“A great city,” explained Horace Greeley speaking of New York, “derives its subsistence and its profits from ministrations, . . . not only to the real needs of the surrounding country, but to its baser appetites, its vices as well; and, as the country becomes less and less tolerant of immoral indulgences and vicious aberrations, the gains of cities therefrom, and their consequent interest therein, must steadily increase.” Greeley was proposing a connection between the moral reformation of the 1820s and 1830s—a “great though silent change . . . in public sentiment,” he called it—and the strength of disorderly conduct in urban areas in later decades. Cities, of course, were home to many refined residents and neighborhoods, but reformers were convinced that like the frontier, few, if any, major cities as a whole had reached the level of sobriety and uprightness of the small towns. Clerics and moralists continued to regard urbanites as an obstacle to their project of moral improvement. And with reason.1

Defenders of jolly fellowship rejoiced that cities were, as former boatman John Habermehl explained, simply too large and too diverse for “the religious people” to ever wipe out “resorts for worldly pleasure.” John Morris agreed. “Puritanism” was, he conceded, powerful, but “the unruly spirits of the land, more especially in our large cities and many important towns in the Southern and Western states[,] revolted against their arbitrary and despotic acts, and prevented them from being enforced.” Cities remained places where men could still drink, fight, and gamble, much as they had done for centuries. But jolly fellowship did not just go on as it had in urban areas. It was transformed.2
Critical to this transformation was the role of what sociologist Robert Park, examining early twentieth-century American cities, called “moral regions,” or “vice districts.” He defined a moral region as a neighborhood, or even a whole section of the city, “in which a divergent moral code prevails, because it is a region in which the people who inhabit it are dominated . . . by a passion or some interest” such as gambling. “In the process of imposing its discipline upon the individual,” Park explained, “in making over the individual in accordance with the accepted community model, much is suppressed.” Every large city develops milieus “in which vagrant and suppressed impulses, passions, and ideals emancipate themselves from the dominant social order.” In such a place a man can “purge himself . . . of these wild and suppressed impulses.”

Moral regions—“immoral regions” would perhaps be a better term—began to appear in American cities in the 1830s and 1840s at the same time that revivals and temperance were peaking, and such districts continued to flourish until the end of the century. Neighborhoods dominated by saloons, gambling halls, billiard parlors, brothels, and vaudeville theaters arose. Their size and significance varied: in “wide open” cities such as late nineteenth-century Chicago, an entire district was given over to such activity. In other locations, such as in Boston, the moral region might be only a few blocks of a single street. Virtually every major city developed one. By the 1850s there was the Black Sea in Boston, the Bowery in New York, South Street in the Moyamensing neighborhood of Philadelphia, the Sands in Chicago, and Murrell’s Row in Atlanta. By the 1890s there was the Potomac Quarter in Detroit, Hell’s Half Acre in Fort Worth, the Soudan in Sioux City, Bucktown in Davenport, Whitechapel in Des Moines, Little Cheyenne in Chicago, Little Chicago in Cheyenne, Commercial Street in Salt Lake City, the Tenderloin in Seattle, Whitechapel in Portland, the Stingaree in San Diego, and the Barbary Coast in San Francisco.

Greeley believed that unreformed men from reformed villages fueled urban disorder: “Thousands who formerly gratified their baser appetites without disguise or shame now feel constrained, not to ‘leave undone’ but to ‘keep unknown’ by hieing to some great city . . . and there balance a year’s compelled decorum by a week’s unrestrained debauchery.” Jolly fellowship, John Habermehl agreed, retained an appeal and periodic urban binges were a way of life for many rural men. In sober and sedate villages such men were, Habermehl believed, like horses “tied to a post, pawing and champing the bit under restraint.” Cities gave them “a little elbow room”; men “under the pressure of steam can without let or hindrances lift the safety valve to ease up.” “Men away from home” would drink, gamble, and wench and then return to their settled, temperate lives. Habermehl
seems to think that without the railroad and the ease of travel to cities it brought, men stifled by small-town life might eventually have exploded and carried out some sort of violent mutiny against “the religious people.” There were also some rural tavern regulars who permanently moved to cities where there was no reason to even pretend to be abstemious and orderly—in the cities they could continue to live as jolly fellows. The rowdy plasterer William Otter moved from Emmitsburg, Maryland, to Baltimore in 1851 and opened a saloon.4

Cities have always accommodated a diversity of lifestyles, and Greeley and Habermehl called attention to the difficulty many men from the countryside had in accommodating themselves to the new social order. But jolly fellowship in cities was spurred not only by men on a bender and rural refugees. Writing in a more urban age, Park believed that moral regions catered mostly to city dwellers. He seems to have had middle-class men in mind; their “suppressed impulses” could find release in vice districts, and they could continue to lead respectable bourgeois lives. Cities also had large numbers of working-class immigrants who had not been exposed in their native lands to Protestant virtues like temperance and bodily restraint and seemed slow to embrace them in America, despite the best efforts of employers and reformers. All of these groups combined to ensure that jolly behavior continued in cities even as it faded in the countryside.5

New York had the earliest and largest urban moral region. The area around the Bowery became lodged in popular imagination as the symbol of indulgent, impious New York. The contribution of visitors on a binge was no doubt substantial, but local residents were surely the primary consumers. New York City had always had plenty of disorder—the presence of large numbers of sailors, who were notorious drinkers and fighters, guaranteed it. The growth of New York’s vice district, like those in other cities, was likely spurred by the moral reform campaigns of the 1820s and 1830s, but its size and strength was much enhanced by changes in Manhattan’s population and geography. The explosive growth of urban areas in this era separated residents not only by class but by age and sex. Because of selective migration from Europe and from the American countryside, New York, like most cities, had an unusually large population of young men. An astonishing 35 percent of the male population in 1850 was between ages fifteen and thirty, and there were more men in that age group than there were in the group over the age of thirty. The many bachelors in New York and elsewhere helped fuel jolly fellowship throughout the nineteenth century. Most unmarried men, whether American, Irish or German, were boarders, and, as Walt Whitman observed, there were “whole neighborhoods of Boarding-houses” in the lower wards of Manhattan.6

Most boardinghouses were male establishments. Many did not accept women.
Wherever men congregated in groups in this era, jolly fellowship could emerge, and boardinghouses were no exception. Many boardinghouse keepers endured the drunken revelry of residents as an inevitable “sowing the necessary wild oats.” Thomas Butler Gunn in his comic 1857 account of boardinghouse life, *The Physiology of New York Boarding-Houses*, describes “the boisterous animal indulgences” in a boardinghouse inhabited mainly by medical students as little short of uproarious: “They got up boxing-matches in garrets, [and] danced infernal dances accompanied with shrieks and howlings.” Drinking was heavy, and “frequent brawls ensued.” Surely few places were this wild, but many were lively. Practical jokes were a boardinghouse way of life. A dwelling occupied largely by shipbuilders was “a headquarters of considerable jocularity,” where the boarders “one night went out on a festive expedition . . . changing sign-boards in modern college fashion.” Almost everywhere, pious boarders were a favorite target of pranksters. Boardinghouses were so associated with merriment that boardinghouse humor became a recognized genre in the nineteenth century, both in printed works and on stage.7

Boardinghouses were key to the vast scale of New York’s moral region. The common room of most houses was too small to accommodate all residents in the evenings so, an immigrant’s guidebook explained, a boarder “has very little choice left him in the matter. He must go to a tavern or drinking-house, or theaters or other places of amusement.” In the evenings men poured into the saloons, theaters, and gambling houses of the city’s lower wards. Statistical correlations of single young men, boardinghouses, saloons, and lower-ward location (see appendix B) suggest that by 1855 the whole area below Canal Street had evolved a distinctive demographic and social profile. The lower wards, symbolized in the Bowery, became the antithesis of sober respectability; the Bowery itself became the metaphor for the high-spirited, manly ambience of the lower wards and even for the indulgent cosmopolitanism of New York City itself. The Bowery caught the popular imagination, but the city’s disorderly district was far larger than a single street. Sporting saloons and theaters lined Park Row across from City Hall Park and lower Broadway. The main gambling houses were west of Broadway on Barclay Street and Park Place, while the city’s prostitution centered even further west along Church Street.8

