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Heather Mair ^a

^a Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

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Club Life: Third Place and Shared Leisure in Rural Canada

HEATHER MAIR

Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies
University of Waterloo
Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

This paper presents a day in the life of the Walnut Lake Curling Club. The reflexive analytic story is crafted from ethnographic research undertaken in 18 curling clubs across rural Canada. Contrary to a growing tendency toward individualized and privatized leisure, curling clubs in rural Canada remain sites for shared leisure. Building on recent efforts to position leisure sites as third places, the paper enhances an understanding of curling clubs' construction, dynamism and fluidity. Ethnographic approaches are offered as presenting opportunities to comprehend how third places are constructed, particularly within the changing context of leisure in rural life.

Keywords curling, ethnography, leisure, rural, third place

Explorations of the role of collective or shared leisure in community engagement form an important pillar of leisure studies (e.g., Arai & Pedlar, 2003; Glover, 2004; Mair, 2006; Pedlar, 1996, 2006). Influential authors outside of the leisure field, such as Putnam (2000) and Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (2008), emphasized that opportunities and spaces for engaging in collective activities, while declining, are essential for healthy individuals and communities. I am particularly interested in rural areas where geographic isolation, declining populations and financial restructuring mean that small communities are generally underserved especially regarding organized and shared opportunities for leisure and/or sport. Perhaps as a result, these settings are also relatively understudied. Despite some attention to rural women's leisure (Hunter & Whitson, 1991; Trussell & Shaw, 2007), investigations of rural contexts are limited as are studies of sports clubs in rural areas.

Leisure and sport ethnographers have demonstrated an opportunity for generating insights, providing rich description and achieving multivocality (Gallmeier, 1989; Johnson & Samdahl, 2005; Sands, 2002; Silk, 2005; Wacquant, 1992). Further, ethnographies can help assess the dynamics of small community and organizational life. Using an ethnographic approach, I present an in-depth look at one particular case: the rural curling club.

Because curling clubs in Canada are unique sport settings, my study is not a traditional sport study. The insights gained from this specific endeavor enhance an understanding of collective leisure and sport more generally. Moreover, my approach helps address

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Address correspondence to Heather Mair, Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies, University of Waterloo, 200 University Avenue West, Waterloo, ON N2L 3G1, Canada. E-mail: hmair@uwaterloo.ca

challenges outlined by critical sport and leisure sociologists such as Maguire (2004), who argue the growing tendency to concentrate on individuals and their performance over play, community, power and access should be countered.

This article has four parts. First, I introduce the sport of curling and its status in Canada. Next, the strategy of inquiry guiding the study is provided emphasizing the opportunities and challenges presented by this particular approach. Third, an ethnographic narrative brings the reader into this understudied setting. In the last section, Oldenburg's notion of the *third place* (1999, 2001) is assessed in light of the findings. I argue curling clubs act not only as a "core setting of informal public life" (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 16) in small communities across the county but also as key sites for communal or shared leisure. The concluding discussion sets the stage for similar investigations and argues ethnographies can be used to more fully comprehend the changing political, social and economic context of third places and shared leisure in rural areas.

Curling in Canada

According to the Canadian Curling Association (CCA, 2004a), nearly 900,000 Canadians curl and 56% of those curl regularly (more than 10 times a year). Currently played in more than 44 countries (World Curling Federation, 2008), curling began in Scotland as a winter game played by teams throwing large rocks on frozen streams or ponds toward a scoring area. Carried around the world by Scottish immigrants, curling grew in countries with cold climates. The game evolved from early days on uneven, natural ice with river rocks of varying sizes to become an increasingly competitive, professionalized, technique-dominated, indoor sport played on high quality, artificial ice in clubs and arenas worldwide. Two teams of four players throw or push large granite stones (more frequently called rocks) from one end of the ice to the other. Teammates use brooms to guide the stones as close as possible to the scoring area, a set of concentric circles or rings at the opposite end (referred to as "the house"). Likened to shuffleboard but invariably complex due to the ice and a hierarchical playing structure, curling is a game of both strategy and endurance.

Many authors have documented the informal beginnings of curling in Canada (Creelman, 1950; Maxwell, 2002; Murray, 1981; Pezer, 2003). It was especially popular in western Canada as it followed the cycles of farming life. Most small communities in Canada have curling clubs ranging from one to four "sheets" or playing surfaces of curling ice. According to the CCA (2008), there are currently more than 1,600 curling clubs in Canada. A 2003 national study indicates that of the 1,078 clubs surveyed, 20% were located in communities with fewer than 1,000 residents and 63% were in communities with populations under 10,000 (CCA, 2004b). Many authors have argued that curling is a part of the Canadian fabric, built on a sense of community, openness, volunteerism and fair play (Maxwell, 2002; Russell, 2004). Yet as the focus turns to Canada's Olympic curling potential and high-performance opportunities for athletes, many rural recreation-oriented clubs are struggling and/or closing due to a lack of finances, rising energy costs, an aging membership and volunteer burnout (CCA, 2004b; Mair, 2007).

