"What We Want Is Good, Sober Men:" Masculinity, Respectability, and Temperance in the Railroad Brotherhoods, c. 1870–1910

Author(s): Paul Michel Taillon


Published by: Peter N. Stearns


Accessed: 26/08/2011 11:00
“WHAT WE WANT IS GOOD, SOBER MEN:” MASCULINITY, RESPECTABILITY, AND TEMPERANCE IN THE RAILROAD BROTHERHOODS, C. 1870–1910

By Paul Michel Taillon

On the morning of 13 December 1907, locomotive engineer J. A. Yarbrough reported for duty switching freight cars in the Atlanta yards of the Central of Georgia Railroad. However, the yardmaster discovered that Yarbrough had spent some time in a nearby tavern and was drunk, and dismissed him from the service. The incident came to the attention of the union that represented Yarbrough, Division 210 of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers. The Division appointed an investigating committee that interviewed Yarbrough’s supervisors and co-workers and discovered that, in fact, Yarbrough had a history of drinking. As the yardmaster testified, “Yarbrough has been drinking for some time, and I made every effort to get him to straighten up and be a man…. .” In the trial that followed, Division 210 concurred in the yardmaster’s judgment and expelled Yarbrough from the union.1

A year and a half later, Division 210 confronted another alcohol-related situation. “We have a brother of whom I think we will do well to investigate the way he is living,” reported G. F. Barker at the lodge’s meeting of 30 July 1909. “If all reports is [sic] true, he is spending the most of his time & money with a woman who was divorced from her husband on his account. He very often stays away from home two or three days at a time & his wife don’t know where he is, then when he comes home he very often comes under the influence of whiskey & makes things as miserable for his wife as he can.” When the investigating committee sustained the charges against the offending member, the lodge tried and expelled him.2

As these stories hint, workingmen’s drinking practices, and the efforts to curb them, occurred on a terrain defined not only by class but also gender. They were practices that affected not just the workplace but also the household, they involved issues of workplace discipline, morality, and sexual misconduct, and they elicited the concern of managers, union leaders, union members, and their wives. While scholars have documented workers’ drinking practices in the age of industrialization—largely in connection with “pre-industrial” or “rough” working-class cultures—and middle- and working-class temperance movements—especially with regard to women’s involvement—they have paid less attention to the interrelationships among drinking, temperance, and the construction of working-class manhood.3 Similarly, labor historians have not always appreciated the extent to which the domestic sphere has influenced male trade unionists or the extent to which matters of domesticity influenced workers’ discourse of manhood.4

This essay examines masculinity in connection with working men’s drinking as well as the uses of manhood in working-class efforts to stamp out that practice. It focuses on the engineers, conductors, firemen, and brakemen who
operated the trains and the unions that represented them, the “Big Four” railroad brotherhoods, in the last decades of the nineteenth century. It was during this period that occupational drinking on the railroads became an issue of concern, the brotherhoods first came to power, and the Post-Civil War temperance wave swept the nation. On the railroads and in other workplaces drinking figured as part of a “rough” style of masculinity that emphasized “manly” confrontation with the rigors and dangers of the job, defiance of management, and consumption of alcohol. The railroad brotherhoods and their women’s auxiliaries, however, deployed a “respectable” style of manhood in their efforts to win train workers over to a temperate lifestyle.

The tensions that inevitably arose between the “rough,” intemperate masculinity of the railroad workplace and the “respectable” manhood articulated by the railroad brotherhoods revealed a gender construction that, to paraphrase Gregory Kaster, was complex and problematical yet central to the activism and collective subjectivity of organized white workingmen in the last third of the nineteenth century. The language of manhood was common in Victorian America and at first glance the brotherhoods’ vision of respectable manhood bore a marked resemblance to middle-class, or “bourgeois,” expectations of masculine conduct, especially in its emphasis on bodily control, striving for upward mobility, and respect for the domestic sphere. Nevertheless, the brotherhoods’ vision of respectable manhood remained firmly connected to railroaders’ workplace, household, and union experiences. Drawing upon the culture of the workplace and bourgeois standards of respectability, the railroad brotherhoods promoted their respectable manhood and temperance message. But they were imperfectly realized at best. As it turned out, neither was the workplace entirely “rough” nor the union entirely “respectable.”

Workplace drinking was not unique to the railroads, but it did seem to be a man’s prerogative. From the colonial period to the present, American women and men, but men especially, have consumed alcohol on and off the job. In the early nineteenth century society, drinking figured prominently; it cut across class lines and played a role in the lives of the elite on down to the laborer. The easy availability of inexpensive whiskey, together with poor water quality, relatively more expensive tea and coffee, and the customary place of alcohol in preindustrial culture, sent per capita alcohol consumption soaring in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Among artisans, the consumption of alcohol occurred within the web of craft social relationships, involving both master and journeyman. The relationship of the less-skilled to alcohol, however, had few of the quasi-romantic qualities that historians have attributed to craftsmen. As Peter Way has shown, the drinking practices and culture of antebellum canal workers was, if anything, brutal and dysfunctional. Factory workers, too, mixed drink with work during the early years of industrialization, but it quickly became clear that imbibing conflicted with the imperatives of industrial discipline.