Yet the Bowery was special. Alvin F. Harlow, the street’s great chronicler, dates the emergence of a distinctive Bowery scene to the late 1820s. It flourished until almost the end of the century. Just about everyone agreed the Bowery was wondrous. Writer Cornelius Mathews in 1853 found it “the greatest street on the continent, the most characteristic, the most American, the most peculiar.”
Henri Browne wrote in his 1869 book *The Great Metropolis* that it was “a city in itself.” To the *National Police Gazette*, which extensively covered the lower ward for its readers, it was “another city.” The Bowery was the major shopping street for residents of the working-class area that later would become known as the Lower East Side, but it was “the Bowery after dark,” the recreational Bowery, that made the street notorious. It was renowned for its “drinking and gambling houses, its poultry-raffling shops, . . . its ‘crack’ ice-cream saloons,” and its dance halls and theaters, *Tribune* reporter George Foster explained to readers eager to know more about the infamous neighborhood. At night, especially on Saturday night, the Bowery thronged with revelers. The crowd was part of the show: the vibrant cavalcade of humanity that assembled on the Bowery—“a grand parade ground,” Foster called it—was as much a part of the Bowery experience as the saloons and theaters.9

Given the large number of men in nearby neighborhoods, it is not surprising that the Bowery was, as social reformer Francis McLean was later to call it, “a man’s street.” Or, more precisely, a white man’s street. Many vice districts were interracial, but the Bowery was unusual in its faint black presence. The theater audiences were mostly white men, and many of the saloons and gambling halls were for white male patrons only. Although most customers were men from nearby working-class neighborhoods, its attractions also lured middle-class New Yorkers and visitors from outside the city, for whom an expedition to the legendary street was a must. Noting that “men set the tone,” Christine Stansell has also called attention to the white working-class women who were a part of the Bowery scene, promenading in their bright dresses and shawls. With so many bachelors in the area, it is not surprising that less respectable women were also present. The street was virtually unique among vice districts in having relatively few brothels actually located on or near it (most were to the west), but many prostitutes cruised the Bowery, and they were often found in the infamous third tier of its theaters.10

The saloons, theaters, and street scene were not the only things that made the Bowery distinctive—there was a character to the street, a spirit. Mathews noted that “in personal deportment, the Bowery people are perfectly independent—every man for himself. . . . They are as near to a primitive state as people in a great city can be, their original traits pretty much as they come from the hand of nature.” Mathews may have been referring in part to the many workers in the crowd, oblivious to middle-class decorum. Yet Mathews may have also been suggesting that the Bowery was a place where the rules that governed the rest of society seemed suspended or at least loosened (with the obvious exception of racial attitudes), where nonconformity flourished, and where standards of behavior
were more lenient. The more fastidious attire that accompanied reformed male demeanor, for instance, was not required on the Bowery. "You needn’t trouble yourself to put on a coat when you go into the street[.]. . . [N]o one will cut you for that breach of etiquette."11

“The old Bowery was a street of carnival,” one reporter remembered. It had a reputation for rowdiness and as a site of male revelry, pranks, and brawling. A famous early incident that helped shape the street’s unrestrained reputation occurred on New Year’s Day, a traditional day for male mayhem, in 1828. It began as a giant charivari. A large crowd of men, said to number four thousand, gathered on the Bowery in the evening with “cracked kettles, drums, rattles, horns, &c.” They then “commenced their orgy,” remembered Gabriel Furman. They pelted a tavern with lime and flour until it was white, then seized a Conestoga wagon and started down the Bowery. They routed the watchmen “in the genuine thwak ‘um’ style,” Furman recalled, and then began a frenzied, anarchic spree of destruction that groups of men in this period sometimes engaged in. Signs were torn down and barrels, carts, carriages, or anything else in their way was smashed. This seemingly mindless havoc then gave way to more focused, if no less pleasurable, violence. The mob demolished all the windows, doors, and seats of an African American church and attacked all the blacks they came on. They continued downtown, running riot, finally ending up at the Battery. In the future Bowery sprees would be less tumultuous, but the street would long be associated with revelry and brawling. Although male fighting was on the wane in most places, on the Bowery, Junius Henri Browne discovered in the 1860s, “fighting is always a proposal to be received, and is generally welcome to someone within the sound of your voice.” By stigmatizing jolly conduct, the crusade for moral reform and self-improvement had given it an important symbolic significance. A geographic area given over to drinking, gambling, fighting, and theaters was now by definition the antithesis of respectability.12

The peculiar demographic and residential patterns of the lower wards made the Bowery America’s largest and most significant urban moral region. No other city came even close until the 1880s, when Chicago’s burgeoning vice district challenged it. But virtually every urban area had, by the end of the Civil War, its neighborhood of theaters, gambling halls, saloons, and brothels. Philadelphia lacked a boardinghouse district, so the demographic impetus was weaker there than in New York. Still, although its vice districts were never quite as lusty as Manhattan’s, they were significant nonetheless. Because of the hostility of Quakers to the stage, several theaters had been built on South Street, which was outside the city until a 1854 consolidation. The street neighborhood became “a haven for
those who shunned orthodox customs” made up of a jumble of saloons, cheap theaters, used-clothing shops, groceries, dance halls, and gambling, billiard, and prostitution houses. In marked contrast with the overwhelmingly white Bowery scene, there was a strong black presence in “Moya,” and racial clashes were frequent.13

Chicago’s vice districts eventually came to eclipse the Bowery. The first moral region to arise was the Sands along Lake Michigan just north of the city, but Chicago mayor “Long John” Wentworth took advantage of an 1857 dogfight that lured the gamblers and saloon keepers outside of town and demolished the gambling houses and bordellos. Then, in 1861, when the Civil War halted traffic on the Mississippi, unemployed riverboat gamblers converged on Chicago and established Gambler’s Row on Randolph Street, also known as “the Hair-trigger Block,” which became the city’s next gambling center. Dubbed the “Wickedest City in the United States” by the war’s end, vice in Chicago continued to flourish after 1865. More than in New York, visitors propelled Chicago’s disorderly district. The city’s role as a railroad hub allowed it to draw patrons from all over the central United States, a vast hinterland of men looking for drink, gambling, sex, and excitement. “Chicago was ‘wide open,’” one newspaperman remembered. “It was not far removed from a western mining camp.” By the 1870s there were twenty “first-class” gambling halls and dozens of less elegant ones in Chicago. “The Store,” as it was jokingly called, the luxurious downtown casino run by famed gambler Mike McDonald, became one of the most celebrated gambling palaces in the country. Satan’s Mile developed on the South Side in the 1880s, centered around the Levee, and became the city’s—and eventually the nation’s—most infamous vice region. The Levee’s “resorts”—whorehouses—were the chief attraction, but in the diversity of its entertainments, it equaled its New York counterpart. One Chicagoan recalled its “drug stores, blacksmith shops, oyster bars, barrel house saloons, sailor’s free and easies, livery stables, gambling joints, dance halls, Chinese laundries, pawn shops, flop houses, basement barber shops, tintype galleries[,] . . . penny arcades, fake auctions, shooting galleries and newsstands selling obscene books.” Although the Bowery was the first and most culturally significant moral region, it was far from the only one.14

“I’M A B’HOY AND I’M IN FOR A MUSS”

Part of the reason the Bowery caught the popular interest was the fascination with the denizens who animated it. In the 1840s the press began to focus attention on a seemingly novel breed of young men known as “b’hoys,” who were rowdy in
comportment and rough in language. This discourse about b’hoys reveals much about how jolly fellowship was being both preserved and reshaped in urbanizing America. The b’hoys’ hallmark was fighting. B’hoys were not found everywhere but were limited to the “large cities and thinly settled places” that had so concerned reformer William Alcott, places where jolly fellowship was flourishing. The Bowery b’hoy was the most celebrated specimen of the type, but there were b’hoys in other cities and on the frontier as well. Philadelphia was noted for the toughness of their b’hoys. “I’m a b’hoy in the Spring Garden style, . . . I’m a b’hoy and I’m in for a muss” (a fight) went a song of the day. Baltimore had b’hoys—“I’m one of the b’hoys—an out and out Fell’s Pinter,” declares a character in William T. Thompson’s Major Jones’ Sketches of Travel (1843). B’hoys were also found in the West. In 1847 a western traveler referred to “the sans ceremonie peculiar to the ‘b’hoys’ of the frontier.” On his way to California during the gold rush, Ohioan Peter Decker encountered “Capt. Goodhue one of the ‘B’hoys’ . . . , a ‘Mountain Man.’” The b’hoy was not unique to the Bowery, but they were so common there that they became identified with the locality.15

