

On the Waterfront: Irish Life in Chelsea & Greenwich Village, Part I

BY JOSEPH L. LONG



Photo:

The new piers in Chelsea around 1910. Part of the era's development along Manhattan's Hudson River, the piers were designed to service the technologically new deep-hulled ships crossing the ocean. The piers helped to generate more commerce, and the skills and labor of the Irish helped to make them successful. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

For if the port made New York, the Irish made the port.¹

Ed. Note: *This is the first of two articles by Joseph Long on the Irish in Chelsea and Greenwich Village. The second article will appear in volume 27 of New York Irish History. It will deal with work done on the Hudson River piers, waterfront labor issues, and aspects of social life in these Manhattan communities.*

This is a history of the New York Irish experience in Greenwich Village and Chelsea from the Depression through the mid-1960s. Using oral histories as its foundation, it looks at factors that knit these neighborhoods together—during that time and in subsequent memory—through the lens of family, community, work, and leisure.

“Irish” includes Irish-born, but more especially second- and third-generation Irish Americans who grew up on Manhattan’s lower West Side among a variety of nationalities as the neighborhoods changed. These Irish had a subculture that reinforced heritage and identity much like better known New York Irish enclaves in Queens (Rockaway Beach, Woodside) or the Bronx (Highbridge) during this period.² In addition, because Chelsea and Greenwich Village revolved around shipping and the Hudson River piers, Irish bonds of community were arguably even tighter on the lower West Side. How the Irish survived, thrived and—for a long time—dominated these very old sections of Manhattan is the subject of this article.³

Joseph Long was born and raised on Seventeenth Street in Chelsea. His parents were from Arklow, County Wicklow. He went to St. Bernard's School on Thirteenth Street and then to Cardinal Hayes High School and Manhattan College. He graduated from New York University with a master's degree in Irish Studies in 2012 (at age 59). ©2013. Published with permission of Joseph L. Long.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE WEST SIDE

WATERFRONT

New York's natural harbor had long privileged commercial shipping on both the East and Hudson Rivers. The rivers generated ready-made opportunities for the working classes, meaning jobs that often required little or no skills and heavy physical labor. As advances in ship technology allowed for larger vessels with deeper hulls, the City's shipping industry shifted after the Civil War from its traditional base on the East River. The Irish had long played an important role on the New York City waterfront. Thus, from the 1860s, Irish and Irish-Americans began to migrate to the West Side, away from older immigrant neighborhoods in lower Manhattan, following longshore work as well as warehouse, trucking, tugboat, and rail employment that was developing there. New docks and wharves were constructed along the west side of Manhattan south of 34th Street, convenient to the Harlem River Railroad which ran along Tenth and Eleventh Avenues.⁴ According to James T. Fisher in his book on the New York waterfront:

In 1897 the Department [of Docks] supervised construction of municipally owned piers—upward of seven hundred feet long—on riverfront terrain between Charles and Gansevoort Streets. The West Side's Irish waterfront coalesced around these imposing new structures before expanding rapidly northward up the Hudson shoreline. Between 1904 and 1909 nearly thirty five miles of new wharves materialized.⁵

This Hudson River waterfront quickly became known throughout the shipping world.

Before the Civil War, this section of Manhattan had historically been the location of country estates for some of New York's wealthy citizens and therefore held one of the lowest foreign-born populations in the City.⁶ Nevertheless, by 1855 (partly as a consequence of a dramatic increase in New York's Irish population in the aftermath of the Famine), a full 24 percent of the residents of Greenwich

Village and Chelsea had been born in Ireland. There were 7,909 natives of Ireland living in the Ninth Ward (between Christopher Street and Fourteenth Street, west of Sixth Avenue) and a further 11,572 Irish-born living in the Sixteenth Ward (between Sixth Avenue and the Hudson River, north of Fourteenth Street and south of Twenty-sixth Street).⁷ The residents of the southern part of the Sixteenth Ward (between West Fourteenth and West Twentieth Streets) were characterized as "very poor, yet respectable, hard-working persons," with a ratio of three Irish-born to every five American-born in 1865.⁸ By 1890 the Irish stock population in these neighborhoods (first and second generation combined) was 35,894, of which those under the age of fifteen accounted for 20.7 percent in the Ninth Ward and 18.2 percent in the Sixteenth Ward.⁹ These young people became the adults who would shape the lower West Side waterfront world of the twentieth century.

In addition to shipping, other businesses took advantage of the goods and services coming through the West Side piers and located in the neighborhood, providing stable employment for decades. "Along the line of the river... iron foundries, factories of various kinds, steam sawmills and planing mills, lumber, coal, and stone yards, etc., occupy most of the squares fronting on the water," reported the Sanitary Commission in 1865.¹⁰ Among these, the major ones were the Manhattan Gas Company at Eighteenth Street and Tenth Avenue;¹¹ the DeLamater Iron Works at the foot of West Thirteenth and West Fourteenth Streets, a foundry for shipbuilding that had 1,000 men on its payroll in 1889;¹² Enoch Morgan's Sons Company, manufacturers of Sapolio brand soap, which erected a new factory at the corner of Bank and West Streets in 1888, and the National Biscuit Company (Nabisco) which opened its corporate headquarters on Fifteenth street, in the southwest corner of Chelsea, in 1898. An elevated train line that began operation along Ninth Avenue and Greenwich Street in 1869, "with a large station in the middle of the intersection at West Fourteenth Street," also enhanced the location of heavy industry,

**Photo:**

A view of West Street around 1900. By the early twentieth century, New York's Hudson River waterfront was known globally as a busy center for transportation and shipping to and from the United States. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

freight handling, and warehousing on the Lower West Side.¹³

Tom Kelly worked at Nabisco in Chelsea until 1969 when the company automated operations in a new plant in New Jersey. He described a business culture that used union labor and offered lots of overtime:

