
WORK AND THE LODGE: FRATERNALISM
IN MERIDEN AND NEW BRITAIN, CONNECTICUT

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May 1977

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CRSO Working Paper #157

Copies available through:
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Social Organization
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Over the last few years a number of labor historians led by Herbert Gutman, David Brody and David Montgomery have begun to look at American labor history in ways that have broken away from the confines of the old concentration on trade union history.¹ Herbert Gutman, for example, has attempted to show that ". . . Gilded Age workers had distinct ways of work and leisure, habits, aspirations, conceptions of America and Christianity, notions of right and wrong and traditions of protest and acquiescence that were linked together in neighborhoods by extensive voluntary associations and other community institutions."²

But there has been no systematic investigation of these voluntary associations and of how they held these subcultures together. The most typical and by far the most extensive of these voluntary associations was the fraternal benefit society. The study of fraternal societies can reveal much about the relationship between workers' home and workplace, between native-born and immigrants, between neighborhood and city, for it can reveal both the solidarities and the divisions of working-class culture and society. Perhaps most important, it can show how behavior at the workplace is affected by patterns of sociability and how the nature of work in its turn produces certain types of sociability. This last is the topic of this paper.

First of all what were these fraternal societies? An article written at the turn of the century gave the following definition: ". . . A typical fraternal society rests upon three things: first,

voluntary organization on a basis of equality; second, some ritualistic system; and third, a system of benefits."³ The first American fraternal societies were copies of English friendly societies offering sick and funeral benefits. Indeed many of them began as transatlantic offshoots of English societies: for example the history of the largest fraternal society, the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, can be traced back to the founding, at Baltimore in 1819, of a branch of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, Manchester Unity, by some English immigrant artisans.⁴ In 1843 the American Odd Fellows' lodges broke away from their English parent. The model for a more elaborate kind of fraternal society, offering life insurance rather than sick and funeral benefits, was the Ancient Order of United Workmen, founded at Meadville, Pa., in 1868 among a group of railroad workers.⁵

Two other organizations that might be termed "typical" were the Knights of Columbus and the Polish National Alliance. The Knights of Columbus was founded in New Haven, Conn., in 1882 by an Irish Catholic priest to meet the needs of Catholics who were prohibited by papal decree from joining non-Catholic fraternal organizations. Whereas the Odd Fellows and United Workmen were open to all white males, membership in the Knights of Columbus was restricted to practicing Catholic males.⁶ The Polish National Alliance was founded in 1880. It was strongly nationalist, campaigning for an independent homeland, but because it held that one did not have to be a Catholic to be a Pole it entered on a bitter dispute with more clerical Polish Americans, led by the Polish Roman Catholic Union.⁷

No brief summary can do justice to the diversity of the fraternal society movement. There were temperance societies, socialist societies,

factory societies, women's societies, black societies, patriotic and anti-immigrant societies, and societies for just about every immigrant group. By 1901 there were some six hundred major fraternal benefit societies with a total membership of five and a half million. The Odd Fellows alone had nearly a million members.⁸ In addition there were thousands of local societies, based in a single community. These catered to as many different groups as the affiliated societies.

In what kind of local context are we dealing with the growth of these societies? The early industrial history of the towns of Meriden and New Britain was remarkably similar. In both a number of small factories and shops were established soon after 1800, and by 1850 each had a considerable industrial establishment. In 1819 Meriden was described in the following terms:

A spirit of enterprise and activity in business characterizes the inhabitants of this town. Various manufactures and mechanical employments are carried on; but those of tin ware and buttons are the most important. There are 5 distinct Factories of the former, and an equal number of the latter, for making metal buttons; and 1 Factory for ivory buttons. There are also 1 Factory for ivory combs, and 2 block tin or hard metal spoon Factories. The wares and manufactures of these establishments, like those of other towns, in the vicinity, are sent abroad [i.e. out of state] for a market.

