

Luc Sante, *Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003)



## 1. · GANGLAND

THE BASIC UNIT OF SOCIAL LIFE AMONG YOUNG MALES IN NEW YORK IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY WAS (AS IT PERHAPS IS STILL AND EVER more shall be) the gang. However this unit functioned and whatever its reasons for existing in other times and places, in the Manhattan of the immigrants it served as an important marker, a sort of social stake driven in which allowed the offspring of the various races and nationalities and sects and livelihoods and districts to differentiate themselves from their heterogeneous peers. Gangs, it should be recalled, were not always criminal. They engaged in violence, but violence was a normal part of life in their always-contested environment; turf warfare was a condition of the neighborhood. As a social unit, the gang closely resembled such organizations as the fire company, the fraternal order, and the

political club, and all these formations variously overlapped; gangs might serve as the farm league or the strong-arm squad for the other entities. It was not until rather late in the century that gangs grew independent of their communities and became criminal outfits solely set on plunder, as a result of increasing population and worsening economic conditions. It is axiomatic that the more sophisticated the gangs became, the more violent they grew as well.

The earliest identifiable gangs date from the years immediately after the Revolution. In the late eighteenth century there were five major groups; records of the time are sufficiently imprecise that we cannot know for sure whether they all existed at the same time. The Smith's Vly gang, the Bowery Boys, and the Broadway Boys were white groups; the Fly Boys and the Long Bridge Boys were black.<sup>1</sup> Both the Fly Boys and the Smith's Vly outfit owed their names to the Fly Market, at the foot of Maiden Lane, which in turn derived its title from the Dutch *vly*, meaning valley. (It should be pointed out that the late-nineteenth-century use of "fly," as in "fly cops," meaning undercover policemen, has a very different and more obvious etymology, and that the black usage in our own time, often applied to gang members, has yet a third source, being derived from the movie character Superfly.) These early gang members were definitely not criminals, and nearly all of them were gainfully employed as laborers of one sort or another, with a high proportion of butchers as well as mechanics, carpenters, and shipyard workers. There was evidently only a small percentage among them who followed the less morally august professions, such as gambling and tavernkeeping. The age range, then as later, was relatively broad, from early teens well into the twenties. The principal pastime of these bands was warring with each other over definitions of territory. Their weapons were stones and slung shots (not a sling shot, but an ancestor of the blackjack, consisting of a weight of shot with a flexible strap or handle), their battlefield the swamp area that later became the Five Points, with clashes occasionally extending down Pearl Street or over to Maiden Lane. Some truly epic fights between the Smith's Vly and Broadway gangs were staged on a rise of the present Grand Street

between Mott and Broadway that was known as Bunker Hill, on which occasions the gangs might muster as many as fifty members each. These conditions lasted a couple of decades into the nineteenth century, the picture only slightly changing with the rise of such additional gangs as the Spring Streeters and the Grand Streeters.

With the development of the slums in the area centering on the drained Collect Pond, the Lower East Side lost most of what remained of its rural innocence. The squalor and overcrowding of this area, known as the Five Points or, in a more general way, the Bloody Ould Sixth Ward, seemed to come almost immediately, and made it a natural terrain for competition that took the form of crime. The corner groceries, which hardly concealed the groggeries that were their true business, were the social centers, so it is natural that the area's gangs were born in them. Around 1825, the first important and decisively dangerous gang of the quarter, the Forty Thieves, captained by Edward Coleman,<sup>2</sup> came forth from Rosetta Peer's grocery on Centre Street near Anthony. This front also, perhaps a bit later, was home to the Kerryonians, an outfit whose members might be guessed to have originally come from County Kerry in Ireland. The Sixth Ward gangs whose lore has survived were apparently all Irish; it is, unfortunately, unrecorded whether their membership equally reflected the substantial black population of the district. In the late 1820s and early 1830s the gang roster of the neighborhood was further swelled by the Chichesters, the Roach Guards, the Plug Uglies, and the Shirt Tails. The latter were, as might be expected, distinguished by the fact that they refrained from tucking their shirts into their pants. The Plug Uglies wore oversized plug hats stuffed with leather and wool; in frays they would mash them down over their ears like helmets—a good idea at a time when the major weapons were clubs and brickbats, and blows were likely to be to the head. The gangs also favored hobnail boots, for effective kicking.

The Roach Guards, named after Ted Roach, the liquor dealer who backed them, suffered a factional dispute some time in the early 1830s. During the argument a member of one feuding sector evidently threw

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a rabbit carcass into the assemblage of the other. These recognized a potent symbol when they saw one and hoisted the corpse as their banner. Henceforth they called themselves the Dead Rabbits, an epithet whose pungency was not diminished by the fact that in flash lingo “dead” was an intensifier meaning “best” and a “rabbit” was a tough guy. Further distancing themselves from their former parent body, the Dead Rabbits sewed red stripes down the outer seams of their pants legs; the Roach Guards continued to sport blue ones.

This period saw the formation of numerous gangs all over the city. They varied greatly in strength, importance, and *raison d'être*. Some were, like fire companies, occupational: there was a band of butcher's boys known as the Hide-Binders, their name also rendered as High-Binders<sup>3</sup> (a term that in some manner now lost came to be applied exclusively to Chinese tong warriors); and a gang of bookbinders' apprentices and printers' devils called the Old Slippers, a name that perhaps sounds less than fierce—although it probably meant they came from Old Slip. The Slippers were opposed by the White Hallers, whose trade is unknown but who presumably lived on Whitehall Street; the Hallers once made news by capturing two Slippers and dipping them first in molasses, then in sand.

