

An Era When the City Roared

By SAM ROBERTS

"NEW YORK is now, as it has been since the 1850s, a global city, the archetype city of everyone's future," the novelist E. L. Doctorow wrote a decade ago. It's arguable, though, exactly if, and when, the city also became capital of the world and whether it still is. Nonetheless, David Wallace makes a compelling and appealing case in **"Capital of the World: A Portrait of New York City in the Roaring Twenties"** (Lyons Press, \$24.95).

The title might be a stretch (as is the cover depicting the silver-spined Chrysler Building, which wasn't completed until after the decade ended). Still, Mr. Wallace's engaging recounting of the era as personified by some of its most colorful characters supports his premise.

"It was the Twenties and we had to be smarty," Dorothy Parker recalled, and, as Harold Ross of The New Yorker advised, "if you can't be funny, be interesting." During that era, Mayor James J. Walker, the columnist Ed Sullivan wrote, "brought New York to life in one person"; Texas Guinan regularly greeted customers at her nightclub with the welcome "Hello, sucker"; and the gambler Meyer Lansky assured his colleagues in crime: "Don't worry, don't worry. Look at the Astors and the Vanderbilts. They were the worst of thieves — and now look at them. It's just a matter of time."

Mr. Wallace, who also wrote **"Lost Hollywood,"** largely celebrates the '20s. "Despite the manifold examples of the downside of the era," he writes, "the bad taste and danger of homemade hooch, the lethality of the newly powerful Mafia, the sexual license found in Harlem, the political corruption of the times, and its brassiness (illustrated by both the early blonde hair dye then available to flappers and nightclub queen Texas Guinan's quips) — life in New York was like none other, before or since."

H. W. Brands, a history professor and biographer of Benjamin Franklin and Franklin D. Roosevelt, enchantingly creates another celebrated era, the birth of the Gilded Age, in **"The Murder of Jim Fisk for the Love**



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CRIMINAL Charles Luciano, a Mafia boss, among the figures described in **"Capital of the World,"** a book portraying New York in the 1920s.

his attending physician: "Doctor, is there an even chance of my getting well again?" As The New York Times noted the next day, "The business-like phraseology of the query would indicate that he was characteristically regarding his living or dying from a speculative point of view."

Biographies of buildings flesh out the cityscape. In the latest — **"The Luxembourg House on Beekman Place: Three Portraits in Time"** (Consulate General of Luxembourg in New York, \$19.95) — Debra Pickrel, Pamela Hanlon and Marianne Matthews trace the provenance of the 1932 town house at No. 17, overlooking the East River. The house belonged to James V. Forrestal, the Wall Street banker who would become secretary of defense, and later on to the songwriter Irving Berlin and, since 1990, to the grand duchy of Luxembourg.

"Once a verdant colonial estate, and later developed as the embodiment of refined living, it is today also dotted with foreign diplomatic missions and consulates," the authors write, tracing Beekman Place's evolution early in the 20th century from an industrial district into one of the city's most exclusive and charming sanctuaries.

of Josie Mansfield" (Anchor, \$15).

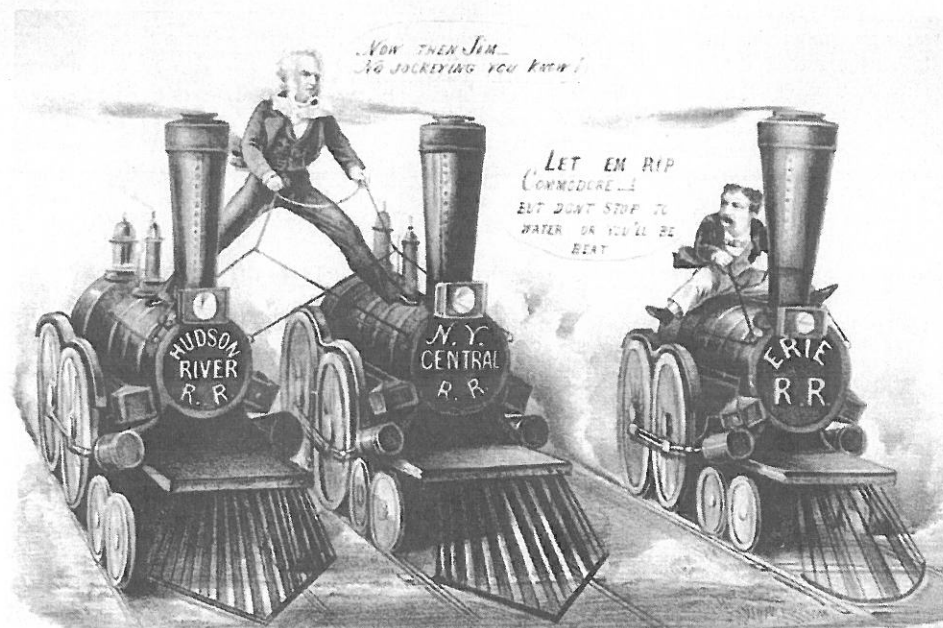
Fisk was the infamous Wall Street buccaneer, a partner of Jay Gould in his battle with Cornelius Vanderbilt for the Erie Railroad and a pal of William M. Tweed, the Tammany boss who, the author writes, "has been testing the limits of the city's tolerance of graft."

Fisk was also the other man in a love triangle with Josie Mansfield, a show girl who left

him for his business associate, Edward S. Stokes. Mansfield and Stokes extorted Fisk, threatening to reveal evidence of financial illegalities. Fisk typically wouldn't pay. Stokes shot him fatally on a staircase of the Grand Central Hotel. Fisk was 36.

"New York receives the news of Fisk's death with mixed emotions," Professor Brands writes crisply.

As he lay dying, Fisk asked



THE GREAT RACE FOR THE WESTERN STAKES 1870

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TYCOONS A cartoon portraying competing railroad magnates, with Jim Fisk illustrated at right.