While antebellum temperance movements attempted to eliminate drinking among workers, workplace drinking continued after the Civil War in a wide range of occupations. Railroaders, as did miners, sailors, stevedores, teamsters, and others, earned reputations for on- and off-the-job drinking. In the railway industry, the problem was apparent. Between 1877 and 1892 on the Chicago,
Burlington & Quincy Railroad (CB & Q), almost 30 percent of employees discharged (nearly half of whom were train-service workers) had violated "Rule G," which prohibited the consumption of alcohol while on duty and on or around railroad property.\textsuperscript{11} During a six-month period in 1900, the Southern Pacific Railroad dismissed 212 employees, of which 77 were sacked for "intemperance," the largest single category. Statistics like these led the U.S. Commissioner of Labor in 1898 to include conductors, engineers, firemen, brakemen, and switchmen in occupational groups addicted to alcohol.\textsuperscript{12}

The conditions and rhythms of running trades work encouraged intemperate drinking. "Inured to danger [railwaymen] instinctively cultivate a disposition for reckless and excitable habits," explained a writer in the \textit{Locomotive Engineers' Monthly Journal} in 1869. "During their trips, the fever of excitement was kept up by the influence of strong drink; and many a man had gained the reputation of being a swift runner and making almost impossible time when he was half drunk."\textsuperscript{13} Indeed, railroaders toiled in one of the most hazardous industries in nineteenth and early twentieth-century North America: in addition to exposure to the elements, they confronted the constant threat of crippling injury or death through boiler explosions, derailments, and, above all, the primitive hand-braking and "link and pin" coupling systems.\textsuperscript{14} The irregular work rhythms and long hours of train-service work blurred the lines between labor and leisure, and if a running trades worker wanted a drink he had little choice but to drink on the job.\textsuperscript{15} Railwaymen's limited options for relaxation after the job was done often left them no alternative except the saloon to eat, sleep, or kill time. An officer of the CB&Q in 1902 complained that in Alliance, Nebraska, there was "absolutely no place for a single man to go and be entertained, except the saloons."\textsuperscript{16}

Neither the lodging alternatives nor the strain of the job, however, fully explain railroaders' drinking. It also played a central role in their work culture. According to sociologist William Sonnenstuhl, occupational drinking cultures present the use of liquor as normative rather than deviant; drinking, both on and off the job, involves a set of behaviors that foster emotional bonds and solidarity among workers.\textsuperscript{17} Thus, when conductor Harry French began drinking as a teenager in the 1880s, because "all railroad men drank," he socialized into the masculine world of railroading.\textsuperscript{18} Ritual drinking helped railwaymen to make sense of their shared work experiences and served to mark out an oppositional space against management—"to soothe the grievances and demonstrate mutual sympathy; drink evil and bad luck to some obnoxious official and drink long life and continued prosperity to themselves."\textsuperscript{19}

Railroading work culture and alcohol contributed to a "rough" style of masculinity among train crews or, in the words of historian James Ducker, their reputation as "a boastful, rough-speaking, hard-living, immoral lot."\textsuperscript{20} Harry French related an 1890s incident in Oregon when a supervisor employed a spy to photograph train crews patronizing saloons. The crew appointed two brakemen "to notify [the spy] that his presence was desired east of the Rocky Mountains," dunking him in the frozen Wilamette River until he agreed to leave. "I would not call them hard boiled," recalled French. "[T]hat term would leave their characteristic in a definite pansy stage."\textsuperscript{21} The railroad workplace, rife with danger and a space apart from the genteel world of white collar labor and women, fostered
a masculinity that had as much in common with the manual working class and
its aggressive celebration of physical strength—and consumption of alcohol—as
badges of masculinity as that of craftsmen who demanded respect for their skills
as a signifier of manhood.22

Railwaymen's drinking and "rough" behavior were not confined to the work-
place, however. After all, train crews, whether married or not, when away from
their families returned to the world of single men and participated in a bachelor
subculture of work and recreation. Away from home, and the watchful eyes of
their communities, the temptation to booze, gamble, and frequent houses of
prostitution may have been difficult to resist. Railroaders, married and single,
were known to pass time in saloons and brothels.23 As a caller on the Santa Fe
Railroad in Salida, Colorado, in the early twentieth century Clinton M. Graham
regularly had to look for train crews in "the whorehouses and saloons."24

This kind of behavior, of course, had ramifications in the household and work-
place. For Harry French, the combination of railroad life and boozing destroyed
his marriage. Unhappy with his job-hopping, frequent absences, smoking, and
drinking, his wife demanded a divorce. Leaving French for a merchant, she de-
declared: "At least he's a gentleman. He doesn't smoke or drink ... He doesn't
chew or use vile language, either." French commented ruefully, "She was choos-
ing between a railwayman and a gentleman of exemplary habits."25 Like women
of all classes, railwaymen's wives knew the effects of alcoholism. Not only could
an alcoholic man lose his spouse bereft of economic support but also could
emotionally neglect her and physically abuse her and their children.26 In the
workplace, alcohol consumption not only contradicted industrial discipline, it
presented very real dangers for train operation. "There is no place for a muddled
brain in the dangerous work of performing the duties of a locomotive engi-
near, with thousands of tons of merchandise, or thousands of lives behind him,"
cautioned the Locomotive Engineers' Journal in 1910.27 Obviously, an inebriated
train worker menaced not only himself but others who depended on him. Thus,
activists in the railroad brotherhoods, together with the wives and sisters of or-
ganized railwaymen based in the women's auxiliaries, turned their attention to
the problem of masculine intemperance.

Temperance had been a core principle of the railroad brotherhoods from their
earliest days in the 1860s and 1870s. In fact, the brotherhoods and other post-
Civil War labor organizations carried on an older tradition of working-class self-
help/reform that fit in with the larger cycle of temperance activism dating to the
early years of the nineteenth century. During the first great wave of temperance
agitation lasting from the 1830s through the 1850s, working-class radicals and
union organizers had urged temperance as necessary to both self-improvement
and resistance to workplace oppression. The most famous of these movements,
and perhaps the most genuine, was the Washingtonian temperance movement of
the early 1840s.28 The brotherhoods' temperance activity incorporated aspects
of earlier working-class and middle-class temperance efforts. It dovetailed with
their efforts to establish themselves as bona fide unions and coincided with the
revival of bourgeois temperance movements in the 1870s and 1880s. Like their
bourgeois counterparts, brotherhood temperance advocates were motivated by
alcohol's debilitating effect on the individual as well as upon the household. By
its very nature, brotherhood leaders believed, alcohol broke down discipline, took away ambition, unleashed the passions, made train workers dangerous on the job, wrecked homes, and stood in the way of social and economic progress. At the same time, the unique realities of railroad life separated brotherhood temperance culture from its bourgeois counterpart.

