

Source: *Experience History*,

James Davison, 549-561

## CITY LIFE

### URBAN SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

EVERY CITY HAD ITS GRIMY tenements and slums but also its fashionable avenues for the rich, who constituted barely 1 percent of the population but owned a fourth of all wealth. In between tenement and mansion lived the broad middle of urban society—educated professionals, white-collar clerks and salespeople, shopkeepers, corporate managers and executives, public employees, and their families. They composed nearly a third of the population and owned about half the nation's wealth. With more money and more leisure time, their power and influence were growing.

City life reflected the stratified nature of American society in the late nineteenth century. Class distinctions continued to be based on wealth and income. But no longer were dress and manners enough to distinguish one class from another. Such differences were more often reflected by where people lived, what they bought, which organizations they joined, and how they spent their time.

### The Immigrant in the City

When the ship put into port, the first thing an immigrant was likely to see was a city. Perhaps it was Boston or New York or Galveston, Texas, where an overflow of Jewish immigrants was directed after the turn of the century. Enough of the newcomers traveled inland so that by 1900 three-quarters of the residents of Minnesota and Wisconsin and nearly two-thirds in Utah had at least one foreign-born parent.\* But some 70 percent of all immigrants, exhausted physically and financially, settled in cities.

ETHNIC NEIGHBORHOODS Cities developed well-defined mosaics of ethnic communities, because immigrants usually clustered on the basis of Old World families, villages, or provinces. These neighbor-

\*Mormons serving as missionaries in Europe and Great Britain especially swelled Utah's population with converts.

hoods were constantly changing. As many as half the residents moved out every 10 years, often because of better-paying jobs or more family members who worked. Though one nationality usually dominated a neighborhood, there were always others.

### ADAPTING TO AMERICA

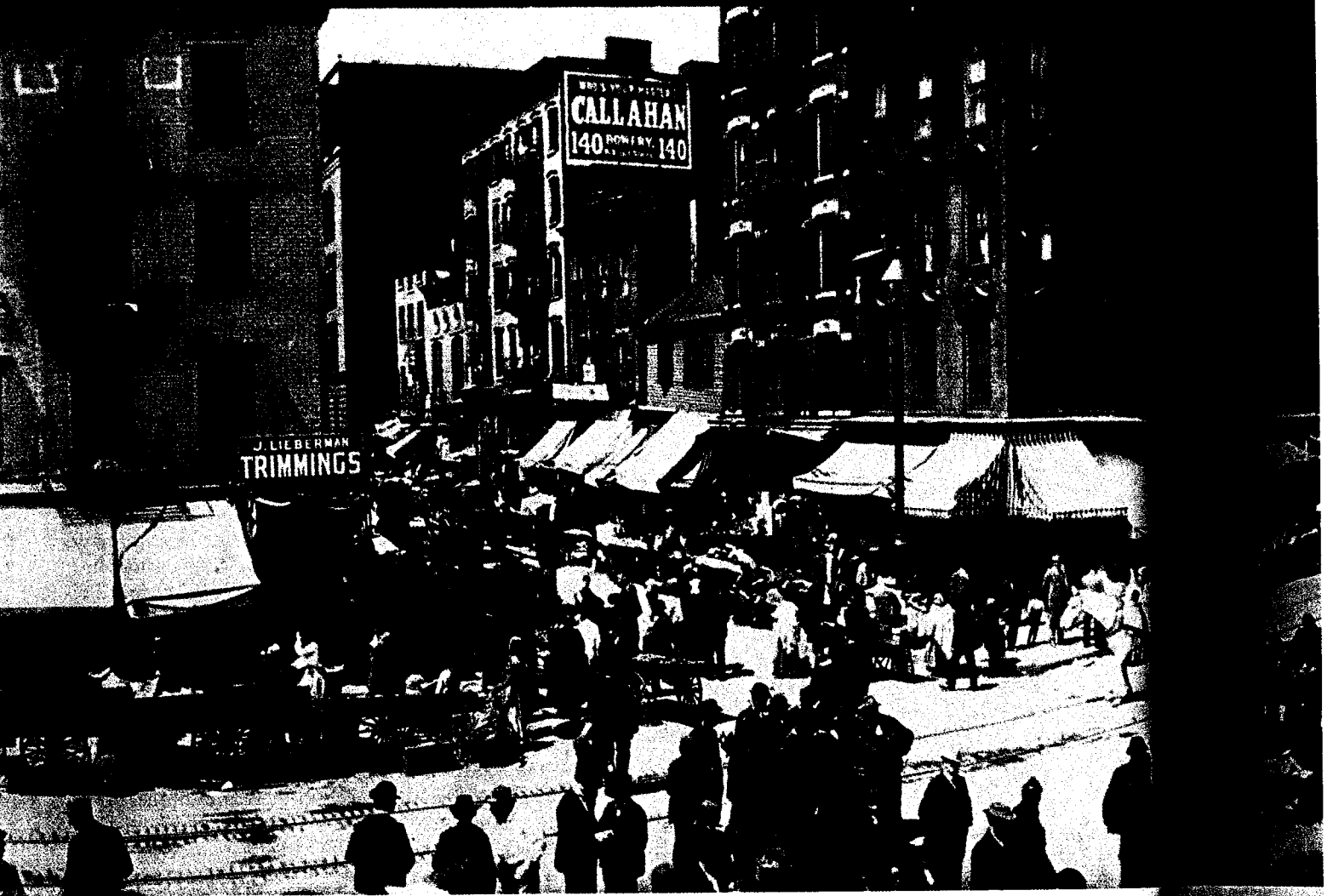
Ethnic communities served as havens from an unfamiliar culture and as springboards to a new life. From the moment they stepped off the boat newcomers felt pressed to learn English, don American clothes, and drop their "greenhorn" ways. Yet in their neighborhoods they also found comrades who spoke their language, theaters that performed their plays and music, restaurants that served their food. Houses of worship were always at the center of neighborhood life, often reflecting the practices of individual towns or provinces. Foreign-language newspapers reported events from both the Old World and the New in a native tongue first-generation immigrants could understand. Meanwhile, immigrant aid societies furnished assistance with housing and jobs and sponsored insurance programs, English classes, and even baseball teams.

Sometimes immigrants combined the old and new in creative adaptations. Italians developed a pidgin dialect called "Italglish." It permitted them to communicate quickly with Americans and to absorb American customs. So the Fourth of July became "Il Forte Gelato" (literally "The Great Freeze"), a play on the sound of the words. Other immigrant groups invented similar idioms, like Chuco, a dialect that developed among border Mexicans in El Paso.

