Jolly Fellows
Stott, Richard

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“What for a Man are you?” demanded Joseph Blakemore of John Everet. Blakemore was in the Coach and Horses Tavern in London in 1731 “playing a Game of Skettles with one Thomas Bennesfield, and there happen’d to be a Dispute about the Game, on account of a Bett.” When onlookers, including Everet, said that Bennesfield had won, Blakemore furiously turned on Everet, asking whether he was a man or not. “A Man, or Piece of a Man as well as you,” Everet replied. “And upon this,” Blakemore struck Everet “upon the Breast, and made him stagger; and several Blows were struck on both Sides,” according to the summary of Blakemore’s trial. Everet was thrown down, as he was getting up, Blakemore “struck him a Blow on the Side of the Head.” Everet collapsed and died.¹

Despite the perception of increased male disorder in late eighteenth-century America, the Revolution did not create jolly fellowship. It had been common among men, especially groups of men, for several centuries in both America and Europe. This chapter examines the meaning of jolly fellowship by first looking more closely at the tavern regulars. What was their social background, their age, politics, religion? Chapter 1 describes the behavior that defined jolly fellowship, whereas this chapter considers the class, racial, and geographical variations among disorderly men. It also examines the way others regarded jolly fellows. Their conduct generated complex responses that reveal a surprising tolerance for their frolics. The European antecedents of jolly fellowship suggest how deep seated these attitudes were. The most difficult question to answer is why men took enjoyment in such comportment. What was the pleasure in heavy drink-
ing, fighting, gambling, and rough practical jokes? Some saw jolly conduct as proof of mankind’s innate sinfulness. Others were convinced that its genesis was biological—it was simply men’s nature to drink and carouse. Men who engaged in jolly behavior did so because of certain conceptions they had of manliness and honor, but that is only part of the explanation. There is a deep-seated aggression, physical and mental, that, at times, challenges rational explanation.

***THE GENIAL SPIRITS OF THE VILLAGE***

Jolly fellowship might be usefully conceptualized in terms of concentric circles. At the center were, of course, the tavern and grocery regulars who gathered daily or several times a week. A larger circle would be men who were not tavern regulars but who would occasionally join them in jolly behavior. The largest circle is men—and women—who did not take part in the tavern crowd’s sprees but shared at least some of their attitudes and tolerated, even enjoyed, their capers.

Tavern regulars were separated by race. Blacks sometimes worked at taverns as cooks and hostlers, but they were rarely part of the tavern crowd. In Kinderhook, New York, “it was the custom for white men” only to congregate in the town’s taverns. Most white patrons would not tolerate African Americans, and few tavern keepers could bear the dishonor of a white man waiting on a black person. There were interracial “groggeries” in cities and groceries where blacks congregated to drink. As temperance spread, the tavern crowd that had once been viewed with bemused toleration was increasingly seen as a threat to the moral order of the community. The jolly regulars were shunned by respectable men and women; they were not as scorned as African Americans, of course, but their ostracism possibly opened the way to greater interaction among fellow outcasts and to more interracial drinking. At Put’s Old Tavern, well off the beaten path in rural Hunterdon County, New Jersey, “color was but little regarded” in the 1840s, Cornelius Larison recalled. Local blacks and whites and “gamesters” from New York and Philadelphia came to wager on cockfights, wrestling matches, and prizefights and men of both races could be found “drinking and talking, laughing and shouting.” Such places, however, seem to have been the exception, not the rule. Generally white jolly fellows shared the racial attitudes of most Americans, and blacks were much more likely to be targeted with violence and practical jokes than treated to a drink.

Women likewise virtually never seem to be among the tavern’s regular customers. Women certainly enjoyed liquor, but they mainly drank in private. There are, however, examples of women exhibiting certifiably jolly conduct. In early St.
Johnsbury, Vermont, Sally Tute, sure of her riding skill, leaped on a horse, “called for a stimulant and challenged any man of the crowd to overtake her” in a race. “Mistress Hess” and “Mistress Fornsich” battled in the street in York, Pennsylvania, in 1803. In the first decade of the century, women in Richmond wagered on the card game loo, and, it was said, sometimes fights resulted. For the most part, however, the record of jolly conduct among women is silent—it was generally an activity for men. William Otter probably spoke for most male tavern regulars in expressing his scorn for jolly women. He joked of his own alcoholic intake—“we had drank as much as we wanted, and more too”—yet when he encountered a tipsy woman he was shocked, pronouncing it “a weakness which is utterly unsufferable in the female.”

Who were the jolly fellows? Here a clear rural-urban difference emerges. In villages the regulars were diverse in social rank. Some were well off, others men of average wealth. Col. A. D. Williams’s store in the upstate New York hamlet of Unadilla in the 1840s was “a rendezvous . . . for the genial spirits of the village including the Colonel himself.” Williams, who was born in rural Otsego County in 1802, was married, and he was elected colonel in the county militia in 1831. By 1850 he owned $8,500 in real property, an above-average assessment. Two doctors were among this “coterie of fun-loving men”: John Colwell, a well-known local physician, born in 1794, a bachelor, “sharp, quick-witted and very sarcastic,” who boarded in Kingsley’s Hotel and owned no property, and Gaius Halsey, the author of the reminiscences that provide most of the information on Williams’s store. Halsey was born in 1819 and later became a politician. The group also included three artisans—Bennett Woodruff, a married blacksmith with $1,300 in real property, Benjamin Ayers, a hatter born in 1806 who owned $3,500 in real estate, and Rufus Mead, a mason. The wealthiest regular was A. B. Watson, a married banker born in 1800 with two servants and property worth $11,250, making him among the best off men in the region.

The village regulars were not riffraff. Elisha Gardiner, the leader of the Hornet’s Nest in Kingston, Rhode Island, was a reputable farmer “at one time doing a great business,” according to the Gardiner family genealogy. Bernhardt Gilbert was the tavern keeper at the Spread Eagle Tavern in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and in 1818 he helped concoct one of William Otter’s wildest sprees in which Otter got into a fencing match with a local doctor using canes and later “bepissed” in his face. Gilbert was one of the richest men in town, owning more than $8,507 worth of property. Whenever “a monstrous practical joke was perpetrated” in Waukesha, Wisconsin, “it was always charged to ‘Aleck’ Randall and his friends.” Randall was a married man in his thirties and a successful lawyer.
The pattern seems similar in the South. A North Carolina newspaper denounced “gentleman farmers, who rise at eight and breakfast at nine o’clock; ride out into the fields and ask a few questions of the overseer, and then repair to some customary place of resort, whether a tavern, or a store at some cross-roads.” It was still possible in this era to be both a tavern habitué and a respectable member of the community.5

Still, despite the presence of well-off individuals among the jolly fellows, many tavern regulars were obscure men. The village tavern was an institution that encompassed, and perhaps united, men of diverse social standing. One of Otter’s most regular partners in pranks, “one of the wonders of the world,” was Caleb Bailes, an Abbottstown, Pennsylvania, mason, a man of average wealth, not prominent in local records. “Cook the hatter,” apparently a journeyman, was the “Col. Cook” of the Hornet’s Nest prank on Charles Comstock. Drovers as well as planters according to Daniel R. Hundley, frequented the southern country taverns. Nevertheless, even with such diversity, there seem to have been comparatively few ordinary farmers among the regulars. Taverns were usually located in villages, and most farmers came to town once a week, so most regulars lived in the village or nearby. Farmers were likely well represented in the second concentric circle of men who would engage in jolly behavior occasionally.6

If men involved in agriculture seem underrepresented among tavern habitués, men in politics and the legal system were heavily overrepresented. William Otter became mayor of Emmitsburg, Maryland; Elisha Gardiner was deputy sheriff of Washington County, Rhode Island; Bernhardt Gilbert, Otter’s partner in pranks, served as Adams County sheriff in the 1820s; and Aleck Randall in Waukesha became governor of Wisconsin during the Civil War. Politicians met and mobilized support in taverns and stores. In some localities each party had its own hangout. The Democrats in Indianapolis gathered at the Mansion House in the 1830s, the Whigs across the street at Washington Hall. Davenport’s store in Plymouth, Pennsylvania, “was Democratic headquarters, and there in the evening would assemble the patriots of the neighborhood who would line up on the counters, spit tobacco juice, swap stories and discuss politics.” Most drinking places, however, were politically neutral, and at them, supporters of the two parties could enjoy debating the issues of the day.7

