

**“MANLINESS IS THE BACKBONE OF OUR NATURE”: MASCULINITY AND CLASS IDENTITY  
AMONG NINETEENTH-CENTURY RAILROAD WORKERS IN WEST OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA**

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*Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, changing, and sometimes conflicting, ideas of masculinity played out in how working class men formed common identities among themselves, and how they interacted with others, on both the shop floor and in their neighborhoods and homes. These gendered identities form a basis for both solidarity and exclusion. In this paper I consider the relationship between gender and class identities in the late nineteenth-century U.S., focusing on skilled male railroad workers in West Oakland, in the San Francisco Bay area of California. During this period the craft unions to which these workers belonged articulated a vision of “respectable masculinity” for their members that was intended to replace prevailing notions of masculinity centered on homosociality and hard drinking. This paper examines the impact of these conflicting visions.*

The archaeological study of gender has focused primarily on women. While necessary in the context of dominant androcentric interpretations of the past, the emphasis on women leaves the impression that maleness is the *absence* of gender—a default setting of human nature, in much the same way that whiteness often seems to be the absence of race or ethnicity (Voss 2006:114-115; Williams 2008:53). As Bryn Williams (2008) notes in his study of Chinese masculinities in California, the study of male gendering is not the study of men, but the study of the social construction of men, of the ideologies of masculinity and how they are enacted in everyday life. As gendering, masculinity is embodied practices, “constantly enacted and re-enacted through the movements, expressions, thoughts, and adornments of daily life” (Williams 2008:55). These practices are constructed in dialectical relation with other social processes and constructions, such as race, class, occupation, and ethnicity (Voss 2006:114-115). A society, especially one as complex as the U.S., will have multiple contested and negotiated notions of what constitutes “masculinity” (Kessler-Harris 1993).

This paper is a beginning effort in identifying the relation between class identities and masculine identities among late nineteenth-century railroad workers in West Oakland, California. The dataset I use derives from the Cypress Freeway Archaeological Project, which was conducted by the Anthropological Studies Center of Sonoma State University between 1994 and 1998 as part of the Cypress Freeway Replacement Project, on behalf of the California Department of Transportation (Praetzellis 1994; Praetzellis and Praetzellis 2004).

This paper builds on earlier research conducted by the author on the interplay of nativist ideologies and forms of labor organization in the construction of working-class identity among these railroad workers, looking at how the divisions of craft-skill and immigration played out in housing, diet, and dining (Walker 2004, 2008). This work emphasized how the idea of a uniquely American standard of living was deployed by U.S. workers in their struggles both with managers, in arguing for a family wage, and against immigrants, who, supposedly having fewer civilized needs, undercut the ability of U.S. male breadwinners to support their families in an appropriate American manner. While barely touched on in the 2008 article, the role of masculine gender identities in these arguments should be obvious. In the later nineteenth century, the discourses of masculinity were part and parcel of class consciousness, creating solidarity against capitalists certainly, but also against other workers, including women. In this paper I follow on from this early research to focus in on the idea of the American Standard of Living and how it was part of changing and conflicting ideas of working class masculinity in the late nineteenth century.

I use a sample of 18 households, covering a broad spectrum of railroad-related or probable railroad-related jobs. The detailed information is presented in Table 1. Eleven of the household heads were either skilled mechanics in the shops or members of one of the “Big Four,” the powerful and conservative Operating Department railroad brotherhoods for engineers, conductors, brakemen, and firemen (Arnesen 2001:28). More detailed background on the organization of labor in the railroad industry in West Oakland is presented in Walker (2004), which is available on-line. The railroad brotherhoods were strongholds of craft unions (exclusive unions based on work skill and place in the production process, as opposed to, for example, industrial unions, which attempt to organize all workers within an industry). Of these craft-union workers, nine were U.S.-born and two were immigrants (Table 2).

Seven of the household heads were workers who were, from the perspective of the railroad managers and craft unionists, unskilled: six laborers, and one cleaner and oiler. Six of these were immigrant households and one was U.S.-born. This distribution reflects the channeling of immigrants into unskilled work.

