

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

BY JOSEPH L. LONG



Photo:
Departing ship and tugboats at Pier 54 in the North River near West 13th Street early in the twentieth century. Beginning in the late 1860s increasing numbers of Irish settled near the expanding West Side docks and provided them with labor and leadership. Courtesy of documentingreality.com.

Ed. Note: *The first part of this article appeared in volume 26 of New York Irish History and focused on development of Manhattan's West Side waterfront after the Civil War, the arrival of the Irish there, and major social institutions that emerged in Chelsea and Greenwich Village through the mid-twentieth century. This final part deals with economic and labor developments in these areas, particularly after WW II, and with recreational and leisure activities that contributed to an enduring sense of community among the Irish and Irish Americans in these two sections.*

By the early twentieth century, New York's West Side piers were the most lucrative on the entire East Coast. While big cruise liners kept the Hell's Kitchen neighborhood active, in Chelsea and Greenwich Village the piers

handling passengers, cargo, and mail were operated by the United States, Grace, Belgian [Red Star?], Savannah, and Cunard lines, among others. There were 290 longshoremen from Greenwich Village working on the Cunard pier in 1939.¹ Eddie Brennan, owner of the Village's White Horse Tavern, still had a mental map in 2012:

[Pier] 54 was a Belgian line when I went there in 1958—55—55 was the Belgian line, 56 was another small line, and then you had the Grace Line, which was 57. That was the new pier. But Pier 54, if you walked out the door, 14th Street was to the left, 12th Street was to the right, and Gansevoort Street was in the middle. And it was always called Pier 54, address: North River. It was always North River... Then below that,

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you would have the garbage dumps. But in those days you still had the meat markets, see. And you would go to the garbage dump, and then 53 would be your next pier, which was about two city blocks away. Of course you had an open pier that had no number. That was probably 55, no, 3. Then you had a US Line that was in there, of course they were all the liquor shapes. That was Jimmy Meione's pier, Italian fellow, and Tony Demec's, Spaniard, or he was Mexican. They had 52 and 51. I might be a little off in my numbers, but...it's pretty on the money. And those names were the fellows that ran those piers. But they were all Irish longshoremen and Irish labor bosses.²

Loading and discharging cargoes for these ships was the business of the piers abutting the neighborhood. The conditions and method of work, the shape system, have been well documented by labor historians. The work was hard, largely manually driven, unsafe, and irregular. "The shape-up was actually a gathering of men seeking work at pier heads. Forming in a semi-circle, they awaited the decision of the hiring boss as he exercised his daily prerogative of selecting his men. When the longshoreman was chosen, he stepped forward to receive his brass check, a metallic object about the size of a quarter. Stamped on the check were a number and the name of the stevedoring firm. Receipt of the check was, in effect, a ticket of admission to work. When the longshoreman entered the pier he would show it to the timekeeper who would make the appropriate entry in the book."³

WAGES ON THE WATERFRONT

Before the Civil War, longshoremen in New York City could earn \$1.50 for a ten hour day, which was a better rate than other manual labor at the time. By 1872, an all-time high was reached: "40 cents an hour for day work, 80 cents for night work, and \$1.00 for Sundays."⁴ Between 1872 and the turn-of-the-twentieth century, employers cut wages, trade unionism was revived, and workers struck.



Nevertheless, "about the years 1911 and 1912 the wages were fairly uniform. Day work was paid at the rate of 30 cents an hour; night work and holidays as time and a half—45 cents; Sundays and Christmas, double time—60 cents. This was the general rate for foreign commerce work and for coaling vessels. It was paid by the larger steamship companies." The average weekly take-home pay for men with decades of waterfront work experience was \$12 or less calculated "on money made at the Chelsea pier, where earnings are comparatively high" and steady. As Charles Barnes observed, "little mention is made of the paltry earnings of weeks when only two or three days' work can be had" and he reported that, because of so many variables, it was nearly impossible to reliably average wages at the port of New York.⁵ His profile of two men gives insight into the Lower West Side Irish community at this time.

The first was a forty-five year old native of Ireland who had emigrated in 1889 and had worked as a longshoremen since that time. "A man of average height, build, and strength, far above the average in intelligence, he has worked all over the port, and has a thorough knowledge of longshore work. He has been president of a union, delegate, and beach walker." This man's average take-home weekly

Photo: "Shaping" at a West Side pier in mid-twentieth century. On some docks there were three shapes a day. Hiring for most jobs on the docks was done through this system. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

pay, all things considered, was \$13.09.⁶ The other was an Irish-American who left Fall River, Massachusetts in the wake of its 1904 strike to join a brother already working on the New York waterfront. This man “is given all the work possible, and takes all he can get” from the White Star Line. “He is small in stature, well groomed, and about thirty years of age. His wife is refined and thrifty, and their home is above the average. He is domestic, rarely smokes, and never drinks.” His average pay was \$14.14 per week, from weekly earnings as high as \$25.05 to a low of 45 cents depending upon the availability of work.⁷ In 1909 the standard of living in New York City “for a family of normal size” required between \$800 and \$900, “or from \$15 to \$18 weekly, if it is to maintain itself in health and decency.” Charles Barnes concluded that “an adequate income is therefore rarely within reach of a longshoreman, even of a superior man willing to work excessively long hours” because the average total could only amount to somewhere between \$520 and \$624 per year.⁸

