

Power Wielded by Gangsters and Famous Battles They Waged

Five Points District the Scene of Memorable Gang Fight That Strewed the Streets With Dead and Injured in 1857, and Many Other Conflicts

This is the second of a series of three articles in which the full history of the gangs and gangsters of New York, from the earliest days, will be told for the first time.

By HERBERT ASBURY.

UNTIL forty or fifty years ago, when the reform waves first began to appear in New York, the Five Points district meant to everybody on Manhattan Island that part of the city which runs from Park Row to Chatham Square, through Mott street into Chinatown, then to Canal street, back to Worth street, through Mulberry street, from Worth to Canal street, through Baxter, and back from Centre street to the Tombs—and right in the heart of this region was Paradise Park, the real Five Points, the junction formed by the crossing of Little Water, Cross, Ambrose, Orange and Mulberry streets, now Park, Worth and Baxter.

For more than a hundred years this district was, as it has been aptly called by a writer with a taste for pungent alliteration, a "seething sink of sin alive with dens of the devil."

And it was even more than that. From its earliest days, as far back as 1741, when fourteen negroes were burned at the stake for participation in the negro insurrection, Five Points was a breeding place for gangs of criminals and for the individual criminals who worked "on their own."

What Dickens Saw. Dickens visited Five Points when he was in the United States in 1842, and subsequently he wrote this in his "American Notes": "Let us go on again and plunge into the Five Points without delay. Every wretchedness and vice are rife enough where we are going now."

"This is the place, these narrow ways, diverging to the right and left, and reeking everywhere with dirt and filth. Such lives as are led here bear the same front as elsewhere. The coarse and bloated faces in the doors have their counterparts at home and all the world over. Debauchery has made the very houses prematurely old. See how the rotten beams are tumbling down, and how the patched and broken window panes seem to scowl dimly, like eyes that have been hurt in drunken frolics."

"What place is this to which the quagmire street conducts us? A kind of square of leprous houses, some of which are attainable only by means of crazy stairs without. What lies beyond this tottering flight of steps that creak beneath our tread? A miserable room, lighted by one dim candle, and destitute of all comfort, save that which may be hidden in the wretched bed."

"Here, too, are lanes and alleys paved with mud knee deep; underground chambers, where they dance and game; ruined houses open to the street, whence, through wide gaps in the walls, other ruins loom upon the eye, as though the world of vice and misery had nothing else to show; hideous tenements which take their name from robbery and murder; all that is loathsome, drooping and decayed is here."

"Naturally enough, Five Points was the breeding place of most of the gangs that had New York in their grip during the early part of the nineteenth century. Not all of the gangs had their headquarters there, and not all of them, of course, depended upon that district for their revenue, but the majority of the leaders of all the old time gangs of New York were Five Point gangsters and killers before they had gangs of their own. This section was the birthplace of the old Five Points gang, perhaps the toughest and the most criminal of all the gangs that ever ruled the city, and the lineal ancestor of the Five Point gang captained by Paul Kelly and other noted gangsters of later periods. Of all the gangs the Five Points gang was the only one of importance to hand down its name through the years."

Besides giving to the gangs some of their greatest leaders, the district of the Five Points was the scene of many of the greatest gang battles that New York ever had. It was there that the great gang battle of July 4, 1857, took place, a conflict that has come down in gang history as the best example of "knock down and drag out" fighting that America afforded. Authorities differ as to the names which took part in this fight. Some say the battle was between the Dead Rabbits and the Bowery Boys, while others declare that it was fought between rival detachments of the Roach Guards of Mulberry street and the Atlantic Guards of the Bowery. Still others say that the Plug Uglies, a gang led by Tom Coakley, was mixed up in the fight.

"The Bloody Sixth" Christened. During the ten to thirty years immediately preceding the civil war the gangs waxed powerful and strong both in politics and in killing and plundering. The Bowery Boys were then in their prime, bitter enemies of the Dead Rabbits and the Five Points gang. On the lower East Side, in the Sixth Ward, the gang outbreaks were so numerous and so bloody that the ward got the name of "The Bloody Sixth," a name that has clung to it to this day. The East River was literally alive with river rats and harbor thieves; the Fifth Ward was as much under the control of gangs and gangsters as the Bowery and Chinatown were in later years, and then there was the Lower Seventh Avenue crowd and the Day Break Boys, who were river pirates, willing to do anything for hire. Besides these there were numerous small gangs of petty and sneak thieves and other gangs that were controlled and kept alive by politicians and which came into general notice only during elections.

