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# In Search of America: One Barbershop at a Time

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IN SEARCH OF AMERICA: ONE

BARBERSHOP AT A TIME

by

Keith M. Buswell

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

American Studies

Approved:

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY  
Logan, Utah

2018

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## ABSTRACT

In Search of America: One Barbershop at a Time

by

Keith M. Buswell, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2018

Major Professor: Dr. Lisa Gabbert  
Department: English

In an article published in *The American Scholar*, Eric Fridman wrote, “The success of a . . . barbershop is more than a testimony to the skills and courtesies of its owner. It also bears witness to the barbershop’s importance as a ritual place where the private and public concerns of men conjoin to create an experience of psychological comfort, social significance, and simple masculine pleasure (1991:439).” This Creative Plan B thesis explains the significant role of barbershops as important “third places” for building informal yet genuine community and social connections. The evidence I use comes from my personal explorations and patronage of American Main Street Barbershops across the country for the past twenty-two years along with a body of scholarly and popular literature on the subject.

I have addressed traditional barbershops as masculine “third places” with four specific patterns which are physical and sensual places, places for social gathering, places of conversation, and the barber’s role as more than just a professional hair cutter.

(34 pages)

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

## In Search of America: One Barbershop at a Time

Keith M. Buswell

Barbershops are a mainstay of the American tradition and have served as an anchor to main streets across the country. They have a colorful history and play an important role as community gathering places for men and boys. Before our society became more mobile, a boy may have grown up in the same barbershop, in the same barber chair, getting his hair cut by the same barber, from his years as a toddler, a teenager, and into his young adulthood. Many old school barbers have cut the hair of multiple generations, grandfathers, fathers, and sons, while standing in the same four foot by four foot space for over forty, fifty, sixty, or even seventy years. This thesis explores the various roles and many contributions of local barbershops from personal observation and business travels across America combined with scholarly and popular literature.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I pay tribute to the countless barbers across the country, old and young, for their genuine efforts in creating and maintaining meaningful informal social gathering places while providing a vital service for men and boys. Barbershops typify traditional Main Street values and traditions. Over the years, many of my barber friends have either closed up their shops or died. Their legacy lives on in simple yet important ways.

As I served as a member of the Utah Board of Education and Utah Board of Regents from 2010 through 2014, I was perpetually inspired by the power of quality education and visionary educators. Rubbing shoulders with each of Utah's public higher education institutions and their talented leadership, led me to pursue a Masters degree after almost forty years from finishing my undergraduate degree. I would like to thank past and present members of the Utah Board of Education, Utah Board of Regents, Utah State University Board of Trustees, and former Utah State University President Stan L. Albrecht along with other administrators and faculty for their inspiration and encouragement. This has been a mind-expanding journey over the last three years, as I have continued to work full-time in the commercial construction and real estate industries.

I would especially like to thank my committee members, Lisa Gabbert, Evelyn Funda, Jeannie Thomas, and Randy Williams, for their keen insights, ongoing support, and able assistance throughout this process. Their collective belief in me and in my research, sustained me. Also, a special thanks goes to Becky Thoms, Alison Garner, and their staff of the Digital Initiatives Department for leading and guiding me through a meaningful internship as I created an important element of my graduate studies, a digital

exhibit bearing the same name as my thesis, *In Search of America: One Barbershop at a Time*.

I give special thanks to my lovely wife, wonderful children, beautiful grandchildren, supportive siblings, friends, and colleagues from Wadman Corporation for their encouragement, moral support, and patience. From the initial coursework, directed studies, digital exhibit internship, proposal writing, and on to this final document, I could not have done it without you.

To my fine father, Dr. Don A. Buswell, for his gift of wonder and wander. He never met a blue highway he didn't like, and he always kept us going by telling us it was "just over the next hill."

I salute you all!

Keith M. Buswell

## DIGITAL EXHIBIT

As a major component of my research for this Creative Plan B thesis was a digital exhibit. I created the digital exhibit using Omeka software. With the able assistance of the staff and student workers of the Digital Initiatives Department located in the Merrill-Cazier Library, I was able to learn how to use this powerful software, developed the theme, framed the outline, did the research, and input the metadata necessary to complete the exhibit. This was a hands-on learning experience assembling the digital exhibit from my personally collected materials from exploring and visiting Main Street barbershops across the country. The exhibit is broken into twelve sections including a summary, introduction, samples of local banter, business cards, photographs, embedded video clips, newspaper and magazine articles, audio interviews, map with a sampling of fifty barbershops in forty states, and a host of quotes and references from the literature regarding the issues addressed in this thesis. The exhibit bears the same name as this thesis, *In Search of America: One Barbershop at a Time*. This digital exhibit represents half of my research and the written thesis comprises the balance of my Creative Plan B Thesis.