Elizabeth Ogg agreed. In 1939, when she surveyed longshoremen living in Greenwich Village, there were about 21,600 longshoremen in Manhattan “but not nearly enough jobs for all of them.” The average annual income was, by then, \$900 based on the ability to get at least twenty hours a week of work. “This is too low an annual income to provide a family with adequate housing in New York City at commercial rents,” Ogg wrote.⁹ Paying the rent and balancing the family budget fell to the women in the waterfront community. Many landlords were lenient in lean times, provided the rent “was paid in full over a year’s time.” In return, families “would never think of moving out of a neighborhood where they were well known to their landlord and grocer unless they were sure they could have such consideration elsewhere.”¹⁰ Women also brought in additional income through cleaning offices; one of the biggest employers of local mothers was the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which had its headquarters at 111 8th Avenue.¹¹ The women who were fortunate to work at “The Port” were

steady breadwinners. If their husbands did not have a ship or were on strike the women came through because they knew how to stretch a dollar and manage households.

THE TURBULENT DECADES

By the 1940s, a turbulent period on the docks, the livelihoods of families that relied on the Hudson River piers were directly affected by four individuals who came into conflict over the economic and social well-being of people who worked and resided on the West Side. These were the Jesuit priests Philip Carey and John Corridan, the labor union leader Joseph Ryan, and the wealthy businessman Bill McCormack, all second-generation Irish Americans.

Joe Ryan was the International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA) president for life. A product of Chelsea, he attended a few years of grammar school at Xavier, then rose to prominence within Local 791, known simultaneously as the “Irish” and the “Mother” local.¹² Ryan eventually lived on 21st Street, down the block from Guardian Angel Catholic Church where he was a daily congregant at the 8 o’clock Mass. Ryan had a long time relationship with Bill McCormack who had “the contract to handle all the stevedoring business of the Pennsylvania Railroad, largest shippers in the metropolitan area.”¹³ This apparent conflict of interest was the basis for Ryan’s misunderstanding and mishandling of the West Side longshoremen that resulted in major strikes in 1945, 1951 and 1953 that were a personal embarrassment to Ryan when he learned he could no longer count on his Local for support.

The old contract between the ILA and the New York Shipping Association expired on September 30th, 1945. For several weeks, Ryan and his ponderous sixty-member negotiating committee had been meeting with management to formulate a new one. “We’ve got a real fine contract here” Ryan claimed, and he tried to persuade his men to accept it. “The new agreement called for a reduction of the 44 hour week to 40 hours, and a pay hike of 10 cents an hour for regular work and



Photos:
(Above) Soldiers arriving in New York in 1945 after World War II. Veterans returning to work on the West Side docks were important in bringing significant reforms to labor systems and wages. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

(Right) Joe Ryan, at center, was president of ILA Local 791 in the 1940s and 1950s. But he also had a close relationship with Bill McCormack who held the Pennsylvania Railroad contract to supply stevedoring services on the West Side docks—an apparent conflict of interest. Ryan lost control of the Local in the early 1950s due, in part, to a “major Irish Catholic insurgency.”
Courtesy of Library of Congress.

fifteen cents an hour for night work, above the old rate of \$1.25 an hour. As usual, Ryan’s imagination had not gone beyond simple wages and hours demands.”¹⁴ When members of Local 791 in Chelsea (22nd Street near Piers 59, 60, and 61) walked off the job on October 1st, 1945, their actions were quickly matched by Local 895 members from the Village. By the next morning, thousands of longshoremen from all over the City joined the Lower West Siders. The strikers were able to get a better increase in the hourly wage as well as a reduction in the shape ups from three to two. “Despite the confusing and often bizarre character of the strike, its roots in Chelsea convinced some that Joe Ryan faced a major Irish Catholic insurgency.”¹⁵

This was the situation that Father Pete Corridan, a Jesuit sent to assist Father Philip Carey, found when he arrived at the Xavier Labor School in 1948. Carey, tied up with helping other labor unions, needed someone to take on the docks. Both men were the sons of Irish immigrants and they both attended Regis High School. Corridan was a fast read and opened up Xavier to dockworkers. It was a place where longshoremen could come to and express themselves without fear. But this brought him into direct conflict with Msgr. John O’Donnell, pastor of Guardian Angel and the Port Chaplain, who received support from Joe Ryan and the ILA. “Taxi Jack,” as Msgr. O’Donnell was known, clearly limited his responsibilities to taking care of the spiritual needs of his parishioners, yielding authority for working conditions to Ryan. Corridan

was thus a threat to the status quo and at one point Cardinal Spellman had to step in and review false charges brought by O’Donnell against Corridan.¹⁶

Over the next couple of years strikes followed similar to that of 1945. At the end of World War II the young veterans from the neighborhood returned to the piers. They had seen the horrors of war and now came back wanting changes to the corrupt and unfair system they had once participated in. “The old ways of intimidating people into keeping quiet and accepting what is given to you was not going to fly,” recalled longshoreman George Long. “These were hardcore veterans who fought on Normandy, Battle of the Bulge and Guadalcanal. Scare tactics were not going to work.”¹⁷ The 1948 walkout by the West Siders resulted in getting better wages, and both valuation and pension funds, aided in no small



part in by a series of exposés in the *New York Sun*. Reporter Malcolm Johnson, who was listening to Father Corridan, now dubbed “the Waterfront priest,” opened with a scandalous accusation that eventually led to an official investigation in 1951:

Here in the world’s busiest port, with its 906 piers, 100 ferry landings, ninety-six car float landings and fifty-seven shipbuilding dry docks and repair plants, criminal gangs operate with apparent immunity from the law. These gangs are well organized and their control of the piers is absolute. Their greatest weapon is terror, invoked by their strong-arm squads and their gunmen.



