

Giordano, R. G. (2003). *Fun and games in twentieth century America: A historical guide to leisure*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press. 304 pages, \$49.95. ISBN: 0-313-32216-3

Reviewed by

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Mary Parr is an Associate Professor in the School of Exercise, Leisure and Sport at Kent State University. Her primary teaching responsibilities are foundations of recreation and leisure and the social psychology of leisure. Her research interests include the integration of leisure theory and practice and the philosophical underpinnings of leisure's meaning and value.

According to his byline, Ralph Giordano is trained as an architect and historian and has “combine[d] both my own architecture and scholarly historical research into a lifetime pursuit of happiness” (p. ix). His book traces “what twentieth-century Americans chose to do when they were not working” (p. xiii) across nine eras: 1900-1914, 1914-1918, 1919-1929, 1929-1939, 1940-1946, 1947-1964, 1964-1979, 1980-1992, and 1992-2000. Each chapter begins with a chronology of major events of the era, some directly related to leisure (e.g., 1910 -- Boy Scouts and Camp Fire Girls are established, 1962 -- Chubby Checker debuts the Twist), and others tangentially related to leisure (e.g., 1912 -- the Titanic sinks, 1909 -- plastic is invented). The chronology represents a sample of events that either set the tone for the era or are representative of it. An introduction and conclusion is found within each chapter, as are sections on Public Interest, Lifestyles, Entertainment, Music and Theater, Sports and Games, Transportation and Vacations. What makes this book particularly useful, and somewhat unique, is Giordano’s attempt to consider the political, economic, and/or social factors that influenced leisure time, forms, value, and meanings within each era and across eras.

The Public Interest sections of the text serve to highlight some of the key issues that defined the era, segueing into their impact on leisure pursuits. For example, sub-headings for the Public Interest section in chapter nine include: “The Contract with America, Generation X, Gun Control and Hate Crimes,” “The American Workforce, New Immigration, and Racial Profiling,” “The Personal Computer, the Internet, and the World Wide Web,” “Planned Communities: Leisure World, Disney’s Celebration, and Leisure Pools,” “Outdoor Recreation, Environmental Protection, Caves, and Jet

Skis.” Then the Lifestyles section connects the key issues to lifestyle patterns. In chapter three, Giordano discusses a change in lifestyle associated with the development of a youth subculture and the freedom afforded by “the automobile’s addition into American culture” (p. 55). In chapter nine, the impact of technology on the quickening pace of American lifestyles, while at the same time producing a more sedentary leisure life-style is discussed. Subsequent sections are more focused on specific leisure pursuits: entertainment, music and theater, sports and games, and vacations.

One of the dangers in this type of survey book is to cover the surface details over a broad spectrum, without delving into any one topic in depth. In this situation, the rich context is often lost and the book quickly becomes nothing more than a recitation of facts. Giordano avoids this pitfall by attempting to identify the political, economic and/or social contexts which influenced peoples’ leisure /free time choices. For example, in the early 40s “the American economy was in full production mode, and many workers found themselves with a newfound prosperity” (p. 110). However, the effects of the war (i.e., shortages and rationing) were such that Americans were unable to use this new-found wealth on the purchase of material goods. Instead, money was spent on entertainment, and nightclubs, dancing, and going to the movies became very popular. Along with reporting statistics related to movie attendance, numbers and types of movies produced, numbers of movie theaters, etc, Giordano discusses the government’s involvement in using movies to promote patriotism, selective service, and the war effort.

This book would be appropriate as a supplement to an entry-level, undergraduate foundations course, or history course. The book lends itself well to further, in-depth study of issues (e.g., race relations, economic status, political ideology, etc.), popular leisure pursuits, places and spaces for recreation and leisure, etc., within and across eras. For example, the purpose of the book is to identify and discuss popular (i.e., mass) leisure pursuits, but class differences do appear. Students could be asked to compare and contrast class differences across eras and discuss the implications of class-based leisure for the future. Other recurring themes and potential topics for more in-depth study are those of race and ethnicity, their impact on leisure pursuits, and how leisure has mediated racial tension at times. Collaborative research projects could be designed around numerous topics and/or issues raised in the book and presented by groups of students. In addition, skills related to the use of technology could be incorporated into the project, from accessing and evaluating information via the world-wide-web, to the design of multi-media presentations. Overall, I believe this book provides a useful framework for more in-depth analysis and discussion. While it may not be appropriate as a stand-alone text, it would be useful either as a supplement for faculty or as required, supplemental, reading for undergraduate students.