



"The bacchanalian revelry that the fiction magazines have led him to expect"

# Bohemia Goes West

*The Greenwich Villagers Retreat Before the Inroads of Civilization*

By ELMER DAVIS



"The Greenwich Villagers, like the Indians, are moving West"

**P**ERHAPS you didn't know that Washington Square is no longer on the map of Bohemia.

The jaded thrill-hound from West End Avenue or Washington Heights, prowling in nocturnal search of the wild free life of Greenwich Village, learns from the policeman that it isn't there any more; he will have to walk two blocks west. The tourist from the interior reaches the goal of his search, consults his Baedeker, and finds no

evidence of the bacchanalian revelry that the fiction magazines have led him to expect. The recurrent flocks of middle-aged virgins from the Columbia University Summer school, who feel that one should know something about the sort of existence those people lead, repulsive as it is, in order to—well, to understand life, you know—these respectable ladies stare about them at the Arch, the Judson church, and the children playing about the fountain and wonder what there is about all this that can be so dreadful. No, they have made no mistake. This must be Washington Square; the sign on the lamp post says so. There is the statue of the Father of His Country, apparently posed after a hard night at Valley Forge; but where are the Bohemians?

**T**HE melancholy answer is, They have gone west, melancholy, because while they have gone only two blocks west up to date, they are likely to keep on going for quite a while—in fact, until they reach the North River and there is nothing left but a leap into Jersey, rather than make which any authentic Bohemian would endure the penultimate infamy of going to work.

Within the last few months the center of what the world in general knows as Greenwich Village, which is but a small part of the district to which that name properly belongs, has experienced a shift of the center of gravity. The life, if you want to call it that, which used to center around Washington Square, and which gave that sedate residential neighborhood a reputation not altogether appreciated by some of the old settlers on the northern side, has moved to Sheridan Square; and already the irresistible pressure which compelled this migration is at work again, getting ready to drive it still farther. The Villagers, like the Indians, are moving west before the inroads of civilization; and it is the melancholy irony of their situation that their own success is the cause of their downfall.

The particular manifestation of modernity which is driving the Latin Quarter of New York away from its old centers may be generally and impersonally described as real estate development; in the case of Greenwich Village this development is incarnate in the person of Vincent Pepe, whose office at the southwest corner of Washington Square may without inaccuracy be called a rescue home for fallen neighborhoods. From the standpoint of municipal improvement, the standpoint of those lovers of old New York who like to see some, at least, of the pleasant residence streets of former days preserved amid the spreading plateaus of loft buildings devoted to the garment trade, he is one of the great benefactors of the city; but the Greenwich Village Bohemian sees him as the compeer of the German in Belgium, of the Turk in Armenia, of Genghis Khan.

## Bohemia Goes West

AND the Villagers may be allowed some irritation, for as soon as they have settled around a center—Washington Square yesterday, Sheridan Square to-day, perhaps the as yet unheard-of Abingdon Square tomorrow—as soon as they have started their new cafés, and made their district famous by a few naughty dances and a well press-agented police raid; as soon as they are beginning to cash in on the publicity which brings tourists to their shops and cafés and jazz-band revels, then Pepe steps in and begins to develop the neighborhood.

He knows, as do the Villagers, that Bohemia has an irresistible attraction for the incurable bourgeois. Your stodgy member of the middle class has read all about the celebrated *vie*—if not in Murger, then in the evening papers which furnish occasional accounts of the doings in Greenwich Village. He may have heard it warbled tunefully in the opera house; he has been taught to think of it as a place where nobody works, hence somewhat different from his office; where liquor is free—how unlike his haunts of refreshment, in these days of a rapidly vanishing stock!—where all women are young and beautiful, a condition which conceivably may not obtain at home.

He goes down to dine in one of its restaurants now and then, finding that the purchase of thirty-five cents' worth of food for sixty cents is more profitable than the purchase of eighty cents' worth of food for two dollars; and eventually the day comes when he and his wife, contemplating the mounting rents on the Upper West Side, wonder if it wouldn't be delightful to live in that charming Bohemian quarter down in Greenwich Village.