“Bowery Boys” were not new; they had been around since the eighteenth century. Gangs composed of young men had been an established feature of city life since the eighteenth century, and New York had “Bowery Boys,” “Broadway Boys,” and “Boys” from virtually every neighborhood. But “Bowery B’hoys” were something more than gang members; they represented a lifestyle. The word can be traced to an English farce called Beulah Spa; or, The Two B’hoys (1833) that opened at the Bowery Theater in 1834 and featured unruly, impertinent teenage brothers. The play was a hit, and “b’hoy” passed into the language as the byword for disorderly young men, especially those who loved to brawl. The Bowery B’hoy exploded into national consciousness in 1848 both on stage and in literature. Benjamin Baker’s comic theater sketch about a brawling volunteer fireman named Mose proved sensationally popular. Baker quickly expanded it into a full-length hit play, A Glance at New York (1848). George Foster’s series “New York in Slices,” which featured b’hoys, ran in the New York Tribune for three months in 1848, and in 1849 it was published as a book.16

The plot of A Glance at New York, which details the efforts of a volunteer fireman named Mose to save an upstate greenhorn from city sharpers, was hackneyed, but actor Frank Chanfrau’s true-to-life performance made the play a triumph. Mose’s distinctive appearance immediately marked him as a b’hoy—wide suspenders, polished boots, a cigar clenched in his teeth, and, the b’hoys’ emblem, “soaplocked” hair, greased down, long in front of the ears and short in back. Mose came from a long line of disorderly male characters in novels and plays,
yet he also represented a new urban type emerging in working-class neighbor-
hoods east of the Bowery. He is a native-born worker, a butcher by trade; he is,
Moses says of himself, “a little raw.” Both butchers and firemen had a reputation
for fighting, and the fame of prizefighter Tom Hyer, a former meat cutter, had
indelibly connected butchering and brawling in the public mind. Mose’s love of
a good fight—a “muss”—is his most conspicuous characteristic: “If I don’t have
a muss soon, I’ll spile.” One scene ends with this stage direction: “Mose upsets
bench and pitches into Jake—General row, stove upset, &c.” Despite his unrul-
iness, Mose is a sympathetic character. He is a brave volunteer fireman and a loyal
friend to his chum Syksey, and he treats his girlfriend, Lize, respectfully. Mose
explains that “the fire-boys may be a little rough outside, but they’re all right here.
[Touches breast.]”17

The play became, in the words of George C. D. Odell, the great chronicler of
the New York theater, “one of the greatest successes ever known in the history of
the New York stage.” Genteel critics such as William K. Northall were disgusted
at this “unmitigated conglomeration of vulgarity and illiteracy,” but they admit-
ted that audiences loved it, and Northall noted that “nothing was heard, sung
or talked about but Mose.” A newspaper exclaimed that “it is now impossible to
talk or write of life in New York without a Mose.” A Glance at New York was only
the first of a series of Mose plays; it was followed by such works as New York as
It Is (1848), Mose in California (1849), A Glance at Philadelphia (1848), Mose in
a Muss (1849), Mose in France (1851), and Mose’s Visit to the Arab Girls (1848).
Mose was something of an urban Davy Crockett, popular not just in New York
but all over the country: Chanfrau may have played the role four thousand times.
Twelve-year-old William Dean Howells in Martin’s Ferry, Ohio, adored Mose
and even dreamed of playing the role himself one day.18

The fascination with b’hoys was further fueled by George Foster’s urban
that dealt extensively with b’hoys and their female counterpart “g’hals,” was a
tremendous success, selling over two hundred thousand copies, making it one
of the era’s best sellers. Edward Z. C. Judson, who used the pen name “Ned
Buntline,” wrote Mose and Lize into his The Mysteries and Miseries of New York
(1848), which he followed with The B’hoys of New York (1850). Their popular-
ity made Buntline’s literary reputation. As they publicized the b’hoj, Foster and
other writers struggled to gauge this seemingly novel urban type. It was generally
agreed that most b’hoys were manual workers, but writer Cornelius Mathews was
convinced that the b’hoj was not simply the representative of a social class, noting
that b’hoys are found “sprinkled in every company, less rarely, it is true, as you
Playbill from the Chatham Theatre, 1848, listing Frank Chanfrau as Mose in *New York as It Is*. Mose is watching a dance contest among blacks in Catherine Market. The Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library.
ascend the social scale.” Northall agreed, describing the city’s b’hoys as extending “from the complete rowdy . . . to the intelligent young mechanic, who only seeks an occasional ‘lark.’” The g’hal was also most often working class, and with her bright dress and urban slang, she too became a fixture of metropolitan sketches in the late 1840s.19

George Foster’s groundbreaking urban journalism in the Tribune did much to establish the uniqueness of New York life in American consciousness. Foster not only heightened public awareness of the b’hoy but also provided the most detailed analysis of him. Foster reports how, like a naturalist, he ventured into saloons and firehouses in the Bowery region to observe the b’hoy in his native habitat. Foster helped develop the “sunshine and shadow” approach that dominated writing about American cities for most of the nineteenth century, and his New York was a city of contrasts. Three geographical areas of New York symbolized the city’s three social groups: Broadway exemplified the elite and the Five Points neighborhood represented the degraded, mostly immigrant, poor. Standing between these extremes and mediating them was the Bowery, the locus of “the American b’hoy, and g’hal.”20

Although most b’hoys were manual workers, b’hoyishness, Foster believed, did not really originate on the job. Rather it was a deliberate choice, a comportment forged in public performance on the street. Foster’s report on the b’hoy is mixed. Their sociability led to excessive drinking, “the worst feature in the character of the b’hoy.” The b’hoy’s bellicosity was his trademark. They were fighting constantly among themselves and with others. “A good strong ‘muss’ is the only safety-valve through which can escape their immense exuberance of animal spirits,” explained Foster. But they brawl more often in fun than in anger: “A fight is a capital joke, and a crown is cracked as though it might be a conundrum.” The b’hoy is a great humorist. “His strongest passion seems fun,” according to Foster, and “he revels in a spirit of broad coarse humor, sparing nothing in its way, and finding its delight in hard knocks as well as droll conceits.” B’hoys are loyal friends, “good, unselfish frolicsome creatures,” “brave [but] easily led astray.” The g’hal is described less precisely—Foster notes that “the g’hal is as independent in her tastes and habits” as the b’hoy himself but spends most space describing her flamboyant dress.21

There had been many rowdy young men in cities, towns, and villages for decades, and soaplocked hair had been worn since the 1830s. Why did the image of the Bowery b’hoy impose itself so powerfully in national culture in the 1840s? The answer has in part to do with New York’s ascent to dominance in American publishing at the same time the Bowery milieu was developing. Magazines and
weekly editions of the city's daily newspapers were read throughout the country and confirmed the city's preeminence in cultural production. But it was not just a question of supply; there was also demand. Certainly, much of the media curiosity with Bowery b'hoys was the result of the very rapid growth of cities in this era, and debate about b'hoys was part of a larger discourse about the prospects and perils of urban life. Yet for all the novelty of large cities in American culture, the b'hoy was intriguingly familiar. With his disorderly behavior the b'hoy
no doubt reminded many readers and theatergoers of the rowdy regulars of the tavern crowd. The b’hoys was the antithesis of the sober and restrained male that was becoming the ideal in the wake of religious revivals and temperance. He was really only an urban jolly fellow—a drinker, fighter, and joker. The new urban type was, paradoxically, an old rural type. And, for that matter, an old urban type as well. Two decades earlier such disorderly comportment probably would have attracted little notice, but now as temperance and the cult of self-control spread, the conduct of the b’hoys fascinated Americans. The g’hal, unlike the b’hoys, seems genuinely new and to have been limited to New York City. The g’hal never seems to have quite caught the popular imagination like the b’hoys. Readers, perhaps, could more easily identify with the b’hoys, who offered a traditional image of masculinity, than they could with the less familiar and more unsettling g’hal.