Their power is such that they are able to levy tribute on every pound of cargo arriving at this port. This is accomplished through highly lucrative rackets controlled by gangsters.¹⁸

Johnson named John Bowers (Hell's Kitchen), Tim O'Mara (Chelsea), and Ed McGrath (West Village) as the bosses of the West Side piers, all ex-convicts with ties to Joe Ryan.

In 1953 the ILA and American Federation of Labor (AF of L) got into a tug of war for control of the piers, causing conflict on the West Side streets between family and friends. John Dwyer, a graduate of St. Bernard's who lived in Greenwich Village, got involved with the Labor School and Father Corridan. Joe Dean's father was a member of the St. Veronica's Irish insurgency and was friends with John Dwyer. Dean recalls:

You talk about some of the strikes! When they had the strikes, and I don't know if you were old enough to remember the AF of L/ILA wars, but the waterfront got divided. A lot of the uptown guys were ILA, downtown guys were AF of L, and the AF of L wanted to become the ILA. There used to be buttons. Even the kids

would fight. I'd be fighting with kids—Tom O'Connell, one of my best friends, his old man was ILA. My old man was AF of L. Fourth and Fifth grade, we're fighting over it. Fist fights. During that time, the unions got sort of separated, and my old man was backed by a guy by the name of Johnny Bowers. Johnny Bowers became the president of the ILA eventually. But the other fringe group was run by a guy by the name of John Dwyer. My sister was John Dwyer's secretary, writing his notes, while my old man was fighting with him. We just never discussed it in the house, ever.¹⁹

Father Corridan supported the AF of L, encouraging the men "to switch unions to be free from 'totalitarian leaders' and to give themselves a democratic organization that would recognize morality of conduct."²⁰ After three votes, the ILA retained leadership even though their past was anything but stellar; the West Side longshoremen felt they were better off with the devil they knew than the one they did not know.²¹ In the end, despite everything, "many longshoremen voted for their jobs first and only secondarily for the ILA."²² As Elizabeth Ogg had learned fifteen years earlier, the Irish need for security was embedded in the psychology of the neighborhood:

They felt it was better for them to take what dock work they could get, even with the low annual income, than to change occupations and run the risk of having no work at all. Once they left the industry their places would of course immediately be filled from the present [1939] oversupply of labor, and it would be extremely difficult and expensive to get back into the International Longshoreman's Association.²³

A WORLD FULL OF CHILDREN

Chelsea's reputation, according to Frank O'Brien, was as "a bad area or a tough area" with "violence and fights."²⁴ But it was also a world full of children. The CYO's Manhattan

Photo:
Father Peter Corridan, S.J., in 1948 joined the Xavier Labor School, which he opened to dock workers. His organizing work with them brought him into conflict with Monsignor John O'Donnell, pastor of Angel Guardian Church in Chelsea and official chaplain for the West Side docks. In his efforts with dock workers, Corridan was highly influential and a threat to the status quo. Courtesy of Library of Congress.



Photo: Gertrude B. Kelly Park on 9th Avenue in Chelsea was dedicated by Mayor LaGuardia on May 16, 1936. Gertrude Kelly (1862–1934) emigrated from Ireland in 1873. In the United States, she became one of the first female medical doctors, an outspoken supporter of Irish independence and women's suffrage, and director of a health-care clinic in Chelsea. Courtesy of New York City Parks Photo Archive.

Center on West 17th Street was the domain of grammar school children between 3 and 5pm on weekday afternoons. Nearby—and because it was a “congested neighborhood”—the City built a model playground on the old site of P.S. 11 in 1934 to demonstrate “the use of small areas for recreational purposes.”²⁵ Two years later, the *Irish World* newspaper was instrumental in having the new Chelsea playground named for Dr. Gertrude B. Kelly, a pioneering physician who had worked with poor women and children in the area.²⁶ Kelly (1862–1934), an Irish immigrant and nationalist, had also helped lead a three-and-a-half week strike of Lower West Side dockworkers against British ships in the late summer of 1920. This was a purely political rather than economic strike, meant to draw attention to the war Ireland was then waging for independence from Great Britain. Kelly was the treasurer of the “Chelsea Pier Picket” strike fund “which gave stipends to longshoremen willing to stay out on strike.”²⁷ This history had receded among locals by mid-century. “We never called it Kelly Park,” said Tom Kelly. “It was always 17th Street Park. Not 16th Street. I don’t know why.”²⁸

There were only two other parks on the Lower West Side. Between 9th and 10th Avenues, from 27th to 28th Streets, Chelsea Park was the biggest open space in that crowded neighborhood. It had a playground from 1910, as well as ball and athletic fields.²⁹ In Greenwich Village, Hudson Park [between Leroy and Clarkson streets, now James J. Walker Park] had a playground from 1903,

but the Irish considered it an Italian park and only ventured to use it for the public baths (indoor and outdoor pools).³⁰ Instead, the local streets near home became urban playgrounds. In Greenwich Village, for example, the Gansevoort Street meat market had a big open area just west of Hudson Street. From the close of business early on Friday mornings until it reopened on Sunday nights, there was very little vehicular traffic using the surrounding streets and stickball reigned.³¹ A broom handle and a spaldeen (ball) was all that was needed.³² Tom Kelly described how the commercial landscape lent itself to play:

On the west side of Hudson Street there was a lot of warehouses from the piers. Now, right on Bleecker and 11th Street, there was a warehouse that went from 11th all the way up to Bank Street, which was the next block. It was a bonded warehouse. The only entrance they used was on Bank Street. The other ones were sealed shut because it was bonded. They handled metals. A lot of lead. I remember watching the trucks, and they would line up the—it was almost like building blocks, right in the middle of the truck. They couldn’t put it on because it would break the truck. And it was mainly lead and copper. So they sealed all the other doors, because it was also, it was bonded, which was a big thing. So we had the whole warehouse, with the windows bricked over, to play stickball. Bleecker Street now, you couldn’t—you had to wait for the lights. Back then, because Hudson Street was two ways, the downtown traffic just kept coming down 9th Avenue into Hudson Street. Now we can’t do that. So we played on Bleecker Street. Stickball. I mean you might have one or two cars. When we played stickball on the weekends, there was no cars. We’d go down and play on Greenwich and Washington Streets, where I was from, because you had the big warehouses. You didn’t lose the balls.... We used to play softball because we couldn’t

get—Leroy Street then, you had to be in a league, and there was, say, thousands of kids around. We played softball on Gansevoort Street...right on the street where the market is. Where Gansevoort Street comes down on the other side of Hudson, and little West 12th, it turns into a V. And while they have cobblestones there, it was all slick because they were down from the 1840s. So every now and then we'd play softball down there all weekend. The meat market wasn't open then until Sunday night. It would start functioning at night so they could get—all the butchers came in, maybe 8 o'clock. There'd be nobody down there... Stickball was the biggest thing.³³

Chelsea boys played each other all the time but then the best players were picked to play against other neighborhoods. "Money games were big," Tom Kelly continued:

The older guys, they always played for money on the weekends. I would play with guys four or five years older than me when I was 15, 16. And I could hit the ball. These were money games. I could hit it further than anybody else. I boogied with the ball...I remember playing outside of St. Bernard's on 13th Street there on Sundays. They would take some trashcans and block it off. The cops would stop you from doing that, but this was from the older guys. And the guys in Chelsea would play us, you know, different neighborhoods. Sometimes guys from 17th would play guys from 19th Street. And for some reason we'd go down there on a Saturday—pretty sure, it had to be a Saturday—we'd play stickball down there. And they would get a keg of beer, put it in the ice tray, and they'd have a keg of beer. Not bottles or cans. And the older guys would drink that. Of course we tried it over there when we were teenagers. And the money there: if you played and you made - you could strike out or pop the ball out—but if you made an error and they scored a couple, you were

in trouble. It was pressure. There really was pressure. And that's where I got my nickname, Herc, for Hercules, because I could hit the ball. We were playing the guys in Chelsea—the Hogans, I think, Tommy Hogan—and I hit the ball over the centerfielder's head once. I hit it



again. He backed up. I hit it three times over, and he yelled in, "What is this guy, Hercules?" They were yelling, "What is this guy, Hercules in disguise?"³⁴

The Hudson River piers were convenient for summertime swimming too. Teenagers congregated at the Gansevoort Street Pier where public access was allowed, even though it was side-by-side with the Sanitation pier that transferred Manhattan garbage to barges for transport to dumping sites. Joe Dean remembered:

We would hang out on 11th and Hudson, we would see all you guys from uptown [i.e. Chelsea] coming downtown with your towels and your bathing suits, walking down. Because it was either spend ten cents at Leroy Street Pool or go to Gansevoort Street Pier, and personally, we had an incredibly good time swimming on Gansevoort Street Pier, all of us. And out of all the guys that swam off of Gansevoort Street Pier, only one guy got sick. Joe Lockman got typhoid fever once... You had to swim at high tide because you couldn't swim at low tide. It was too filthy. We would actually dive off the sanitation barges.³⁵

Photo:
During summer, in Manhattan neighborhoods like Greenwich Village and Chelsea, piers along the Hudson informally got used for recreation. Courtesy of myinwood.net.

Swimming in the Hudson was treacherous, even without the “distractions” of the Sanitation barges. Artie Shea had his own description of what could happen:

Me and—he’s dead now, but—Mickey Corbett and Gerald Kearney, they lived on 13th Street. Their fathers were longshoremen. We swam over to Hoboken once. And we were 14 years old. I’ve still got all the clippings from the paper. When we got over there, we climbed up on the pier and the guard arrested us. He said, “Where did you come from?” He thought we were breaking in. We said, “Oh, we came across the river.” He didn’t believe us. So they took us down to the Hoboken station house and called our parents up. Like holy shit, you know. “He’s where?” [laughs] “How did he get there?”

You know what, it was pretty common for kids to swim in there, and once in a while some of the kids would go over there. But none of them ever got caught, you know. Because one of the kids didn’t know how to swim, so we put him in a tire tube. Gerald Connor. And he paddled... they put it in all the newspapers. It was in the Daily Mirror and The Journal American. My parents were just livid about it. Of course the papers make up things. You know, they said, “Mrs. Shea said, ‘I fed him and sent him out. He was ready.’” My mother was terrified. [laughs]... Security guard, he thought we were breaking into something. I don’t know why. We just had our bathing suits.³⁶

Girls had adventures too. Mary Woods’ family goes back generations in the Village on her mother’s side.