Buswell, Keith M. "*In Search of America: One Barbershop at a Time*." Digital Exhibit, Omega software, Utah State Digital Exhibits, Merrill-Cazier Library. Logan, Utah. January 2018. [exhibits.usu.edu/exhibits/show/mainstreetbarbers/](http://exhibits.usu.edu/exhibits/show/mainstreetbarbers/).

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## IN SEARCH OF AMERICA: ONE BARBERSHOP AT A TIME

### INTRODUCTION

I grew up in North Ogden, Utah, a small town situated on the foothills of the Wasatch Front of the Rocky Mountains. I spent my youth picking fruit, playing baseball, hiking, and horseback riding. The halcyon days of my youth were an extension of the strength of my family and our community. In the late fifties, we were a four-barber town: three were part time, working evenings and Saturdays to augment their regular jobs. Only one barber was full-time.

The barber I spent the most time with was Bill Thompson. His shop was in the basement of his small home with an entrance down exterior stairs on the side of his house. Once the door opened, warmth and smells confronted you, acknowledging your arrival at the barbershop. In this small and narrow room, there was only one old-time barber chair. On the black and white checkered linoleum floor sat a row of beige plastic molded chairs with a magazine rack filled with *The Saturday Evening Post*, *National Geographic*, *Readers Digest*, and *Boys' Life* magazines. Along the front wall, opposite the barber chair, was a small black and white television set. As a Seventh Day Adventist living in a Mormon community, Bill did not work during Saturday days but after his Sabbath ended, he worked Saturday evenings. This was the time when my father, brothers, and I generally made our visit. Wearing a barber's off-white smock, Bill had his own hair well groomed, pulled back, and set in place with a little dab of Brylcreem. It was a simple shop where a boy could listen to the talk of the adults, explore magazines, and watch a little of the *Lawrence Welk Show*, a weekly musical television program of

the time. This barbershop was a pivotal place for gathering, a generator of memories, and an important part of my childhood.

Years later, on a bitter-cold Saturday morning in January 1996, I drove from my home in Great Falls, Montana, to the small ranching town of Conrad to attend one of my son's wrestling tournaments. With time to kill between matches, I found the Home Café, a main street diner, and nearby was Tom's Barber Shop. After a hearty country breakfast, I rediscovered the joy of earlier times within the close confines of a local main street barbershop: the smells, conversation, old-school equipment, a gathering place and community hub. Although I was just a visitor in town, I felt like I had come home due to the comfortable and familiar nature of the setting. My experience was delightful as I listened to the local banter between the barber and his patrons that included older fellows along with several youngsters. The shop had an ample assortment of magazines geared towards men: *Sports Illustrated*, *Time*, *Field and Stream*, *Popular Mechanics*, and *National Geographic*. By the time it was my turn, I felt comfortable with the barbershop, townspeople, and barber.

This brief encounter, in Tom's Barber Shop, became my "ah ha" moment, opening my eyes to the promising possibilities of connecting with local cultures and communities as I explore main street barbershops; and I resolved to get my haircut in all fifty-six counties in Montana. Thus, this was the beginning of my research odyssey visiting local barbershops across the country, whenever possible, while traveling for business or pleasure. Now, almost twenty-three years later, I have had my haircut in close to three hundred barbershops, in over two hundred cities, and in forty-two states.

I would describe myself as a sixty-four-year-old white-haired businessman, a husband, a father, a grandfather, a portly poet, and a wanderer. Educationally, I earned an

associate degree from Ricks College, a bachelor's degree from Brigham Young University majoring in Interpersonal Communications with English and Psychology minors. As a non-conventional student, I am completing a master's degree in American Studies at Utah State University while working full time. For the past forty plus years, I have worked in various aspects of the commercial real estate and construction industries across the country. Early in my career, I was also involved with several high growth entrepreneurial consumer electronics chains building stores from coast to coast. My lovely wife, Tricia, and I have lived in Colorado, Kansas, and Montana before returning to live in Utah. We have eight children and twenty grandchildren. In my spare moments, I enjoy time with family, community service, reading, writing, hiking the hills, and traveling the blue highways across America in search of another Main Street Barbershop. My full head of hair began turning white while I was in my late twenties. Now many years later, I still don't consider myself to be as old as my hair, yet this is getting harder to defend with each passing year.

I am particularly interested in the Greatest Generation barbers who began their trade after World War II, some cutting hair for over sixty-five years. Many of these barbers have cut hair for four generations of patrons – grandfathers, fathers, sons, and grandsons. I am fascinated by local main street barbers, including the stories and the sense of place I find in each unique barbershop. Although they are each different, the shops have many similarities and trademarks such as the barber poles, equipment, furnishings, and smells laced in and around each barbershop.