“The Headquarters of the Sporting Fraternity”

Until the 1820s and 1830s, jolly fellowship was widely tolerated even though it diverged from mainstream values in various ways. But with what Greeley called the “great though silent change . . . in public sentiment,” traditional male values and activities came under fire. Cities, most especially New York City, not only kept jolly values alive but concentrated and intensified them and began to adapt them to an urbanizing society. New York’s lower wards became a cultural crucible refining jolly fellowship into something close to a counterculture. No longer could respectable men openly drink, fight, and gamble. These activities, nevertheless, remained profoundly appealing for many, and new urban institutions and male roles emerged that allowed men to participate in them in new ways. Like so much else in antebellum America, jolly fellowship became commercialized and professionalized. The era in which fighting and gambling ceased to be an ordinary part of daily life for most men saw the advent of prizefighting and gambling houses as well as the rise of the “sporting man,” a gambler-politician who was a sort of professional jolly fellow. What were once informal, spontaneous activities carried on by men everywhere now could be occupations for experts, and the appeal of pugilism could be satisfied by reading accounts of battles between professional fighters.

Boxing became nationally popular in the 1840s. Early pugilists were mostly men who had achieved success as local bullies in set fights; instead of fighting just for honor, they now fought for stakes. A New York butcher named Jacob Hyer in his later years claimed he fought the first American prizefight in 1816 with an English sailor. Although prizefighting was illegal, and early boxers faced prosecu-
tion for assault, other fights followed in the 1820s, and in the mid-1830s New York emerged as the undisputed center of American pugilism. The development in Manhattan of big-time gambling helped fighters in raising stakes for matches, and extensive coverage by the *New York Herald* and the sporting press consolidated the city’s predominance in the sport.23

“In the year 1840 the fighting spirit took a sudden start,” the *New York Herald* recalled. This upsurge coincided with the arrival in the United States of James “Yankee” Sullivan, who was to become the country’s first professional prizefighter. Born in 1813 near Cork, Sullivan (one of his many aliases; his real name was apparently James Ambrose) was a petty criminal and prizefighter. Convicted of burglary, he was transported to the penal colony at Botany Bay in Australia. Sullivan eventually worked his way to America and then back to England—hence the nickname “Yankee”—where he resumed his fighting career. “Sully” returned to the United States in 1841, and his knowledge of prizefighting gained in England led to a rapid refinement of the sport in America. His career stumbled, however, when he helped promote an 1842 match in which his protégé Chris Lilly killed Tom McCoy. The death sent Sullivan into prison and prizefighting into eclipse until the late 1840s.24

Sullivan’s expertise permitted him to easily vanquish early opponents, and distraught native-born Americans began to “cast their eyes about the pugilistic circle to find a man capable of holding up the honor of the Stars and Stripes against the encroachments of the Green Flag of the Emerald Isle.” Their hopes came to focus on Jacob Hyer’s son Thomas. The much-anticipated Sullivan-Hyer showdown took place in 1849 for a huge stake of $10,000. Dodging legal authorities by sailing around Chesapeake Bay, on 7 February Hyer and Sullivan landed on the Eastern Shore accompanied by about two hundred friends and fans. Along with a few nearby residents, they were the only people to actually see the contest. It was remarkable that prizefighting was able to attain great popularity even though before 1860 probably only a total of a few thousand people in America had ever seen a match. In a short, intense bout, Hyer was victorious, making him a national hero. The clash raised popular interest to an extraordinary level, where it would remain, with the exception of a post–Civil War lull, for the rest of the century. Professional fighting spread to Philadelphia in the late 1840s and to New Orleans and San Francisco in the next decade.25

It is almost impossible to overstate how much interest major prizefights attracted in the nineteenth century and how famous top prizefighters were. It was a journalistic commonplace that a championship match would sell more newspapers than any other event, including a presidential election. The public enthusi-
asm over the Yankee Sullivan–Thomas Hyer bout in 1849 illustrates how the sport captivated Americans. In New York, the Herald believed, the excitement rivaled that of the Mexican War, noting that “throughout the city . . . excitement” was “tremendous” as word spread that the fight was imminent and that nothing “has been heard or talked about for several days past but the fight.” Crowds swarmed outside newspaper buildings, and taverns and saloons were jammed as New Yorkers awaited word of the outcome. In Philadelphia it was the same story. The Public Ledger reported that the fight “was almost the sole topic of conversation in our streets, and caused hundreds to congregate in the vicinity of newspaper offices for the purposes of obtaining particulars” of the outcome. Taverns in Baltimore were jammed with men “in feverish anxiety,” and rumors in the street were “as thick as blackberries,” the Sun reported. In San Francisco, throngs met every ship from eastern ports in the early summer of 1849. A passenger on the Leonore that arrived in San Francisco harbor in July vividly remembered the scene in a poem:

We knew they longed to meet us,  
To hear the news from home  
Of fathers, mothers, sisters  
They’d left, so far to roam  
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
And now their greeting voices  
Across the sea rang clear,  
Who won the fight, who won the fight?  
I’ll bet it was Tom Hyer.

No! Yankee Sullivan’s the boy,  
Another crowd would cry,  
How many rounds, how many rounds?  
He’d lick his man or die.26

The popular interest in prizefighting peaked with the 1860 battle between American John C. Heenan and the English champion Thomas Sayers. Born in Troy, New York, Heenan went to California during the gold rush. After briefly working in Benicia as a blacksmith—thus to be forever dubbed “the Benicia Boy”—he returned to New York City in 1857 to make his career as a professional fighter. Reports that his match with Sayers was finalized caused a sensation throughout the country. “Never in the history of nations,” Thomas Bigelow Paine remembered, “has there been a sporting event that even approached it in public importance.” Newspapers printed article after article. Heenan’s departure for
England was a major public event; there were stories from the training camps of both men and speculation on the organizers’ plans to elude the police. Tension rose as the entire nation awaited word of the outcome. On 28 April 1860 the news arrived that the forty-two-round fight had been ended by the crowd pushing into the ring, preventing, Americans believed, Heenan’s impending victory. Interest reached an almost hysterical level according to the New York Clipper:

The Charleston Convention was almost forgotten. Scarcely any work outside of the newspaper world was done on that day. On Saturday night the city went wild with enthusiasm. . . . The fight, and the heroic conduct of both Heenan and Sayers[,] was the topic of conversation at the family fireside, in the markets, stores and everywhere. Go where we might, it was nothing but fight talk. Fight here, fight there and fight everywhere.

Even genteel publications gave the match huge play—Harper’s Weekly denounced the “bloody, brutal and blackguard prize-fight in England” but ran a two-page illustration of it. Heenan became a national hero. When English war correspondent William Howard Russell arrived in 1861 to cover the Civil War, he was amazed to discover that Americans seemed more interested in rehashing Heenan-Sayers than discussing the impending conflict between the states.27

Part of prizefighting’s appeal was as symbolic ethnic and national competition. The notion that a contest was between two individuals, one of whom happened to be an Irish immigrant or an Englishman and the other of whom happened to be a native-born American, was incomprehensible to most nineteenth-century men. Yankee Sullivan was Ireland. The Heenan-Sayers fight was America versus England, part of an intense sporting rivalry between the two nations that also included the 1851 victory by the yacht America.28

The main reason, however, for prizefighting’s tremendous appeal was simply that fighting remained fascinating to many men. Indeed, the sport’s role as symbolic national and ethnic competition may have been as much a justification for interest in boxing as a cause of its popularity. The all-Irish Yankee Sullivan–John Morrissey battle in 1853 attracted almost as much interest as the Sullivan-Hyer fight. The public fighting tradition, waning but still vibrant in many places, was the foundation of the sport’s appeal. Most prizefighters had begun fighting in neighborhood brawls. John Heenan had led the West Troy boys in their battles with Troy gangs in the early 1840s. And prizefighters often battled outside the ring—most seem to have liked to fight. The Thomas Hyer–Yankee Sullivan prize-fight had its origin in a confrontation between the two at a drinking house at the corner of Park Place and Broadway, where they happened to run into each other.
Neither man could back down without a humiliating loss of honor, and the furious barroom melee left Sullivan bloodied. “It is scarcely possible to describe the excitement this event occasioned. . . . For five or six days nothing else was talked of in all circles,” a biography of Sullivan related. “Broadway swarmed with crowds which concentrated from all quarters to catch a glance, while parading from one drinking house to another, of the man who had whipped Yankee Sullivan.” Rough-and-tumble champions still could receive great acclaim: New York’s Bill Poole was considered by many the greatest fighting man in the city in the 1850s—better than Hyer, better than Heenan—even though he never fought a prize-fight. Yet, though it was built on a popular fighting tradition, its supporters argued that boxing actually contributed to the waning of individual male fighting. The American Fistiana (1849), an early history of the sport, claimed that rather than stimulating brawling as critics alleged, prizefighting’s prominence actually had a “marked influence in the repression of all kinds of rowdyism.” Prizefights aided men in controlling their bellicose propensities by allowing them to vicariously participate in matches between professionals. Instead of fighting themselves, men could read the round-by-round, blow-by-blow accounts of bouts that newspapers provided.29

