

Research Paper – Literature Review

Whittling: from popular American pastime to niche hobby

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Introduction

The gentle art of whittling is a relaxing and absorbing hobby that can be enjoyed almost anywhere from round the campfire to in a cozy armchair at home. All you need is a good pocketknife, a piece of wood and your imagination. (Benson, 2019, description section).

The literature, as it pertains to whittling, can be viewed through two broad themes: woodcarving with a knife conceived as either a serious hobby, to create a particular material object, or as a type of soothing, satisfying activity independent of any outcome. Both of these key themes are colored by social norms surrounding gender, especially as it pertains to masculinity and expectations around labor, self-expression, and relaxation. Likewise, both explore the cognitive, social and psychological benefits of whittling. There is a considerable amount of overlap and interplay between these topics. Much of the literature, whether scholarly or popular, mentions these to the extent that the hobby cannot be discussed without considering how these have informed its practice and its culture.

Serious Leisure Perspective – whittling culture and associated communities

Leisure Studies is a relatively recent area of research that continues to build knowledge around leisure pursuits and hobbies. Particularly relevant to the examination of whittling is Robert A. Stebbins model, presented as the Serious Leisure Perspective (SLP), which provides a framework that organizes hobbies along a spectrum from casual to project oriented to serious hobbyist (2008). In this model, a person who whittles at sticks for the pleasure of the essential activity, generating only a pile of wood shavings, qualifies as a casual hobbyist. While the person who invests considerable time and resources producing more elaborate projects for gifting or entering into competitions, and who interacts within a community of other whittlers, qualifies as

the serious hobbyist. They may subscribe to relevant hobby magazines, interact with social networking groups, or give workshops to teach others the skills they have acquired.

While this model was intended to classify leisure pursuits according to degree of dedication, it can also parallel the progression towards mastery of whittling as a skill. A person may start as a casual whittler, progress to simple projects, and then derive so much benefit that they become a serious whittler keen to share their love of the hobby with others. Stebbins calls this shared participation the *social world* (2008). However, it is possible that some individuals after mastery will drop the hobby, moving on to something related or different, perhaps carving with chisels or power tools. Whittling, being a particularly versatile practice compared to other handicrafts, can find the enthusiast moving between these categories depending on the social setting and surroundings: a casual campfire chat with friends, the need to make a particular gift, or an investment in expensive, specialized carving knives after reading about an admired artist.

Since the 1960's, whittling has been viewed as a vintage folkway that looks back to the past, rather than existing as an evolving artform. But a simple Google search today will return an abundance of recently published how-to books, hobbyist magazines and websites, as well as tutorial videos and social media feeds. And, though the whittling hobby has continued to decline, spoon carving has seen a recent surge in popularity as project-based leisure utilizing social workshops and kits created by serious hobbyists and tool companies. In contrast to whittling's persistence in the serious and project-based hobby categories, casual whittling is increasingly rare. Whittling resulting in a practical or decorative object may deliver a greater sense of meaning and satisfaction in an era where few people engage in labor that sees the creation of something from beginning stage to end product, and where often the work is intangible and performed in a digital rather than physical space. Likewise, idle time and the need to busy one's

hands is now easily satisfied by games and entertainment available on our smart phones, a digital multi-tool which has taken over the pocket space once promised to the pocketknife.

Stigma and stereotypes

For some serious hobbyists, like Lester I. Hunt who prefers the term pocketknife artist, and likeminded enthusiasts who took up the hobby in the mid-century, the casual, non-productive whittling activity reinforces stereotypes of whittlers and detracts from what they feel should be a valued artform (1979). Persistent associations with elderly men, boys, the American hobo, and uneducated rural folk generated a stigma around casual whittling as performative time-wasting even as whittling was simultaneously viewed as a healthy occupation of attention and skill in the categories of project based or serious leisure.

