

The Griswold Inn

**Research Topic**

My research topic is Monday nights at The Griswold Inn.

**Thesis**

My thesis is that Monday nights, otherwise known as Sea Chantey Nights (from 8:30-11:00), at The Griswold Inn serve as more than an occasion for alcohol consumption and raucous behavior. That they are in fact a spiritual experience for all the regular attendees. I also hope to support by my research that the lead singer is a form of shaman, and that the other member of the group (Tim) is an apprentice.

**Research Methods**

I have attended Sea Chantey Nights at The Griswold Inn (hereafter known as The Gris) as a "regular" for the past five years. Therefore, I have many close friends that I could speak with. I had many informal interviews with people who have been attending Sea Chantey Nights for a wide range of years (one to thirty years).

**Description of Findings**

Sea Chantey Nights at The Gris have been in place for over thirty years, it has always been the same band: The Jovial Crew, headed by the same man: Cliff Haslem, since he came to the United States from Liverpool, England. The premise is fairly simple; songs are sung and played by the band (whose members sometimes vary), and sometimes guest artists, beers are drunk, and attendees are encouraged to sing along. It sounds straightforward, but is in fact more complicated. I do not believe that if Sea

Chantey Night existed in a less historic setting that it would be what it is to so many people.

I found that most regular attendees do see this as a form of worship and/or church, although it does not always take the place of an actual church. Some regulars attend a formal church, however, many do not. Most of my informants reported a sense of guilt when they miss a Monday, partly because it is the only time that many of them see each other.

People often bring their friends and family in with them (I, myself have brought many people, including my parents), most of whom have said something akin to "Sea Chantey Night, that sounds totally weird, why would you go to that?". The answer is complicated, yes it is fun, but that is not the only reason. There is a unique atmosphere that is almost familial. Guests are so quickly accepted, and so often remembered when they return, that they usually find themselves looking forward to it as the one good thing about Mondays.

It can also serve as an outlet for example, a friend of mine, Ted (not his real name), was going through a rather messy divorce a while ago, one Monday his wife asked him for a large monetary settlement. That night, Ted arrived at The Gris, and announced that he felt like yelling, a number of his friends went up to Cliff (the lead singer), explained the situation and asked him to sing every song he knew that's chorus involved yelling. Cliff obliged, and Ted spent the evening yelling out his frustrations in a socially acceptable manner, in fact, by the time left he was quite relaxed.

## Analysis

There is not one single symbol that Sea Chantey Nights revolve around, for that reason I chose the spatial analysis. One would assume that the focal point would be the bar, however, that is not the case. Basically The Gris is an old nautical-themed inn, located in Essex Connecticut since 1776. The town is on the Connecticut River, and so it has always been a nautical-centered place. The restaurant consists of four major areas; the dining area, the wine bar, the banquet room, and the tap room. For my purposes I will focus on the tap room, you enter through the front of the room, but on the right, the band is on your left, and the bar is all the way in the back, the tables are in between, with three two person tables along the right-hand wall. It is a relatively small intimate space.

There are four major spatial groups; the fire group (my label), who stand in front of the fire on the left wall about half-way back, the table group (my label), who sit at the tables in the center of the room, the "wall people" (their name), who sit and stand along the right wall, and last but certainly not least, the "corner people" (their name), who stand in the small space all the way in the back at the very end of the bar, and in front of the entrance to the dining room. These groups are well recognized by all, there is an amount of commingling, however, most people return to their "group" fairly quickly. There is also a space for unconnected visitors, who usually stand in front of the "corner people" or in front of the bar facing the band.

If there was a symbol I suppose it might be the small fake Christmas tree that sits on top of a nonworking pot-bellied stove in the middle of the tables. The tree is always there, twelve months of the year, and always decorated with paper for some holiday or other, and nobody I spoke to seems to have a clue of its origin or purpose, it is just there,

for as long as anyone can remember. It serves as the symbol because everyone notices it, points it out to their friends

Cliff would be the shaman because he leads the evening, even though Tim is the one gets people involved. Cliff used to perform this duty, however, he is getting older and has had health complications over the last few years. Therefore Tim has taken over this duty and newcomers now count on him for cues on when to participate. Even so, whenever Cliff is not available, it isn't quite the same, in mood or tone.

### **Comparison**

The first comparison is with Robert Bergman's article "A School for Medicine Men", in my mind, the way that Cliff is training Tim is somewhat like the way they train them at the school. Tim began by only singing one song once in a while, and gradually began singing more and more song more frequently. He did not become a regular member for many years (about ten), until the other member of the Jovial Crew moved to Florida. In fact, when Paul is back in Connecticut, he continues to replace Tim. Like Mr. Dick, Cliff's criticism can be quite harsh, but he always softens it with a smile.

The second comparison is with Mary Lee Daugherty's piece "Serpent-Handling as Sacrament". While Sea Chantey Night is not nearly as dramatic and/or dangerous as serpent-handling, it often has a similar effect. People who "never sing" (such as myself) almost find themselves caught up in the mood and the moment, singing their hearts out. When they leave they often heard remarking that they don't know what happened because they never sing in public.



## Conclusions

In conclusion, I would say that it is a form of worship and/or church, there are rituals, rules, and codes of behavior. Everyone knows when to clap, when to sing, what to sing, when to shout, and those who break the rules are looked at strangely and admonished quietly by their friends, who all know the rules, as well as the lyrics. One of the strictest unwritten rules is that everyone must be silent during the last song ("The Going Home Song"). When this particular rule is broken it throws the end of the evening off. I would argue that Cliff is sacred in this ritual, it just isn't "right" without him.

It is a liminal experience every time, however, it is never felt as strongly as your first time. You arrive not sure what to expect, you have been told that it is fun, strange, and a little nutty. The night begins with quieter songs so as not to disturb the diners in the next room, those last about forty minutes getting a bit louder towards the end, and then there is a short break. After which the mood is rowdier, and people are ready and anticipating the next set, which is used to boost the energy as high as possible, and get everyone involved and excited. This is when most newcomers get swept up in the magic of it all. The second set goes for about an hour, and then there is another break. The third and final set is much quieter and toned down, ending with five to ten slow shanties about leaving, endings, and homes. By the last song you feel relaxed, calm, and ready to tackle the rest of your week. You have seen your friends, some of whom are like family, and you have caught up with them about their week. When people are away for a period of time it is quite usual for there to be hugs, and gentle teasing about where they have been. There is, maybe not surprisingly much less alcohol consumption on Mondays than on

other nights, people seem to want to be as alert as possible, much as you would for a regular church ceremony.

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