Strategy of Inquiry

Curling has been well studied from an historical standpoint, but the social role of the clubs and their changing place in the community is unexplored. Raised in a small eastern Canadian fishing village, I knew from an early age that curling clubs were places

for social and physical activities for many residents. In 2005, I designed a study exploring the club's role in small communities across the country. I adapted the research strategy from a traditional/generic qualitative approach, including conducting in-depth interviews and using participant observation techniques, since capturing the richness of life in the clubs necessitated the development of an ethnographic approach. The following subsections outline these developments and the ethical considerations that influenced the design.

Research Setting and Site Selection

Most clubs have league play for members but the primary curling event is called a *bonspiel*. The term is assumed to originate from lowland Scotland and refers generally to a multi-day, multiteam tournament and includes many social events (including meals and prizes). *Bonspiels* can be held for youth, women, men, seniors or any combination of gender, age and/or ability. As my aim was to explore the social aspects of these gatherings, I attended noncompetitive *bonspiels* or are what are referred to colloquially as "*funspiels*." All clubs host at least one such event annually.

The communities visited varied in population size from just under 10,000 residents to just over 300. Their economic foundations ranged from forestry to farming to being "bedroom" communities within commuting distance of major urban centers. The average population of communities visited was 3,651 residents. Club membership varied greatly but averaged approximately 110 members.

In 2005, I undertook pilot research with six curling clubs across Canada's three Prairie Provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Site visits and more than a dozen in-depth interviews were conducted with key members (i.e., club presidents and/or board members and regular volunteers). Clubs were identified with the help of a contact at the Canadian Curling Association, an organization representing more than 900 clubs. The clubs were visited in both the summer and winter months to observe their activities at different times. In 2006, I expanded the project to include two more clubs in six additional provinces. To date, 18 clubs have participated in the study. In total, more than 500 hours were spent in the curling clubs, averaging about 30 hours per site over these *bonspiel* weekends.

Methodology and Methods

My research approach builds on previous developments in ethnography, which while not without controversy and debate, is shifting from its early positivist foundations (Van Maanen, 1988). In particular reference to sport ethnography, MacAloon (1992) wrote, "By ethnography I shall mean, quite simply, intensive, long-term, and face-to-face participant observation in natural settings and the systematic recording of conceptions, discourses, relations, and behaviors of the sports actors, agencies, and communities selected for analysis" (p. 107).

Once the research began, I realized the nature of the setting (e.g., loud, public) was not conducive to in-depth interviews. Since I was trying to blend into these small settings, physically recording notes onsite was not feasible. I relied on informal conversations and used a digital recorder and notebooks to capture pieces of conversations, participant observations and thoughts immediately after leaving each club. I recorded the conversations and observations as thoroughly as possible, including details about the clubs as well as comments or stories that participants had shared. As a result, the verbal exchanges presented in the narrative are my recollections of conversations and observations. Upon returning

home, the digital recordings were transcribed and additional notes were added filling in the gaps and adding additional depth and description. Photography and video were used during visits, and reviewing these materials helped immensely in terms of refining observations and adding details to the descriptions.

Ethics, Trust, and Feedback

I first visited the clubs in the off-season. These visits offered a look into the club's off-season role in the community and gave me a chance to meet key players (usually the president of the club or primary caretaker). Also, these visits helped to develop relationships of trust. Upon returning to the club in the winter, I came to depend on these *gate keepers/key informants* who would help me mix with the rest of the club's membership. An information letter outlining the study was presented to these contacts, and copies were posted in plain view around each club during visits. Usually, the key informants gave me an opportunity to introduce myself to the group at the beginning of the *bonspiel* when I explained the study, outlined ethical protocols including the use of camera and video-recording and invited people to speak with me informally during my visit. While I did not create a formal agreement with participants to share materials from the visits, copies of all video footage and photography were sent back to the club, and participants were encouraged to maintain contact after I left. A handful of curlers have done so.

In 2007, I published a paper (Mair, 2007) outlining some of the preliminary research results and sent copies to the clubs participating up to that point. In 2008, I developed a newsletter/poster highlighting the research to date and sent copies to all participating clubs. All clubs and individuals have been given pseudonyms in an effort to protect participants and to guard their confidentiality.

Acknowledging the influence and role of the researcher in the research process is important. I followed Richardson's (1997) argument that researchers must move beyond attempts to ignore or suppress their social characteristics and to acknowledge their role in shaping knowledge. Silk (2005) provided a discussion about the challenges of ethnographic research in sport environments including what activities (e.g., alcohol consumption) to participate in and how much (see also MacPhail, 2004). To these struggles I can add concerns about being present at events where people were conscious of my observing them as well as witnessing socially unacceptable or risky behaviors (e.g., excessive drinking). I addressed these issues openly and answered participants candidly when they asked if I would be describing these kinds of activities in my research. I made it clear to participants that the purpose of the study was to investigate the various functions of the club in the community and in many cases the club plays the role of local bar. Curling is well known as a sport involving drinking, and although this has changed somewhat, no one seemed uncomfortable or expressed discomfort with my presence in this regard. Nonetheless, as all ethnographers do, I had to decide what to present here. I crafted a story describing a typical day during a *bonspiel* and described how drinks are bought as part of the ritual of the game and indicated their role in the evening celebration. While I was careful about my own alcohol consumption, I was also keenly aware of the need to reciprocate when drinks were bought for me by club members.