The “sporting saloon,” a distinctive nineteenth-century institution, exemplified the popular fascination with pugilists. Boxing was illegal in most places, and matches were staged more or less clandestinely, so income from fighting was meager. Prizefighters therefore opened saloons where their celebrity would attract customers eager to rub elbows with a fighting man. It was a jolly fellow’s delight: your work was to lounge around the bar. Yankee Sullivan’s Sawdust House in New York City in the 1840s was among the earliest sporting houses. Sullivan’s place was said by the Clipper to have been “continually thronged with supporters of all classes” hoping to meet the great man and perhaps even get to spar with him. “Park Row and the Bowery teemed with ‘sporting houses,’” prizefighter Owen Kildare remembered. Sporting saloons spread to Boston, Philadelphia, and other cities. A typical sporting saloon had a bar, a ring for boxing exhibitions, billiard tables, and tables for faro and other card games. Some houses had pits where dogs and gamecocks could fight and where badgers and other animals were baited. (Virtually all major prizefighters owned fighting dogs.) Gribben’s sporting “hostelrie” on the Bowery, for instance, had a sparring room and files of past issues of the Spirit of the Times, an American sporting and horse-racing paper. Most were elaborately decorated with objects sportif—Gribben’s featured a gallery of prints of famous past and present prizefighters. The decorations of another “celebrated Sporting-house in New York” included two stuffed fighting
dogs that had been preserved after they killed each other in competition. Many establishments employed what the press called “pretty waiter girls,” who were, if the price was right, available for sex.³⁰

Like prizefighting, gambling became institutionalized. A passion for gambling once had been fulfilled by wagering at cards or billiards in taverns; now men could indulge their fancy in gambling houses and billiard parlors run especially for that purpose. The first gambling halls in America seem to have appeared in New Orleans in the 1820s or perhaps even earlier. A crackdown by authorities in 1835 curbed New Orleans wagering, and Manhattan eclipsed the Crescent City as America’s principal gambling center. Pat Herne and Henry Colton opened the earliest “first-class” casinos in the city in the 1830s, and others followed in the 1840s. An exposé of gaming in the 1850s announced that “the city of New York is the great headquarters of the gamblers in this country.” The rules set by the city’s gaming establishment came to be followed nationwide. Park Place, Barclay, and Vesey streets west of Broadway emerged as the center of New York first-class gambling. These fancy establishments had elegantly furnished salons for faro and roulette and smaller rooms where poker and other card games were played. Most set out a lavish free banquet for patrons. Bettors at such places included members of the city’s elite, businessmen visiting the city, and “rich young rakes and spendthrifts” as well as professional gamblers. Second-class and third-class houses opened all over the lower wards where less well-heeled customers could “buck the tiger,” that is, play faro, in the slang of the day. In such places players were said to be bilked with stacked dealing boxes. By 1867 one magazine claimed that there was “scarcely a street without a gambling-house” in New York.³¹

The first billiard saloon in the city opened on Park Row in the 1820s, and by the 1840s there were a number of large, ornate billiard parlors in the lower wards. The most famous of these fancy billiards establishments was on Ann Street, and it became one of “the headquarters of the sporting fraternity.” By the 1850s admission was charged to watch games between top players, and the matches were covered by the press. Billiard competitions soon were dominated by professionals, most famously Michael Phelan from Troy, who became the sport’s first star.³²

Other cities soon followed New York’s lead in developing institutionalized gambling. It was estimated there were twenty gambling “hells” in Boston in 1833, and in 1844 Lyman Brittain brought first-class gambling to the city. New York gambler Joe Hall opened an elegant casino in Philadelphia in 1853, but first-class houses never flourished there the way they did in other cities. Gambler John Morris believed that wagering in the City of Brotherly Love “was under the control of the rowdy element” who ran the second- and third-class houses
“Free and Easy at Country McCleester’s, in Doyer Street,” New York Clipper, 29 January 1859. This sporting saloon, operated by prizefighter John “Country” McCleester, was one of the best known in the country. Note the pictures of a dogfight, prizefight, and racehorse on the wall. English in origin, the “Free and Easy” was a fascinating nineteenth-century male ritual. According to a 17 March 1860 article in the New York Leader, traditionally the participants gathered at the tavern or saloon on Wednesday and Saturday nights. The “president” then called the meeting to order and a vice president was elected. Drinks were served. It was the president’s prerogative to begin the first song, which, by custom in New York City, was “Old Domestic Drama.” Then came a toast such as “luck in a bag and shake it out as you want it.” They alternated between toasts and songs the rest of the evening. Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.
and used strong-arm tactics to demand such large payoffs that genteel gambling houses found it hard to make a profit. Washington, D.C., with its concentrations of politicians—“men away from home”—had a particularly large and vigorous vice district. Edward Pendleton’s House of Fortune on Pennsylvania Avenue was one of the nation’s earliest fashionable houses and among the most famous. Although elegant casinos like the House of Fortune attracted widespread public attention, only four of Washington’s seventeen major gambling houses were labeled first class. By the end of the Civil War there were said to be one hundred gambling houses and hundreds of professional gamblers in the nation’s capital. In New Orleans the 1835 crackdown proved only a temporary hindrance, and by the 1840s gambling was thriving again. Herbert Asbury cites an estimate that there were five hundred gambling places in the city, including thirteen first-class houses. San Francisco, with a population of approximately forty-thousand in 1852, had forty-six gambling houses.33

“A COMBINATION OF GAMBLER, HORSEMAN AND POLITICIAN”

In the 1840s the first New York lower-ward luminaries emerged. These celebrity b’hoys, or “sporting men” as they came to be called, embodied qualities that other men, and not just men with a taste for a jolly lifestyle, found intriguing. They were living a male fantasy of a life of drinking and gambling. Many continued the jolly fellows’ tradition by getting involved in politics. In essence they were a kind of professional jolly fellow and as such became New York legends. There had always been an element of performance in jolly fellowship—the village bully strutting down the street—and these men presented themselves to the public as the epitome of jolly existence. As New York consolidated its dominance of cultural production, some became nationally famous. The turbulent careers of Mike Walsh, Isaiah Rynders, and Thomas Hyer suggest how the Bowery milieu was becoming a counterculture in which men who embraced jolly fellowship could not only live but thrive. In later years their lives and the New York of the 1840s took on the aura of a kind of foundation myth for the postbellum sporting fraternity.