### CHANGING IDEAS OF MASCULINITY

From our perspective, it seems inevitable that exaggerated masculinity is an integral part of being working-class and male. The working-class male has become the national benchmark for what it means to be an American man (Freeman 1993). Icons of masculinity such as the cowboy or the construction worker are so ingrained in our consciousness that even their hats impart some sort of masculinity to the wearer. The spectacle of politicians surrounding themselves with hardhat-wearing men or wearing hardhats themselves while standing awkwardly next to some piece of heavy equipment have become staples of American political theatre.

But the middle-class fascination with working-class masculinity is a historical phenomenon, and has roots that extend at least to the later nineteenth century. This was a time of rapid social, economic, and technological change in America that affected the middle class as well the working class. We see throughout society pervasive appeals to manliness, what later authors have referred to as a late nineteenth-century “crisis of masculinity” (Dabakis 1995; Kimmel 2005). In response to fears of “over-civilization,” there was an increased interest among middle-class men in self-conscious “rough” or “muscular” masculinity: Theodore Roosevelt’s advocacy of the strenuous life, the romanticizing of the frontier, the growth of organized sports, and a cult of the primitive. But we also see it in the artistic valorization of working-class bodies, such as Douglas Tilden’s 1901 monument to labor, “The Mechanic’s Fountain,” in downtown San Francisco (Dabakis 1995), as well as an increasing interest in hitherto-scorned working-class recreations such as music halls, saloons, and prizefighting (Bederman 1996:17; Parsons 2000:283).

Among working-class men, the redefinition of masculinity took somewhat different forms. A conventional distinction is that between “rough” and “respectable” masculinities (Bederman 1996; Dabakis 1995; Kessler-Harris 2002; Maynard 1989; Meyer 2002). In the literature, rough masculinity is exemplified by the unskilled canal workers described by Peter Way (1993a, 1993b). This culture is characterized by heavy drinking, physical competitiveness, homosociality, and an opposition to and rejection of the genteel culture of supervisors and the middle class. We really know little about the historical context or changes in this kind of masculinity. It tends to be associated with unskilled workers, who have been little studied.

We know more about respectable masculinity, since this is part of the claims of skilled craft workers, who have been lavishly studied by labor historians. For much of the nineteenth century, these workers had a culture that emphasized what labor historian David Montgomery described as “manly bearing”—a bearing derived from work skill, autonomy of the shop floor, fraternal identification with others in his trade, and the ability to support his family. In relation to management, it was oppositional. Men were not deferential, and those who broke production rates were “willing to doff their manhood” (Montgomery 1979:13).

Table 1. Households and features used in the analysis (data from Anthropological Studies Center 2001).