Whittling has deep ties to the folkways of the Ozarks and Appalachia where it is still a celebrated tradition. But, as the encyclopedia of Arkansas relates, “The folk custom of whittling can also come with a stigma of laziness or backwardness. Some people dislike being called whittlers and prefer to be called wood carvers, which sounds more artistic and professional” (Sohl, 2025). Whittling in this region is sometimes called Ozark style woodcarving because of its unique subject matter, but also due to this stigma. The carvings produced by serious hobbyists in the Ozarks and Appalachia are works of great skill utilizing traditional knowledge passed down over generations. And yet whittling as a casual activity has been heavily caricatured as *hillbilly*, a derogatory term for people living in remote mountainous locations in the southern United States who have been stereotyped as impoverished, hostile and out of touch with modern life while at the same time viewed as self-reliant and fiercely independent (Blevins, 2025). This is evident in American popular culture of the mid-century and especially *the Beverly Hillbillies*, which ran from 1962-1971 and used whittling as a setup for laughs. The humble Jed Clampett and his naïve

nephew Jethro are frequently depicted on the porch of the mansion casually whittling at sticks as they converse. At other times, Jed is shown whittling alone in deep thought.

The actor who portrayed Jed, Buddy Ebsen, was previously also cast as a hobo passing through Mayberry on the second season of *the Andy Griffith Show* in 1961. The literature connects the stigma around whittling, a measure of class and social bias, to the events of the Great Depression, despite whittling's place as a popular pastime of middle class men in the post-war era. Historian Steven M. Gelber's explains that during the Depression era, whittling was suggested to combat the ache of unemployment's unoccupied hours, and migrant workers, known as hobos, whittled as they stowed away on freight trains, traveling the nation in search of work (1991). This was also a time which saw increased migration from the Ozarks and Appalachia into the Midwest as rural people sought out work in industrial cities (Wikipedia, 2025). Art historian Amy Ortiz Holmes who has written extensively on the subject of Tramp Art and the whimsies whittled by American hobos, relates that, unlike other art forms typically defined by their media or era, these carvings were defined by their makers, a group coded into myth, both othered and romanticized. (2010, p.19, 96).

Labor

Gelber applies Stebbins's SLP framework to spotlight the parallel relationships between hobbies and labor, here occurring in association with the unemployed or underemployed, suggesting a connection with social norms in the US that equate the value of a person with their value as a productive worker (1999). But as labor has continued to shift from agrarian to industrial and now to digital, and the generation that lived through the events of the Great Depression have passed on, whittled objects made by regular folk with repurposed materials have attained more recognition and value, finding their way into art collections and museums

(Ortiz, 2010). The stigma of earlier eras has been traded for a romanticized nostalgia for the rustic and the perceived freedoms and authenticity of nomadic or agrarian life, in this way offering another kind of escape from the pressures of modern labor, technology, and new economic burdens.

Exploring the divide between labor and leisure, Gebler explains that, while having the qualities of both work and play, hobbies are neither. A hobby can function as both an escape from the pressures of paid labor as well as entertainment which improves the individual through learning a skill, rewarding them with a degree of prestige when mastered. In his examination of baseball as a pastime, Gelber points to an unresolved tension between studies which show that people infuse their leisure time with their work values, and studies which point to leisure fulfilling needs which cannot be met by work (1983).

Gifting culture

The literature also notes that the sense of satisfaction experienced by whittling enthusiasts is linked to a culture of gifting. Carved objects have long been gifted as tokens of affection, reinforcing social bonds, and holding meaning ascribed by both the giver and the receiver. Hobbyists commonly produced toys and puzzle objects for their children. Carved spoons were a traditional courtship gift in Appalachia. Objects carved by migrant workers from scrap wood, commonly classified as Tramp Art, were given as a token of gratitude or in trade for things like lodging or a meal (Ortiz, 2010). Ortiz explains, “Creative skill and masterful practice of the crafts of woodworking and whittling allowed makers of tramp art to enrich their own lives and extend that richness to the lives of others through gifting and sharing” (2010, p. 124). And because of their handmade nature, these might be passed down over generations as heirlooms, providing the hobbyist a sense that their identity will be preserved through memory attached to

these tangible artifacts. Ortiz quotes Jules Prown's idea that objects allow history to exist in the present moment so "we have a direct sensory experience of surviving historical events" (2010, p.3). Similarly, the gifting of a pocketknife, the whittler's primary tool, was something the giver took pride in, with the idea that they were passing down intergenerational knowledge and connection while also creating a memory. And for those who whittled whimsies like the ball-in-cage, wooden chains, or working tools like pliers, there was a sense of delight and accomplishment in watching the receiver's astonishment and then revealing how it the seemingly impossible carving trick was accomplished (Bronner, 1983).

