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One day in the early 1930s as investigators for the Bureau of Social Hygiene were trying to infiltrate working-class pool rooms, gambling dens, and saloons, they inadvertently stumbled upon a man who ‘stood out among the fellows’. Like other men attracted to these ‘dives’, this man, who remained anonymous and was described as a ‘tall, husky looking specimen of a Neapolitan push-cart man’, had been erratically employed and shifted from job to job – some more notorious than others. But what distinguished him from other men, investigators argued, was that ‘he likes women more than he likes drink’, which they found ‘quite unusual’.1

Their surprise at finding a man who preferred women over drink suggests that most working-class men were not only particularly fond of the companionship and the camaraderie saloons and other all-male hangouts had to offer them, but that male culture or homosocial relationships profoundly shaped gender relations. Indeed, working-class men had long used their saloons, street corners, and pool rooms not only to sustain and celebrate the cultural traditions of camaraderie, fraternity, and reciprocity through various rituals of mutual assistance – the most well known being the practice of treating one another to rounds of drinks. They also participated in a culture in which they fashioned their status and identity primarily around the social relationships they developed with other men – a status that was often at odds with the larger community. Part of the thrill of being male was, for example, violating the community norms parents and other adults established, which might include hanging out in smoke-filled pool rooms, loitering about the neighbourhood streets and sidewalks, or harassing passers-by. By the late nineteenth century, homosocial relations still largely defined working-class men’s day-to-day lives. But the rise of dance halls, movie houses, and amusement parks presented new challenges. While the heterosocial peer culture associated with commercial leisure encouraged new forms of intimacy and contrasted sharply with the organisation of leisure around a
vigilant family and community, working-class men often found that the masculinity with which they were most familiar did not always mix well with heterosocial amusements and hence challenged their dates’ expectations about intimacy and leisure.²

Nowhere was the drama and tension surrounding homosocial solidarity and heterosocial intimacy more vividly played out than in working-class social clubs where the two came crashing together. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, social clubs, also known as pleasure, athletic, and cellar clubs, were ‘independent organization[s] of young men or women, maintaining private quarters for the social activities of the members and their friends’.³ They were hangouts ‘where boys and girls hobnob after school hours in poorly lighted basement rooms’ or ‘avenues of escape from crowded homes and inconvenient quarters … [where] the young men and women may go to dance and otherwise while away their leisure time’⁴. At the same time, most men used their clubs to organise their homosocial lives and relationships. Social clubs usually consisted of about a half a dozen to twenty-five members or more, who were in their late teens to late twenties and who had known each other through athletic teams, gangs, school clubs, political organisations, or they became acquainted as pinochle or billiard players and at their parents’ lodges or philanthropic organisations.⁵ With roots in athletic teams, gangs, and other all-male get togethers, social clubs remained an integral part of a larger homosocial world where men sustained and even celebrated their relationships with other men. In short, working-class social clubs resemble what anthropologist Victor Turner calls ‘liminal’ spaces. According to Turner, liminal spaces are ‘betwixt and between’ the ‘formerly familiar and stable and the not-yet familiar and stable’ and thus provide a ‘release from normal constraints’ and make possible the ‘deconstructing of the “uninteresting” construction of common sense’ and the ‘meaningfulness of ordinary life’.⁶ Social clubs routinely defied the normal order of things by blurring the boundaries between heterosociality and homosociality, between masculinity and femininity, and even between public and private since most clubs were community-based yet consumed with sexual experimentation and intimacy. As such, social clubs offered working-class men the opportunity to enjoy the best of both their homosocial and heterosocial lives, but only if they could find some way to manage them simultaneously.

This essay explores the manner in which men organised their social clubs during the 1920s and the 1930s when the number of clubs reached their peak, and the problems club members faced when trying to balance heterosocial and homosocial leisure. In particular, it examines social clubs that were located primarily in large cities like New York and Chicago and the different activities in which these groups of men participated to support their basement hangouts. Although some clubs received financial assistance from politicians, saloon keepers, or other community members, this essay considers the working-class hangouts found in the basements of

tenement flats or some other neighbourhood shack or vacant room and supported through funds club members collected from weekly dues and by sponsoring dances and other social events at which they charged an admission or hat-check fee. Thus, while almost all of these clubs revolved around a larger homosocial culture and would remain crucial to the ways in which men constructed their masculinity, club members generally found themselves either using their clubs for some sort of heterosocial fun or dependent upon mixed-sex leisure to keep their clubs afloat, both of which challenged the male culture upon which these clubs were initially based.

Over the past two decades, historians have taken a closer look both at all-male hangouts like saloons and fraternal lodges, and at dance halls and other heterosocial amusements. But they have generally ignored the relationship between the two, assuming that rigid boundaries separated homosocial and heterosocial spaces and that the transition from one to the other was inconsequential. For most men, either there was no simple transition between the two, or the boundaries separating homosocial and heterosocial leisure were virtually indistinct at points, especially in social clubs where men used their hangouts to develop and strengthen relations with other men and to establish intimacy with women. As a result, most men did not simply abandon the social practices and rituals around which they organised their clubs when they set up dances and other social nights to attract potential dates or spouses. Instead, they devised strategies that allowed them to participate in heterosocial leisure and still remain committed to the male culture of which they were a part. In some cases, men were able to resolve the obvious contradiction and successfully used their clubs as ‘dancing and dating cooperatives’. But coming to terms with heterosocial leisure was never that simple or easy and, unlike the ‘tall, husky looking specimen of a Neopolitan push-cart man’ who liked women more than he liked drink, most men found themselves constantly struggling both with and against the women they admitted into their clubs to define the use of club space as well as the meaning of intimacy, leisure, and even masculinity.

According to Herbert Asbury, social clubs had been a ‘feature of life in the congested tenement districts’ for ‘many years’ before the 1890s. But it was during the early 1890s that they began to appear ‘in greater numbers than ever before’. On the one hand, social clubs grew increasingly popular because politicians found that they could use a club as a ‘tool in building up’ their ‘own personal or local political machine’, and hence many clubs were ‘patterned after’ and supported by the ‘political associations which have been formed in large numbers by the Tammany district leaders’. On the other hand, saloon keepers were out to increase their profits. According to Raymond Calkins, who conducted a study of saloons at the turn of the century, some men were initially attracted to a social club because it was a ‘more comfortable way to drink’ than at a saloon, and beer was not always available from the saloon on Sundays. In the clubs, alcohol could be ‘bought in advance and freely dispensed to all comers’, and some clubs
obtained licences and had ‘bars of their own’. As a result, the social club was a potential rival, and the money that used to ‘find its way into the tills of the saloon’ was now ‘paid directly to the brewer’. To ensure their profits, saloon keepers opened their rooms up to social clubs for dances and other entertainment and provided music free of charge, or they organised their own social clubs and had members meet on different nights in their saloons.9

When working-class men failed to find a politician or a saloon keeper willing to support their pleasure, they simply paid their own way and expenses. In his 1913 study of leisure in New York, Michael Davis found a group of twenty-five men aged twenty-one to twenty-five who paid dues of ten cents a week for a room above a saloon.10 Indeed, with Prohibition and attempts to clean up boss politics, many men lost the patronage upon which they had initially relied and had no choice but to organise their own clubs. By the 1920s and 1930s, the price of their clubs ranged from the ‘cheerless’ twelve-dollar-a-month basement cellars to the more luxurious forty-five-dollar three-room spread, both of which required members to pay dues from twenty-five to fifty cents a week, although about any place would do ‘just so the rent is cheap’.11 Many working-class youths used vacant houses, lofts, garages, store fronts, shacks, barns, attics, the ‘empty front basement rooms intended for janitors’, and even their parents’ basements.12 In Harlem in the 1930s it was believed that social clubs were out of view entirely because the ‘top-floor-back apartments are cheapest’. In Brownsville, ‘furnace rooms of two family houses serve as club quarters’, and, with the end of Prohibition and the removal of the premium from Greenwich Village cellars, many men found old speakeasy sites ideal. The most popular club, and the type from which its name was derived, were the social clubs located in the basement flats of high-stoop tenements called cellar clubs, where ‘all one can see of clubs from the street are windows peeping over the sidewalk and a home-made sign’.13