NAME	BLOCK	ADDRESS	PERIOD OF RESIDENCE	FEATURE NUMBER	FEATURE TYPE	DATE OF DEPOSITION	ETHNICITY	OCCUPATION	CLASS SEGMENT
Renters	31	1860 Short	1890s	2524	Pit	ca. 1895	Portuguese	Laborer	Unskilled Immigrant
Breen	2	802 Brush	1877-1882	1300	Well	1876-1880	Irish	Laborer	Unskilled Immigrant
Broderick	6	813 Filbert	1875-1900	4220	Privy	1880	Irish	Laborer	Unskilled Immigrant
Corrigan	6	825 Linden	1876-1891	4245	Privy	1880	Irish	Boilermaker	Skilled Immigrant
Crocker	28	1825 Short	1900-1	2404	Pit	1900	White U.S.	Laborer	Unskilled U.S.-born
Fischer	27	1862 Goss	1899-1900	2855	Privy	1900	White U.S.	Carpet Layer/Upholsterer	Skilled U.S.-born
French	1	669 Sixth	1880	954	Privy	ca.1880	White U.S.	RR Conductor	Skilled U.S.-born
McNamara	29	1865 Goss	1877-1894	4724, 5112	Privy, Pit	late 1870s	White U.S.	Laborer	Unskilled Immigrant
Hickey/ Loomis	3	770 Fifth	1878-1881+ (Combined)	1747	Privy	1880	White U.S.	Carpenter/Carpet Layer	Skilled U.S.-born
Lewis	27	883 Cedar	1876-1882	2873/2874/ 2864/2786	Pits	1880	White U.S.	Brakeman	Skilled U.S.-born
McDonald	4	818 Myrtle	1875-1890	3178	Privy	early 1880s	White Canadian	Carpenter	Skilled U.S.-born
Murray	4	822 Myrtle	1875-1898	3185	Privy	1880s	Irish	Laborer/ Gardener	Unskilled Immigrant
Quinn	5	812 Filbert	1875-1880	3830	Privy	1875-1880	Irish	Laborer/ Fireman	Skilled Immigrant
Robertson	20	1814 Atlantic	1872-1900+	6325	Privy	mid 1880s	White Canadian	Foreman	Skilled U.S.-born
Taylor	3	768 Fifth	1874-1892	1753	Pit	1884	White U.S.	Carpenter	Skilled U.S.-born
Tighe	3	762 Fifth	1880-1882	1858	Privy	1882	Irish	Railroad Car Cleaner/Oiler	Unskilled Immigrant
Van Epps	2	809 Castro	1874-1892	1431	Privy	early 1880s	White U.S.	Carpenter	Skilled U.S.-born
Vogt	6	822 Linden	1877-1894	4236/4237	Privy	early 1890s	White U.S.	Carpenter	Skilled U.S.-born

Table 2: Skill by nativity.

	IMMIGRANT	U.S.-BORN	TOTAL
Skilled	2 (18%)	9 (82%)	11
Unskilled	6 (86%)	1 (14%)	7
Total	8	10	18

The shift to a “respectable masculinity” with a working-class identity grounded in domesticity, temperance, consumption, and leisure came with the gradual acceptance of wage labor in the later part of the nineteenth century. Demands were no longer made on the basis of the workers’ rights as producers, but on the basis of their needs as consumers (Glickman 1993:224-226).

The American standard of living was tied to discourses of domesticity, morality, and temperance. The linking of working-class masculinity to more middle-class ideas of respectability and domesticity made a number of simultaneous arguments, beyond the obvious appeal to middle-class mores. It could be deployed in negotiations with managers, as an argument for the cross-class solidarity between men, and, in the context of paternalistic relations, the responsibility of heads of household for their families, be it an actual family or a managerial metaphor (Fine 1993; Fink 1993; Frader 2004).

It was also an argument against immigrant workers who, by possessing fewer material needs and who had not cultivated civilized desires, undercut the livelihood and the masculinity of American workers (Glickman 1993). And it was an *American* standard of living. John Mitchell, the then President of the United Mine Workers, argued in 1903 that:

It is not reasonable to compare the American standard of living with the British, the German, the Russian, or Chinese standards. The American demands and receives better wages and better conditions of life than either the Englishman or the German, and there is no comparison possible between his standard and that of the Russian or the Chinaman [Mitchell 1903:114].

This was a common refrain among union leaders.

It could also be used against women workers—again through the cross-class solidarity of men, an alliance between managers and workers, but also because women, like immigrants, had fewer civilized needs and could keep alive on less (Glickman 1993:234; Kessler-Harris 1991:11). Domesticity and the ideology of separate spheres were significant factors, since the living wage arguments idealized a world in which men provided for dependent wives and children. Female independence impugned the masculinity of male workers (Kessler-Harris 1991:10).

## THE RAILROAD UNIONS AND MASCULINE CULTURE

The culture of railroad workers, even those in the brotherhoods, was by all accounts a rough one that “emphasized manly confrontation with the rigors and dangers of the job, defiance of management, and consumption of alcohol” (Taillon 2002:320). The relationship between alcohol consumption, saloon culture, and masculinity in the nineteenth century has been discussed by many authors (Blocker 2006; Dixon 2006; Holt 2006; Kingsdale 1973; Murdock 2001; Noel 1996; Parsons 2000; Reckner and Brighton 1999; Smith 2008; Taillon 2002; Way 1993b; Wilson 2005), so I am going to leave it as a given.