The backgrounds and cultural values of immigrants often influenced the jobs they took. Because Chinese men did not scorn washing or ironing, more than 7,500 of them could be found in San Francisco laundries by 1880. Sewing ladies' garments seemed unmanly to many native-born Americans but not to Russian and Italian tailors. Slavs tended to be physically robust and valued steady income over education. They often worked in the mines for better pay than in factories and pulled their children from school to earn a living.

FAMILY LIFE On the whole, immigrants married later and had more children than the native-born. Greeks and eastern European Jews prearranged marriages according to tradition. They imported "picture brides," betrothed by mail with a photograph. After marriage men ruled the household, but women managed it. Although child-rearing practices varied, immigrants resisted the relative permissiveness of American parents. Youngsters were expected to contribute like little adults to the welfare of the family.

In these "family economies" of working-class immigrants, key decisions—over whether and whom to marry, over work and education, over when to leave home—were made on the basis of collective rather than individual needs. Though boys were more likely to be employed outside the home than girls, daughters in immigrant families



| Hester Street, Lower East Side, New York City

went to work at an early age so sons could continue their education. It was customary for one daughter to remain unmarried so she could care for younger siblings or aged parents.

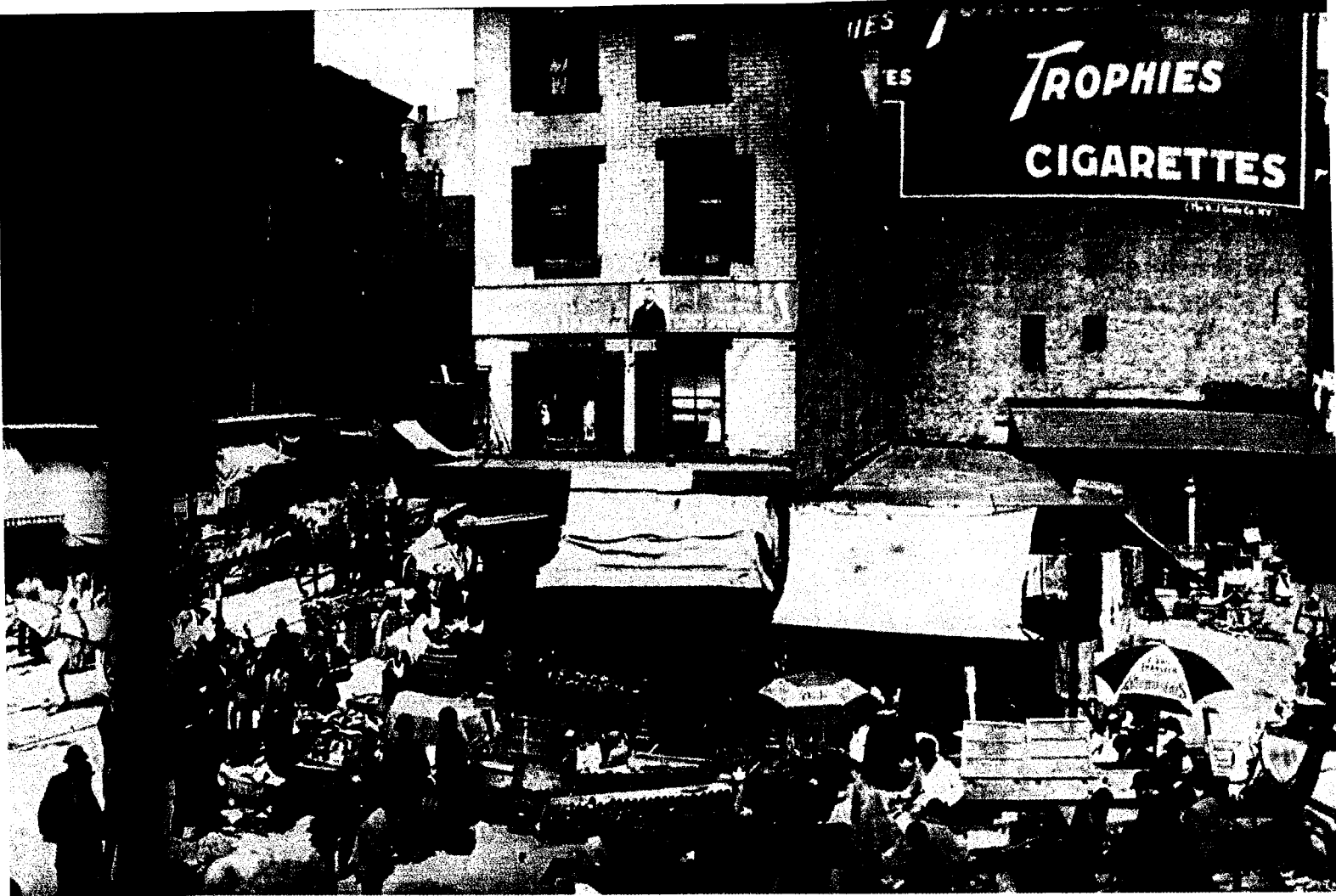
**SPECIAL SITUATION OF THE CHINESE** The Chinese were an exception to the pattern. The ban on the immigration of Chinese laborers in the 1880s (page 548) had frozen the sex ratio of Chinese communities into a curious imbalance. Like other immigrants most Chinese newcomers had been single men. In the wake of the ban those in the United States could not bring over their wives and families. Nor by law in 13 states could they marry whites. With few women, Chinese communities suffered from high rates of prostitution, large numbers of gangs and secret societies, and low birth totals. When the San Francisco earthquake and fire destroyed birth records in 1906, resourceful Chinese immigrants created “paper sons” (and less often “paper daughters”) by forging American birth certificates and claiming their China-born children as American citizens.

**ACCULTURATION** Caught between past and present, immigrants from all countries clung to tradition and acculturated slowly. Their children adjusted more quickly. They soon spoke English like natives, married whomever they pleased, and worked their way out of old neighborhoods. The process was not easy. Children faced heartrending clashes with parents and rejection from peers. Sara Smolinsky, the immigrant heroine of Anzia Yezierska’s novel *Bread Givers* (1925), broke away from her tyrannical family, only to discover a terrible isolation: “I can’t live in the old world and I’m yet too green for the new.”

### Urban Middle-Class Life

**THE HOME AS STATUS SYMBOL AND HAVEN** Life and leisure for the urban middle class revolved around home and family. By the turn of the century just over a third of middle-class urbanites owned their homes. Often two or three stories, made of brick or brownstone, these houses were a measure of their owners’ social

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standing. The plush furniture, heavy drapes, antiques, and curios all signaled status and refinement.

Such homes, usually on their own lots, served as sanctuaries from the chaos of the industrial city. Seventeenth-century notions of children as inherently sinful had given way to more modern theories about the shaping influence of environment. Calm and orderly households with nurturing mothers would launch children on the right course. "A clean, fresh, and well-ordered house," stipulated a domestic adviser in 1883, "exercises over its inmates a moral, no less than physical influence, and has a direct tendency to make members of the family sober, peaceable, and considerate of the feelings and happiness of each other."