Midway in seriousness between these amateurs and the Five Points outfits were the agglomeration of gangs that grew up along the Bowery. These were led by the Bowery Boys, by then a venerable institution, and included the O'Connell Guards, the Atlantic Guards, the American Guards, and the True Blue Americans. What these gangs had in common were their neighborhood and their enmity toward the Five Points gangs. Otherwise, they were a heterogeneous mix: the O'Connell Guards were Irish to the hilt, for example, while the American Guards and the True Blues made much of their allegiance to Old Glory. They could find common ground as well in an opposition to all things English, but friction soon developed as a result of the political rivalry between the Irish-oriented Tammany Hall and the Nativist Party, or Know-Nothings. Still, at first such ethnic divisions were probably not all that serious; the True Blue Americans, paper tigers who were known

mostly for wearing black frock coats buttoned up to their chins and for darkly scheming against the English while striking terror into the heart of no one, were, in fact, Irish. Most of the Bowery Boys were employed and reasonably prosperous by contrast with their Five Points counterparts; most were butchers' or mechanics' apprentices, and many belonged to fire companies as well. In the crudest sociological terms, it could be said that the Bowery gangs represented the working poor, and the Sixth Ward gangs were the underclass. On either side of the fence, the gangs all rumbled with each other and kept constant intramural spats going—Shirt Tails vs. Plug Uglies, O'Connells vs. Atlantics—but joined forces to fight neighborhood against neighborhood. Later in their careers they would prove themselves capable of all uniting in common cause against the police.

The major outfits in both these milieux endured until the events surrounding the Draft Riots in 1863 changed the face of the area. The Bowery Boys and the Dead Rabbits in particular grew in size, ferocity, and renown until they were recognized as units of military effectiveness, unstoppable by ordinary means. Their conventional battles, which in the early days were still held at Bunker Hill, as if by formal designation, were bad enough. These battles lasted for days at a time, with the amalgamated gangs massed behind barricades of piled carts and paving stones, fighting with every weapon then available: fists, feet, teeth, bludgeons, brickbats, rocks, knives, pistols, muskets, on several occasions even cannons. More than once, the city had to call out the National Guard or the 27th Regiment to cool things down. As vocational schools, the two gangs had their different specialties. The Dead Rabbits turned out numerous keepers of dives (for example, Kit Burns, Shang Allen, Tommy Hedden), and enforcers, shoulder-hitters, mayhem artists: Hell-Cat Maggie (it was, in the early days, common enough for the gangs to have female members) filed her front teeth to points and wore artificial brass fingernails, and went on to make an independent career of saloon brawling. The Bowery Boys, on the other hand, specialized in supplying bodies to political entities, for poll fixing, poll guarding, repeat voting, and any number of other activities. The clash

between Tammany and Nativist factions constantly threatened the stability of the gang, which somehow always survived, although internecine battles were common. One particularly serious fray occurred in June 1835 when the O'Connell Guards and the American Guards battled for two days, beginning at Grand and Crosby Streets and spreading eastward into the Sixth Ward, where the Five Points gangs joined in, fighting impartially against both sides.

The extraordinary longevity of the Dead Rabbits and the Bowery Boys was matched by the longevity of their dispute. Their enmity survived both fracasas in which they sided together, such as the anti-Abolitionist riots of 1833, the general looting after the fire of 1835, the Astor Place Opera House riot of 1849, and endless disputes in which they butted heads. The Bowery Boys would assure the cooperation of their pacific Bowery neighbors by spreading rumors that the Dead Rabbits planned to sack shops along the avenue; the Dead Rabbits would enlist the aid of all the Irish by spreading rumors that the Bowery Boys planned to assist Nativists and Republicans in burning St. Patrick's Cathedral (the old one on Mott Street) to the ground. Sometimes ethnic loyalties overrode neighborhood affiliation, as when Orangemen from the Five Points allied themselves with the Bowery Boys against the Dead Rabbits.

Both gangs possibly reached their apex in the summer of 1857. At the time the city had two competing police forces, the Municipal Force and the Metropolitan Force, as a result of political machinations (we shall return to this strange phenomenon), and as rival cops showed more interest in fighting each other than in curtailing crime, the city was virtually unpatrolled. On the night of July 4th a large party of Dead Rabbits and Plug Uglies raided the clubhouse of the Bowery Boys and the Atlantic Guards at 42 Bowery. An all-night battle ensued during which the Bowery side appeared to prevail. The next day, fighting continued around Pearl and Chatham Streets, during which some passing Municipal cops were beaten up; the Metropolitan Force steered clear of the area. The Roach Guards joined the Rabbits and the Uglies in an attack on a Broome Street dive called the Green Dragon, which