The Biscuit, it was two big buildings, solid brick.... The one place they [local residents] made money was Nabisco because they had a side track there. All the flour, all the molasses and everything like that, they had vacuum pumps that came down to the top of these things and sucked up all the stuff. Because it had to be mixed so that gravity could take it down to the ovens, which were automatic ovens. So the one place they made some money was from Nabisco. Because the trains were always there because of this thing. They worked six days a week a lot of times, because until they got other plans, the big new plans to build in New Jersey and everything, they made the

cookies [including Oreos] for the whole East Coast. Sometimes they would work six days, which made everybody happy because they got the overtime. It was all union, the drivers, the workers. It wasn't the greatest union. The workers were all teamsters. I mean the drivers, the truck drivers and everything. But the interior ones had their own union. Not great, but they had full benefits, made money. So they got overtime as soon as they went there, and people used to love that. They worked three shifts around the clock before they moved out to New Jersey. The only reason they moved was because they couldn't keep up with production. They wanted to automate it. But I knew so many people that worked there from the neighborhood. It supported a lot of people in the neighborhood. I mean, some of the women worked the production lines, the cookie lines and everything like that. My father—everybody that worked as a truck driver with my father, I used to drive a trailer there and they

*used to take the finished product, but also the big thing was to bring in boxes and paper that they wrapped it in. They said, "This is the big thing people. Forget about it." So when we went out and delivered a whole trailer load of cookies to a distribution plant, we didn't come back empty. We went over to the plant and picked up the boxes that they boxed these in. And they still were doing that when I was out in Fairlawn [New Jersey]. That was a big thing. These things didn't come back empty. They always hooked them up.*¹⁴

Commercial development on the lower West Side was also spurred by the Gansevoort Market, opened in 1879, where area farmers sold produce and the West Washington Market "for meat, poultry, and dairy products" which opened in 1889.¹⁵ "The stores fronting on the [Gansevoort Market] square are nearly all occupied by fruit and vegetable dealers," observed the *New York Times* in 1883. "There are several cheap eating-houses in the neighborhood at which the countrymen refresh themselves after having disposed of their produce."¹⁶ The market stalls and nearby buildings were refrigerated in 1904 to modernize the business so that, down to World War II, "wholesale produce, fruit, groceries, dairy products, eggs, specialty foods, and liquor (until Prohibition) were among the dominant businesses in the district."¹⁷ Trucking companies dominated the landscape on Tenth and Eleventh Avenues in Chelsea, and in Greenwich Village alongside of Washington and Greenwich Streets.

HOUSING FOR WEST SIDE WORKERS

In the midst of all this, the neighborhood was equally residential. Some of the earliest multi-family dwellings built in the area are evidence of "a new interest on the part of owners in making profits from working-class housing."¹⁸ Many of those erected parallel to the Hudson River, along West and Washington streets, were on landfill. Sanitary conditions were generally good in the Ninth Ward in 1865 when it was inspected by Dr. James L. Brown. However, just above Fourteenth Street to the north, in

the Sixteenth Ward, Drs. William C. Hunter and Guido Furman found challenges to residents, including inadequate sewers, poor garbage collection, badly constructed privies, and nuisances such as "soap-fat factories and slaughter-houses."¹⁹ By the inspectors' count, there were 2,335 "tenant-houses," most of them purpose-built brick tenements of newer construction in 1865, "from 3 to 5 stories in height, and from 15 to 30 feet in width," with "one main room and one or two bedrooms to each family" with the main room "used as kitchen, dining room, and sitting-room."²⁰ The character of such housing changed little from the second half of the nineteenth century; as late as 1939, "a shared toilet, heat only from the kitchen stove, no running water, no bath tub, dark, stuffy, cramped quarters in ramshackle tenements that, once afire, would burn like tinder—these are the oft-repeated tale" for waterfront workers.²¹

Space constraints and lack of privacy remained facts of life on the Lower West Side. Bob Gibson, a life-long resident of West Eleventh Street, recalled, "I did not have a bed to sleep in until my two older brothers left the household for a state vacation [i.e. in prison]."²² Joe Dean, a retired New York City policeman with two generations of roots in Greenwich Village, slept on a pull-out chair near the fire escape in the living room until he was in second grade:

*I grew up on 296 West Eleventh Street. Me and my two sisters, my mother, and my father. Four room railroad flat, no privacy. We did have a bathroom in our apartment, which was a lot more than a lot of guys in my neighborhood had. Guys used to come up to my house when I was a kid and they'd say, "What's that?" I'd say, "It's a bathroom." It's funny because my mother lived on Eleventhth Street her entire life, born at 336 and died at 296 West Eleventh, and I did not get a bed until my older sister got married when I was eight. And then I shared a bunk bed with my next to older sister, who's now seventy-one, until she got married.*²³

Longshoremen and their families tended to live west of Hudson Street. According to Thomas Shelley, “Generally speaking, the farther west one went from Sixth Avenue and the closer to the Hudson River, the poorer the Irish families were likely to be. Many men worked as longshoremen on the docks, or in the coal and lumber yards, or in the Empire Brewery, a colossal building that occupied a whole city block between West Tenth Street and Charles Street.”²⁴ Tom Kelly, a lifelong resident of the Village, recalled how class divisions were defined by architecture on the West Side:



I grew up on Eleventh Street off Bleecker Street. We lived across Bleecker from Joe Dean. Now on our side of the street there was—it was funny—there was three tenements in a row, and then the brownstones started. So next to us, the building next to us was a bigger tenement. We had ten railroad flats and the super living in our tenement. Next door it was twenty, twice the size. Next door to that was the next two brownstones, [one of which was] the young Methodist girls’ home. Girls that were either going to college or mainly, after high school, going to secretarial school, that were Methodist, would come into these two brownstones. Now, up from that, there was money. They weren’t tenements. They were small, what they call brownstones. Now they’re not all brownstones of course. But they were three-story buildings. Across the street from us, the biggest building had an awning. So we were always teased when we were kids. And the other thing is, we had a bunch of trees on the street.... On the other side of Hudson Street, you didn’t see a tree. Where the warehouse district was,

*all the tenements and everything, you didn’t see them. There might have been one tree or something. And there were no brownstones down there. These were tenements. But where we were, we were teased because we were considered the rich people.*²⁵

The upside was a dense network of relatives in the neighborhood. “There was a time when all of us, at Christmas or Thanksgiving or Easter, walked to our relatives’ house,” remembered Joe Dean:

*My grandparents lived in 77 Barrow Street, my aunt and uncle lived in that building. My mother’s brother, my mother’s two brothers, my mother’s aunt, my grandparents, all lived in 77 Barrow Street. ... and I used to help my grandfather carry the ashes—remember the ash cans?—because my grandfather was the super. But my uncles on my father’s side lived in 63 Perry and 44 Perry Street. My other aunt lived on West Sixteenth Street. It’s just incredible that you could visit all of your aunts and uncles and cousins.*²⁶

Photo:

Eleventh Street west of Hudson Street as it appeared in 2012, showing some of the residential buildings there early in the twentieth century. The buildings shown are just two blocks from the waterfront and often housed large families in small apartments. Courtesy of Joseph Long.

