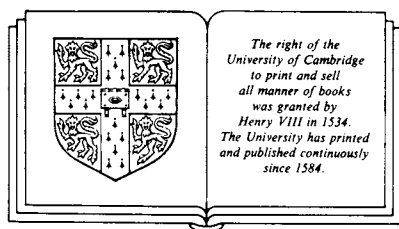


# Eight hours for what we will

*Workers and leisure in  
an industrial city, 1870–1920*

ROY ROSENZWEIG



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## *Introduction*

On December 2, 1889, hundreds of trade unionists paraded through the streets of Worcester in a show of strength and determination. "Eight Hours for Work, Eight Hours for Rest, Eight Hours for What We Will" declared a banner held high by local carpenters. The banner drew upon the chorus line of "Eight Hours," the official song of the eight-hour movement and probably the most popular labor song of that period. Twenty-three years later Worcester's labor newspaper still used the first two stanzas of "Eight Hours" to express the goals of the city's machinists:

We mean to make things over;  
We're tired of toil for naught;  
We may have enough to live on,  
But never an hour for thought.

We want to feel the sunshine,  
We want to smell the flowers;  
We are sure that God has willed it,  
And we mean to have eight hours.<sup>1</sup>

Like the words to "Eight Hours," the actual quest for "eight hours for what we will" reverberated through the labor struggles of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As a compositor told the U.S. Senate Committee on Relations Between Labor and Capital in 1883: "A workingman wants something besides food and clothes in this country . . . He wants recreation. Why should not a workingman have it as well as other people?"<sup>2</sup> And in industrial communities across America workers fought not only for the right to time and space for leisure but also for control over the time and space in which that leisure was to be enjoyed. This study examines how workers struggled to maintain "eight hours for what we will" and what that "eight hours" meant to them.

Despite the importance that working people attached to a sphere of life free from the constraints imposed by their employers, the subject of leisure has attracted little attention from American labor historians. In part, this may reflect a general scholarly reluctance to take up seemingly "nonserious" subjects like play. "Many people

are uncomfortable when discussing leisure," observes a sociologist of his colleagues; "as with sex, they want to make a joke of it." But for labor historians, the neglect of leisure stems from a more general inhibition than notions of academic propriety. It reveals the narrowness of their field as it has been traditionally conceived. Until recently most labor history, as one scholar notes, has been little more than "a category of political economy, a problem of industrial relations, a canon of saintly working-class leaders, a chronicle of militant strike actions." This institutional and economic perspective is largely the legacy of John R. Commons and his students at the University of Wisconsin, who in the early twentieth century wrote the first systematic history of American labor. However, as the bedrock of all later work in labor history, the solid and often brilliant foundation laid by the Commons school threatened to undermine the field that subsequently tried to build upon it. In its neglect of the social and cultural dimensions of working-class experience, the Commons approach severely restricted the range of questions that labor historians asked and, correspondingly, the types of answers they found.<sup>3</sup>

Fortunately, in the 1960s such scholars as David Brody, Herbert Gutman, David Montgomery, and Stephan Thernstrom began to remedy the deficiencies of the old Commons school. Their work – and that of a generation of younger historians – has moved beyond the history of trade unionism and has initiated the transformation of labor history into working-class history.<sup>4</sup> Still, many crucial aspects of American working-class life have yet to be considered. Much of the new scholarship has concentrated on the workplace – the possibility of occupational mobility, the changing job structures, the formal and informal resistance to new forms of work discipline. Despite the increasingly important place of recreation in the lives of workers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we still know relatively little about their lives outside the factory.

But why should labor historians – or indeed, any historians – concern themselves with the history of leisure? In fact, the study of popular recreation helps to explain some of the distinctive features of American working-class development: the absence of a mass-based labor or socialist party, the weakness of working-class consciousness and solidarity, and the late emergence of industrial unions. The failures of the socialist movement cannot be understood merely by studying the internal workings of the Socialist party. Nor can the weakness of unionism among steelworkers before the 1930s be explained simply by reference to the institutional history of the

Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel, and Tin Workers. Only, as one historian urges, when workers are “studied in a totality that includes their cultural backgrounds and social relations, as well as their institutional memberships and economic and political behaviour” can we begin to address these issues adequately.<sup>5</sup> Thus, this study of working-class recreational patterns in Worcester, Massachusetts, from 1870 to 1920 attempts to contribute to a more comprehensive history of the American working class in its broadest social, economic, and political context. To do this, it seeks not simply to describe the pastimes and amusements of Worcester workers but to shed light on three central questions about American labor and social history. First, what have been the central values, beliefs, and traditions of the American working class, and how have they shaped workers’ views of themselves and the society at large? Second, what are the interclass bonds and conflicts within America’s industrial communities? Third, how did both working-class culture and class relations change in the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century?