they demolished with iron bars and paving stones while drinking up the entire stock of liquor. The Bowery gangs hastened to the scene, and another large battle began near the corner of Bayard Street, during which a Metropolitan cop who made a foolhardy attempt to intervene was beaten up and sent back to the White Street headquarters in his underwear. This prompted a detachment of Metropolitan Force to come marching up Centre Street in quest of revenge, but the combined action of all the gangs sent them away in defeat. The riot swelled as reinforcements for both sides arrived from all over the city. It was noted that whenever the noise of the fighting abated, the Five Points women could be heard taunting their men, accusing them of cowardice. Looting and vandalism took place on the fringes, while inhabitants of nearby buildings assisted by pelting the rioters indiscriminately with rocks. The police of both forces would make sporadic arrests, which had no effect whatsoever, and finally agreed with each other long enough to bring in the aging gangster and political boss Isaiah Rynders, who pleaded for a halt to the fighting. The gangsters jeered at him and beat him up as well. Rynders then made his way to the Police Commissioner's office to demand that he call out the army. Three National Guard regiments arrived late in the evening, and the fighting stopped, probably more on account of the rioters' exhaustion than for any other reason. The toll was officially set at eight dead and over a hundred wounded, but these figures seemed absurdly low; it was widely rumored that the gangs had taken away their own dead and secretly buried them in alleys and tunnels. The following day, as scattered fighting broke out in fringe areas as far as the German neighborhoods along Avenues A and B, north to Fourteenth Street and east to the river, *The New York Times* ran the following notice:

*We are requested by the Dead Rabbits to state that the Dead Rabbit club members are not thieves, that they did not participate in the riot with the Bowery Boys, and that the fight in Mulberry street was between the Roach Guards of Mulberry street and the Atlantic Guards of the Bowery. The*

*Dead Rabbits are sensitive on points of honor, we are assured, and wouldn't allow a thief to live on their beat, much less be a member of their club.<sup>4</sup>*

The riot, as bad as it was, would turn out to be a mere dress rehearsal for the Draft Riots six years later, in which 70,000 to 80,000 people fought, with some individual mobs comprising as many as 10,000.

In the era before the Civil War, the only other significant concentration of gangs was along the waterfront, where gangs were much more singlemindedly criminal, and divided their attention between prey in the form of dive patrons and that represented by the harbor shipping. An 1850 report to the mayor by Police Chief George W. Matsell estimated that there were between four hundred and five hundred river pirates in the Fourth Ward, divided among about fifty gangs, whose numbers were sometimes augmented by thieves commuting from Brooklyn, New Jersey, or Staten Island. The major gangs included the Daybreak Boys, the Buckaroos, the Hookers, the Swamp Angels, the Slaughter Housers, the Short Tails, the Patsy Conroys, and the Border Gang.

Mugging was done by all these units as well as by ad hoc bands of thieves. Scorning such refinements as knockout drops, they developed a simple routine in which a well-dressed intruder, sailor, or, indeed, nearly anybody else walking by would be lured under a window, a female accomplice would dump ashes on him from above, and the gang would drag him to a cellar where he would be stripped, robbed, beaten, and often killed. A zone grew up between the southern docks (in what is now the financial district) and Corlears Hook, into which cops allegedly never ventured in groups of fewer than six. In the late 1860s it was estimated that, on Cherry Street alone, 15,000 sailors were robbed each year to the tune of about \$2 million.

The first of the great East River gangs was the Daybreak Boys, who were headquartered at a saloon run by one Pete Williams at Slaughter House Point, the old name for the intersection of James and Water Streets in the territory that since the days of the Dutch had been

associated with tanneries. They specialized in robbing ships at anchor and derived their name from their practice of working the hours around dawn. Their captains were Nicholas Saul and William Howlett; other members included Slobbery Jim, Patsy the Barber, Sow Madden, and Cowlegged Sam McCarthy. All were under twenty years of age at the height of their careers. In their heyday they were said to have stolen property worth in excess of \$100,000 in two years. On an August night in 1852, detectives followed Saul and Howlett out to the brig *William Watson*, where they bungled a robbery, fatally shot the watchman, and then fled. The two were hanged in the Tombs yard the following January before a crowd of more than two hundred spectators. Shortly thereafter Slobbery Jim and Patsy the Barber had an epochal fight over the division of twelve cents from the pockets of a German immigrant they had killed, in the course of which Jim murdered Patsy; he was never seen again. Then Daybreaker associate Bill Lourie, owner of the saloon the Rising States on Water Street, was arrested for robbery along with Sam McCarthy. Police Roundsman Blair and Patrolmen Spratt and Gilbert reported killing twelve Daybreakers in 1858, and that same year Detective Sergeant Edwin O'Brien arrested fifty-seven gang members, variously Daybreak Boys, Short Tails, and Border Gangsters. What was left of these three gangs faded from view along with the Swamp Angels<sup>5</sup> and the Hookers. In view of such accounts, one might wonder about the disparity between the bloodthirstiness of these gangs and their obvious lack of sophistication and brains. Or perhaps the police were simply superior in equipment and in reasoning, and older and stronger as well. A diet of ale and mash would probably tend to make one both violent and rather vulnerable.<sup>6</sup>

The only gang of note at this period on the less frequented West Side docks was the Charlton Street Gang, which worked the North River in rowboats. In 1869 they were joined and soon commanded by Sadie the Goat, a former East Side barfly best known for having had an ear chewed off in a fight by the formidable Gallus Mag, of the Hole-in-the-Wall. The ear was later returned to her, and she was said to wear it in a locket around her neck. Her own preferred method of

engagement was the head butt, hence her moniker. Under Sadie, the gang grew more ambitious. They stole a sloop, flew the Jolly Roger from its mast, and ranged up the river as far as Poughkeepsie, robbing villages and outlying houses. Like Tom Sawyer, Sadie was evidently up on her pirate lore; she made captives walk the plank, and directed her gang in kidnappings after learning that Julius Caesar had once been held for ransom by pirates. Their career fell victim to their notoriety; once word of their exploits got around, Hudson Valley farmers began keeping firearms in sight, and one welcoming committee eventually defeated the gang.