Drinking and homosociality were central to the culture of railroad workers. But, as we move into the Victorian era and the hegemony of the middle class, they were increasingly incompatible with the ideals of respectable manhood being articulated by union leaders. Respectable manhood derived from the home and a morally uplifting association with womanhood, not from the workplace and the raucous company of men (Taillon 2002:326). In his study of railroad workers and temperance, Paul Michel

Taillon notes how the vision of respectable masculinity put forward in union literature extended well beyond the workplace and into the community:

It resided in the fulfilling of one's duties and obligations as a skilled worker and union member, but it also extended beyond the workplace and union hall and into the family, community, and politics.... This vision of manhood required, and was realized through, a public demonstration of respectability in multiple arenas of life [Taillon 2002:324-325].

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Archaeologically, where does this leave us? As an identity rooted in consumption and the household, respectability is easier to identify than rough masculinity, which is rooted in the workplace and defined by a set of behaviors that will not leave much in the way of material remains. There might be evidence, for example, of workplace drinking, but largely, rough masculinity will be a material culture defined by absences.

For this analysis, I compared only by craft-union membership (“skill”), since there weren’t enough skilled immigrant workers and unskilled U.S.-born workers to make separate categories useful. I have, however, marked immigrant status off in the graphics, since it is an important consideration.

Identifying possible archaeological signatures for masculinity identity is not a simple problem. Obviously trawling through a database looking for different kinds of manly artifacts is not a viable option. So instead I focus on two historical behaviors associated with respectable masculinity that may have archaeological correlates: the public demonstration of respectability, and temperance.

As material evidence for the public demonstration of respectability, I used artifacts associated with male grooming. While clothing would be the most obvious archaeological correlate for a respectable self-presentation, its survival was too erratic to be useful. Grooming items, such as cologne bottles, hairbrushes, combs, and dental care items, were common enough to serve as an acceptable proxy.

Comparing the Minimum Number of Items (MNI) of these artifacts (Figure 1) across skill shows that these items are associated with skilled (i.e., craft-union) workers, both U.S.-born and immigrant. This does suggest that a number of railroad brotherhood members accepted the idea of a respectable self-presentation to society, one that may have been at odds with the rougher opposition to genteel or dandified self-presentation.

Temperance, for obvious reasons, I measured through alcohol consumption, or lack thereof. In order to compensate for assemblage size, the number of alcohol bottles is expressed as a percent of the overall assemblage from that household. The results (Figure 2) of this are not unsurprising—disappointing maybe, but not unsurprising. There was no decline in alcohol consumption associated with craft-union households. They drank as much at home as unskilled laborers.

There are a couple of possibilities here. One is obviously that the rhetoric of temperance was not particularly influential. Another is that this rhetoric, as far as the railroad workers go, centered on the negative effects of saloon culture—a central part of rough masculinity. It is possible that the temperance movement may have had an effect in that men now drank privately, in the domestic sphere, rather than at saloons, a change that would be difficult to pick up archaeologically, and actually rather awkward to argue.

It is also possible that railroad brotherhood members may have switched to more acceptable forms of alcohol, such as wine over hard liquor. The measure here is the percent of each identifiable alcohol type within the alcohol bottle assemblage for each household. Skilled workers, regardless of nativity, did show a preference for wine and/or champagne (Figure 3), possibly part of a turn towards refined dining and less intoxicating drink.

Unfortunately, skilled workers also showed quite a preference for liquor (Figure 4), although this may actually be an American preference rather than related to skill. It is also possible that laborers were simply drinking their liquor in saloons.