At the same time, working-class men were careful about their club’s location. According to Isadore Zeligs, who conducted a study of social clubs for his sociology class at the University of Chicago in the 1920s, many clubs, known as ‘side street hide outs’, were tucked away along alleyways or on the back sides of buildings. One of the side street clubs he investigated was located in the basement of a private home and ‘completely hidden from view’ because there was ‘no sign at its entrance’, which was ‘thru a side door about half way to the rear of the house’. Some men undoubtedly ended up with a ‘side street’ club, because rooms facing a busy avenue, or ‘main street’ clubs, were harder to find and afford. Renting a main street club meant more passers-by, especially girls, and the increased chance of making new acquaintances, the goal of many men. But the hangout’s location was also a matter of choice, depending on its purpose. Zeligs insisted that ‘public opinion’ was ‘very intensely averse to their [side street clubs] existence’ because they were organised primarily for ‘sensations and
stimulations of the simplest and most impulsive kind’, distinguishing the side street club from clubs set up along the busiest streets and avenues, which were a much more obvious part of the community’s life and culture. The reasons men set up a club varied as much as the buildings in which they gathered. Besides using their clubs to elude their annoying parents and take part in certain ‘sensations and stimulations’, Kerson Weinberg, also a sociology student at the University of Chicago in the 1920s, found that Jewish working-class men set up social clubs to avoid the potential discrimination they faced. In particular, Weinberg explained that while these hangouts allowed for the expression of the ‘dominant urge of solidarity’, they also represented a compromise for young Jewish men too ‘extroverted’ to ‘sit and brood’ and not ‘sufficiently extroverted to break away from [the] community’ because of the ‘bristle of anti-semitism’, which further explains the increased visibility of social clubs throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as immigration from southern and eastern Europe reached its peak; social clubs were one of the few autonomous spaces available to Jewish youth desperate to escape from the anti-semitism that typically reared its ugly head at more public gatherings.

Using a club house to escape the discrimination some men faced was never a peculiarly Jewish practice, however. In Chicago throughout the early twentieth century, social clubs maintained a conspicuous presence in many working-class immigrant neighbourhoods, including Little Sicily, Cicero, Back of the Yards, and Chicago’s South Side where Italian, Czech, Polish, and Irish working-class youth spent much of their time socialising. In New York during the early 1920s, John Mariano noticed ‘placards proclaiming the existence of at least thirty such clubs all within the short space of four blocks’ while strolling along New York’s Mulberry Street, the main thoroughfare of the Italian Lower East Side, and even Harlem boasted its share. The Eastside Dudes was a social club organised in central Harlem in 1933 out of a gang whose members hung out at a candy store or huddled together in hallways to escape the bitter winter cold, until the mother of one of the members died and left him a life insurance policy worth five hundred dollars.

Of course neither gangs nor social clubs were ever limited to large cities like New York and Chicago. Recreation surveys from the early twentieth century routinely reported social-club activity in such diverse cities as Kansas City, Missouri; Cincinnati; Philadelphia; Bridgeport, Connecticut; and Madison, Wisconsin, where (according to a police manual) most of the thieves with whom the city had to contend were recruited ‘from young men who spend their time in and around places known as hang-outs, such as candy stores, cigar stores, two-and-half-cents-a-cue pool parlors [and] fake social clubs’. With smaller cities, investigators usually failed to report the number of clubs, but only the number of dances or parties social clubs sponsored; in Kansas City, Missouri, ‘it was found [that] during the month January 1912, twenty [social] clubs gave forty-three card parties and

socials … reaching between one and two thousand people’. For larger cities, the numbers varied between five hundred and one thousand through the 1920s. In 1898 there were an estimated seven hundred in Philadelphia and one thousand in Cincinnati, while New York claimed more than five hundred in the 1920s, a figure that equalled the number of commercial dance halls. By the Depression, there were five thousand social clubs in the greater New York area with approximately 150 thousand members, numbers which contributed to the belief that they were ‘Depression born’. 

The popularity of sports also contributed to the large numbers of social clubs. In the 1890s many clubs adorned their walls with pictures of sporting celebrities, trophies, or pennants, and generally organised athletic competitions with other clubs or used their hangouts to hone their craft. Calkins found that sometimes a club might include ‘a ring and boxing-gloves’, which, he noted, ‘betr[ay]ed] the character of the club’. Over forty years later, sports remained the reason working-class men set up a basement hangout. According to Robert Bonadonna, he and his buddies set up their club (the Powerhouse Athletic Club) ‘on a whim, just to provide a group of sports minded friends a title & a bond’. Bonadonna and the other club members kept their boxing gloves in the basement and ‘used to spar with each other and a few other things like that’, things like ‘box ball, stoop ball, ringaleveo, kick the can, buck-buck, softball’, and weight lifting.

Other working-class men may have been interested in sports, but they set up their clubs to meet ‘girls’. The first thing to go when they organised what investigators called a ‘dancing and dating cooperative’ was the usual tenement-house ‘cockroach’ green paint. One working man in the 1930s named Arti stated he had ‘lived with that color all his life’, and he would just be ‘darned’ if he was going to let the social-club walls stay that way even if he had to ‘paint it with hair and use spit for mixing’. Members would generally also ‘sand and wax the floor to danceability and screw colored bulbs into the lighting fixtures to give the place some atmosphere’. The group also collected second-hand furniture such as ‘a table and a few hard chairs for the back room pinochle ring and a couple of couches and overstuffed chairs to go down the side of the dance floor’. And to add the romantic touch that was conspicuously absent from tenement flats, many clubs put in an artificial fireplace. ‘They streamline it; they make its opening in the shape of a heart’ and use ‘real wood with bark’ and ‘make it “work” with colored electric bulbs’. The artificial fireplace was so popular that one study of social clubs along New York’s Lower East Side in the 1930s found that twenty-one of twenty-eight clubs included it.

Indeed, social clubs provided young working-class men with the opportunities they desired to meet and entertain their dates. Almost all clubs, including side street clubs, held regular social nights in their own rooms, at least once a week, if not every Saturday and Sunday night. Social nights featured skits, singing, tap dancing, amateur programmes, stunt nights, bingo, and drawing of lots, much like commercial dance halls,
which used prizes to attract female patrons. But dancing with ‘thrice amplified swing music’ from a Victrola or a radio with a ‘loudspeaker hookup’ was the biggest attraction. Nearly every social club included a dance floor. Some clubs even remodelled tenement flats using removable wall partitions that could be set aside at a moment’s notice to uncover a dance floor big enough to accommodate fifteen couples.26 The more ambitious clubs – that is, most, apart from side street clubs whose members were careful about attracting too much attention – also organised picnics and other outings, and they usually held a semi-annual or annual affair. Affairs were elaborately staged and organised dances held in rented halls throughout the neighbourhood or in up-town hotels into which members would ‘sink’ the club savings – as much as fifty to one hundred dollars during the late 1930s – to hire a big-name orchestra and to advertise the ‘affair’ with posters that were ‘plastered over the neighborhood’.27

Social clubs also encouraged more intimate moments. In some clubs, sexual encounters of varying degrees were a common part of club culture and not just for members of a side street hangout. At a Chicago club in the 1920s, Weinberg reported that on social nights ‘petting and other intimate relations between the sexes is prevalent in free fashion’. ‘During the early evening there is quite a good deal of chattering and much dancing … Towards midnight most of the participants are coupled off, dancing has ceased practically, and the corners, every chair and couch occupied’.28 In fact, some social clubs had no ‘hard and fast rules’ about so-called immoral conduct. According to the vice-president of Club Colossal, a New York club in the 1930s, ‘it [sexual intercourse] is up to the fella. If he gets hold of something in the club room he can lock the door and go ahead. We don’t have any lining up or anything like that, but if a guy wants, we don’t bother about stopping him’.29 Members of a Chicago club during the 1920s, for example, boasted about what they referred to as ‘lays of their own’ – women known as ‘mistresses’ who were invited into their clubs specifically ‘when no one was around and then they’d give ’em the works’.30

Some men, of course, vigorously argued that they would never use their clubs for anything more than a simple get-together. According to one member, his social club was ‘the last place they would come to for anything like that [sexual intercourse]’ ‘If they got caught here’, he insisted, ‘every relative in New York and Jersey would know about it in a week’.31 At a Club Regal social night in the 1930s, for example, ‘three of the fellows and their girl friends stayed around after social night was over and the rest of the gang had gone home’. Later that night, a neighbour, who recognised one of the girls, saw them leaving after three o’clock in the morning. The girl’s mother was promptly told of the assignation and in ‘less than a wink’ through the ‘air shaft telegraph system’ word spread to the rest of the neighbourhood. Parents throughout the community rigorously questioned their sons about the incident, and at the following Tuesday’s club meeting, the three boys were summarily expelled after having admitted to being in the

club late, suggesting that their parents were sure to intervene if club members violated the community’s sexual norms and standards. At the same time, the extent to which men regulated their own behaviour also may have reflected the age of certain club members. According to one man in the 1930s, ‘sexual intercourse’ in his club was ‘impossible’ since an older member is in charge all the time rooms are open and only a few of these have keys’. Before the 1930s, social clubs rarely included ‘older members’ or, more specifically, men who were in their thirties – that is, until the Depression. As men began to postpone marriage during the Depression, increasing numbers of them remained attached to their hangouts into their late twenties and even early thirties, which helps explain the tenfold increase in the number of clubs during the Depression. As a result, a greater disparity of ages was likely to exist among club members as unprecedented numbers of men faced worsening economic times, affecting not only the make-up of individual clubs but also the types of activities in which they participated.

