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The Market on Saturday Night

BY DAN MILNER

The most important center in any village, town, or city is its primary place of exchange—the market. It is the place where everyday, or once a week, or sometimes in between, people spend what they have to buy what they need. Today, that can range from local farm produce to clothing or tools made on the other side of the globe. In many smaller localities within New York State, the market can be a vestigial general store or modern convenience outlet, while in towns and cities, it is likely to be the main street or a mall. In Manhattan, beginning in 1812 and for more than 140 years thereafter, Washington Market dominated the scene.

Built partially on wetlands and now the site of the World Trade Center, Washington Market at first contained both wholesale and retail businesses, becoming the largest food market in the country by 1859. Its bustling location between the downtown central business district and the Hudson River, however, became a traffic nightmare, as horse carts and hand trucks and throngs of people could barely move in and around it. So, the two functions, wholesale and retail, were separated after the Civil War. The retail operation, between Washington, Vesey, and Fulton Streets and the river, was rebuilt between 1883 and 1884—but not before Edward Harrigan, the greatest 19th-century musical chronicler of Manhattan's streetscape, captured the atmosphere in his 1882 realist song lyric, "The Market of Saturday Night":

I'm a poor market woman,
I do a fine trade,
Selling my goods at the stall;
A nate bit of money
Myself I have made
Where I sit with my back to the wall.

I sell turkeys and partridges,
Turnips and cabbages,
Crockery and tinwear so bright,
Parsnips and cresses,
And little babes' dresses,
At the market on Saturday night.

The Mondays and Tuesdays
And Fridays are fine,
Wednesdays and Thursdays are light,
But thousands of people
They stand in a line
At the market on Saturday night.

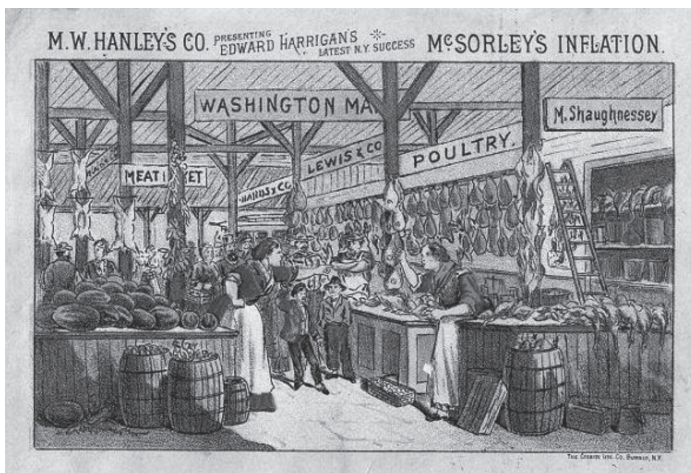
We sell lemons and butterbeans,
Carrots and holly greens,
Celery, so crispy and white,
Pickles and chow-chow,
And dogs that say bow-wow
At the market on Saturday night.

In summer or winter,
Oh, when the wind blows,
Filling wid dust all our eyes,
In rain or in frost
Or terrific snow,
We're shouting and yelling our cries.

We sell peanuts, bananas,
And Chinese Havanas,
It's really a beautiful sight,
It's oleomargarine,
Little pigs *crubeens*,
At the market on Saturday night.

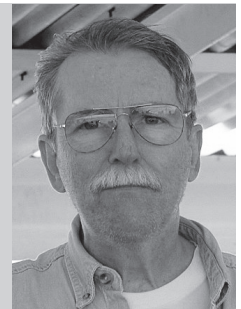
Saturday night is crucial to the widowed stallholder, because it is the apex of the week, the evening before the only day of rest for most working class New Yorkers. While most of the city happily puts work aside, she joyously embraces it. Saturday night is when the throng descends, when she might make her weekly rent in one day and could raise the cash needed to buy her stock for next week. Who is this woman? First, she is Irish. We know that because she refers to pickled pigs feet as *crubeens*. Second, she is proud, someone who has worked her way up to being a small business owner, possibly after laboring at a laundry tub—one of the self-employed army of stallholders in the city's prime bazaar.

If you want to sing "The Market on Saturday Night," you may do so. Just go to the University of California website (<http://www.library.ucsb.edu/OBJID/Cylinder3626>) to listen to Ada Jones' remarkable 1909 recording. Interestingly, the tune David Brahim wrote for Harrigan's lyric sounds very much like a minor key rendition of the Dublin standard, "Biddy Mulligan, the Pride of the Coombe." Which appeared first? Probably the New York melody. ▼



"The Market on Saturday Night," which appeared in Edward Harrigan's 1882 musical play, *McSorley's Inflation*.

Dan Milner comes from a family of Irish traditional singers. A former ranger in the National Park Service, he teaches cultural geography at St. John's University. Dan's recordings for Smithsonian



Folkways include *Irish Pirate Ballads*, which received two Indie nominations in 2009, and *Civil War Naval Songs* with Jeff Davis and David Coffin. His book of 150 folksongs from Ireland, England, and Scotland is *The Bonnie Bunch of Roses* (1984).

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