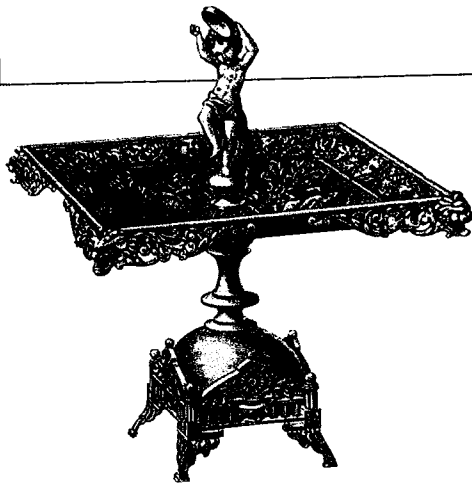
A woman was judged by the state of her home. The typical homemaker prepared elaborate meals, cleaned, laundered, and sewed. Each task took time. Baking bread alone required several hours, and in 1890 four of five loaves were still made at home. Perhaps 25 percent of urban households had live-in servants to help with the work. They were on call about 100 hours a week, were off just

one evening and part of Sunday, and averaged \$2 to \$5 a week in salary.

By the 1890s a host of new consumer products eased the burdens of housework. Brand names trumpeted a new age of commercially prepared food—Campbell's soup, Quaker oats, Pillsbury flour, Jell-O, and Cracker Jacks, to name a few. New appliances such as "self-working" washers offered mechanical assistance, but shredded shirts and aching arms testified to how far short mechanization still fell.

Toward the end of the century Saturday became less of a workday and more of a family day. Sunday mornings remained a time for church, still an important center of family life. Afternoons had a more secular flavor. There were shopping trips (city stores often stayed open) and visits to lakes, zoos, and amusement parks (usually built at the end of trolley lines to attract more riders). Outside institutions of all kinds—fraternal organizations, uplift groups, athletic teams, and church groups—were becoming part of middle-class urban family life.

*At Home  
Wednesday, July nineteenth and twentieth  
at Eight o'clock, Liberty Street,  
Montpelier.*



Newly developed "electroplating," which deposited a thin layer of silver or gold over less expensive material, allowed manufacturers to sell wares previously reserved for the wealthy to middle-class consumers. Pictured here are a silver- and gold-plated card receiver and a calling card, once part of the courtly culture of elites and by the 1880s found in more and more middle-class homes. This "downward mobility" of manners and material culture allowed the middle class to ape the conventions of their social superiors, in this case by using calling cards to reinforce social networks and to serve as social barriers should personal contact be unwanted.

## Victorianism and the Pursuit of Virtue

Middle-class life reflected a code of behavior called Victorianism, named for Britain's long-reigning Queen Victoria (1837–1901). It emerged in the 1830s and 1840s as part of an effort to tame the turbulent urban-industrial society developing in Europe.

Victorianism dictated that personal conduct be based on orderly behavior and disciplined moralism. It stressed sobriety, industriousness, self-control, and sexual modesty and taught that demeanor, particularly proper manners, was the backbone of society. It strictly divided the gender roles of men and women, especially in the realm of sexuality. According to its rules, women were "pure vessels" devoid of sexual desire, men wild beasts unable to tame their lust. A woman's job was to control the "lower natures" of her husband by withholding sex except for procreation.

Women's fashion mirrored Victorian values. Strenuously laced corsets ("an instrument of torture," one woman called them) pushed breasts up, stomachs in, and rear ends out. Internal organs pressed unnaturally against one another;

ribs occasionally cracked; uteruses sagged. Fainting spells and headaches were all too common. But the resulting wasp-like figure accentuated the image of women as child bearers. Ankle-length skirts were draped over bustles, hoops, and petticoats to make hips look larger and suggest fertility. Such elegant dress symbolized wealth, status, and modesty. It also set off middle- and upper-class women from those below, whose plain clothes signaled lives less luxurious.

WOMAN'S  
CHRISTIAN  
TEMPERANCE  
UNION

When working-class Americans failed to follow Victorian guidelines, reformers helped them pursue virtue. It seemed natural to Frances Willard that women, who cared for the moral and physical well-being of their families, should lead the charge. She resigned her position as dean of women at Northwestern University and in 1879 became the second president of the newly founded Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU, organized in 1874). The very title of the organization, stressing the singular "woman," spoke for the unity of all women. Under Willard's leadership, the organization grew by the 1890s to 150,000 members, all of them women and most of them middle-class and white. By the turn of the century it was the largest women's organization in the world.

Initially the WCTU focused on temperance—the movement, begun in the 1820s, to stamp out the sale of alcoholic beverages and to end drunkenness. For these women, the campaign seemed not merely a way to reform society but also a way to protect their homes and families from abuse at the hands of drunken husbands and fathers. In attacking the saloon, Willard also sought to spread democracy by storming these all-male bastions, where political bosses conducted so much political business and where women were refused entry. Soon, under the slogan of "Do Everything," the WCTU was promoting suffrage for women, prison reform, better working conditions, and an end to prostitution. Just as important, it offered talented, committed women an opportunity to move out of their homes and churches and into the public arena of lobbying and politics.

COMSTOCK LAW

Anthony Comstock crusaded with equal vigor against what he saw as moral pollution, ranging from pornography and gambling to the use of nude art models. In 1873 President Ulysses S. Grant signed the so-called Comstock Law, a statute banning from the mails all materials "designed to incite lust." Two days later Comstock went to work as a special agent for the Post Office. In his 41-year career he claimed to have made more than 3,000 arrests and destroyed 160 tons of vice-ridden books and photographs.

Victorian crusaders like Comstock were not simply missionaries of a stuffy morality. They were apostles of a middle-class creed of social control and discipline who responded to growing alcoholism, venereal disease, gambling debts, prostitution, and unwanted pregnancies. No doubt they overreacted in warning that the road to ruin lay behind the door of every saloon, pool hall, or bedroom. Yet the new urban environment did indeed reflect the disorder of a rapidly industrializing society.

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## CITY SCENES

City life fascinated novelists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many of them lived in cities and observed the cityscape as it shifted shape under the impact of industrialization and immigration. Edith Wharton, the child of wealthy New Yorkers, saw New York's upper crust—of old-money, self-styled aristocrats with colonial pedigrees—crumble as a new generation of wealthy industrialists and financiers breeched its barriers in the 1870s and 1880s. Her *Age of Innocence* (1921), describes the effect on the patrons of New York's old opera house, the Academy of Music. The second document, Frank Norris's portrait of turn-of-the-century San Francisco from his novel *McTeague* (1899), presents an entirely different slice of city life.