The gang battles in New York appear to have begun about 1834, although there were unimportant conflicts prior to that time. But in that

year a political gang which had been hired by crooked politicians to overthrow elected officials at the polls broke into the State Arsenal, then at Elm and Franklin streets, during the election excitement and at a time when the police were having troubles of their own. These gangsters armed themselves with muskets and proceeded to rule the city, or at least such portions of it as they cared to graze with their murderous presence. Several persons were killed and others wounded more or less seriously before the State and city authorities called out the militia and dispersed them. But as usual the politicians came to their aid, and there is no record of any convictions, except, perhaps, a few for such minor offenses as disorderly conduct.

A Famous Gang Battle.

Two rival gangs appeared in the field in the following year, 1835, one of them composed of men of American ancestry, while the other was known as the O'Connell Guards and composed mostly of Irish immigrants. The O'Connells and the American gangsters came to blows on June 21, 1835, at Grand and Crosby streets and had a royal battle which lasted for hours, in spite of the efforts of the Municipal Police, as the city's law enforcing body was known at that time. During this battle several, according to the old records, suffered such injuries as smashed heads at the polls broke into the State Arsenal, then at Elm and Franklin streets, during the election excitement and at a time when the police were having troubles of their own. These gangsters armed themselves with muskets and proceeded to rule the city, or at least such portions of it as they cared to graze with their murderous presence. Several persons were killed and others wounded more or less seriously before the State and city authorities called out the militia and dispersed them. But as usual the politicians came to their aid, and there is no record of any convictions, except, perhaps, a few for such minor offenses as disorderly conduct.

The fight between the O'Connells and the Americans comes near rivaling the one fought twenty years later between the Dead Rabbits and the Five Points. The fight raged and spread as far as Grand and Chatham streets—at that time Chatham street was the name of the present Park Row—where it finally subsided, only to break out again the next day in a Bowery resort known as the Green Dragon, near Broome street. Gangs of the Five Points and the Bowery frequented this place, and not only did they become involved in the fight but the Five Points themselves also scented the battle and came en masse to the fray. The Green Dragon was wrecked. This battle became known as the Five Points riot, and was probably the largest gang fight that had taken place in New York up to that time.

A Gangster in Congress.

Two of the noted gangsters of the days before the civil war were Bill Poole and John Morrissey. Morrissey was a slinger, the leader of a political gang which was invaluable for its work at the polls at election times, and from this he graduated naturally into a gambling house keeper whose triumphs were even greater than those of Richard Canfield in later days. But Morrissey abandoned the gambling in time, and at last went to Congress. When he died in 1878 he was a member of the State Senate.

In 1849 Morrissey went to California in the gold rush, expecting to make a fortune. He was unsuccessful, but when he returned to New York after an absence of two or three years he found Bill Poole installed as leader of the True American party, or "Know Nothings," a rival faction to that part of the Democratic organization controlled by Morrissey. The gangs of the two men had bloody battles on the Bowery and other parts of the East Side, and the murder of Poole in the old Stanwix Hall, a resort in 579 Broadway, near Niblo's Garden and the Metropolitan Hotel, was a direct result of this gang rivalry.

Poole was a butcher by trade, with a stall in the Washington Market, but he became interested in sports and the sporting world, and rose to such eminence that besides commanding a gang he owned a saloon known as the Bank Exchange Cafe, at Broadway and Howard street. He was a big man, of magnificent physique, and wore a sweeping black mustache of the type affected nowadays by moving picture comedians and called the "walrus." But in those days such a mustache was the last word in style. Poole was a fighter, a deadly rough and tumble brawler who was idolized by the gangs of the Greenwich Village district for his undoubted prowess.

The old timers on the Bowery, the men who cherish gang history,



The famous gang battle of 1857.

still like to talk about the fight between Morrissey and Poole on the Amos street dock in 1854 as the greatest of all battles between two gangsters. The rivalry between the two men and their gangs was very bitter and finally one day they met. Morrissey offered to bet Poole \$500 that Poole could not pick out a spot where he, Morrissey, could not whip him. Poole at first named the foot of Christopher street, but Morrissey knew that that was in the heart of the territory controlled by the Poole gang and did not believe he could get fair play there. So he offered to bet another \$500 if Poole would name another place, and this time Poole said he would fight Morrissey on the Amos street dock, now West Tenth street.

