

“Big Tim” Sullivan—King of the Bowery

BY RICHARD F. WELCH, Ph.D.



In the burgeoning, bustling metropolis that was New York City in the late 19th century, financial power may have been exercised on Wall Street and displayed in the mansions lining Fifth Avenue, but the political center of gravity was located in the teeming neighborhoods below 14th Street. Perhaps the most dynamic—certainly the most colorful—of the Lower East Side’s districts was the Bowery, whose saloons, dance-halls, theaters, nickelodeons and museums, along with a plentitude of illicit entertainments, provided much of the vitality and identity to the City in the decades before the Great War. During this last effervescent period of the Bowery’s history, from about 1890 to the outbreak of the Great War, the polyglot area, largely inhabited by immigrants and their first American generation offspring, was a virtual fiefdom of one of the most intriguing, colorful, and controversial figures ever to stride across the City’s political landscape. Tammany Hall boss, inveterate gambler, theater impresario, motion picture promoter, protector of criminals, master of political chicanery, benefactor of the poor, Timothy D. Sullivan, “Big Tim,” the “Big

Feller,” reigned over New York’s cultural and political landscape in a manner unseen before or since.

Befitting a man who came to be idolized by thousands of the poor and working class, Timothy D. Sullivan was born July 23, 1862 in the squalor of New York’s Hudson River tenements barely two weeks after the convulsions of the Draft Riots. His father died when Tim was about four and his mother remarried a nasty drunk. This negative example turned Tim into a lifelong teetotaler, while his mother’s struggles to raise her brood inspired an appreciation of women which later emerged in an unexpected feminist streak. The future politico entered the working world at age 7 starting as a “newsie”—one of the small army of young boys trying to scrape money together selling newspapers. Tim was forced to abandon schooling at eleven, unable to pay the fare to get him to high school. But Sullivan was a quick study, and his natural intelligence and ambition soon made him leader of the “newsies” and won the attention of the politicians. Municipal politics in the “Gilded Age” was a full contact sport, and

Illustration:

The Bowery late in the 1800s ran through the center of Sullivan’s electoral district, which included people from a variety of ethnic groups. Big Tim prided himself in effectively turning them all (politically) into “Sullivans.” Courtesy of Richard F. Welch.

A member of the New York Irish History Roundtable, Richard F. Welch is a professor at Long Island University specializing in American and Irish History. His most recent book, The Boy General: The Life and Careers of Francis Channing Barlow, was published by Kent University Press. He is currently at work on a full biography of Big Tim Sullivan. ©2007. Published with permission of Richard F. Welch

physical prowess was a ticket to advancement. According to legend, Sullivan made his name when he decked a man beating a woman in front of the “Tombs,” New York’s municipal jail, thereby winning a reputation as a man of principle and action.¹

TAMMANY HALL DOMINATION

The real rulers of the downtown neighborhoods were the Tammany Hall politicians. Tammany

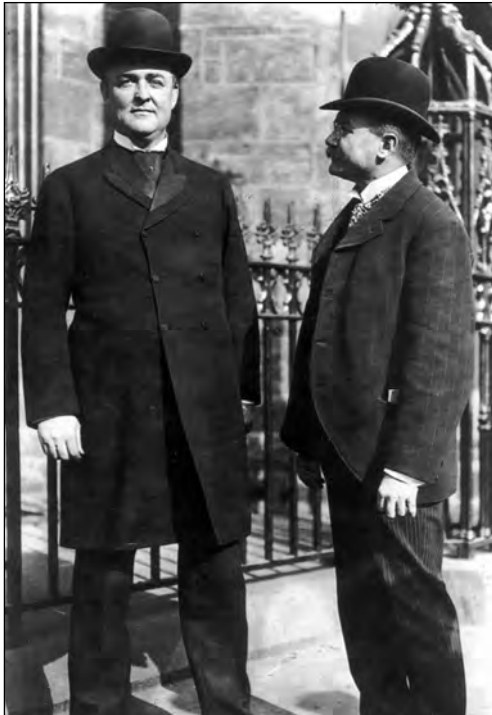


Photo:
Timothy Sullivan, c. 1905, on left. Quick-witted, he earned a reputation as a man of principle and action—and generous political leadership. Courtesy of Richard F. Welch.

Hall, the New York City Democratic organization, had come to dominate the City through its control of the immigrant and working class vote. In exchange for voter loyalty, Tammany provided jobs, food, sometimes shelter, help with the law, and a vociferous defense against an often contemptuous Old Stock Society. The Tammany chiefs enriched themselves through both “dirty” and “honest” graft. “Dirty,” or “police” graft, involved using

their control of the police to either shakedown or protect gamblers, illegal alcohol dealers, and brothel keepers—for a cut in the profits, of course. “Honest graft” entailed growing fat on City contracts, using insider knowledge to buy up property eyed by the City and then selling it to the municipal government at exorbitant mark-ups. Many partook of both forms of graft depending on where the opportunities lay. A smart kid on the make from the Five Points would see how the game was played and appreciate the possibilities—and duties—of the system.

Sullivan won his first race, to the New York State Assembly, in 1886. In the Presidential elections of 1892, he delivered his electoral district for the Democratic candidate Grover Cleveland by a margin of 388 to 4.

“[Benjamin] Harrison got one more vote than I expected,” Tim confessed to Tammany boss, Richard Croker, “but I’ll find that fellow.”² Croker was so impressed by Sullivan’s drive and thoroughness that he made Tim the Tammany leader of the Third Assembly District—the heart of the Bowery, a section which took its name from the already famous thoroughfare running northward through it.