The neighborhood was dangerous, but we never told our parents it was dangerous because then they wouldn’t let us out. But I remember the freedom of skating. I skated all over the place... roller-skated all over the place. I would skate up to Central Park and then take the

train back. I’d skate over to Washington Square Park. I skated all over the place... I don’t think I understood the implications, the sexual implications, of it. I was a very defiant child. And I was difficult. I’m sure there were a lot of WASPS and very sort of middle class Jewish girls that I could have played with, with the dolls or in the house. But I wanted to be free, I wanted to be out, I wanted to skate. I remember they would always say, “Mary, take your hands off your hips” because it was un-ladylike. And one day I remember somebody said, “You won’t be a lady.” And I said, “I don’t want to be a lady. Ladies have no fun.” I don’t think I understood the sexual implications of that. But I was a tomboy. I wanted to be out, I wanted to have fun. I wanted to be with boys. We kind of roamed together.³⁷

The neighborhood roofs were also co-opted for recreation. Many locals raised pigeons for sport and hobby.³⁸ Eddie Brennan was taught by his father and had a number of coops in Greenwich Village, built with materials salvaged from the piers. “Oh God, I had coops in this area here, let’s say a ten block radius, fifteen coops,” he said.

I built and [would] get thrown off, come back the next day they were ripped down. I’d go somewhere else. I had them in 323, 321, had them on the old Egg House roof on Bank Street, I had them on West Street with my father. Honey Cummins was on between Charles and Perry on Hudson with Frank Shaeffer, who was a dock boss on Pier 34. I had them on 242 West 10th Street. I had them all over the city.³⁹

Pigeon culture on the Lower West Side was multi-ethnic but a particular favorite of the Irish. Eddie Brennan described “the allure of the pigeons,” as he called it:

You would go up there every day. You were there—that’s where you hung out - and you’d look for strays, and you’d poke

your pigeon and flatter them. You always kept them hungry and when you'd throw feed, the pigeons would come down. The strays would see that. They were of course flying for five hours, who knows, and they'd come down to get on your roof to get some of that feed. But the technique was keep the birds flattered and you'd get them down, and then you'd scare them. But not too much because you don't want to scare him, the stray. Because the stray [i.e. someone else's pigeons] would get me fifty cents. Fifty cents would get me six pounds of food. Pigeon food. That's how you kept the birds....If I lost a pigeon that I felt I wanted, I'd go to different roofs. In those days there were eight roofs. It was a big Irish thing...around here it was, yeah. The Italian guys loved it too, but it was a big Irish thing because it was a big English thing. And it also was a big German thing. Passenger pigeons. And you'd holler up, "Hey did get a blue Teague?" Say "Yeah, come on up and get him." You'd come up and you'd give him fifty cents, get your Teague back. If you didn't want the bird he would take it to the bird store. He'd hold it a week or two and then he'd take it to the bird store and he'd get fifty cents.

My father was a pigeon flyer. He had a bar on West Street....His place was with Sonny Thompson. And that building was vacant in those days, and he had pigeons in the top floor apartment, which I occupied in 1974. I got that apartment and cleaned it up. It was another building. But in 1948 I'd go up there and feed the pigeons and he'd give me a rifle, and he'd say, "Sit on a can here with the feed in it." And the rats come to take the eggs. He said, "Shoot the rats." So I would shoot the rats with a .22 rifle. [I was] about twelve, eleven [years of age]. He'd say, "Here Eddie, sit here. Here's your rifle. Shoot them." He knew I knew how to shoot. And I'd shoot the rats, and the pigeons would fly right out the domus that was still out there when I took the apartment. I'd open the domus

and the pigeons—he had 450 pigeons in that. The room was twenty-three feet high at the peak, thirty feet deep with its own staircase...that was the coop. He flew them right out the window. But later years I took a roof next to it and I had my own coop... [with] 400 pigeons, at least, in that roof. When I had the coop on 11th Street, or 242 West 10th Street, I took those pigeons. A couple of fellows got in trouble and I took that roof over with Brother Boral, and there was 120 up there all the time. A hundred and twenty was nothing. Some guys had 300 or 400 up there on a roof.⁴⁰

Tom Kelly also raised pigeons and described the gambling and dangers associated with it among the Lower West Side Irish:

It was a big betting thing for the English, and the Irish picked it up. Homing pigeons.⁴¹ Every single block, somebody had a coop. Say the block between 11th and Bank Street from Greenwich to Washington. You could build four or five coops there, but they wouldn't because one of the big things was to send your pigeons up and to capture birds from another flock. And that was a big thing. Other than racing them for money, your tumblers, you'd send them up and try to capture birds from another flock. That was all legal. Nobody would fight about that. You captured one or two birds. It was very, very dangerous, because a lot of people with the pigeons—or birds, as we used to call them—were tough guys. If they caught you up there—because a lot of people used to go up to steal them, and you'd sell them to somebody; you'd sell them to someone, they didn't ask. As long as it was healthy, they'd buy it for less than they could buy it at the shop over on the Lower East Side that sold pigeons. But a lot of people—kids—I had a coop with Tommy Groat, Meatball Gibson, Danny Hanley. There was five of us. And we robbed the lumber from construction sites and built a big coop on a place. We had to break into this ware-



