior high	12%
	senior high	20%
	business or trade	5%
	some college	30%
	college graduate	28%
	no response	5%

The distance from the respondent's home address and the house ranged between 5 and 400 miles with a mean of 104 miles. They were asked if their work required them to travel to determine if there was a relationship with distance travelled. This exploratory analysis was looking for the travelling salesman type. If a relationship were present it would dilute the value of the house as a draw to the town since it could mean the person was just passing through on a normal route and stopped in rather than making a special trip to the house. Of those who answered the question, 30% said their work required travel. The correlation between work required travel and distance to the house was .17 which is not significant and seems to confirm the value of the

house as an attraction in its own right.

The respondent's religions were:	fundamentalists	27%
	protestants	47%
	catholics	14%
	no response	12%

Half of the respondents claimed they did not drink alcoholic beverages. Of those who do drink, a small majority prefer beer to liquor. The range of expenditures on beer each month was \$2 to \$50 with a mean and median of \$5 and a mode of \$10. The range of expenditures on liquor each month was \$1 to \$40 with a mean of \$5, a median of \$9 and a mode of \$10.

More than two thirds of the respondents said they did not smoke. Twenty percent said they smoked a pack or more.

The respondents were asked if they supported various causes and among them was legalized prostitution: 55% were against it.

Since it is doubtful that people will come to this small town to make a purchase and then decide to visit the house, it was assumed that in every case the opposite was true. The attraction was the house and the purchase was made in the same town only because the consumers had been drawn there. The more than 60 purchases recorded during the two day study show the important economic spillover effect of the house among other marketing establishments in the local area.