He started out alone, but two blocks from the meeting place he was set upon by a group of Poole's gangsters and beaten. He retreated, came back with some of his own fighting men, and while they were giving the Pooles a drubbing he slipped through the frays and went on to meet his antagonist. They had no sooner faced each other than Morrissey rushed at Poole, but Poole ducked, seized him by the ankles and hurled him over his head. Then Poole fell upon him and the two men lay there biting, gouging, kicking and using every manner of unfair fighting trick. Morrissey finally said he had enough. He was badly beaten and was in bed for several days. Poole, however, bore no evidence of the struggle, with the exception of a gash

on his cheek where Morrissey had bitten him. But the fight didn't settle the rivalry between the two men and their gangs. The gangs continued to fight and Morrissey and Poole led them in the big battles, but they did not meet again as individuals until the afternoon of the day on which Poole was murdered. This meeting was also in Stanwix Hall, where Poole was drinking with some companions. Morrissey came forward and spoke to Poole and insulted him. One of his friends handed him a pistol, and as Poole showed no inclination to fight, Morrissey pointed it at him and snapped it twice, but it failed to explode. A policeman came in about that time, arrested Poole and took him to the station house, where he was discharged. Morrissey was escorted

out of the place by the policeman and permitted to go after walking two or three blocks. Poole went back to Stanwix Hall late that night. Shortly after midnight some of the members of Morrissey's gang, including such lights as Lewis Baker, James Turner and Patrick McLaughlin, also known as "Paudeen," came into the saloon. McLaughlin called Poole a vile name and offered to whip him. "You are not worth fighting," said Poole. "Sall in, boys!" cried Turner, turning to the men with him, below the threshold of his cloak Turner drew a revolver, which he leveled in the hollow of his arm. Poole sneered at him contemptuously, as Turner squinted along the sights, and laughed uproariously when Turner pulled the trigger and the ball lodged in his own arm. But the next instant Turner fired again and struck Poole in the leg and as the latter stumbled and fell Baker stepped up and said: "I guess I'll take you, anyhow."

Baker then drew a revolver and shot Poole in the left side, below the heart. He fired again, and missed, and then Poole struggled to his feet, seized a carving knife from the bar and dashed after them. But they escaped, and Poole fell into the arms of a friend at the door and was taken to his home. He lived for fourteen days, and then died. The police arrested eight men for the crime, including Morrissey, but none of them was punished. Baker escaped after the shooting, and made his way to Jersey City, where he was smuggled on board a ship bound for the Canary Islands. This vessel was overtaken by a fast clipper ship owned by George Law, one of Poole's political backers and a leading member of the True American party, and Baker was taken off and brought back for trial.

The Famous Battle of 1857. The famous gang fight of 1857, probably the greatest free for all fight that New York ever witnessed—at least that is the opinion of many men who have knowledge of that and subsequent gang fights—occurred during a time when the Police Department was demoralized by reason of a fight between Mayor Ferris and Wood, who favored the old Municipal Police, and the new Metropolitan Police Board, which had been created by the Legislature as a reform measure growing out of general lawless conditions and

Old Timers Still Talk of the Morrissey-Poole Clash as Greatest of All Fights Between Rival Leaders—McGurk Recalled as "Wickedest Man in World"

the increased affiliation of politicians and gangsters. There were several encounters between detachments of Municipal and Metropolitan Police, and on one occasion Daniel Conover, who had been appointed Street Commissioner, and who sided with the Metropolitan Police faction, had to get a warrant before the Mayor would permit him to enter the City Hall. But there was a fight before he got in. The Municipal Police refused to let the Metropolitan Police enter, and twelve persons were wounded in the resulting battle. The riot was only quelled when the Seventh Regiment, then passing down Broadway to en-train for Boston, was called in. Mayor

"Brickbats, stones and clubs were flying thickly around and from windows in all directions and men ran wildly about brandishing firearms. Wounded men lay on the sidewalks and were trampled upon. The belligerents were mostly young men and as they came more closely together those acquainted with the feuds of the districts discovered that the rioters were the Bowery Boys and the Dead Rabbits of Mulberry street crowd.

"Now the Rabbits would make a combined rush and force their antagonists up Bayard street to the Bowery. Then the fugitives, being reinforced, would turn on their pursuers and compel a retreat to Mulberry. Elizabeth and when he got close enough hurled a big stone which struck the Goliath of gangland on the head.

As a result of the battle eight men were killed and more than forty were taken to the hospital. Two or three days later all of the newspapers were required to remove the name of those that the members of that gang were not thieves and that they did not participate in the riot. On the contrary the Dead Rabbits said that they celebrated the Fourth in a lawful and proper manner and that the fighting was between the Atlantic Guards and the Roach Guards of Mulberry street. All of the best available records, however, declare that the Dead Rabbits were in the battle and that they did their share of killing and maiming. In all likelihood the battle was a general gang fight in which members of practically all the gangs of the city took part, because the gangster in those days was not as cowardly as he of recent years and as a rule would not only stand up and fight but would go to a great deal of trouble to find a fight. If he happened to find a private battle he immediately made it a public one.