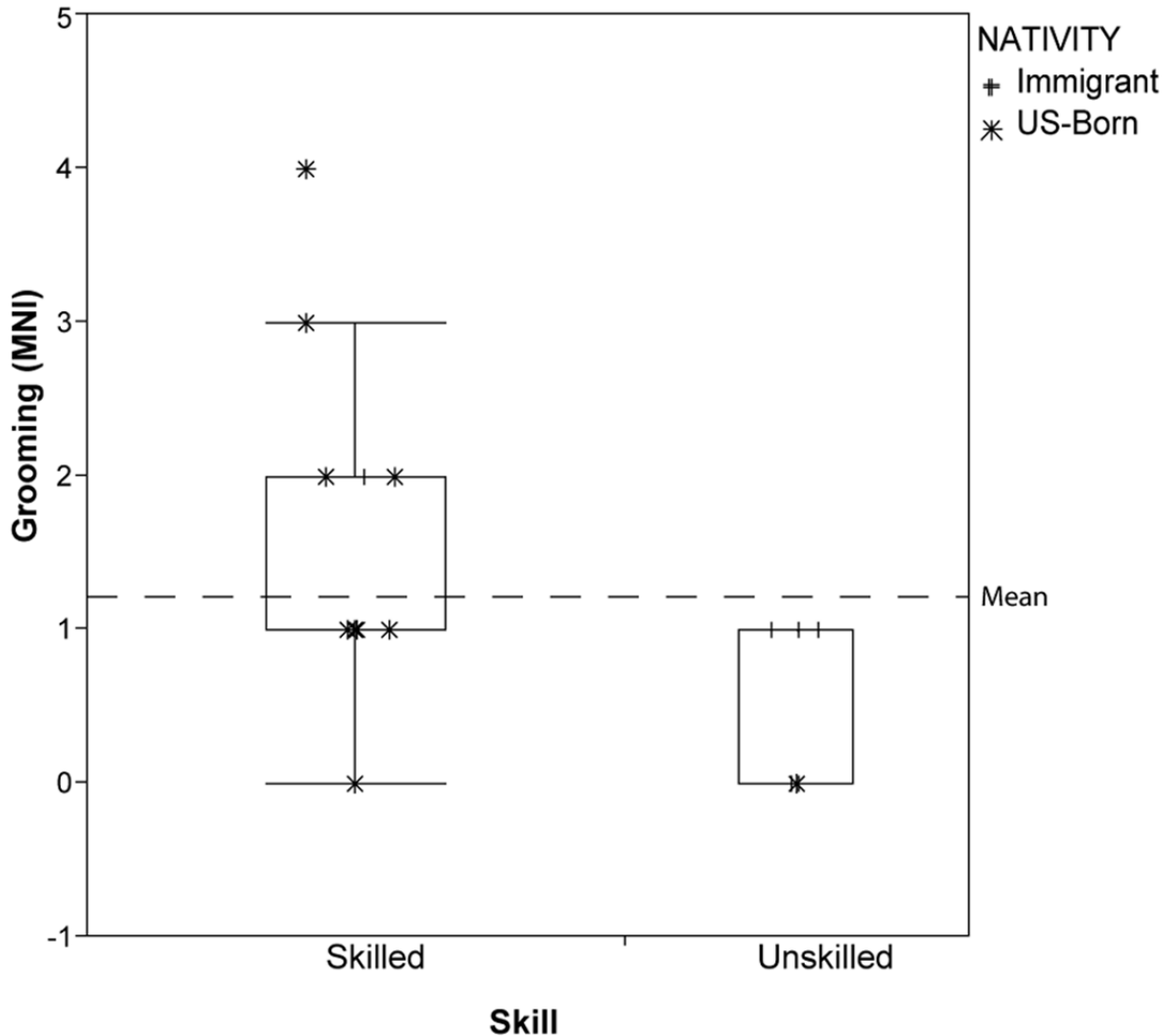


Figure 1. Box plot of grooming artifacts within each household, by skill.

In conclusion, the results of this analysis are not clear-cut, which is probably as it should be. The contrast between rough and respectable masculinities was an ideal, not a reality. Most men experienced expectations of masculinity not as choices, but as tensions. Even middle-class men, as I noted earlier, sought to recover a more robust masculinity by valorizing activities that were perceived as rough and working-class.