Mary Thomas recalled that from the 1920s there was a knot of Irish people in Chelsea from Arklow, a small town in County Wicklow: Arklow was very poor. Two classes. Rich and poor. And there were more poor than there were rich. However, after saying that, we didn't know we were poor because...there was fishing and so we always had enough to eat and we were lucky in as much as we had our brothers and sisters that were away, that you kind of took care of the ones that were coming up.”²⁷

Men in Arklow made their living from the Irish Sea, and it was easy enough to transfer skills learned at an early age to the Hudson River. Muriel Harpow, who lived in Chelsea for more than seventy years, had the impression that “everyone who was from Ireland and lived in Chelsea came from Arklow.”²⁸ Many of these Irish-born got jobs as barge men working for the

Erie Lackawanna and Lehigh Valley Railroad Companies, transporting goods from the railroad terminals in New Jersey, across the Hudson, to the piers all along the west side of Manhattan. Father John Corridan noted in the 1940s that “sixty percent (50 or 60 percent out of 116) of the Erie Railroad boat crews come from the little town of Arklow, County Wicklow. They live between Eighteenth and Twenty-first Streets on Eighth Avenue. They could control the union, but there is no unanimity among them. They had a club at one time. Michael Greene was its organizer.”²⁹ Others, like Andy Kenny and Tom Long, were bosses on the United States line’s piers 59 and 60.³⁰

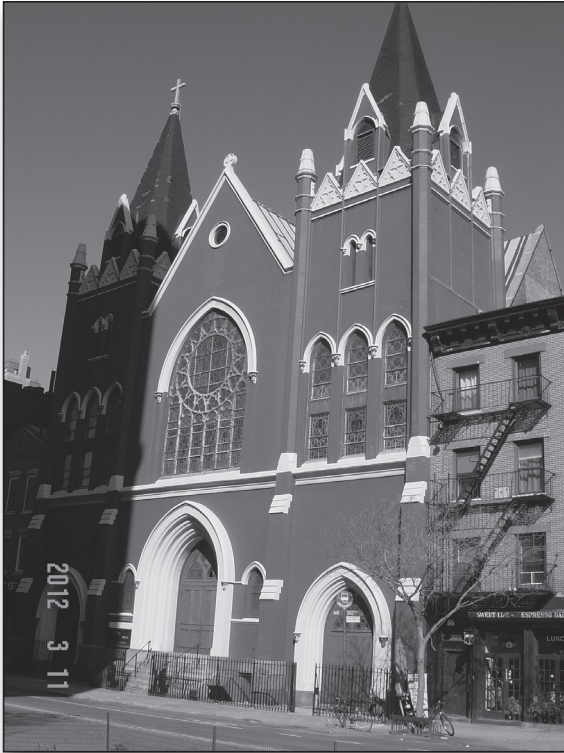
MAJOR SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

Most of the Irish in the lower West Side were Catholics, and their world was influenced by a Catholic parish infrastructure in Greenwich Village and Chelsea with roots in the nineteenth century. During that century, anti-Catholicism had been pervasive in New York

Table: Population of Lower West Side Catholic Parishes, New York City, 1914

PARISH	PARISH POPULATION	SCHOOL POPULATION
St. Veronica 155 Christopher Street	6,500	1,400
St. Bernard 14th betw 8th & 9th Aves	10,000	N/A (under construction)
St. Francis Xavier West 15th St	5,000	1,010
Guardian Angel 21st nr 10th Ave	3,000	262
St. Columba 25th nr 9th	5,000	708
St. Michael 34th betw 9th & 10th Aves	7,000	1,334
TOTAL	36,500	4,714

SOURCE: Remigius Lafort, S.T.D., Censor, *The Catholic Church in the United States of America: Undertaken to Celebrate the Golden Jubilee of His Holiness, Pope Pius X*. Volume 3: The Province of Baltimore and the Province of New York, Section 1: Comprising the Archdiocese of New York and the Diocese of Brooklyn, Buffalo and Ogdensburg Together with some Supplementary Articles on Religious Communities of Women (New York City: The Catholic Editing Company, 1914), pp. 318, 322-323, 327, 329, 351, 378.



City, and there had been nativist incidents in Greenwich Village including an anti-Irish riot at Abingdon Square on July 4th, 1853.³¹ Nevertheless, according to Thomas Shelley, by 1900 Catholics, “mainly Irish and Italians,” had “transformed the old American Ward into a predominantly Catholic neighborhood.” St. Joseph’s on Waverly Place and Sixth Avenue, established in 1829 with responsibility for the West Side between Canal Street and Thirty-fourth Street, was the “Mother” parish from which six more were started in order to serve the needs of the Irish faithful.³² St. Columba was opened in 1845, followed by St. Francis Xavier in 1847, St. Michael’s in 1857, St. Bernard’s in 1868 and, in 1887, both Guardian Angel and St. Veronica’s. On the eve of the First World War, the total population of these six parishes was 36,500 (see Table, p.8). While there were eventually also national parishes in the neighborhood for Germans, Italians, and Spanish, until the middle of the twentieth century the Irish were the dominant Catholic ethnic group on the lower West Side, especially in those sections near the Hudson River. In 1939 the *WPA Guide to*

New York City could still describe Chelsea as a “conservative Irish Catholic community” and Greenwich Village, at least down to 1910, as full of “faithful followers of the Roman Catholic Church.”³³

The West Side Catholic churches had a full schedule of Masses both on weekdays and Sundays. Serving as an altar boy was a coveted position. Many of the oral histories with “retired” altar boys included memories of serving first Mass on a Sunday morning, when everyone else was sleeping, in the dead of winter with the West Side winds blowing in off the river—an early lesson in responsibility. Joe Dean’s father and his fellow longshoremen attended St. Veronica’s before reporting for work: “It’s amazing, and the way they supported the church, the longshoremen would be at the seven o’clock Mass and then be on the pier at eight o’clock. I remember serving seven o’clock Mass as a kid and seeing all those longshoremen. Every time they sat down you’d hear the baling hooks hit the seat next to them.”³⁴ At St. Bernard’s, just down the block from the meat market, the early morning weekday Mass was full of butchers just off the third shift and still in their coats covered in a mixture of white and red. On Sundays, many of the fathers in St. Bernard’s parish attended a crowded extra Mass at 12:15p.m. in the lower church. It ended at one o’clock when local bars were allowed to officially open.