Temperance among brotherhood men came out of the same concerns motivating bourgeois advocates, but, like earlier working-class temperance movements, also derived from their workplace experiences and organizational culture. The railroad brotherhoods, like a host of contemporary labor organizations, belonged to a tradition of fraternalism that infused much of the North American labor movement. One of the most widespread cultural forms and practices in the Victorian Era, Masonic fraternalism offered an organizational model not only for a host of competing fraternal orders and insurance societies but also for many craft unions. Patterning their unions on the fraternal model, early brotherhood leaders hoped to benefit from the popularity and respectability that mainstream fraternalism enjoyed in American society after the Civil War. Equally important in the brotherhoods' fraternal culture were the principles of mutual aid and moral uplift. Mutual aid, ranging from visiting sick or injured members to death and disability insurance, met a very real material need among railroaders who labored in a hazardous industry, while moral uplift, more idealistic in orientation, emphasized the individual self-improvement of men who labored in rough environments. Brotherhood leaders believed the magic and drama of fraternal ritual, the promise of moral uplift, and the tangible benefits of fraternal insurance would make them attractive to railwaymen. At the same time, they hoped the mainstream legitimacy of fraternalism would make them acceptable to railway managers as trustworthy representatives of skilled railway labor.

The brotherhoods' practice of fraternalism, moral uplift, and temperance figured as part of a craft-union strategy to control the market for railroad labor, positioning themselves as the sole suppliers of skilled and reliable railway labor. To railroad managers they claimed their benefit and uplift work would educate union members in the skills necessary for train operation and ensure that they had the appropriate habits for such labor. Their employers, brotherhood men assumed, then would recognize and reward employees accordingly and, acknowledging the brotherhoods' role in this effort, accept them as partners in labor relations. During the late 1870s and 1880s, conditions in the railroad labor market as well as mainstream expectations of respectable, steady behavior, favored such an approach. "Let us endeavor ... to cultivate friendly relations with our employers, devoting our leisure time in striving to acquire a more thorough knowledge of our business, and attain a higher standard of excellence as locomotive engineers," urged Peter M. Arthur, Grand Chief Engineer of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, in 1874. Then, "we shall feel justified in coming before the public, claiming their sympathy and support in our efforts to obtain a fair remuneration for the service rendered." In return for recognition as the representatives and suppliers of labor, the leaders of the railroad brotherhoods promised the railway corporations not only skilled, competent workers but also reliable, temperate men.

This agenda dovetailed with the interests of railwaymen's sisters, wives, and daughters. After all, better men meant better domestic lives for women. Be-
ginnning in the mid-1880s, the railroad brotherhoods' women's auxiliaries gave institutional voice to women's concerns. Reflecting the desire of female relations to have a greater institutional presence in the unions that represented their husbands, brothers, and fathers, the women's auxiliaries organized to promote uplift work, assist local lodges, and to establish educational, political, and social contacts for women. The brotherhoods' women's auxiliaries were among the first in the U.S. labor movement, but like other working-class and middle-class women who organized voluntary associations and auxiliaries to fraternal orders and unions, these women justified their incursion into male space and discourse on the basis of their domestic moral authority as women. Some brotherhood men expressed ambivalence at the prospect of women's institutional presence. Yet, brotherhood leaders recognized the household as the site where railwaymen were fed, clothed, and nurtured, women as the ones who performed that "reproductive" labor, and the vital role such labor played in the continued viability of the railroad labor force and the maintenance of steady, temperate men. The rhythms, risks, and rewards of the railroad workplace affected women, children, and the household, and the support of wives was an important asset in organizing railwaymen. Moreover, brotherhood leaders knew that railroad employers looked favorably upon employees who had their domestic lives in order and were less likely to view with hostility labor organizations with women's auxiliaries. For all these reasons, they supported women's organizing efforts and welcomed their involvement in temperance.

The challenge for the railroad brotherhoods, of course, was to make good on their temperance promises. Together with women in the auxiliaries, brotherhood leaders and activists filled the pages of their journals and the text of their speeches with inspirational messages and moral suasion designed to keep brotherhood men away from the bottle. The rhetoric combined the moral style of bourgeois temperance advocacy with an emphasis on alcohol's impact on the man and the family. Alcohol, the argument went, did not confer masculinity but in fact undermined manly vigor and respectability. "Intemperance," wrote an 1878 correspondent to the Engineers' Monthly Journal, "takes the engineer from his engine and his manhood...." Engineer J. C. Thompson in 1894 emphasized alcohol's debilitating effects, physically; he personally knew a young man "of Herculean build" whose drinking habit turned him into "the filthiest of slouches." Without physical strength or employment, the railwayman was unable to fulfill that third pillar of manhood, the role of breadwinner. As the Engineers' Journal warned: "[Alcohol] makes wives widows, children orphans, fathers friendless, and all at last beggars."