The Third Assembly District that Tim Sullivan took over was not an organization stronghold, and Croker hoped the young, ambitious Irishman could shape its polyglot, teeming neighborhoods into solid Tammany territory. While a large number of Irish and Germans still resided in the area, a growing number of Jewish and Italian newcomers were transforming the district into the most pluralistic section of the city. But Tim, by now Big Tim due to his stature and presence, rose to the challenge and quickly won the allegiance of most of the Bowery’s multiethnic population. Profoundly Irish by birth, heritage and political orientation, the new district leader held little in the way of ethnic prejudices and tended to take people as he found them. Brought up in abject poverty himself, his world-view was refracted through the prism of a non-ideological class-consciousness. As one contemporary put it, Sullivan “...took them [immigrants] as fast as they came [and] flung them into his melting pot. They went in Silvestros and Gordzinskis and they came out Sullivans. He naturalized them, registered them, and voted them for Tammany Hall.”³ Big Tim did more than just vote them. Soon a significant number of his captains were Germans, Jews, or Italians whose rapport with their brethren kept the Bowery Democratic and instilled a sense of loyalty to Sullivan which crossed ethnic and religious divisions. Within two years, Sullivan’s hold on the allegiance of the Bowery was so deep that he had effectively created “a machine within a machine.” As a later historian succinctly put it, “below 14th Street Big Tim Sullivan was Tammany Hall.”⁴

IRISH ROOTS

While the Big Feller formed fast friendships and alliances with members of all New York’s

numerous ethno-religious groups, his Irish Catholic identity was never in doubt. His mother was born in Kenmare, County Kerry, which later led the City to name a downtown street after the village as a gesture of respect to Sullivan. His father's place of origin is unknown, but historically the O'Sullivans were a powerful clan in West Cork, which lies adjacent to Kerry, giving Big Tim strong South Munster antecedents. Later in life Sullivan made it a point to visit Ireland on his several trips abroad.

In addition to his family, most of the Big Feller's Tammany allies were Irish. His club adopted green and gold as its colors and a harp was sometimes added in the organization's repertoire of political symbols. Big Tim's adherence to the faith of his ancestors was less obvious. There is no evidence that religion played much of a role in his life. However, in at least one major issue he followed the tenets of the Church. "I am an Irish American," he once proclaimed conflating Irish and Catholic, "and we don't believe in divorce."⁵ The remark explains why he remained married to his wife long after they had become estranged from one another. But although he followed Catholic strictures on divorce, he was unconcerned about its prohibitions on extramarital sex, and fathered at least one and probably two illegitimate children.⁶

Like a medieval fiefdom, Sullivan's organization ran on personal loyalty and its hierarchy was primarily made up of members of his extended family, known locally as "the Wise Men" or the "Sullivan Clan." The most important of these was Tim's cousin, Timothy Patrick Sullivan, later known as Little Tim. The two Tims bonded like brothers and until 1909 dominated New York City politics.

Sullivan's power, which reached far beyond the Bowery, sprang from his shrewd intelligence and charismatic personality. At 6 feet and 200 pounds his sobriquet, "The Big Feller," was well earned. He had dark hair and a handsome Irish face. Even as he grew older, stouter, and began

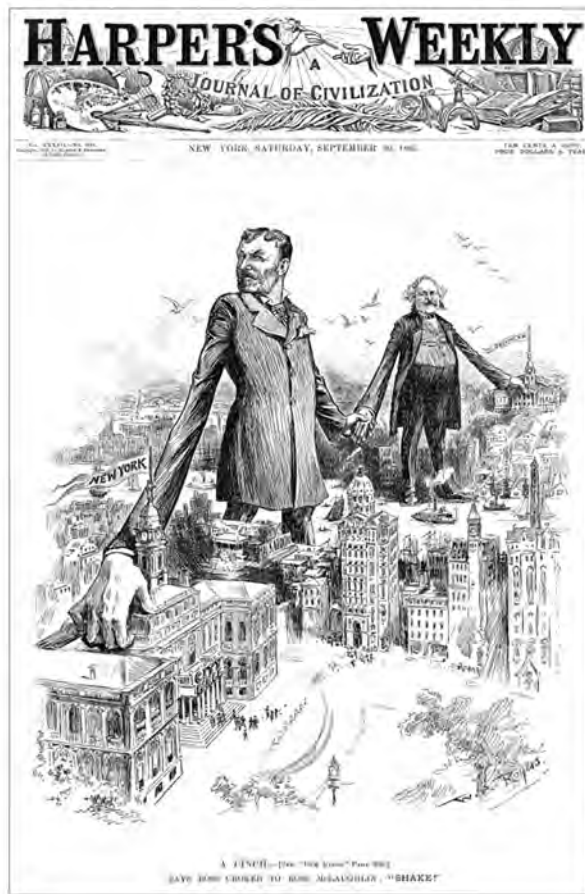
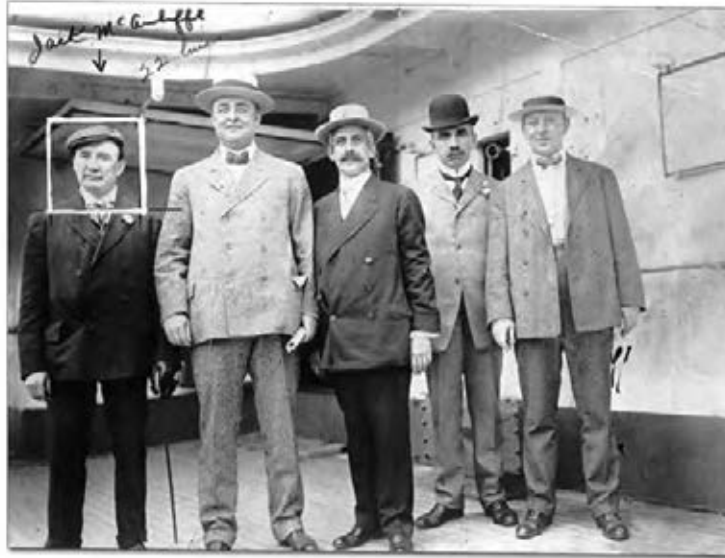


