Leisure's histories

J. L. Hemingway

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To understand the history of leisure requires us to ask some fundamental questions. What is history? Does leisure have a single continuous history, or multiple often intersecting histories? Is a final, definitive history of leisure possible, or does leisure’s history continue evolving though the events it deals with may be long past? Difficult questions indeed, but we need answer them here only in sufficient detail to appreciate why leisure’s history matters to us as members of contemporary society and as leisure services professionals.

Leisure and Historical Study

When you began studying leisure, it probably didn’t take long to realize that leisure has been defined in many ways. Sometimes this definitional multiplicity is frustrating, but rather than throw up our hands, we should take it as a sign that leisure is a very complex phenomenon closely interwoven with other fundamental elements of our individual and social beings. This doesn’t mean we are free to choose whichever definition of leisure seems convenient and go from there. Definitions must be consistent with what we’re studying, with why and how we’re doing so. We must expect from our subject only what it can give. Just as our questions must match what we study, so must our methods and the precision expected in our answers. These considerations should guide us in defining leisure for historical study.

We cannot go back in time to conduct surveys about leisure motivations or experiences. We can, however, examine the historical record to learn what people regarded as leisure, when they had leisure and how much, who participated in what forms of leisure and the meanings attached to them, and the importance leisure had to what kinds of people. The nature of many historical sources means we must often be content with narrative description rather than correlational or causal analysis. But this is a problem only if we expect more of the historical record than it can actually give.

What we look for in the historical record are patterns of activity regarded as leisure by the people who engaged in them and the meanings they attached to it. Rather than imposing our preconceived definitions and meanings, the people we study historically must be allowed to reveal their definitions and meanings to us through the historical record. It is our task to explore and interpret that record. In doing so, however, we must avoid “presentism,” the error of expecting to find people attaching the same meanings and values as we do to words like leisure, labor, work, free time, recreation, play, idleness, or fun. We must not, that is, regard contemporary leisure as a standard for evaluating historical leisure.

We must instead take the historical record and the people who made it as much as possible on their own terms. Encountering activities or beliefs contrary to our own, the proper response is to ask why reasonably intelligent people came to engage in those activities or hold those beliefs. Why did they attract and make sense to those people? How did they help organize experience and help people understand their world?

What we search for in the historical record, then, is evidence about the social practices that constituted leisure. Social practices are coherent sets of activities that make sense to their participants, structuring and giving meaning to their social worlds. Social practices make sense because they are governed by largely informal rules and expectations about how to conduct ourselves and deal with other people. Our shared, usually tacit understanding of these rules and expectations creates the socio-cultural contexts within which most of daily life occurs. We are seldom moved to question these rules and expectations, which are as natural to us as water is to fish. Indeed, one value of historical study is that exploring past social practices may prompt us to examine our own. For our leisure practices are constructed from the same building blocks as historical leisure practices: socio-cultural expectations about the activities constituting leisure and the accepted uses of time and space for leisure.

What History Is

In defining leisure for historical study, we have also arrived at a preliminary definition of history: the study of past leisure practices, how they were constructed, and what they meant to the people who participated in them. To understand why leisure’s history matters, we now need to expand this definition a little further.
Let’s start with the phrase “past leisure practices,” which shouldn’t mislead us into thinking that leisure’s history involves only the distant past. Leisure’s history begins now, at the present moment. One reason for studying leisure historically is that current leisure practices, however new or different they seem, are built on those of the past. Today’s technologically sophisticated role-playing games have roots in earlier such games like “Dungeons and Dragons” along with fantasy and sci-fi literature and films. Strategy games have a history reaching back to the invention of chess, about 600 in India. Many other examples, particularly from sports and games, could be cited, of course, and there is a long tradition of chronicling them in the study of leisure (Dulles, 1965, is the most distinguished contribution here).