In this paper I argue that traditional barbershops are masculine “third spaces” that have four important components. First, barbershops are environments that involve all of the senses. Second, barbershops are important informal social gathering places where

men become accepted participants in community dialogue. Third, barbershops are a refuge and a place for conversation. Fourth, barbers provide more than just a haircut: they play a role as a confidant and trusted friend.

## METHODOLOGY

I identified these patterns in part based on my personal experiences in the sampling of barbershops I visited across the country with its diversity of geography, demographics, and ethnicity. The barbershops have not all been located in small towns, I have patronized many suburban and urban shops which represent the whole range of demographics. These include women-owned, African American, Italian, Greek, Vietnamese, and Hispanic barbershops. I also had my hair cut in major metro areas such as New York City, Washington DC, Pittsburgh, San Diego, Cleveland, Dallas, Indianapolis, Phoenix, Fort Lauderdale, and others. The sizes of the cities range from less than fifteen hundred people to metropolitan areas exceeding a population of eight and a half million. The majority of barbershops I visited, however, were operated by white, older men in smaller shops in country towns. The barbershops I visited in urban centers were generally located in neighborhoods yet had similar physical and social patterns as those located on main streets in small towns.

My approach to my topic is based in personal fieldwork and narrative, which includes components of both qualitative and quantitative research. My fieldwork is from “the insider’s point of view.” I have been in the barbershops and experienced things first hand as a regular paying patron. My observations are as a participant not as a scholarly spectator. Traditionally, anthropologists and ethnographers spend many months or even years living within a culture to learn lessons from those they studied. They often develop strong bonds with the people with whom they worked. In fact, they often become advocates for and friends of those they lived among. My experience differs from these academic professionals as I have spent years among those I study but it is a study filled

with a multiplicity of brief encounters in very similar environments and physical places scattered across the United States. With the breadth and depth of my experiential sampling coupled with available research of published articles and books, I have found significant patterns among barbers and within barbershops.

During my personal and professional travels, I have covered many miles on flights, freeways, blue highways, and city streets. Have you ever had your haircut on the moon? I have. For the past twenty-two years I have crisscrossed the country in search of America, one barbershop at a time. Across this beautiful land I have traveled over two hundred and forty-four thousand miles from coast to coast and from the Canadian border to Mexico. This mileage equates to ten trips around the world or a trip from the earth to the moon. During this time, I have enjoyed having my haircut in two hundred and eighty-six different barbershops located in two hundred and seven cities, in one hundred and forty six counties, in forty two states plus the District of Columbia, and in three countries: United States, Mexico and New Zealand. In the state of Utah, I have had my haircut in seventy-three different cities and towns. I may be the only person that has had his haircut in all twenty-nine Utah counties. Almost a quarter of all the barbershops I have patronized in the United States are actually located on streets named Main Street.

You may wonder “why would a person travel such great distances and invest so much time and money pursuing haircuts?” Frankly this is not about haircuts; this search is about the disappearing traditional main street culture and decline of genuine social connectivity. You might also ask about the risk and danger of getting a bad haircut. Yes, there have been a few bad haircuts but no bad barbers. Most barbers that I have encountered are outgoing, jovial, and willing to talk about most anything however others are guarded and calculated in their conversation. Although barbers come from diverse

backgrounds, different parts of the country or from other countries, there is a certain sameness about their barbering practices and places of business. Once you are inside, with the old-school adjustable chair, smells, memorabilia, clutter, and symbols of barbering such as interior or exterior barber poles, a person doesn't know if they are in Avon, Connecticut; Keokuk, Iowa; or Yakima, Washington. It is these patterns of sameness that I want to draw attention to. Back in 1871, in a short essay entitled *About Barbers*, Mark Twain observed, "All things change except barbers, the ways of barbers, and the surroundings of barbers. These never change. What one experiences in a barber's shop the first time he enters one is what he always experiences in barbers' shops afterwards till the end of his days" (1871:1). The patterns of barbering are ubiquitous across the country.

The barbers and their stories have become my stories. Besides being an observer participant and active listener, there becomes a memoir component as I become part of their story and as a storyteller, I pass on what I have heard and observed. I have quantitative data on Excel spreadsheets that summarize the name of the barber and barbershop, an address locator: major street, city, county, and state information for each barbershop I have visited. I track information per state and per year. Regular auto mileage is used as a point of reference instead of calculating miles flown in airplanes. The mileage calculations are determined from where my home was at the time of the haircut to where the barbershop was located. Although this quantitative data is impressive in its sheer quantity, my research has been experiential and personal – my hair, my eyes, my ears, my nose, my money, and my time.