Streets Barricaded With Carts. But the entrance of the police into the battle only brought a breathing space. No sooner had they left with their prisoners than the fight was renewed. The rival gangs heaped up barricades of carts in the streets and from behind these defenses they shot and hurled bricks and stones and used their clubs. It is related that one giant gangster of the Dead Rabbits snaked coolly up and down some thirty feet in front of his barricade, using his pistol with effect and throwing bricks that caused many a broken head. He was finally knocked senseless by a small boy whose brother was fighting with the Bowery Boys. This lad crept up on hands and knees, keeping out of sight of the big gangster, and when he got close enough hurled a big stone which struck the Goliath of gangland on the head.

Sharkey's Escape From Tombs. No story of the old time gangs of New York would be complete without mention of William J. Sharkey and his escape from the Tombs, around which considerable fiction and many plays have been written. Sharkey was a gangster of renown, the head of a crowd called the Sharkey Guards, and a man who occupied much of the same position in gangland of his day as such notables as Kid Twist and Monk Eastman occupied in later years. His period was in the late '60s and '70s, and his gang had headquarters at Wooster and Houston streets.

Sharkey kept a small gambling house in New York for a long time, and made a great deal of money. Soon, however, he got the idea that more money was to be made in Buffalo, so he went there and started a place. But he had had luck and came back several thousand dollars out of pocket. Later he sent one of his gang henchmen, Robert S. Dunn, also known as Bob Isaacs, to Buffalo with \$500 to open a gambling house. Dunn lost the money and came back to New York, and shortly after that Sharkey met him at the Place, a notorious dive in 288 Houston street.

"Give me back my money!" demanded Sharkey. "I'm broke," replied Dunn, "I haven't any money at all."

Sharkey drew a revolver and shot Dunn through the head. The gang leader escaped but was captured and sentenced to be hanged. He escaped, however, with the aid of his sweetheart, Margie Jordan. This woman came to visit him in the Tombs one afternoon, and Sharkey walked calmly past the keepers clad in a woman's dress that she had brought with her. A reward of \$1,500 was offered for his arrest, but he was never found. He was reported to have lived for a long time in Cuba, and the last rumor that came in about him said he had left Cuba for Spain. That was many years ago.

Roach Guards Into Fray. There was a fight in which brick bats, stones and clubs were used freely, but the Bowery Boys had the better of the battle and drove the Dead Rabbits and the Shirt Tails back to their dens in Five Points, near Paradise Park, and around Elizabeth, Mulberry and Park streets. One of the gangs which owed allegiance to the Dead Rabbits in those days and which fought with the Roach Guards in all big battles, was the Bowery Boys, a crowd that had a uniform, a pair of trousers with a red stripe. That and an undershirt was their battle regalia. This gang heard of the victory of the Atlantic Guards and assembling all its members marched toward the Bowery to renew the attack. Two policemen who tried to stop them were beaten unmercifully, one of them seriously injured by being struck on the head with a brick.

But the police sent reinforcements from the White street station, and there was a battle in which the authorities succeeded in arresting two of the gangsters. That didn't prevent the big fight, however. The police were finally driven away and the gangs came together in Bayard street, the Bowery Boys and the Atlantic Guards having poured out of their rooms to meet the invaders. In its issue of July 6, 1857, The New York Times gave this description of the fight that followed:

As bands of organized criminals the gangs do not appear to have done a great deal between the times of Sharkey, or a few years afterward, and the late '80s and early '90s. Not that there were no gangs then. There were about as many then as there ever had been, but they do not seem to have been so active. They were used mostly around election time and strong arm men, but between elections they devoted themselves to stealing and an occasional murder. About that time, too, the clean-up of Five Points—not including the Bowery and Chinatown—which began with the erection of the Five Points Mission as far back as 1852, got going in dead earnest, and the gangs and gangsters were driven to the Bowery, and to the streets radiating from Chatham Square and off the Bowery, and to Chinatown. There they waxed strong, and laid the foundation for the terror and trouble and caused so much trouble during the early part of the present century. There were, of course, many gangs on the West Side, the forerunners of the Gophers, the Hell's Kitchen, the San Juan Gang, the more modern Hudson Dusters, and all the others that came after.

In the '80s and '90s the favorite

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