For leisure’s history to matter, however, historical study must go beyond chronicling earlier activities and their possible connections to later ones. Chronicling tends toward “presentism” in two ways. First, it emphasizes apparent similarities of past leisure practices to later or present ones, not the importance of past leisure practices to the people who engaged in them. Second, it tends to assume a direct line of descent from past to later or present leisure practices, treating more recent practices as an assumed standard. Yet when people in the past engaged in leisure, they thought of themselves as doing just that, and not as blazing a trail to our present leisure.

Chronicling is also limited by its emphasis on description over analysis. The past tends to be presented as fixed, as being what it had to be. Human agency, the ability of people to act deliberately and consequentially, is thus down played. Human agency is one of those Big Questions in historical study. Happily, we don’t need to resolve it here, but we do need to know what it involves. Human action is deeply nuanced. Its scope is shaped and at times outright limited by many different bounding factors, but there is almost always some range, wider or narrower, of alternative actions from which people may choose. What people understood these alternatives to be and why they chose from among them as they did are questions lying at the core of historical inquiry. Rather than pursue this difficult question further, however, for our purposes it is enough to say that human beings make their own history, though not always as they want or intend to, in ways they recognize at the time, or with the consequences they expect.

Historians of leisure explore the leisure practices people constructed within the limits imposed by various bounding factors. Among these factors are the shared cultural capacities — what Bourdieu (1989, pp. 14, 18-19) calls “schemes of perception, thought, and action” — that create the immediate social world within which so much of our activity occurs, leisure very much included. Especially since the 1980s, historians have come more and more to study how these cultural capacities shape leisure practices. As a result, the scope of what is considered relevant to leisure’s history has been considerably expanded. No longer is leisure’s history restricted to formally structured activities, institutions and organizations, and a few professional leaders and great events. Historians now find it necessary to examine patterns of consumption, property ownership, housing and domestic furnishings, diet, employment patterns, salaries and wages, the domestic economy, slave owning, civic participation, fraternal and social groups, education and literacy, music, reading tastes, religion, and much more.

Perhaps the most important consequence of this widened scope for historical analysis has been a clear recognition that there can be no single, unified history of leisure, that leisure has multiple histories, maybe even as multiple as the factors shaping people’s leisure choices and activities. With this has come more open acknowledgement that histories, including histories of leisure, inevitably reflect the perspectives from which they are written, the questions they address, and the data used to answer them. This is not to say that relativism is acceptable or that we can make history be whatever we want it to be. It is to say that history reflects the angle from which we look at it, the questions we bring to it, the landmarks that catch (or don’t catch) our attention. What appear to be the same events are experienced and understood differently by people who are differently situated, who see them from different angles of vision. This applies equally to historians and to participants in events.

History is about events, their causes and consequences, how people experienced them, and the meanings people attached to them. All this is open to multiple understandings depending on the angles from which we approach it. It is no surprise, then, that as our historical understanding expands, we are likely to find history itself changing as what once seemed certain turns out not to be so after all. However
discomfiting, our best response is to remember that what changes most as our historical understanding matures is not so much history but us, and for the better.

Why Leisure's Histories Matter

Any number of reasons may be given why the histories of leisure matter, but at the risk of considerable simplification they will be divided here into two broad class: enriched professional education and practical application.

Enriched professional education. All professions expect their members to have a basic knowledge of the profession's history if for no other reason than to establish professional identity and continuity. To be a leisure services professional in the U. S. therefore means knowing something about, for examples, the playground movement, the urban reform movement and creation of urban parks, the emergence of organized camping, the genesis of the national parks, and the evolution of professional leisure services organizations.

Such basic understanding acquired, usually acquired during early professional training, is a good beginning. Leisure is such a remarkably multi-faceted phenomenon, however, that a basic understanding may leave us unaware of the full richness of leisure's histories and thus unable to draw on it either in understanding contemporary leisure or in arguing for its significance. Enriched professional education goes beyond the basics to explore the factors that shaped leisure's histories and the influence of historical leisure on the structure and content of contemporary leisure. Not only do we become more effective advocates for leisure, an obligation that comes with being a member of the leisure services profession, but we also become more sensitive to important developments in leisure's wider field. Given how easily our focus can be narrowed down to our immediate professional issues and settings, we need regular reminders that much (if not most) leisure occurs outside those settings while still influencing the attitudes and expectations brought into them. An enriched understanding of leisure's histories is both a good preventive and effective cure for such narrowness.