## MASCULINE THIRD PLACES

The concept of “third places” is found in Ray Oldenburg’s book, *The Great Good Place* (1999). Oldenburg observed, “All great cultures have had a vital informal public life,” (1999:ix) and “Deprived of these settings, people remain lonely within their crowds” (1999:xxviii). Oldenburg’s idea is that home is the first place, the workplace is the second place, and informal public gathering places are the third places. A strong example of a thriving third place was the cozy Boston bar known as Cheers in the American television sitcom by the same name; a 1980s pop culture favorite. This successful sitcom ran for over ten years. The theme song could be used for many third places, “Where everybody knows my name.” Oldenburg also said, “These places serve community best to the extent that they are inclusive and local” (1999:xvii). Barbershops fit this description as they are both local and inclusive, at least for most men, as patrons are welcome as either long time customers or as someone just passing through town.

In addition to being third places, barbershops are specifically *masculine* third places. Trudier Harris observed, “It is a retreat, a haven, an escape from nagging wives and the cares of the world. It is a place where men can be men” (1979:112-118). In James Twitchell’s book, *Where Men Hide*, barbershops are noted as one of several hiding places for men. This book discusses places where men go to escape, relax, find comfort, and associate with friends and other men. These include the deer camp, the fraternal lodge, the garage, the gym, the barbershop, and the office. Regarding barbershops specifically, Twitchell writes, “The barbershop is a place where all men—well, almost all men—are treated as equals...you drop by, you wait your turn, you chat a bit, you get your hair cut, and you pay. You never complain” (2006:105). Being equals, as men needing haircuts,

levels the social playing field.

The old saying of finding “a home away from home,” reflects the need for third places—that is, social interaction in places other than home and work. Throughout his book Oldenburg discusses the impact, generally negative in his view, of the flight to the suburbs and decaying inner cities as part of his understanding of a declining sense of community. He argues that many third places have disappeared over time as urban sprawl, suburban living, and social media have impacted main streets. For the past forty years, as regional malls and super-sized power shopping centers have dotted the country, a new breed of businesses prospered as franchised or corporately-owned unisex haircutting retail shops. Names of some of these chain operations include Master Cuts, Super Cuts, Great Clips, and Fantastic Sam’s. In these shops, a high percentage of the haircutters are young women who consider themselves more as stylists not barbers. Everything is orderly and aligns with the corporate protocol for design, furnishings, operations, and cleanliness; yet, in my opinion, they miss the mark as a manly retreat and fortress. There are thousands of these retail storefronts in malls and sterile suburban strip centers. During the years of these growth concepts, the number of traditional and locally owned and operated barbershops has declined. It is indeed true that main street barbershops have been disappearing. Hunter reports:

After World War II the number of shops increased again, so that by 1948 there were approximately 92,000 shops. By 1967, the number had climbed to 112,000. In the 1970s, however, that began to drop sharply. Between 1972 and 1977 alone, the Bureau of the Census reported that the number of barbershops declined 25%. From 1972 to 1990, a total of 108,168 barbers died, retired, or went into another trade. In those same years, 45,772 barbershops closed forever. According to the National Association of Barber Schools, there were only 62,507 shops left by 1990. (1996:118)

From estimates from DataUSA, the number of barbershops today is in the range of fifty

seven thousand. Taking into consideration the substantial population growth during that period, this is a huge decline for barbershops. Other third places have also declined. Putnam, for example, in his book *Bowling Alone*, discusses drastic membership declines during that same time frame in civic clubs and professional associations for the medical and legal professions (Putnam 2000). Yet barbershops continue to play an important role in society by providing what I am calling a “masculine third space.” The pattern of men gathering in a place to get a haircut while grabbing tidbits of gossip and feeling a connection with the community is one that has brought value and enjoyment to men for generations and that continues today. Barbershops are men’s perpetual third places for gathering, communicating, and connecting.

Most men are creatures of habit. The search for their chosen barbershop is not arbitrary or capricious. Once an acceptable barber or barbershop has been located, repetition and consistency come into play as the patron generally stays committed to the same shop for years, often for generations; men don’t shop barbershops like shoe stores. If new to an area they may try a few different shops but once satisfied, they stay put and return month after month to the same place and the same barber. Patrons declare their allegiance and personal ownership by touting, “He is my barber; this is my barbershop.”

My earliest experience with barbershops as a masculine third space was in Bill’s Barber Shop. This memory includes sitting high up on the “board” which bridged the gap across the arms of the barber chair, so the barber could elevate the toddler or small boy for easier reach; these young patrons were often flanked by their mothers for safety and emotional security purposes. It was a rite of passage for a boy to grow tall enough to have the “board” removed and be able to sit in the regular barber chair seat. Bill would still need to pump the pedal to raise the chair up until additional growth and inches came into

play. It was as if you grew up in the barber chair from being a toddler, a teenager, and into adulthood. On the Internet, among a number of barbershop photos, I found a barbershop placard, which illustrates this point, “The Barbershop...Where Boys Become Men.”