For all its importance in the construction of nineteenth- and twentieth-century working-class identities, masculinity is difficult to approach archaeologically, without clear-cut correlates in the archaeological record. Archaeologists have noted that the ideology of “separate spheres” was far more dynamic and probably less pervasive than portrayed by nineteenth-century prescriptive literature (Rotman 2009; Wall 1994). Looking at the discourses surrounding masculine identities highlights the importance of the domestic private sphere in defining this style of masculine behavior. But it was also an identity enacted outside the home, in workplaces, saloons, and music halls. This analysis is confined to evidence drawn only from residences. This does mean the associations are quite tight. But in isolation, data from residences can only tell us so much. Masculinity was enacted in public, in the neighborhood and community. The evidence from households needs to be integrated with the more diffuse neighborhood-

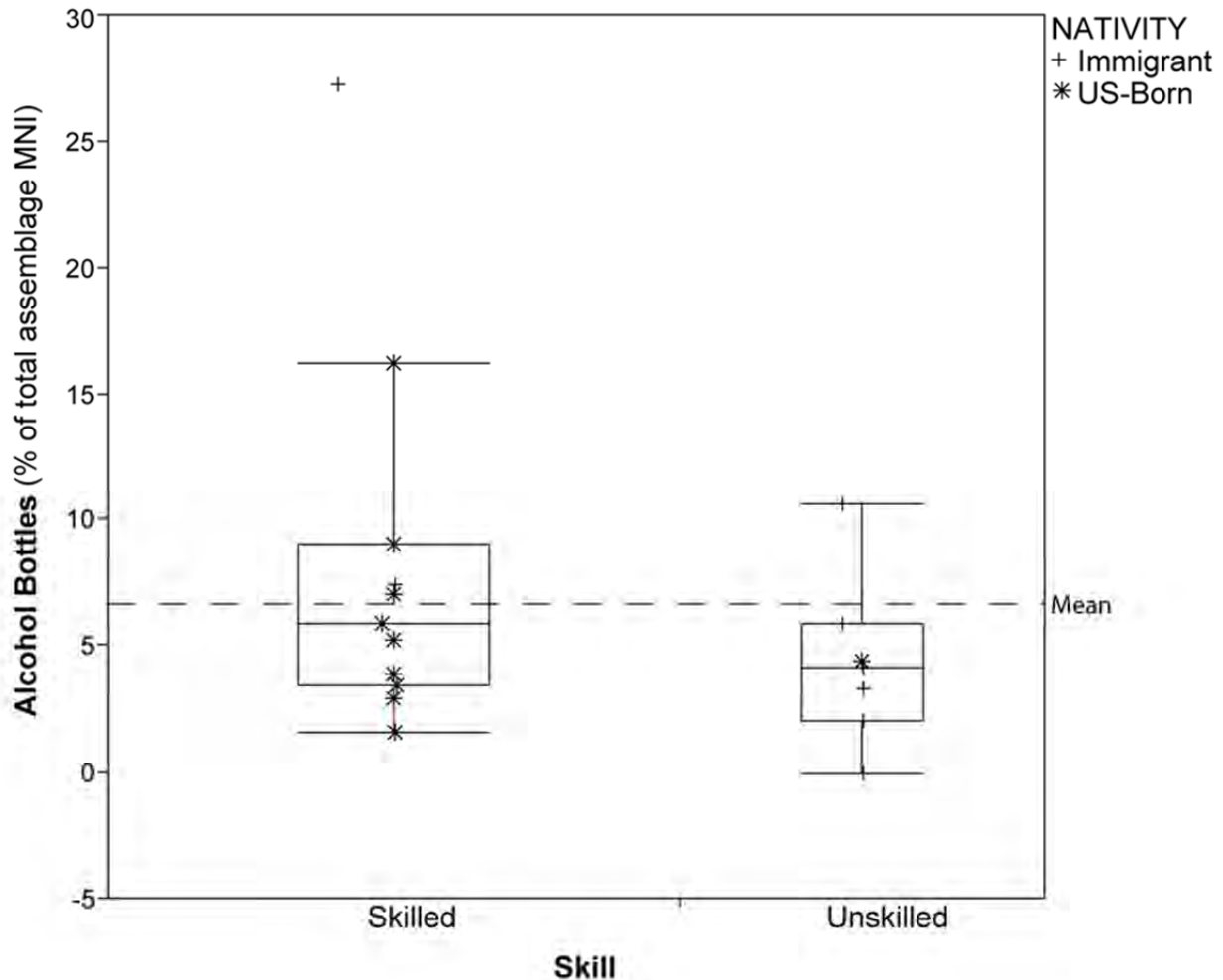


Figure 2. Box plot of alcohol bottles within each household, by skill.