Analytic Approach and Presentation

As Spradley (1979) argued, skilled ethnographers gather most of their data through participant observation and many casual, friendly and yet directed conversations or what he termed *ethnographic interviews*. Early on, these conversations were open-ended and exploratory

as I sought to gain an understanding of this new social setting. As the study progressed, I became comfortable sharing thoughts, theories, and insights about the research with participants, gaining their feedback on findings to that point.

As Wolcott (1994) argued, description, analysis and interpretation happen simultaneously in this research approach. After the first year, I began to look systematically at the data, initially reading over field notes line by line to generate ideas about major themes that might aid in analysis and interpretation. Open coding generated insights regarding key consistencies. In particular, I started to see patterns in terms of what people were telling me were their reasons for belonging to the club and how their actions reinforced these comments, the various roles played by club members, discussions about outside forces shaping the club and the community, social events taking place alongside the physical activity of curling and the overarching structure of the *bonspiel* event and observations regarding how individuals related to one another during the *bonspiel*. As discussed below, all are elements in the construction and re-construction of third places.

Deciding how best to share the findings of this ethnographic project was challenging and this paper represents only one piece of the larger work. I present the narrative in an uninterrupted format to best capture the rhythm of my experience over the course of one day. The subheadings provide readers with the main events that structure the day (i.e., meals and the evening celebration). Versions of this story were shared with 11 participants for feedback, confirmation and validation. Seven were either directly involved in the study and/or had extensive experience in rural curling clubs. I asked them to consider whether I had captured the events of a typical Saturday *bonspiel* at a small town curling club. The rest were colleagues, friends and research assistants with varying degrees of familiarity with curling. From them I sought feedback on the strength of the narrative to convey a sense of being in a club setting.

This approach is not new especially in anthropology and sociology (Chase, 2005; Ellis, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1988, 1995; Richardson, 1990), and yet it is just being introduced in both leisure studies and the sociology of sport (e.g., Johnson & Samdahl, 2005; MacPhail, 2004). Narratives, more than merely descriptions of events as Polkinghorne argued, “. . . are to be different from chronicles, which simply list events according to their place on a time line. Narrative provides a symbolized account of actions that includes a temporal dimension” (1988, p. 18). Thus, the process of creating and presenting a narrative seeks not only to describe activities of individuals or groups but also to consider the wider social meanings that underscore them. Further, it aids both in describing less understood places and demonstrates how changing social relations mediate their existence (Chase, 2005).

In addition, my role as a researcher and a visitor for just one weekend is made explicit. As Chase (2005) argued, the goal is not just to report on events but also to communicate the narrator’s point of view and “to express emotions, thoughts and interpretations” (p. 576). Coined *narrative ethnography*, the process allows the researcher and the researched to be “presented together within a single multivocal text focussed on the character and process of the human encounter” (Tedlock, 1992, cited in Chase, p. 659).

I follow Johnson and Samdahl (2005) and offer a reflexive analytic nonfiction story created from discrete pieces of data (p. 339). The events and conversations I recount below took place and the individuals I describe meeting exist in different clubs. The “Walnut Lake Curling Club” is an amalgam of the clubs, and the presentation of the events, individuals and conversations is organized so as to reflect a typical Saturday at a *bonspiel* and to illustrate the extent to which these are important yet changing third places for shared leisure.

A Day in Club Life: Saturday at the Walnut Lake Curling Club *Bonspiel*

Early Morning Breakfast

On Saturday morning, I woke early and walked down to the club before the first curlers arrived. The building looked a bit run down in the morning light. Flaking red paint covered the two-story club house, and the attached Quonset-hut structure covering the ice looked like an old tin can, cut in half and placed upside down. A sign, "Welcome to the Walnut Lake Curling Club Est. 1949," was painted over the door along with two curling brooms crossed over a curling stone. The club was empty, dimly-lit and quiet. The bar was locked up and the large round tables were clean and orderly, with beer bottles stacked in their boxes in the corner. I heard a vacuum cleaner but failed to see anyone. I guessed it was Sheila, the club's part-time cleaner and wife of Frank, the ice-maker/maintenance man.

I set my pack filled with notebook, pens, camera, voice recorder and information letters on a chair. I knew I would be spending about 18 hours in the club that day—much of the time sitting—so I chose my location carefully. I would be moving around but knew it was best to start where people could find me for a chat. Also, during these long days of research and social mixing, I had learned to choose locations affording a clear view of the curling ice so I could watch the games if no one wanted to talk. I did not want anyone to feel put on the spot.

The club was fashioned like an old recreation room and reminded me of my family basement. The cool air smelled of old dust. Old worn but comfortable looking couches were placed in one corner with a television and comprised the "kid's area." The bar dominated another corner and the walls were covered in pictures, trophies and plaques. Ten large round tables each with seats for eight (two teams) were placed around the room. There was a long line of single chairs in front of the glass for spectators.