Illustration:

Harper's Weekly, September 30, 1893: "Says Boss Croker to Boss McLaughlin: 'Shake!'" Cartoonist W. A. Rogers portrays the alliance between two giant bosses of New York City's Democratic machine, Richard Croker (left), the "Master of Manhattan," and Hugh McLaughlin (right) of Brooklyn. Croker was the leader of Tammany Hall in the 1890s. Impressed by Sullivan's effectiveness in organizing voters Croker moved him into political leadership in the Third Assembly District.

to lose his hair, he remained an impressive man. According to one contemporary observer, "his smile could adequately be described only by the word beautiful. He radiated kindness."⁷ Sullivan was not overly given to oratory, but when he felt the need he rang the chimes of neighborhood comradeship and solidarity, delivered in authentic Lower East Side argot, stirring his followers and confounding his opponents. He also understood running the Bowery was a profession, and all the benefits which accrued from his power were dependent on running his district for the perceived benefit of its inhabitants. "All this talk about psychological power and personal magnetism over man is fine business for pretty writing," he remarked in 1909, "but when you get down to brass tacks it's the work that does the business.... And so, after all, there ain't much to it to be a leader. It's just plenty of work, keep your temper or throw it away, be on the level and don't put on any airs, because God and the people hate a chesty man."⁸



THE MASTER POLITICO

Tim's first duty was to win elections—a task he performed with clocklike regularity. As his hold on the Lower East side grew, New York's reformers denounced Sullivan's aggressive use of street intimidation—a time honored device in the poorer neighborhoods—to control and expand suffrage. His methods were well established when he decided to move up and run for a state senate seat in 1893. To ensure the necessary pluralities, lodging housemen, often non-registered transients—and sometimes non-citizens—were turned out and voted. When the Republican candidate for district attorney, William Travers Jerome, threatened to send outside poll watchers to the Bowery in 1901, Sullivan publicly challenged him with a threat of his own. "If Jerome brings down a lot of football playing, hair matted college athletes to run the polls by force, I will say now that there won't be enough ambulances in New York to carry them away."⁹ Tim's strong-arm tactics were usually employed to ensure his allies prevailed in Democratic primaries or on behalf of Tammany's state and municipal candidates. By 1892 he himself was so popular that even the *New York Times*, then a Republican organ and bitter critic, later admitted

*...there is no doubt that he was the real choice of the majority of voters in his district when he ran for the State Senate or the National Congress...*¹⁰

If the situation required, Sullivan employed the century-old practice of employing gangs for muscle. The two most actively used while The Big Feller ruled the Bowery were Monk Eastman's Jewish gang and Paul "Kelly" Vaccarelli's Italian crew. Besides intimidating opposition voters, Eastman could turn out 400 to 500 "repeaters" (men who voted more than once). Vaccarelli reportedly could supply 1,000.¹¹ When it came to repeaters, Tim favored men with beards. By shaving off

their facial hair in stages, Tim figured he could get four votes apiece from them.¹²

Tammany politicians had to endure periodic investigation organized by the Republicans who dominated most of the state outside of New York and Brooklyn. In 1894, the Lexow committee had uncovered enough evidence of political corruption that a wave of public discontent cost the "Democracy"—as Tammany Democrats liked to call themselves—control of City Hall. After losing the mayoralty in 1895, a circumstance which was costly in patronage and contracts, Croker, Sullivan and the other Tammany leaders worked energetically to regain it in 1897. The inhabitants of the ethnic downtown neighborhoods generally regarded the largely Anglo-Saxon Reform politicians with suspicion, and when the Fusion (Republican/Reform) government attempted to enforce Sunday closing laws they lost the support necessary for victory. After Tammany nominee Robert A. Van Wyck triumphed in the polls that year, downtown Democrats danced in Union Square and in front of "The Wigwam"—Tammany's headquarters—waving upraised brooms, traditional symbol of a sweep, and chanting "Well. Well, well, Reform has gone to hell."

PLAYING DEFENSE

Though Tammany had won big in 1898—the first mayoral election in the expanded City of Greater New York—by 1901 it was on the defensive as evidence of massive police graft began to

Photo:

Sullivan, second from left, with supporters on an excursion boat during a "chowder" outing. The man on his right, Jack McCauliffe, was a former welterweight boxing champion.

Courtesy of Richard F. Welch.

accumulate. The charges cost Tammany both the mayoralty, won by Republican Seth Low, as well as the district attorney's office. While Tammany regrouped and "Little Tim" kept everything well oiled and ready "below the line" (14th Street), Tim headed for Washington, having won a Congressional seat.