Before the 1830s there does not seem to have been any clear political orientation to jolly fellowship. There were both jolly Republicans and Federalists. With the growth of the temperance movement, however, Democrats seem to have become more prevalent among the tavern and grocery crowd than Whigs. The Whig party never officially endorsed temperance, but it often nominated
protemperance men, and members of antidrink organizations were considerably more likely to be Whigs than Democrats. To jolly fellows, the “government is best which governs least” philosophy of the Democrats was likely more appealing than the reform-minded moralism of their rivals. Whigs certainly thought so. “Loafers from around the grog-shop” was Horace Greeley’s surly assessment of the voters that defeated Henry Clay in 1844.8

Not only were politicians among the tavern’s loyal patrons; so too were men involved in the legal system. In an era of traveling circuit courts, lawyers were known for conviviality, and they, along with judges, bailiffs, and clerks, appear routinely in accounts of the escapades of the regulars. Thomas Heald, the leader of the raucous regulars at Davis’s tavern, was a prominent Concord lawyer, and the law occupies a large place in the sprees of even jolly fellows who were not lawyers. Sham lawsuits were one common prank. In the fall of 1803 Charles Comstock, the Hornet’s Nest’s favorite victim, went to Providence on business. “When I returned home, I found seven copies of writs, and one pair of my oxen carried away.” When Comstock complained about this baseless legal action, they replied “they were in jest: for that is part of their sort of wit.” False suits for debts were also a favorite prank of Wisconsin tavern jokers.9

The jolly fellows’ fascination with the law and the legal process found expression in the mock trial. A traditional European male ritual, the mock trial could be staged wherever men congregated in nineteenth-century America, in taverns, fire companies, steamboats, in western mining towns and even in state legislatures. Bob Smith’s House of Commons tavern in New York City held such trials, complete with wigs, as a regular entertainment for the customers. The volunteer firemen of Hook and Ladder Company Number Three in New York City in 1835 “summoned up a jury for a mock trial, to try a man for falling asleep in club house, found guilty and fined a pot of beer,” printer Thomas Chamberlain recorded in his diary. “The boys” in Licking County, Ohio, staged a sham trial of their comrades who pulled down an abandoned schoolhouse. So many jolly fellows were associated with courts and law enforcement that sometimes they were able to make a mock trial appear to be a real one. James S. Buck, in his jolly Pioneer History of Milwaukee (1876–86), tells the story of a sham lawsuit in early Milwaukee that was gotten up to settle a dispute between Egbert “Limpy” Smith and Frederick Wingfield, which stemmed from gossip the tavern crowd had started as a joke. Asa Kinney, a real justice of the peace, presided. The whiskey jug was passed freely, and Smith and Wingfield were drunk by the time the proceeding started. At the conclusion of the trial the two men were instructed to embrace, “AND NOW,” ordered the “judge,” “‘let the Sheriff embrace the court!’”
John Haight, the plaintiff’s lawyer, who was not in on the joke and who had been promised forty acres of land if he won the case, “sprang to his feet, ‘By God! it’s all a d——d sell.’”

Mock trials usually were contrived for the amusement of those taking part rather than to chasten someone. They may have served some of the same purposes as debating societies: to provide a forum for young men to practice the skills of argument and public speaking. This would be especially true for men interested in the law and politics, as many regulars were. The male ritual may also have helped define the playful nature of jolly fellowship. Participating in an enterprise that required the involvement of a number of men could have given those taking part a sense of unity and distinctiveness.

The religious views of the tavern crowd, like their social ranking, were diverse. Critics accused them of indifference to divine matters. Charles Comstock censured the Hornet’s Nest: “As to their religion, part of it is Rum, some of them are Nothingarians, some of them Universalists, a few of them Friends, and some of them are Baptists, but most of them are Nothingarians.” Like the population generally, many jolly fellows were unchurched. There were also, however, many others who were churchgoers. The Williams’s store gathering in Unadilla was largely made up of Episcopalians, several of whom were quite active in church affairs. Aleck Randall, the Waukesha joker, was a Presbyterian. These regulars saw no contradiction between a jolly life and a Christian life. None of the Ten Commandments, after all, mentioned drinking, fighting, gambling, or playing pranks. Barnum describes Bethel, Connecticut, as a pious Presbyterian village in the 1820s despite all the drinking, practical joking, horse racing, and general hilarity that went on; indeed the clergyman sometimes even joined in the pranks. This easygoing attitude began to disappear in the 1820s and 1830s as religious revivals and the temperance movement surged. Sedate demeanor became a prerequisite in many denominations for being a good Christian.

The regulars in a village tavern typically varied in wealth, age, political affiliation, and religious outlook. In cities, however, where class lines were more sharply drawn, there were different drinking places for different social groups. In New York in the 1830s workers drank in groceries and “three cent” houses, while “more respectable people” congregated in “six cent” houses. And, increasingly, new standards of gentility meant more respectable men shunned drinking places altogether. There were certainly jolly white-collar men in cities. Newspaperman Thomas Nichols visited a rowdy Buffalo tavern in 1837 whose customers included not only sailors and canalers but also “some of the wilder young clerks.” But generally urban grocery and tavern regulars seem more likely to have been
manual workers and also to have been younger than village patrons. William Otter engaged in jolly fellowship with men who occupied a wide variety of social positions in Adams County, Pennsylvania, but his comrades in New York City and Philadelphia were solely apprentices and journeymen. John Lane, Big Bill Otter’s “particular croney” in New York, was an obscure baker whose name never appeared in a city directory. The great majority of men arrested in New York City tavern brawls were manual workers, most under age thirty.12

Although evidence exists that enables one to generalize about tavern and grocery regulars, it is more difficult to find information about the second circle of men, those who joined in jolly sprees and frolics only occasionally. In Kingston, Rhode Island, according to Comstock, “There are some young men who live there, who are not in full communion with the hornet’s nest cunning, although they are sometimes drawn in; for bad company bears a great sway upon the youth.” In Bethel too, men who were not part of the store crowd sometimes joined in their pranks. In rural areas this fringe group likely included men who lived too far from a tavern or store to hang out there regularly. On Saturday they could come to town, repair to their favorite spot to drink, gamble, fight, and joke away the day. Jacob Drafts in Lexington, South Carolina, lived quietly on his farm most of the time, but when he came to town he spent his day drinking, “bragging, blackguarding and sometimes fighting.” He then returned home until the jolly craving overcame him again.13

The largest circle was men (and women) who rarely, if ever, engaged in jolly behavior but who were not necessarily hostile to the jolly fellows or repulsed by their conduct. Tavern regulars had their critics (discussed in chapter 3), but most people, it seemed, tolerated, even condoned, the jolly fellows’ escapades. In part this was because such comportment was accepted as inevitable and unchangeable: it was men’s nature. But this tolerance went beyond resigned acceptance—there is considerable evidence that the frolics, fights, and pranks were intriguing, even alluring, to many people who themselves would not participate in them. Edward Jarvis explained that “the moral sense of the [Concord] community did not approve” but neither “did it effectively condemn” the village’s tavern roisters, and it considered tales of their exploits “as proper means of entertaining their friends or others.” Sources of entertainment were scant compared to later in the nineteenth century, and boozers, brawlers, and bettors provided lively topics of discussion. The jolly fellows’ romps did more than add zest to local gossip. Many men and women regarded their antics not just with interest, but with relish. Concordians who would not themselves join in the drink-fueled “waywardnesses”
of Thomas Heald and his cohorts “found amusement in relating them to their families and neighbors,” Jarvis observed.\textsuperscript{14}

Being drunk occasionally was considered “proof of spirit.” In St. Johnsbury, Vermont, related Samuel Graves, “It was counted a good joke for an honest man to lose his way home of an evening, or mistake his neighbor’s home for his own.” When former Mississippi governor George Poindexter, “somewhat fuddled” after an evening at the Mansion House Bar in Natchez in 1836, opened what he thought was the door to his room and plunged twenty feet onto the sidewalk, he became the talk of the town. Tales of drunken revelry were considered appropriate even for children. A Philadelphia publisher in 1815 published a series of nursery rhymes that included “Pug’s Visit to Mr. Punch.” A bored Punch (as in Punch and Judy) and his wife decide to “send for [their] friend Pug” and to “make [themselves] jolly” by cracking “a good bottle or two.” Pug comes immediately,

For he always was ready to kick up a row,
So they eat Mr. Punches tarts, jellies and pies,
And they all got as tipsey as David’s old sow,
Too drunk to walk home on the carpet Pug roll’d.\textsuperscript{15}