Politician-editor Mike Walsh was one of the most colorful personalities of his era. Born near Cork, Ireland, in 1810, he emigrated to New York where he apprenticed as a printer and “ran” with volunteer fire company Number Thirty-four, the renowned Howard Hose. He soon attracted notice. Part of his appeal was good looks. He had, according to the New York Ledger, a “handsome[,] . . . open, honest
face, and a fine intellectual looking head.” Walsh worked for several newspapers and became well known as the owner and editor of the vituperative *Subterranean* between 1843 and 1847. Walsh was a Democrat, but he shrewdly steered his own course around the myriad city and state party factions, most of the time remaining independent of Tammany. His popularity among workingmen and his gang of followers, organized in 1840 as the Spartan Association, gave him enough influence to win election to the state assembly in 1846 and in 1852 to the House of Representatives. After his return to New York, he was “more or less connected to the city press” until his 1859 death.\(^3\)

Walsh’s political accomplishments, however, do little to suggest why he became so celebrated—and so reviled. His brilliant oratory as the angry champion of the city’s workingmen was part of the reason for his fame. Walsh’s rhetoric was a peculiar mixture of republican attacks on luxury and growing social inequality combined with boisterous, profane vilification of those whom he felt were not true friends of the workingman, which seemed to include at one time or another just about everyone not named Mike Walsh. One main target was the “jugglers, wire pullers and office beggars of Tammany Hall”—“Boys! Look out for them!” His invective was personal and relentless: city recorder Frederick Talmadge was described as a “beastly and polluted old vagabond,” while *New York Sun* editor Moses Beach was “a lecherous lover of black wenches” (Walsh threw racial slurs around freely). Walsh’s arrests and trials for libel provided him ongoing publicity. When he was released from prison after an 1844 conviction, fifty thousand (or so he claimed) of “the subterranean populace of New York” gathered in City Hall Park to greet him.\(^3\)

Walsh’s renown was based in part on his unquestioned devotion to the city’s workingmen, in part on his superheated oratory, and in part on his carefully crafted reputation as one of the jolliest fellows in the city. Walsh portrayed himself and the Spartans as real men, men who used their hands at work and were not afraid to use their fists in politics. “You have *men* to contend with here!” he bel- lowed at Tammany hecklers in an 1841 political meeting. Walsh’s opponents were, he suggested, less virile than the Spartans. A favorite rhetorical technique was to focus on their diet: they were “milk and water men,” “walking vegetables,” “fish-blooded calves who live on bran and water.” Walsh and his gang, in contrast, were meat-eating, liquor-drinking, hot-blooded men. The combativeness was not just rhetorical. The Spartan Association had in its ranks a number of fighting men, including at one point boxers Yankee Sullivan and John “Country” McCleester, and Walsh’s roughnecks tried, sometimes with success, to bully and brawl their way to victory in party caucuses and even elections. In an 1842 local election,
the Spartans attacked men distributing ballots for a Sixth Ward candidate they opposed. Walsh, despite his Irish heritage, considered himself a “true American,” and the fight escalated into a full-scale riot between the Spartans and Irish.36

Walsh was not ashamed of his reputation for frolicking and fighting; indeed, he emphasized it—the b’hoyish persona was part of his appeal. Mike—not Michael—bragged of his own alcoholic intake in the Subterranean. Not only did he lead the Spartan Association in its political brawls, but, despite being a small man, he also engaged in some well-publicized personal fistfights, including one in Washington with James Lindsay Seward, a Georgia congressman. He enhanced his bellicose image by associating with prizefighters and was one of the referees at the 1842 Yankee Sullivan–Thomas Secor fight. Much was made of Walsh’s friendship with prizefighter Thomas Hyer. Walsh often drank with Hyer at the Hone House on Broadway opposite City Hall Park, and Walsh was among the small group of men who actually witnessed Hyer’s Eastern Shore prizefight with Yankee Sullivan in 1849. Like his pugilist friends, he was an avid gamecock fighter. Rumors connecting Walsh with Kate Ridgely, a “dashing looking woman” who was one of the city’s best-known prostitutes, enhanced his virile image.37

Walsh never shied away from writing about himself and sometimes recounted his nocturnal rambles for the edification of Subterranean readers. An 1846 column entitled “A Glorious Time” relates how he began one evening by going to a Bowery saloon where he fell in with “Country,” presumably boxer John McCleester, and three other men. They went on to another drinking place where “all the boys were in perfect ecstasies at seeing me.” After an evening drinking and singing on the Bowery, Walsh made his way at dawn to Red Hook in Brooklyn to witness a rough-and-tumble fight, staged “merely to settle a dispute.” After enjoying the “nineteen well-contested rounds,” he returned to the city, stopping first at the Saracen’s Head Tavern in Dey Street and then a Chatham Street saloon before finally making his way back to the Bowery. Walsh’s critique of the emerging industrial economy seems in part motivated by his sense that the sober, businesslike ethos of the age was suffocating the traditional egalitarian, tavern-based lifestyle he so loved. Walsh strongly defended male jolly revelry from criticism by clerics and temperance advocates.38

It was Walsh’s status as the most tireless and original practical joker of his era that cinched his reputation as one of New York’s jolliest fellows. There were other celebrated pranksters in the city, such as Blaisus “Blaze” More, the legendary fire department joker who once hired a man to whitewash the marble city hall. Despite such competition the New York Leader proclaimed that “Mike Walsh was in eminent degree the best practical joker of his time.” The New York Times in its
1859 obituary noted that Walsh “was exceedingly fond of practical jokes, and was accustomed to indulge this propensity in this respect on all occasions, whether in legislative halls or drinking saloons.” Walsh’s most celebrated prank, and among the most famous American pranks of the century, was the “Frank McLoughlin sell,” which, the Leader declared, kept New York “in a fever of excitement for nearly a week.” When McLoughlin, a noted sporting man, returned to New York from the California gold rush, Walsh went around to saloons spreading the word that McLoughlin had “many letters and presents to the boys in New York from old acquaintances in California,” recalled James Fairfax McLaughlin. Walsh directed them to Kelly’s saloon in Bayard Street where he said McLoughlin awaited them. Before they arrived there, Walsh told the bartender to tell them McLoughlin was at the Ivy Green on Elm Street; “from the Ivy Green,” they were directed “to the Carlton House, from the Carlton House to the Franklin House and so on.” The Leader claimed that at one time five thousand men were engaged in this wild goose chase through the lower wards.39

Walsh’s jolly reputation was a significant part of his appeal. After he died in 1859 at age forty-four, some newspapers suggested his short life exemplified the evils of alcohol. A broadside ballad quickly appeared defending Walsh’s character. To the tune of the traditional drinking song “Rosin the Bow,” the lyrics noted the press reports that Mike “indulged in strong drink”:

Well, shot if he did? don’t yees know-o-o
That a dhrop always dhrives away woe,
An I’m shure a small taste av the craythur
Would keep out the cowld here also.

The Leader in 1860 ran a series called “Anecdotes of Mike Walsh” that recounted his most famous practical jokes. For instance, he had once sent a message to the city coroner that “Col. Owl of New Orleans has died.” When the coroner arrived he found a stuffed owl in bed. In later years the Clipper and even Harper’s New Monthly Magazine printed tales of Walsh’s pranks, which suggests that some better remembered him as a jolly fellow than as a working-class tribune.40

The careers of Isaiah Rynders and Thomas Hyer demonstrate that in the lower wards it was not only possible to live a jolly lifestyle but to make a living doing so. Walsh’s political rival Isaiah Rynders was one of New York’s first sporting men, a term with a quite specific meaning in nineteenth-century America. A “sporting man,” explained the New York Tribune, was “a combination of gambler, horseman and politician—prominent among whom were ‘Tom’ Hyer, ‘Bill’ Poole, [and] ‘Yankee’ Sullivan.” Police Gazette writer Edward Van Every designated the
sporting element as made up of “‘shoulder-hitters’ [pugilists], dog-fighters, gamblers, actors and politicians.” Billiard players could be sporting men. Pimps and confidence men could also be “sports,” as they were also called. Members of the theatrical profession, especially minstrels, likewise could be sports. In an era when respectable people condemned the theater, stage performers often identified with gamblers and pugilists as fellow outcasts and associated with the sporting fraternity.41

Both the term “sporting man” and the type originated in the early 1840s and by the 1860s were found in every major city. There were professional gamblers early in the century, mostly in the South. But before the 1840s most gambling men, “blacklegs” as they were called, were nomads, traveling from town to town with their gambling paraphernalia and running games in taverns or rented houses. As the “moral revolution” swept the countryside, gamblers filtered into urban areas and settled down. Many jolly fellows had been involved in law enforcement or had held political office, and sporting men extended this heritage. Virtually all sports had a connection to politics, usually as Democrats. Some, like Rynders, were basically professional politicians, while others like Yankee Sullivan lent their support in other ways, most characteristically by providing muscle in caucuses and on election day. Many owned saloons where they and their cohorts, like the tavern crowd before them, spent their time.42

Isaiah Rynders was born in 1804 near Troy, New York. In the jolly fellow tradition, every sporting man needed a nickname, and Rynders’s was “Captain,” owing to his having briefly been the skipper of a Hudson River sloop. “A lithe, dark handsome man” with “a prominent nose and piercing black eyes,” Rynders headed west and was said to have been a faro dealer on a Mississippi riverboat. He killed a rival gambler, so the story goes, in Natchez in an 1832 duel with bowie knives and fled to South Carolina where he became the superintendent of a racing stable. Rynders returned to New York in 1840 with a stake from his pursuits in the South and, as the New York Times explained, “established himself as a ‘sporting man,’ and at the same time became identified with Tammany Hall and began to take an active part in politics.”43