Practical application. The most obvious examples here are historically-oriented programs and facilities (e.g., living history, reenactments, special events, historic sites, and museums). Such programs and facilities are worthwhile in themselves but are also often vital components in creating a viable tourism industry, especially in areas otherwise lacking in attractions. Considerable preliminary research and preparation are necessary to develop historically-oriented programs and facilities. A surprising amount of what has been aptly labeled “fakelore” (Nabokov and Loendorf, 2004, pp. 21-28) is embedded in everything from local legends, tour guidebooks, and interpretive materials to scholarly books. It is imperative to identify and address such misinformation to maintain the credibility of historically-oriented programs and facilities. Visitors to historically-oriented attractions are quite often very well informed. They will be quick to spot inaccuracies and are not likely to be shy about pointing them out. Thus not only must features of an historically-oriented attraction like structures, implements, and costumes be highly accurate, but staff and volunteers must be as knowledgeable as possible about the attraction itself and its wider historical context. This very much includes the history of leisure, which often holds particular fascination for visitors.

Another practical application for historical methods is the creation and preservation of organizational memory. Every organization maintains administrative files, but the extent and value of these files can vary considerably. By creating an archive, however, an organization can preserve a far richer historical record of its culture, mission, activities, and relationships with service populations. Materials of all sorts can then be made available as needed, for example during employee orientations or on symbolic occasions to reinforce organizational identity and loyalty.

The Historical Record: Sources

The phrase “historical record” has appeared here more than once. It's time to give it a concrete meaning. Stated briefly, the historical record consists of all the sources available to us for historical inquiry. The record will be more complete in some cases than in others, but there will almost always be gaps. Nor will the sources be impartial. They will always have a point of view, and there will always be other points of view. When going to the historical record, then, keep in mind that history is subject to multiple
understandings, reflecting the perspectives from which it is viewed.

Four basic types of sources are available to historians: physical, written, visual, and aural. Physical sources include actual sites (e.g., parks, playing fields), structures (e.g., buildings, stadia), and artifacts (e.g., toys, equipment, apparatus, implements). Some research purposes require first-hand inspection of physical sources; nothing else will do. Written sources are probably the most familiar; they include text documents of all types and all media. Visual sources consist of glyphs (e.g., pictographs), paintings and drawings, and other art objects. For much of history, these were the primary means to record both the appearance of things and events. More recently, of course, photography and videography have replaced them. Finally, aural sources are sound recordings (including voice, music, and environmental). Despite some overlap among these types of sources, there are reasonably clear expectations about appropriate methods for analyzing each of them and about their appropriate uses in historical research. Historians tend to emphasize written sources, but the others may be equally useful and in some cases essential.

There is a hierarchy of sources, based on their presumed accuracy, reliability, and usefulness. Primary sources stand at the top of this hierarchy. Of particular interest to historians are accounts by participants in or observers of events, notably those account dating from the time of the events or soon afterwards. The immediacy of such accounts presumably increases their accuracy. Human memory is both fragile and malleable. Accounts recorded long after events may be inaccurate or perhaps adjusted based on subsequent developments. Diaries, letters, and memoirs written by participants or observers closer to events are therefore privileged over later accounts.

Government documents at all levels are also important primary sources. Some are more familiar in leisure services (e.g., reports from the Bureau of the Census and Bureau of Labor Statistics) than others (e.g., committee reports and hearings transcripts). Recreation and social service program brochures are classified as government documents. If necessary, federal and state freedom of information (FOIA) acts can assist researchers in obtaining records not immediately available.

Other useful primary sources are community directories and almanacs that list businesses and other organizations (sometimes with their missions and activities). These are useful to track voluntary, nonprofit, fraternal or social groups. Remember that such groups may issue annual or other reports. Corporate and business reports are also helpful if they are available, as are sales catalogs and advertisements in newspapers and magazines which provide an idea of the availability of leisure goods and services (see Cross's 1997 innovative study of children's toys). Finally, written materials, movies, TV and radio shows, and artwork from can also be primary sources. Examined carefully, with due attention to point of view and intended audience, these may offer rich clues about the structure and contents of leisure at specific times and places.