The parish school served the educational needs of many families with young children; St. Michael’s and St. Francis Xavier also had high schools. Staffed by diocesan priests, teaching orders like the Jesuits, Christian Brothers, Sisters of Charity, Franciscans, and Presentation Sisters, as well as lay teachers, the schools were remembered as being mostly Irish, with teachers like Ms. Mulvaney, Ms. Delaney, Ms. Mulcahy, and Ms. Loughlin at St. Bernard’s.³⁵ According to Artie Shea, who graduated from St. Bernard’s in the early 1950s, “That’s all there was. We had maybe a few Puerto Rican children.”³⁶ Frank O’Brien, who went to Xavier, had a similar memory: “Yeah, in the ‘50s we had some Cubans in the class too.”³⁷ Because of the demographics

Photo:

St. Veronica’s Church on Christopher Street in Greenwich Village, less than two blocks from the waterfront. The Church provided religious and educational services to nearly seven-thousand parishioners in 1914 and was one of a half dozen churches serving Catholics in the west Village and in Chelsea. Courtesy of Joseph Long.



Photo: St. Vincent's Hospital on Twelfth Street and Seventh Avenue in Greenwich Village. It provided health and medical services to residents of the Village and Chelsea. It was also an important employer for residents. The hospital was founded in 1849 by the Sisters of Charity to serve the disadvantaged. Courtesy of Margaret Fitzpatrick.

of the neighborhood, the school culture was Irish including instruction in step dancing and singing traditional Irish songs for the annual St. Patrick's Day play. Bob Gibson, from West Eleventh Street, graduated from St. Veronica's and discussed its school records for the years 1912–1962. Many family names were repeated over the generations, such as Coughlin, Barry, Cronin, Corrigan, Callaghan and Dunn, and in general Irish surnames were in the majority among the students until the 1960s when different nationalities start to move into the neighborhood.³⁸

In addition to schools and churches, the Archdiocese of New York operated St. Vincent's Hospital in the heart of Greenwich Village. Founded in 1849 by the Sisters of Charity of New York, St. Vincent's was part and parcel of the City's Irish community, patronized, identified with, and supported by Irish New Yorkers.³⁹ Generations of West

Siders were born at St. Vincent's and, besides providing medical care, the hospital also provided jobs. Peter English, a native of Arklow, Co. Wicklow, immigrated to New York in 1928 where his father had already found work as a river barge captain for the Erie Lackawanna Railroad. Like many Chelsea families, they took advantage of connections within that Irish neighborhood. His mother and sister found work as chambermaids at the Waldorf Astoria; one brother operated a barge like his father, and another brother started on a career path at St. Vincent's. According to Peter English:

Well, what happened is that [about him]...my mother went in the late '20s I guess, or the early '30s...to St. Vincent's and spoke to the nuns when it was demanded that there was a need for him—my brother Michael—to get a job. So she prevailed, and they assigned him to the engineer in the heating system for the hospital. And he did twenty-some odd years there. He got a license.... Whatever happened to Sisters of Charity—they were tough nuns. I inherently think they dumped him for some reason or other, and he went to... [Angel Guardian Home]. He did the same thing there. And he died in the engine room. The boiler room.⁴⁰

Joe Dean's family also had connections with the hospital. "I had seven relatives at one time working there—but my aunt and uncle, cumulatively, worked there ninety-something years...when you wanted a bed at St. Vincent's, you called Dan or Rita Quinn." He recounted a story about another uncle, Johnny Hogarty who died at St. Vincent's Hospital:

He deserted in World War II. He was

*in all these battles in Italy and Africa and he finally had it. He gets caught stealing trucks, which is what he did for a living, you know, in the real world. He's in Africa, in jail, and who does he run into but a buddy of his from Grove Street [in Greenwich Village], Jimmy Corbitt, who was an MP. True story. He says, "Jimmy, you've got to get me out of here." He says, "Johnny, how am I going to get you out of here?" He says, "Get me out of here." He got him out of there, got him on a boat, and he wound up coming back to New York. He changed his name to Skyler. Jimmy Skyler. And that's the name he used in conjunction with the Hogarty deal, you know. When he died in St. Vincent's at age fifty-one from a heart attack, my uncle Dan Quinn did the death certificate. And on the death certificate it said "James Skyler, also known as John Hogarty," so the wife could get some of the veterans benefits—even though he was a deserter, and never got caught.*⁴¹

Another neighborhood anchor was the Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) which operated its Manhattan Center at 353 West Seventeenth Street, just east of Ninth Avenue and right across the street from the National Maritime headquarters. Established in the 1930s (an outgrowth of a boys' club set up in 1890 by Father John C. Drumgoole on nearby West Fifteenth Street), it was a meeting place for neighborhood children from grammar through high school.⁴² Frank O'Brien remembered:

They had the gymnasium up at the top floor. If you wanted to box or watch boxing matches, it was there. You had the next level was the gym where all the basketball games were played. You had a hall down on the first floor which had a TV room, and nobody really had a TV. So after school you could go down there. In those days they had baseball in the afternoon. You could watch the ball game,

*and everybody sat in the room and you had to behave in order to stay there. So you had that. Then the lower floor was the bowling alley.... They had dances. We had dances. They had one down in the bowling alley. They had a big area, if you remember, on the side of that. Nobody really owned a lot of records and things, so they provided all the music and everything.*⁴³