Knowing that they were competing against the physical pleasures of alcohol and a compelling workplace culture of consumption, brotherhood temperance advocates constructed an alternative, temperate identity for railroaders. In contrast to the rough style of masculinity based in the workplace and connected with alcohol, brotherhood leaders articulated a code of behavior in the form of "respectable" manhood. In their texts and spoken utterances, respectable manhood depended on the individual but was to be achieved together in a mutual fashion. It involved self-control, self-improvement, and unflinching defense of one's rights against unjust oppression. It resided in the fulfilling of one's duties and obligations as a skilled worker and union member, but it also extended be-
yond the workplace and union hall and into the family, community, and politics. In the workplace, the respectable railroader mastered his craft and engaged in dignified productive activity, and in his local lodge he dedicated himself to fraternal uplift and reaffirmed his bond with union brothers. He earned a family wage, sustained a household as a responsible breadwinner, contributed to his local community, and actively participated politically through voting and associating on a free and equal basis with fellow citizen-men. This vision of manhood required, and was realized through, a public demonstration of respectability in multiple arenas of life. In securing the public respect of other men, from union brothers to employers, the respectable railroader realized his own self-respect.

To realize this vision of manhood, and to supplant the “rough” style of masculinity among railwaymen, brotherhood leaders attempted to translate the virtues they preached—cultivating manners, practicing self-control, striving for self-improvement, and above all temperance—into “manly” qualities. To make them desirable to railroaders susceptible to drink, brotherhood spokesmen and spokeswomen presented these qualities as heroic. In an 1882 editorial, for example, Eugene V. Debs, then Secretary-Treasurer of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen (BLF), argued for sobriety as a manly quality: “If the square man [that is, the temperate man] grasps the throttle of an engine there will be no sleeping at that post . . . No drink touches his lips while he is making his run. Clear-brained, keen-eyed, strong-armed he stands at his post . . . Duty does not call to him in vain.” “Above all, beware of the wine cup,” warned a woman in the Locomotive Firemen’s Magazine in 1897. “A railroad man should be the last person to touch a drop of liquor.” Debs and others sought to transform the intemperate drinking culture of the railroader at home and at work by connecting the discipline and restraint of respectable manhood with what it meant to be a “real” railroader.

Although the ideal of respectable, temperate manhood articulated by Debs and other brotherhood leaders involved bodily control in the best Victorian, bourgeois fashion, they also emphasized the physical aspects of railroading. In an 1884 essay, Debs painted a portrait of manhood based in corporeal ability and practical mental aptitude: “[Firemen] are remarkable for common sense. They are bronze-browed, hard-fisted, noble-natured men. They are forever dealing with problems which demand and command serious thought. A locomotive fireman cannot, in the nature of things be a dude.” For Debs, manhood was bound up in the work function and the skill it demanded, and control and restraint of the body, firmly grounded in the railroad work process, had distinctly working-class, not middle-, class meanings. In contrasting firemen to “dudes,” Debs ridiculed the “unmanly” conduct of leisure-class men who did not work with their hands. By contrast, respectable working-class men not only earned a wage sufficient to support a family, they celebrated the risks, rewards, and ennobling effects of physical labor. In this manner, brotherhood spokesmen like Debs synthesized aspects of the “rough” style of masculinity found in the running trades work culture and redefined it as sober and respectable.

Auxiliary women contributed to this discourse, and in reports, personal testimonials, and fictional stories, emphasized alcohol’s destructive effect on families and the “unmanly” behavior that brought it on. “I have seen young men with bright prospects, choose rather the darkness of grog-shops and billiard halls than the light of their homes,” wrote a contributor to the Engineers’ Monthly Journal
in 1876 under the pseudonym, “Only A Woman.” “I know of husbands who have lost their way, and so live on in their dissipation, complaining that there ‘is no attraction at home;’ a most cowardly plea. . . .” These missives highlighted drunken men’s cowardliness by dwelling upon the innocence and moral superiority of women. In a 1900 editorial Birdie St. Clair Dorsey conveyed the suffering an alcoholic brakeman caused his wife: “The sorrow of this good wife was due to the fact that her husband indulged too freely in the liquor habit, and thus deprived his family of much.” Dorsey described the wife as a good “manager” of the family budget and “heroically brave.” Yet, this woman, despite “her nobility of character and her great mother heart,” died tragically young, leaving her children bereft.43 As was true with earlier both middle- and working-class temperance movements, encomiums to feminine virtue and devotion highlighted the baseness and irresponsibility of masculine intemperance.44 Respectable men, by contrast, placed the needs of their families before their own desire for drink.

Rather than echoing Debs’ heroic, workplace-centered vision of manhood, auxiliary women placed the domestic sphere at the center of their vision of respectable manhood. The charter members of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen Ladies’ Society, recalled founder Georgia M. Sargent, “firmly believed that they could exert a home influence among the brothers who were denied the blessings of a happy home life on account of separation there from. . . .” Through such closer union, assumed these women, they could make the brotherhoods better unions and their husbands, brothers, and sons better men. All the “railway boys” needed “to bring to the surface their sterling qualities,” argued Sargent, “was the refining influence which is exerted by association with pure womanhood and home surroundings.”45 Sargent’s vision suggested that respectable manhood derived from the household, not the workplace, and to this extent it had something in common with bourgeois standards of manhood and respectability. To middle-class reformers, respectability implied not only temperance but also striving for a bourgeois standard of life. According to this ideal, after the workday was over respectable men separated themselves not only from drink but also from the raucous male world outside the home to the domestic sphere and its morally-uplifting qualities.46

It appeared that auxiliary women wanted respectable bourgeois men, for the “sterling qualities” to which Sargent referred involved greater attention to matters of domesticity, fidelity, as well as consideration. Some women wished their spouses to take a greater hand in household chores and in child-rearing.47 Others simply wanted affectionate, considerate partners. An 1890 letter from a woman named “May” to the Locomotive Firemen’s Magazine’s Women’s Department described a husband who ignored her and who spent his leisure time in saloons drinking and playing cards. “He has never come or gone without a kiss,” she lamented. “Heart sick,” she considered her “marriage to be a complete failure” and asked for advice from other readers. Sympathetic sisters wrote to the Magazine expressing their sympathy, scolding her husband, and offering counsel.48 It seemed to Ida A. Harper, “Editress” of the Women’s Department, that railwaymen were “quite satisfied to take the wife’s love for granted . . . They utterly fail to comprehend her monotonous and isolated life, her longing for sympathy and tenderness, her grief and heartache at their apparent coldness and
indifference." Prescriptive essays, editorials, and letters from women served notice to brotherhood men as to the kind of men they wanted them to be.

