

# San Franciscans at Work and at Play, 1846-1869

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The period between 1846 and 1869 was one of enormous transition for the city of San Francisco. This was no less true with regard to the pastimes which occupied its inhabitants' leisure hours than it was for business, industry, and the structure of family and community life. The less than 100 wooden structures which in 1846 comprised Yerba Buena had been replaced by 1859 with 18,659 buildings, of which 4,347 were brick. The population rose from an estimated 459 to 170, 250 and rapidly changed from one which was predominantly Mexican-Spanish and Indian to one which was highly pluralistic. During the first half dozen or so years the population of the city was highly transient, extremely young, and predominantly male. The diaries and letters of the early arrivals often reflected a deep sense of loneliness, which abated somewhat as transportation and communication systems linked California with the East Coast and as family life became more stable. While in business dominant "Yankee" practices prevailed, in those activities variously referred to as pastimes, recreations, play, and sports a considerable amount of cultural diversity could be found in the 1850s and, somewhat less so, in the 1860s. In fact, holiday festivities (e.g. the 4th of July, Washington's Birthday) were often used to reaffirm something like a total sense of community.

As busy as they were with work and earning money (pursuits which contemporary writers lamented were all-consuming fetishes with San Franciscans), the city's inhabitants found innumerable ways to divert themselves. Several of the early Mexican-Spanish pastimes (e.g. bull-fighting) persisted for some years with only slight modifications; other recreations were introduced by various ethnic communities; still others, especially organized forms of sports which increasingly began to appear in the late 1860s, were imported from the eastern part of the nation. Throughout the period gambling and drinking continued to remain popular ways for many San Franciscans to pass their leisure time. Local newspapers, journals, diaries, letters home, and early "histories" of the region attest to the urge to gamble on something, an urge which should not seem too surprising as for most the entire venture in California was something of a life gamble. Throughout the two and a half decades dancing continued to be popular, with social clubs, military organizations, benevolent societies, and other groups sponsoring dances and balls. From 1849 on musicals, melodramas, burlesques, minstrel shows, opera, concerts, and the legitimate theater provided another continuing source of entertainment. Excursions to local scenic areas quickly became popular, and as the city grew, more and more inhabitants took their families on trips away from the urban center in an effort to "refresh" themselves from the frantic pace of city life. Russ Gardens, a favorite sport for German Turnverein exhibitions, Hayes Park Pavillion and similar establishments offered a variety of recreative facilities and activities to San Franciscans.

As early as 1855 the State Legislature sought to prohibit "noisy and Barbarous amusements" on the sabbath, but it appears that San Franciscans observed the law more in the breach than in its observance. Attempts to ban Sunday amusements fell especially

hard upon the laboring classes, who, in general, did not gain the “8-hour system” until 1866. Horse racing was a perennial favorite sport, with the wealthier citizens supplying the horses as well as the more fashionable events which sometimes accompanied a day at the course, while a very considerable amount of the monies wagered seems to have come from the pockets of those who labored at the many trades to be found in the city. A number of abortive efforts were made to found a yacht club, and these were finally crowned in 1869 with the establishment of the San Francisco Yacht Club. The state’s first baseball club seems to have been officially established in 1859, and the sport began to attract a growing audience. The arrival in August, 1869, of the Cincinnati Red Stockings created a considerable amount of excitement in San Francisco, even though the eastern team bested the local “picked nine’s” by very considerable scores. In 1860 the San Francisco Olympic Club, possibly the oldest such athletic club in the United States, was established. While its primary purpose had been to provide young men of the city with a place where they might engage in vigorous gymnastic activities, within a few years the club had taken on a tone of considerable social prestige, leading in the early 1870s to a temporary rift between the social and the athletic “elements” of the membership. The establishment of the Olympic Club, and the subsequent increasingly organized and regulated nature of its activities, illustrated the shift to more and more organized and regulated forms of sports and recreative activities for San Franciscans in general which