### DOCUMENT 1

#### Edith Wharton describes the Opera Scene

Though there was already talk of the erection, in remote metropolitan distances "above the Forties," of a new Opera House which should compete in costliness and splendor with those of the great European capitals, the world of fashion was still content to reassemble every winter in the shabby red and gold boxes of the sociable old Academy. Conservatives cherished it for being small and inconvenient, and thus keeping out the "new people" whom New York was beginning to dread and yet be drawn to; and the sentimental clung to it for its historic associations, and the musical for its excellent acoustics, always so problematic a quality in halls built for the hearing of music.

... what the daily press had already learned to describe as "an exceptionally brilliant audience" had gathered... transported through the slippery, snowy streets in private broughams, in the spacious family landau, or in the humbler, more convenient "Brown coupé."\* To come to the Opera in a Brown coupé was almost as honourable a way of arriving as in one's own carriage; and departure by the same means had the immense advantage of enabling one (with a playful allusion to democratic principles) to scramble into the first Brown conveyance in the line,

\*Broughams, landaus, and coupés are horse-drawn carriages with drivers.

instead of waiting till the cold-and-gin congested nose of one's own coachman gleamed under the portico of the Academy. It was one of the great livery-stableman's most masterly intuitions to have discovered that Americans want to get away from amusement even more quickly than they want to get to it.

Source: Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* (New York, 1920), pp. 1-2.

### DOCUMENT 2

#### Frank Norris Describes a Working Class Scene

[Polk Street in San Francisco] never failed to interest him. It was one of those cross streets peculiar to Western cities, situated in the heart of the residence quarter, but occupied by small tradespeople who lived in the rooms above their shops. There were corner drug stores with huge jars of red, yellow, and green liquids in their windows, very brave and gay; stationers' stores where illustrated weeklies were tacked upon bulletin boards; barber shops with cigar stands in their vestibules; sad-looking plumbers' offices; cheap restaurants, in whose windows one saw piles of unopened oysters weighted down by cubes of ice, and china pigs knee deep in layers of white beans....

On week days the street was very lively. It woke to its work about seven o'clock, at the time when the newsboys made their appearance together with the day laborers. The laborers went trudging past in a straggling

file—plumbers' apprentices, their pockets stuffed with sections of lead pipe, tweezers, and pliers; carpenters, carrying nothing but their little pasteboard lunch baskets painted to imitate leather; gangs of street workers, their overalls soiled with yellow clay, their picks and long-handled shovels over their shoulders; plasters, spotted with lime from head to foot. This little army of workers, tramping steadily in one direction, met and mingled with other toilers of a different description—conductors and "swing men" of the cable company going on duty; heavy-eyed night clerks from the drug stores on their way home to sleep; roundsmen returning to the precinct police station to make their night report, and Chinese market gardeners teetering past under their heavy baskets. The cable cars began to fill up; all along the street could be seen the shop keepers taking down their shutters.

Source: Frank Norris, *McTeague* (New York, 1899), pp. 5-6.

### Thinking Critically

Who populated Wharton's "world of fashion," and who were the "new people"? Why did New York's self-styled aristocrats prefer the small Academy to larger, newer buildings? How does Norris's San Francisco street scene compare with Wharton's description of New York's Academy of Music? What can the excerpts from these novels tell us about city life at the turn of the twentieth century? About the interests of these two novelists?

### CONTRACEPTIVES AND ABORTION

The insistence with which moralists warned against "impropriety" suggests that many people did not heed their advice. Three-quarters of women surveyed toward the turn of the century reported that they enjoyed sex. The growing variety of contraceptives—including spermicidal douches, sheaths made of animal intestines, rubber con-

doms, and forerunners of the diaphragm—testified to the desire for pregnancy-free intercourse. Abortion, too, was prevalent. According to one estimate, a third of all pregnancies were aborted, usually with the aid of a midwife. (By the 1880s abortion had been made illegal in most states, following the lead of the first antiabortion statute in England in 1803.) Despite Victorian marriage manuals,



| The Sawdust Trail, painted by George Bellows in 1916, depicts one of the revival meetings of William Ashley ("Billy") Sunday in Philadelphia. Sunday, a hard-drinking professional baseball player turned evangelist, began his religious revivals in the 1890s and drew thousands. Here, Sunday leans down from the platform to shake the hand of an admirer. In the foreground, a swooning woman, overcome with a sense of her sins, is carried away.

middle-class Americans became more conscious of sexuality as an emotional dimension of a satisfying union.

## City Life and "Manliness"

The corrupting influence of city life on manhood troubled some onlookers as much as political or moral corruption distressed reformers. The components of traditional "manliness"—physical vigor, honor and integrity, courage and independence—seemed under assault by life in the industrial city, particularly among white middle and upper-class men who found themselves working at desks and living in cushy comfort. As early as the 1850s Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. (father of the famous Supreme Court Justice), lamented that "such a set of stiff-jointed, soft-muscled, paste-complexioned youth as we can boast in our

Atlantic cities never before sprang from the loins of Anglo-Saxon lineage."

The dangers of this decline in "Anglo-Saxon" manliness risked catastrophe according to anxious observers. Soft, listless white men lacked vitality but also the manly discipline and character that came from living what Theodore Roosevelt called "The Strenuous Life" of action and struggle. Debased by the seamy pursuit of business, Roosevelt warned, such "weaklings" left the nation "[trembling] on the brink of doom," its future imperiled by laziness, timidity, and dishonesty. The "virile qualities" essential for achievement and leadership would vanish. Roosevelt, frail and asthmatic as a boy, turned himself into a strapping man through backbreaking workouts. He commanded desk-bound, "civilized" white men to follow his lead, even to reinvigorate their intellects with the "barbarian virtues" of physical strength he saw in darker-hued "primitives." Gender and race were thus being blended into a heady brew of white supremacy.

A frenzy of fitness spread across the nation. Bicycling, rowing, boxing, and what one historian called a college "cult of sports" promised to return middle and upper-class men to "vigorous and unsullied manhood." Austrian bodybuilder Eugen Sandow ignited a weightlifting craze when he toured the country in the 1890s with feats of strength and poses he dubbed "muscle display performances." In a show of manly courage a young Roosevelt lit out for the Dakota Badlands, writer Richard Harding Davis for Cuba in the middle of the Spanish-American War, and explorers Robert Peary and Matthew Henson for the North Pole in 1898. (In their last attempt to find the Pole in 1908–1909, they were carried partway on a ship called the *Roosevelt*.) Exploration became more than a journey of discovery; it turned into an exercise in undaunted manliness.