I looked through the glass to the ice surface and saw Frank dressed in a thick fleece, ball cap and jeans. He was a quiet and rather shy man. He nodded to me as he lined up the curling rocks and finished preparing the ice surface for the coming day of games. I took a quick picture of him through the glass and walked around the club waiting for people to arrive. The air was chilly, and I could smell stale beer and cleaning products. I read a computer-made sign advertising the *bonspiel*. The registration was \$160 per team (\$40 per player) and included Saturday's and Sunday's breakfasts and lunches, Saturday night's banquet, assorted snacks and two drink tickets.

Frank clicked on the large florescent lights and the ice sheets were flooded with light. They were painted bright white with large blue and red concentric circles at both ends. I read the signs along the walls. They were advertisements purchased by local businesses: one each from the local bank, farm equipment supplier, real estate agent and restaurant. Hanging from the rafters over the ice were brightly colored championship pennants. I felt a growing excitement and a bit of nervousness as I thought about spending the day in this storied place.

Soon those curlers unlucky enough to have the first game began to trickle in. Among them were three volunteer breakfast makers. Edith, June and Bob smiled at me as they began their kitchen work. They were all seniors.

"You're back, eh?" June asked, smiling.

Edith looked at me and asked, "I wanted to ask you, is this research for your thesis?"

"No, I'm finished school. I'm a professor."

Edith raised her eyebrows. Bob looked at me for a moment over his glasses, "You look too young to be a professor!"

June asked if I'm married or had any children. They told me about their children. All had left the area. "There's nothing here for them anymore." Edith sighed.

While they were cooking, I took pictures and asked them about the club. June told me she used to curl with her parents and joined the club upon returning to the community to work as a nurse. Bob joined the club 15 years ago after co-workers encouraged him to play in a *bonspiel* for teachers. He noted that since his wife died, he'd become even more involved in the club. He'd even done a stint as club president in the late 1990s. The room filled with the smells of bacon, toast and fresh-brewed coffee, much like a small town diner.

Greg arrived. A burst of fresh cold air followed him in. Fit and in his mid-fifties, Greg was the current club president and chief organizer of the *bonspiel*. He was also my key contact. I had met Greg in the summer when I came to set up the research. When I met him again the previous night, he seemed a little surprised, if pleased, that I had followed through on my promise to return for the *bonspiel*.

This morning he looked harried. His thick salt-and-pepper hair ruffled from the winter wind. He caught my eye and gave me a warm smile but was too busy to chat. He moved quickly to unlock the bar, set up the cash register and tune the radio to the local country music station. A few curlers approached him to pay their team's registration. Last night, I had given Greg the equivalent of one player's registration fee. It helps support the clubs and allows me to feel comfortable joining the meals and other events. As with other clubs, Greg initially balked at the idea of taking money but I think he was pleased for the financial support.

I got a coffee and walked over to Raymond, a fellow I had chatted with a bit the previous night and asked if I could join him. Raymond smiled, "You're back, eh?" and motioned for me to sit down. Everyone seemed to know Raymond and he knew them. His name was on one of the pennants hanging over the ice. In 1985, his men's team went to *The Brier* (the highly competitive men's national championships watched by millions of Canadians each year). As fellow curlers walked past, they offered hellos and made joking comments about too much drinking the previous evening. An older gentleman leaned over to me and said, "Don't believe a thing this fella tells you!" Raymond laughed rolling his eyes and shaking hands with him. While we chatted, he continued to nod and smile to everyone as they entered the club, their brooms, shoes and sport bags in hand. I heard them stomping their feet loudly, shaking the snow off their boots.

I asked Raymond about the club. He described himself as a *curling orphan*, a common phrase among players whose parents were avid curlers. Many have described being left at home with a babysitter while parents went to "the club" or left to play with the other *orphans* while mothers kept an eye on them from the ice.

Raymond chuckled, "I can't tell you how many wrench sets and flashlights I got for Christmas over the years." Such products were, and still are, standard prizes at *bonspiels*. Then he looked over his left shoulder to the wall behind him: "There's a picture of Mom there." I saw an old black and white picture of four slim young women standing together, smiling and holding their brooms over eight rocks covering the house. He looked over his right shoulder, "There's Dad." He, too, was in a black and white picture depicting much the same scenario. Both parents held a legendary spot on the club's "Eight-ender Wall of Fame." An "eight ender" occurs when one team lands all of their rocks in the scoring area and the other team has none, which is a remarkable achievement and one that most clubs record for posterity. Then Raymond told me that both his parents have passed away. I wondered what it might be like for this 50-something curler to sit and have breakfast at the club—*his* club—surrounded by these images and memories.

By late morning, the club was filled with curlers and the atmosphere was festive. The curlers were constantly moving around the club in various stages of dress with their status evident in an array of curling clothing and equipment. As players were reunited after the games and the social events of the previous evening, teasing and curling shot re-plays

ensued. I heard laughter and good natured barbs. I watched as children of all ages were deeply integrated into club activities. They sat with parents or other relatives, ran and played games. I looked around the room and saw no one on their own or left out of the banter. Groups of people chatted about family, work, politics and sports. The club, like a community center, was filled with a mix of all ages.