Auxiliary women, however, knew the difference between bourgeois standards and ideals and the reality of their own daily lives. To be sure, the women's auxiliaries articulated an uxorial identity for their members and stressed the importance of well-managed homes with competent wives at the helm, elements that could be taken as "bourgeois." As the Women's Department of the Railroad Trainmen's Journal reminded readers in 1895, it was "the duty of every wife to first consider the happiness of her home, especially if she be a mother." Yet the domesticity of brotherhood women and men was equally shaped by the economic uncertainty and the possibilities of poverty and violence that historically plagued the working class. A singular fact of life for the wives of railroad workers was that the rhythms and risks of railroad work disrupted "normal" family life; they, too, bore the irregular work schedules and stresses of their husbands and stood to suffer if their partners endured crippling injury or death. The women's auxiliaries dedicated themselves to protecting women against these realities of railroading life. In this respect, alcoholic and abusive husbands figured as but one of a number of calamities that could befall working-class families such as those of railroad workers. As Ruth Alexander has demonstrated with the Washingtonian temperance movement, brotherhood women's concern with temperance presupposed the right of wives to sober, responsible husbands. The auxiliaries functioned as vehicles for the elaboration and realization of that right.

Similarly, the railroad brotherhoods' temperance efforts resembled but did not duplicate bourgeois temperance movements. Like them, brotherhood temperates linked abstinence with the values of community advancement, family purity, and Christian pietism. The adoption of these values by workers has been taken by many historians to signify an accommodation or deference to bourgeois ideology. Many working people no doubt accepted these messages uncritically; however, just as many reformulated them in their own interests. For all the bourgeois trappings of brotherhood temperance, their devotion to sobriety signaled only a partial acquiescence to bourgeois values. As did earlier working-class temperance advocates, brotherhood men took as much inspiration from the meaning of their work and the older, artisanal ethic of self-improvement as they did middle-class prescriptions. To the extent that the brotherhoods deployed bourgeois values publicly, they may have indicated "upwardly-mobile" or "confused" class aspirations. Yet they also gave voice to a respectable style of union organization and negotiation with railroad employers. Whether or not they were successful in their efforts was another question.

How did railwaymen respond to the brotherhoods' temperance message and the efforts of the women's auxiliaries? This question highlights the problematic relationship between union leadership and the rank and file. Given the sources available, principally union journals and other official publications, we have heard disproportionately from brotherhood and auxiliary leaders on the unions' program of temperance rather than from the railroading rank and file. Historian Warren Van Tine has correctly drawn attention to the difficulties of analyzing rank and file attitudes, noting the impressionistic nature of documentation and
complexity of group attitudes. The one direct source of members’ voices, letters to the union journals, were often written by an activist minority.58

The published letters of wives and members and the pronouncements of brotherhood leaders indicate that temperance advocates certainly believed they were successful in impressing upon men drinking’s dangers. Grateful wives wrote to the brotherhoods’ journals expressing their appreciation of the unions’ uplifting influence. “My good husband though given to associations not in accordance with my feminine views of life, has been, through the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, made a better man,” wrote “A Fireman’s Wife” in 1876.59 Similarly, brotherhood spokesmen boasted about the brotherhoods’ success. “Twenty years ago locomotive enginemen were, as a class, a reckless, roystering, intemperate, and uneducated set of men, social outcasts, shunned and ignored by self-respecting persons,” noted Wilfred P. Borland, author of a serialized advice column in the Locomotive Firemen’s Magazine, in 1893. “To-day they are sober, industrious, self-respecting, and respected...”60 Membership figures apparently bear out the claims of brotherhood leaders. By the early twentieth century the brotherhoods had organized the majority of workers in the railroad running trades. If judged by membership density alone, one might conclude that most running trades workers found the brotherhoods’ message compelling. Assuming that brotherhood members indeed hewed to the temperate line, Borland and other temperates might have had good cause for celebration.

Workers, however, joined unions for more than just moral uplift and, quite possibly in the case of the brotherhoods, many or most may have joined in spite of brotherhood temperance. In fact, opinions among the membership regarding alcohol and intemperance were far from unanimous. W. T. Nicholson of Grand Forks, North Dakota, for example, elicited an angry response to an 1893 letter he submitted to the Firemen’s Magazine. Entitled “A Sermon For The Boys,” he moralistically warned against gambling, drinking, and “visiting fast houses.” With these habits, he claimed, one betrayed himself as well as his brothers: “You not only are sapping out the noblest part of your own manhood, but you are placing a scar upon the virtue of your brother, and on the generations which may follow.” Three months later, a letter bearing the title “In Defense of ‘The Boys’” from a Grand Forks engineman appeared in rebuttal. “One who was not acquainted with the boys would think ... that they were a set of confirmed drunkards, inveterate gamblers, regular patrons of houses of ill-fame; not permitted to associate with respectable people.” While conceding that the “boys may get on their ears once in a while and use language which would not be appropriate to the society which our friend is lamenting,” the writer denied that the men on his division were drunkards or gamblers.61