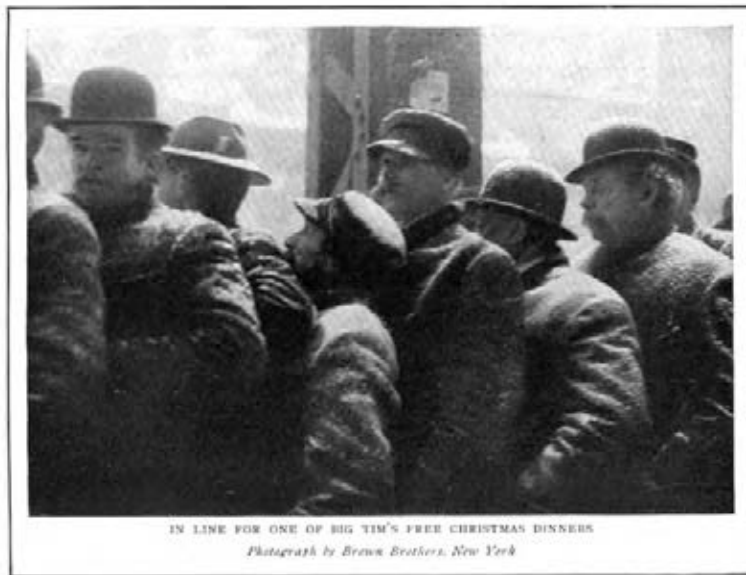
Following the 1901 debacle, Croker left New York for England and Ireland where he devoted himself to horse racing and baronial living. Sullivan could easily have taken over the Tammany leadership had he so chosen, but he declined. He had more than enough on his plate, and was enjoying himself too much to take on an additional burden. He threw his support behind Charles Francis Murphy, an ambitious district leader who grew up in the Gas House District adjoining the Bowery. Prim, proper, with a hard, calculating mind masked behind the face and demeanor of a seminary student, "Silent Charlie" was as determined to end the Tammany connection with "police graft" as he was to pursue "honest graft."

The new Sachem, as Tammany leaders were dubbed, succeeded in putting the "Democracy" back in control with victories in the mayoral elections of 1903, 1905, and 1909—triumphs which were dependent on Tim's organization. With control of 11 of the City's 35 electoral districts, the Sullivans delivered a crucial block of votes for Tammany.¹³ Nor was that all. The Big Feller wielded the power to make or break aldermen, sheriffs, judges, state senators, state assemblymen, or even Congressmen. After 1900 no one could receive the Democratic nomination for mayor without his approval.¹⁴ Indeed, knowledgeable observers believed Big Tim and the "Wise Men" were more powerful than Murphy himself.¹⁵

POLITICS AND THE UNDERWORLD

Big Tim's s burgeoning political power was paralleled by deep involvement with sections of the Lower East Side's underworld. Though the connection became crime and politics was an old one in New York, Sullivan reigned over an unusually extensive and lucrative system of graft, kickbacks and shakedowns. Most of his dealings were with practitioners of "victimless crimes"—gamblers, illegal saloons/dive keepers and after hour's tav-

erns. His support for illegal purveyors of alcohol reflected the attitude of the immigrant groups who dominated his district and much of working class New York. The forces of reform, primarily old-stock Protestants, generally wanted to curb



alcohol sales on Sundays and regulate the places it was sold. The Irish, Germans and Italians resented this intrusion into the social life they conducted at their saloons, beer gardens, and neighborhood wineries. It was Tammany policy to protect these operations and Tim, who owned several saloons himself, was a company man in this regard.

More problematic was the extent of Sullivan's interests in prostitution, which was rife in the Bowery and the Tenderloin district to its north, arousing ire among reformers and concern among many on the Lower East Side as well. These allegations, reached a climax in the hard fought election of 1901 and played a major role in Tammany's defeat, though Sullivan's sway downtown remained unshaken. Tim always vehemently denied any connection with "white slavery." "No one who knows me," he protested, "will believe that I would take a penny from any woman, much less the poor creatures who are to be pitied more than any other human beings on earth. I'd be afraid to take a cent from a poor woman of the streets for fear my old mother would see it. I'd a good deal rather break into a bank and rob the safe. That would be a more manly and decent way

Photo:

A photo of men waiting on line for one of Big Tim's Christmas dinners. Sullivan was unusually generous in the extent of support and assistance he provided to constituents and non-constituents alike. Courtesy of Richard F. Welch.



Photos:
Above: Big Tim, second from left, during one of his Labor Day "chowders," probably in 1909. The man on his right is Tom Foley, a Tammany district leader and the man for whom Manhattan's Foley Square is named.

Opposite page: Timothy Patrick Sullivan, known as "Little Tim," was one of Big Tim's "Wise Men" who helped him in influencing New York City politics during the decades surrounding the turn of the nineteenth century. Little Tim died in December, 1909. Both photos courtesy of Richard F. Welch.

of getting money."¹⁶ While Sullivan was doubtless well acquainted with the sex trade there is no evidence that he had personal investments in brothels or prostitution. But some of his captains certainly did¹⁷ and some of that money would have flowed into his coffers.

