
Clubs, Gentlemen, And The Western City

The Role of Seattle's Exclusive Clubs in the Identification of an Elite Class and the Attainment of Metropolitan Status

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Private clubs, ranging from exclusive metropolitan men's clubs to less pretentious sporting and athletic groups, have been a part of American society for centuries; and memberships in these clubs have long been eagerly sought by those who aspired to the upper echelons of business and society. As nineteenth century American society moved westward, clubs soon followed, springing up in towns and cities throughout the West. For the newly prosperous elite of western cities these exclusive organizations performed two important functions. First, their very existence was considered evidence that the town had left its frontier years behind and had become a sophisticated metropolis capable of supporting the lifestyle of a leisure class. Second, they provided the new elite of these western communities an opportunity for reinforcing their own rather precarious positions in local society.

At the turn of the century Seattle was a city with a limited reputation as a social or cultural center. Though visitors to the Northwest frequently commented on its bustling business district, their compliments for refinement and respectability were reserved for Tacoma and Portland, Seattle's rivals to the south. Seattle's leading citizens, like those of many western cities, were concerned about their unsophisticated frontier image, and during the late 1890's and early 1900's they turned their attention to improving and promoting the city's social and cultural life. These efforts included the establishment of a number of exclusive sporting organizations and events. This paper investigates just two, the annual horse show begun in 1906, and organized horse racing, established and promoted in 1902 by the King County Fair Association and Gentlemen's Driving Club. While some Seattleites scoffed at them as pretentious, the majority considered these events and organizations significant contributions to the community's cultural and social standing. The horse shows, races, Fair Association and Driving Club all functioned as status symbols, both for their members and participants, and for the city which promoted their existence and the sophisticated lifestyle they symbolized.