The CYO center was an enormous value for local parents. They always knew where their children were during its hours of operation (it closed at ten p.m.), and generations of youngsters learned the value of teamwork and how to socialize there. In the summer, for the kids who could not leave the city for traditional Irish destinations like Rockaway Beach and the Jersey Shore, the CYO organized a day camp that kept children busy from nine a.m. to four p.m.; even the roof of the center provided a needed outlet for summer enjoyment.⁴⁴

The CYO "was run by a guy by the name of Doc Dougherty," Frank O'Brien remembered. "He was the administrator, whatever you might want to call it, but he ran the CYO office there. And the last thing you want to do was to get thrown out of the CYO. As bad as anybody was, that was the last thing they did because your whole life was in there."⁴⁵ In addition, after 1947, New York City paid someone "to coordinate and supplement the activities of public and private agencies devoted to serving youth." This Youth Board helped with after-school programs and recreation in the neighborhood.⁴⁶ "It was a New York City agency that actually assigned somebody to there, to assist in running sports programs for them." O'Brien spoke about remembering who was assigned:

Which is the first thing I remember, like in the early stages of grammar school, I still remember him. His name was [Mike] Jeffers. He was one of the first ones that was there, and he in turn taught us a lot of things.... We used to



Photo:
The Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) Manhattan Center on West Seventeenth Street became an important community institution in Chelsea and Greenwich Village. Begun nationally in the 1930s, local CYOs offered scheduled activities and competitive sports popular among children and youth in local parishes. Courtesy of Joseph Long.

bring money in every week towards buying basketball uniforms, because they didn't provide anything like that. So in order to have a team with uniforms you paid for it yourself.... They had discussions.... They taught you how to pay for your own things in life, how to get along with each other—because we had discussions over the color of the uniforms, the name of the team. This was a big thing because you learned, when you went into business or whatever later in life, that you negotiated everything. Where if I wanted a yellow uniform I'd try and convince some of the other guys, "Why don't we get the yellow and blue, or the blue and the yellow ones." And I remember the first team, we called it the Royals. It was when they had the Rochester Royals then. I still remember the yellow uniforms with the blue, and we had an insignia of a crown and everything. So we almost designed the whole uniforms by sitting down, negotiating, buying them. He taught us how to more or less get the best buy. He had cata-

*logs from different places, had the pictures and that, and put it all together. ... Yeah, it was what you learned there. And it was always discipline. If you were any kind of problem, you were out. You wouldn't be able to play in the sport team.*⁴⁷

Basketball was *the* game on the Lower West Side, and competition between family and friends was fierce once on the court. The CYO was always at odds with neighborhood fathers who volunteered to coach the parish teams (both Catholic and Protestant parishes had small gymnasiums) because it frequently grabbed players for the Manhattan Center teams, thereby depleting the parish teams. The West Side CYO team played all over the Bronx and Manhattan, but especially where there was another Youth Board coordinator. According to Frank O'Brien:

*We used to play this Black team, who we all got along with when we were really competitive in basketball, St. Charles Borromeo. We used to go up there [142nd Street & Eighth Avenue] and they'd come down to our gymnasium. It was like a rivalry. For some reason the Youth Board had a group up there with St. Charles, and one of the guys who we played ball against, his name was Vince Shomo. Vince Shomo went on to be—he was a fighter with the golden gloves then in New York City. Shomo won it about six years in a row. He was a good basketball player, but obviously he turned out to be a great boxer and everything. But there was some connection between St. Charles, I guess because they also had somebody from the Youth Board.*⁴⁸

Many of the CYO teams were successful in citywide tournaments, even playing for championships at Madison Square Garden. The counselors who worked at the center were mostly Irish American. In the 1960s, Mike Jeffers and Joan McCarthy were the directors. Ed Delaney was in charge of the basketball program, the most popular sport,

**Photo:**

Greenwich House, a settlement house on the Village's Barrow Street, was founded in 1902 to provide services for working-class and poor families in the area. It provided, among other things, after-school programs and sports programs (including boxing and basketball) for families and youth in the area. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

with boxing, under head trainer Pete Mello in the 1940s and 1950s, a close second. The coaches spent endless hours teaching the game and making sure that players represented the center in sportsmanlike conduct. For many years, the CYO amateur boxing team was a challenger for the New York Golden Glove Championships.⁴⁹ Ed Smith and John Mulhearn handled the game room activities. These counselors were college-educated and, while shaping the lives of the youngsters in the neighborhood, always took the time to discuss the value of education.⁵⁰

One young man, for whom basketball was his ticket out of the old neighborhood, never forgot his roots. Frank McGuire, born and raised on Fourteenth Street, the son of a New York City cop, became head coach at the University of North Carolina and started to recruit players from back home. "I believe we know more about basketball in New York,"

McGuire once said. "Even the players are better. A kid has to dodge and fake just to get on the subway. It makes him a good feinter just to walk on the streets."⁵¹ Brian Sullivan, the son of a Greenwich Village longshoreman, remembered his father's friendship with McGuire: "Frank would call my father up every year. Dad would get dressed up in a suit and tie and go up to the Garden [Madison Square Garden] and sit behind the bench. They would go out to dinner after the game. Frank and my father were friends in grammar school [St. Bernard's]."⁵²

The CYO's Manhattan Center also provided the forum for weekly bingo games that adults—especially the West Side mothers—could enjoy. Frank O'Brien was also employed there on Friday nights to sell the paper Bingo "Specials" which were popular with neighborhood women:

It was packed from—they had, the

bowling alley had tables, the gymnasium had tables, the gym floor had tables, and they had a P.A. system through the whole building.... So even though they were on all different floors, they played the same game, which made the prizes bigger because you could bring in so many people. Then in those days the only activity most people had was the night out for the Bingo, so it was a big thing for the women. They would show up and they all had little good luck charms with pictures of their grandchildren and whatever. And I remember them being as tough as nails, running the women. You couldn't cross them. You had to cater to them.... It was not only a night out, but it was a way to get something extra that they could bring home and treat the kids to something. So they took it as serious as can be, to get that money in there. But it was good prizes and everybody, kids would walk around, you might be assigned to soda so you would walk around and you'd sell the soda and you'd get paid. So it was not only a place to hang out in, it was a place where you could work at thirteen, fourteen years old and get paid so you'd have some money for yourself for the week.⁵³

There were two other institutions that provided great support to the neighborhood. The Hudson Guild, a non-denominational center at 436 West Twenty-seventh Street, was formed in 1895 by Dr. John Lovejoy Elliott.⁵⁴ The Greenwich House, also without religious affiliation, was located on Barrow Street, just off Seventh Avenue South. Like the CYO, these also played a major role in the development of Lower West Side youngsters.