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, then, there was no single reason why working-class men set up a social club nor were all men able to use their clubs the same way. For most men, their hangouts provided them the free space to commiserate over their shared problems and even the chance to expand their opportunities for intimacy. But the location of their hangouts and the membership often posed certain problems. While members of a side street club could perhaps elude more easily their parents and other community members, and take advantage of the privacy their hangouts had to offer, other men had either to avoid using their clubs for more intimate matters, or, like the men from Chicago, who used their clubs to entertain their ‘mistresses’, make sure ‘no one was around’. As a result, working-class men generally found more privacy in their social clubs than the neighbourhood streets, or as one man put it, ‘that dark place under the stairs’. But they had either to cautiously abide by the community’s sexual norms or discreetly circumvent them, lest they attract their parents’ unwanted attention and intervention as well as the interference of older members who often held the keys to the club room and watched over the behaviour of their younger counterparts.

Of course, dating and dancing did not consume all of men’s leisure time, nor were social clubs built primarily for heterosocial relationships and activities. Throughout the first few decades of the early twentieth century, when upwards of forty per cent of men over fifteen were single, working-class male culture revolved primarily around what historians have called a bachelor subculture. The ethic of male solidarity and manliness associated with the bachelor subculture was forged through the social practices endemic to saloons, street-corner gangs, blood sports, games of chance, and demonstrations of sexual prowess with women and other men. In many ways social clubs were simply an extension of a larger male culture and the ethic of male solidarity and manliness upon which it was based. By

participating in club culture, young working-class men learned how to
drink, to smoke, to play cards, and to gamble, skills that often served them
in cultivating and sustaining same-sex relationships. 37 Frederick J. Santoianni,
a WPA cost clerk from Bridgeport, Connecticut, often went to the neigh-
bourhood club, or ‘dive’ as some people called it, to avoid arguing with his
mother. Many of the men in his club, he explained, had a ‘bad name’ or
had served some time in the ‘goose house’. But ‘if you are smart enough
[and] just listen to them and don’t talk’, he insisted, ‘some of those boys
can teach you more “stuff” in one hour than what you can learn in college
in a whole year’. 38 William A. Carroll, Democratic member of the Council
from Brooklyn in the 1930s, enthusiastically agreed and ‘recalled with
what sounded like nostalgia that when he was a boy [he] learned to play
crap, pinochle, and rummy in just such a place [a cellar club]’. 39

At the same time, social clubs offered men new and unique ways to
demonstrate their masculinity to the group. The Ukelele Aces, a New York
club in the 1930s, not only tiled, painted, and completely installed an extra
washroom for ‘girls’, constructed five tables, several chairs, two reading
lamps, and built a dance floor with an ‘inlaid center’ out of scraps they
‘picked up on the job’, but assumed the titles associated with these trades
as a sign of prestige. Members, for example, often identified themselves as
the club’s electrician, butcher, tile setter, shoemaker, plumber, concrete
layer, painter, candy cook, brick layer, and contract worker. In the process,
they not only found a way to distinguish themselves through the collective
work of building a club house, but implicitly embraced the values generally
identified with adult men who regularly latched on to skill and physical
prowess as a way of proving their manhood. 40

Once their clubs were complete, members continued to use them to
demonstrate their skills and masculinity to the group. In the 1930s the ‘Y
Boys’, so-called ‘camera enthusiasts’ from New York, ‘turned the darkest
of their three basement rooms into a developing laboratory’. Despite their
meagre twelve- to twenty-dollar-a-week salaries, they were able to enjoy
an expensive hobby through the cooperative buying of equipment and
supplies. Another club from the 1930s, called the ‘Versatile Craftsmen’ and
located on New York’s East Third Street, used only ‘a tiny back room in
their basement flat for social affairs’. They had converted the rest of the
club into a workshop where members had assembled several radios, a
boat, a glider, and had rebuilt a couple of outboard motors. 41 By using
their clubs as workshops, the ‘Y Boys’ and the ‘Versatile Craftsmen’ insisted
that the skills that were perpetually being routinised and rationalised in the
workplace remained the basis for a shared masculinity that explicitly
recognised and celebrated their identity as workers. In other words, the
Versatile Craftsmen, the Y Boys, and the Ukelele Aces were not simply
building a club house or using it as a workshop; they were constructing a
realm of unalienated labour in which they controlled every step of the
production process, suggesting that the boundaries separating work from
leisure were virtually indistinct at points. The work men performed in their hangouts allowed them to reclaim the humanity of their labour, which helped them establish a standard by which they measured the impact and experience of wage labour and which affected the ways in which they understood their roles as producers and as consumers. In the meantime, they not only constructed goods that enriched the club experience and more fully established club ties and a greater sense of interdependence and mutuality among the members; their workshops also provided the social spaces needed to repair the damage done to their working selves by the endless and monotonous hours of wage labour.

Having a social club also provided working-class men with the chance to manage a quasi-domestic space. In almost every club senior members initiated new members and generally held the keys to the club’s hangout, which granted them more say in organising club events and greater responsibility in overseeing the actions and behaviour of other men as well as the club’s reputation. At the Acme Social Club in New York, for example, the vice-president supervised ‘a rotating committee of five’, who gave ‘the room a thorough cleaning every two weeks: windows are washed, bath and showers scoured, floors scrubbed etc’. With this arrangement, seniority granted some men the privilege as well as the distinction of not having to perform domestic chores, which perhaps exacerbated already hostile feelings about domesticity for some men. But the day-to-day experience of keeping their hangouts clean, as well as the opportunity for some men to supervise the operation, helped reaffirm the club’s collective culture and gave men the chance to practise the skills they would eventually use once they assumed the responsibilities of adulthood.

With the Depression, club membership may have even made it easier for young men to cope with their prolonged bachelorhood. Increasing numbers of men remained attached to their clubs until they reached their early thirties because they lacked the resources needed to marry, and their clubs, along with the gambling and other all-male fun, offered them the companionship they craved to deal with the hard times they faced. Of course, ‘older members’, who preferred to spend their evenings around the back-room pinochle ring, often complained about the ‘noisy youngsters’ with whom they shared their clubs and who eagerly anticipated the weekly social nights. The difference of opinion was often sharp enough to break up a club and contested the ‘dominant urge of solidarity’ that brought these men together. But older members were also careful to negotiate the use of club space and time because they depended upon their younger counterparts’ weekly dues, and their seniority offered them the chance to manage and maintain a quasi-domestic space and oversee the behaviour of younger men. Club members may not have had the wherewithal to set up their own households, but through their clubs they could assume similar responsibilities and lay claim to a masculine identity at a time when neither their age nor their income afforded similar privileges.
For many working-class men, then, their social clubs were never entirely heterosocial despite the popularity of club social nights and affairs. Nor were they simply domestic or irrepresibly masculine. The social club was a space where the different identities and experiences with which young working-class men had to contend often blurred together. They were spaces where the boundaries between heterosociality and homosociality broke down, where work and leisure seemed indistinguishable, and where the worlds of boyhood and adulthood collided. Of course, the in-between or liminal status of the social club should not suggest that it was completely distinct or separate from the ‘familiar’ or ‘stable’. ‘Liminality’, Turner also argues, ‘must bear some trace of its antecedent and subsequent stages’.\textsuperscript{44} On the one hand, this meant that working-class men’s behaviour did not change as much as the context in which it took place. As children, working-class boys took part in much of the same rowdy behaviour that would eventually define their social-club life and culture. For example, gathering together at their favourite social club to forget their parents and the mundane affairs of the home or just to enjoy the simple pleasures of good conversation, close association, and male camaraderie was not altogether different from hanging about a street corner or on the front stoop of somebody’s home. These rituals simply took on new meaning once they reached their late teens and early twenties and as their families and potential spouses expected them to assume certain responsibilities and quit postponing their role in reproducing those more accepted measures of manhood such as the breadwinner ethic. On the other hand, their clubs provided men opportunities generally reserved for adulthood. Working-class men did not simply hang out in their basement clubs. They converted them into second homes or quasi-domestic spaces and took great care to manage and maintain them, both of which prepared them to assume the responsibilities associated with married life. As a result, their clubs afforded them the opportunity to lay claim to a masculinity that could potentially bridge the gap between the bachelor subculture and the breadwinner ethic, an option that undoubtedly enhanced the social club’s appeal and popularity and which allowed men to negotiate more easily the economic circumstances in which they often found themselves and ease their transition to adulthood.\textsuperscript{45}