It was not just the tavern and grocery regulars who were interested in fighting; the allure was widespread. In Marietta, Ohio, in the 1830s, John Morris remembered, the “educated portion of the people,” who would never themselves fight, “did not consider it beneath them to be the aiders and abettors of rowdyism.” Morris believed that the fights between local “gladiators” in the antebellum period were to most people “as interesting and exciting as were those which took place in the arena of ancient Rome to its people.” Matches between champions were eagerly anticipated almost everywhere and were a topic of village discussion and wagering. Jonas Heinrich Gudehus, a German immigrant who traveled through Pennsylvania in 1822 and 1823, discovered that before “a frolic or vendue begins there is especially much talk about who wants to fight at the same, for that is their chief pleasure. . . . One always hears people say: . . . ‘Haven’t you heard who’s going to fight at the frolic?’” Whether drunken brawls or “set fights,” battles would immediately attract large and enthusiastic crowds. So intense was the desire of spectators to see the fighting in Williamston, North Carolina, “that they would often climb up on each other’s shoulders.” When anticipated battles failed to “come off,” there was dejection. “A very Poor Court, no fighting or Gouging, very few Drunken people,” a disappointed peddler recorded in his diary of his visit to Liberty, Virginia, in 1807. Rather than trying to prevent battles, onlookers let
men fight it out, and once the confrontation started they often exhorted belligerents to greater effort. In Union, Maine, when a battle began, the crowd “would run and gather round the ring, to give the combatants room and see that they had fair play.” In Martin County, North Carolina, should anyone try to halt the fight or interfere, another spectator would “spring upon the interloper” and stop him, often leading to another brawl.” In the celebrated fracas on the floor of the House of Representatives in 1798 between Matthew Lyon of Vermont and Roger Griswold of Connecticut (one of a number of fights in legislative bodies in this era), shouts of “Part them, part them,” were immediately countered by cries of “Don’t.”16

Pranks likewise had a wide appeal. Papermaker Ebenezer Stedman recalled in his handwritten reminiscences of the 1820s how in Lexington, Kentucky, “the talk along the people . . . was, ‘Well what is Hostutters last prank?’” referring to Frank Hostutter, the town’s most celebrated practical joker. His “tricks & Pranks [were] Enjoyed By Evry Body that day in Lexington.” Though women rarely participated in jolly sprees, they joined in finding the antics of the regulars amusing.

A Connecticut peddler had a special bean in his snuffbox that imparted, he believed, a much improved flavor. P. T. Barnum tells the story that his grandfather, Phineas Taylor, a legendary joker, one day borrowed the bean, telling the peddler that he wanted to see if it would improve the flavor of his own snuff. Taylor then whittled a piece of wood, dyed it to look like the original bean, and returned it to the peddler. Taylor then “acquainted nearly all the town with the joke.” The next time the peddler passed through Danbury “nearly every man, woman and child begged for a pinch of snuff,” praised its taste, and questioned the owner about the special qualities of the bean, questions he happily and proudly answered. The joke was eventually revealed and the peddler never forgave Taylor “to the day of his death.”17

Popular tolerance is illustrated by the almost complete lack of legal sanctions for jolly conduct; men involved had little reason to fear arrest. The law was clear. Drunkenness, fighting, gambling, and malicious mischief were illegal and had been so since colonial times. But carousing men received wide latitude from authorities. This was in part, no doubt, because judges, justices of peace, and sheriffs often were themselves jolly fellows. But the lack of effective legal sanctions cannot be attributed just to the influence of jolly officials. There is considerable evidence of a widespread, though not universal, view that disorderly male behavior was not criminal, no matter what the laws said.

Habitual drunkards faced arrest, but men inebriated on a spree seemed to have received little in the way of punishment from either public opinion or the law.
Professional gamblers faced prosecution even in the South, but only in Massachusetts and Connecticut were private bettors in any real danger of arrest. Fights between men were “personal difficulties,” not breaches of law. Henry Fearon witnessed a tavern brawl in New Orleans and noted that such things “are an everyday occurrence; and it is not often they are taken cognizance of by the police.” Even when someone was seriously hurt, or even killed, in a fight, the perpetrator was rarely punished unless weapons had been used. He was simply unlucky—with thousands of punches thrown in hundreds of fights, a few will prove crippling or fatal.18

Free-for-alls and even minor riots were an accepted part of urban life. Tavern disturbances, such as the general fight in McDermot’s grocery in New York City that involved William Otter and his mates, was only a minor cause for concern. Both the public and legal authorities believed it inevitable that groups of young men would let off a little steam from time to time. Indeed, many deemed such spontaneous brawls beneficial because they made major riots less likely. Only purposeful disorders, those in which the participants had a goal beyond mere mayhem, alarmed authorities. Violent holiday roistering was a tradition, and a crowd of men in New York on New Year’s Day 1822 “went forth . . . displacing signs, knocking down the watchmen,” firing pistols, and pelting any women they came across with snowballs. They were eventually arrested, but, according to the sheriff, the magistrate “in consideration of the day discharged them all, with suitable admonitions, and without requesting any fees.”19

This leniency suggests the extent to which jolly fellowship was accepted. The tavern crowd in villages and towns were by no means outcasts; they often included members of the local elite. Although the regulars were viewed as a distinct subset of the male population, many other men occasionally engaged in jolly behavior, and many more men and even women were intrigued by it. The drinking, fighting, gambling, and pranks of the tavern regulars were not isolated phenomena: their actions found sympathetic resonance with others.

“Tis no festival unless there be some fightings”

The disorderly conduct of men in groups in the early republic was nothing new. The American Revolution stimulated male disorder, but it did not create it. In colonial New England, taverns were centers of male sociability, and most had their band of regulars. When magistrate Samuel Sewell went to Wallis’s tavern in Boston in 1714 to halt the “disorders” there, the group of men drinking “refus’d to go away. Said they were there to drink the Queen’s health, and they had many
other Healths to drink. Call’d for more drink; drank to me.” In a Wenham, Massachusetts, tavern in 1681 the tavern keeper’s daughter promised Thomas Abby, already in his cups, “that she would give him a quart of wine if he could whip” John Hutton. Abby “fell upon” Hutton and wrestled him to the floor and proclaimed himself “the best man in the land.” Gang fights in Boston were a tradition on Guy Fawkes Day, known in America as Pope’s Day. “Champions of both ends of the town engage each other in battle under the denominations of North and South End,” recorded an eyewitness to the traditional brawl in 1764. On the evening of 5 November “the two parties met near the Mill Bridge where they fought with clubs, brickbats for half an hour, when those of the South End gained victory. . . . In the fray, many were much bruised and wounded in their heads and arms, some dangerously.” Cards, dice, bowling, and shuffleboard were “virtually universal in Bay Colony taverns,” according to Richard Gildrie in his study of Puritan comportment. Cotton Mather denounced not only tavern fighting and gambling but the “Horse-play” of the customers.20

Outside New England, taverns seem to have been even rowdier. A Philadelphia grand jury denounced “whites in their tumultuous resorts . . . [who] most Daringly . . . swear, Curse Lye Abuse and often fight.” As in the nineteenth century, onlookers were shocked by the “Kicking, Scratching, Biting, Throttling, Gouging [and] Dismembering” that characterized Southern combat and the way enthusiastic spectators urged on participants. In a notorious 1766 incident, two friends, Robert Routlidge and Col. John Chiswell were drinking in Mosby’s tavern in Prince Edward County, Virginia. They had words, Chiswell tried to smash a toddy bowl over Routlidge’s head, then threw furniture at him, and finally fatally stabbed him. One traveler had hardly alighted from his carriage on election day at Hanover Court House, Virginia, when a fight began “between two very unwieldy, fat men, foaming and puffing like two furies.” Gambling was openly engaged in. Richardson’s tavern outside of the City of Brotherly Love on the Germantown road was the site of the most famous cockfighting match in colonial America. In March 1770, James Delancey brought his birds down from New York to fight those of Timothy Matlack. The cockfight ended in a human fight. Southern taverns were sites of incessant wagering on both cockfights and horse races among other events. Militia days, court days, and election days were traditional scenes of disorder.21

Groups of men, especially young men, displayed similar conduct both in early modern England and continental Europe. English taverns and beer houses were centers of conviviality in both city and village, and men spent a considerable amount of time and money there. Wagering was a normal part of tavern recre-
ation in an age when men carried dice with them as a matter of course. Enterprising English tavern keepers sponsored horse races, boxing and wrestling matches, cockfights, and bullbaitings. Fights, even small riots, were a part of daily life. At a bullbaiting in Chester in 1619, “a contention fell out betwixt the butchers and the bakers of the citye.” They “fell to blows” and “a brawle” commenced.

