



Blalock, Stephanie. "Go to Pfaff's": The History of a Restaurant and Lager Beer Saloon [review]

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REVIEWS



STEPHANIE BLALOCK, *“Go to Pfaff’s”: The History of a Restaurant and Lager Beer Saloon*. Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 2014. Online at *The Vault at Pfaff’s* (pfaffs.web.lehigh.edu). 100 pp.

The past several years have seen a flourishing of interest in the history of bohemianism, and especially in Walt Whitman’s relationship to it. Daniel Cottom’s *International Bohemia: Scenes of Nineteenth-Century Life* (2013), Justin Martin’s *Rebel Souls: Walt Whitman and America’s First Bohemians* (2014), Joanna Levin’s *Bohemia in America, 1858-1920* (2009), and Levin’s and Edward Whitley’s collection *Whitman Among the Bohemians* (2014) are just some of the recent publications on the topic. Something about that brief stint in Whitman’s life—he was immersed in New York bohemianism for less than two years, in 1859 to 1860—is appealing to us in the twenty-first century. The circle of New York artists and writers was one of the first groups of Americans to embrace liberal social and sexual values that resemble our own—women were full participants in American bohemianism, free love abounded, and the social circle seemed to have presented a relatively safe space for Whitman to have explored his attraction to other men. The bohemians gathered almost nightly at Pfaff’s beer cellar for bonhomie even as their nation was becoming increasingly politically divided, and that image might offer a tantalizing alternative to contemporary Americans, who cope with national turbulence mostly through digital surrogates for the kind of community the bohemians enjoyed.

Stephanie Blalock’s book, *“Go to Pfaff’s”: The History of a Restaurant and Lager Beer Saloon* contributes to the body of scholarship on bohemianism by fleshing out the specifics of Charles Ignatius Pfaff and the beer hall that served as the bohemians’ home base. Blalock, who holds a PhD in English as well as an MLS and is currently working as a digital humanities librarian, brings a librarian’s skills to this impressively researched, brief book. Pfaff’s cellar has until now been a murky setting for much of the scholarship on antebellum bohe-

mianism, but Blalock has filled in that background with rich detail. Drawing on a stunning array of sources, including immigration and census records, auction listings, and numerous historical newspapers, Blalock presents the story of a German immigrant who worked as a waiter in Switzerland before immigrating to New York and establishing his own beer hall with the help of his wife before her early death. The rotund, hairy, jolly Pfaff waited on his customers in those early years with his toddler son tucked under one arm, and sometime in the late 1850s hit it off with the local art crowd. The likeliest account of Pfaff's relationship with the bohemians—Blalock is always careful to show us her research and make the tentativeness of her conclusions clear—is that Henry Clapp, Jr., the editor of *The New York Saturday Press*, took a liking to Pfaff's because it reminded him of the bohemian halls he had frequented in France before importing the term “bohemianism” to the United States. Clapp brought his bohemian followers with him to Pfaff's, and he and Pfaff enjoyed a mutually beneficial arrangement in which Clapp advertised the beer hall in his newspaper and Pfaff extended courtesies and generous lines of credit to Clapp and the other bohemians. Ever the businessman, Clapp seems to have undertaken a symbiotic relationship with Pfaff that is similar to the one he cultivated with Thayer and Eldridge, the publishing firm that published Whitman's 1860 *Leaves of Grass*, the first edition Whitman did not pay for himself. Clapp brought in the bohemians, and Pfaff treated them as VIPs, clearing other patrons from an area reserved for Clapp's crowd, permitting a hole in the wall for Clapp's pipe, and at least occasionally allowing his well trained staff to run news copy to the press for his clientele. In return, Clapp's unassuming beer cellar, which was undecorated to the point of being dismal in some patrons' estimations, especially compared to the extravagant interiors of his competitors, became a curiosity and destination, where locals and visitors could drop by to observe New York's eccentric literati at work.

Whitman does not play a prominent role in Blalock's book, but the details about Whitman's relationship with Pfaff and his business that she does include are interesting and not well-worn: Pfaff did not make a favorable first impression on Whitman, but soon the two became friends and would celebrate reunions with special bottles of cham-

pagne; Whitman visited Pfaff later in their lives and remembered his time at Pfaff's fondly. One anecdote Blalock uncovered from an early book of recollections of the bohemian Pfaff years has the contrarian poet George Arnold calling for a toast to the success of the Confederacy, which riled Whitman so much that he took a swing at Arnold and started a bar brawl that Pfaff himself broke up.

Blalock's details and anecdotes are dense and fascinating. Readers who are not already interested in antebellum bohemianism or Whitman may wish for the book to make a stronger argument for why Pfaff's biography and the story of his beer hall are important to American literary history. Readers who come to the book with an interest in bohemianism, Whitman, or some of the other figures—such as the liberated actress Ada Clare, who shirked social norms and died a bizarre death by rabies—will find the book to be like reading page-turning details one never knew about old friends.

"*Go to Pfaff's*" is available to read for free online, thanks to a forward-thinking arrangement between Lehigh University Press and the digital project *The Vault at Pfaff's*, directed by Edward Whitley and Rob Weidman, which is hosted by Lehigh University. The book went through the standard peer review process at Lehigh University Press, but with the aim of being made available under a creative commons license at the place where it was most likely to be found by readers interested in the history of Pfaff and the bohemians who frequented his business.

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JOHN MARSH, *In Walt We Trust: How a Queer Socialist Poet Can Save America From Itself*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2015. 248 pp.

In the late pages of *In Walt We Trust*—a lively and incisive appeal to revisit our national (queer and socialist!) poet in light of the crises facing American democracy today—John Marsh poses the vital ques-