At the same time, the collective culture around which men organised their masculinity was never confined to the work of building a club house or managing club space; while social clubs blurred many boundaries, they often made the boundaries surrounding race and ethnicity more rigid. During the 1920s, members of the Cornell Athletic Club in Chicago noted that solidarity was initially engendered through the desire to escape family supervision and the annoying interference of their neighbours. But they greatly augmented their commitment to one another through ‘clashes’ with other groups of men. ‘Clashes’ usually took the form of football games or other sporting events, which often ended in free-for-all fights.\textsuperscript{46} These fights,
however, sometimes escalated into raids on other groups of men and their clubs, which served as a crucible in which definitions of race and ethnicity were formed. In the summer of 1921 along the ‘Jewish–Polish’ frontier in Chicago, ‘it was rumored that a few Jewish boys’ had been ‘assaulted when passing through the Polish community’. News of the mêlée quickly spread throughout the Jewish neighbourhood, sending ‘men like “Nails” – and “Nigger”’ – into the fight for revenge. Their slogan – ‘Wallop the Polock!’ Many men joined the fight after hearing the news in their pool-room hang-outs. But the social and “basement” clubs of Lawndale [also] found a good opportunity for sport in the “Polock Hunt”’. Club members generally set out after their ‘enemies’ on what contemporaries called an ‘expedition’, picking up other gangs along the way and forming ‘the nucleus for a mob before [they] finished’.47

Athletic and social clubs also played a significant role in the Chicago Race Riots of 1919. According to the Chicago Commission on Race Relations, ‘it was no new thing for youthful white and Negro groups to come to violence’. The Commission concluded, however, that if it had not been for all-white gangs or athletic clubs ‘it is doubtful if the riot would have gone beyond the first clash’. According to the grand jury, ‘many of the crimes committed in the “Black Belt” by whites and the fires that were started back of the Yards … were more than likely the work of the gangs operating on the Southwest Side under the guise of these clubs’. The grand jury’s report further stated that the ‘authorities employed to enforce the law should thoroughly investigate clubs and other organizations posing as athletic and social clubs’, which the foreman of the grand jury insisted were ‘athletic only with their fists and brass knuckles and guns’. It was even suggested to the coroner’s jury, which conducted inquests into the thirty-eight riot deaths, ‘that race hatred and tendency to race rioting had its birth and were fostered in the numerous social and athletic clubs made up of young men and scattered through out the city’. The coroner’s jury found the suggestion a bit far-fetched, but advised that if it was even partially true, athletic and social clubs should be investigated and controlled, compelling the police to shut down some of the more infamous clubs ‘for a period of several months’.48

Club members further strengthened an ethic of solidarity through the sexualisation and objectification of women. Almost all clubs featured pin-ups of bathing ‘beauties’, movie stars, or some other ‘half clad woman’. Many clubs also sponsored stag parties and posted gossip sheets or produced newspapers in which the members listed whom their dates were and the activities in which they participated. At the Go-Guys social club in New York, ‘information about the love affairs … of members is furnished by a weekly bulletin board newspaper’ entitled the ‘Heity-Toity’.49 Other clubs took the idea of sharing in the sexualisation of women considerably further. Members of a club located in Chicago’s Lawndale community in the 1920s sometimes shared a prostitute. ‘One time’, a member recalled,
'a whore came down and she took us eight guys in a row.' These visits, according to the same fellow, took place 'about once a month or once in two months until we got tired of her and told her not to come down anymore'. Of course not all men took part in race riots or invited prostitutes into their club rooms. As the experiences of some of these men suggest, the day-to-day ways in which they publicly demonstrated their masculinity could be as innocent as a football game between rival clubs or through other forms of physical prowess and skill. Members of the Powerhouse Athletic Club, for example, preferred dangerous gymnastic stunts and bodybuilding to street fights and race riots. Growing up during the Depression, the members of the Powerhouse could not afford to buy any athletic equipment so they 'borrowed two bus stop signs that were on heavy iron bases and taped them together to make a weight of about a hundred pounds, which they used for bodybuilding exercises, together with pull ups, pushups, sit ups, etc'. With muscles in tow, the Powerhouse AC 'toured the playgrounds of Brooklyn and put on [their] performance for the admiration of the local population', including several different gymnastic stunts, like the dangerous 'giant swing on the high bar and a fly-away (air somersault)' without 'belts, nets or any protection'. Yet while some clubs may have been able to avoid street fights or other violent confrontations, the manner in which they fashioned their masculinity often took unexpected turns. On the one hand, some clubs were just better at avoiding the community’s watchful eyes and spent most of their time involved in seemingly innocuous pursuits like sports or neighbourhood dances and, when ‘no one was looking’, stepped boldly across the line separating rough from respectable. The Chicago club whose members had a ‘whore come down’ once every month or so also organised weekly social nights to which the neighbourhood girls were invited, and they often sponsored a large dance at a hall downtown, both of which attracted attention to the club and its members. On the other hand, clubs that adhered to the community’s social and sexual norms often found that the potential for violent conflict was always present despite their best efforts to avoid it. When members of the Powerhouse went to a local dance hall, Bonadonna explained that you had to look out for what he called the ‘local Romeos’. According to Bonadonna, ‘If you were a good dancer you were sometimes resented by the competition’. ‘If you were very good [at dancing], you had to be very careful not to ask some girl to dance if you thought she was with some guy who looked big and strong … Because then you’d be encroaching on his domain in an area where he couldn’t compete’, which he suggested could lead to violence. Some men, like the ‘local Romeos’ Bonadonna faced, were simply out to establish exclusive rights to certain women and feared the potential competition they faced from other men who were just as anxious about making dates. But as George Chauncey has shown, working-class men’s
unruly behaviour also reflected concerns about the rise of an increasingly visible gay subculture. According to Chauncey, the ‘highest compliment in this world [the bachelor subculture]’ was to be called a ‘man’ or a ‘regular guy’, implying that these same men were ‘in danger of being called something else: unmanly, a mollycoddle, a sissy, even a pansy’, names often associated with the ‘fairy’ or effeminate male who had ‘assumed the sexual and other cultural roles ascribed to women’ and who, Chauncey argues, ‘influenced the culture and self-understanding of all sexually active men’.53 As a result, working-class men could, in part, shape a gender identity. Yet they still faced a perplexing dilemma. On the one hand, they opened themselves up to charges of homosexuality or at the least of questionable masculinity if they did not cautiously watch over their gender-role performance, or if they embraced too thoroughly the homosocial relations upon which their clubs were based. On the other hand, the street fights and stag parties that strengthened the bond between club members also stigmatised all non-members, including women, as outsiders and hence did not always mix well with club social nights and other heterosocial fun.