“The ‘habit of fighting from boyhood’ was deeply ingrained in English culture,” J. Carter Wood discovered in his study of English violence. “A fair fight,” complete with seconds, was the traditional English way for men to settle disputes or merely to determine who was the better man. As in America, market days and holidays were especially violent, and the English saying was “tis no festival unless there be some fightings.” Boxing and wrestling matches were traditional entertainments. The practice in the north of England of “up and down” fighting in which no holds were barred led to occasional fatalities. Collective combat was equally common. Witney, Oxfordshire, had an annual brawl on Guy Fawkes Day between the “up-town and down-town boys.” During Christmas season in London it was customary for men from St. Anne’s parish to battle St. Giles’s parish with sticks. Shrove Tuesday in London and other English cities in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was not only a day of cockfighting but of brawling, wrecking bawdy houses, and rioting. Battles sometimes ended with crowds coursing through the streets, breaking windows and creating bedlam. Violence could whirl into brutal pranks: in London passersby were rolled in barrels; in Bayton, Worcestershire, drunken villagers would drag “timber in the night time into the highways . . ., [and] pull up men’s pales and stiles and rails and cause general havoc.”

Male English disorder was part of a broad European pattern. In Augsburg, Germany, tavern brawls were an almost daily occurrence. Minor riots “arising haphazardly for a variety of reasons” were a routine part of Paris life, historian Thomas Brennan discovered. Men would pour out of taverns, cabarets, and workshops and join the battle. Fairs in France, like those in England, could flare into violence—the battle cry when the fighting started was the village name; all townsmen were expected to rally to the cause. The compagnons—the clandestine French brotherhoods of young journeymen that were separate from the occupation-based guilds—were notably unruly. Their weapon of choice was the stout cane each carried, and when they met members of rival brotherhoods, they were “led to fight by rage and unparalleled fury so as to kill one another.” These fierce brawls continued into the nineteenth century. Gambling was an integral part of tavern life—in French medieval taverns, the dice game hazard, still popular in nineteenth-century America, was a great favorite. Practical jokes were popular
tavern pastimes. A German favorite was hiding a man’s hat and refusing to return it until the victim bought a round of drinks. Drinkers who had fallen asleep or passed out were “the victims of countless tricks” in France.24

In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Venice, neighborhood groups fought for command of bridges over the canals. Arranged in advance, the Guerre di pugni (the War of the Fists) began with individual fights on the bridges between champions, and then the general brawl began. The rival bands, often numbering in the hundreds, pushed and threw each other into the canals, where the fighting continued. When they gained control of a bridge, the winning fighters and the victorious neighborhood earned immense honor. Given the ubiquity of fighting in Europe, the reputation of the Irish as the Old World’s eagerest brawlers is indeed impressive. Much of this renown was based on the huge fights between village-based gangs that occurred in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ireland. In what were known as “faction fights,” gangs with names like the “Pudding Lane Boys” and “Black Hens” would battle in village streets with cudgels, often for several hours. There seems to have been no discernable motive other than what one observer described as “the agreeable recreation of fighting.” Lives were sometimes lost, but, he explained, “they are lost in pleasant fighting—they are the consequences of the sport.”25

Sociologist Norbert Elias has argued that European society underwent a “civilizing process” whereby spontaneous, impulsive individual attitudes gave way in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to a reflective and restrained personality structure. In Freudian terms, the superego became stronger. Elias believed that this process could be seen in many areas of social life, including sexual behavior and table manners. And in interpersonal violence. Homicides are an indicator of the overall level of violence and provide a way of comparing the European and American experience. Homicide rates in early modern Europe vary widely across space and time, but the overall picture seems clear: lives often came to violent ends. Lawrence Stone’s conclusion that in medieval and early modern England most killings were a result of “drunken bar-room brawls or village quarrels” seems applicable to Europe generally. The usual agents in these deadly melees were bladed weapons or staffs, both widely carried. The European homicide rate was generally high, in the range of twenty to forty killings per one hundred thousand people per year in the late medieval period. (For purposes of comparison, in the United States in 2000 it was five and a half per one hundred thousand.) In some places it was even higher—in sixteenth-century Amsterdam it was forty-seven, higher than any rate ever recorded for New York City. The European homicide rate in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries sharply dropped, as Elias’s
model predicts. The primary reason for the decline, according to criminologist Manuel Eisner, “seems to have been . . . a decrease in male-to-male fights.” By the end of the eighteenth century the rate in London was in the range of two per one hundred thousand.26

American homicide rates before the nineteenth century have not been extensively studied, but Randolph Roth puts the seventeenth-century New England rate at seven to nine per one hundred thousand (slightly higher than England in this period), dropping to one to two in the next century. Eric Monkkonen’s statistics on New York City in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries show rates in the range of five to ten. Rates in both the South and West vary considerably but were higher—in some places much higher. Although American men often fought, it was usually with fists—and sometimes feet and teeth—but outside the South rarely with guns and knives. The sectional difference is clear. New England was the least violent and deadly region. Men in New England battled,
but probably less frequently and certainly less brutally than anywhere else in the country; fatalities were virtually unknown. The combat of choice in northern New England, “collar-and-elbow” wrestling, so named from the starting position, was tamer than fist fighting or no-holds-barred wrestling; you only had to throw your opponent down to win. Weapons in male combat were almost unheard of in the region. Charles Woodman was stunned when his antagonist in an 1827 tavern brawl in New Haven pulled a knife and stabbed him in the hip.\(^{27}\)

The South was a different story. Battles were often brutal, rough-and-tumble eye-gouging, biting affairs in which the loser was literally defaced. Southerners were also much more apt to resort to weapons. William Johnson’s Natchez diary recounts fights with chairs, iron bars, umbrellas, shovels, hatchets, sword canes, whips, bowie knives, dirks, and pistols. Although only a tiny minority of southern fights were, in the language of the day, “shooting affrays” or “stabbing affrays,” they were clearly much more common than elsewhere. White southerners were more likely to carry weapons and to use them. Edward Isham got into a fight outside Chattanooga with “a fellow named Moore.” He “had a revolver and rock and I had a little pocket pistol.” It was “a desperate fight” that ended when Isham, after his gun failed to fire, pistol whipped his adversary. In an 1837 Natchez fight with “a Dr Reigna,” “Mr Rogers of Manchester” fired at him with a revolver, and then, recorded William Johnson, knocked Reigna down, pulled a knife, and “stabbed him clear through the body and screwed it around in his Dead body.”\(^ {28}\)

“A GENEROUS PARCEL OF ROWDIES”

What are we to make of such conduct, widespread among men in not only the American but the European past as well? Was it simply a fragmentary collection of attitudes and acts, or was there some underlying outlook, perhaps even an ethic? “Ethic” is surely too strong; it is very doubtful there was a consistent motive behind jolly conduct in all times and all places. Yet, it does seem that there was more to it than simply random notions and escapades. There clearly was a pattern to jolly demeanor, perhaps even a meaning, and the rest of this chapter tries to suggest some of the causes and purposes of disorderly male conduct. Such an effort requires moving at times beyond the evidence to make interpretations and suppositions about the motivation for the behavior I’ve been describing. A few cases draw on evidence from male domains I discuss in other chapters in the book. The following analysis is necessarily speculative. It hopes to recover some plausible explanations of the attitudes that underlie jolly fellowship, though such explanations cannot be certain or complete. And in so doing, the analysis aims
to help one comprehend the importance of this distinctive comportment not just in the antebellum period but in other places and times where men engaged in similar conduct.

It was taken for granted that many men simply could not restrain themselves from drinking, fighting, gambling, and playing pranks, even if they had wanted to. Jolly male conduct was viewed as spontaneous, even involuntary. Among gamblers it was axiomatic that “no man can resist cards and brandy.” It is striking how often such behavior is described in terms that make it seem like a natural force. Fights broke out and swept over bystanders like a storm. In Williamston, North Carolina, when a battle would start one man would jump in, and “then another and another would go in until the battle would wax fierce and general.” Yale students visiting a Wild West show were described as “overcome” by rowdyism. Similar language described pranks. The young Isaac T. Hopper, for example, often “felt the spirit of mischief too strong to be resisted.” Henry Brokmeyer, who had once worked in a St. Louis foundry, remembered that “days would pass without a word being heard beyond the ordinary civilities.” Then suddenly one day an urge to frolic would overpower the shop, and the men would erupt into “regular field days of banter . . . with a lively sprinkling of blackguarding thrown in gratis. . . . How these days come, what causes them, no one can tell.” Drinking was surely part of the reason for this impetuous conduct. Perhaps some of the attraction of such conduct was that it opened a space in which one could exercise less self-restraint and engage in pleasurable activities without hesitation or compunction. Drinking, however, does not necessarily lead to impulsive or rowdy conduct in all times and places. The influence of alcohol on human behavior is complex and socially variable. In future decades American men drank heavily without getting into fights. It may be that drinking was more a justification or rationale for disorderly comportment than a cause.29