Libraries, academic and public, are good starting points for locating primary sources. Many serve as depositories for government documents and other records. Ask a reference librarian for assistance. Do not overlook historical or professional associations, which may have useful although narrow holdings. So, too, do government agencies, usually required by law to preserve public records and make them available. In any case, the more precisely you identify what you’re looking for, the better your chances of finding it.

Readers are likely already familiar with secondary sources. This is, after all, what most textbooks are. Secondary sources may be scholarly or popular, prepared after the events discussed by people who did not participate in or observe them. Most secondary sources are books or journal articles, though documentary films are also possible. A good secondary source is clearly based on independent research using primary sources, clearly identified and referenced, and makes extensive use of relevant secondary sources. When relying on secondary sources, good practice requires providing two or more sources in support of important points and to avoid using any source repetitively.

Tertiary sources are derivative reports at third-hand for which an author has done little or no independent research. They make little direct use of primary sources and summarize the existing secondary literature without adding anything new to it. What use there is of primary sources is indirect, signaled by references including the phrase “as quoted by” indicating the author hasn’t checked the primary source but is relying on another author. Unavoidable at times, it is far more often a sign that the author’s research lacks thoroughness and rigor. Avoid tertiary sources as a a general rule.
No historical source is infallible. The best-intentioned historian, the most scrupulous report writer, the most observant eyewitness: All can and do make errors of fact and interpretation. Historical analysis thus requires using as many different sources as possible while adopting a critical, analytical stance that challenges each one: What do you know? How do you know it? Why do you want me to know it, too?

Genres of History

To close this chapter, it's appropriate to look several genres of leisure history to get a brief notion of what they involve. And brief is all that's possible. Having once recognized the full complexity of leisure, historians responded with a steady expansion of their inquiries far beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries. The result is a growing literature whose richness can scarcely be suggested here.

First, though, a genre of history is simply a body of research with an identifiable literature linked by shared themes, questions, research methods, and assumptions about the factors shaping human activity. Genres aren't necessarily a formal category, though often enough they form the basis of academic curricula and have professional societies, journals, and conferences devoted to them. Some genres are highly specialized, others are more diffuse. Finally, most genres come in several different flavors, between which non-specialists can have trouble distinguishing, a difficulty that appears to be growing, not diminishing.

Social History. Of all genres of history, this has seen the greatest expansion over the past fifty years, partly because so much can be included in it and partly in reaction against traditional history. Social history addresses the activities and experiences of the ordinary people so often hidden from view by traditional history's emphasis on political, diplomatic, military, and economic events and leaders. In contrast, social history examines such themes as gender, race, ethnicity, the family, domesticity, and work. There is significant cross-over among social history's sub-genres as well as between it and other disciplines. Peiss's (1986) study of young working women from immigrant families in New York between roughly the 1880s and 1920s is an excellent example of social history that pulls together a number of themes (e.g., ethnicity, gender, class, technology) to demonstrate how these women used leisure to create identities independent of the patriarchal family structures in which they lived.

Peiss’s study highlights opportunities created by new modes of entertainment and transportation. Movies created new spaces in which mixed audiences could mingle away from parental supervision. Expanded urban streetcar service allowed escape from one's neighborhood at least temporarily and enabled access to commercial leisure centers that attracted people of many different classes. Among the most well known of these was Coney Island, to which Peiss devotes a chapter and Kasson (1978) a short but highly informative book. Rabinovitz (1998, 2012) also explores the role of movies and amusement parks for women and American culture generally. Cross (1990) touches on these and related themes.