The author of “In Defense of ‘The Boys’” was not simply excusing the drinking habits of his mates, but defending a different standard of respectability. “Mr. Nicholson,” he wrote in a parting shot, “is one of these goody goody persons who would attend church and contribute a nickel (if he had no penny) and feel that he had done more good than if he had contributed two dollars towards assisting some poor man who had lost a limb...”62 The railroad brotherhoods, like every other union or complex organization, did not have unitary cultures. In fact, letters like the one defending “The Boys” suggest that at least one other standard of masculinity, male camaraderie, and sobriety—apart from the “rough”
and "respectable" standards—competed within the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen. This alternative standard resided in a skilled worker's competence and the mutualism of workplace and union and sanctioned both moderate drinking and a degree of roughness. The railroad workplace may not have been as "rough" as thought, but it is clear that brotherhood men did drink, challenging the "respectable," temperate images the brotherhoods sought to cultivate. The well-known fact that Eugene Debs enjoyed tossing back a few with "The Boys" on his frequent visits to local lodges may have fit with his more physical, heroic vision of manhood, but it also indicates that his own relationship with alcohol and manhood was more complex than his temperance rhetoric alone would indicate.

Perhaps it was awareness of the complicated reality that made brotherhood and women's auxiliary leaders understand that moral suasion was not enough to maintain sober railwaymen. The auxiliaries responded by hosting "dry" activities for brotherhood members and their families away from the masculine spaces of workplace and lodge. In the late 1880s and 1890s, for instance, the pages of brotherhood journals were filled with announcements of and reports on dances, picnics, concerts, ice cream socials, and train excursions. By organizing "wholesome" entertainments, auxiliary wives encouraged husbands to spend their recreational time with the families where women could maintain a watchful eye and standing hand on men who otherwise might backslide into intemperance and improvidence. As a "A Switchman's Wife" explained in the Switchmen's Journal in 1887: "Our aim is to get our husbands and ourselves together so that we can spend an evening once in a while in a more profitable way than for them to go to town and get a little too much strong drink." The auxiliaries, along with the railroad brotherhoods, provided railroaders with the opportunity to consort with the temperance-minded, learn to live and work without liquor, and behave like respectable men.

But hosting "dry" social events was not enough. Brotherhood leaders realized they had to enforce sobriety through more coercive means and did so by insisting on dry lodge meetings, refusing to pay the insurance claims of members injured or killed as a result of intoxication, cooperating with management in the enforcement of "Rule G" (as in the case of engineer Yarbrough in the opening anecdote), and expelling those found guilty of drunkenness. If intemperance affected the household, they considered it their responsibility to enforce proper conduct there. Toward this end brotherhood local lodges investigated instances of alcohol and domestic abuse. At an 1887 meeting of Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen Lodge 191, Fon du Lac, Wisconsin, for example, the members looked into an incident involving one of the men: "Bro. Lynch reported Bro. Kiper as being Drunk and abusing his Wife most shamefully. . . . " Kiper requested the lodge appoint a committee to look into the matter, and at the next meeting the lodge expelled Lynch.

The fact of the matter is that incidents like those involving men like Lynch were not atypical. Even assuming that the brotherhoods may have been successful among their own membership, the majority of railroaders continued to drink, some moderately and others to excess. Studies of occupational drinking on the railroads conducted at the turn of the century and as late as the 1970s confirmed that decades after the height of the brotherhoods' temperance efforts, an intemperate drinking culture was alive and well. The brotherhoods' own internal
records suggest they fought an on-going battle against intemperate drinking and inappropriate behavior. Every issue of the brotherhoods' journals contained lists of members who had been expelled for drunkenness, and local lodges routinely reprimanded, suspended, and expelled members for intoxication. Expulsions for drunkenness ran second only to expulsion for non-payment of dues. The brotherhoods vigorously prosecuted members who fell off the wagon out of concern for their workplace reliability, fear of the public embarrassment misbehaving brotherhood men could cause, and distress about his family's well-being. Disciplinary measures, more than moral exhortation, were often the only effective means of keeping members from indulging to excess.

Yet even disciplinary measures could be ineffective in the face of alcohol addiction, as illustrated by the case of R. R. Burgay, of Macon, Georgia, who found himself repeatedly hauled before Engineers Division No. 210. First, he was charged and reprimanded for public drunkenness in September 1904. Burgay behaved for the next couple of years until December 1906 when a lodge brother preferred charges against him for "being Drunk in this City [Macon] on the night of November 28th." The investigating committee sustained the charges but asked "that the division be as lenient as possible as the supt. has had Bro. Burgay in office and has given him another show provided he is not expelled from the order." Again, the Division let Burgay off with a reprimand. Two years later, almost to the day, Burgay again appeared before the Division on charges of drunkenness and unbecoming conduct, having gotten drunk and trying to knife another man in a fight. This time, the lodge expelled him.68 Leniency like this drove brotherhood leaders to distraction. Writing to Division 210's master in 1907, Grand Chief Engineer Warren S. Stone reminded him that "we do not consider a technicality in the words in enforcing our law on this subject [of alcohol] . . . It is time members of this Organization put away maudlin sympathy for wrong doing."69 Apparently, the program of temperance promoted by brotherhood leaders was imperfectly realized at best among the rank and file.