Emotions were expressed physically. When angry, men fought, when sad, they cried, when happy, they embraced. Men had words, brawled, made up, and were friends again. Just as a man could get mad at someone and punch him in the face, he could with equal passion fall on a favorite male companion with kisses. Many nineteenth-century men were as unreserved in expressing fondness for other men as they were in displaying animosity; both were part of the same impulsive emotional pattern. Male friendships were often intense. George Birmingham, a Buffalo bookbinder, wrote to New York cabinetmaker Henry Price, “I shall never forget you, and I can always bring you to mind when I think of your kindness, I think of you every day.” It was not simply that men used sentimental language to express friendship. Affection was more than a matter of words; it was
also physical. Men kissed, hugged, held hands. On court day in Williamston, North Carolina, men would drink, then battle in rough-and-tumble fights, and then “towards the close of the day the boys would become ‘unco happy,’ and be seen walking about shaking hands, hugging each other in the most affectionate manner, and making vows of eternal friendship.” In Georgetown, Kentucky, two veterans of the Battle of Lundy’s Lane encountered one another for the first time in years. “They clinched And such hugging & kissing. . . . Then they held each other By the hand & Surveyed their Looks,” Ebenezer Stedman recounted. The men then began drinking and “commenced Singing War Songs.” Two bosom companions in early Milwaukee had a falling out, as male friends so often did in this period, and a dinner was arranged to effect a reconciliation. “To strengthen their brotherly love,” they ate off each other’s plates “and finally wound up with a kiss.” Displays of emotion and even physical affection were not unmanly.30

Such behavior was considered normal and usually occasioned little comment. It was common for men to be photographed with their arms around each other. Men could be much more open in avowing affection for and in touching other men than they could be with women because it was believed there was nothing erotic about men’s love for other men. Such comradeship was explicitly defined in opposition to sexual love. A letter writer to the New York Clipper explained the attachment volunteer firemen felt for each other; it was “so fond, so devoted, nothing [could] alter it, nothing [could] surpass it.” But this love was sublime precisely because it was “so divested of passions[,] . . . so disconnected with selfish sensuality.” In male relations with women it seemed a slippery slope from touching to kissing to intercourse. There seems to have been the implicit conviction that the ultimate purpose of a man’s relationship with a woman was sexual and thus required close monitoring. There was little such concern in relationships between men, so physical expressions of male devotion, such as holding hands, were not viewed as a prelude to depravity. Just the opposite. Men holding hands represented an unaffectedly forthright conjunction of kindred spirits.31

Because men focused so much emotional attention on each other, it seemed as if they had an ability to “see” other men with exceptional acuity: faces and bodies were scrutinized and remembered. In a period during which most Americans lived in villages and farms, other people seemed to have occupied a larger part of human experience than today. Few traveled very far, and for most men and women their frame of reference was their neighbors. The occasional stranger never failed to attract intense interest. Letters, diaries, and reminiscences, some written many years later, contain detailed, often eloquent descriptions of other men’s physical appearance, more detailed, often, than their portrayals of women.
James Buck in his *Pioneer History of Milwaukee*, writing almost forty years after the fact, describes early male settlers with “coarse and shaggy hair,” “dark eyes,” “arms of great length,” and “short thick ears.” The precise physical descriptions by whites of whites stands in contrast to the often vague white word portraits of the faces and bodies of people of color. It seems as if whites could see little beyond blackness. Perhaps many were like the traveling salesman in Owen Wister’s *The Virginian*, who claimed he could recall every face he had ever seen—“can’t lose one off my memory.” But he added, “white men, that is. Can’t do nothing with niggers or Chinese.”

Conduct-of-life literature warned that “true character” could not be judged by appearance, but there remained a widespread conviction in this era that people could, indeed should, be judged by their looks. A well-built or good-looking man was likely a superior person, a puny or ugly one inferior. Men ceaselessly sized up other men. Height and weight were carefully assessed and shoulders, chests, and arms scrutinized and evaluated, eyes, noses, and mouths studied and judged. Large men and men with powerful physiques received attention and honor. There was “an unfeigned admiration of the powerful man” in antebellum Oneida County, New York, James M. Williams discovered. Bullies were not esteemed, but “physical power” mattered; it was taken for granted that the strong would dominate the weak. Power at this level was direct and personal. In an era when only men could vote, politics was a masculine endeavor, and big men often prevailed. Nineteenth-century ward bosses in New York City were brawny men, while elected officials in Oneida County were typically “great big men.” Handsome men also were honored. Leaders among groups of men were routinely singled out for their looks, their “finely chiseled features,” or their “honest, open face.” Unattractive men were scorned. William Baumgartner in early Milwaukee was unusually ugly, so “his very presence caused a chill wherever he went,” James Buck remembered. Physical oddities were openly noted and became the subject of ridicule. John Stone in Concord “walked with a jerk, so he was called Hop Stone and jeered on account of this peculiarity.” Perhaps this is part of the reason why men were fascinated with disguise in this era. Painted faces and fantastic costumes liberated men from the tyranny of their natural face and body, creating a sort of momentary equality in masquerade.

Tavern regulars had a reputation for charity. Poor men and women were often treated either by the tavern keeper or the regulars to free meals, and those who were sick and had no other place to go were taken care of without charge. It was said of Yankee Lewis’s tavern outside Kalamazoo that “no man was allowed to go away from his house hungry.” Benevolence in this era was not entirely disin-
terested. The attitude, John M. Williams discovered, was “You help me and I’ll help you.” Chance played a central role in life, and few could dare live as individualists, as Caroline Kirkland discovered in Michigan, given that a stray spark or sudden illness could “throw you entirely upon the kindness of your humblest neighbor[.] If I treat Mrs. Timson with neglect to-day, can I with any face borrow her broom to-morrow?” Nor was aid automatic. Paton Yoder discovered that race, nationality, and social status all were factors in a person’s decision to help. Blacks, as a rule, had no claim on white compassion. At times charity seemed almost whimsical—one person would be profusely helped, another seemingly similar person turned away, perhaps ridiculed, for reasons difficult to discern. However, even in an era when mutuality was a way of life, the tavern crowd retained a powerful reputation for generosity. Such compassion was, by later standards, direct and personal. The Clary’s Grove Boys in Illinois were as openhanded as they were wild. “They were a terror to the entire region,” wrote William Herndon, “yet place before them a poor man who needed their aid, . . . a widow, an orphaned child, and they melted into sympathy and charity at once. . . . There never was a more generous parcel of rowdies.”

While treating some with compassion, the tavern crowd could turn ruthlessly on others. Blacks and Indians, the Irish, cripples, lunatics, weaklings and drunken men were open to humiliation and assault. Animals were also beyond the frame of moral reference. All were fair game. Blacks, of course, were routinely targets of violence. “Having always a propensity for fun,” Big Bill Otter and his pals in Philadelphia were presented in 1807 with “an opportunity . . . to give loose to, and gratify it.” With the approval of white neighbors they stormed a black church and beat up the congregation; “they kept on until nearly the whole of the darkies were stretched out,” Otter boasted. “No particular regard was paid to sex, they levelled them indiscriminately.” It is well known that violence against blacks by whites was widespread, and so the point requires little elaboration.

The Irish also faced attacks. There was, however, a difference. The violence against blacks was rougher, deadlier, and motivated more by racial hatred than anything else—they were more often than not assaults, not fights. William Otter’s autobiography relates attacks on blacks but fights with Irishmen. On Christmas Day, 1806, in New York, Otter and some of his companions came on a brawl between sailors and Irish that turned into a riot that “kept both sides fighting all that night.” The confrontation with the Irish was certainly inspired by ethnic and religious enmity, but it is also possible to discern in it a devotion to fighting so characteristic of this period. The Irish had battled among themselves in Ireland and continued their faction fighting on the other side of the Atlantic. They were
not reluctant brawlers and neither were Americans. Elias Pym Fordham, an English visitor in 1816, was struck by the similarity: “When intoxicated . . . [Pennsylvanians] sometimes fight most furiously. In this they resemble the Lower Irish.” The coming of significant numbers of Irish helped unite American brawlers. Instead of one end of town fighting the other, how much more exciting it was for native-born men from both ends of town to combine to battle the Irish, as happened in Lockport, New York, on 24 December 1822.36