In exploring such questions of culture, class, and change, labor historians face more than the usual problems of studying a group that has left few written records; they also confront the vexing difficulties of examining that group’s private behavior. One solution to this research problem would be to write a national study, drawing on fragments of information from a large number of scattered sources. Unfortunately, such national studies cannot always critically control all the material they gather. They face the danger of distorting or misinterpreting discrete local and ethnic patterns. This problem would be less disturbing had not the nineteenth century American working-class experience been an intensely local experience.<sup>6</sup> Granting this, a community study – such as that of Worcester – offers the best opportunity for capturing workers’ lives in all their complexity.

But why look at Worcester in particular? Authors of community studies have often advanced exaggerated claims that “their” community embodies an “ideal-typical expression” of American society.<sup>7</sup> Of course, there is no such thing as an “ideal-typical” American community – not Newburyport, Massachusetts, not Muncie, Indiana, and certainly not Worcester. “The notion,” writes anthropologist Clifford Geertz, “that one can find the essence of national societies, civilizations, great religions, or whatever summed up and simplified in so-called ‘typical’ small towns and villages is palpable nonsense. What one finds in small towns and villages is

(alas) small-town or village life.”<sup>8</sup> The same holds for medium-sized industrial cities like Worcester. Admitting the limitations of a single community study should not, however, lead us to conclude that a study of Worcester tells us only about that one city. In Worcester we can test analytical categories – class, ethnicity, and religion, for example – and social processes – class conflict and cultural change, for instance – which may prove useful in examining other American communities, large and small. The study of working-class recreation in Worcester provides a building block for more general theorizing about the nature of working-class life in America. To understand how the Worcester working-class experience fits into this broader perspective, however, we must initially consider the peculiarities of the city itself.

The first chapter (Part I) therefore describes some distinguishing features of Worcester: the power of the city’s industrialists, the weakness of working-class political parties and trade unions, and the importance and cohesiveness of ethnic communities and organizations. Beginning with this context, Part II (Chapters 2 and 3) pursues the cultural dimensions of the late nineteenth century Worcester working-class experience. Chapter 2 examines how workers developed the saloon as a distinctive ethnic working-class leisure institution – a separate and largely autonomous cultural sphere. It then considers the saloon as an expression of a value system that rejected, but did not actively challenge, the moral order of Worcester’s upper and middle classes.

The “alternative culture” visible in the late nineteenth century working-class saloon did not provide, however, the basis for class-wide solidarity or consciousness. In Worcester, at least, this culture remained rooted in distinctive, insular, and often antagonistic ethnic communities. Chapter 3 explores how Worcester’s immigrant workers used July Fourth celebrations to affirm and mark out their cultural distance not only from the city’s elite and native middle class but also from fellow immigrants.<sup>9</sup>

Despite its insularity and its divisions, the alternative culture of Worcester’s ethnic working class did not go unchallenged by the dominant forces in Worcester society. Part III (Chapters 4, 5, and 6) looks at struggles – covering the years 1870 to 1920 – over working-class leisure to understand better the vertical dimensions of working-class life in Worcester – the interrelationships of workers and the middle and upper classes. In particular, these chapters consider the temperance, parks, playground, and Safe and Sane July Fourth movements as concerted campaigns to thwart working-class efforts



at carving out and maintaining distinctive and autonomous spheres of leisure time and space. Yet these class struggles over recreation also reveal the ambiguities and complexities of Worcester's class structure – both the internal divisions within the city's working class (often along ethnic or religious lines) and the collaborative ties across class boundaries.<sup>10</sup>

In the end, this study argues, Worcester workers successfully protected their leisure time and space from outside encroachment. Although they exercised very limited control over their work time, workers effectively managed to preserve their nonwork hours as a relatively autonomous sphere of existence. Nevertheless, the late nineteenth century world of the saloon and the holiday picnic as well as the cultural attitudes embedded in these institutions could not remain static and unchanged in the early twentieth century. Part IV (Chapters 7 and 8) describes the gradual and uneven transformation of the working-class world described in Chapters 2 and 3. Chapter 7 looks specifically at the rise of a leisure market as seen at the amusement park as well as at the impact of commercialization on both the celebration of the Fourth and the saloon. It points out, however, strong indications of continuity amid the obvious signs of change. Indeed, even when workers went to the movies – the subject of Chapter 8 – they shaped the moviegoing experience according to the dictates of preexisting recreational patterns and long-standing cultural inclinations. Still, working-class life in America was changing. By 1920 the movie theater had begun to express a working-class culture very different from that found in the late nineteenth century saloon – a culture that brought workers closer to the mainstream of American society without ever giving them real power within that society.