Rynders, according to the Clipper, had “a strong love for the card-room and the race-track.” Rynders let it be known that he carried a bowie knife, and he engaged in some well-publicized fistfights that enhanced his combative reputation. The Captain eventually purchased a farm in New Jersey where he raised trotting horses that he raced at New York–area tracks. Rynders’s opened a saloon, the Arena, adjacent to the Park Theater on Park Row across from City Hall Park. It became the hangout “of many of the leading sporting men of the metropolis,” the
Clipper remembered, and a popular rendezvous for “actors, gamblers, pugilists and the like.” Rynders also seems to have profited from connections to brothels in the city, using his political leverage to protect them.44

Rynders’s power burgeoned. An energetic speaker, he used rhetoric that “suited the bhoys exactly,” the Herald remembered. Like his archrival in the turbulent world of lower-ward politics, Mike Walsh, the Captain mixed Biblical and Shakespearean quotations with invective: “‘Boys, I want to tell you that L—— is a damned liar,’ or ‘M—— is a notorious scoundrel who wants to get into office to rob you.’” The establishment of the Empire Club, a Democratic political association “first organized principally among sporting men” in 1844, was his most significant accomplishment. Rynders was “as practical and persistent as Walsh was the reverse,” wrote reporter Matthew P. Breen, and, the Leader explained, the new group “threw the Spartan Band entirely into the shade.” At its height, Rynders’s organization was, according to the Herald, “the strongest political club in the country.” Rynders once admitted to journalist Thomas L. Nichols “that we have a good many sporting men and fighting men” in the Empire Club, but he claimed, “that is the worst you can say of us.” Whigs and abolitionists, however, did say worse things about the Captain and his club. Rynders, along with Walsh, was one of the first to understand how brute force could be a recipe for political success in the turbulent world of nineteenth-century urban politics.45

Election-day brawling had a long Anglo-American tradition, but Rynders used it more systematically to consolidate power than anyone had before. With contingents of prizefighters that included at various times Thomas Hyer, Yankee Sullivan, Chris Lilly, John McCleester, and Charles “Dutch Charley” Duane as well as fire company sluggers like David Scannell, the Empire Club battled to victory in ward-nominating caucuses and disrupted Whig gatherings and rallies. The club’s members attacked the “Grand Clay parade” in 1844, and when Yankee Sullivan grabbed the reins of Cornelius Vanderbilt’s horse, it was said that the Commodore jumped off and thrashed him. In national politics Rynders aligned with the southern wing of the Democratic Party. If he hated anyone “more than a Whig it was an Abolitionist,” reported the Times, and he and his supporters delighted in breaking up abolition and Free Soil meetings. Rynders was rewarded by Tammany for his strong-arm tactics in its support. He was made a weigher in the Customs House, and in 1857 Buchanan appointed him United States marshal for the New York district, a top patronage office. Though his authority fell short of later-day politicos like William Tweed and “Honest John” Kelly, Rynders was perhaps New York City’s first political boss. The Captain was a friend of actor Edwin Forrest, and Rynders achieved something close to national infamy in 1848.
when he allied with fellow sporting man Edward Z. C. Judson—the writer “Ned Buntline”—to incite the demonstrations against Forrest’s English rival Charles C. Macready. The result was the Astor Place Riot in which twenty-three were killed. Rynders’s gambling and racing background, his popular saloon, his association with pugilists, his truculent reputation, his staunch Democratic politics, and his hard-hitting rhetoric were all part of his manly appeal to Empire Club members and all part of what men in general admired about the Captain.46

Prizefighters were an important part of the sporting fraternity, and Thomas Hyer’s nickname, “the Chief,” suggests his exalted position in the city’s sporting world. Son of pioneer prizefighter Jacob Hyer, Tom was raised in the rowdy world of butchers and gangs. His original vocation as a meat cutter is significant. In medieval times, butchers, by violating the traditional taboo against shedding blood, placed themselves, like barber-surgeons, on the margin of social acceptability. Butchers in New York remained a group apart—they were regarded the jolliest, most violent, most racist segment of the city’s working class, and it was almost inevitable that b’hoys would be depicted as butchers as often as they were. Butchers were noted pranksters. Thomas F. De Voe, himself a former butcher, recalled that Catherine Street Market’s butchers included “several ‘regular jokers,’ full of life and fun, and fun they would have, sometimes at considerable expense.” Ernest Keyser, who did the largest business of any butcher in the city from his Washington Market stalls in the 1830s, was famed for his practical jokes. He became something of a legend, and in city slang someone who “kill[ed] for Keyser” (that is, slaughtered beef for Keyser) was a working-class rowdy.47

Butchers seemed to revel in blood; it was their vocation and their avocation. Mose, the butcher-hero of the play A Glance at New York, brandished this sanguinary symbolism: “Mose: ‘What! Yer don’t know where de slaughterhouse is yet? Well, drive up Christie Street till you smell blood and dere stop.’ ” Meat cutters shed blood every day in the markets and seemed less hesitant than other men to shed blood outside it. They were notorious in their love of blood sports, especially dogfighting and bullbaiting. And butchers loved to brawl. They were far more often involved in both collective and individual violence than any other occupational group in the city; it was the hallmark of their subculture. Meat cutters took part in tavern riots, joined antiabolition mobs, attacked wardens trying to round up stray hogs, and were found among theater rioters.48

Although Tom Hyer’s stint at the Centre Street Market was brief, he was always
identified in the public mind as a butcher. Hyer was arrested five times for rioting as a young man. Violence against women seems to have been another part of the butchers’ subculture, and in one rampage in 1836, the seventeen-year-old Hyer was part of a gang that demolished a grocery store, attacked three brothels, and raped a prostitute. He was convicted of sexual assault but served only a short sentence. Hyer was clearly a very rough customer, but his 1879 biographer put the best face he could on Tom’s ferocious nature, noting that Hyer “was born with a love of fight, whether man, dog or game fowl,” alluding to the fact that Hyer was also a dedicated fighter of gamecocks and dogs. Hyer first gained fame in the prize ring in 1841, upholding native honor with his victory over Country McCleester. His 1849 victory over Yankee Sullivan made him America’s first athletic star.49

Just as Hyer’s rise probably helped pave the way for the Mose plays, so the success of the Mose plays probably contributed to the view of Hyer as not just a great fighter but the embodiment of assertive white working-class manliness. Hyer’s good looks and fine physique contributed to his towering status. Prizefighters became the gold standard in male beauty, and their bodies were described with loving precision in the press. Yankee Sullivan’s torso, the New York Whip rhapsodized, had a “symmetry and beauty that we have seldom, if ever seen equaled.” Hyer became something of a sex symbol, admired more, it seems, by men than by women. Stories about Hyer consistently described his gorgeous face and magnificent physique; he was “one of the finest looking men of modern times,” raved the Clipper. Accounts resorted to classical allusions to praise his appearance—Hyer was “the American Achilles”; he was “slim-waisted, beautifully modeled and had the features of a roman senator.” Having a fine build was almost essential not only for boxers but for any luminary in the lower-ward sporting and political world. Isaiah Rynders “had good shoulders and was physically powerful.” The youthful William Tweed “possessed the physique of a young gladiator,” and Tammany chieftain Honest John Kelly had “the thews and sinews of a young Hercules.”50

People clamored for a glimpse of the Chief. The honor of being the best fighter not just in the neighborhood or village but in the entire country was immense. When the hero walked down Broadway, passersby stopped dead, and “their gaze would follow this tall, commanding figure until it disappeared from view,” his friend Dutch Charley Duane remembered. Like many sporting men, Hyer went into the saloon business and opened a barroom next to the Bowery Theater that was “for some time, literally coining money.” Men of “all climes and creeds flocked for the privilege of gazing upon Hyer,” Police Gazette reporter Theodore “The” Allen recalled. Hyer capitalized on his renown by giving sparring exhibitions and even going on stage. When he appeared at the Bowery Theater, hundreds were
said to have been turned away. He went on tour, performing in Albany and elsewhere. With his fame and appearance, Hyer was positioned to become a force in city politics. He became one of the many pugilists in the Empire Club, but after a falling out with Rynders, the Chief left the Captain’s organization and became part of a loose gang of native-born butchers and other “muscular men” clustered around Washington Market butcher and prizefighter “Boss” William Harrington. Known as the Unionists or the Union Club, these pro-Whig sluggers congregated