Midday Lunch

A dozen teenagers and a sprinkling of parents arrived laden with bags of food. They stood awkwardly, some staring at the curling through the glass. Greg met the group and showed them to the kitchen. I sat beside Angela, a woman in her mid-thirties. I asked her about the group of teens. "The high school track club is making lunch. The money helps them pay for a competition out of town." I asked if any of these kids curled and she shook her head no, but she suggested this might spark their interest.

I ate lunch with Alan and Marg, their daughter Beth, son-in-law Harold and granddaughter Jennifer. Jennifer curled as a child but chose hockey in high school. Now a university student in her early twenties, Jennifer was home to play with her relatives in the *bonspiel*. She admitted missing the socializing and family visits that come with curling. Beth was not curling because of chronic knee pain. A long-time curler, Beth said she was learning to use "the stick" (a relatively recent but increasingly popular addition to curling as it aids in the delivery of the rock, much like shuffleboard) and that this would keep her in the game and in the club.

Greg joined me at the table as the group left to prepare to curl. He had two cold beers and gave one to me. I thanked him and made a mental note to return the favor later that day. "How's it going?" He asked. "Are you getting what you need?" I smiled and thanked him for his help and asked about the track team. Greg described the scenario characterizing it as the club's efforts to build relationships in the community.

As in other places, working with community groups helped keep the club alive. Greg described how the club was often used for charity *bonspiels*, other fundraisers such as dances, auctions, banquets and for parties and meetings in the off season. "It can mean more work for our volunteers in terms of cleaning, working the bar and having to be around but it keeps our doors open because people know about us, support our events, use our facilities and maybe even join the club." I told him that I was starting to see strong parallels between curling clubs and community centers and he agreed. "While curling clubs used to be pretty exclusive places, we just can't afford to be that way any more. We have to be more open to the community. I wish more people knew they could just walk in and they would be very welcome here."

A new crew of volunteers entered the kitchen under the leadership of Wendy, a retired business owner. At midday they were already making preparations for the evening banquet. The banquet dinner is a central event in the *bonspiel*. I could hear their laughter and teasing as they peeled and chopped. When I popped my head into the kitchen, Beth smiled at me. "You can't curl because of your knee but you can still volunteer, eh?" I asked, smiling back. "Oh, I wouldn't miss this. I love to cook and it's such great fun to chat with the girls." Beth introduced me to the other women in the kitchen and I talked with them about challenges faced by women members of the club.

As with many clubs, women were once barred from being there at the same time as the men, except to cook. Wendy described how things had evolved from the days of separate men's and women's organizations into a fully integrated club. "Some of the old boys grumbled at first," Beth shrugged, "but change has to come and they got used to it." They told me how young women today were struggling to find time to curl—working hard

to balance their family and work duties with their love of the game and the club. I nibbled on a peeled carrot and tried to stay out of the way while we talked.

The Late-afternoon Lull

After three years of engaging in this ethnographic research, the ebb and flow of club life over the course of the day was familiar. Things had quieted down dramatically. Half a dozen teams were sitting together, sharing their curling stories and the requisite post game drink (bought by the winning team for the losing team).

All day long a small army of volunteers were selling tickets on prizes to be drawn at the evening's banquet. They seemed to enjoy this job, visiting the tables, making jokes and good-naturedly cajoling people to buy more tickets. When they approached me, Kim, in her mid-fifties, said, "It's one for two dollars, three for five dollars, or we'll give you an arm's length for ten." I asked to buy an arm's length and held out my arm for the measurement. Kim giggled and said, "No, Heather. We didn't say it had to be *your* arm! Come over here. Let me introduce you to Bill."

I followed Kim to a table with five men I had yet to meet. Their ages ranged from mid-forties to late sixties and they were dressed in fleece sweaters and ball caps. Kim laughed and said to Bill, "Heather's buying an arm's length of tickets, Bill. She needs your help." Bill, a thin, bearded man in his sixties, smiled and stood up to an impossible height and held out his arm in what was obviously a well-known ritual. His arm was easily 50% longer than mine. Kim lined up the tickets and ripped off a long line. She introduced me to Bill. "This is the girl from Ontario doing the study on curling clubs. Be nice to her!"

Bill shook my hand and invited me to sit down. I introduced myself to the group and talked about the study. They appeared puzzled over my interest in their club. When I explained my desire to learn more about the social side, they shared numerous stories making each other laugh and reminisce about the "good old days" with *bonspiels* lasting into the early morning hours. Bill and Keith described all the work they put into the club over the years. Bill explained, "It seems everyone knew something that could help the club. I was an electrician and Keith is a plumber. We all just chipped in, you know. It's not like that now, you can't get people to do anything for free anymore. You gotta beg them or make it part of their membership."

Bill and his buddies became deeply engaged in a game of hearts. I thanked them for sharing their stories and said I hoped to talk with them again later. I sat back down in front of the windows and watched a tight game but was soon drawn into conversation with Julie and John sitting nearby with Sam, their 11-month-old baby.