The same authors described Berlin, which at that time included New Britain, as being "celebrated for its manufactures and mechanical arts."¹⁰

Seventeen years later, in 1836, a guide to Connecticut noted "the Brass factory of Messrs. North and Stanley, 4 stories in height" in New Britain. It went on to note that New Britain contained forty five factories, mainly in brass, and that these employed seven hundred out of the fifteen hundred inhabitants.¹¹ The same guide described Meriden as "one of the most flourishing and enterprising manufacturing towns in

the State." It listed the following factories:

2 for patent augers and auger bits, 3 for ivory combs, 6 for tin ware, 4 for Britannia ware, 2 iron founderies, 1 manufactory for coffee mills, 1 for clocks, 1 for Norfolk door latches, 3 for block tin spoons, 1 for wood combs, 1 for skates and iron rakes, and 1 for gridirons.¹²

Of these factories it was those making Britannia ware and spoons that were to be the most important for the future of Meriden. Britannia ware was a kind of superior pewter which because it kept its shine better became very popular. By 1850 Meriden was producing such articles as cups, soup ladies, sugar bowls, cream pitchers, candlesticks, lamps and mugs from this material.¹³

In 1850 five companies merged to form the Meriden Britannia Company which subsequently dominated the market. In 1855 a new material called nickel silver was introduced, which, though it contained no silver, was more similar in appearance to sterling. At about the same time the company began electroplating some of its products and also acquired the services and trade mark of the Rogers brothers of Hartford. The "1847 Rogers Bros." name on knives, forks and spoons became world renowned. The brand became so popular that every other manufacturer soon felt obliged to introduce a line that had Rogers as part of its name. Soon the cheaper Britannia ware was abandoned and the firm concentrated on the higher priced and more profitable silver-plated ware. In 1895 the company extended the process of moving up-market by going in a substantial way into the production of sterling silverware.¹⁴

Because of the success of the Meriden Britannia Co. several other entrepreneurs set up in the same line, so that Meriden earned the title of "the silver city." As in other industries at this time increased competition soon led to increased concentration, and in 1898 a silver

trust was organized under the name of the International Silver Company with an authorized capital of twenty million dollars and its headquarters at Meriden. It included the Meriden Britannia Co. and two other Meriden concerns as well as companies in Hartford, Wallingford, Bridgeport, Norwich, Waterbury, Lyons, N.Y., and Toronto. Within a few years it had taken over further companies in Wallingford, Middletown, Derby and Meriden.¹⁵

There were other manufacturing concerns in Meriden, producing such items coffee mills, shot guns, vises, pocket knives, lamps, mechanical pianos and organs, and table cutlery, and there was a series of companies in the making of cut glass.¹⁶ But the business life of Meriden was dominated by one corporation, the International Silver Co., and that one corporation dominated its industry.

New Britain's industrial growth paralleled that of Meriden. The brass foundry of North & Stanley has already been mentioned: this firm, whose origins go back to 1800, owed its early prosperity to its market in sleigh bells and to the first use of a machine in the manufacture of hooks and eyes.¹⁷ By the late 1830's a number of firms, whose partners seemed to change almost constantly, were manufacturing hardware. One of these firms, owned by two brothers of the Stanley family, was the first to introduce a steam engine as a power source.¹⁸ The Stanley name was later to become one of the most renowned among New Britain manufacturing concerns. The years between 1837 and 1850 saw the beginning of four of the large hardware firms that were to give New Britain its name of "the hardware city". These companies were Russell & Erwin, Landers Frary & Clark, P & F Corbin and the Stanley Works. The fifth major corporation in the town, the Stanley Rule and Level Co., was organized in 1857.¹⁹ In 1902 the manufactures of New Britain made their

own effort at reducing competition when the American Hardware Corporation was formed from the merger of P & F Corbin and Russell & Erwin, as well as a lock firm and a screw firm. According to the U.S. Immigration Commission of 1910 this company "exerts a strong influence in the industrial affairs of the city."²⁰ By the early twentieth century New Britain was thus dominated not by a monopoly but by an oligopoly of the American Hardware Corp., the Stanley companies (to be merged in 1920) and Landers Frary & Clark.

It can be seen from Table I that up until 1880 Meriden and New Britain attracted roughly the same proportion of immigrants. Meriden drew a number of workers directly from Sheffield and Birmingham, England, to work in the plated silverware and cutlery industries. But the other immigrant groups that settled there -- Irish, Germans, French Canadians and Swedes -- were the same groups that settled in New Britain. After 1880 however, while immigration gathered pace in New Britain, it slackened off in Meriden, and by 1900 New Britain had passed Meriden in the raw number of immigrants. Moreover these immigrants came not from the groups that had settled there earlier but from southern and eastern Europe: they were Italians, Lithuanians, Ruthenians and above all Poles, for New Britain soon had one of the largest Polish communities in New England, indeed a community that had considerable influence among Poles nationally.²¹

What attracted these immigrants to New Britain was the demand for unskilled labor. The U.S. Immigration Commission reported: "The introduction of machinery, with its attendant opportunity to make use of low-priced labor, has made the employment of the immigrant not only possible, but highly profitable . . . Most of the immigrants have entered the lower,