Traditionally, barbershops have been segregated by sex and this segregation remains important. Men and women are drawn to separate places for hair cutting services. Although I have patronized women-owned barbershops and had my haircut by many women barbers, I have never seen a woman actually getting a haircut in a barbershop. Mic Hunter notes:

A barbershop is a place for men. It is important to understand that periodically separating the sexes in this way does not necessarily lead to sexism. Males (and females) need a place where they can be alone with their own gender. In America, the barbershop (and the beauty parlor) have traditionally been places where such bonding could take place. You may have noticed how often a barbershop and a beauty parlor exist near one another yet maintain a distinct separateness. (1996:33)

Men enjoy the separation and privacy away from women. Eric Fridman, in an article published in *The American Scholar*, emphasizes the importance of barbershops as a place for men. He writes:

The success of a ... Barbershop is more than a testimony to the skills and courtesies of its owner. It also bears witness to the barbershop's importance as a ritual place where the private and public concerns of men conjoin to create an experience of psychological comfort, social significance, and simple masculine pleasure. (1991:439)

In my opinion, Fridman's succinct description of the barbershop experience for men is accurate and insightful. James Twitchell compares women's hair salons to barbershops somewhat negatively, saying “The barbershop is not about poodle grooming, it's about male camaraderie...The American barbershop offered a refuge from the gaze of women. It was a retreat, not a launching pad” (2006:117).

All three of these authors emphasize the importance of barbershops as masculine third spaces.

Oldenburg concludes his book by lamenting the lack of masculine third spaces: “Male bonding and male territory are both declining in American society. In the private and public sectors, few places remain that communicate a clear impression of masculinity” (1999:239). The traditional old-time barbershops that still exist continue to produce a climate of masculinity and male bonding. Twitchell adds, “the old barbershop was really not about the haircut at all...it was about men feeling at ease with other men” (2006:117). My experience would indicate that the differences between a franchised mall unisex haircutter and a main street barbershop is that a mall shop is not a destination or third place for men to gather to chat and in this chain-ized culture, the difference is not necessarily the quality of the haircut but often the quality of the conversation and the lack of a real sense of community. A man or boy is the next number up, not a regular patron with personal ties to the individual cutting their hair, as is the case in the more classical barbershops.

## BARBERSHOP PATTERNS

### PATTERN #1: BARBERSHOPS AS SENSUAL AND PHYSICAL PLACES

Although there is no cookie-cutter layout or design for barbershops, one of the major similarities from shop to shop across the country, regardless of location, whether in rural farm towns, suburbs, or neighborhoods of large metropolitan cities is the physical aromas, sights, and sounds. Barbershops are sensuous hubs that create strong memories due to the multiple senses involved with each visit – sight, sound, touch, smell, and with the richness of the overall experience, you can almost taste it. Due to the sensual nature of these “third places,” the physical environment itself reintroduces the barbershop to the customer upon each return trip as a non-threatening, safe haven, almost like returning home after a lengthy absence. Stephan Dohanos was the artist of the painting entitled “Barber Getting Haircut.” It was the cover illustration for *The Saturday Evening Post* edition of January 26, 1946. The physical conditions and characteristics in his painting are timeless from that era to those still found in main street barbershops today. The visual vibrancy within a shop includes the antique barber chair, the rotating barber pole (one of the most recognizable branding images in society), large mirrors, combs, brushes, scissors, razors, hair tonic containers, neck dusters, barber apron, customer cape, patron seating, black and white linoleum floors, array of magazines, and miscellaneous barber memorabilia. Sounds within a barbershop are intermittent yet are ongoing such as the electric clippers, scissors, hot shaving cream dispenser, traditional chair moving up or down, vacuum for final cut hair cleanup, and patron’s playful jesting. In some shops, a radio or television is on providing other background noise. The sense of touch comes into play as the barber positions the patron’s head as the haircut proceeds, cuts the hair,

shaves the beard, and applies the finishing touches with tonics.

Smell is one of the most powerful senses and is closely tied to our memories and emotions. As I consider the strongest childhood memories tied to my sense of smell, three come to mind quickly: my maternal grandfather's dairy farm with the pungent smell of cow manure which welcomed us to the country, my mother's warm homemade wheat bread coming out of the oven which welcomed us home from school, and the crisp smell of a fresh cut Christmas tree filled our front room which welcomed us to the holidays. Another powerful smell from my youth but one that has continued throughout my life, with its associated emotions and memories, is the unique smells of a barbershop. Even if a man was asked to close his eyes before opening the door to a barbershop, once inside there would be no doubt of where he would be with the ripe smells of the barbering trade welcoming him into the confines of this manly destination.

