

Sporting and Recreational Pursuits in Oakland, California: With Particular Emphasis on the Contributions of Immigrants, 1850-1900

Deane Anderson Lamont
University of California at Berkeley

In the nineteenth century the United States sustained waves of immigration from many parts of the globe. Whether as sojourners or permanent residents, the immigrants' presence and cultural practices came to have a significant effect upon their adopted homeland. On the West Coast, the discovery of gold in 1848 led to an explosion in the immigrant population in northern California generally, and in the main port of entry, San Francisco and its environs, especially. This paper will focus on those who came from Europe between 1850 and 1900. The influence of those immigrants

and their descendants upon the emergence of San Francisco's now prominent East Bay neighbor, Oakland, will be specifically examined.

Early immigrants to northern California repeated behavior patterns exhibited by newcomers in other regions of the United States. Of particular significance was the immigrant propensity for association with their own ethnic group, both at work and during recreation. This practice led to the rise in northern California of ethnically-based worker associations, guilds, and benevolent societies, Scottish athletic clubs, and English cricket teams.

Myriad ethnic and religious groups established clubs in Oakland. Among them were a Hebrew Benevolent Society (1862), a Fenian Circle (1864), a Turnverein (1866), an Ancient Order of Hibernians (1871), a Saint Andrew's Benevolent Society (1878), and a Danish Society (1882); other German, Irish, and Jewish associations and an Orangemen's Lodge were organized by the 1870s. Members of ethnically-based associations regularly enjoyed recreational time together and often participated in sport. All through the 1870s the Oakland Turners were giving exhibitions (both boys and girls took their turn during demonstrations). During the same decade, Englishmen of the St. George's Club often took to the water to prove the prowess of their maritime race was undiminished Cricket games were being played in the Oakland area from the 1860s.

Oaklanders were not alone in enjoying the pleasures of the Easy Bay outdoor life. Almost from its inception, Oakland was a site upon which San Franciscans chose to recreate. While San Franciscans spent organized leisure time in their own city during the second half of the nineteenth century, Oakland and the pastoral area immediately surrounding it came to be particularly popular as a site for their day trips. This is understandable given that many San Franciscans were immigrants who themselves had hailed from agrarian locales.

Oakland was not just San Francisco's playground. As described earlier, Oakland's ethnic associations had long engaged in physical recreations in the East Bay; however, not all of Oakland's recreational activities were tied to an ethnic or religious society. Baseball clubs are a good example. By 1867, Oakland had six clubs. Baseball was not the only team sport. In 1879, the Oakland Football Club (playing under rugby rules) took on the Wanderers Club in San Francisco. During the 1870s interscholastic sports were undertaken and female collegians often rowed together on Lake Merritt.

In 1869, the first horse-drawn railcar began operation in Oakland. Street cars allowed passengers to move relatively cheaply and comfortably to once distant recreational sites. Oakland's parks now came within easy reach of most of the city's

populace. Ranging from compact city parks to the grander Badger's Park and Shellmound Park, Oakland's numerous planned green areas offered Oaklanders and visitors from other cities a chance to enjoy the great outdoors -- an opportunity that many middle-class Americans during the late-Victorian era were increasingly happy to accept. By 1895, Oakland could boast eleven well-kept city parks.

By the 1870s and 1880s, what with Oaklanders at play in their own city and the regular attentions of day-trippers from San Francisco, Oakland had become the Bay Area's playing field. In addition to its obvious tangible attractions, Oakland offered visitors from "across the Bay" an escape (even if temporarily) from those urban pathologies that many nineteenth century city dwellers believed were constantly beating down upon them. The East Bay's rural image acted as a tonic for its own citizens and numerous visitors from cramped San Francisco. Certainly San Franciscans recreated in their own city, and even north of the Golden Gate, but the number who utilized Oakland's bucolic setting during the second half of the nineteenth century is a testament to its special attraction. The push to escape the city combined with the pull of Oakland's rural resort-like parks, was evidently enough to initiate and maintain for many decades a unique demographic phenomenon in northern California.