TABLE I

MERIDEN

	Population ¹	Foreign-born	No. of fraternal societies	Fraternal societies per 1000 population
1850	3,559			
1860	7,426			
1870	10,495	3,022 28.8%	6 (1872)	.6
1880	15,540	4,931 31.7%	15	1.0
1890	21,652	6,879 31.8%	62	2.9
1900	24,296	7,215 29.7%	79	3.3
1910	27,265	8,042 29.5%	85	3.1
1920	29,867	7,916 26.5%	89 (1919)	3.0
1930	38,481	8,871 ² 23.1%	70	1.8
1940	39,494	7,203 18.2%	64	1.6

NEW BRITAIN

	Population ¹	Foreign-born	No. of fraternal societies	Fraternal societies per 1000 population
1850	3,029			
1860	5,212			
1870	9,480	3,162 33.4%	3	.3
1880	11,800	3,697 31.3%	16 (1881)	1.4
1890	16,519	5,753 34.8%	37	2.2
1900	25,998	9,293 35.7%	64	2.5
1910	43,916	18,030 41.1%	88	2.0
1920	59,316	21,340 36.0%	85 (1919)	1.4
1930	68,128	20,746 ² 30.6%	82	1.2
1940	68,685	17,079 24.9%	75	1.1

1. 1850-70 population is for the respective towns; thereafter it is for the cities.

2. Whites only.

Sources: U.S. Census, Meriden Directories and New Britain Directories.

more unskilled occupations where the lowest wages were paid . . . Today the Poles and the Italians are probably the most numerous of all the races in the lower occupations in the factories."²² But it was not only immigrants who were restricted to unskilled positions. As the same report observed: ". . . Because of the large amount of unskilled labor required for the production of hardware and kindred manufactures, the bulk of employment available is in the unskilled (and consequently less remunerative) occupations."²³

Meriden presents a striking contrast. The report quoted above commented:

Over one-third of the city's industrial output consists of plated silverware and britannia ware. In these industries men of the highest skill are employed, and the average wages paid are the highest paid in any industrial employment in the United States . . . The various occupations in almost all industries in the community require men of experience and skill, and those who apply for work having no trade stand little chance of finding employment.

The report explained the decline in the number of immigrants as follows:

Since 1900 immigration to [Meriden] has been light, and the indications are that it will be even less in the future. The immigration which may come in the future will be made up of immigrants from eastern Europe and from Asia, and as this class of aliens are almost entirely unskilled laborers, few of them will find employment. The demand for all classes of labor, especially the unskilled, is small, and a ready supply within the city is always available.²⁵

It was on these skilled crafts, such as the metal spinners, the polishers and buffers, the engravers and chasers, that the strength of Meriden's labor unions was founded. During the Meriden centennial celebrations in June 1906 a special day was set aside to honor labor, and the souvenir of the celebration wrote: "Meriden has for many years been considered one of the strongest labor union cities in Connecticut, and the organizations were never on a more solid basis or more widely distributed among the workmen of the various crafts than at the present time."²⁶

The findings of the U.S. Immigration Commission in 1910 confirm the strength of unions in Meriden. The Commission reported, on the basis of its survey, that 24.8% of all males aged 21 and over were union members. This 24.8% figure was made up of 29.3% among the native born and 23.2% among the foreign born.²⁷

In New Britain the overall figure for union membership was only 2.9% and the Commission noted: "The factories do not welcome the labor union; all of the more important shops are 'open shops,' in which unions exert little influence."²⁸ The result of a New Britain strike of 1915 shows how weak unions were there. After being out for five weeks the machinists of the New Britain Machine Co. voted to call off their strike and the local newspaper reported: "The men say they have gained an important point in the strike and that the company would now accept an applicant if he shows a union card. A man belonging to the union would not be discriminated against, but would get a job just as quickly as one who did not."²⁹ In 1905 the same newspaper reported of Labor Day:

Labor Day is observed here only in the closing of the factories and stores. No demonstration was undertaken by the local labor organizations although some of the unions are said to be strong. The chief reason given for the omission is that men are timid about showing their labor union affiliations lest it might affect their jobs in some of the factories.³⁰

Just as Meriden had flourishing labor unions so it had flourishing fraternal organizations. In 1900, when as can be seen from Table I, these organizations reached their peak, there were nine Odd Fellows' organizations and the same number of Foresters' lodges, three lodges of the Knights of Columbus, two of the Ancient Order of United Workmen and of the Knights of Pythias, and a whole host of other societies of every conceivable type, ranging from the Young Men's Total Abstinence and Benefit Society,

to the Windhorst Benevolent Society of German Roman Catholics, and from the Union des Ouvriers Canadiens Francais to the Wilcox Silver Plate Sick and Funeral Aid Society.³¹

These societies were not just an interesting by-product of a community with a highly skilled workforce and a large labor union membership. They were a vital part of a strong working-class community. They flourished alongside labor unions because they performed a number of vital functions and met a number of vital needs. They were not alternatives to unions, or supplements to them; rather they were part of an interlocking relationship between work, unionism and sociability, and, as we shall see, once Meriden's unions declined so did its fraternal organizations and vice versa.