Barbershops are a physical place that draws on the senses and on tradition. During a trip to the Washington DC area, I carved out time to visit Delaware. Along with enjoying the beautiful countryside and coastline, I stopped for a haircut from a local barber to continue my quest. I located a shop named Wayne & Sammy's Barber Shop in downtown Dover. After parking on the street close by, I bounced up the stairs and briskly opened the front door. I provided quite a shock to Sammy, the African American barber. His initial response to this white-haired white man invading his all black shop was, "What do you want?" I meekly replied, "Just a haircut." So, he pointed to the back of the small shop and told me to take a seat. As I sat and glanced around, using all my senses, the smells and physical characteristics were similar to other barbershops I'd visited across the country. Geography outside the shops vary but the environment inside the shops parallel each other. On this visit, I startled the barber but if I returned for another haircut,

I am confident it would be a simple welcome without much fanfare as just another paying customer. Sammie gave me a good haircut, and I was on my way. Dover, Delaware is a long way from Conrad, Montana; in fact, approximately 2,225 miles. And, although the cultures and climates differ greatly, the physical barbershop and the smells, sights, and other experiential dimensions associated with the haircut experiences were very comparable, as illustrated by my experience in this African American barbershop.

## PATTERN #2: A MASCULINE SOCIAL GATHERING PLACE

Oldenburg observes: “On many days, half the trade in any of the three local barber shops never spent a dime, but merely stopped in to swap fish stories, glance through the latest magazines, and enjoy the sweep of a large electric fan and the pleasant tonsorial odors” (1999:110). This has certainly been true in my experience. For example, just a few minutes after eight on a summer morning in 2010, I dropped in to Tom’s Clip Joint in Hurricane, Utah. I hoped and thought that I would be the first customer of the day but to my surprise, Tom already had four men in his shop, one sitting in the barber chair and the other three in the regular customer chairs. When I stuck my head into the shop, I asked how long of a wait should I expect. Quickly the man in the barber chair stood up and the others said they were not getting a haircut but just dropped by to “chew the fat with the fellas” to start their day. It was exactly as Oldenburg notes: “The waiting seats a barber has to offer were not intended for the use of noncustomers, but that was often their major use” (1999:204). This was one of the Main Street gathering spots like the corner café or gas station where men could chat and have their morning routine of touching base with other men in an informal and safe social setting. In regard to this barbershop, it probably helped when the men were talking not only with their old friend Tom the barber; they were also talking with their mayor. This was an easy forum to discuss local or national current events and political issues. No one was there to get a haircut but me.

During my personal journeys, I have seen this happening in various barbershops across the country. In Cut Bank, Montana, I stopped in to get a haircut at Jack’s Barber Shop on Main Street. It was early on a weekday morning. There was a patron already in the barber chair talking with Jack. When I walked in, the man got out of the chair saying

he had just stopped by for a quick visit. They finished their conversation and the other man was gone. I have no idea if their conversation was brief or if they had been talking for some length. Due to the ease of the situation, what I did conclude was this was somewhat of a regular occurrence not just a fleeting brief encounter. The barbershop was certainly a regular connecting point and gathering place for these men. This small quaint old shop was a classic with black and white checkered linoleum floor tile, old school barber chair, antique barbershop memorabilia on shelves, and hanging on the wall. This became a memorable haircut as this older barber was a rookie and had only been cutting hair for a year; previously he worked as a forklift operator in Southern California. All the while discussing his background, he continued pushing his electric clippers up and down my head in an unusually aggressive manner as if he was driving a forklift in a busy warehouse. It didn't take long, and it was over. He spun me around and had me look into the large mirror only to see a very short haircut. Later when I returned from my brief trip, my wife and children, who often rated my haircuts, were shocked to see the shortness of my hair and the poor quality of the haircut. In good humor, they suggested that we switch the name from Cut Bank, Montana to "Cut Bad," Montana.

Even with differing geographic locations across the country, the consistency of barbershops as masculine third places is quite revealing. Men come for one of two things: a haircut or social interaction and on some days, get both.

### PATTERN #3: THE CURRENCY IS TALK AND THE TALK IS GOOD

Barbershops act as a bunker of sorts where men can be open and free to discuss the issues of the day or remain quiet as a silent yet listening participants. The talk is not nasty or critical; it usually is just men being men talking sports, hunting, cars, weather, local and national politics. As Vince Staten stated, “I want a barbershop, a community of men. ... where the currency is talk. You learn more in the barbershop than you ever learn in the newspaper. The barbershop is the community center in many places. That community may be an entire small town or a neighborhood. Or it may just be a community of like-minded folks” (2001:13-14). Barbershops are breeding grounds for discussions and social interchange.