Other races, outsiders, and those without power faced perpetual rough jokes, tricks, and frauds from the jolly fellows. There was always an element of aggression in jolly joking, and “pranks” against those whose victimization attracted little sympathy were often brutal, even deadly. In the Hudson River town of Catskill, New York, “a set of wild and reckless young fellows, spoiling for sport, concluded it would be fine amusement to pitch ‘sonce,’” a “spruce and rather consequential darkey,” off the dock, “compensating him for each immersion by a glass of rum.” Eventually they got Sonce so drunk that he drowned, which James D. Pinckney, author of an 1862 reminiscence, found comical, since “it seemed a puzzle how the water got into him when he was chock full already.” Catskill carousers also targeted a feeble-minded man; cats were thrown through his window, and they “used levers to move his house off the foundation.” Gambler Robert Bailey in his autobiography tells the story of an elaborate prank in which a Virginia physician tricked a pharmacist’s black helper into eating excrement to cure him of his idea of becoming a doctor. The boy was “reconciled to his situation.” Edwin Scott’s reminiscence of life in Columbia, South Carolina, in the 1820s and 1830s describes practical jokes on those perceived as community outsiders. Pranksters hung a “stuffed Paddy” on Terence O’Hanlon’s door, a common trick on St. Patrick’s Day. “Some wags” persuaded Jewish storekeeper Sammy Lopez that he could be elected mayor and convinced him to campaign vigorously; his humiliation at the polls on election day was a fine joke. In Milwaukee, Native Americans were the victims of nasty pranks. Firecrackers were tied to one Indian’s blanket, and the explosions so startled him that he jumped up and to the delight of onlookers landed in the mud and “spoilt all his good clothes.”37

Why did so many men engage in jolly conduct, drinking, fighting, and gambling? Why did their responses to others swing capriciously from empathy to animosity? Why did they act so openly and impulsively? To many in the first half of the nineteenth century, it hardly needed explanation—it was simply human nature or, more precisely, men’s nature. Traveling geologist G. W. Featherstonhaugh’s explanation of the uproarious conduct he witnessed in Little Rock in the 1830s was that he was viewing “the animal man before religion and education have
made him a rational being.” Savage male fighting could be understood only by reference to the natural world. An English visitor to North Carolina was shocked to see men butting heads—a popular method of fighting in some locales—“as practiced in battle between bulls, rams and goats.” The men who engaged in this behavior sometimes themselves used animal metaphors. Herndon describes Abraham Lincoln, age sixteen, after his triumph in a fight over William Grigsby, waving a whiskey bottle over his head and swearing “he was the big buck of the lick. . . . If anyone doubts it . . . he only has to come and whet his horns.” From the “animal man” perspective the constant fighting could be interpreted as a way of establishing a male pecking order. In Scott County, Tennessee, the best fighter was the cock of the walk: “The victor would leap on a stump crowing and flapping his arms.” Equally animalistic seemed the howling that often broke out among men in groups. In Rochester, New York, in 1828 men stood outside a theater “hootin’, howlin’, shoutin’, shriekin.” Soldiers on shipboard on their way to fight in Mexico in 1846 began “hootin’, hissing, and hallooing . . . [in] imitations of wild beasts and domestic animals.” Christmas was a common time for men to howl. In Philadelphia on 24 December 1833 “men and boys howled as if possessed by the demons of disorder.”

Are men fighting and howling “the animal man” in action? Could biology play a role in such comportment? “Is there a deep structure of manhood?” asks anthropologist David D. Gilmore in his cross-cultural study of masculinity. He finds “intriguing similarities” in men’s behavior among societies that otherwise exhibit little in common. Hormones, of course, can affect human behavior, and men as a whole are more aggressive than women because of testosterone. Male fighting is widespread in a range of different cultures—in the Truk Islands, for example, brawling and unrestrained drinking made one a real man. Yet Gilmore also points out that the influence of testosterone on comportment seems relatively modest, and there are cultures, most famously the Semai of Malaya, in which men are submissive and pacific. Jolly fellowship clearly is not universal. Gilmore, however, acknowledges that, across cultures, assertive masculinity seems more common. Is there a deep structure of manhood? He can only conclude “maybe.” And if research in evolutionary psychology were to determine that such male behavior had a foundation in human biology and change Gilmore’s “maybe” into a “probably,” what would that really prove? It would be significant, but jolly male behavior, which seemed so “natural” to people in the early nineteenth century was regarded by the end of the century as unnatural. Manhood by then had come to be equated with self-control—men who did not get drunk, gamble, punch, and kiss other men were normal. Restraint was second nature. However “natural” the
grounds for this behavior, men in groups, can—and as chapter 3 suggests—do control their behavior when they want to.39

Other observers believed the explanation was not so much biological as ethical. Men were, as Charles Francis Adams put it in describing the drinking and attendant disorder in eighteenth-century Massachusetts towns, in “the earlier stages of moral development.” Minister Horace Bushnell attributed the impulsive, indiscriminate generosity of so many men to their living in “a childlike age.” Society had matured, but men’s attitudes remained that of boys. There is something puerile in jolly behavior: the impetuosity, the fighting, the bullying, the fascination with vomiting and other bodily functions, the crude and often silly jokes, the thoughtless cruelty to animals. Can human culture be childish in the way that individual humans are? Do cultures grow up? Norbert Elias has argued that central to the history of Western societies since the Middle Ages is a pattern whereby conduct once appropriate and routine for adults becomes restricted to children. In the course of the civilizing process, men and women learn to behave peacefully and with bodily restraint. What was once human behavior becomes “childlike” behavior. It may be that one of the reasons terms like “youth” and “boy” were imprecisely defined in the nineteenth century was that the variation in the comportment of children and adults was less distinct than it later became.40

Male behavior was indeed often impulsive and violent, but approaching jolly fellowship from the perspective of “the animal man” or childishness yields complexities and contradictions. Fighting among men was not simply natural but embedded in social convention. Rough-and-tumble fights had rules. Combatants settled in advance what tactics would be permitted. “Whatever terms are specified,” an English traveler discovered, “they never infringe [their agreement].” In Hookstown, Pennsylvania, fighters were not allowed to bite until first blood had been drawn—to do otherwise was “dishonorable.” Jonas Gudehus provided a fascinating account of fighting in Pennsylvania in the 1820s. Men with a grudge against each other would drink together at an auction or other public gathering and begin insulting each other “as though they were joking,” then scuffle, “still to be viewed as joking until some rough boxes on the ear or kicks.” (Note the close connection Gudehus describes between comedy and violence; this is a common phenomenon in this era.) Then comes the challenge. “Would you like to fight?” “Ei, I think so.” “Ei, I think so too.” They then drink “quietly a good glass of rum,” which seems to serve as a kind of sanction for the fight. They take off their jackets, hats, and scarves and “grab each other at the chest to check first who stands the surest.” Only after that does the actual fighting begin. They furiously “hit, kick, scratch and bite” until some one yells “Enough,” which instantly ends the battle.
Head butting contests, which could seem so wild and animalistic to observers, were often arranged in advance and followed a conventional procedure. Combatants did not charge each other like rams but butted “in the usual manner,” that is, by holding each other’s ears. Jolly fellows’ behavior was not completely uncontrolled. They stopped drinking before getting drunk and often would stop gambling before they had lost all their money. Many of their pranks required extensive calculation and preparation. Jolly fellowship cannot be reduced simply to natural or adolescent behavior. It seems best regarded as a constructed comportment with equivalents, if not roots, in the European past.41

“What was the allure of this behavior? Why were so many men spontaneously drawn to jolly conduct? In part, what accounts for jolly fellows’ joy is simply that they were engaging in what was then and what is still today defined as pleasurable activity. Drinking and gambling certainly have proved gratifying in a very large number of cultures over a very long period. It is easy for us to understand the happiness men might have felt sitting around the tavern fire quaffing rum with friends, joking and discussing issues of the day. Or the pleasure they might have taken in lining up an easy shot at the last ball in billiards with money on the line. Nor is it hard to see why the Hornet’s Nest was so gleeful when Charles Comstock swallowed the cat story. But other aspects are less easy to understand. What is the allure in gouging someone’s eye, dosing unsuspecting victims with harsh purgatives, and tormenting animals?