The most famous pirate of the time was a middle-aged crook named Albert E. Hicks, who in 1860 was shanghaied by a Cherry Street crimp and woke up aboard the sloop *E. A. Johnson*, bound for Virginia to pick up a shipment of oysters. Five days later the boat was discovered drifting off the coast of New Jersey, empty and with signs of bloodshed. Inquiring policemen found that Hicks had been seen in Manhattan with a great deal of money on his person. He skipped town, but was arrested in Providence, R.I., carrying a variety of effects that included a watch and a daguerreotype which could be traced to the ship's officers. The U.S. Circuit Court found him guilty of murder and piracy on the high seas, and he eventually confessed to having killed all hands with an ax. The case received maximum publicity and achieved enduring fame when P. T. Barnum acquired a life mask of Hicks as well as all his clothes for \$25 and two boxes of cigars. Hicks was hanged a mere four months after his deed, on Bedloe's Island (the future site of the Statue of Liberty), to much pomp.

The dives around Corlears Hook grew their own species of crook. In the Tub of Blood, the Hell's Kitchen, the Snug Harbor, Swain's Castle, Cat Alley, and the Lava Beds thrived such gangsters as Skinner Meehan, Dutch Hen, Brian Boru, Sweeney the Boy, Hop-Along Petet, and Jack Cody. Hop-Along was a half-wit who was said to go berserk whenever he saw a police uniform, Sweeney and Boru were legendary for having slept in a marble yard for twenty years; one night (according to Frank Moss's account) Boru got so drunk he was eaten by rats. The

river pirates of the area's later period featured the Patsy Conroys, who ranged all the way from the Fourth Ward to the Hook. The membership included such worthies as Joseph Gayles, known as Sacco the Bracer; Scotchy Lavelle, who much later was to employ Irving Berlin as a singing waiter at a dive on Doyers Street; Mike Kerrigan, who was to become well known as a bank robber under the name Johnny Dobbs; and such impressive if forgotten names as Kid Shanahan, Pugsey Hurley, Wreck Donovan, Tom the Mick, Nigger Wallace, Beany Kane, and Piggy Noles. They sprang up in the early 1870s and flagged by 1873, when Sacco was killed by cops in a fight on the river, and a number of the others were arrested for robbing the brig *Mattan*, anchored off Castle Garden. Their mantle was assumed by the Hook Gang, led by Suds Merrick and Terry Le Strange. The Hook Gang was diversified, with a hand in activities ranging from piracy to burglary to picking pockets. Piggy Noles, who joined the Hooks after the demise of the Conroys, became famous for having stolen a rowboat, repainted it, and sold it back to its original owner, a legend later to circulate concerning many a car thief. Another member of the gang, Slipsey Ward, got his comeuppance while attempting the extraordinarily brazen, or stupid, task of single-handedly taking over a schooner.

The gangs had been driven away from the Fourth Ward by 1865 by concerted police action, and in 1876 the Steamboat Squad was formed to clean up Corlears Hook. The river dives were a thing of the past by 1890 (one reason being that most shipping had by then moved to the North River side), and the last of the gangs dissolved by 1900. The waterfront was therefore relatively unmolested until after World War I, when a major gang called the White Hands arose on the Brooklyn shore of the East River and, captained by Dinny Meehan and Wild Bill Lovett, controlled a block of territory that ran up both banks from Red Hook to the Brooklyn Bridge. Their major occupation, in that more sophisticated time, was extorting protection money from barge owners. In one form or another this gang limped through two decades of bloody wars of succession. According to one authority, who unfortunately does not provide substantiation, the White Hands were a direct

outgrowth of the Swamp Angels, who would have had to lay low for some forty years.