level associations of the archaeology of sites such as workplaces and saloons, which were major arenas for the construction of working-class manhood in the nineteenth century.

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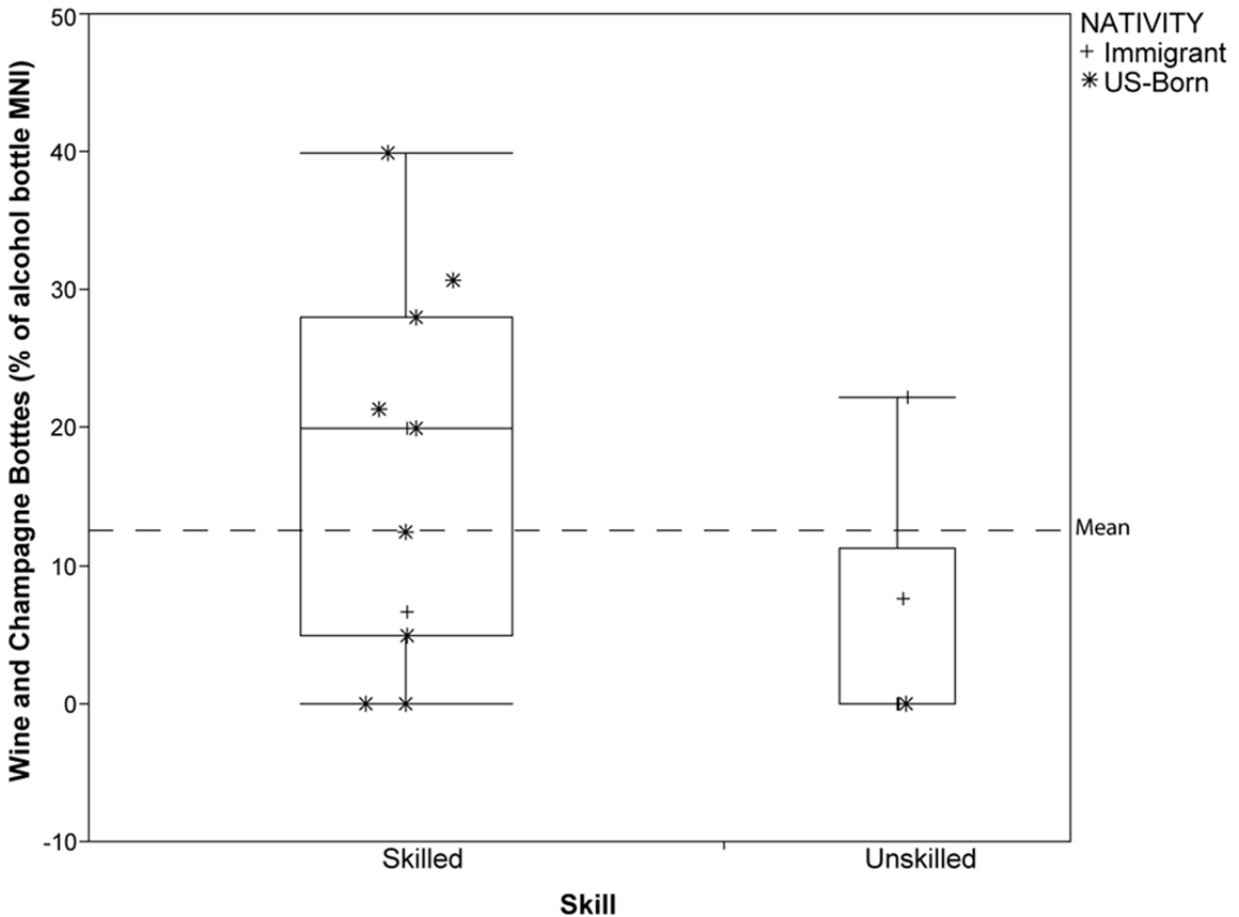


Figure 3. Box plot of wine/champagne bottles within each household, by skill.