Regardless of attacks by Republicans, good government organizations, and the charges and revelations of state investigating committees—which never led to any formal charges lodged against him—or even the occasional loss of City Hall, the Big Feller's personal political power remained unassailable, and his income grew steadily from the late 1880s on. In the middle of the 1890s, Sullivan formed a syndicate with Frank Farrell and sometime police Commissioner "Big Bill" Devere (part owners of the New York Highlanders, renamed the Yankees) which provided protection to gamblers and gambling houses. Between them the trio represented the police, state senate and state gambling commission. After conducting its own investigation, the *New York Times* published a list of the trio's assets. According to the paper, 400 poolrooms, which were banned by law, paid \$300 per month a piece for protection or \$120,000 annually to Sullivan-Devere-Farrell; 500 crap games contributed \$150–175 a game; 200 small gambling houses kicked back \$150 a month or \$30,000 a year; 20 upscale sporting establishments forked over \$10,000 a month or \$20,000 a year; 50 envelope games provided \$50 per month, \$2500 annually; and

policy operators were down for \$125,000 a year. Altogether the *Times* reckoned that the triumvirate divvied up \$30,095,000 between them.¹⁸

Gambling was Big Tim's personal vice and he pursued it day and night at the poker table and racetrack. After separating from his wife in 1905 he moved into the Occidental Hotel at the corner of Broome Street and the Bowery. The hotel became the home for his organization, the Timothy D. Sullivan Association, and was the scene of a poker game which Tim reputedly ran for 5 years. Despite his love of betting games he was often unsuccessful in his wagers. An old friend remembered, "He couldn't have won with ten cards to choose from."¹⁹

THE BOWERY PHILANTHROPIST

Big Tim's popularity among the denizens of the Bowery derived from his innate generosity, which he liberally bestowed on friends, supporters, and constituents, and, sometimes, anyone he took a liking to or for whom he felt pity. Throughout his career he made a point of visiting city jails and police courts frequently, offering bail, sympathy or sometimes employment. While such visits were part "constituent service"—maintaining the loyalty of his voters—his solicitous behavior also sprang from a heartfelt and manifest empathy for those in trouble. "The thieves down here [the Bowery] ain't thieves from choice," he once explained. "They are thieves from necessity, and necessity don't know any law. They steal because they need a doctor for someone dying or they steal because there ain't any bread in the house for the children."²⁰ "If we can help some boy or some father to another chance," the Big Feller announced, "we are going to give it to them."²¹ Tim's willingness to provide a helping hand was not confined to those who found themselves in trouble with the law. He frequently led unemployed men uptown and found jobs for them on public works projects.

While all Tammany leaders provided favors and support to their followers, few indulged in it on Sullivan's scale. Starting in

the depression year of 1894, the Big Feller began hosting massive Christmas dinners for the poor and not so poor of the district. The suppers were served at Tim's clubhouse, which could seat about 250 at a time. The diners ate in shifts as the electoral district leaders oversaw the distribution of turkey and fixings. The guests were usually treated to performance by vaudeville singers and performers as they feasted on their Christmas meal.²² In 1903, Sullivan added the distribution of shoes and socks to his Christmas festivities.²³ A notable characteristic of the Bowery leader's largesse was his no questions asked policy. Whoever showed up for help or a Christmas meal got it. "Help your neighbor but keep your nose out of his affairs," Sullivan advised.²⁴

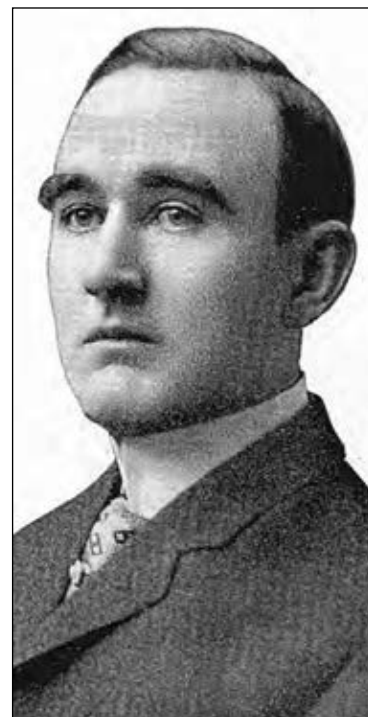
For the Lower East Side, the biggest social event of the year was the long anticipated "chowder" which the Big Feller organized each summer. The "chowders" were day long extravaganzas, including breakfast and dinner, featuring boat rides to a nearby amusement grounds, usually College Point on Long Island. The outsized party began in the morning when Big Tim led a parade of district leaders, prominent sports figures, Tammany officials, and the excited revelers to the excursion boat. En route to Long Island, Tim's guests were treated to breakfast, free drinks, and games of chance. After disembarking, the celebrants were treated to more food, drink, and athletic competition such as foot races and baseball. When the exhausted throng returned to the neighborhood late in the evening, their arrival was greeted with fireworks and the day ended with a torchlight parade.²⁵ Nor did he forget the boys peddling newspapers in the streets. He always had money in his pockets for the "Newsies", and at least once treated 2000 of them for a day at Coney Island—where he was part owner of Dreamland amusement park.²⁶ According to contemporary observers, Big Tim gave away \$25,000 a year in his district while "[H]is patronage amounts to seven or eight times as much."²⁷ Critics claimed he took a great deal more out of the district, but since much of that came from illicit interests his

overall positive role as the Bowery's benefactor is hard to dispute.

By the late 1890s, Tim's connections with theater people in New York and Saratoga led to investments or ownership of vaudeville and motion picture houses in the City. In 1898, for example, Sullivan and one of his partners, George J. Kraus remodeled the "Volks Garden" on East Fourteenth Street and renamed it the "Dewey Theater" after the Spanish American War hero. Although (perhaps because) some critics denounced the performances of scantily clad chorus girls as immoral, "The Dewey" became Union Square's most popular theater and netted Sullivan \$25,000 per year.²⁸ Sullivan's interest in vaudeville owed much to the pecuniary rewards, but it also reflected his genuine concern for his "people." Inexpensive amusements were highly popular among the tenement dwellers who craved some distraction from the reality of poverty, six-day weeks, and twelve-hour plus workdays.