Commercial leisure and leisure-based consumption draw considerable attention from social historians, largely because in a market-based society like the U. S., being able to consume and knowing what to consume are important factors in establishing both personal identity and social standing. Some historians (e.g., Hurley, 2001; Nasaw, 1993) have studied commercial recreation’s creation of sites for social interaction, including how the changing nature of these sites affects the interactions occurring there. Though the significance of consumption is already evident in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (e.g., Breen, 2004; Bushman, 1992), its growing importance in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been particularly studied (e.g., Cohen, 2003; Cross, 2000; Leach, 1993). The dependence of consumption-based leisure on one's work-based earnings is an irony some critics have pointed out (e.g., Butsch, 1990; Cook, 2001). A further criticism has been that some consumption-based leisure activities reinforce workplace roles and attitudes (e.g., Gelber's 1999 study of hobbies).

The study of the routine activities and settings of daily life is worth mentioning here as a final sub-genre of social history. By setting leisure in context, whether in the early settlements (e.g., Hawke, 1988) or more recently (e.g., Kyvig, 2002), the analysis of daily life provides vital clues for understanding the structure and content of leisure, and the meanings attached to it.

Labor history and shorter hours. Although sometimes treated as a sub-genre of social history, labor history — the study of work, wages, working conditions, unions, and work hours — has enough substance to
stand on its own. The influence of work on free time and earnings makes it difficult to imagine an adequate historical understanding of leisure without some sustained attention to labor history as well.

In two widely influential works, English historian E. P. Thompson (1963, 1967) identifies the early development of factory-based timed labor as the vital element in the emergence of an identifiable working class. In contrast, some U. S. labor historians (e.g., Montgomery, 1968, 1979, 1993) argue that working class interests emerged before American industrialization, specifically among wage-earning artisans in the urban workshops. As soon as they had the means, these artisans hoped to open their own workshops or to relocate and take up farming. A great many actually did just this, establishing an idealized pattern that became embedded in American culture (see, e.g., Foner, 1995).

This ideal became increasingly difficult to achieve in the second half of the nineteenth century. Particularly in the North and parts of the Midwest, the Civil War encouraged industrialization, larger businesses, and concentration around railroad networks. The capital required to open an independent business increased accordingly. Good agricultural land became increasingly scarce, making it necessary to relocate considerable distances if one wanted to farm. Urban populations grew in cities old and new (e.g., Cronon, 1996). Skilled artisanal work was more difficult to find, wages for unskilled work remained low. A permanent class of wage-earners emerged, followed by workers’ associations and unions. Among their first concerns was the length of the working day.

Artisans complaints about long working days involved their negative effects on family life, church involvement, self-improvement activities, and civic engagement (e.g., Roediger and Foner, 1989, chs. 1-2). These complaints were understandable from men (which almost all artisans were) having realistic hopes of advancing beyond wage earning. For later wage earners, without the artisans’ hopes, a shorter work day was a simple matter of survival. These workers made shorter work days a primary goal, as they organized, repeating the artisans’ earlier concerns while increasingly emphasizing worker health and safety. Labor historian B. K. Hunnicutt (1984, 1988) has traced the growth of the shorter hours movement among workers, social activists, clergy, and educators. He finds a steady decline in work hours from the late nineteenth century until the Great Depression, when legislation was introduced in Congress to establish a six hour work day as a means of spreading available employment more widely, thereby alleviating some effects of the Depression. Known as the Black and Connery Bills, this legislation actually passed the Senate, but business opposition and a shift by President F. D. Roosevelt prevented further action. Subsequent policy decisions by the Roosevelt administration favored job creation through government economic stimulus over job sharing as an answer to unemployment. A number of firms nonetheless adopted the six hour work day voluntarily, among them the Kellogg’s Corporation. Kellogg’s continued to have workers on the six hour day until 1984, though in steadily declining numbers. Hunnicutt (1996) tells this story with fascinating insights into the conflicting meanings the additional free time had for Kellogg’s workers.

Park history. This genre, considerably narrower than other more widely recognized genres, has clear relevance to leisure history and the leisure services profession. The creation of urban, state, and especially national parks is often pointed to as among the proudest achievements of the U. S., for which there is surely considerable justification. As historians have explored the history of American parks, however, it has become increasingly clear that their creation reflected existing patterns of political, economic, and social power far more than is acknowledged in the official histories or in more traditional celebratory accounts (e.g., Tilden, 1968, on national parks).