Furthermore, the railroad labor force was not necessarily the leadership's first priority. While the logic of unionism would seem to dictate that the railroad brotherhoods enroll every worker in the running trades, they declined to admit just any railroader. They wanted the right kind of "material." As a Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen officer put it in 1876, "those who fall under our ban are intemperate men, bad men, and those who are swayed by evil purposes. We dare not run the risk of making such men members of our fraternity."70 Whenever possible, the brotherhoods sought to win the allegiance of railwaymen before they had fallen into bad habits. With strict rules governing admission and day-to-day behavior, they concentrated on providing support to those railroaders who had already demonstrated lives of temperance and respectability. "What we want is good, sober men, who are upright in their business dealings," stated a leader of the Switchmen's Mutual Aid Association in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in 1891. "Then, we can command the best treatment from both the railroad officials and the business public."71 In other words, the goal was to organize and maintain good, sober men and to make sure that they were upstanding in the household and that they performed their duties dependably in the workplace. To have tolerated or condoned anything less would have been to sacrifice the brotherhoods' claim to legitimacy in the eyes of railroad management and the
public and, therefore, their claim to act as the representatives and brokers of skilled railroad labor. This reflected the brotherhoods' approach to labor-market control, not through organizing all members of the craft, but, with management's cooperation, driving from the craft all bad apples leaving only union men.72

Viewed this way, the railroad brotherhoods' language of temperance and respectable manhood was as much intended for public consumption as it was the uplift of railwaymen. Clearly, respectable manhood was a prescriptive tool, employed for larger organizational purposes; it helped mobilize and discipline membership while demonstrating to railroad management and the public that the brotherhoods were labor organizations to be trusted and nurtured. Was it successful? Illinois Central Railroad president Stuyvesant Fish seemed to think so. Testifying before the U.S. Industrial Commission in 1899, he described the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and the Order of Railroad Conductors as "useful and honorable organizations of intelligent railroad men."73 By the era of World War I the railroad brotherhoods were the sole unions representing the workers of the railroad running trades, and, while the intervention of the state into railroad industrial relations was crucial to the brotherhoods' success, these unions made their claims to legitimacy and power in their own words.

Still, the rhetoric of temperance and manhood appearing in the brotherhoods' journals and in the public statements of their leaders was more than mere "spin." Judging from the tone of their utterances, the women and men who argued for respectability and sobriety sincerely believed what they said. What is also clear is that there existed a range of opinion of the subject of alcohol, temperance, and gender identity. While some brotherhood leaders, like Warren Stone, were true believers in the cause, working for total abstinence from alcohol, others, like Eugene Debs appear to have taken a more relaxed view of the matter. But both saw the issue in terms of respectability. Debs, as did many other railwaymen, reveled in the male camaraderie of the workplace and enjoyed the bibulous pleasures connected with it. However, Debs distinguished between "drinking" and "drunkenness" and argued for the separation of drink from work; to enjoy alcohol in moderation after work was not to separate it from the workplace and masculine culture, but it was to ensure that railwaymen conducted themselves respectably in the eyes of management and the public. The auxiliary women who contributed to these discussions and activities also no doubt believed in the desirability of temperate men; yet whether or not they demanded abstinence, they believed that eliminating drunkenness improved their lives and the lives of their children. For them, and their male union supporters, sobriety and respectability were about alcohol but they were also about economic security, fidelity, and respectful treatment.

The ways in which concerns about drink and drunkenness influenced the agenda and actions of the railroad brotherhoods demonstrate that matters of culture and gender were central to the workings of political and economic institutions like labor unions. Like most trade unionists in the mid- and late nineteenth century, the leaders of the railroad brotherhoods used the language of manhood to constitute themselves as organizations, to discipline their members, and to express their goals and grievances to employers and the public. Their respectable manhood prescribed an idealized moral masculinity the essence of
which was male workers' resolute, heroic, and respectable free agency in their own deliverance from abasement. But that idealized vision in fact was problematic, was never fully realized, and it obscured a more complicated reality.

Respectability and temperance provide a window onto that complicated reality and the class and gender tensions in the late nineteenth-century labor movement. For one thing, they highlight the fact that even if women were not organized as workers they nevertheless wielded influence in men's labor organizations. Women's temperance rhetoric and activity bolstered brotherhood temperance efforts and to an extent influenced union policy. But in doing so they also complicated that message. Brotherhood leaders' language of manhood was firmly grounded in the workplace and union hall. Women's vision of manhood acknowledged workplace realities but also demanded a domestic component. To the extent that brotherhood men took these messages on board, they understood the reciprocal relationship between the workplace and household and supported a comprehensive unionism that responded to the needs of railwaymen and their families. Men's acceptance of these ideas also suggests that women played a role in the construction of a temperate masculine identity and one that was not simply in opposition to women as "other."

The respectable masculine identity articulated by brotherhood leaders was complicated for other reasons. It promoted mutualism among railroad men yet at the same time involved bourgeois values and looked to a cross-class homosocial mutualism encompassing management and workers. This language no doubt reflected brotherhood leaders' quest for railroad management's and the general public's acknowledgment not only of railroaders' manliness but of their own manliness and legitimacy as union leaders. To the extent that the rank and file took on these ideas they undercut class feeling and consciousness. In gendering class solidarity, respectable manhood foreclosed the possibility of women's involvement in organized labor as workers, and in connecting manliness to respectability and craft identity it shut out the unskilled, who constituted the majority of the railroad workforce. To the extent that the ideal was constructed in opposition to blackness it excluded a host of working people who happened not to be of Northern European descent. To be sure, there was a range of opinion within the railroad brotherhoods—the rank and file accepted, resisted, and altered the "official" brotherhood message in varying degrees. But on the claim that the railroad brotherhoods were for deserving white railwaymen, there was near universal agreement. In this light, brotherhood leaders and their adherents viewed sobriety, domesticity, and respectable manhood and womanhood as a collective enterprise rather than as an individual pursuit. After all, the daily experiences of these skilled workers taught many of them that, whatever influence they might wield as individuals, their only hope securing advancement and respectability was through collective action, if narrowly-defined. Attention to respectability and temperance offers a way to understand how gender and class shaped collective action and how workingmen and women incorporated their gender identities and interests into the institutions they built.