In 1904 Tim expanded his field of operations joining with John W. Considine to create a chain of 40 mid-sized vaudeville houses west of Chicago. Charlie Chaplin and Will Rogers were among the entertainers who honed their talents in Sullivan-Considine enterprises. The New York politico took in about \$200,000 a year from these western investments.²⁹ By 1908, Sullivan's entertainment interests had expanded to encompass the new medium of motion pictures, and he entered in a business /political alliance with William Fox, the Jewish movie pioneer. Their partnership began when Fox leased two of Tim's vaudeville houses for \$100,000, and began to mix live entertainment and movies.³⁰

Ironically for such a highly social, convivial man, personal happiness eluded Sullivan in his private life. In 1886 he married Nellie Fitzgerald,



but they soon became estranged and had no children. An illegitimate daughter was born to him in 1896, but her existence became publicly known only after his death. He was fortunate in having a sizable extended family, but he saw two of those closest to him die young. Nor did the Big Feller have a real home. He kept an apartment in the Occidental Hotel, which also doubled as his clubhouse after 1900, and owned a house on East Fourth Street, but never seemed settled anywhere.

KING OF THE BOWERY

Washington bored Tim and he left Congress in 1906. By 1908 he decided to get back into the game as a state senator. But even as he prepared to begin what would become a second, progressive phase of his state senate career, the old charges and accusations came back to bedevil him. On March 16 1909, as another bruising City election got underway, *McClure's Magazine*, a bitterly anti-Tammany journal, ran what today would be termed a "hit-piece" by George Kibbe Turner using one of Sullivan's "rackets"—the "Lawrence Mulligan Civic Ball" as the hook. Repeating charges leveled at Sullivan since the 1890s, the article provides a good example of reformist attitudes towards the Bowery leader. On the night of the ball, Turner wrote:

The streets of the Tenderloin lie vacant of its women; the eyes of the city Detective force were focused on the great dancing hall—stuffed to the doors with painted women and lean-faced men. In the center box...sits "the Big Feller"—clear-skinned, fair-faced and happy. Around him sit the gathering of his business and political lieutenants...the rulers of New York.... [T]he Big Feller smiles gaily upon the frail congregation below him—the tenth short-lived generation of prostitutes he had seen at gatherings like this since, more than twenty years ago he had started his first Five Points assembly—he himself as fresh now as then....In the welter on the slippery floor, another city judge...leads through the

*happy mazes of the grand march a thousand pimps and prostitutes to the blatant crying of the band—"Sullivan, Sullivan, a damned fine Irishman!"*³¹

Sullivan held his fire until October 31, 1909, choosing to respond at a huge political gathering at Miner's Bowery Theater—of which he was part owner. Wild applause kept Big Tim from speaking for several minutes after he was introduced. Referring to his own wealth he declared "I'm worth something, and there's no reason why I shouldn't be. I'm an average downtown boy, with a head that's always clear, for I don't drink or smoke. But I haven't changed my residence since I got my money, and I ain't going to. I was born among you and I'm going to die among you."³² He then recounted the tried and true story of how his poor, hard-working mother had struggled to keep her brood going, feeding them even if that meant she herself went hungry. The audience responded emotionally and Tim had them in the palm of his hand.

Turning to Turner's most serious charge, his alleged involvement with prostitution, Tim began by offering to produce a list which would prove the balls attendees were all "virtuous" women and "decent" men. "I've been living here all my life," he went on

...and I never knew a man engaged in this business [prostitution], and I won't stand for this. I'm not going to say anything but this man Turner better keep out of this district.

*I've never professed to be any more than an average man. I don't want you to think I'm very good, for I've done a lot of wrong things. I'm just an average man, but I've told you of that old mother of mine and what she did for me, and I want to say here before you all that there is no man on earth who believes in the virtue of women more than I do.*³³

As political theater Tim's performance was magic. Probably those at the Mulligan ball were overwhelmingly working men and women. But it was at least partly dishonest as his assertion

that he never knew anyone involved in prostitution—which was endemic in the City—was false on its face.

As expected, Tim sailed to an easy victory, but otherwise the election of 1909 was a mixed success for Tammany. It was a tough year for the Sullivan clan as well. After 2 years of mental decline Florrie

Sullivan, a cousin and leading lieutenant, died insane in June.³⁴ An even greater blow fell on December 22, 1909 when Timothy P., “Little Tim,” Sullivan, died of what was officially pronounced Bright’s disease, though whispers of consumption or mental difficulties had preceded his death.³⁵

Though Little Tim’s early demise was an emotional and professional body blow to his older cousin the Big Feller soon began the most productive phase of his political career lending his talents and political clout to benefit of working people, especially working women. Sullivan’s commitment to state guaranteed security may have been affected by his recent experience with human mortality, but a more immediate influence was his newfound friendship with Frances Perkins, later Franklin Roosevelt’s Secretary of Labor, but then a young social worker agitating to improve conditions for the laboring poor—especially the women who worked the Lower East Side’s numerous sweatshops. In the 1912 legislative session, destined to be Sullivan’s last, he threw his support behind a Perkins inspired bill which set a 54-hour work week for approximately 400,000

women workers. “Well, me sister was a poor girl,” Tim explained to Perkins, “and she went out to work when she was young. I feel kinda sorry for them young poor girls that work the way you say they work. I’d like to do them a good turn. I’d like to do you a good turn. You don’t know much about this Parliamentary stuff, do you?”³⁶