THE side streets of Greenwich Village are built up, for the most part, with old houses of red brick,—two-story or three-story dwellings, survivals of the day when the region was a residential suburb of a less feverish New York. You can go down to the neighborhood of Sheridan Square or Washington Square and find a score and more of them which have been lately made over. And the case of any one is typical of them all.

Regard, then, No. 28B Washington Place; three stories and basement. Rather shapely, but pathetically dilapidated; built of dingy red brick, with broken shutters hanging awry beside the dingy windows; a flight of steps leading up to a pair of dirty Ionic door-posts, behind which is a fine but battered old door topped by a neglected fanlight. Mrs. Harahan, who rents furnished rooms, leases the whole house—three stories and basement—for a thousand dollars a year.

She makes little more than her living, even when the tenants pay; and this is a matter of some uncertainty. For they include Rodolfo Smith, who had a one-act play produced by the Provincetown Players, thereby gaining great fame in the Village; Mimi Perkins, who starred in his play, and who makes a precarious living out of the Sunday papers; Marcelle Rabinowitz, whose "Passage of the Red Sea" hung in Bruno's Garret for a month, with no purchaser; the plutocratic Musetta Spingler, whose father pays her a modest subvention to stay away from her home in Salina, Kansas, where she brought undying shame on the family by smoking a cigarette at the Elks' picnic; Leon Collins,

who sings for his meals, accompanied by his own balalaika, at the Idle Hour restaurant in the basement next door; Olga Nitchevo, who teaches the ukulele, designs futurist gowns and hats, and sells cigarettes in the Pink Pajama tea room round the corner; and a sprinkling of reporters, young and earnest clerks in publishing houses, and other aspirants to participation in the carefree existence of the Village.

But the house is favorably situated, right in the midst of the district which Bohemians have made famous. There is a demand; and eventually the real



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is a demand; and eventually the real estate operator persuades somebody to buy the house—or rather the land, for in some of these transactions the house is thrown in for good measure. Then the remodeling begins. First you take out the old hot-air furnace and put in steam heat. Next a bath is installed on every floor, and a kitchenette; one room being cut up into these two auxiliaries. The interior is redecorated, divided into apartments; the living room of each apartment is fitted with a fireplace.

Meanwhile the exterior has been transformed. The old brick is repainted; the wide stones above the windows are polished into whiteness by the sand blast; the shutters are repaired and painted light green; the old doorway and fanlight, treated with loving care and white paint, are revealed as admirable specimens of an architecture that is gone; window boxes and gayly colored awnings lighten up the front; studio lights are put in where needed. Instead of the three-stories-and-basement rooming house, which Mrs. Harahan got for a thousand a year, you now have a studio apartment house. The front basement is rented to a book shop for \$45 a month; the rear shelters the janitor. There is a first-floor front and a first-floor back apartment, each of two rooms, kitchenette and bath, at \$60 a month; a second-floor front and a third-floor front, of the same size, at \$65; and a duplex studio, second and third rear, at \$125. The house which Mrs. Harahan got for a thousand a year now brings in \$5,040.

But who are the new tenants? No authentic Villager can pay these prices. The second-floor front goes to Mr. and Mrs. Kaplansky, who have decided that ten rooms on Riverside Drive is unthinkable in another Garfield winter, and that the profits of the movie industry can well be spent in acquiring the spirit of Bohemia; the third-floor front to Mr. Garfinkel, proprietor of a flourishing waist factory in the West Twenties, whose young wife knows she has a voice that can best be developed in the atmosphere of Greenwich Village; the duplex studio is rented by Mrs. Myron Baxter, widow of the Baxter National Bank of Texarkana, who has come to New York to chaperon her daughter Myrtle and Myrtle's undeniable talent in water colors.

Where are Rodolfo Smith and Mimi Perkins, Marcelle Rabinowitz and Musetta Spingler? They have gone west—west of Sixth Avenue, where the rents are lower. And now that they and their kind have made Sheridan Square famous as the new center of Bohemia, the relentless pursuer is on their heels; houses west of Sixth Avenue are being remodeled every day; foresighted Bohemians already look forward to another migration toward the setting sun, as Daniel Boone moved westward ahead of the civilization he had made possible.

*Sketches by Dorothy Ferriss*

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