What played a significant motivating role in much of this behavior was a view of what it meant to be a man. In the early and mid-nineteenth century, there were shifting and competing views about manhood, and manliness could be secured and enhanced in different ways. Many in the nineteenth century equated manhood with self-control, with mastery over impulse. Such men found fulfillment in home, work, and religion. By the middle of the nineteenth century, restrained manhood had achieved the status of a coherent outlook and wielded considerable discursive power. The jolly fellows’ views of what made a man are harder to pin down. There were hundreds of conduct-of-life books aimed at young men praising self-controlled manhood, but jolly comportment had few overt defenders—there were very few authors writing that men should get drunk, should fight, should gamble. Even antitemperance writers emphasized their abhorrence of excessive alcohol consumption. Jolly fellowship lacked a vocabulary; it was a matter as much of actions and gestures as words. There was some common ground
with restrained manhood. William Otter’s sense of what made him a man was complex—his six-four body, his drinking, fighting, and practical jokes were crucial, but perhaps even more important was his capacity for hard work.\textsuperscript{42}

Generally jolly fellows were less willing to restrain their aggression. Manliness, they thought, ought to be examined and displayed in public in the company of other men. Drinking and gambling were manly endeavors, but fighting was perhaps the most primal means by which male honor could be enhanced. Blakemore’s question to Everet at the Coach and Horse Tavern, “What for a Man are you?” was a challenge to fight, recognized as such. Phrases like “Are you a man?” or “I am your man” were in America, as in Europe, an invitation to combat. An argument in 1811 New York City between a drunken passerby and a wood Sawyer escalated into a fight with the words, “Damn you, are you a man? If you are a man walk out in the street.” “May the better man win” was much more than a figure of speech. “Chaw his lip or you’ll never be a man” was the advice of a Florida father to his son on how to fight. “Mr. McClure” and “Col. Sanders,” recorded William Johnson in his diary, had an argument in a Natchez court. As they exited the courtroom, “Mr. McClure Knocked him Down and Jumped on to him and was gouging Him in an instant.” So “many Persons was Surprised to find McClure So much of a man” that a banquet was held in his honor. As John Morris explained, men were “esteemed . . . in proportion to their prowess in ‘free fights.’ ” A brawler could lose favor when defeated. When pugilist Dan Rice whipped “Devil Jack” in a Bayardstown, Pennsylvania, tavern brawl, “the bully . . . lost prestige” and his friends “of the lower element” deserted him.\textsuperscript{43}

If a winner gained honor, a defeated fighter did not always lose respect. What was unmanly was refusing to fight or failing to put up a good fight. Such a person would be called a coward, which was among the most debasing insults any man could receive. Although efforts were made to insure competitive matchups, it was understood that some men were simply bigger and stronger than others, so pride could often be maintained in a hard-fought loss. “The defeated” in Scott County, Tennessee, were “not considered disgraced if [they] put up a good fight.” Wiley Britton, who was beaten up in several fights while working as a teamster on the Sante Fe trail, discovered “that a man who makes a good fight in defense of his rights wins the respect of his associates” even when he is defeated. If honor was gained only in victory, men would be sharply divided into winners and losers; defining honor simply as putting up a hard fight was a broad definition that may have helped reinforce jolly male solidarity.\textsuperscript{44}

There was a difference between North and South. Male honor in the North was more often corporate, male honor in the South more individual. There were,
of course, many one-on-one battles outside the South. But in the North and Mid-
wester bands of men representing a village or neighborhood brawled, an activity that
appears to have been less common in the South. Northern honor followed the
European pattern more closely. Not only was Southern reputation more solitary,
but the stakes were higher. The slave system made southern white men extremely
sensitive to social status and determined to protect it. You could not submit to
another. With stakes so high, southern combatants were more likely to resort to
weapons to defend their honor, and thus injuries and deaths in fights were more
common. The duel was the epitome of the southern stress on reputation. There
were “affairs of honor” in the North—James Watson Webb, the pugnacious edi-
tor of the *New York Commercial Advertiser*, issued challenges and fought duels in
a manner that would not have been out of place for a truculent South Carolina
planter. But he was an exception; dueling was far more common south of the
Mason-Dixon Line. It was limited mainly to elite southerners and helped confirm
their social status; challenges by men deemed ordinary were contemptuously dis-
missed. The duel was a way for southern gentlemen to maintain their elite posi-
tion by settling quarrels without taking part in the rough-and-tumble brawls that
common southerners engaged in. In reality, however, southern elite men seemed
to have dueled in addition to, rather than instead of, fighting. When their blood
was up, southern men went at each other, regardless of their social status. William
Johnson recorded many street brawls in Natchez that leading citizens of the town,
including doctors and lawyers, participated in.45

The Southern cult of honor permeated even the world of slaves. Planter Rob-
ert Wright, a former Maryland governor, put so much stress on personal honor
that he told not only his sons but even his bondsmen not to brook any indigni-
ties—he commanded his slaves “not to take an insult from any rich man’s do-
"mestic slaves under any consideration,” remembered G. W. Offley, a free black
minister. French count Francis de Castelnau recalled watching a street brawl in
Tallahassee, Florida, in the late 1830s between planters in which accompanying
slaves joined in on their master’s side. On Christmas Eve, 1858, in legendarily vio-
"lent Edgefield County, South Carolina, two slaves argued over a twenty-five-cent
debt; when one asserted “he was as good a man” as his adversary, a fight broke out
that ended in a fatal stabbing.46

A successful prank could also enhance a man’s repute. Successfully carrying
out a sharp practical joke brought prestige; by the same token, being duped in a
prank meant a loss of honor, at least temporarily, as jokers would remind victims
of their humiliation. Actor Dan Rice “hoaxed,” in his words, the citizens of Rock
Island, Illinois, by collecting admission for a comic performance and then ab-
sconding without giving a show. Rather than going to the authorities and charging Rice with fraud, the spectators instead scurried home to avoid losing face by being observed having been hoodwinked by Rice’s “joke.” A victim could complain or even attack a joker, but then he would be “a bad sport.” The appropriate thing for the butt of a joke to do, an Illinois lawyer explained, was to “console his irritated feeling with the reflection that he would get his revenge on some future occasion.” Among jolly fellows there was reciprocity to pranks. Today’s victim might be tomorrow’s perpetrator. The circular nature of practical joking may have also contributed to a feeling of unity among jolly fellows.47

Honor in fighting and pulling off pranks could be shared. But manhood also often was enhanced at the expense of others. The jolly fellows believed that it was their prerogative to bully and humiliate men who were puny, dimwitted, of different races, or otherwise misfits or outcasts. By attacking and denigrating marginal groups the jolly fellows helped enforce the social order by maintaining a boundary between themselves and outcasts. Publicizing and strengthening widely accepted social divisions helped clearly to mark the ambit of the community and allowed those within it to feel a camaraderie with each other and an empathy for one another. Male peer groups served a similar function in Europe, where the charivari targeted individuals who violated village norms. In a multiethnic and multiracial American society, this function may have been of greater importance than in Europe. The jolly fellows were publicly tolerated in part because their targets were often those whose mistreatment elicited little sympathy. There may also have been a tacit public understanding that the jolly fellows’ conduct helped enforce the boundaries of the recognized community.48

The boundary-maintaining function was also satisfied by the use of nicknames, which were almost universal wherever men assembled in both Europe and America. Nicknaming practices are complicated; they may serve several functions and meanings can vary by the context in which they are used. To have a nickname established one as an insider, and the nature of the nickname suggested one’s status in the circle of men. A “little coterie of persons” in Medfield, Massachusetts, gave each other exalted nicknames that were used more often than their real names. The storekeeper was “Emperor,” the tavern keeper “Alderman.” There was also a “Pope,” “Count,” and “Marshal Ney.” John Janney remembered in Loudon County, Virginia, in the 1820s a “Squire Tommy,” a “Long Tommy” and a “Bacon Fat Sammy,” among many others. It was the custom in early Keokuk, Iowa, “to select for every character of any special note in the place, some sobriquet or nickname,” an old-timer explained. Timothy R. Mahoney discovered a remarkable 106 nicknames among the early settlers there. Many names referred to physical
appearance, as if a man’s essence was embodied in his face and physique. Egbert Herring Smith in Milwaukee walked with a halting gait, and so he was “Limpy.” “Big-bellied Sam” resided in Loudon County. In Keokuk were a “Cock-eye,” “Bow Legs,” and “Peg Leg.”

The jolly fellows’ behavior did more than simply stigmatize outsiders. It unified insiders. Charles Fenno Hoffman, a writer who visited the Old Northwest and upper South in 1833 was astonished at the combination of benevolence and brutality he witnessed. People were extraordinarily hospitable “to the white stranger, but having no place in their system of doing good for the unfriended Indian,” whose life “does not weigh a feather.” Westerners, he concluded, must have “two consciences—one for the white and one for the red man.” There was a puzzling juxtaposition of heartless and humane in the conduct of jolly fellows and in that of many other Americans as well. Examples of generosity toward fellow native-born whites contrast with instances of viciousness toward African Americans, Indians, and other marginal groups. Perhaps this is not contradictory; perhaps there is, in a way, only one conscience. Communities are defined in part by who they exclude, and the very clear-cut ethnic, racial, and other barriers that the jolly fellows helped sustain may have strengthened the connectedness of those inside the boundary. Impulsive, instinctive benevolence may have been possible, in part, because the line was so distinct between who merited community sympathy and who did not. Perhaps charity among fellow whites was strong not despite their contempt toward people of color but because of it—the price paid for community kindliness was intolerance. They were two sides of a coin.