Photo:
Bars and clubs near the waterfront were used by longshoremen in Chelsea and Greenwich Village for many purposes including finding employment leads and waiting for shape-ups to occur. They also reinforced community ties and provided services for family affairs. Some saloons became informally associated with certain piers. The White Horse Tavern on Hudson Street had its own unique clientele. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

house, which we knew how to do, to get up to feed the pigeons. And I wasn't really big into pigeons. It wasn't really my thing but I hung out with them, so... we'd go up there and probably had 100 birds. Some of them we bought in the East Side. Send them up with the flock and they'd make a beeline for the street. They would hustle us, you know. But there was an awful lot of people—mainly, when I was a kid, a lot of the kids had them—but it was mainly the people that were twenty years older. There was a generational thing there.⁴²

IN SALOONS AND CLUBS

A different type of socializing took place where the street segued into the saloons and clubs of the Lower West Side. Many of the bars along the Hudson River catered to the longshoremen and both were the products of the shape system that was the foundation of how waterfront workers were hired. For a long time there were three shapes a day “with all its uncertainties and injustices” and, without an alternative place to wait, the men spent that time in the local bars rather than venture too far from the possibility of getting work. “They were afraid

they might lose a chance to work if they left the vicinity of the pier gates,” Elizabeth Ogg observed in 1939.⁴³ Certain bars were identified with certain piers. Shannon’s on 23rd Street and Joey’s, right next to Local 791, were characterized as U.S. Line bars. The Grace on 18th Street and McKenna’s on Hudson Street had a Grace Line following. The Port Tavern and Reilly’s on 8th Avenue had a Port Authority following. The Blarney Rose, on 14th Street off 8th Avenue, catered to the tugboat and barge workers. These were all places that men could congregate during the day to have a hot meal or sandwich, or stop into after work to have a “ball [shot] and beer.” For some this led to alcoholism, gambling, loan-sharking and family strife.

On the other hand, the saloons also reinforced community. On weekends, family and friends met after Mass in some of the bars, for example, O’Neill’s [now called Moran’s] at 19th Street and 10th Avenue, and the Blarney Rose. Others, like Shannon’s, had back rooms where showers and engagement parties were held. The Rhinelander Club on 14th Street, just off 8th Avenue, was a hall where dances were held on weekends, attracting hard-

working mothers and fathers who got dressed up to enjoy an evening out. Dressing up was not a problem since certain other bars had reputations for being places where you could purchase goods that “fell off trucks.” Word of mouth travelled quickly as to what was available and business, especially for clothes and shoes, was brisk.

The White Horse Tavern on 11th Street and Hudson, open since the 1880s, was known as a Merchant Marine hangout. Tom Kelly made a distinction between it and other bars in the neighborhood.

Now the White Horse was different. The White Horse, because they had a lot of artists in there, and they had pints and they had half-and-half, which was considered exotic. They also had a lot of seamen. Not longshoremen but seamen. They were very...pinkish, let's put it that way, lot of people in the Communist party. They also had, at one point, five to six, seven people that had fought in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade that hung out there permanently. They had one guy, Larry O'Toole, happened to be an Irish name. He was made Lieutenant. He was wounded twice in

the Spanish Civil War. And these guys were die-hard Communists. They went over there and put their life on the line. None of them could get into the Army in the Second World War. All of them volunteered. They became merchant men. They could get that job because they were being killed in droves. And that was a big deal. And that's one of the reasons it became a lot of maritime guys who went in there. When I was a kid, we were told, “Stay away from there. It's a commie bar.” Now this is during the '50s, when you know, the Cold War. Occasionally there'd be a fight up there. Some of the younger guys would try to get in. They'd keep them out. There would be a brawl. A lot of these guys in the White Horse could fight. Somebody would say, “Hey let's go beat a couple of Commies up.” And they'd go up there and get the shit kicked out of them, because these were guys that were merchant marines. They were tough, and as I said they had a crew that fought in the Abraham Lincoln brigade. And they wouldn't back down from anybody. I mean these guys had seen more battles than most people did in the Second

Photo:

The site of Shannon's bar on West 23rd Street off 10th Avenue, now occupied by the Half King pub. Shannon's was known as a bar for workers on the United States Line. Its back room was used for family parties and other celebrations. Courtesy of Margaret Fitzpatrick.





Photo:
St. Bernard's School
was on 13th Street in
Greenwich Village.
Interaction and
education in schools
like St. Bernard's,
along with other
shared experiences,
contributed to a sense
of community and
lasting relationships
among the Irish of
the lower West Side.
Courtesy of Margaret
Fitzpatrick.

World War. And they were tough. And a lot of neighborhood guys got the shit kicked out of them. So the White Horse was always different. Then it became, there was like a lot of artists, writers, hung out there. All from Dylan Thomas, who supposedly drank himself to death there, even though he didn't die outside or anything. But you had Norman Mailer. When I was a kid, I used to sneak in there. Phony draft card. Stand in a corner, don't bother anybody, and they'd serve you. There was people playing chess, no juke box, no music, no TV. And people arguing. I thought it was fascinating. About different things. Norman Mailer, people like that.⁴⁴

In 1967 Eddie Brennan and a silent partner bought the White Horse. Eddie was born and raised in Greenwich Village, a product of St.

Veronica's who worked on the docks. During a hiatus from the piers, he bartended in the neighborhood and managed to come up with a down payment.