The range of men’s responses to this dilemma varied considerably. Some men simply abandoned their hangouts – at least temporarily. Most men cited moving, marriage, and full employment as the main reasons for leaving their hangouts, claiming that their social clubs were simply another stage of the life-cycle they had outgrown. Yet social clubs also became unusually quiet when ‘the guys have steady girls’. One man known as Ellman, who was a member of a Chicago club in the 1920s called the Dirty Dozen, ‘was one of the meanest fellows’ when he was with his gang. But when he went out with his ‘girl’, ‘on the sly’, he was ‘very courteous, quitting his loud talk and dropping his braggadocian air’. In other words, Ellman could adopt a more congenial manner and try and live up to his date’s expectations about intimacy and leisure, but only after separating himself from the ‘Dirty Dozen’, men who ostracised ‘the man who danced, who went out with girls, or who was well-mannered’.54

Other men, too ambivalent about giving up their hangouts, tried to manage their heterosocial and homosocial lives simultaneously, although the type of club to which they belonged affected the different kinds of strategies they embraced. At side street clubs, members tried to negotiate their dilemma by making their clubs appear as heterosocial and respectable as possible to the women they invited in as guests. On the one hand, this meant regulating their own behaviour. At the side street club Isadore Zelig visited, the owner of the private home in which the club was located was convinced that the men who were renting a room in his house did not ‘behave properly’. But, he exclaimed, ‘I’m not responsible for what they do’ – that is, as long as they paid the rent on time and ‘don’t cause any trouble’, suggesting that some men may have been able to circumvent the community’s sexual norms and that their clubs actually offered the refuge for which they may have been looking. Yet even though the club’s chief aim

was gambling, Zeligs was surprised to find that the men’s behaviour quickly changed once their female friends arrived. According to Zeligs,

What surprised me was the great success this little club had in procuring guests of the other sex. When the latter were present, which was the case many nights during the week as well as the week-ends, gambling ceased entirely. (This was not the case in a number of other clubs.) Everyone concentrated on the ‘social,’ and put forth great effort to entertain and make their guests feel quite comfortable.  

Thus, while the side street club may have gained a notorious reputation because of its location and the conscious attempt on the part of club members to separate themselves from their communities, they were still able to attract the neighbourhood ‘girls’ and, in the process, manipulate the line dividing rough from respectable – as well as the reputation that distinguished the side street club from clubs located along busy avenues and in plain sight of the rest of the community.

Indeed, by ‘concentrating on the social’ and by prohibiting gambling and other manly ‘virtues’ like ‘coarse’ language and drinking, working-class men could effectively set their clubs apart from other working-class male hangouts. From street-corner gangs to pool rooms and saloons, working men revelled in the use of hard language and liquor as an accepted part of male sociability. The use of ‘vulgar’ language and other male social practices allowed them to openly proclaim their independence from feminine constraints and to delineate male space, and, according to Ray Oldenburg, when men slip ‘into a distinctly masculine style of talking … a common heritage surfaces and an almost immediate intimacy is engendered’. By prohibiting or at least regulating certain male vices, working men attempted not only to clean up the image of their clubs but also to redefine them as heterosocial space.

On the other hand, members of a side street club relied on decorations to enhance their club’s heterosocial appeal. At the same side street club Zeligs visited, the club’s rooms included the typical accessories like cheap couches, card tables, a few cushions, lamps, books, and magazines, while the walls were covered with pennants, banners, and ‘numerous pictures taken mostly from magazines and newspapers’. Yet the old worn-out couches about which Zeligs complained were also covered by ‘attractive linen’, the windows were curtained, and even flowers adorned some of the card tables. Clean windows, curtains, flowers, and other decorations resembling their tenement homes often clashed with many of the other decorations found in side street clubs like sports banners and trophies. But the ambiguous feel of the decor these two different styles produced, especially with regard to gender, allowed members to distinguish themselves and their clubs from other male hangouts.

The main street clubs followed a similar routine. Besides carefully decorating their hangouts, club members insisted that their conduct remain
‘He Likes Women More Than He Likes Drink …’

‘gentlemanly’. In both Chicago and New York clubs during the 1920s and 1930s respectively, card playing and gambling were generally allowed, but only if the stakes were small, while on social nights the gamblers were ‘removed to the rear room’ or gambling was eliminated altogether. Other clubs forbade swearing, and although alcohol was often present during club social nights, in many clubs it was only permitted during monthly beer parties. For example, the Chicago club that welcomed a prostitute into their hangout every month or two also restricted gambling at different times throughout the club’s history, set up rules to eliminate swearing, organised a ‘cleanup committee’ each week, and fined members when they violated these rules. Indeed, many clubs went so far as to establish patrols on social nights to police behaviour. Offending guests were ‘tossed out’, and members who violated club rules could be brought up on charges ‘by an executive committee’ that met weekly to mete out punishment, including fines, suspension, or, if the offence was egregious enough, expulsion.

Yet while side street clubs shared many of the same strategies as clubs located along busy avenues, members of these main street clubs also went to great lengths to show off the club’s culture. In some cases this meant having their parents ‘drop down for five minutes or so’, or they actually invited them in on social nights as chaperones. Other clubs offered a ‘parents’ night two evenings a season in which the members have a party and put on plays for them’, or they held street dances. At a neighbourhood dance in New York in the 1930s, the ‘block was closed with police posts and ropes’, ‘the jazz band seated themselves in a large Mack truck right by the curb’, and ‘people from almost all over the local district danced in the streets’. Most of the men and women who attended were ‘fellows and girls between the ages of fifteen and twenty-one’, but street dances still attracted the attention of the entire community and gave parents a better look at club culture.

Members of main street clubs also called attention to their hangouts by donating the money they raised on social nights to local charities and political causes. In the 1930s, the Square Club was affiliated with the American League for Peace and Democracy and helped all movements on New York’s East Side that were ‘anti-Fascist and pro-China’. Occasionally, they even gave small dances with a hat-check fee of fifteen to twenty-five cents to raise money for Spain, Chinese relief, or for ‘neighborhood charities’. Other clubs participated in housing campaigns or donated money to needy members and other families. A Jewish club in Chicago during the 1920s often contributed money to families ‘not limited to the neighborhood’, and for the Jewish holiday of Passover the club provided funds to a local charity for the ‘additional expense of the holiday-food as tradition required’.

Of course, not all clubs joined political movements or donated funds to local charities. In fact, clubs with older members were much more likely to take part in charity work or political protest movements than those with younger men who were obsessed with their own ‘affairs’ and dances or
deliberately isolated themselves to escape crowded homes and obtrusive parents. Thus, while the dancing and other boisterous behaviour in which all club members participated could distract or mute any overt political expression among some men, it could just as easily nurture dissent, especially among older men whose bachelorhood stood in sharp contrast to the younger men surrounding them and the problems they may have faced in trying to end it. In other words, club life compelled certain men to face more directly the problems and contradictions endemic to working-class life, or more specifically the burgeoning consumer culture that steadily gained strength throughout the early twentieth century and their distance from it. The political movements and charity campaigns in which they participated allowed them not only to confront more directly the problems they faced but also to successfully duplicate many of the functions associated with the mutual-aid societies with which their parents were already familiar and, as Lizabeth Cohen argues, help create a second-generation ethnic, working-class culture that recognised their parents and many of their old-world values.66

Members of main street clubs also tried to establish a more conspicuous presence by occupying the sidewalk immediately in front of their hangouts. On weekends (or just about any day of the week during the Depression when greater numbers of men had an abundant amount of free time) working-class men could be found camped out around the front stoop, or terrace as they called it, in the easy chairs and overstuffed couches they dragged out of their hangouts.67 In many ways, the obstruction of sidewalks by groups of young working-class men represented a challenge to the use of public space and leisure time. But hanging out on the terrace also allowed the entire community to observe the day-to-day activities of club members and to interact with and establish more personal and face-to-face relationships. The Go-Guys, for example, often hung out on the front stoop of their East Broadway club. They quickly attracted the attention of their neighbours and before long found themselves babysitting children whose parents had sent them over to be ‘watched by the fellows when they are sitting out front’. The Go-Guys may have occupied their front terrace to hang out and intimidate outsiders, but they ended up making themselves more accessible and familiar to both their families and the larger community.68

As the experience of the Go-Guys suggests, many parents not only tolerated social clubs but often embraced the boys they found hanging about the neighbourhood streets and sidewalks. Many parents accepted social clubs because their own sons belonged to some of the neighbourhood clubs, since most hangouts were in an adjoining flat or in the basements of their own buildings. But club efforts also may have contributed to some clubs’ popularity and success. The Go-Guys, for example, had initially organised their hangout on a different block, but eventually moved because their neighbours, who suspected ‘immoral purposes’, disliked them. Once the boys set up on East Broadway, they immediately began to regulate more
closely the drinking, the gambling, and the promiscuous behaviour for which their other club had been notorious, and soon found themselves babysitting neighbourhood children and regularly holding social nights without their neighbours’ objection or interference. Men belonging to clubs like the Go-Guys may not have been able to transgress the community’s sexual norms as easily as those who belonged to a side street club. But they still found ways to successfully negotiate the line dividing rough from respectable and use their clubs as ‘dating and dancing cooperatives’. The Go-Guys not only made themselves a more conspicuous part of the community’s life. They also effectively incorporated their parents into the club’s culture and day-to-day routine, which suggests that while historians have emphasised the development of peer cultures, they have failed to acknowledge the degree to which the young men who made up those peer cultures remained embedded in families and neighbourhoods and still dependent upon their parents’ approval and good will for a variety of reasons.