## Challenges to Convention

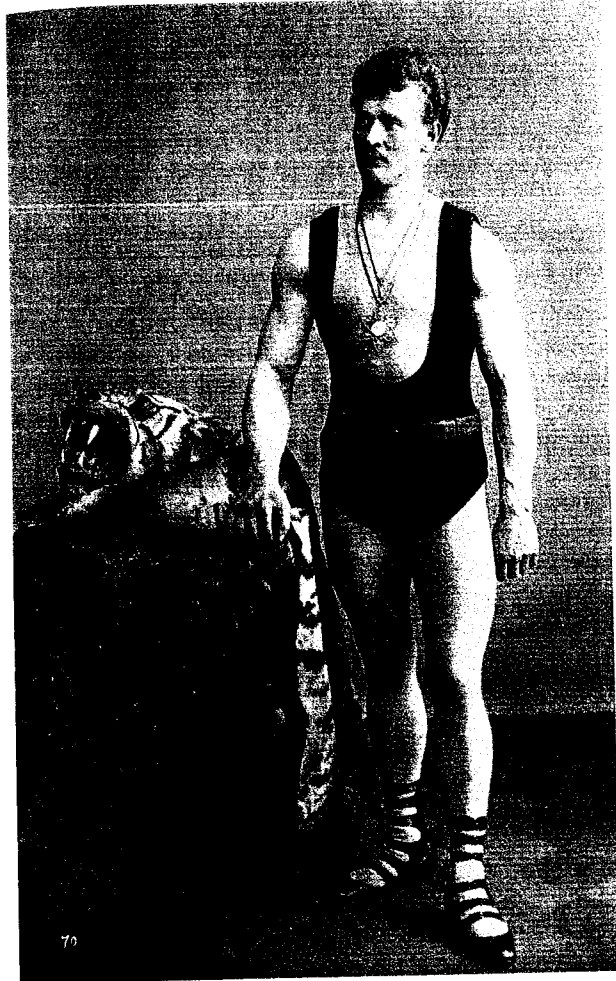
VICTORIA  
WOODHULL

A few intrepid men and women openly challenged conventions of gender and propriety. Victoria Woodhull, publisher of *Woodhull &*

*Clafin's Weekly*, divorced her husband, ran for president in 1872 on the Equal Rights party ticket, and pressed the case for sexual freedom. "I am a free lover!" she shouted to a riotous audience in New York. Although Woodhull made a strong public case for sexual freedom, in private she believed in strict monogamy and romantic love for herself.

URBAN  
HOMOSEXUAL  
COMMUNITIES

The same cosmopolitan conditions that provided protection for Woodhull's unorthodox beliefs also made possible the growth of self-conscious communities of homosexual men and women. Earlier in the century Americans had



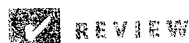
Eugen Sandow

idealized romantic friendships among members of the same sex, without necessarily attributing sexual overtones to those friendships. But for friendships with an explicitly sexual dimension, the anonymity of large cities provided new meeting grounds. Single factory workers and clerks, living in furnished rooms rather than with their families in small towns and on farms, were freer to seek others who shared their sexual orientation. Homosexual men and women began forming social networks: on the streets where they regularly met or at specific restaurants and clubs, which, to avoid controversy, sometimes passed themselves off as athletic associations or chess groups.

Only toward the end of the century did physicians begin to notice homosexual behavior, usually to condemn it as a disease or an inherited infirmity. Indeed, not until the turn of the century did the term *homosexual* come into existence. Certainly homosexual love itself was not new. But for the first time in the United States, the conditions of

**As late as 1870, half the children in the country received no formal education at all, and one American in five could not read.**

urban life allowed gay men and lesbians to define themselves in terms of a larger, self-conscious community, even if they were stoutly condemned by Victorian morality.



How did class and ethnicity determine life for city dwellers?

## CITY CULTURE

"WE CANNOT ALL LIVE IN cities," reformer Horace Greeley lamented just after the Civil War, "yet nearly all seemed determined to do so." Economic opportunity drew people to the teeming industrial city. So, too, did a vibrant urban culture, boasting temples of entertainment, electrified trolleys and lights, the best schools, stores and restaurants, the biggest newspapers, and virtually every museum, library, art gallery, bookshop, and orchestra in America.

### Public Education in an Urban Industrial World

Those at the bottom and in the middle ranks of city life found one path to success in public education. Although the campaign for public education began in the Jacksonian era, it did not make real headway until after the Civil War, when industrial cities began to mushroom. As late as 1870 half the children in the country received no formal education at all, and one American in five could not read.

Between 1870 and 1900 an educational awakening occurred. As more and more businesses required workers who could read, write, and figure sums, attendance in public schools more than doubled. The length of the school term rose from 132 to 144 days. Illiteracy fell by half. At the turn of the century nearly all the states outside the South had enacted mandatory education laws. Almost three of every four school-age children were enrolled. Even so, the average American adult still attended school for only about five years, and less than 10 percent of those eligible ever went to high school.

The school day started early. By noon most girls were released under the assumption that they needed less formal education. Curricula stressed the fundamentals of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Courses in manual training, science, and physical education were added as the demand for technical knowledge grew and opportunities to exercise shrank. Students learned by memorization, sitting in silent study with hands clasped or standing erect while they repeated phrases and sums. Few schools encouraged creative thinking. "Don't stop to think," barked a Chicago teacher to a class of terrified youngsters in the 1890s, "tell me what you know!"



**Educational reformers in the 1870s pushed elementary schools to include drawing as a required subject. Their goal was not to turn out gifted artists but to train students in the practical skills needed in an industrial society. Winslow Homer's portrait of a teacher by her blackboard shows the geometric shapes behind practical design.**

rate but equal," upheld by the Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), kept black and white students apart but scarcely equal (see pp. 479–480). By 1882 public schools in a half dozen southern states were segregated by law, the rest by practice. Underfunded and ill-equipped, black schools served dirt-poor families whose every member had to work. In fact, only about a third of the South's black children attended and rarely for the entire school year.

Like African Americans, immigrants saw education as a way of getting ahead. Some educators saw it as a means of Americanizing newcomers. They assumed that immigrant and native-born children would learn the same lessons in the same language and turn out the same way. Only toward the end of the century, as immigration mounted, did eastern cities begin to offer night classes that taught English, along with civics lessons for foreigners. When public education proved inadequate, immigrants established their own schools. Catholics, for example, started an elaborate expansion of their parochial schools in 1884.

**EDUCATIONAL REFORMS** By the 1880s educational reforms were helping schools respond to the needs of an urban society. Opened first in St. Louis in 1873, American versions of innovative German "kindergartens" put four- to six-year-olds in orderly classrooms while parents went off to work. Normal schools multiplied to provide teachers with more professional training. By 1900 almost one teacher in five had a professional degree. In the new industrial age, science and manual training supplemented more conventional subjects in order to supply industry with better-educated workers. And vocational education reduced the influence of organized labor. Now less dependent on a system of apprenticeship controlled by labor, new workers were also less subject to being recruited into unions.