“PLEASURE AT THE PRICE OF MISERY TO OTHERS”

The regulars did not behave as they did simply to delineate the social border of the recognized community and strengthen white sympathy and solidarity. At an even more profound level, they seem to have taken a deep and intense psychological satisfaction in inflicting pain, both mental and physical. “The desire to make fun of others—the weak, the odd, the unfortunate—was common,” Jarvis remembered. People of color, disfigured persons, simpletons were prime targets. But any person vulnerable in any way could be a victim. One of the most characteristic activities of the tavern crowd was darkening the faces of men passed out drunk, to humiliate them by making them literally black men. “Wags” in Kingston, Rhode Island, it was said, intentionally got a man dead drunk so they could make up his face “in the most fantastic style.” Charles Fenno Hoffman came across one such victim in Tazewell, Tennessee. He spotted a man beside himself
in fury: “I caught sight of his face by the moonlight, and discovered that he had undergone a very common piece of western waggery, having his face blackened when overcome by liquor.” Drinkers in Georgia would recover to find their faces blackened, pant legs cut off, hair cut off, hats and shoes taken. Amos Banks, the leading joker of Lexington, South Carolina, victimized men dead drunk. “As one lay in the street,” he would hire some of the boys “to black his face and cover him with an empty crate loaded down with heavy weights, which, when he woke up prevented his escape from the cage without help, or he would scatter corn around the prostrate body and call the hogs to root and roll it over and over.”

There is no suggestion in these accounts that “niggering” persons was intended to shame them into shunning future excessive drinking; perpetrators like Amos Banks were themselves hard-drinking men in a hard-drinking age. The victims were not necessarily adversaries of the blackeners. Some victims were socially marginal men, but in other cases they were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. Sometimes they were even friends of pranksters; they had just left themselves unprotected and were thus fair game. The motive seems to have been the visceral pleasure of power over another, the pleasure derived from inflicting humiliation and pain without remorse or fear of retribution. The joy was achieving mastery over the helpless, making them, as happened to Kentucky victims, “for months the laughing Stock” of the community. This is very similar to the strain in black folklore that Lawrence Levine detected—the humiliation and injury of others for its own sake. It is not so much the cleverness of the prank but the suffering of the victim that afforded the most pleasure. John M. Roberts, an Ohio schoolteacher, recounted that when Addison Cornwell got drunk in 1853 “a set of harpies” from the village “fell upon him & tore his clothes, blackened his face, & hauled him around the turnpike.” Such men, Roberts believed, were “ever ready to pounce on a poor, weak individual who is unable to help himself.” By drinking themselves insensible, the victims made themselves vulnerable, temporarily placing themselves in the same category blacks and Indians were in permanently.

Many other men besides Roberts’s “set of harpies” derived pleasure from others’ suffering. William Otter’s autobiography recounts many examples of his cruelty, often in fond detail. Otter might seem mentally disturbed, but others routinely accompanied him in his sadistic escapades, such as when Big Bill drowned a friend’s dog “for a piece of sport.” Eventually it becomes clear that Otter expected readers, like his confederates, to join him in finding these vicious rampages enjoyable. Not just enjoyable but comical. One night in Gettysburg on a “spree,” Otter pulled the ladder out from under a journeyman chair maker named James Doogan, who was using it to climb up to visit his girlfriend. “Poor Jim . . . had a
very hard fall, [and] he came crawling on his hands and knees toward me, making his way homewards as well as he could, every yard or two he would mutter the words O Lord, which tickled me most prodigiously, I almost killed myself laughing at him.”

To Otter, Doogan’s suffering was hilarious, and others shared his malicious sense of humor. Frank Hostutter, the celebrated practical joker of Lexington, Kentucky, put a slab of tobacco in the soup at White’s tavern, remembered Ebenezer Stedman. “Old Feaster” commenced vomiting and others quickly followed. “First one woold Puke, then the other, then all together.” One regular was certain he was poisoned and “was Goin to Die & Hell wod Be his portion.” Stedman concludes: “Frank got the Prais on all hands of Playing the Best Joke of the Season & people did enjoy a good Joke in them days.” Commentators on humor from Hobbes through the mid-nineteenth century took it for granted that the comical was cruel.

Just as men could take pleasure in the pain of other humans, they savored the agony of animals. William McLaren recalled with delight how a favorite amusement in early Illinois “was to round up a chip-monk, rabbit, or a snake, and make him take refuge in a burning log-heap, and watch him squirm and fry.” At times the killing of animals exploded into a paroxysm of slaughter. In a “circle hunt,” hunters drove animals before them into the center of an ever-contracting circle, where they were massacred. In one such hunt near Waverly, New York, in 1818, as the men approached the center “the excitement increased to rashness and recklessness.” The hunters were so beside themselves in Dionysian bloodlust that “they shot in every direction” and ended shooting each other as well as animals.

The slaughter of passenger pigeons in James Fenimore Cooper’s The Pioneers (1823) is another example. Virtually the entire village, man, woman, and child, joined in using guns, bows and arrows, and even poles to knock the birds out of the air. A cannon loaded with bird shot was used. Fluttering, dying pigeons covered the ground, but “none pretended to collect the game.” As the killing frenzy wound down, an abashed Judge Temple reflects that he “has purchased pleasure at the price of misery to others.”

Sometimes this pleasure seemed to come from the sheer anarchic delight in destruction and obliteration, in creating chaos out of order. A balloon ascension was scheduled to take place at Philadelphia’s Vauxhall Garden on 8 September 1819 at five-fifteen in the afternoon. Eight hundred paid the $1 admission fee to the garden, and the surrounding streets, fields, and lots were jammed with an estimated thirty thousand onlookers. The wind was unfavorable and the bag slow to inflate. At six, the throng, said to have been drinking steadily, went berserk.
They tore down the fence around the garden and swarmed in. The money box was pillaged, the balloon ripped to shreds, and the balloonist’s equipment demolished. The mob then “attacked the bars, drank the liquor, [and] broke the bottles and glasses.” The rioters then “commenced work on the pavilion,” recounted J. Thomas Scharf and Thompson Wescott in their 1884 history of Philadelphia. By eight the building was plundered and trashed. They then set it on fire and “in a short time the pavilion was in ashes.” The rioters “completed their work by destroying the shrubbery and shade trees of the garden,” Niles’ Weekly Register reported. At the University of Georgia, a “young mob” of students, according to the school’s historian W. Merton Coulter, wreaked havoc in 1830, pulling down fences, tearing up corn, blocking roads, breaking the railings off the bridge, and stealing wagons and pushing them into the creek. Boatmen on the Ohio, Mississippi, and other major rivers were notoriously unruly in the first decades of the century. They drank and fought, and then, reported an observer, for no apparent reason other than a joy in devastation, they would go wild, “breaking furniture, demolishing bars and taverns, and pull[ing] down fences, sheds and signs.”

Bill Buford, an American magazine editor living in England in the 1980s, fraternized with a gang of Manchester United football hooligans and went with them to an international match in Turin, an episode described in his book Among the Thugs (1991). After an 1984 game, the Manchester supporters, accompanied by Buford, went on a rampage, smashing shop windows, overturning cars, and beating up Italian fans. Buford recounts with amazement how profoundly appealing he found the senseless destruction and how enjoyable inflicting pain on others was. “I would have assumed, if I had thought to think about it, that the violence would be exciting, . . . but the pure elemental pleasure was of an intensity that was unlike anything I had foreseen or experienced before.” That men derived emotional satisfaction from cruelty and mayhem does not mean that the jolly fellows’ violence and degrading pranks did not also serve calculated and rational ends. As this chapter and other chapters make clear, they very often did. But it does offer the suggestion that beneath even the most considered violence there may be a deep-seated craving to hurt and humiliate others. Yet the ambit of human behavior was wide. Men who inflicted pain on their vulnerable fellow men for their own pleasure could just as spontaneously give openhanded help to others. Examples of extraordinary brutality stand beside examples of great generosity.

Jolly fellowship was not unique to the antebellum United States. Similar conduct could be found in both colonial America and seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe. Such behavior required no explanation; it was just the way men were. The strong ruled the weak, the clever dominated the dull. Jolly attitudes
reverberated with many who did not themselves join the drinking, fighting, and gambling, and usually the frolics of the tavern and grocery crowd received only mild reproach, if not tacit approval. Yet this traditional male behavior came under powerful scrutiny in America beginning in the second and third decades of the nineteenth century. What once was natural now required explanation, what once was unobjectionable was now censured. This process would reshape the moral order of American society.