Besides demanding ‘gentlemanly’ conduct or donating their time and money to improve their club’s image, club members also targeted their female guests’ behaviour to enforce certain gender conventions. Some clubs reproduced gender roles by simply appropriating the labour of the women they admitted into their clubs. For example, if a member’s ‘steady date’ regularly attended club events, she could expect to ‘be called on to help make curtains … slip covers for the second-hand furniture’, or help serve refreshments at club parties. Curtains, which were a conspicuous decoration in most hangouts, including side street clubs, were especially important because they were part of the public performance members were attempting to stage. Whether that performance was for the larger community or just the neighbourhood girls who attended club social dances, the addition of curtains not only added the feminine touch that was noticeably absent from most male hangouts, but also helped define women’s role in club life and the behaviour expected of women who were planning to participate in future club events.

Club members also tried to exclude ‘those of reputation’. In the 1930s the Square Club in New York forbade ‘rough talking or acting’, stating that ‘members and guests must be clean and orderly’. Many other clubs established similar rules to control women who violated ‘common decency’ on the dance floor. At one of the social nights the Rutgers St Boys organised, one girl had to be ‘put out’ when she ‘got very hot and started cutting up [on the dance floor]’. Her conduct, they argued, was not in accordance with ‘common decency’.

Many clubs, and especially main street clubs, excluded ‘those of reputation’ because they feared the potential interference of parents. According to one man, if parents of the ‘nicer girls’ found out that they admitted so-called ‘bad girls’, they ‘would … forbid their daughters to attend the dances held two or three times a week’. By regulating or trying to eliminate rough talking, acting, and dancing, working-class men were suggesting that their

clubs were as much a breeding ground for marriage as a space to couple up unsupervised, which perhaps explains the zeal with which they tried to eliminate certain women. In the process, they defined what they considered an appropriate night of heterosocial fun and, above all, linked more effectively the reputation of their hangouts to the ‘decent girls’ they admitted into their clubs. They accomplished this by instituting rules that established a limited range of acceptable behaviours and by stigmatising the women who flaunted club rules and engaged in indecent behaviour as promiscuous and potentially dangerous. In short, they projected all that was negative on to the women who defied their understanding of conventional femininity. By having the indecent ones ‘put out’, they not only removed the potential threat, but shifted the blame for the unseemly image of many clubs away from themselves and male culture’s more notorious side.

At the same time, however, all men, including members of side street clubs, generally recognised that rough talking, acting, and dancing were not simply the actions of indecent or promiscuous women. Women’s behaviour not only challenged the manner in which men defined and organised dating and courtship, but also served as a metaphor for the larger problems men confronted with the rise of commercial leisure. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, dance-hall culture not only offered women the opportunity to experiment with new identities and to ‘put on style’, but also granted them a considerable amount of influence in their relations with men. William Krueger, a carpenter and resident of Chicago in the 1920s, offers a revealing example. At the age of fifty-four in 1926, Krueger had witnessed the emergence of ‘modern’ dating practices and found these new ‘flappers’ he met in dance halls excessive. A taxi dancer named Ann Novak, for example, dated Krueger twice and then abruptly asked for a pair of six-dollar slippers, a dress for thirty-five to forty dollars, and money for an apartment. Krueger angrily refused her request, stating that ‘if she wanted clothes that cost that much she’d have to find some man who had a bigger income’. The expensive dress and slippers Novak demanded were undoubtedly accoutrements of the dance-hall girl’s identity and style, which alone seemed to frustrate him. But to make matters worse, these purchases were usually tied to various sexual favours, which in Krueger’s case were always withheld. With other women, he suffered similar indignities. In the case of one Jewish woman whom he ‘liked very much’, he could not tolerate her affinity for hard liquor. At her home one evening, Krueger was surprised to find ‘whiskey bottles all around her bedroom’. ‘A little beer now and then is alright’, he exclaimed, ‘but I don’t want a whiskey drinking wife so I quit her’. When Krueger was last seen in the dance hall, he was engaged to a German woman named Grace who had promised to marry him once he agreed to pay for her tonsillectomy.75

In all of Krueger’s dating experiences, the women involved somehow violated his understanding of femininity. They either drank too much, claimed autonomy with their sexuality, or made too explicit a connection

between consumption and heterosocial relations. In social clubs, working-class women also adopted a particular identity and style through rough talking, acting, and dancing, behaviour which often unnerved their male hosts not only because it violated some abstract idea about ‘true womanhood’, but because it encroached upon certain male privileges, privileges that helped define the often rigid gender distinctions that separated men from women. But unlike the dance hall, where men like Krueger had fewer options to regulate women’s behaviour and chose simply to ‘quit’ their dates, social clubs afforded them the prerogative to weed out the ‘indecent ones’. In other words, the public world of commercial leisure was a much more fiercely contested realm than Beth Bailey suggests. During the nineteenth century, according to Bailey, courtship ‘took place within the girl’s home – in women’s sphere … or at entertainments largely devised and presided over by women’. Dating, she explains, moved courtship out of the home and into the public sphere, ‘commonly defined as belonging to men’. Outside the home – or women’s sphere – ‘female controls and conventions lost much of their power’, which shifted the balance of power in men’s favour. Men undoubtedly had certain advantages by entertaining their dates without the potential intrusion of family. But the shift in the balance of power was never as profound as Bailey argues, compelling men to look elsewhere – in this case to their social clubs – for more control over their dating relationships.

When rough talking, acting, and dancing failed to challenge male control of social clubs, women adopted a number of other strategies. The Go-Guys, for example, felt the need to establish rules to prevent women from sitting around the club with their coats on. According to one of the Go-Guys, club members insisted that when a woman attended one of their events, she had to ‘act like she was in her own home’, and hence they did not ‘like or allow girls to sit around with their coats on’. ‘They wouldn’t do that at home’, he insisted. By keeping their coats on, some women were perhaps trying to cover up shabby or workaday clothes or were saving their ‘special’ clothes for ‘special’ occasions. But they also seemed to be suggesting that they were a bit uncomfortable with club culture. To be sure, many women were as enthusiastic about participating in social-club events as their male counterparts, and the women who sat around with their coats on were just as anxious to elude their parents’ watchful eyes as the women who more fully embraced club life. But they were ambivalent about hanging out like ‘one of the guys’, who considered their social clubs a second home. By keeping their coats on, they constantly reminded their male hosts that they were displeased with male-defined leisure, and that they were prepared to leave at a moment’s notice for more aesthetically pleasing and personally fulfilling entertainment and dates.

Other women challenged men over the use of their clubs by appropriating certain space. After the members of the Melody Moon Club in New York made some very subtle hints – such as ‘O.K. if you don’t want to
sit on my lap buy yourself a chair’ – the women chipped in and bought another second-hand sofa.79 The sofa, no doubt, stood as an endless source of irritation to the men and a constant reminder of how certain women rejected their sexual advances. Yet it also contested male-defined intimacy and single-handedly allowed the women to stake a claim to club space. These women may not have initially organised the club, and were denied membership, but they nonetheless owned some of its property and the advantages ownership implied.

Women also disrupted the same-sex relationships upon which most men had initially organised their hangouts. ‘It was petty jealousies’, stated one club member in the 1920s. ‘If one girl would prefer one guy to another then he’d be jealous of that guy and try to tease him’, which often caused the two fellows to ‘have a scrap’.80 Going steady only made the problem worse. Working-class men often became resentful when members became ‘tied to a skirt’, because the men involved usually lost all interest in their clubs, or their dates simply refused to attend club events despite their best efforts to ‘concentrate on the social’.81 In the 1930s, for example, the Madison Street Boys of New York welcomed their ‘sweet hearts’ into the club any time, but admitted that few of them ‘come in except on dance nights’.82 Club members anxious to ‘keep company’ on other nights were forced to abandon their hangouts along with the social practices endemic to club life. As a result, most men found that their commitment to male culture was something less than a masculine privilege. It was more of a mutually agreed-upon arrangement they begrudgingly reached with their ‘steadies’, but an agreement equally beneficial to women ambivalent about being incorporated into male culture because it implicitly recognised female-defined ideas about intimacy and leisure.