Part of the Hudson Guild's charter was to be "concerned with all the people in the area regardless of natural origin, religious faith, race and economic or cultural status. To provide a common ground where people can become acquainted with their neighbors and learn to appreciate and respect the contributions each brings to a community is a major objective."⁵⁵ It sponsored a cooperative store during

World War I, to "ease the economic burden on Chelsea" families of "food shortages and inflation."⁵⁶ In conjunction with New York University's Center for Human Relations, the Hudson Guild performed a survey of the area of Twenty-second Street to Thirtieth Street, Sixth to Tenth Avenues, in 1953. "The survey cites the U.S. Census of 1950 which shows that of foreign-born residents only 11.25 percent were from Ireland."⁵⁷ But the oral histories reveal that they were Irish Americans from the parishes of St. Michael and St. Columba who took great advantage of the Hudson Guild offerings. Among these was Jeanne Caffrey, another lifelong West Sider who credits the Guild with persuading the City to build the park that still exists on Twenty-eighth Street, where the Guild sponsored movie nights during the summer that enabled families to congregate and enjoyed themselves with neighbors. The Guild would also sponsor dances for the teenagers, a place for social interaction under supervision. Ms. Caffrey looked back fondly on the "farms." The Hudson Guild had "several hundred wooded acres in New Jersey's Watchung Mountains" near Andover and a variety of cabins were available for rent during the summer and the majority of renters were family and friends—who sometimes called the place of their sojourns "Chelsea in the Woods." The mothers and kids spent time at the lake and there were a variety of supervised activities for the children; husbands came up for the weekends to see the family.⁵⁸

Greenwich House on Barrow Street was similar in offering outlets to the kids from Greenwich Village. Boxing loomed large in Joe Dean's recollections of Greenwich House:

Greenwich House was wonderful, and I was there recently. And the guy that ran it, Fernard Antonelli, who is long dead... would stand by the front of the door, because the dues were ten cents a month, and none of us had the ten cents. None of us. And he'd say, "Next time you better have it," and he'd forget about it. ...you had a game room, number one, where

the guys and girls hung out. Ping-Pong, card playing, you know, trying to make out with a girl. And then up in the gym was basketball and boxing. Boxing was big in Greenwich House because...you know, Gene Tunney trained there when he fought Jack Dempsey, Patty Young, who was the number one contender for a while, Buster Peppy, Billy Gardner, there was some top fighters that came out of Greenwich House. But when boxing started to sort of lose its flavor, although it stayed big in the CYO into the '60s, because Jimmy Hogan and Jackie Kelly and all those guys, they all fought out of there. But Pete wound up being an Olympic boxing coach. Bill Clancy was up in CYO too. There's a great story about the CYO. I'm a boxing historian. When Rocky Marciano came to New York to fight Joe Lewis, they asked him to stay at the Doral Hotel in Forty-ninth and Lex. He decided to stay at the YMCA Sloan House on Thirty-fourth Street. ... The money that they gave him he kept in the toilet tank, in the room that he had. But he trained for that Joe Lewis fight at the CYO on Seventeenth Street. Charlie Goldman, Al Wheel, maybe Bill Clancy, they all were part of it. But that's where he did his training for that fight. Greenwich House was terrific. Friday night was basketball. They'd play the guys from Seventeenth Street, the guys from Sullivan Street.⁵⁹

Eddie Brennan also remembered some of the Irish kids from the neighborhood who excelled in boxing at Greenwich House:

You had good guys. I was lucky to fight on the same card with guys that really could fight. Johnny Lackland was one... Johnny was a neighborhood guy, yeah. Went to school with me. ...And Billy Gardner. Billy Gardner was an exceptional kid. And Billy went on to fight. Billy was pro at seventeen years old... They played basketball there. The guys

were there a lot. A lot more than me. I just trained to fight, but I never took it serious, serious. I just liked it. Billy did. Johnny did. They were good. I was just like, "Okay, you throw me in there too." But they were city champions. ...they boxed out of Greenwich House. They took CYO apart. Those two alone. Billy—I remember Billy fighting in Lenox Hill. I was up there. I didn't fight. But Billy was my pal. And Billy said, "Eddie, they're gonna fight me again. And again, and again." Four guys in one night. They were dying to beat him. They couldn't beat him. He was that good. And I'd have to say, "Billy, you can beat them. What, are you kidding me?" He says, "No, they're gonna bring somebody else in." He was always playing himself down. He knew how good he was. Beautiful guy. And he beat four in one night. City champion, which was nothing for him. Then he got involved with the wrong fight people. They just didn't.... He should have been in the Olympics. He would've walked through. He would've walked through anything he did, except—between you and I—the wrong shit. Drugs got a hold of him, and they didn't know how to deal with him. And he didn't know how to deal with it. And it wasn't his thing. Billy was always a subdued, clean—no smoking, no drinking. Somehow he got involved with drugs.⁶⁰

The competitive sports and culture of masculinity—even the slide into drugs or crime—among the children of the Lower West Side, mediated as they were by the churches, schools, and other institutions in Chelsea or Greenwich Village, were byproducts of a world that orbited around waterfront work.

Although the Irish dominance of waterfront work on the Hudson was waning by the late 1890s—as the number of Italians in the area began to grow and “sharp foremen played one group against the other”—they were “still in positions of superior skill and responsibility” on the eve of the first world war.⁶¹ A 1912 study

found the Irish particularly concentrated with “certain conservative steamship companies” that operated out of the nine piers in Chelsea.⁶² Thus local union and power dynamics related to those piers, and to the ones in the West Village, strongly influenced the lived experience and memories of the lower West Side as Irish.

