

## AMERICA'S ANXIETY OVER TAKING A VACATION GOES BACK TO OUR PURITAN ROOTS, HISTORIAN SAYS

**Did you pack your laptop the last time you went on vacation? Find yourself staring at your Blackberry more than the sunset? Then return home exhausted because of all the office emails you received and answered while you were supposed to be relaxing? That doesn't surprise historian Cindy Aron, who says tension between work and play has long haunted Americans.**

Vacationing became part of American life in the nineteenth century and was first enjoyed by elite Northerners and Southern farmers, says Aron, a history professor at the University of Virginia and the author of *Working at Play: A History of Vacations in the United States*.

The first vacation spots were natural springs and seashores, which promised a respite from cities and plantations where disease was rampant in the summer. Places like Saratoga Springs in New York and White Sulphur Springs in West Virginia drew wealthy vacationers and invalids who hoped the waters would offer a cure for a myriad of ailments.

"It wasn't always about health," Aron said in a recent lecture at the MARIAL Center. "Clearly folks went to these places for enjoyment and recreation, too. They hoped to enjoy the dances, balls, courting, socializing. The walks and rides in the countryside."

Some traveled from spring to spring for months. "These were not people who needed to work every day."

Vacations as we think of them today really began in the 1850s and after the Civil War, with the rise of the middle class. Railroads, roads, and the automobile made it easier to get to summer resorts, and the expanding middle class worked in professions that allowed them to take some time off.

But Americans still had to be persuaded that it was okay to take time off from work, Aron said. And our Puritan roots dictated that nothing good came from wasteful idleness. For the growing middle class—defined by their core values of hard work, discipline, self control, and sobriety—the idea of taking a relaxing vacation seemed to threaten everything they held dear.

"They had a persistent dilemma. How to enjoy leisure without jeopardizing their commitment to work," said Aron.

Religious campgrounds became safe resorts, where there was no alcohol, gambling, or Sunday sunbathing. Another alternative was the development of self-improvement resorts like Chautauqua, where activities leaned toward intellectual lectures and foreign language classes.



Cindy Aron

Americans worry about their jobs, so many carry with them devices that keep them connected to the workplace.

The legacy of this remains with us today in getaways centered around everything from touring national monuments to learning to golf. Even camping first surfaced as a way for vacationers to do a little work, but still relax and enjoy the peace and isolation of the natural wilderness.

All this feeds into Americans' love/hate relationship with vacations. And the anxiety often manifests itself today by vacationers who seem to carry with them every conceivable device that will keep them connected to the workplace.

"Next time you come home exhausted from a vacation spent getting into shape at a health spa or running yourself ragged visiting European churches or dragging your kids to important cultural or historical sites, please remember you come by it right. It's part of a long history," said Aron.

You can view Aron's MARIAL lecture online at [www.marial.emory.edu/calendar/eventarchives.html](http://www.marial.emory.edu/calendar/eventarchives.html) ■

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growing numbers of people in other countries, emphasizing the need for more comparative analyses of the meanings and forms of middle classes elsewhere across the globe. Why such changes are coupled, for example with a growing importance of dowry in India, for example, or with a receding participation in mainline churches and a growing appeal of "new-age" and Pentecostal churches in Barbados, are just two examples that raise important analytical questions with relevance to these two nations and beyond. Bringing such comparative bodies of scholarship together will not only yield new insights about work, fam-

ily, marriage, and religion, but they will shed new light on the dynamic relationship between status and class, culture and political-economy, and broaden the very ways in which we approach these fundamental aspects of life in today's neo-liberal age.

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