The struggles over women’s behaviour also convinced some men that social nights and the women they admitted into their clubs were the source of most of their problems. As one club member in the 1930s stated: ‘That’s the reason so many clubs get into trouble letting girls run in and out all the time until you’d think they was members. And you know the old story about familiarity breeding contempt.’83 Many men genuinely tried to improve their club’s image and to redefine it as heterosocial, but they remained ambivalent about being ‘down club’ with their female guests, and this led them to either restrict the participation of women or adopt the more familiar and comfortable male practice of excluding them altogether. Many clubs were ‘closed clubs’: men were members; women were invited guests, generally at the discretion of their escorts.84 On social nights, some clubs did, indeed, welcome ‘any and all girls’, but many other clubs required a guest card, or they kept ‘a regular list’ of the ‘girls’ they invited to their socials, suggesting that members demanded some familiarity or at least the opportunity to look over the potential visitor before admitting her.85 Several other clubs had an open front room for social nights but often reserved a back room for members, while nearly every club held their social nights during what they
called their ‘season’, usually in the winter. In the 1930s at New York’s Club Majestic, social nights raised much of the revenue needed to keep the club afloat, but members only offered them ‘during the cooler weather while athletics take the stage during the warmer season’, effectively allowing men to manage their heterosocial and homosocial identities without giving up either their social clubs or the male culture to which they had grown accustomed.\textsuperscript{86}

The bachelor subculture did, indeed, allow for unmitigated expressions of manliness. But while working-class men could intentionally separate themselves from family and community and collectively fashion a masculinity through their relations with other men, most men – and especially during some stages of the life cycle – found themselves eager for more heterosocial associations and generally recognised the potential problem, an issue historians have generally overlooked. Some men responded to their dilemma by separating themselves from their hangouts once they found a steady date, or they tried to ignore it and set up a side street club, hoping to avoid nosy neighbours and the potential problems associated with them. Yet most men still found that they had to try and make their clubs more heterosocial. On the one hand, they were eager to attract the neighbourhood girls, and they feared the intrusion of their parents, who were just around the corner. On the other hand, men had to either give up heterosocial leisure or change the manner in which they organised male culture, because even if they had successfully eluded their parents and set up a side street club, the women they admitted into their clubs still struggled with and against them over the use of club space and the nature of intimacy, which inevitably challenged the ways in which men defined leisure, sexuality, and even their own masculinity.

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, working-class men used their social clubs to help them deal with the problems they faced when trying to balance homosocial and heterosocial leisure. On some nights, their basement hangouts afforded them the freedom they desired to set up their own ‘dating and dancing cooperatives’, where they could more easily experiment with their sexual behaviour and develop personal and intimate relationships. At other times, social clubs were the central location of an adolescent male culture in which identity and status revolved around an ethic of solidarity and manliness that was produced, in part, at the expense of women. The men who belonged to clubs took several measures to mitigate the obvious contradiction. While side street clubs focused primarily on regulating their own behaviour and changing the club’s decor, other clubs went to great lengths to include their communities, with block parties, parents’ nights, and even donations to charity, all of which allowed them to publicise more effectively the heterosociability of club life and negotiate the expectations of family and community along with their own desire for mixed-sex leisure. Indeed, the rules of ‘common decency’ they established, along with the stigmatisation of women who defied club
rules, allowed working-class men to enforce certain gender conventions. In the process, they not only challenged the behaviour associated with the dance-hall habitué, but also shifted the blame for the infamous reputation of their hangouts away from the different social practices and rituals that made up their masculinity.

Men's collective efforts to regulate women's behaviour did not, of course, solve all their problems. While social clubs made certain boundaries more rigid, the use of the club as a quasi-domestic establishment, the ambivalence toward community sexual mores, the regulation of certain male vices, and the fact that women paid and laboured to outfit and decorate many clubs only seemed to contribute to the ambiguity of club space and belied the idea that social clubs were inherently masculine. In other words, they inadvertently produced social spaces that blurred the boundaries surrounding conventional gender norms, making it easier for women to challenge male-defined leisure, dating, and courtship. Contesting the use of club space was no easy task for most women, excluded from membership and the other privileges granted men. But they were surprisingly effective in convincing the men they dated to abandon their clubs along with the collective social practices most men considered fundamental to their understanding of masculinity.

The extent to which men successfully distanced themselves from the homosocial world in which they came of age varied considerably. These men would eventually abandon their clubs along with their adolescence, marry, and assume the responsibilities of adulthood. But the transition would probably prove difficult for many of them. Once they emotionally and physically separated themselves from their social clubs, they were bound to participate in other rituals – in saloons, in fraternal lodges, and at sporting events – that, in part, also fashioned a masculinity at women’s expense. As a result, social clubs not only provided many men with their first intimate heterosocial and sexual experiences, but served as the basis for developing a masculine identity that would continue to affect the ways in which they would organise other heterosocial relationships, including marriage.

By the post-World War II period, the transition to married life would prove equally difficult for many men. But the social club’s role in that transition was changing. With the end of the Depression, working-class men were likely to spend more of their leisure time at dance halls, roadhouses, or at other public venues than at the neighbourhood social club. Robert Bonadonna, for example, fondly recalled the time he spent at the Powerhouse Athletic Club. But as members of the Powerhouse reached their late teens, ‘girls’ not only began to ‘preoccupy more of their attention’, prompting a change in the club’s name to the Powerhouse Social and Athletic Club; the group began to venture beyond the neighbourhood boundaries and their basement hangout. ‘The girls, the dancing, the social beer drinking later on at road-houses or night clubs’, Bonadonna explained, ‘changed our emphasis as we got to be about eighteen’, which suggested
that their social club was losing out to the night clubs and road houses just as members became more interested in making dates.\textsuperscript{87}

Throughout the post-World War II period, this trend would only gain strength. The dramatic expansion of the US economy along with the popularity of the automobile and the unprecedented growth of suburbia meant smaller numbers of men were restricted to neighbourhood basements and there were fewer basements from which to choose. In a working-class suburb on Kansas City's north side in the 1970s, most young men spent part of their adolescence hanging out in somebody's basement. And like their counterparts from the 1920s and 1930s, their basement hangouts represented a new stage in the life cycle. But the time they spent in their social clubs was usually a much shorter period than for working-class men earlier in the century. Because they were living in the suburbs, almost all of these men had trouble finding an unfinished basement that was available, and most of them had access to a car once they turned sixteen and took their first job, guaranteeing them the opportunity to explore beyond their own homes and neighbourhoods. To be sure, these men had similar problems trying to negotiate their heterosocial relationships and homosocial lives. But not because they had attached themselves to a social club. In their case, there simply was no comparable all-male institution to take the social club's place. As the number of clubs declined or began to fade once these men reached their mid teens, they were likely to find themselves individually negotiating not only their dates' demands, but also those of their parents, who were just as concerned about their sons' and daughters' whereabouts as parents from preceding decades. Thus, while the social club may have been at the centre of the tension surrounding homosocial and heterosocial relationships for men during the 1920s and 1930s, their social clubs still offered them an important advantage denied men who came of age during the post-World War II period: the chance to collectively regulate their dates' behaviour and more readily live up to their parents expectations about intimacy and leisure, both of which had made it easier for men to negotiate the male culture with which they had come of age and their desire for mixed-sex leisure and fun.\textsuperscript{88}

Notes

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3. ‘How they Begin’, Box 17, Folder 10, Henry Street Settlement Records (hereafter HSSR), Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota, 17; see also Peiss, Cheap Amusements, pp. 59–62.

4. “‘Cellar Clubs’, Hit As Peril To Youth’, World Telegram (New York), 22 November 1938; ‘Rooms of Their Own’, Evening Public Ledger (Philadelphia), 1 August 1939.


7. Kathy Peiss offers the best discussion of the differences between homosocial and heterosocial leisure, but her work focuses primarily on married men’s and women’s leisure; see Peiss, Cheap Amusements, pp. 12–29. On fraternal lodges, see Mary Ann Clawson, Constructing Brotherhood: Class, Gender, and Fraternalism (Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1989).