“Tom Hyer in Ring Costume,” c. 1850. Hyer was considered one of the handsomest men of the age. In Life and Battles of Tom Hyer, comp. Ed. James (New York, 1879). Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
in a saloon on the other side of the Park Theater from Rynders’s Arena and battled the Empire Club on election day. Often urged to run for office—it was widely believed that a seat in Congress was Hyer’s for the asking—he always refused.51

Hyer, like many other pugilists, went to gold-rush California, and when he returned he found his reputation as best fighting man in the city no longer secure. One challenger was John Morrissey, a swaggering Irish-born tough who came down from Troy in 1848 to make his mark in the New York fighting fraternity. Morrissey’s Hibernian background and overbearing manner quickly antagonized Hyer. Police broke up a rough-and-tumble fight between the two, but, despite constant rumors of an impending match, a prizefight was never arranged. There was, in addition, Bill Poole, a native-born competitor, also a former butcher. Despite being handicapped by a small body, Poole was a tremendous fighter. Openly ambitious, he hoped to use his brawling ability to make his mark. He was too scrawny to match Hyer or any good boxer in the ring, but in rough-and-tumble fights “Butcher Bill” was unbeatable; his great quickness enabled him to throw down a rival and “easily keep him there until he cried ‘enough,'” Allen wrote in the Police Gazette.52

Poole turned his attention to provoking the hot-headed Morrissey. After a confrontation in a barroom in July 1854, Morrissey agreed to a set fight. The battle, the most famous rough-and-tumble match in the city’s history, took place on the Amos Street Dock for $50 a side. It was short and brutal. Poole was able to throw Morrissey, “and then went at him with fists and feet . . . , gouging out his right eye . . . , [and] cutting head, face, ears,” according to the Tribune’s breathless account, and Morrissey was forced to submit. The followers of the two men then engaged in a wild free-for-all. Poole’s victory over a champion prizefighter created a sensation. A broadside ballad immediately feted the winner: “Oh! Billy Poole! Oh Billy Poole! You are a tip top scholar. / For by the rule of Hyer’s school, you made the champion ‘holler.’”53

Hyer found himself increasingly surpassed in popular esteem. The sociable, handsome Poole, with his “finely chiseled” face and “full and manly” chest, was the man of the hour. Poole quit butchering and became a sporting man, opening a barroom on the Bowery where “men of all stripes and callings from all over the country” came hoping to meet the hero. Like other sporting men, Poole became involved in politics. In origin the Poole-Morrissey rivalry does not really seem to have been political or ethnic—the Clipper believed that the real issue was simply who was “the biggest ram in the pen”—but as the Know-Nothings skyrocketed to prominence, Butcher Bill saw his chance and claimed leadership as the head of nativist brawlers. When an antagonist sneered to Poole, “Aren’t you a pretty
American?” he proudly proclaimed, “Yes I am—I am their standard bearer.” After increasingly bitter clashes between the two men’s supporters, Butcher Bill ran into Morrissey in the elegant Stanwix Hall barroom on Broadway on the evening of 24 February 1855. The confrontation was broken up but later that night, Poole returned to Stanwix Hall, a fight broke out, and in the melee a Morrissey supporter shot Poole in the chest, severely wounding him.54

The shooting created a furor. Poole with his Amos Dock victory had become “generally known to the great mass of the people,” reported the New York Times, and as he lingered near death the scene outside his Christopher Street home resembled a market place or camp. By day it was crowded with people . . . and at night parties of [Greenwich] villagers camped about a watch-fire.” Poole died on 8 March; his last words allegedly were “I die a True American.” (According to Charles Haswell, the word on the street was that his last words were a distinctly less elevated “By ——, boys, I’m a goner!”) Butcher Bill was a martyr, and his funeral was a maelstrom of nativist passion. It was, according to the Herald, “one of the most extraordinary demonstrations ever made in a Christian country.” An estimated crowd of eighty thousand lined Broadway to watch the funeral procession. A weeping Tom Hyer was one of the pallbearers.55

The arrival in 1857 from San Francisco of yet another handsome native-born fighter, John C. Heenan, completed Hyer’s eclipse. Retired from prizefighting, Hyer worked as a saloon keeper and later a celebrity faro dealer in a gambling house. Always a heavy drinker, Hyer’s health was by this time in decline, and his once magnificent face and body deteriorated until he was “a perfect wreck of his former self.” As his looks faded, his friends and supporters fell away. Hyer died in 1864 at age forty-five, but he continued to be honored among men, and his portrait could be found in saloons throughout the city into the next century.56

“A GLORIOUS TIME”

Walsh, Rynders, and Hyer personified the lower-ward moral region of New York City as it emerged in the 1840s. They acted out a swaggering manliness that surpassed anything of the jolly fellows. The tavern had been a male domain, but the New York sporting world was much more so. In Mike Walsh’s account of his midnight rambles in “A Glorious Time” all twelve people named are men. The only women mentioned are several at Red Hook who watched the rough-and-tumble fight. One might dismiss “A Glorious Time” as fiction, but the coroner’s inquest after Walsh’s death similarly tells a virtually all-male story. On Wednesday, 17 March 1859, Walsh began drinking at five-thirty in the afternoon in a Fifteenth
Ward saloon with a sporting man named Billy Mulligan. Walsh then went on to a hotel saloon where he shared drinks with several other men before finally ending up around eleven at his favorite watering hole, the Hone House at Broadway and Park Place. There he met Tom Hyer and several other men and continued to drink heavily until two in the morning. The testimony makes it clear that such evening barhopping was his customary routine. While walking home Walsh collapsed and died, apparently from a heart attack. The inquest after Poole’s shooting reveals a similar picture; the action was played out mainly in saloons, and all twenty-two witnesses who testified or gave affidavits were men.57

In the lower-ward world, jolly fellowship became more emphatic and ostentatious, the drinking heavier, and the fighting more violent than among the tavern crowd. It was a masculine world but not a bachelor world. The large number of unmarried men in the lower wards fueled the Bowery scene, but Walsh, Rynders, and Hyer were all married. It comes as something of a surprise in the inquest into Walsh’s death when his wife, Catherine, is called to testify. It turns out Walsh lived with his wife and two children on West Twenty-first Street. Poole had a wife and young child when he died. Their position as husbands and fathers did not deter them from spending their evenings and often their days drinking with other men in saloons. What did Catherine Walsh think night after night as her husband came home drunk at two or three o’clock in the morning? The record is silent. Mike himself seems rarely to have mentioned Catherine—there is virtually no information on her.58

The brawny world of the lower wards marginalized respectable women, but this was, for many men, part of its attraction. Cities remained places where they could still be men and live a traditional two-fisted jolly life. As rural and small town America became more tranquil and monotonous, the disorderly city, the evil city, stood out all the more. New York City emerged as the most powerful redoubt from respectability, and the Bowery b’hoy captured the popular imagination as symbol of unfettered urban life. Sporting men appeared who seemed to live as full-time jolly fellows, drinking, gambling, and fighting. They too became objects of public curiosity, not just in New York but throughout the country. Jolly fellowship was professionalized and amplified into something close to a counterculture in New York’s lower wards in the 1840s and 1850s. In future decades, “sporting society” would only increase in scope and cultural significance.

For some men the Bowery region was attractive, a place where they could conduct their lives according to their own wishes. For others it was an evil place, the antithesis of Protestant, middle-class propriety. For all it was a place of fascination. In 1849, at the height of the Bowery b’hoy mania, another masculine domain ma-
terialized on the Pacific Coast that immediately exercised a similar allure and repulsion, even more alluring and more repelling: gold-rush California. The city’s newspapers, which had done so much to publicize the Bowery and the b’hoy, now turned to promoting “the California adventure.” The two moral regions were to become connected by more than unruly behavior. Many New York gamblers, prizefighters, and sporting men went west, establishing a link between eastern urban vice districts and the frontier that would last until the end of the century.