John described growing up and curling in a nearby village and pointed out that, even after moving to Walnut Lake, he remained a member of his old club for a long time out of loyalty. When that club had to close due to a drop in membership and rising repair bills, he joined the Walnut Lake club and convinced his wife to join. He remarked that times had changed. "It's not like it used to be when curling was the only thing to do in the winter. Now, there are so many choices and sometimes people just don't want to commit the time to being part of a club. People will volunteer if you ask them to do something but no one will take on any positions."

When I asked how involved they were in the club, Julie said she would like to volunteer more when Sam gets older, maybe take a coaching course for junior curlers. "Curling is a really affordable sport for kids, much better than hockey. And it's based on sportsmanship, respect and etiquette." John joined in, "Yeah, in terms of affordability, this club offers family rates. People complain about fees but it works out to what you pay for a movie every week. That's a pretty good deal for entertainment."

When John and Julie stood to gather their curling gear, they were instantly surrounded by willing sets of arms to hold Sam. He spent the next two hours mostly asleep passed from one supportive lap to another. Every few minutes, Julie stopped to peer through the glass, awaiting the “thumbs-up” sign from Sam’s current caretaker. She smiled and resumed curling. I wondered whether Sam will relish his status as a curling orphan.

The atmosphere in the club was reserved and quiet. The country music station babbled away to itself and people seemed content to relax and wait for the evening’s events to begin. I sat with the group taking care of Sam. Some were older curlers and they told me stories of much busier times, days when the club would be full of activity and the socializing never ceased. I heard that family and even job commitments can have curlers moving in and out of the clubs more than once a day: shuffling kids to other sporting events, especially hockey tournaments; returning home for chores; slipping out to get the weekly grocery shopping finished; or heading to work.

I have learned to move around during this part of the day. Fatigue from the late nights and early mornings, the constant awareness that people are watching how I interact in the club, as well as the concentration required to actively listen during conversations begins to set in and I risk losing focus. On this afternoon, I stepped outside to stretch my legs and breathe some fresh air. Greg was standing with two men in front of two aging barbecues. Beers in hand, they were in charge of the steaks. Greg made countless trips to his truck to bring in the banquet prizes he had coaxed from local businesses.

Evening Celebration

The moments before the banquet marked a dramatic increase in energy. Some curlers had escaped home to change clothes and meet remaining domestic demands. They returned to the club refreshed. Their clothing was casual, but many women had put on blouses, clean jeans and a bit more makeup. I could smell aftershave, hairspray and perfume. People smiled at me and seemed pleased that I was present to share in this ritual meal.

As the games had finished for the evening, the ice went dark and the club was like a small town pub. Drinks, mostly but not exclusively alcoholic, were served and their frequency increased. A happy rising din filled the air. I felt a second wind and shared people’s excitement about an evening of entertainment, prizes, conversation and good food. The smells from the barbecues wafted into the club and the buffet tables were laden with food. Greg entered with a huge platter loaded with steaks. Many cheered his arrival.

People found places at the tables, sitting with their teams and/or family members and friends. As in most places, a club member said grace. All heads bowed and the club was quiet. I sat with Valorie who belonged to two curling clubs (Walnut Lake and a club in her old hometown where she curls with her dad); Daniel, an immigrant from England new to curling and volunteering to help Frank with ice-making; Josh and Irene, a police officer and bank clerk new the area and curling as a way to get to know the community; Susan, a long time member and club treasurer for the past 12 years; and Bev a retired municipal worker whom Susan convinced to curl that weekend for the first time in 25 years.

While we ate, we talked about the role curling plays in their lives. Their answers echoed what I had heard elsewhere: a chance for physical activity, an opportunity to socialize in the winter, a way to stay connected with people of all ages and an opportunity for family members to spend time together outside of home. Susan said, “It works because with curling, people have something that brings them together.” Curious about me and the study Valorie asked, “Do you curl?”

“Well, I will eventually curl in a small club but I don’t now because I’m always away at other clubs with this project.”

“But you know how to curl. . . ?” She persisted.

“Oh yeah, in fact, my students and I took lessons last fall to get the hang of the game and see how clubs welcome new curlers.”

“Who’s paying for your study?” Susan asked.

“I have a grant from Sport Canada and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. They are interested in finding out how to get more people to participate in sport and what I find so surprising is that no one talks about curling.”

“What have you found so far?” Josh asked.

“Well, I think people need to know how important the social part of the sport is. I see people curling and I know the sport is fun, but I think people also need to hear the things you just told me about: about community and family and socializing and feeling connected. That’s what I’m finding so far. What do you think?”

“That makes sense” said Josh. I saw nodding heads around the table.

Greg approached us and asked if I wanted to meet Earl, a man in his late-eighties. Earl was an honorary lifetime club member who, while no longer curling, still comes to share the banquet meal. “Heather, meet Earl. He’s done a lot for this club and he can tell you some stories.” As Earl and I talked about old times in the club, people came over to shake his hand and to ask how he was doing.

“We used to spend time in the club no matter if we were curling or not.” He said. “We built this place. If it was broken, we’d fix it. Did you notice the little closet downstairs? I think they put the kid’s games in there now.”

“Yes I did. Did you make that?”