13. ‘A Room of Their Own’, Box 17, Folder 10, HSSR, pp. 2–3.
14. Zeligs, ‘Basement Social Clubs’, Box 142, Folder 3, BUR; Susan Porter Benson initially came up with the term ‘main street’ clubs.
15. Weinberg, ‘Jewish Youth’, Box 139, Folder 3, BUR, p. 60.
20. Calkins, Substitutes, p. 50; Cincinnati 1913 directory gives a list of 190 ‘Pleasure, Social, Outing, and Fishing Clubs’, while a ‘further list from the Mayor’s office brings the number up to 214’: see Juvenile Protective Association, Recreation Survey of Cincinnati, p. 21.
22. Calkins, Substitutes, p. 49.
25. ‘A Room of Their Own’, Box 17, Folder 10, HSSR, 3–4; see also Isadore Zeligs, ‘A Study of Basement Social Clubs’, Paper for Sociology 270, 1928, Box 142, Folder 3, BUR, p. 3.
29. Club Colossal, Box 17, Folder 9, HSSR, p. 3.
30. Weinberg, ‘Jewish Youth’, Box 139, Folder 3, BUR, p. 70.
31. Cerise Social Club, Box 17, Folder 9, HSSR, p. 4.
32. ‘Club Regal Inc.’, Box 17, Folder 10, HSSR, p. 29.
33. Katherine Street Boys, Inc. (Governour Street Boys), Box 17, Folder 9, HSSR, p. 3.
34. On men’s ages in the 1920s, see Zeligs, ‘Basement Social Clubs’, Box 142, Folder 3, BUR, pp. 4, 9, 13, 17; Weinberg, ‘Jewish Youth’, Box 139, Folder 3, BUR, p. 51; on men’s ages in the 1930s, see ‘Index to Tables of Facts About the 28 Clubs’, Box 17, Folder 10, HSSR, p. 4.
35. ‘Club Regal Inc.’, Box 17, Folder 10, HSSR, p. 24.


43. Popular Street Boys Association (Rutgers Street Boys Assn Inc.), Box 17, Folder 9, HSSR, pp. 2–3.


45. Historians have generally recognised a gap between the bachelor subculture and the breadwinner ethic. see Chauncey, *Gay New York*, pp. 79–80.


48. The Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot* (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1922), pp. 12–17. The grand jury explicitly cited the Ragen’s Colts, a ‘mostly Irish American’ club who kept a hangout at Fifty-Second and Halstead Streets and who received support from politicians in Chicago. But some evidence suggests that other clubs, which were independent, also may have been involved in the riots. While a third of the reported incidents of violence occurred in the Black Belt, 41 per cent took place in a white neighbourhood west of the Black Belt and near the stockyards where social clubs also thrived. See Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, pp. 27–38; for more details about the riot, see also William M. Tuttle, Jr, *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (Atheneum, New York, 1970).

49. Joy-Goys Social Club (Go-Guys), Box 17, Folder 9, HSSR, p. 3.


55. Zeligs, ‘Basement Social Clubs’, Box 142, Folder 3, BUR.
57. Zeligs, ‘Basement Social Clubs’, Box 142, Folder 3, BUR.
58. Ohyeah Social Club (Sowatt), Box 17, Folder 9, HSSR, p. 3; BRA (Benjamin Rothbergh Assn), Box 17, Folder 9, HSSR, p. 2; Athlitso Social Club (Soliath), Box 17, Folder 9, HSSR, p. 2.
59. Résumé of Club Imperial (Club Majestic) Box 17, Folder 9, HSSR, p. 3; Athlitso Social Club (Soliath), Box 17, Folder 9, HSSR, p. 2.
60. Perfecto Social Club (Acme), Box 17, Folder 9, HSSR, p. 4; ‘How the Fellows Behave’, Box 17, Folder 10, HSSR, p. 57; Joy-Goys Social Club (Go-Guys), Box 17, Folder 9, HSSR, p. 4; Résumé of Club Imperial (Club Majestic), Box 17, Folder 9, HSSR, p. 3; Weinberg, ‘Jewish Youth’, Box 139, Folder 3, BUR, p. 67.
62. Joy-Goys Social Club (Go-Guys), Box 17, Folder 9, HSSR, p. 3; Perfecto Social Club (Acme), Box 17, Folder 9, HSSR, p. 4; Seward Street Boys Social Club Inc., Box 17, Folder 9, HSSR, p. 4.; Athlitso Social Club (Soliath), Box 17, Folder 9, HSSR, p. 2.
63. Popular Street Boys Association (Rutgers Street Boys Assn. Inc.) Box 17, Folder 9, HSSR, p. 3; Broadway Strutters (Ukelele Aces) Social Club Inc., Box 17, Folder 9, HSSR, 5; Stoney, ‘Club Life’, p. 8; Thrasher, ‘Boys Club of New York’, Reel 7, Series III, Unnumbered Folder, BSH, p. 307; BRA (Benjamin Rothbergh Assn), Box 17, Folder 9, HSSR, p. 3.
64. ‘The Block Dances’, 8, in Frederic M. Thrasher, ‘The Use of the Superior Boy in Research’, Reel 6, Folder 229, BSH.
65. Circle Social Club (Square Club), Box 17, Folder 9, HSSR, pp. 1–2; Zeligs, ‘Basement Social Clubs’, Box 142, Folder 3, BUR, p. 19; Broadway Strutters (Ukelele Aces) Social Club Inc., Box 17, Folder 9, HSSR, p. 4.
66. See James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1990), pp. 120–24; Robin Kelley, “We Are Not What We Seem”: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South’, *Journal of American History*, 80 (1993), pp. 75–112; on mutual-aid societies, see Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, pp. 64–75, 147; Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, p. 60; according to Isadore Zeligs, during the 1920s, the clubs that generally took part in political protest or donated money to charity generally included men in their late twenties as opposed to men who were only interested in social nights, who were generally in their late teens and early twenties. See Zeligs, ‘Basement Social Clubs’, Box 142, Folder 3, BUR, p. 17.
67. ‘Club Neighborhoods’, Box 17, Folder 10, HSSR, 15; ‘Club Life’, Box 17, Folder 10, HSSR, 49; Dreamalong Social Club, Box 17, Folder 9, HSSR, 2; Stoney, ‘Club Life’, 8; Weinberg, ‘Jewish Youth’, Box 139, Folder 3, BUR, 13; Fri-Le-Has Social Club Inc. (Lenton) Box 17, Folder, 9, HSSR, 1; On the uses of public space, see George Lipsitz, ‘We Know What Time It Is: Race, Class and Youth Culture in the Nineties’, in *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music and Youth Culture*, ed. Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose (Routledge, New York, 1994), pp. 17–28.
68. Joy-Goys Social Club (Go-Guys), Box 10, Folder 9, HSSR, p. 4.
69. Joy-Goys Social Club (Go-Guys), Box 10, Folder 9, HSSR, pp. 3–4.


72. Circle Social Club (Square Club), Box 17, Folder 9, HSSR, p. 2.

73. Popular Street Boys Association (Rutgers Street Boys Assn Inc.), Box 17, Folder 9, HSSR, p. 3.

74. Revers Social Club (Ramblers), Box 17, Folder 9, HSSR, p. 3; ‘Report Defends Cellar Clubs of East Side Youth’, *New York Herald Tribune*, 24 July 1939.

75. Paul Cressey Notes, ‘William Krueger’, Box 129, Folder 6, BUR.


77. Joy-Guys Social Club (Go-Guys), Box 17, Folder 9, HSSR, p. 4; some women found social clubs friendlier than dance halls. See Weinberg, ‘Jewish Youth’, Box 139, Folder 3, BUR, p. 55.


79. ‘Melody Moon Club’, Box 17, Folder 10, HSSR, p. 43.

80. Weinberg, ‘Jewish Youth’, Box 139, Folder 3, BUR, pp. 70–3.

81. Broadway Strutters (Ukelele Aces) Social Club Inc., Box 17, Folder 9, HSSR, p. 3.

82. Grover Street Boys, Inc. (Madison Street Boys), Box 17, Folder 9, HSSR, p. 3.


84. ‘Index to Tables of Facts About the 28 Clubs’, Box 17, Folder 10, HSSR, p. 6.

85. Wa-Del Social Club, Box 17, Folder 9, HSSR, 2–3; ‘Social Nights’, Box 17, Folder 10, HSSR, p. 50; Weinberg, ‘Jewish Youth’, Box 139, Folder 3, BUR, p. 55.

86. Résumé of Club Imperial (Club Majestic), Box 17, Folder 9, HSSR, pp. 3–4; Stoney, ‘Club Life’, p. 8.


88. My understanding of basement hangouts in Kansas City, Missouri, in the 1970s and 1980s is based on my own experience growing up in a working-class suburb on Kansas City’s north side.