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- 7 Robert Ernst, *Immigrant Life in New York City, 1825–1863* (NY: King’s Crown Press, 1949) pp. 193–194; Bayor & Meagher, *The New York Irish*, Table A.2 pp. 552–553.
- 8 *Report of the Council of Hygiene and Public Health of the Citizen’s Association of New York upon the Sanitary Condition of the City* (NY: D. Appleton and Company, 1865), p. 186 [hereafter Sanitary Report (1865)].
- 9 Bayor & Meagher, *The New York Irish*, Table A.6, p. 558. In 1919 the Joint Legislative Committee Investigating Seditious Activities “commissioned maps prepared by the New York City Police Department and the State Police identifying neighborhoods in which certain immigrants and their offspring predominated.” The “ethnic map” for the Irish was colored green and clearly highlighted the West Side neighborhoods of Hell’s Kitchen, Chelsea and the western section of Greenwich Village as Irish neighborhoods. Sam Roberts, “Ethnic Maps,” *New York Times*, 4 January 2012, p. A19.

Endnotes

- 1 James T. Fisher, *On the Irish Waterfront* (NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), p.1.
- 2 Marion R. Casey, “From the East Side to the Seaside,” in *The New York Irish*, eds. Bayor & Meagher (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), pp. 400, 407; Kate Feighery, “The Best Air in the City: Socioeconomics of the Irish in Highbridge,” *New York Irish History*, Vol. 24 (2010); William Geoghan, “On the Streets of Park Slope,” *New York Irish History*, Vol. 12 (1998); Terrence Flynn, Sr., “The Irish in the Rockaways,” *New York Irish History*, Vol. 12 (1998); Catherine Gregory, *Woodside: A Historical Perspective, 1652–1994* (NY: Woodside on the Move, 1994).
- 3 This is the world I grew up in. My parents came from Arklow, County Wicklow, a small coastal town on the Irish Sea. My father, his brother and my mother’s brother were employed on the Manhattan waterfront. In addition, many of their friends were also employed on the Hudson River. My own lived experiences of the Lower West Side significantly helped me connect with the individuals interviewed for this thesis. All the oral histories cited in this paper are available in the Joseph L. Long Collection, Archives of Irish America, New York University.
- 4 *WPA Guide to New York City* (NY: The Guilds Committee for Federal Writers’ Publications, Inc., 1939), p. 151.
- 5 Fisher, p. 3.
- 6 Thomas J. Shelley, “Catholic Greenwich Village: Ethnic Geography and Religious Identity in New York City, 1880–1930,” *The Catholic Historical Review*, Vol. 89, No. 1 (January 2003), p. 60; Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Encyclopedia of New York City*, s.v. “Greenwich Village” (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 556
- 7 Robert Ernst, *Immigrant Life in New York City, 1825–1863* (NY: King’s Crown Press, 1949) pp. 193–194; Bayor & Meagher, *The New York Irish*, Table A.2 pp. 552–553.
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- 9 Bayor & Meagher, *The New York Irish*, Table A.6, p. 558. In 1919 the Joint Legislative Committee Investigating Seditious Activities “commissioned maps prepared by the New York City Police Department and the State Police identifying neighborhoods in which certain immigrants and their offspring predominated.” The “ethnic map” for the Irish was colored green and clearly highlighted the West Side neighborhoods of Hell’s Kitchen, Chelsea and the western section of Greenwich Village as Irish neighborhoods. Sam Roberts, “Ethnic Maps,” *New York Times*, 4 January 2012, p. A19.
- 10 Sanitary Report (1865), p. 120.
- 11 Sanitary Commission (1865), p. 186.
- 12 Edward A. T. Carr, *Faded Laurels: The History of Eaton’s Neck and Asharoken* (NY: Edward Carr, 1994); Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation (<http://www.gvshp.org/block638.htm>), accessed May 2, 2012.
- 13 Jay Shockley, *Gansevoort Market Historic District Designation Report, part 1* (New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, 2003), p. 7, <http://www.nyc.gov/html/lpc/downloads/reports/gansevoortpt1.pdf>, accessed May 2, 2012; *Encyclopedia of New York City*, s.v. “Chelsea,” p. 234
- 14 Thomas Kelly, January 14, 2012, Joseph L. Long Oral History Collection, Archives of Irish America, New York University. Nabisco “has about 46 acres of floor space and employs several thousand workers,” reported the *WPA Guide to New York City*, p. 151.
- 15 Shockley, p. 8.
- 16 *New York Times*, 23 September 1883 quoted in Shockley, p. 9.
- 17 Peter Davies, “Now and Then: Gansevoort Street,” *High Line Magazine*, Spring 2012, p.13; Shockley, p. 9.