Finding a neutral place, a safe harbor, where men feel a sense of independence and social equality, lacking in economic pressures, provides protection and a healthy environment for open communication and the exchange of individual ideas. In shops that take no appointments, titles and income levels do not dictate priority or preference, as it does not matter if you are the banker, business owner, custodian, farmer, or truck driver, you wait your turn and are part of the community of patrons. Oldenburg notes, “Third places exist on neutral ground and serve to level their guests to a condition of social equality. Within these places, conversation is the primary activity and major vehicle for the display and appreciation of human personality and individuality” (1999:42). By way of an example, in 2011, I found a local barbershop just off Main Street in Durant, Oklahoma. This was a tiny dusty shop, one chair, one barber with stacks of old magazines in piles scattered around the shop. It felt more like I was visiting a cluttered antique store. Barber Doyle welcomed me into his shop. As we got acquainted, our

conversation grew into a more serious discussion of national politics and religion; both topics often avoided in barbershops. We agreed upon certain things yet respectfully disagreed upon others. As two individuals with differing personalities, backgrounds, and opinions, we were able to share a relatively brief yet meaningful and brisk connection.

Oldenburg provides this insight:

Neutral ground provides the place and leveling sets the stage for the cardinal and sustaining activity of third places everywhere. That activity is conversation. Nothing more clearly indicates a third place than that the talk there is good; that it is lively, ... colorful, and engaging. The joys of association in third places may initially be marked by smiles and twinkling eyes, by hand-shaking and back slapping, but they proceed and are maintained in pleasurable and entertaining conversation. (1999:26)

From my experience I am convinced that the barber, the patron, and those waiting for their turn, all benefit from the neutrality and non-judgmental conversation. As Oldenburg observed, “The game is conversation and the third place is its home court” (1999:31). One of the old-time Cache Valley barbers, Monte Freeman, upon his retirement after 65 years of barbering said, “You become very, very close. I enjoyed very much before taking appointments when the shop was first-come first-service because you had the talk going all the time. You had the guys telling stories, and it was a gathering place” (Zsiray: 2017). I have found lively jesting and brisk conversation, a culture of communication, and male bonding from shop to shop. Often the barber serves as the comedian telling the stories or as the facilitator getting customers or men just dropping by to lead the way in generating the dialogue. Oldenburg suggests a theme of entertainment as an essential part of the third places’ experience:

In third places, the entertainment is provided by the people themselves. The sustaining activity is conversation, which is variously passionate and light-hearted, serious and witty, informative and silly. And in the course of it, acquaintances become personalities and personalities become true characters—unique in the whole world and each adding richness to our lives. (1999:xxii)

In the summer of 2005, I needed a haircut and decided to travel to Chubbuck, Idaho (near Pocatello) to accomplish the task. Lynn's Barber Shop had a handful of customers, both old and young, patiently waiting their turn. Lynn told me it could be a long wait, but I told him it wasn't a problem for me. This traditional barbershop, a refuge of sorts, was a one barber, two-chair shop filled with local banter. When he was almost finished with an older man in the barber chair, Lynn spun him around toward the large mirror behind the chair and asked, "How does it look?" One of the other patrons quickly chimed in by saying, "Isn't that like a barber, to ask the customer if the haircut is acceptable when he hasn't given the man his glasses back?" With a straight face and without hesitation, Lynn responded, "I only learned two things in barber school. First, never say 'oops' out loud and second, never give the customer his glasses back until you get his money." In Chubbuck, while his customers basked in the banter, the barber was the entertainment and storyteller. Although there is no memory of the quality of the haircut, the experience endures due to the richness of the story and the story is good. In my journeys, I often share this particular story with other barbers; they all chuckle and identify with the sentiments.

#### PATTERN #4: THE BARBER'S ROLE – MORE THAN JUST A BARBER

The personality and caring nature of a local barber carries with it the opportunity for the barber himself to become a trusted confidant and friend. Hunter explains,

A barber is many things to his customer. He is political commentator; he is sports and news reporter. He hears confessions. He gives advice. For some he is the father they never had, or a reminder of the father that has passed on. The touch a man receives at the barbershop may be the one physical contact, other than a handshake, that he will every experience from another man. (1996:27)

Not only the practices of the barber or the physical characteristics of the barbershop itself but the man-to-man relationship over a long period of time gives both the patron and the barber insights into each other's lives. Staten parallels Hunter in his assessment of the roles a barber plays in the life of his customer:

Barbers over the years have been confidants, friends, father figures. They've supplied us with news, gossip, and corny jokes. And, oh yeah, they've cut our hair. How do you replace something like that in a culture? Maybe some people are content to have good-looking hair and an empty soul, but for me the character of the barbershop is the most important thing about it. A good haircut has very little to do with a good barbershop. (2001:171)

Seasoned barbers develop lasting relationships with their customers, often for generations, and miss the friendship and conversation upon retirement. A retired barber in my town of Pleasant View, Utah, told me he misses the people the most. He kept his barber chair and has it set up in his garage and still cuts hair for some of his old buddies. There are barbers that would maintain that they know their patrons better than the spouses. From his travels photographing barbershops and interviewing barbers, Hunter shares:

When one barber learned that I make my living not as a photographer but as a psychotherapist, he said that explained my interest in barbers. He observed, "We are in the same line of work. We both get paid to listen to people's problems. I carry other people's pain the same as you do, son. I just also give them a haircut

to remember me by.” (1996:3-5)

Barbers due to their consistent contact over a number of growing up years may not create the path for a boy’s future life but serve as points of contact and markers along the path. The barber may provide wise counsel and insights during life’s journey but most of all, they give of their time, talent, and concern. The boy and the man will remember the emotion, the connection, the safe haven, and the physical characteristics of this special place. Staten suggests,

Barbers make the barbershops. Like barbecue joints they don't do well as franchises. Folks want idiosyncrasy in a barbershop and a barbecue joint. So no two barbershops are alike because no two barbers are alike. ... Ask ten men to name the barber who gave them their first haircut. Then ask the same ten men to name their childhood doctor. I'll bet you more can name the barber than the doctor. (2001:15)

As an integral part of growing up, barbers and their shops do invoke strong memories.

## CONCLUSION

My interest is in humanity, community, and connectivity, not haircuts, styles, fades, or shaves. Barbershops, bastions of manhood, serve as informal social connecting points and play an important role as masculine third places in our society. In my view, the disappearance of “third places” has weakened the fiber and strength of communities. Individuals have become more isolated from meaningful social contact, connection, and conversation. People remain “lonely in crowds.” Oldenburg hopes for improvement to correct the negative effects of suburban and urban planning that he thinks have almost killed the sense of community. His concluding plea, “it doesn’t have to be like this” (1997:296).

The barber and his shop provide an environment for social interaction, renewal, and bonding. Putnam in his book, *Bowling Alone*, states, “Informal social connectedness has declined in all parts of American Society” (2000:108). With rambling suburbs, shopping, dining, and watching movies at home, many are missing third place connections with main street culture and their own neighbors. Barbershops will not cure all social ills, yet with their sense of place and their strength as gathering hubs, this decline can be altered. A restoration of sorts as a channel for communication, barbershops can do their part in providing an informal environment for men to connect or reconnect with each other.

Barbershops have a long history. Although there exists a certain sameness, the business has changed over the years, but barbershops are still active today with the resurgence of the "Hipster Barbers" with their patrons' willingness to wait and pay for authentic experiences with the intent and focus on quality grooming. I think barbershops

have a bright future as efforts are made to recapture some of the cultural richness from the past. From my travels across the country, I have hope for the future of America's main street barbershops.

There seems to be a universal human need to “come home.” This may be in the form of finding one’s self, reestablishing relished relationships, or just rubbing shoulders with the concept and power of “The Home Place.” Home is certainly a place “where everybody knows your name.” In a large home furnishings store in Freeport, Maine, after having my haircut in nearby Portland, I found a rustic placard with this message, “We travel the world over in search of what we need and return home to find it.” The barbershop plays a role in this home place connection. In barbershops, I have found genuine goodness and places of peace. In virtually every encounter I have experienced in my quest, as I enter and when I depart, I have felt as if I have "come home" only to "leave home" again. When I drop by for a haircut without an appointment and as a regular paying customer, I enter as an outsider and leave as an insider. I love the concept of friendship and although I am most often just passing through when I get a haircut, I generally leave town with at least one friend, the local barber.

These four barbershop patterns: (1) the physical sensory place; (2) the masculine social gathering hub; (3) the currency is talk; and (4) the barber’s role, more than a haircut, have created a foundation for barbershop research on an ongoing basis. Although the patterns and traditions of barbershops are old topics, there is a certain sameness and a certain freshness that exists. What was old is becoming young again; what is missing and greatly needed in our social connectivity is improving. My time in a barbershop is limited to often less than an hour. The power of the brief encounter continually manifests itself. In our society, we need common civility and genuine personal connections. I have found

both in barbers and barbershops.

Since my full head of white hair is still growing, my research continues, as I explore America, one main street barbershop at a time. In fact, I need quite a few more haircuts and many miles for my safe return to Mother Earth from the Moon. Along the way, a few bad haircuts but no bad barbers.

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