## Higher Learning and the Rise of the Professional

**HIGHER EDUCATION** As American society grew more organized, mechanized, and complex, the need for managerial, technical, and literary skills brought greater respect for college education. The Morrill Act of 1862 generated a dozen new state colleges and universities, eight mechanical and agricultural colleges, and six black colleges. Private charity added more. Railroad barons like Johns Hopkins and Leland Stanford used parts of their fortunes to found colleges named after them (Hopkins in 1873, Stanford in 1890). The number of colleges and universities nearly doubled between 1870 and 1910, though less than 5 percent of college-age Americans enrolled in them.

**BLACK COLLEGES** A practical impulse inspired the founding of several black colleges. In the late nineteenth century, few institutions mixed races. Church groups and private foundations, including the Peabody and Slater funds (supported by white donors from the North), underwrote black colleges such as Fisk and Howard Universities during Reconstruction and, later, colleges such as Livingstone and Spelman. By 1900, a total of 700 black

**EDUCATIONAL VALUES AND CONFORMITY** A rigid social philosophy underlay the harsh routine. In an age of industrialization, massive immigration, and rapid change, schools taught conformity and values as much as facts and figures. Teachers acted as drillmasters, shaping their charges for the sake of society. "Teachers and books are better security than handcuffs and policemen," wrote a New Jersey college professor in 1879. In *McGuffey's Reader*, a standard textbook used in grammar schools, students learned not only how to read but also how to behave. Hard work, Christian ethics, and obedience to authority would lead boys to heroic command, girls to blissful motherhood, and society to harmonious progress.

**EDUCATIONAL DISCRIMINATION** As Reconstruction faded, so did the impressive start made in black education. Most of the first generation of former slaves had been illiterate. So eager were they to learn that by the end of the century nearly half of all African Americans could read. But discrimination soon took its toll. For nearly 100 years after the Civil War the doctrine of "sepa-

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*American Impressionist Mary Cassatt painted this mural panel of women picking apples for the Gallery of Honor in the Women's Building at the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition. Entitled Young Women Plucking the Fruits of Knowledge or Science, it played on the Biblical story of Eve and the apple. Traditionally, the apple had always been identified as the fruit on the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden. That fruit was forbidden: when it was eaten by Eve, who shared it with Adam, the result was original sin. Cassatt stood the story of Eve on its head. In doing so she suggested that the place of women in society was changing. No longer bound by cultural conventions against the dangers of educated and potentially "uppity" women, a new generation of educated females was to be justly celebrated for its achievements in science, the arts, and the professions.*

students were enrolled. About 2000 had graduated. Through hard work and persistence, some even received degrees from institutions normally reserved for whites.

**PROFESSIONAL SCHOOLS** In keeping with the new emphasis on practical training, professional schools multiplied to provide training beyond a college degree. American universities adopted the German model requiring young scholars to perform research as part of their training. The number of law and medical schools more than doubled between 1870 and 1900; medical students almost tripled. Ten percent of them were women, though their numbers shrank as the male-dominated medical profession became more organized and exclusive.

Professionals of all kinds—in law, medicine, engineering, business, academics—swelled the ranks of the middle class. Slowly they were becoming a new force in urban America, replacing the ministers and gentleman freeholders of an earlier day as community leaders.

## Higher Education for Women

Before the Civil War women could attend only three private colleges. After the war they had new ones all their own, among them Smith (1871), Wellesley (1875), and Bryn Mawr (1885). Many land-grant colleges, chartered to serve all people, admitted women from the start. By 1910 some 40 percent of college students were women, almost double the 1870 figure. Only one college in five refused to accept them.

Potent myths continued to make college life hard for women. As Dr. Edward Clarke of the Harvard Medical School told thousands of students in *Sex in Education* (1873), the rigors of a college education could lead the "weaker sex" to physical or mental collapse, infertility, and early death. Women's colleges therefore included a strict program of

physical activity to keep students healthy. Many also offered an array of courses in "domestic science"—cooking, sewing, and other such skills—to counter the claim that higher education would be of no value to women, who were more likely to be making homes than business deals.

College students, together with office workers and female athletes, became role models for ambitious young women. These "new women," impatient with custom, cast off Victorian restrictions. Fewer of them married, and more were self-supporting. They shed their corsets and bustles and donned lighter, more comfortable clothing, including "shirtwaist" blouses (styled after men's shirts) and lower-heeled shoes. Robust and active, they could be found ice-skating in the winter, riding bicycles in the fall and spring, playing golf and tennis in the summer.

## A Culture of Consumption

The city spawned a new material culture built around consumption. As standards of living rose, American industries began providing "ready-made" clothing to replace garments that had once been made at home. Similarly, food and furniture were mass-produced in greater quantities. The city became a giant marketplace for these goods, where new patterns of mass consumption took hold. Radiating outward to more rural areas, this urban consumer culture helped to level American society. Increasingly, city businesses sold the same goods to farmer and clerk, rich and poor, native-born and immigrant.

**DEPARTMENT STORES** Well-made, inexpensive merchandise in standard sizes and shapes found outlets in new palaces of consumption called "department stores" because they displayed their goods in separate sections or departments. The idea was imported from France, where shopping arcades had been built as early as the 1860s. Unlike the small exclusive shops of Europe, department stores were palatial, public, and filled with inviting displays of furniture, housewares, and clothing.

The French writer Emile Zola claimed that department stores "democratized luxury." Anyone could enter free of charge, handle the most elegant and expensive goods, and buy whatever they could afford. When consumers found goods too pricey, department stores pioneered layaway plans with deferred payments. Free delivery and free returns or exchanges were available to all, not just the favored customers of exclusive fashion makers. The department store also educated people by displaying what "proper" families owned and the correct names for things like women's wear and parlor furniture. This process of socialization was taking place not only in cities but in towns and villages across America. Mass consumption was giving rise to a mass culture.

**CHAIN STORES AND MAIL-ORDER HOUSES** "Chain stores" (a term coined in America) spread the culture of consumption without frills. They catered to the working class, who could not afford department stores and operated on a cash-and-carry basis. Owners kept their

| Artist Edward Shinn's *Sixth Avenue Shoppers* shows a nighttime scene in the city's shopping district. In an era of more flexible gender roles, Shinn nonetheless captures a traditional division of gender with the women (at left) crowded around shopping stalls and men (at right) hunched over a cockfight.



costs down by buying in volume to fill the small stores in growing neighborhood chains. Founded in 1859 the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company was the first of the chain stores. By 1876 its 76 branch stores had added groceries to its original line of teas.

