



ISSN: 2471-6839

PANORAMA

Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art

Saloons and Saloonkeepers in the Digital Age

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Teaching the history and material culture of saloons poses a challenge, because unlike a painting or sculpture in a museum, saloons no longer exist in their original form. With the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1920, the saloons closed and their buildings and furnishings repurposed. In theory, they could have been reborn following the repeal of Prohibition, but their reputation was so tainted that proprietors preferred to open bars or taverns. Later, in the postwar period, the saloon of historical reality was replaced by the mythic saloon of Hollywood and western American tourism. How then can we know the historical saloon?

Such was the question my twelve students and I set out to answer in the spring of 2015. The context was an upper level seminar in the American Studies program at UC Berkeley. Throughout the term we pursued a multidisciplinary approach, incorporating methods employed by art historians, archeologists, folklorists, historians, and others. As the semester progressed, however, I sensed that the students' conception of saloons and saloonkeepers remained mostly stereotypical, untethered to historical reality. Despite my efforts to underscore material aspects, students did not acknowledge that saloonkeepers were unique individuals who worked at a saloon that once existed. I wanted them to dig down to a strata of historical specificity in a way that would teach them to how to locate real people in the social and material landscape of an actual town.

Accordingly, I created an in-class exercise called *The Digital Archeology of Late Nineteenth-Century Saloonkeepers in California*. The assignment was designed not only to address the above issue, but also to develop specific skills in the students. Today's students are thoroughly digital creatures, but most do not know how to use—much less know of—the many excellent subscription-based online resources offered by the university. I wanted my students to learn how to use these resources so that their research papers offered specificity with respect to time, place, and people. The multistep exercise had students work in groups of three or four, each student with his or her own laptop. By working together in real time, I hoped their research would proceed in a non-linear fashion, would be more varied, and produce collaborative results based on collectively gathered and assessed evidence. Moreover, working digitally meant students could keep multiple tabs open, and thus toggle between archival resources in ways that would have never been possible in an earlier era. Finally, I structured the exercise more like real research instead of class assignment in which students are guided to a specific conclusion. I had no clear idea what they would find.

Each group began searching the 1880 Census (accessible through the university subscription to *ancestry.com*) for saloonkeepers living in California. Each suitable hit was evaluated on the basis of whether or not that individual conformed to the general

profile of a saloonkeeper as explained by scholars whose work we had read. Uncharacteristic saloonkeepers were given preference. Then the candidates were ranked, and the group decided which saloonkeeper would be the subject of their advanced research.

Next, students were directed to find the Sanborn Fire Insurance Map that corresponded to the town or city where the saloonkeeper lived. These maps were published starting in the nineteenth century to aid in the estimation of fire risk and are now available online. Although digitization comes with certain downsides, in its favor is accessibility and the opportunity to move quickly between text-based and visual resources. Indeed, by shifting gears from census to maps, students were required to situate a specific individual, known only by name and profession, into the three-dimensional context of a townscape. Incidentally, not all communities were mapped in 1880, so the map closest in date to the census was chosen.

With map (or maps) in hand, each group returned to the original census entry and wrote a profile on their saloonkeeper. First, they attended to the personal, including age, sex, marital status, place of birth, parents' birthplace, and all individuals residing at the same address. They then examined similar census data for neighbors of the saloonkeeper. This information enabled groups to sketch out a biography of the saloonkeeper and position him or her within the context of the social makeup of his or her neighborhood. In so doing, students were able to understand this individual within larger networks of family, kin, ethnicity, class, and the geography and demographics of a particular neighborhood.

Each group then focused on the saloons where this individual might have worked. Turning to the Sanborn map, students evaluated the distribution of the saloons in town, noting where they were clustered and also noting surrounding businesses. To develop an understanding of saloon life in that community, they read primary historical articles about saloons from regional historical newspapers archived in the California Digital Newspaper Collection.

Finally, each group wrote a summary account of their saloonkeeper, the communities in which he or she circulated, the saloons in which he or she might have worked, and local saloon culture. This was a heady experience for students, a true fleshing out of history based on evidence. And it was all the more exciting that the results of their inquiries could not have been foretold. They not only found but came to embrace specific individuals who did not conform to the generic Hollywood images of saloonkeepers, and they were engaged in the examination of known information about actual people and real towns of which they either heard or knew firsthand.

Perhaps befitting the tension between the material and the digital, the success of this exercise ultimately rested on a paradox: in the absence of the whole historical object—in this case the architecture and environment of the saloon—it was our experience that digital resources helped to allow such spaces to be reimagined more tangibly by connecting these establishments that were long gone to the actual people who operated them and the real neighborhoods they served.