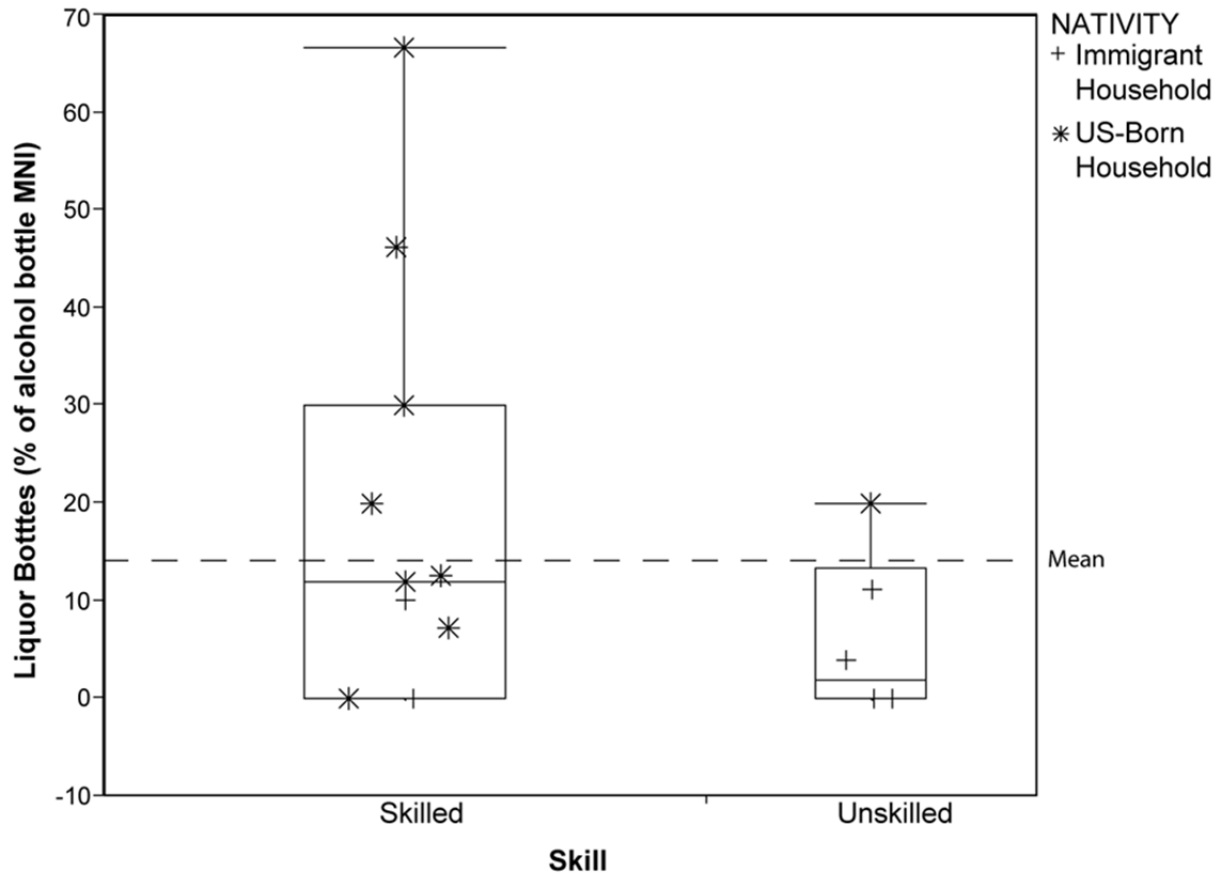


Figure 4. Box plot of liquor bottles within each household, by skill.