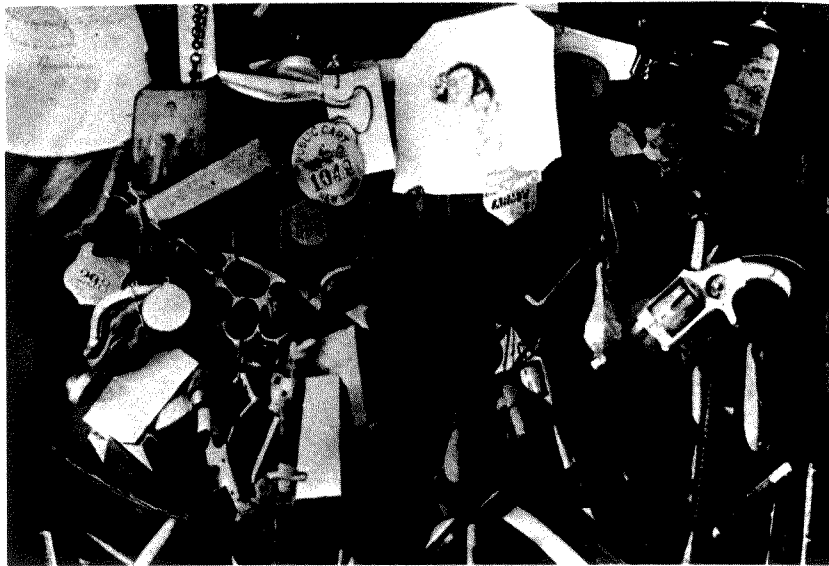
The 1860s and 1870s were the grand era of bank robberies. James L. Ford wrote in his memoirs fifty years later: "Such operations as bank burglary were held in much higher esteem during the 'sixties and 'seventies than at present, and the most distinguished members of the craft were known by sight and pointed out to strangers."<sup>7</sup> The district gangs of the time were mere pikers and barroom brawlers compared with such an outfit as that put together by George Leonidas Leslie, also known as Western George and referred to in the press as King of the Bank Robbers. His gang was made up of veterans of various gangs, including Jimmy Hope, Jimmy Brady, Abe Coakley, Red Leary, Shang Draper (the panel-house king), Johnny Dobbs, Worcester Sam Perris, and Banjo Pete Emerson. According to George W. Walling, who was Police Superintendent from 1874 to 1885, the Leslie gang was responsible for 80 percent of the bank robberies in New York between the Civil War and Leslie's death in 1884; estimates of their total take ranged between \$7 million and \$12 million. Such statistics must be viewed with suspicion as sounding entirely too convenient; one set of devious masterminds, after all, does less to damage police prestige than a whole town full of bank robbers. Nevertheless, there is no denying Leslie's prowess. He was perhaps responsible, for example, for the June 1869 robbery of the Ocean National Bank at Greenwich and Fulton Streets, which netted at least \$786,879. His gang also sacked the Manhattan Savings Bank at Bleecker and Broadway, in October 1878, to the tune of \$2,747,000, but despite its impressive profile, this job was not an unqualified success. The heist was some three years in the planning, but even so, the planning proved fallible, and, contrary to Leslie's usual caution, force was used, rather than bribery, to subdue the bank's janitor, which led to the gang's being identified. Not only that, but the take turned out to be principally composed of non-negotiable bonds, so that the business end of the haul amounted to a relatively paltry \$11,000 in cash and \$300,000 in negotiable securities, of which latter the bank eventually recovered \$257,000. Arrests in the



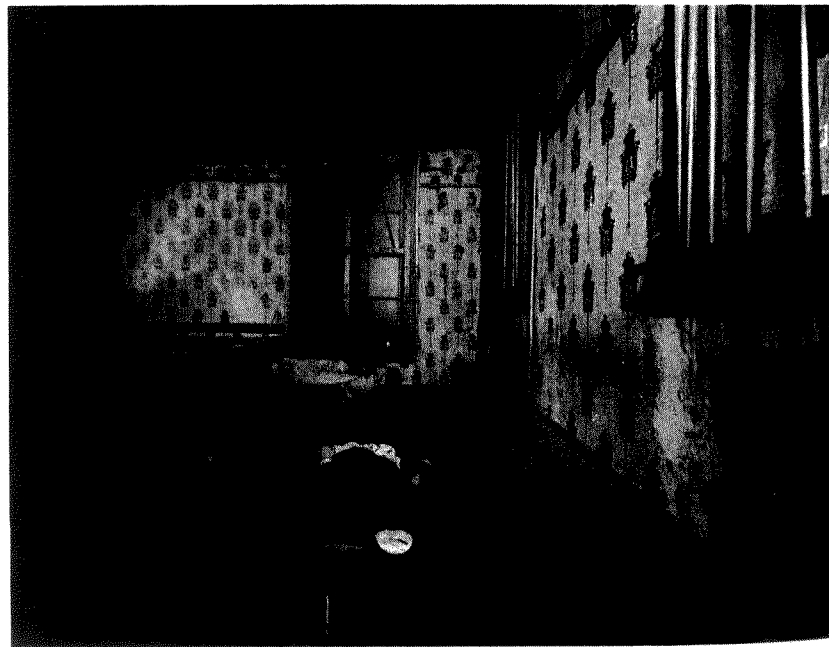
A low character in Raoul Walsh's *Regeneration*, 1915, one of the few Bowery crime dramas to be shot (in part) on location



Murder in a blind tiger, taken from the point of view of the gunman. NYPD evidence photo, circa 1915



Weapons and miscellanea seized by the police. Photograph by Jacob Riis



Pool-hall murder. NYPD evidence photo

case began in May 1879. Only John Hope, son of Jimmy, and strongman Bill Kelly actually went to jail, though, as Coakley and Emerson were acquitted and the indictment against Leslie was dismissed for lack of evidence. Afterward, Leslie became a freelance consultant, advising other gangs on strategy and tactics, for a cut of their proceeds. In June 1884 his body was found at the base of Tramp's Rock, a landmark that formerly stood somewhere on the boundary between the Bronx and Westchester County. He was said to have been murdered by accomplices, but the case was never solved, perhaps intentionally.