“Well,” he chuckled. “One day we were all sitting around. We didn’t feel like going upstairs to get a beer. So we decided to build a little extra bar right there. We just cut out a little spot and built around it and we had a bar there for quite a few years.”

As we talked, I thought about the opportunity presented by the club for people to be an integral part of a place that is not home and not work and to be intimately involved in a community place and to share leisure. I started to imagine I could see how the fibers of the club’s walls were made from the blood and sweat of its members. As we talked, a few passersby remarked that they were glad I had met Earl. Earl was a legendary figure in this club and he relished this status.

Greg took on the role of Master of Ceremonies and stood up in front of a microphone, testing the volume and getting everyone’s attention. He thanked the volunteers and everyone for coming to the *bonspiel*, especially the teams from other clubs. Greg began to draw for the prizes, calling out the winning numbers. Everyone cheered and clapped as winners went to up to collect their prizes. The celebratory noise level in the club had risen and it became increasingly hard to hear him. I never hope to win but laid out my tickets like everyone else. My tickets yielded a ball cap from the local golf course and a pack of poker chips. As always, I offered to put the prizes back into the pile for another draw but the crowd clapped and encouraged me to keep them as a keepsake from their club.

After the prizes were finished, people wandered around to see what others had won. I could hear bursts of laughter. Volunteers began to clear the tables to make room for the dance. On this night, music was provided by a local DJ and his son. Lights began flashing in the corner and the club was a dance bar. The music was mostly suited to a middle-aged crowd and nearly everyone (i.e., men and women together or groups of women) started to dance almost immediately. Bob Seger’s *Old Time Rock and Roll* was an early lure to join in. I sat with Dave and Denise, long-time curlers and members of an urban club about two hours away. They told me that they have been coming to this *bonspiel* for more than 10 years. “It’s a weekend away and now we know everybody so we like coming back for a visit.”

Dave leaned close to be heard over the loud music, “I hope you’re learning to appreciate not just curling, but *bonspielung*.” I’ve learned what this means: *bonspielung* is the partying, socializing part of curling tournaments. For many, this weekend might be the only social event of the winter. “Oh yes!” I laughed. With that, he grabbed my hand and pulled me to the dance floor. The people around us cheered and clapped. The song ended. Out of breath from effort and laughter, I thanked Dave for the dance and offered to buy him a beer and Denise a soft drink (the sober driver for the evening). He grinned, “Sure.”

For the rest of the evening, curlers and visitors alike dropped by the table. Some asked how my study was coming along, some teased me for choosing a research project that involved drinking and dancing and some sat down and told serious stories. “My wife left me three years ago,” said Joe. “I’d always wanted to curl and she didn’t so we never joined. I joined two years ago and I have to say, those were dark days. I don’t think I’d be here if it weren’t for this club and the guys I curl with.”

“What is it that this club brings to you?” I asked carefully.

He answered, “Just a place to go. A way to be with people. A reason to get out of the house. I’m getting better at curling too.”

By 1:30 a.m. the crowd was considerably smaller. Beer bottles crowded the empty tables. I had learned drinking and driving concerns changed the tone of many such social nights and most people were careful about their consumption. The last stragglers sang their way out the door and the DJ packed up. Greg and a few others stayed behind to clear and reset the tables, sweep the floor and lock the doors.

I said, “Good night, see you in the morning!” and put on my coat, mittens and hat. As I walked out in the brisk winter air, I hoped for a few hours of sleep in what was left of the night. I still had to record my thoughts and observations and write some notes. In a short few hours, I would return to see Greg start the morning coffee and watch as another group of volunteers started breakfast and awaited the Sunday morning curlers.

Rural Curling Clubs as *Third Places* for Shared Leisure

In this section, the notion of third place is introduced and considered critically in light of my study. According to Oldenburg (1999; see also Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982), a third place is:

... a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home [first place] and work [second place]. (p. 16)

The “character” of the third place, as Oldenburg (1999) described it, includes a “homey” yet neutral place, which acts as a social leveler in that individuals participate equally; conversation is a key activity; there is capacity for accessibility and accommodation; participants can become “regulars”; it maintains a low profile in the community; and is marked by a playful mood (pp. 22–42). Glover and Parry (2008) described Gilda’s Club as a third place for individuals living with cancer and their families since it played an important role as a home away from home and as a site for sociability. Cheang (2002) also identified sociability, play and laughter as central components leading to the identification of fast food restaurants as third places for older adults.

The narrative illustrates the extent to which these aspects exist in curling clubs. The physical layout of the clubs, described as a “family rec room,” conveys a comfortable homey atmosphere. Of course, sociability, especially laughter, conversation and storytelling are fundamentally important to club life. The clubs foster an atmosphere of playfulness with a

spirit of lighthearted teasing and fun. I also attempted to illustrate how the curling club is a social leveler because it is a relatively inexpensive sport. Further, the role of “regulars” such as Greg, Beth and Earl illustrate how volunteerism, long-term commitment and a sense of ownership form the foundation of the club. The notion of being low profile in the community, however, is the subject of much consternation for club members. Participants expressed a desire for more people in the community to be aware of their club.