Not only did these organizations provide security for working people with their sick and death benefits, but they helped in maintaining the solidarities and networks without which the unions could not survive. When a buffer or engraver left work at the end of his shift, he might well drop by his lodge for a drink with his fellow workers or with workers from other plants who were his lodge brothers. He might be an officer in his lodge, holding some title like Noble Grand or Chief Ranger, a title that would strengthen his feelings of self worth. He might not be in the same lodge as the Germans of Teutonic Lodge, IOOF, or the French Canadians of the Foresters of America, but he would meet with them in the Odd Fellows' Encampment Degree or in the Foresters' annual memorial day parade (which visited both the Catholic and the Protestant cemeteries). Similarly he might meet with the members of other lodges and other ethnic groups in the fraternal bowling or baseball leagues.³²

And these solidarities would be revealed when the workers went on strike. The Eagles or the Moose might hold a benefit for the strikers; the union and the TABs (Young Men's Total Abstinence and Benefit Society) might jointly put on a minstrel show to raise money for the strikers; while at other lodges the scabs would be given the cold shoulder.³³

It is interesting that fraternalism appears to have reached its peak in Meriden around 1900 (see Table I), for labor union strength too seems to have declined after then. There were a number of preliminary skirmishes between unions and employers who were emboldened by their monopoly hold on the silver industry, but the final confrontation did not come until 1915. In October of that year the silver workers of the International Silver Co. went out on strike. Wages and hours were the surface grievances,³⁴ but what precipitated the strike appears to have been the use of "efficiency experts." The owner of a small local cut glass concern wrote to the local paper:

In the recent past, or in the past few years, the efficiency expert came into existence and with him and his force came many tags and long rows of figures. At the same time the working atmosphere of the factory commenced to change. All possible leaks were looked after and stopped and, incidentally, some leaks were stopped that were not leaks. At the commencement the aim of the factory was to cut out all unnecessary effort: to do away with the drones; by the means of tags to have an actual knowledge of what each man was doing and through comparing the same find out how some men could be speeded up. That is the cause of the strike, speeding up.

The screws were put on here, there and everywhere. Everything was sacrificed to speed. Foremen were removed and so-called speed producers replaced them. A system of espionage was introduced. All this was given a name -- it was called modern methods. The workmen say it should be called school-room methods.

The personal touch under which these factories prospered ceased to exist. A sheet of paper and many tags took the place of personal touch.

He went on to charge that a Department of Labor mediator had said that a man could only work forty-five minutes in each hour actually producing, but had found the men in one factory being forced to work fifty-four

minutes in the hour.³⁵

Feeling that their craft status and traditional control of their work was in danger, the silver workers decided to strike. But they were aware that 1915 was a recession year and that the speed-up affected not just skilled workers but the whole corporation. So they decided to form an industrial union, "one big union" as they called it using the language of the IWW.³⁶ The new Silver Workers Union was organized on September 15, 1915, and the strike began on October 4.³⁷ On January 17 the company won an injunction against the union's picketing tactics and by the end of the month it was clear that the strikers had lost. The company, whose plants outside Meriden, Wallingford and Waterbury had not been struck, had resumed work with scabs brought in from New York replacing the skilled workers. The unskilled workers had been forced back to work through sheer hunger: the new union did not give any strike benefits. These were paid only to the long-standing craft members. Most of the craft workers simply left town to find work elsewhere.³⁸

The strike was not officially declared off until January 1919 -- three and a half years after it began -- when the company agreed not to discriminate against its former employees. "Believing that a closer relationship between employers and employees is desirable," the company declared, "we have had in process for some time the formation and construction of a mutual welfare plan."³⁹ The defeat of the union was total.

Although the fraternal organizations of Meriden had suffered no such death blow they had begun a long and lingering decline. The old working-class community of Meriden had been destroyed.