- 18 Shockley, p. 6.
- 19 Sanitary Report (1865), pp.117, 185.
- 20 Sanitary Report (1865), pp. 187, 189, 197.
- 21 Elizabeth Ogg, *Longshoremen and their Homes* (NY: Greenwich House, 1939), p. 49
- 22 Bob Gibson, January 15, 2012, Joseph L. Long Oral History Collection, Archives of Irish America, New York University.
- 23 Joseph Dean, December 2, 2011, Joseph L. Long Oral History Collection, Archives of Irish America, New York University.
- 24 Thomas J. Shelley, *Greenwich Village Catholics: St. Joseph's Church and the Evolution of an Urban Faith Community, 1829–2002* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2003), p.103.
- 25 Thomas Kelly, January 14, 2012.
- 26 Joseph Dean, December 2, 2011. My own small apartment in Chelsea seemed to be a meeting place on weekends. My father's friends and uncles would stop by to talk, play cards or have a drink. I cannot even recall hearing these men complain about their work. Granted I was a young age, but nonetheless impressionable and eager to listen and learn.
- 27 Mary Thomas, November 10, 2006, interview with the author.
- 28 Muriel Harpow, telephone interview with the author, February 12, 2012.
- 29 Fr. John Corridan S.J., Box 11–12, Xavier Institute of Industrial Relations Papers, Walsh Library, Fordham University.
- 30 Like a lot of immigrants, my maternal grandfather, William English, came to Chelsea from Arklow and worked for the Erie as a barge captain. He lived in one of the many rooming houses that were in Chelsea and Greenwich Village catering to the Irish seamen. He saved enough money to send for his wife and kids some years later. For more detail on this one can refer to an interview with my maternal uncle, Peter English, October, 16, 2011, Glucksman Ireland House Oral History Collection, Archives of Irish America, New York University.
- 31 Hugh E. O'Rourke, "An Irish or Nativist Riot? The Abingdon Square Incident," *New York Irish History*, Vol. 13 (1999).
- 32 Shelley, *Greenwich Village Catholics*, p.72.
- 33 *WPA Guide to New York City*, pp. 128, 151. "The bulk of St. Veronica's parishioners [circa 1903] were employed in...humble occupations, many of them as longshoremen and teamsters....In 1908 the principal of St. Veronica's School reported that the fathers of half of her students were unemployed." Shelley, "Catholic Greenwich Village," pp. 66–67.
- 34 Joseph Dean, December 2, 2011. A baling hook was a common tool used by longshoremen in hoisting materials. The hook is a prominent prop used in the final segment of the movie *On the Waterfront*.
- 35 The nuns from the various orders only went by first names so you never knew their ethnicity for sure.
- 36 Artie Shea, November 6, 2011, Joseph L. Long Oral History Collection, Archives of Irish America, New York University.
- 37 Frank O'Brien, November 26, 2011, Joseph L. Long Oral History Collection, Archives of Irish America, New York University. I remember there were five girls with the last name of Rodriguez in my classes at St. Bernard's and they were expected to sing and dance in the St. Patrick's pageants. Non-Irish in the schools did not seem to faze the nuns. During my interviews with residents of Greenwich Village, the Galicia connection was often raised. Galicia is a part of the northwest coast of Spain and a number of Galicians immigrated to the section of Greenwich Village west of Hudson Street, where the men were able to get work on the piers. Unlike relations with other ethnic groups, the Irish and the Galicians bonded and there were many instances of intermarriage. Names such as Baral, Dominguez, Barriero and Lopez married into Irish families, with names such as Mullins. Ed Mullins was a longshoreman and every one of his eight children married someone with Galician heritage.
- 38 Bob Gibson, January 15, 2012. I tallied Bob Gibson's raw data; even with a margin of error, the impact the Irish had is quite interesting. Bob Gibson recently retired from the Tri-Borough Tunnel Authority (TBTA) where he supervised members of the security detail who are responsible for the safety of New York City bridges and tunnels. During the oral history, his passion and love for his Irish identity clearly came through. Bob resurrected the TBTA's Emerald Society and was the president of its chapter at the time of his interview.
- 39 Bernadette McCauley, "Taking care of Their Own: Irish Catholics, Health Care and St. Vincent's Hospital, (1850–1900)", *New York Irish History*, Vol. 8 (1993–94), p.51.

- 40 Peter English, October 16, 2011. My uncle called this “Madonna Home” in the interview but it was, in fact, the Angel Guardian Home run by the Sisters of Mercy in Borough Park, Brooklyn.
- 41 Joseph Dean, December 2, 2011.
- 42 *WPA Guide to New York City*, p. 152.
- 43 Frank O’Brien, November 26, 2011.
- 44 Some of us were lucky enough to be hired as counselors. You learned quickly what it mean to have responsibility when you had to make sure that 12 to 14 were on the same train as you visited sites throughout the city.
- 45 Frank O’Brien, November 26, 2011.
- 46 New York City Department of Youth and Community Services, <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dycd/html/about/history.shtml>, accessed May 2, 2012.
- 47 Frank O’Brien, November 26, 2011.
- 48 Frank O’Brien, November 26, 2011. For the career of Vincent O’Neal Shomo, see http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Vince_Shomo, accessed May 2, 2012.
- 49 Mello coached the 1952 Olympic boxing team that included Floyd Paterson, later the heavyweight champion, at the CYO’s West Side Center. Red Lewis assisted with the boxing program.
- 50 My father died when I was 14 years old and Ed Delaney stepped in to help guide me to the right path when I was most vulnerable to drugs and crime. Irish guys from the West Side—like Gerry O’Shea (12th Street), George Long (17th Street), Lannie Sullivan (15th Street), Frank O’Brien (17th Street), Mike Sullivan (Hudson Street), Bob (Upton) Beehler (Bleecker Street), John Conboy (19th Street), Allie Byrnes (9th Avenue), Frank McQuade (9th Avenue), Billy Smith (15th Street) and Brian Sullivan (Hudson Street)—played against the more elite Catholic teams of Lasalle, Rice, Power Memorial, Cardinal Hayes and Xavier High Schools.
- 51 “Frank McGuire, 80, Basketball Coach, Dies,” *New York Times*, October 12, 1994.
- 52 Sullivan. Oral history, February 8, 2012. Once at North Carolina, in the mid-1950s, McGuire started to recruit New Yorkers to go south to play for him and he had a pipeline to the best Catholic school players in New York City. In 1956, his New York-influenced squad won the national championship against a Kansas squad led by Wilt Chamberlain. Frank McGuire revolutionized the college game by starting to recruit from beyond local areas. The college game today owes him a debt of gratitude. Frank never forgot where he came from. He always made sure his teams came to New York to play and that helped with his recruiting.
- 53 Frank O’Brien, November 26, 2011.
- 54 Hudson Guild Records, 1896–1990s http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/archival/collections/ldpd_6930622/index.html, accessed May 2, 2012.
- 55 Rhetta M. Arter, *Living in Chelsea*, (NY: New York University, 1954), p.5.
- 56 Hudson Guild Records, 1896–1990s http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/archival/collections/ldpd_6930622/index.html, accessed May 2, 2012.
- 57 Arter, p. 15.
- 58 Jeanne Caffrey, January 7, 2012, Joseph L. Long Oral History Collection, Archives of Irish America, New York University.; Hudson Guild Records, 1896–1990s, http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/archival/collections/ldpd_6930622/index.html, accessed May 2, 2012.
- 59 Joseph Dean, December 2, 2011.
- 60 Edward Brennan, February 11, 2012, Joseph L. Long Oral History Collection, Archives of Irish America, New York University.
- 61 Charles B. Barnes, *The Longshoremen*, (NY: Russell Sage, 1915), p. 8; Shelley, “Catholic Greenwich Village,” p. 83.
- 62 Barnes, p. 10.