Thus, these small clubs can be conceptualized as third places. Importantly, the ethnographic approach also cast light on the need to reflect their dynamism and fluidity. Minahan and Wolfram Cox (2007) describe the global *Stitchn’ Bitch* movement, a growing network of locally based and electronically connected third places where women meet, knit and talk. They position its growth as a dynamic response to globalization, environmentalism and technological change. Third places are not static. As Oldenburg (1999) argued, established third places must face the threats of escalating privatized and individualized leisure (p. 11).

The narrative showed how social change was a consistent theme in discussions in the clubs, but also reflected that members of the clubs are not passive. Many clubs are actively remaking themselves in the face of some rather daunting social and economic transformations. The changes to the community were made manifest in the club. The next subsection addresses four of these shifts directly.

Changing Communities/Changing Third Places

The population of rural Canada is shrinking, and more than 80% of Canadians currently live in large urban centers (Bollman & Clemenson, 2008). Out-migration and an aging population are both factors in and results of decreasing opportunities for employment, leisure and sport activities. As a result, curling club members are aging and the clubs struggle to attract young working families, young adults and youth. As the narrative conveyed, the rural curling club survives by operating as a sport club, youth center, senior center, diner, restaurant, pub, community center and dance hall. The CCA (2004b) reported that nearly 60% of clubs operate in the off-season offering leisure services such as community events, bingo and local weddings.

In addition, the influence of changing social values is also felt in the clubs. First and foremost, gender is a key organizing factor of nearly every aspect of club life, although the way gender relations play out in the clubs is varying and complex. For instance, while exceptions undoubtedly exist, ice-makers in all but one of the clubs studied were men averaging about 65 years of age. Volunteer labor both in terms of leadership in the foreground (e.g., the Master of Ceremonies) and the background (e.g., kitchen cooks, cleaners) were also clearly, if incompletely, gendered. Women were predominantly, but not exclusively, found in traditional roles such as cooking while men seemed most likely to be in charge of the physical upkeep of the club as well as in leadership positions. This finding is supported by feminist research in leisure studies (e.g., Thompson, 1990). While curling is a sport known for achieving better gender parity than most especially other popular winter sports such as hockey (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993), the power relations that structure volunteer work were constructed along traditional gendered lines. Noting, however, that many clubs strive for equity in leadership positions (e.g., president, board members) and that many have come far in a short period of time is important.

Issues of accessibility and accommodation are also deemed central to the viability of third places. For instance, Audunson (2005) described public libraries as essential third places, provided they are tolerant and open to multiculturalism. Curling clubs are no exception. For instance, the delivery stick described in the exchange with Beth and her family is keeping people in the club well into older adulthood. Efforts to address issues of

accessibility also reflect broader social changes that must be faced by third places. In the case of the curling club, some modifications, particularly the introduction of the delivery stick, were responses to the needs of the existing aging membership. Yet other examples such as the growing acceptance and provision for individuals in wheelchairs and with vision impairments indicated a desire to reflect and attract nontraditional populations. In two cases, individuals with vision impairments took part in *bonspiels*.

The last interrelated element of change affecting the way the clubs operate in the community is in the provision of social support. Small communities are dramatically underserved especially for older adults and others in need of additional social supports (Standing Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, 2008). The clubs are not just outlets for physical activity and socializing but also provide informal networks of support. The story illustrates how participants described membership as a way to address loneliness and to feel part of something that extends beyond family and work relationships.

Membership provides opportunities to play a role in the life of the club not as just curlers but also as regular club members. Further, this role is supported and reinforced by others. Consider for example Greg, the president and main organizer; Wendy, the leader of the kitchen volunteers; Frank, the icemaker; Kim, the volunteer; Bill, the man with the long arms and long history in the club; Raymond, the curling orphan and former champion who embodied the history of the club through his parents; and Earl, the lifetime member and club legend. Over the course of the research, I became attuned to the ways club members show themselves (and others) and how they enacted their memberships through these roles.

The narrative sought to reflect the on-going efforts of curlers to change their clubs from exclusive, and ultimately threatened, elite spaces where white men dominated toward more open, equitable and accessible community centers. All clubs were open to the community. In all cases, I saw and spoke with people who were not members, including family members or interested residents. Deliberate efforts to engage charities and community groups indicate growing connections throughout the community. As of this writing, two clubs have changed their names to “curling centers” in an effort to counter the exclusivity conveyed by the word club.

Conclusion

Maguire (1991) contended that investigations of sport, and I would argue leisure, need to be considered in the wholeness of their social context. Studying leisure and sport in small communities presents one response to this need. Lengkeek (1991) argued that researchers tend to approach clubs as something to enhance or improve (i.e., to focus on their instrumental role such as instilling democratic values) rather than as representative of social phenomena and, thereby, a subject for social research and enhanced understanding of social life.

Curling clubs are among the most emblematic features of Canadian society, and yet remarkably few scholars have studied them. This research sought to deepen an understanding of this example of shared leisure and to bring the reader into this third place at a time of great change. Environmental, social, political and economic concerns are changing the place of rural communities in society, and the clubs are both reflections and agents of that change. Similar investigations of leisure and sport settings can build an understanding of both their inner-workings as well as the forces that shape them.

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