Even the 1869 Ocean National Bank job might not have been entirely to Leslie's credit. It is a measure of the deliberate confusion surrounding municipal affairs manipulated by Boss Tweed and associates that to this day the amount taken and the ultimate responsibility for that job cannot be established in any definite way. Other sources, who round off the amount of the take to \$2,750,000, credit the Bliss Bank Ring, a gang organized by George Miles Bliss and Mark Shinburn, and among the proponents of this theory there is disagreement over the exact composition of the ring. It was alleged by Thomas F. Byrnes, who acceded to the leadership of the Detective Bureau in 1880, that the Bliss Ring had pulled off the job with the assistance of numerous bribed police officials, who then pinned the deed on Leslie to protect themselves. Conveniently, Bliss was finally caught in an attempt to rob the Barre Bank, in Vermont, in 1875; Shinburn was arrested for a robbery in Belgium in 1883, after which events their respective trails vanished. It is a measure of the political and judicial chaos of the period that even within Byrnes's account there are contradictions as to the year of the robbery, the amount taken, and just who was involved. Even in such an apparently well-publicized case, the border between lore and fact is extremely hazy, so the prospects for factual certainty in the murkier strata of crime is correspondingly dimmer.

Fences in the mid-nineteenth century were powerful enough, and perhaps sufficiently liberal with bribes, to operate with a degree of openness. Maybe the most effective among them chose to retain anonymity, such as the nameless genius who succeeded in handling \$50,000 worth



of needles and thread stolen from the H. B. Claffin warehouse in the 1870s. A thief who had goods to dispose of would not have had to look very hard to find takers. For many years the Eighth Ward Thieves' Exchange, at Bowery and Houston, ran a sort of fence supermarket, and it was eventually succeeded by the Bowery's Little Stock Exchange, the one at which it was rumored that real diamonds had changed hands for a mere dollar. Before the Civil War, there had been, for example, Joe Erich on Maiden Lane and Ephraim "Old" Snow on Grand and Allen, who was said to have disposed of an entire flock of sheep. Later there was Old Unger's on Eldridge Street, and Little Alexander and Bill Johnson on the Bowery, the latter of whom fronted as a dry-goods retailer. After the Civil War, the major names were John D. Grady, aka Travelling Mike, and the formidable Marm Mandelbaum. Fredrika Mandelbaum, an impressive, narrow-eyed figure, secure in her 250-pound bulk, had a three-story building on the corner of Clinton and Rivington Streets where she ran a fencing operation with the assistance of her husband, Wolfe, and their son and two daughters, under the guise of a haberdashery. Her first listing in police records dates to 1862, and over the next twenty years she is said to have passed between \$5 million and \$10 million in goods through her mill. She was also alleged to have operated a Fagin school on Grand Street, but this very popular allegation was bandied around so carelessly in the decades after the appearance of Dickens's novel that such tales should be viewed with caution. Mandelbaum, whose house was said to be furnished as opulently as any Vanderbilt's with goods liberated from uptown mansions, was the social leader of the female criminal set. Her friends included such prominent sneak thieves and blackmailers as Big Mary, Ellen Clegg, Queen Liz, Little Annie, Old Mother Hubbard, Kid Glove Rosey, the con woman Sophie Lyons, and Black Lena Kleinschmidt. Black Lena was an uncommonly successful pickpocket and moll-buzzer who was undone by her taste for social climbing. After saving her money for years, she finally moved to the then fashionable suburb of Hackensack, N.J., and began entertaining a straight crowd. Legend has it that her end came when, at one of her lunches,

a guest recognized a diamond ring Lena was wearing as her own unique piece, stolen years before. Marm Mandelbaum, for her part, was indicted for grand larceny by the district attorney in 1884, but jumped bail and fled to Canada. She had the last laugh, as her bondsmen succeeded in transferring the property pledged for her bail to her possession by means of back-dated documents.

Mandelbaum was represented by the era's paramount criminal lawyers, William Howe and Abraham Hummel, to whom she paid a retainer of \$5,000 a year. This pair were very nearly a law unto themselves, and were so much a part of the New York scene, both high and low, in the latter half of the nineteenth century that they can hardly be discussed without the use of superlatives. In their forty-odd-year career they were said to have represented more than a thousand defendants in murder and manslaughter cases alone, with Howe personally pleading more than 650 of these. The firm was established in 1861 by Howe, a corpulent, flashily dressed practitioner noted for his overwhelmingly theatrical manner, in particular much given to weeping in the courtroom. His partner, the canny, diminutive Hummel, joined as an office boy in 1863 and was elevated by Howe to equal status within a few years. They redefined the word "shyster" (which originated when a lawyer named Scheuster so often irritated Justice Osborne of the Essex Market Court that the latter began accusing other obstreperous attorneys of "scheuster" practices). Their offices were in a building on Leonard and Centre Streets, directly across from the Tombs, that was ornamented with a forty-foot sign advertising their practice. Their cable address was LENIENT. They sometimes obtained the minutes of successful trials, had them reprinted, and distributed them as publicity. They owned reporters at most of the daily papers and kept a regular stable of professional witnesses. Hummel once got 250 of the little more than 300 prisoners on Blackwell's Island released all at once on a technicality. They kept no records.