But Tim did, and with his backing the bill passed despite strong opposition. With the law apparently passed, the Big Feller and his cousin and fellow senator, Christy Sullivan, left the capitol for the Albany dock to catch a boat back to New York. Before the steamer could arrive, a phone call came through for Tim. A frantic Perkins told him that two waverers changed their votes after he had departed forcing a

new vote to reconsider the law. Both Sullivans rushed back up the steep hill from the Hudson to the capitol and burst into the senate chamber “...one red-faced and puffing, the other white-faced and gasping.” The two Sullivans called out to be recorded in the affirmative, saving the law from imminent defeat. “It’s alright, me girl,” the Big Feller said approaching Perkins. “We is wid [sic] you. The bosses thought they were going to kill your bill, but they forgot about Tim Sullivan. I’m a poor man meself. Me father and mother were poor and struggling. I seen me sister go out and work when she was only fourteen, and I know we ought to help these gals by giving ‘em a law which will prevent them from being broken don while they’re still young.”³⁷

Photo:

Part of the funeral procession for Big Tim Sullivan in September, 1913. The man at front is Tammany leader, Charles F. “Silent Charlie” Murphy, who succeeded Richard Croker as sachem. Courtesy of Richard F. Welch.

Sullivan's concern for women's issues extended to women's suffrage. In part, this was based on his respect for their labor. "If women are going to be the toilers," he proclaimed, "I'm going to give them all the protection I can."³⁸ His commitment to women's suffrage led him to unexpected friendships with various women reformers including feminist/suffragette Harriett Stanton Blatch, daughter of pioneer women's rights advocate, Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Sullivan and Blatch, leader of the Equality League of Self-Supporting Women, became close allies and the prominent feminist arranged for Big Tim to speak before women's groups. Sullivan's appearances before audiences of largely upper middle-class Anglo-Saxon suffragists must have been an exotic experience for both sides. "It's [women's suffrage] going to come and you can't stop it," the Big Feller lectured the state senate.³⁹ But "Silent Charlie," more conservative by nature, could delay it, and women's suffrage did not become law in New York State until 1917.

At least as unpredictable as his support for women's causes was Tim's introduction of the law which still bears his name—the "Sullivan Law." The new legislation, which made it a crime to carry a concealed pistol without a license, was Tim's response to increasing violence on the Lower East Side. After the bill was passed some cynical observers claimed it was a Tammany measure to keep their sometime gangster allies under control. [Guns could be easily planted on gang members who could then use the time spent confined at public expense to ponder their offending behavior.] Such charges wouldn't have bothered Big Tim who would have seen the utility of doing both the right thing while reaping the practical advantages.

DECLINE AND FALL

In 1912, as Sullivan was forcing progressive legislation through the state senate, his world began to unravel. Among the gamblers whom Big Tim helped establish—for a cut—were Herman Rosenthal and Arnold Rothstein, whom he described as "... smart Jew boys. They're gonna

go places."⁴⁰ He was half-right. Rothstein went on to a major career as a gambler and Tammany link to the underworld, but Rosenthal, could never quite make it despite Sullivan's backing and money. By 1912 Rosenthal had butted heads with New York Police Lieutenant Charles Becker, head of Special Squad Number 2—the "Strong Arm Squad." Tim did what he could to aid the hapless gambler, but Rosenthal kept digging a deeper hole. When Rosenthal later refused to contribute \$500 to a defense fund for Becker's press agent who was facing a murder rap, Becker raided his house and smashed his gambling den. Rothstein advised Herman to get out of town, but instead the unlucky gambler began blabbing to newsmen and threatened to go to District Attorney Charles Whitman and tell everything he knew about the arrangements between vice and the police. At 2 a.m. on July 16, 1912 four gunmen cut Rosenthal down in front of the Café Metropole on West Forty-third Street.

Before he was killed, Rosenthal had given a virtual affidavit to *New York World* editor Bayard Swope. In this statement he declared "There is only one man in the world can call me off, that is the Big Fellow, Big Tim Sullivan, and he is as honest as the day is long, and I know he is in sympathy with me."⁴¹ Sullivan may well have had some sympathy for Rosenthal, but he likely had none for going to the district attorney and confessing everything he knew—which was plenty—about the way business was conducted in the New York underworld. The introduction of Tim's name set tongues wagging. Some wondered if Becker, officially charged with ordering the murder, would have dared eliminate Rosenthal without Tim's approval. A year later others would ask if Tim's bizarre demise was related to the Rosenthal murder. As it was, Rosenthal's affidavit and murder triggered another series of sensational revelations of the widespread corruption within the police department and its alliances with politicians and criminals. Becker, who may have been dirty but who was probably framed for Rosenthal's murder, was executed along with the three hit men who actually did the shooting.

But Big Tim would not see any of this. Even as he completed his most productive year in Albany he fell into a downward spiral of psychological maladies—manic-depression, paranoia, violent hallucinations and threats of suicide.⁴² After the death of his long-estranged wife, Nellie, Big Tim suffered a complete mental breakdown and the family committed him to a private sanitarium.⁴³ In January 1913, following a petition by concerned friends and family a sheriff's jury declared him a "lunatic and incapable of managing himself or his affairs." In February, Sullivan and his estate, then estimated at 2–3 million dollars, were entrusted to a committee consisting of family members and advisors.⁴⁴ Between January and July 1913, the shrunken Big Feller was taken to various European sanitariums and German mineral baths in hopes of causing some improvement. After his return he went to live at his brother Patrick's home in the Eastchester section of the Bronx. On August 31, after an all-night card game, Sullivan walked away from his sleeping nurses and disappeared into the night.

