

Cultural Commentary

Free Time is Me Time

William C. Levin

This just in via your United States Bureau of the Census (www.census.gov/compendia/statab/). Three and a half million American adults (1.6 percent) admit to having played backgammon in 2006. That's lots of people, by golly, but more than twice as many Americans (8.4 million) committed Karaoke that year, and about five times as many (18 million) worked on their scrap books.

Take a look at the data from the 2006 survey of Adult Participation in Selected Leisure Activities that is cited above. Americans are bird watching and working with wood, painting and model making, flying kites and baking in large numbers. But the really big numbers for leisure participation are in activities like barbecuing (a third of adult Americans), reading books and entertaining at home (about 40 percent each) and dining out (almost half of the adult population).

In reading this data I felt uneasy about the range of these activities. Something made me think that dining out and bird watching, for example, don't really belong on the same list. In short, it seems to me that some of these activities do not rise to the level of what I consider a genuine hobby. As a dedicated hobbyist, I believe this is a distinction that is worth making. Before making the attempt, please allow me to list my credentials.

I am a serial hobbyist, having devoted my leisure time to various passions including, but not limited to, woodworking, fishing, sailing, opera (watching, not singing), tennis, golf, poetry (reading, not writing), guitar (playing and building) and rowing. I'm not saying I have been particularly good at any of these, merely that each



has, at some time, besotted the hobby portion of my brain. Some have remained with me for life (woodworking and sailing), and some faded away, leaving me with fond memories and a library of specialty books. I still have four shelves of books on fly fishing, two of which are about fly tying and bamboo fly rod construction. (I wish I could find my copy of *The Idyll of the Split Bamboo* by George Parker Holden. It's apparently worth some money now.)

In distinguishing a real hobby from a mere leisure activity I do not depend solely on an examination of my own experiences. I have also dipped into the academic literature on the subject. Given the many billions of dollars spent yearly in America on leisure activities, it should be no surprise to you that there are several serious academic journals devoted to leisure studies, and dozens of departments of leisure studies in the United States. In addition, other academic departments, such as sociology, also offer courses on the subject of leisure. So, here are my criteria.

First, people pursue their hobbies for fun. Of course, the choices people make are matters of individual taste. I have no idea how anyone could enjoy spelunking, the exploration of caves, which appears to require that the spelunker wedge him or herself into increasingly narrow passages until the possibility of turning around is gone. But no one needs to defend the pastime they love. If your colleagues in the accounting firm don't know that on weekends you travel hundreds of miles to take part in Civil War battle reenactments, there will be no need to explain yourself. Just keep your musket at home. As to the amount of fun you have at your hobby, be aware that the border between fun and obsession is fuzzy. Remember the scrap bookers? In a recent article in *Maclean's*, a Canadian weekly news magazine, some men complained that they had become "scrapbook widowers" who had problems keeping up with the bills for supplies. This brings me to my second point.

Hobbies are, by definition, not pursued for money. They almost inevitably require more outlay than income. By lots. The moment a hobby makes more than it costs, it becomes a business. For most hobbyists, the costs



incurred are not important. If you love golf, you pay for clubs, course fees and lessons, and that's that. But I am aware of people who try to make money from their hobbies. For example, I know some men (no women, for some reason) who love their fishing, and who sell what they can to local fish markets to "defray the costs" of their hobby. In New England the odds are good that the striped bass or bluefish you buy in June from your small, local market, was caught by an amateur. Of course, after calculating the cost of the boat, boat insurance, fuel, tackle, bait, launching or mooring fees, clothes and sun block the honest fisherperson would have to charge a buyer \$850 a pound for the fillets just to break even.

But just because you can't make money pursuing your hobby doesn't mean that someone else can't profit. Selling to hobbyists is big business. Go online to "mygranniesatticantiques" to find that turn-of-the-century sewing machine you have been longing for, or visit Para-Gear or Drop Zone for the skydiving gear you can't live without. Literally. The more popular the hobby, the larger and more numerous the suppliers.

Third, hobbies tend to develop in the devotee a set of skills and specialized knowledge. In most cases these do not have much use in the real world. I never have found a practical application for the movements required to produce a topspin forehand on the tennis court. Neither will you impress normal people with your ability to sing all sixteen verses of the English folk ballad, "The Knight and the Shepherd's Daughter." Such things are the natural byproducts of a hobby intensely pursued. Some do have real-world uses, though caution is often a good idea. In the 2004 documentary film "Word Wars," a small group of fiercely competitive Scrabble players are shown compulsively studying lists of words, especially those employing high value Scrabble letters. Here are

some words that are legal in Scrabble, taken from a list that will use up those pesky "K's" in your tray. They are, dekkko, hokku, kayak, kakas, kamik, kapok, kecks, keeks, kirks, kopek and kukri. Try using one of these in every day conversation and see how valued your special knowledge is to "normal" folks. Even my spell checker has warned me to doubt the authenticity of half of them. Such special skills and knowledge only have currency with others who love the particular hobby. Which brings me to my fourth point.

Though hobbies can be pursued in private, they tend to develop communities of like-minded people. After all, it is near-impossible to reenact a Civil War battle on your own, though I am certain it has been tried. In the age of the internet, these communities of shared interest are larger and more organized than ever. Only a few decades ago it would have been very difficult to make connections with others who, like you, were desperate to race their radio-controlled model sailboats. Now there are national and local organizations just a few mouse clicks away, each with lists of rules and schedules of races in your area. Check out the Marblehead Model Yacht Club (mmycboat.com) for racing most weekends for five classes of model boats.

If we use these criteria to define a true hobby, then we should be able to distinguish mild, leisure activity from true hobbying. When you take advantage of a pleasant June evening to grill some burgers in the back yard,

it's just leisure. But there are true barbecue hobbyists. In fact, they are regularly featured on television's Food Network, competing in large-stakes contests in the pulled-pork, whole hog and brisket categories. They have custom smoked-meat trailers, secret dry-rubs and years of accumulated knowledge that they would gladly share with you, but then they'd have to kill you. And the company of like-minded grillers and smokers makes their faces shine like Texas-style sauce on a judge's chin.

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Left, Spelunking, for fun.

Below, Civil War battle reenactors.