Footnotes

1. See for example Herbert G. Gutman's essays collected in Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America (New York, 1976); David Brody, Steelworkers in America: The Nonunion Era (Cambridge, Mass., 1960); David Montgomery, "The 'New Unionism' and the Transformation of Workers' Consciousness in America 1909-1922," Journal of Social History, v. 7, no. 4 (Summer 1974), pp. 509-529.
2. Herbert G. Gutman, "A Brief Postscript: Class, Status, and the Gilded Age Radical: A Reconsideration," Work, Culture, and Society, p. 277.
3. B.H. Meyer, "Fraternal Beneficiary Societies in the United States," American Journal of Sociology, v. 6, no. 5 (March, 1901), p. 647.
4. Albert C. Stevens, The Cyclopaedia of Fraternities, 2nd ed., (New York, 1907), p. 254.
5. Ibid., pp. 128-130.
6. Ibid., p. 216.
7. Victor Greene, For God and Country: The Rise of Polish and Lithuanian Ethnic Consciousness in America 1860-1910 (Madison, 1975), pp. 86-89.
8. Meyer, "Fraternal Beneficiary Societies," p. 650; Stevens, Cyclopaedia, p. 259. It is worth noting that total labor union membership at this time was only 1.1 million -- see John R. Commons and Assocs., History of Labor in the United States, v. 4 (New York, 1935), p. 13.
9. John C. Pease and John M. Niles, A Gazetteer of the States of Connecticut and Rhode Island (Hartford, 1819), p. 126.
10. Ibid., p. 56.
11. John Warner Barber, Connecticut Historical Collections (Hartford, 1836), p. 66.
12. Ibid., p. 230.
13. C. Bancroft Gillespie and George Munson Curtis, An Historical Record and Pictorial Description of the Town of Meriden . . . A Century of Meriden (Meriden, Conn., 1906) [hereafter referred to as A Century of Meriden], pt. 3, pp. 38 and 41.
14. Ibid., pt. 3, pp. 41-44. See also U.S. Immigration Commission, Immigrants in Industries, pt. 21 "Diversified Industries," v. 1 (Washington D.C., 1911), p. 123 -- Meriden is referred to in this report as "Community B," New Britain as "Community C."
15. Gillespie and Curtis, A Century of Meriden, pt. 3, p. 35.
16. Ibid., pt. 3, pp. 3-34, 48-160.
17. David N. Camp, History of New Britain (New Britain, Conn., 1889), pp. 268-270, 275-276. The hooks and eyes were put out to be mounted on cards by the women of the local communities; earlier the women had made the whole product at home.
18. Ibid., pp. 278-281. The steam engine was installed in 1832.
19. Ibid., pp. 283-4, 365.
20. Immigrants in Industries, pt. 21, v. 1, p. 214.
21. Ibid., pt. 21, v. 1, pp. 124-5, 131-3, 223-4, 230-1; Daniel S. Buczek, Immigrant Pastor: The Life of the Right Reverend Monsignor Lucyan Bojnowski of New Britain Connecticut (Waterbury, Conn., 1974), passim.
22. Immigrants in Industries, pt. 21, v. 1, p. 257.
23. Ibid., pt. 21, v. 1, p. 218.
24. Ibid., pt. 21, v. 1, pp. 157-8.
25. Ibid., pt. 21, v. 1, p. 138.
26. Centennial of Meriden, June 10-16, 1906: Report of the Proceedings (Meriden, Conn., 1906), pp. 161, 169-170.
27. Immigrants in Industries, pt. 21, v. 1, p. 156.
28. Ibid., pt. 21, v. 1, p. 260.
29. New Britain Record, Oct. 23, 1915, p. 2.
30. Ibid., Sept. 4, 1905, p. 2.
31. Meriden Directory, 1900.
32. Ibid., 1900; Meriden Record, April 16, 1914, p. 2; Meriden Journal, June 12, 1890, p. 8.
33. Meriden Record, Aug. 13, 1913, p. 3; Oct. 23, 1915, p. 1; Oct. 29, 1915, p. 4; Jan. 12, 1916, p. 10.
34. Ibid., Oct. 4, 1915, pp. 1, 9.
35. Ibid., Oct. 29, 1915, p. 6. The writer of the letter, James D. Bergen, was the owner of the J.D. Bergen Company, one of many small glass concerns in Meriden. See Albert Christian Revi, American Cut and Engraved Glass (New York, 1965), p. 84.
36. Meriden Record, Sept. 20, 1915, p. 1.
37. Ibid., Sept. 16, 1915, pp. 1, 11; Oct. 5, 1915, p. 1.