Department of History
5 and 7 Wynyard Street
Auckland, New Zealand
ENDNOTES

For their criticisms and suggestions I would like to thank Jennifer Frost, Greg Kaster, Nancy Garner, Marshall Clough, and the anonymous reviewers for *Journal of Social History.*

1. J. L. Fickling to W. J. Turner, T. B. Willis, Mr. Hugh, December 15, 1907; S. A. Whitehurst to T. B. Willis, December 18, 1907; B. Smith, Terminal Trainmaster, to T. B. Willis, December 18, 1907, all in Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, Simpson Division No. 210, Records, The Southern Labor Archives, Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia, box 316, folder 46 (hereafter cited as BLE 210, Records).

2. G. F. Barker to Members of Division 210, July 30, 1909; J. L. Fickling to C. E. Vance, J. R. Flanigan, W. J. Reynolds, August 1, 1909; Investigating Committee to Division 210, August 8, 1909, all in BLE 210, Records, box 316, folder 48.


5. The "Big Four" included the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, Order of Railway Conductors, Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, and Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen. Sometimes the Switchmen’s Mutual Aid Association is included in this group.

6. As Michael Kimmel has argued, in the nineteenth century "manhood" was "understood to define an inner quality, the capacity for autonomy and responsibility, and historically had been seen as the opposite of childhood." At the turn of the twentieth century, manhood was gradually replaced by the concept of "masculinity," which contrasted with femininity. It could be achieved permanently, but it had to be demonstrated constantly. See Michael S. Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York, 1996), 119–20. I use "manhood" and "masculinity" much as Kimmel defines them, but find the latter also applies to certain situations in the late nineteenth century.


15. On the work hours and rhythms of railroad labor, see Licht, 236–38.


19. Sonnenstuhl, 26–29; LEJ (September 1869), 403.


27. *LEJ* 44 (December 1910), 1068.


31. During Reconstruction and much of the Gilded Age, as Robert Weir has suggested, fraternal organizations, with their cross-class composition and tendency to mitigate class conflict, were more viable than labor unions. See Weir, p. 9, 21, 24. I elaborate on this argument in Tailon, “Culture, Politics,” Chapter 6.


36. LEJ 12 (February 1878), 77; LEJ 28 (May 1894), 413–14.

37. LEJ 12 (January 1878), 21.


39. As Michael Kimmel has observed, “masculinity is largely a homosocial enactment.” See Kimmel, 7.


42. In making this argument, Debs countered the disdain with which middle-class society held manual labor. See Jonathan Glickstein, Concepts of Free Labor in Antebellum America (New Haven, 1991), 9–10, 14–16.

43. “Light In Our Homes,” LEJ 10 (September 1876), 409; “An Heroic Brakeman’s Wife,” LFM 29 (October 1900), 325. It is possible that the 1876 letter was to the LEJ actually was written by a brother or officer boosting the union. If so, it is still revealing for its use of domesticity as an argument among brotherhood men and significant as a possible attempt to cultivate support among women.
44. See Alexander, 781–82.


47. See, for example, LFM 14 (March 1891), 228; “Fathers,” Railroad Trainmen’s Journal 12 (February 1895), 133; “The Training of Children,” Switchmen’s Journal 4 (November 1889), 323.

48. LFM 14 (June 1890), 527; LFM 14 (July 1890), 692; LFM 14 (October 1890), 885, 888–89.


52. See Rosenfeld, 250–54, 262–63.

53. See Alexander, 775–777.


56. See Alexander, 766; Tyrrell, 159–90; Wilentz, 306–14.


59. “From a Fireman’s Wife,” LFM 1 (December 1876), 24.


WHAT WE WANT IS GOOD, SOBER MEN 337

64. See, for example, Brotherhood of Railroad Brakemen, Constitution and By-Laws of the Brotherhood of Railroad Brakemen (Galesburg, Ill., 1886), 26. They also prohibited their members from engaging in the liquor trade and expelled those who did. See Timberlake, 87; Railroad Trainmen's Journal 28 (February 1911), 131; LEJ 50 (March 1916), 202.


67. See, for example, Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen, Division No. 177, Minutes, January 1, 1886, January 6, 1886, January 13, 1886, Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen, Lodge No. 177, Records, box 1, vol. 1, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, box 1, folder 1.

68. R. Smith to Macon Division, September 25, 1904; J. L. Fickling to Committee, October 2, 1904; Committee to Division, October 9, 1904, all in BLE 210, Records, box 316, folder 45. J. L. Fickling to Committee, December 2, 1906; G. R. Smith, to Division, December 2, 1906 and December 15, 1906; all in BLE 210, Records, box 316, folder 46. J. L. Fickling to F. M. Pair, G. I. Dozier, G. W. Little, November 1, 1908; Committee to Division, November 15, 1908; D. M. Mann to F. M. Pair, November 15, 1908; R. R. Burgay to Division, November 15, 1908, all in BLE 210, Records, box 316, folder 47.

69. Warren S. Stone to J. L. Fickling, December 18, 1907, BLE 210, Records, box 316, folder 46.


71. Sonnenstuhl, 33; quoted in Ducker, 133.

72. In his testimony before the U.S. Industrial Commission, Peter M. Aurthur affirmed his belief that railway companies were cooperating with his organization in ridding the service of alcohol-addicted men. He also noted that the BLE did not aim to achieve a “closed shop” on the nation’s railroads. Rather, in his view, the Brotherhood’s merits were inducement enough for men to enroll of their own free will. See U.S., Industrial Commission, Report, vol. 4, 117–18.


74. See Kaster, 25.

75. See Kessler-Harris, 195–96.

76. See Kaster, 26.