When I left the piers, when I gave up the piers for a period, I went steam fitting, I went [into] carpentry, I could always get in. And I was day bartending in a few places and Jimmy that owned this place [the White Horse] wasn't doing well, asked me to come in here, which I did. And he said, "Do you want the place?" He wouldn't sell it. ...He said, "You want it?" I said, "Yeah, but what do you want?" He was dying. He said, "Here's the story. \$22,000 for two thirds, and the promise from the silent partner that he would pay \$11,000, at a total of \$33,340. When you're ready." So I took a job bartending days here

and I took a job over in Cedar Tavern on University [Place] at night, and in four months I had put [aside]—which it took, for the license to go through, and it was difficult getting a liquor license in those days—and I gave him \$11,000, and I owed him 10. And the other 5—I had \$5,000, I had \$6,000—the other 5 I got from my jukebox. I got a jukebox guy, which I'd made a deal with him in the very beginning. I said, "I want 5 grand on a loan, and I'll put a jukebox in the White Horse." And they said, "Okay." So I got the cigarette machine and the jukebox, and that's how I got in here. And in eighteen months I paid them all off. Because I picked up, I shot the joint right up. It was a good spot, I mean...it was a good location [for a time] but it had went down and it was hard. It was difficult.⁴⁵

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Greenwich Village became a center for the Beat movement and a focal point in the City's folk music scene. Brennan developed relationships with many of the artists and writers, especially the Clancy Brothers from County Tipperary who spent many a night drinking, talking and singing in the White Horse into the early hours of the morning.

I knew [Paddy Clancy] from 10th Street, but I also knew him from here [White Horse]. But from 10th Street I really got friendly with him...that's where I flew the pigeons. 242 West 10th Street. Eddie Gibson—it was his roof, and he was the super. And I became his friend and I took care of those pigeons and they became mine, with him and Brother. And Pat, and then when I started drinking in here I went to work on the piers, and I was coming in here drinking. I'd seen the Clancy Brothers would be in here singing... they would sing in here and that's where they would be discovered in a sense... they were just good at what they did [singing], and they were the first to do it [commercially].⁴⁶

Even after being catapulted to fame via the *Ed Sullivan Show*, the old neighborhood still pulled the Clancys back to the White Horse when they came to town. "They did three interviews here for me," Brennan said, when they could have gone anywhere else. "They said, 'We'll do it at the White Horse.' ...Liam came here two years before he died." And that was typical Lower West Side Irish.

AN ENDURING COMMUNITY

Caroline Ware concluded her classic 1930 study of Greenwich Village pessimistically, declaring that an urban and industrial setting could not foster community, that "calling an area a neighborhood did not make it one." In her opinion, "social development" was dependent upon "a coherent social life" that she did not find on the Lower West Side, despite the fact that she documented a "culture framed by...ethnicity and the experiences of a diverse working class."⁴⁷ Of the Irish, she described a once rich neighborhood culture that revolved around political clubs, religious societies, and county organizations—a culture that by 1930 was either dead or disappearing.⁴⁸

Only the frequent wakes, as one after another of the old inhabitants died, continued to bring rich and poor together periodically for nights of informal festivity. In spite of continued social activities, moreover, the sense of being a social unit had departed. Only among the very old was there any group feeling and this because they were living in a past which had ceased to be. The rest of the Irish talked of the time before the War [WWI] when everyone knew everybody else and every street was like a large Irish family. In 1930, all that remained were shattered fragments of groups that used to exist but had long since lost their significant unity...among the Irish who had centered their life around the neighborhood, no one interviewed failed to reminisce and lament. The effect of the disruption of the neighborhood upon the Irish was to make most of the younger move or intend

*to move, while most of the older were left wistfully living in the past.*⁴⁹

By recording some of the experiences of the Irish who lived on the Lower West Side after 1930, in their own words, this article reveals things that Ware could not see. First, among those whose livelihoods depended upon the port, the boundaries of neighborhoods could be simultaneously fluid (when work was considered) and static (when there were youth or sports team rivalries). In the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, the bond between the Irish living on the waterfront in both Chelsea and Greenwich Village was not restricted by the geography of urban planners and social scientists. Second, shared experiences across generations—home life (living conditions, family income), institutional religion (including Catholic schools), and leisure (especially a common street culture among the children)—replaced the more formal ethnic and religious associational culture that Ware rested her definition of Irish community on. Instead, recreation and education built lasting relationships, in the midst of the searing experiences of the strikes, union strife, and the glaring publicity of the Waterfront Commission. In the memories of those interviewed for this article—even taking into consideration the pitfalls of nostalgia—the Irish neighborhoods on the Lower West Side survived intact for at least three decades longer than Caroline Ware anticipated. Unlike other New York City Irish neighborhoods in the mid-twentieth century, a living relationship with the harbor, and all that that implied, imprinted a sense of community on the Irish in Chelsea and Greenwich Village.

