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Larry Wilson: Theory of leisure class in Southern California

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The leisure class is one in which we all seek to matriculate. Historian Lawrence Culver's new "The Frontier of Leisure: Southern California and the Shaping of Modern America" shows that for our forebears who came at the turn of the last century, that was likely even more true that it is for ourselves.

Particularly for Anglo-Saxon Protestants from the Midwest and the East, their families had prided themselves on rarely going outdoors. A tan was a sure sign of manual labor. Culver, a Utah State professor who gave a talk at the Huntington-USC Institute on California and the West on Thursday, posits that the consequent vitamin D deficiencies of many of these shut-ins contributed to the illnesses that forced many to come here in the first place.

Altadena and Pasadena in particular were riddled with tuberculosis sanitariums filled with Easterners who came to take the cure, which included sunshine and exercise - and stayed. Twenty-five percent of those who came before 1900 were either sick or thought they were. Charles Lummis himself, early proponent of the high-low Arroyo Culture and editor of "Land of Sunshine," walked all the way to Highland Park from Ohio after falling prey to, oddly enough,

Pasadena was truly a resort town, Culver noted, would send home photographs of themselves sitting on the Hotel Raymond verandas, warm in January. When people figured out they could live here as well, they

made photos of their new bungalows into picture postcards and put those into the mail to gloat.

And so summertime eventually happened to these folks, pre-air conditioning. On hot summer weekends, Culver found statistics in Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks records showing that fully a quarter of the entire population of the county went to the beach. Try that today and there's 2.5 million on the sands!

History and historians are about irony, and one Culver uncovered is that while the beaches the county was buying up were paid for by the tax dollars of all who lived here - including an already significant Latino population and a growing black and Asian one - the beaches were segregated for whites only. He also cites the famous weekly International Day at the Brookside Park



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plunge - everybody in the water but whites, after which the pool was drained. And he notes the growth of backyard swimming pools thanks to cheaper concrete-spraying came just as public pools were forcibly integrated. One more ethnic note: WASPs loved to call Southern California, climate-wise, "our Italy" - one that came without Italians.

Our Southern California life of leisure used to be perforce communal when we rode the Red Cars to the beaches or to enjoy the high life at Mount Lowe. Air conditioning, television and the automobile changed that. "We have designed the city so it is very easy to be alone," Culver said. "What are the long-term consequences of that?" Couldn't say. But take a group hike or fly-fish or golf with buddies as an antidote, just in case the news is bad.

Public Editor Larry Wilson's blog is www.insidesocal.com/publiceye.



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