Far from department and chain stores rural Americans joined the community of consumers by mail. In 1872 Aaron Montgomery Ward sent his first price sheet to farmers from a livery stable loft in Chicago. Ward eliminated the intermediary and promised savings of 40 percent on fans, needles, trunks, harnesses, and scores of other goods. By 1884 his catalog boasted 10,000 items, each illustrated by a woodcut. Similarly, Richard W. Sears and Alvah C. Roebuck built a \$500 million mail-order business by 1907. Schoolrooms that had no encyclopedia used a Ward's or Sears' catalog instead. Children were drilled in reading and spelling from them. When asked the source of the Ten Commandments, one farm boy replied that they came from Sears, Roebuck. Countrywide mass consumption was producing a mass material culture.

## Leisure

As mechanization slowly reduced the number of hours on the job, factory workers found themselves with more free time. So did the middle class, with free weekends, evenings, and vacations. A new, stricter division between work and leisure developed. City dwellers turned their

free time into a consumer item that often reflected differences in class, gender, and ethnicity.

### SPORTS AND CLASS DISTINCTIONS

Sports, for example, had been a traditional form of recreation for the rich. They continued to play polo, golf, and the newly imported English game of tennis. Croquet had more middle-class appeal because it required less skill and special equipment. Perhaps as important, croquet could be enjoyed in mixed company, like the new craze of bicycling. Bicycles evolved from unstable contraptions with large front wheels into "safety" bikes with equal-sized wheels, a dropped middle bar, pneumatic tires, and coaster brakes. A good one cost about \$100, far beyond the reach of a factory worker but within the grasp of a mechanic or a well-paid clerk. On Sunday afternoons city parks became crowded with cyclists. Women also rode the new safety bikes, although social convention forbade them to ride alone. But cycling broke down conventions too. It required looser garments, freeing women from corsets. Lady cyclists demonstrated that they were hardly too frail for physical exertion.

### SPECTATOR SPORTS FOR THE URBAN MASSES

Organized spectator sports attracted crowds from every walk of life. Baseball overshadowed all others. For city dwellers with dull work, tight quarters, and isolated lives, baseball offered the chance to join thousands of others for an exciting outdoor spectacle. By the 1890s it was attracting crowds of 60,000. Baseball began to take its modern form in 1869, when the first professional team, the Cincinnati Red Stockings, appeared. Slowly the game

evolved: umpires began to call balls and strikes, the overhand replaced the underhand pitch, and fielders put on gloves. Teams from eight cities formed the National League of Professional Baseball Clubs in 1876, followed by the American League in 1901. League players were distinctly working class. At first teams featured a few black players. When African Americans were barred in the 1880s, black professionals formed their own team, the Cuban Giants of Long Island, New York, looking to play anyone they could. Their name was chosen with care. In an age of racial separation, the all-black team hoped to increase its chances of playing white teams by calling itself "Cuban."

Horse racing, bicycle tournaments, and other sports of speed and violence helped to break the monotony, frustration, and routine of the industrial city. In 1869, without pads or helmets, Rutgers beat Princeton in the first intercollegiate football match. By the 1890s the service academies and state universities fielded teams. Despite protests against rising death tolls (18 players died in 1905), football soon attracted crowds of 50,000 or more. Beginning in 1891 when Dr. James Naismith nailed a peach basket to the gymnasium wall at the YMCA Training School in Springfield, Massachusetts, "basketball" became the indoor interlude between the outdoor sports of spring and fall.

#### BOXING

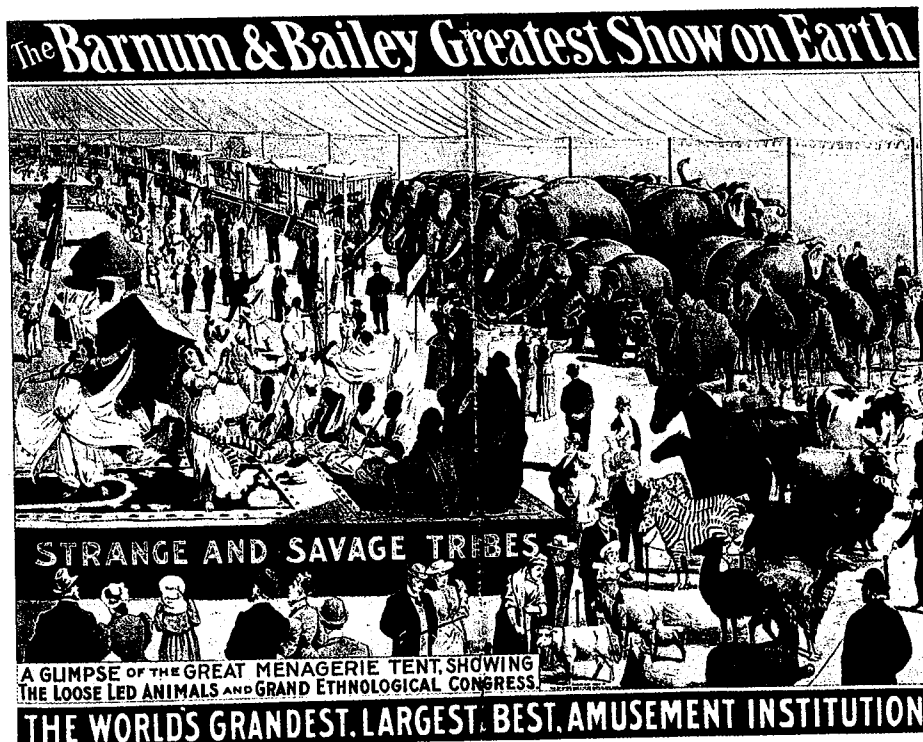
Bare-knuckled prizefighting, illegal in some states, took place secretly in saloons and commercial gyms. In the rough-and-tumble world of the industrial city, the ring gave young men from the

streets the chance to stand out from the crowd and to prove their masculinity. "Sporting clubs" of German, Irish, and African American boxers sprouted up in cities along the East Coast. *The National Police Gazette* and other magazines followed the bouts with sensational stories chronicling matches in detail. When the sport adopted the Marquis of Queensbury rules in the 1880s, including the use of gloves, boxing gained new respectability and appeal. Soon boxing, like other sports, was being commercialized with professional bouts, large purses, and championship titles.

## City Entertainment at Home and on the Road

City entertainment, like city life, divided along lines of class. For the wealthy and middle class there were symphonies, operas, and theater. Highbrow productions of Shakespearean plays catered to the aspirations of the American upper class for culture and European refinement. Popular melodramas gave their largely middle-class audiences the chance to ignore the ambiguities of modern life, if only for an evening. They booed villains and cheered heroes, all the while marveling at the tricky stage mechanics that made ice floes move and players float heavenward. By 1900, people were bringing their entertainment home, snapping up new phonograph recordings at the rate of 3 million a year.