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Endnotes

- 1 Elizabeth Ogg, *Longshoremen and their Homes* (NY: Greenwich House, 1939), p. 12.
- 2 Edward Brennan, February 11, 2012.
- 3 "In 1958, close to 38,000,000 long tons of ocean-going cargo with a staggering value of \$8,500,000,000 was handled through the port's facilities. In the fiscal year ending June 30, 1951, 73% of United States mail sent abroad in American bottoms sailed from New York." Charles Hathaway Trout, *The New York Longshoremen and his Union* (MA, Columbia University, 1961), p. 1.
- 4 Barnes, p. 77.
- 5 Barnes, pp. 80-84.
- 6 Barnes, pp. 85-86.
- 7 Barnes, p. 85.
- 8 Barnes, p. 92.
- 9 Ogg, pp. 23, 30-31.
- 10 Ogg, pp. 32-34.
- 11 On 17th Street, the block I grew up on, I can remember five Irish-born women that worked nights. Alice Morgan, Kitty Wadden, Mary English, Mrs. Flanagan and Annie Long were all from Arklow and all worked long enough to pension out. Their husbands all worked on the docks. Husbands came home and the women went out to clean the offices. There were plenty of times that the transition did not hand off smoothly. Your father may work overtime, or stop off to have a few. That is when the older siblings heated up the dinner. If not then neighbors pulled you in to eat with them. The children of the neighborhood learned quickly to fend for themselves. It was a way of life. Two parents at work is not a new concept for us who lived on the Lower West Side.
- 12 Frank Miskell, March 21, 2009. Glucksman Ireland House Oral History Collection, Archives of Irish America, New York University.
- 13 Malcolm Johnson, *On the Waterfront: The Pulitzer Prize-Winning Articles That Inspired the Classic Film and Transformed the New York Harbor* (NY: Chamberlain Bros., Penguin Group, 2005), p. 152.
- 14 Trout, p. 70.
- 15 Fisher, p. 95.

- 16 Fisher, pp. 72, 86.
- 17 George Long, March 27, 2012, Glucksman Ireland House Oral History Collection, Archives of Irish America, New York University.
- 18 Johnson, p. 17.
- 19 Joseph Dean, December 2, 2011.
- 20 Vernon H. Jensen, *Strife on the Waterfront: The Port of New York since 1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), p. 121
- 21 Frank Miskell, March 21, 2009.
- 22 Jensen, p. 134. *On the Waterfront*, even though filmed in New Jersey, was based on these events.
- 23 Ogg, p. 38.
- 24 O'Brien. Oral history, November 26, 2011.
- 25 Dr. Gertrude B. Kelly Playground, City of New York Parks & Recreation Historical Signs Project, <http://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/M066>, accessed May 2, 2012.
- 26 "Mayor Eulogizes Woman Surgeon," *New York Times*, May 17, 1936, p. N10
- 27 Joe Doyle, "Striking for Ireland on the New York Docks," *The New York Irish*, Ronald H. Bayor & Timothy J. Meagher, eds. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), pp. 357, 372
- 28 Kelly. Oral history, January 14, 2012.
- 29 Chelsea Park, City of New York Parks & Recreation Historical Signs Project, <http://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/chelseapark>; Recreation Parks, Manhattan in *Directory of Social and Health Agencies of New York City*, Vol. 30 (NY: Welfare Council of New York City, Community Council of Greater New York, Charity Organization Society of the City of New York, 1921), p. 207
- 30 James J. Walker Park, City of New York Parks & Recreation Historical Signs Project, <http://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/jameswalkerpark/history>; Directory of Social and Health Agencies of New York City, p. 220
- 31 It is hard to envision that in this era, since the area I am trying to describe is right in the heart of today's trendy Meatpacking District. The restaurant Pastis sits in our old center field.
- 32 Encyclopedia of New York City, s.v. "stickball," p. 1245
- 33 Kelly. Oral history, January 14, 2012.
- 34 Kelly. Oral history, January 14, 2012.
- 35 Dean. Oral history, December 2, 2011.
- 36 Shea. Oral history, November 6, 2011.
- 37 Woods. Oral history, January 17, 2012.
- 38 I can remember going with the brothers Frank and Rich Miskell to feed their father's birds. He had a coop with his partner, Whitey Munson, on Gansevoort Street. It was on the roof of a pickle factory.
- 39 Brennan. Oral history, November 11, 2011.
- 40 Brennan. Oral history, November 11, 2011. He also described "chucking up:" "We'd go down and give the bus driver, we'd give him a couple bucks. He'd take a couple of boxes of pigeons up. Last stop would be 155th Street, and he [would] let them out. And we'd see how long it took them to come back. Whoever would come back would win the bottle of beer....you bred for looks and you bred for speed. You bred show birds."
- 41 "European immigrants brought the tradition with them in the nineteenth century, and residents [of New York City] have kept pigeons in rooftop coops since then." *Encyclopedia of New York City*, s.v. "Rock Pigeons," p. 1117.
- 42 Kelly. Oral history, January 14, 2012.
- 43 Ogg, pp. 17, 20, 24, 48. The shape-up times in 1939 were 7:55am, 12:55pm, and 6:55pm.
- 44 Kelly. Oral history, January 14, 2012.
- 45 Brennan. Oral history, February 11, 2012.
- 46 Brennan. Oral history, February 11, 2012. In the 1970s, the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem had a sold out reunion concert at New York's Lincoln Center. Eddie Brennan attended the performance. As a tribute to their old friend they singled him out in the audience and proceeded to sing "Brennan on the Moor."
- 47 Ellen Fitzpatrick, "Caroline F. Ware and the Cultural Approach to History," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (June 1991), pp. 190–192.
- 48 Caroline F. Ware, *Greenwich Village, 1920–1930* (University of California Press, 1963), pp. 209–210.
- 49 Ware, p. 210.