Cranz’s (1982) now classic history illustrates this for urban parks, where expectations about park users and the perceived need for social control often dominated park planning and design. Parks were often enough located to the advantage of privileged groups and the disadvantage of others, including using the creation of parks to eliminate unwanted shanty towns and even more substantial housing. Rosenzweig’s (1987) study of Worcester, MA, revealed that far from maintaining parks in immigrant neighborhoods, some were actually used as dumps. Worries that immigrants might penetrate middle- and upper-class neighborhoods were reflected in conflicts over the use of public space, with most parks designed along Olmstedian principles that discouraged free play, sports, and spontaneous socializing. Only after sustained political conflict was it finally agreed that immigrant parks would be improved and maintained.
National parks exhibit a somewhat similar pattern. Though wilderness, the frontier, and the West were all eventually regarded as threats to civilization (e.g., Marx, 1964; Nash, 2001; Smith, 1978), they eventually became symbols of American strength and virtue. This did not prevent steady encroachment on any land with economic value, however, prompting growing concern that what was most unique about the U. S. would be swallowed up. Not until Yellowstone was a large block of land designated as (supposedly) protected from development. The Yellowstone effort was successful, as Runte (1997) points out, because at the time no one saw any economic value in the land set aside, except perhaps some local and railroad visionaries who recognized its potential tourism value. The Yellowstone effort was also successful because Native Americans, particularly the feared Blackfeet, had finally been destroyed. Only then were systematic exploring and surveying of the Yellowstone territory deemed sufficiently safe (e.g., Black, 2012).

The Future of Leisure's Past

There’s a touch of iron in speculating about the future of leisure’s history, but the issue is real and so should be concern at the prospects. Put simply, the future of leisure history lies in hands other than those of the leisure services profession, practitioner or academic. Leisure services is an applied field. It does not prepare its own historians, and with limited exceptions there is no recognized professional specialty in history. Few trained historians are recruited to or attracted by the field. Almost all historical study of leisure is therefore carried on outside leisure services, with the consequence that it is disconnected from the field’s historical needs and concerns.

Given this, what paths is historical study of leisure likely to follow in the next decade?

Social history will continue growing, though more slowly. Historians will continue giving critical attention to gender, race, and ethnicity, exploring these in a widening range of times and places. We will learn more about patterns of daily life, domestic relations, and the structure of local communities. The effects of demographic changes — the aging boomers, later marriages and fewer children, population shifts, individual mobility — will attract interest as post-boomer generations become more dominant.

The lines between labor history and social history will blur further, reflecting the changing nature of work in the twentieth century. Attention will shift from work hours to the broader question of free time in quality of life (e.g., Hunnicutt, 2013). Stagnant income growth and persistently imbalanced distributions of wealth may stir interest in class as a research focus, especially regarding leisure-based consumption.

The effects of technology change on leisure will see dramatically increased attention. Accelerating through the twentieth century and then fairly exploding with the digital revolution, innovations in transportation, recreational equipment, and electronic devices have reshaped leisure. Historians of leisure and leisure services practitioners both will need to respond to these dramatic changes.

Historically-oriented programming and facilities are likely to remain popular. Historic preservation has received increased emphasis from government and citizen groups, reflecting widespread interest in establishing contact with human and natural heritages. The economic value of historical tourism is a further reason to anticipate further, if possibly slower growth in this area.

Conclusion

Underlying this chapter is a basic assumption, that the great value of studying leisure’s history and indeed any history is to understand the past out of which the present has emerged and from this to further understand the role of human action in creating our present world. We all too often take the world as given, as fixed. We resign ourselves to making do with what is or finding small ways around it. History shows us that human action has limits, yes, but it also shows us that human action has possibilities. The work of historians may show us that the past was not what we thought it was, but the more we understand the past, the more we can free ourselves from it by challenging the existing in the name of the possible.
Notes

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References