Workingmen found a haven from the drudgery of factory, mill, and mine in the saloon. It was an all-male



[This lithograph is from an 1894 poster for the Barnum & Bailey Circus. It depicts a menagerie tent in which exotic animals are displayed side by side with "Strange and Savage Tribes," thus collapsing the boundaries between animals and human beings. Much smaller than the Big Top, menagerie tents allowed Euro-American patrons to examine animals and humans up close. The Barnum show presented its first "ethnological congress" of "native" peoples in 1886, as the United States began its drive for empire abroad. The human specimens were meant to give Americans a glimpse of foreign cultures and to be instructive. "Even the best informed and most intellectual had something to learn," boasted a circus route book.]

# DAILY LIVES

## THE VAUDEVILLE SHOW

It looked like a palace or some high-toned concert hall. Patrons walked through a richly ornamented arched gateway to gold-domed, marble ticket booths. Ushers guided them through a stately lobby cushioned with velvet carpets. The house seats were thick and comfortable and positioned well back from the stage. Thousands of electrical fixtures set the place aglow.

Benjamin Franklin Keith, who had worked in circuses, tent shows, and dime museums, opened the New Theatre in Boston in 1894. Seeing housewives with children as a source of new profits, resourceful theater owners such as Keith had cleaned up the bawdy variety acts of saloons and music halls, borrowed the animal and acrobat acts from circuses and Wild West shows and the comedy acts of minstrel shows, and moved them to plusher surroundings. They called the new shows "vaudeville," after the French "pièces de vaudeville" developed at eighteenth-century street fairs.

For anywhere from a dime to two dollars, a customer could see up to nine acts—singers, jugglers, acrobats, magicians, trained animals, and comics. The mix of performers reflected the urban tempo and new urban tastes. Skits often drew on the experience of immigrants, and early comedy teams had such names as "The Sport and the Jew" and "Two Funny Sauerkrauts." "Continuous shows" ran one after another, from early morning until late at night.

Saloon music halls had catered to a rowdy all-male, working-class clientele. Vaudeville was aimed at middle-class and wealthier working-class families. Keith worked diligently to make each of his theaters "homelike." Backstage signs warned performers not to say "slob" or "son-of-a-gun" or "hully-gee' . . ." Within a few years Keith was producing the kind of show, as one



Balconies at vaudeville shows, like this one depicted by Charles Dana Gibson, attracted a wide variety of customers. Most seats cost \$1, and theater owners scheduled performances from morning until night.

comedian put it, "to which any child could bring his parents."

The audience, too, was instructed on proper behavior. No liquor was served. No cigars or cigarettes were permitted. Printed notices directed patrons to "kindly avoid the stamping of feet and pounding of canes on the floor. Please don't talk during acts, . . ."

Enjoying its heyday from 1890 to 1920 vaudeville became big business. Nearly one in five city dwellers went to a show once every seven days. Headliners earned \$1,000 a week, theaters \$20,000. Owners such as Keith and Edward Albee merged their operations into gigantic circuits. By the time of Keith's death in 1914 the Keith-Albee circuit had built an empire of 29 theaters in more than seven cities.

Vaudeville became middle-class mass entertainment. Moderate and moral, it furnished cheap recreation that also reinforced genteel values. Skits encouraged audiences to pursue success through hard work. An emerging star system made American heroes out of performers like Will Rogers and George M. Cohan and American models out of Fanny Brice and Mae West. Ethnic comics defused tensions among immigrants with spoofs that exaggerated stereotypes and stressed the common foibles of all humanity. And theatergoers learned how to behave. Order and decorum replaced the boisterous atmosphere of saloons and music halls. Vaudeville audiences adopted the middle-class ideal of behavior—passive and polite.

preserve—a workingmen's club—where drink and talk were free from Victorian finger-wagging. Rougher saloons offered fulfillment of still more illicit desires in the form of prostitutes, gambling, and drugs. Young working women found escape alone or on dates at vaudeville shows, dance halls, and the new amusement parks with their mechanical "thrill rides." In the all-black gaming houses and honky-tonks of St. Louis and New Orleans, the syncopated rhythms of African-American composer Scott

Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag" (1899) and other ragtime tunes heralded the coming of jazz.

### TRAVELING CIRCUSES

As much as any form of entertainment, the traveling circus embodied the changes of the new urban, industrial world. Moving outward from their urban bases, circuses rode the new rail system across the country (after the first transcontinental tour in 1869) and with the advent of steamships crisscrossed the globe. The largest, the mammoth New

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York-based Barnum and Bailey Circus, carried dozens of gilded show wagons, hundreds of animals, tons of equipment, and sometimes thousands of performers, work hands, and animal tenders. With factory-like precision, circus workers erected and dismantled small tent cities in hours, moved them across vast spaces in days or weeks, and performed as many as three shows daily.

Circuses were popular entertainment and big businesses, but they also were disseminators of culture that both supported and subverted social conventions. When owners reassured customers that their scantily clad dancers came from respectable Victorian families or their muscular lady acrobats prized the Victorian ideals of family, motherhood, and domesticity, they winked slyly because they knew that the very appearance of these women, let alone their talents, defied the Victorian ideal of dainty and demure femininity. When in 1886 Barnum & Bailey displayed exotic peoples and animals in the first "Ethnological

Congress" ever to accompany a traveling circus, patrons saw living embodiments of "strange and savage tribes" from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. These displays opened American eyes to a wider world while reinforcing prevailing notions of white supremacy.

As the United States was embarking on a quest for empire (see Chapter 21), circuses trumpeted national expansion with celebrations of American might and exceptionalism. To audiences at home, reenactments of famous battles abroad brought faraway places near and made abstract principles of foreign policy real. To foreign audiences, those same reenactments trumpeted the rise of a new world power.



**REVIEW**

How did city culture shape national culture?

**REVIEW**  
**The Growth of Cities**

**SOURCES OF  
URBAN GROWTH**

Industrialization

Migration

Buildings and Bridges

Transportation and Communication Networks

**IMPACT BY REGION**

North:

New York, NY (3,437,202)  
Philadelphia, PA (1,293,697)  
Boston (560,892)

Midwest:

Chicago, IL (1,698,575)  
St. Louis, IL (575,238)  
Cleveland, OH (381,768)

South:

New Orleans, LA (287,104)  
Louisville, KY (204,731)  
Memphis, TN (102,320)

West:

San Francisco, CA (342,782)  
Denver (133,839)  
Los Angeles (102,479)