For 14 days, the whereabouts of Big Tim were unknown. On September 13, just before a cheap City coffin was to be sealed and sent to the Potter's Field on Hart Island, a patrolman took the last legally required look at the unidentified corpse of a man who had been hit by a train near the Westchester Freight Yards in the early morning hours of August 31. Though the body had been severed at the trunk, the face was unscathed. After taking a second, closer look, the policeman recognized the man as Big Tim Sullivan. Sullivan's family was quickly notified, and Larry Mulligan, Tim's half-brother, made the official identification. "Yes. It's Tim. Poor Tim! Poor Tim!" he moaned gazing into the coffin.⁴⁵

Tim's wake, at his clubhouse, was attended by 20,000 people, representing the panoply of the Bowery's heterogeneous population. They included not only politicians, officeholders, and business associates but, in the words of the *New York Times* "...rich and poor, old and young...behind the Irishman walked the Jew

the Italian, the Scandinavian, the Chinese and even the Turk. It was, in fact, a procession of all nations."⁴⁶ A funeral mass was held the next day at Old St. Patrick's Cathedral on Mott Street which had been specially scrubbed for the occasion. After the services, the funeral procession rolled through the streets crowded with mourners and onlookers as it made its way across the Williamsburgh Bridge to Calvary Cemetery in Long Island City.

In many ways Big Tim Sullivan was a transitional figure in American politics. By 1912, his illicit activities—interests in gambling, underworld connections—were increasingly anachronistic. But Big Tim was lot more than a relic from a rougher time. His philanthropic activities, whether direct aid, or the popular amusements he arranged, brought genuine happiness and relief to his constituents. His embrace of progressive legislation—gun control, reduction of the workday, the vote for women—placed him far ahead of most of his contemporaries, not only in Tammany, but politics in general. Ironically, the type of state guaranteed protections he began to support would ultimately do much to undercut the ability of machines like Tammany to maintain its power. It seems likely that Tim would not have cared. Whatever his warts, and some were pretty ugly, the Big Feller served "his" people, cared about them, provided for them, and taken all in all improved their lives. His like—like his time—will not be seen again.

Sullivan, Sullivan, A Damned Fine Irishman!

Notes

- 1 *New York Herald*, 19 May 1907, Section 2, 1.
- 2 M.R. Werner, *Tammany Hall*, (Garden City, Doubleday & Doran, 1928), 438.
- 3 Oliver Simmons, "Passing of the Sullivan Dynasty" in *Munsey's Magazine*, Vol. 1, No.III (December 1913), 412.
- 4 Cited in Thomas M. Henderson, *Tammany Hall and the New Immigrants* (New York: Arno Press, 1976), 13.
- 5 *New York Times*, 23 July 1908, 6.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 3 January 1916, 9.

- 7 Alvin F. Harlow, *Old Bowery Days*, (New York: D. Appleton, and Co., 1931), 510.
- 8 Cited in Harlow, 513.
- 9 Cited in Daniel L. Czitrom, "Underworlds and Underdogs: Big Tim Sullivan and Metropolitan Politics in New York, 1889–1913," *Journal of American History*, 78, Dec.1991, 549.
- 10 *New York Times*, 14 September 1913, 2.
- 11 Harlow, 503.
- 12 Ibid., 505.
- 13 Obit., Thomas J. McManus, *New York Times*, 31 July 1926, 11.
- 14 Simmons, 413.
- 15 *New York Times*, 23 December 1909, 2.
- 16 Cited in Ibid., 550.
- 17 See Czitrom, 550.
- 18 Harlow, 172. The source of the numbers was a Republican opponent and it possible that the extent of the trios control over gambling—as well as its monopolistic aspects—were exaggerated for political purposes. Nevertheless, Sullivan and his allies were certainly major players in New York gambling operations at the time and amount.
- 19 Ibid., 512.
- 20 In Henderson, 3.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Czitrom, 545.
- 23 *New York Times*, 23 January 1911, 4.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Czitrom, 543-44.
- 26 Harlow, 444.
- 27 Hartley Davis, "Tammany Hall, the Most Perfect Political Organization in the World," *Munsey's Magazine*, 1901, 66.
- 28 Czitrom, 547.
- 29 Ibid., 551.
- 30 Ibid., 552.
- 31 Cited in Harlow, 515.
- 32 *New York Herald*, 1 November 1909, 1.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Harlow, 517.
- 35 *New York Times*, 23 December 1909, 1.
- 36 George Martin, *Madame Secretary. Frances Perkins*, (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1976), 92.
- 37 Frances Perkins, *The Roosevelt I Knew* (New York: Viking Press, 1946), 14.
- 38 Czitrom, 553.
- 39 Harriot Stanton Blatch and Anna Lutz, *Challenging Years* (New York: G.P. Putnam's, 1940), 152.
- 40 Jonathan Root, *One Night in July*, (New York: Coward-McCann, 1961), 46.
- 41 *New York World*, 17 July 1912, 1.
- 42 *New York Tribune*, 23 January 1913, 6.
- 43 Harlow, 520.
- 44 Werner, 509.
- 45 *New York Tribune*, 14 September 1913, 1.
- 46 *New York Times*, 15 September 1913, 9.