The mainstay of Howe and Hummel's practice was the breach-of-promise blackmail suit, which they effectively worked on both sides, representing showgirls who had had affairs with society figures and then

been dropped, and at the same time being kept on retainer by many of these playboys as protection against further suits. Their client list virtually defined the newsworthy part of Manhattan society in the last thirty years of the nineteenth century. In the criminal world they represented entire gangs, such as “General” Abe Greenthal’s national pickpocket ring, the Sheeny Mob, the forgers of Chester McLaughlin’s Valentine Ring, and the foremost downtown gang of their day, the Whyos. They worked for George Leslie (receiving \$90,000 from him in the wake of the 1878 Manhattan Savings fiasco, for many years afterward the largest legal fee on record), the counterfeiter Charles O. Brockway, the major bookmaker Peter De Lacey, the procuresses Hattie Adams and the French Madame, the abortionist Madame Restell, the Tammany boss Richard Croker, the banco artists Hungry Joe and Kid Miller, the dive owners Harry Hill and Billy McGlory, and such once-famous murderers as Dr. Jakob Rosenzweig (the Hackensack Mad Monster), Annie Walden the Man-Killing Race-Track Girl, and Ned Stokes, who shot Jim Fisk. In civil cases of various sorts they represented bridge-jumper Steve Brodie, *Police Gazette* publisher Richard K. Fox, song-and-dance man Ned Harrigan, exotic dancer Little Egypt, music-hall proprietor Tony Pastor, the anarchist Johann Most, the bohemian feminists Victoria Woodhull and Tennessee Claflin, the eccentric George F. Train, and a slew of theatrical figures that included P. T. Barnum, Edwin Booth, John Drew, John Barrymore, and Lillie Langtry. Their industry did not flag until Howe died in 1902 and Hummel was chased from the country by the reform crusader William Travers Jerome, dying in London in 1926.

Some of the flavor of their ambiguous attitude toward the law can be derived from their sole published work, the 1888 *In Danger*. It begins with their citing as an inspiration a sermon by one Dr. Guthrie. “The City, Its Sins and Its Sorrows,” which they quote at length:

*“It had been well for many an honest lad and unsuspecting country girl that they had never turned their steps cityward nor turned them from the simplicity of their country home*

*toward the snares and pitfalls of crime and vice that await the unwary in New York . . .”*

And they proceed to describe the temptations in mouth-watering detail:

*. . . elegant storehouses, crowded with the choicest and most costly goods, great banks whose vaults and safes contain more bullion than could be transported by the largest ships, colossal establishments teeming with diamonds, jewelry, and precious stones gathered from all the known and uncivilized portions of the globe—all this countless wealth, in some cases so insecurely guarded.*

And go on to discuss the ease and convenience of crime in New York:

*All the latest developments in science and skill are being successfully pressed into the service of the modern criminal . . . the traveling bag with false, quickly-opening sides . . . the shop-lifters’ muff . . . the lady thieves’ corsets . . .*

Under the guise of alerting the public to the dangers of big-city crime, they offer explicit directions for making burglars’ tools, explain the logistics of skin games, and give formulas for rigging cards. The booklet is, in fact, an advertisement for crime, couched in all the subtlety known to the science of publicity at the time. Having instructed the potential criminal on how to pursue the profession, they detail its rewards: the unbridled nightlife available at Harry Hill’s and Billy McGlory’s, the monetary advantages of blackmailing and quackery, and, of course, the fact that anyone could do it.

*In no particular can the female shop-lifter be distinguished from other members of her sex except perhaps that in most cases she is rather more richly and attractively dressed.<sup>8</sup>*

Howe and Hummel bring nineteenth-century Manhattan into relief as a wide-open town dominated by two industries: larceny and entertainment, which often overlap. The corruption of minors, the bribery of witnesses and officials, the generalized suborning of the system of justice: they practiced all of these, and they also, like artists, gave a coherent shape to the chaos of their times, tying its many ends together, showing the common thread that linked P. T. Barnum and faro mechanics, Tammany ward-heelers and The. Allen, Western George and sideshow freaks, trunk murderers and the French Madame. It was often bruited about that they were criminal masterminds who set up jobs for their clients and then got them off at the other end if they were caught, and this is not entirely beyond the pale of speculation, but they scarcely needed to compromise themselves in such barefaced fashion when they had made themselves indispensable to the city's many layers of cupidity. Howe and Hummel, it might be said, were the truest realists of their time, by their example sweeping away the cant of moralists and the hypocrisy of journalists. They saw the inhabitants of New York City as one class, united under the single standard of greed.

Howe and Hummel's clients the Whyos were the most powerful downtown gang between the Civil War and the 1890s, a huge group who ranged all over Lower Manhattan, having (so Asbury theorizes) emerged from the Chichesters, one of the first but thereafter least publicized of the original Five Points outfits. They had numerous headquarters over the years: "Dry Dollar" Sullivan's saloon on Chrystie Street (he was later to become the preeminent Tammany politician of his day), various niches within Mulberry Bend, a churchyard at Park and Mott Streets, an Italian dive at Worth and Mulberry, and the saloon called the Morgue, on the Bowery. Their membership, whose most prominent figures included such colorful names as Hoggy Walsh, Fig McGerald, Bull Hurley, Googy Corcoran, Baboon Dooley, Red Rocks Farrell, Slops Connolly, Piker Ryan, Dorsey Doyle, and Big Josh Hynes, variously worked as pickpockets, sneak thieves, dive owners, and brothel and panel-house keepers. Hines claimed his berth in

history by being the first man ever to hold up a session of the newly invented game of stuss (robbing stuss setups soon became nearly as popular, and certainly more remunerative, than trying one's luck at playing the game). Mike McGloin, who was hanged in the Tombs in 1883 for the murder of a saloonkeeper, articulated what might have been the Whyos' motto: "A guy ain't tough until he has knocked his man out."<sup>9</sup> Piker Ryan made his mark by getting himself arrested while carrying a take-out menu of Whyo services:

<i>Punching</i>	.....	\$2
<i>Both eyes blacked</i>	.....	\$4
<i>Nose and jaw broke</i>	.....	\$10
<i>Jacked out</i>	.....	\$15
<i>Ear chewed off</i>	.....	\$15
<i>Leg or arm broke</i>	.....	\$19
<i>Shot in leg</i>	.....	\$25
<i>Stab</i>	.....	\$25
<i>Doing the big job</i>	.....	\$100 and up

Dandy Johnny Nolan was enshrined in memory for his invention of a copper eye-gouger that could easily be slipped over the thumb (although, if truth be told, this does not sound so very different from Hell-Cat Maggie's artificial brass fingernails); he was also noted for embedding sections of ax blades in the soles of his boots. The Whyos' longest-lived captains were Danny Lyons and Danny Driscoll; both ended up getting hanged in the Tombs yard. Driscoll got his for accidentally shooting and killing a young female bystander in the course of a quarrel. Lyons was a whoremaster whose stable included Bunty Kate, Gentle Maggie, and Lizzie the Dove (Maggie eventually stabbed the Dove in the throat with a cheese knife in the course of a bar brawl). He added Pretty Kitty McGown to the string, but her former lover tracked Lyons down; Lyons killed him and was arrested soon after.

Lesser gangs in this period included the Hartley Mob, centered on Broadway and Houston Street, which happened to acquire a hearse

and often carried out jobs under cover of mock funerals, staged complete with black drapes on the vehicle, crepe bands for their hats, and a coffin for the swag; the Molasses Gang, which developed the neat but perhaps self-limiting gambit of walking into grocery stores, asking the keeper to fill a derby hat with molasses “on a bet,” clapping the hat over the proprietor’s head, and emptying the till; the Dutch Mob, including future Western George associate Sheeny Mike Kurtz, which specialized in staging street fights to draw crowds, whose pockets they would pick, in the area from Houston to Fifth Streets east of the Bowery until it was cleaned up by Police Captain Anthony Allaire in 1887; the Mackerelville Crowd, which dominated the neighborhood of that name that once covered the area between Eleventh and Thirteenth Streets, between First Avenue and Avenue C; and the Battle Row Gang, which emerged from the original Battle Row (a title subsequently claimed by numerous Manhattan streets and alleys) on Sixty-third Street between First and Second Avenues, and which was soon unopposed in the semi-rural district that covered the streets numbered in the sixties from river to river.

The middle West Side, which really developed as a neighborhood only after the Civil War, brought forth its first significant mob, the Tenth Avenue Gang, which made its name by jumping a southbound express at Spuyten Duyvil, tying up the personnel, and throwing off cash and securities packed in iron boxes to confederates who stood waiting at trackside as the train approached Forty-second Street. They in turn were absorbed by the Hell’s Kitchen Gang, captained by Dutch Heinrichs, which pursued a variety of occupations: mugging, house-breaking, extorting protection money from shopkeepers, and robbing the rail yards at the Hudson River depot on Thirtieth Street. Farther downtown, in the area north of Washington Market then inhabited principally by Turks, Syrians, and Armenians, there were the Stable Gang, which worked out of a Washington Street barn and preyed on recent immigrants; the Silver Gang, a group of burglars also domiciled on Washington Street; and the versatile Potashes, captained by Red Shay Meehan, who derived their name from the Babbit Soap Factory

on Washington near Rector Street. The neighborhood’s most venerable outfit was the Boodle Gang, which had begun as far back as the 1850s as butcher-cart thieves—a term that actually applied to robbers preying on any sort of vehicles. Installed in a labyrinthine double-tenement block bounded by Greenwich and Washington, Spring and Canal Streets, they divided their time between raiding stores and wagons at the Centre and Washington Markets and waylaying bank messengers.

The history of the city’s gangs can be seen as running a close parallel to the progress of commerce. From small, specialized establishments narrowly identified with particular neighborhoods, gangs branched out, diversified, and merged, absorbing smaller and less well-organized units and encompassing ever-larger swaths of territory. After the Whyos, their numbers decimated by jailings and deaths, dissolved in the early 1890s, a small number of very large gangs, organized as umbrella formations made up of smaller entities, came to dominate the scene. There were four such conglomerates operating in the lower part of the island over the better part of the two decades on either side of the turn of the century: the Five Pointers, the Eastmans, the Gophers, and the Hudson Dusters. The Five Pointers (named with a feeling for history, since the neighborhood of that name had, for all intents and purposes, not existed in nearly thirty years) boasted as many as 1,200 members and controlled an area ranging from Broadway to the Bowery, from Fourteenth Street to City Hall Park. They were headquartered at the New Brighton Dance Hall on Great Jones Street, which was owned by their captain, Paul Kelly. The Eastmans were named after their leader, Monk Eastman. From their base in a saloon on Chrystie Street (from which a police raid once removed two wagonloads of slungshots, blackjacks, brass knuckles, and revolvers), they worked the territory from the Bowery east to the river, from Fourteenth to Monroe Streets. Their turf included the East Side brothel district as well as the main share of Bowery dives, which were for some reason concentrated on the east side of the avenue.

The middle West Side of the island was owned by the Gophers (generally pronounced “Goofers,” although not derisively), who were