Gender norms and whittling

Historically, whittling has heavily conformed with and reinforced masculine norms. In the United States it has carried associations with male social bonding, intergenerational communication, and rites of passage. At one time, the gift of a pocketknife marked a boy's first steps into manhood, carrying connotations of impending readiness to enter the workforce. The pocketknife was considered an essential tool, both useful and risky, and boys were taught how to safely and responsibly use it by either their father or by another adult male in a structured group setting like Boy Scouts or in a shop class (Mertz, 2017). The latter gave boys from industrialized, urban settings a reason to employ skills associated with rural and rustic living and provided an introduction to mechanical labor. This prolonged whittling's life as a popular hobby while also reinforcing masculine norms around ruggedness, self-reliance, and creativity linked to labor-adjacent productivity as opposed to the deeper self-expression promoted by the arts.

In this context we again see the parallels between hobbies and labor. Historian Steven M. Gelber, reflecting on the increasing use of the term hobby in the early 20th century, explains, "The word 'hobby' became a strategic term used less to be descriptive than to carry the weight of

authoritative approval when applied to individual activities (1991). He notes that the term was coined to distinguish between what were considered as good or bad pastimes according to prevailing social norms as opposed to simply denoting a type of leisure (Gelber, 1991). Good pastimes were perceived as productive.

There has long been a notion in the U.S., reflected in the proverb “idle hands are the devil’s playground”, that children, particularly boys, need to be kept busy and productive lest they stumble into mischief or engage with activities viewed by the community as unhealthy or otherwise destructive. Gelber relates that as the U.S. became more industrialized, work hours began to decrease which made more time available for leisure, but unstructured free time was linked to both laziness and the belief that boredom leads to trouble (1991). In reality, cognitive studies show us that boredom leads to creativity (Guihyun, 2019). So, in truth we have society attempting to direct creativity towards what were considered acceptable forms of expression that would reinforce rather than contest social norms and hierarchies. “By making leisure more work-like, hobbies affirmed the centrality of work in the American ideology” (Gelber, 1991).

This connection between hobbies and labor was also extended to elders. Whittling, even today, is heavily associated with retirement, and an old man whittling on his front porch as the sun sinks low is a timeworn country stereotype. Hobbies have long been viewed as a way to give elderly men purpose and increase feelings of self-worth diminished by the loss of employment due to retirement or disability (Gelber, 1991). Men may look forward to retirement and yet struggle with depression when it arrives if they constructed their identity and social world around their profession. Again, we see whittling referenced as a way to pass the hours and ease boredom while preserving identity built around labor, maintaining a semblance of productivity. Additionally, American folklorist Simon J. Bronner points to how whittling is felt to ease

anxieties around death and dying, by distracting elders from negative thoughts while allowing them to create and gift something tangible that will persist after their passing (2012).

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As a hobby, messy piles of wood shavings made whittling better suited to the outdoors. It was also compatible with other outdoor leisure pursuits like camping, fishing, hunting and hiking where it could be put to practical use making items like tent pegs, cooking implements, walking sticks, and simple fishing lures. This association further entrenched whittling as a gendered activity ascribed mainly to men. Women and girls in the U.S. were traditionally encouraged toward hobbies performed within the home, reflecting the norms surrounding women's labor which was often limited to domestic arts. For example, women's folkways in the Ozarks included needle and textile arts like quilting, knitting, and spinning. Despite divergence along lines of gender and location, Ortiz notes many parallels many between whittling and quilting including the use repurposed or scrap materials, their meditative nature, and their function as either social or solitary hobbies (2010).

But woodworker and curator Deidre Visser argues that women have always participated in woodworking activities, and the same popular publications which promoted male hobbyists not only reinforced masculine stereotypes but also acted as gatekeepers to exclude women. She

notes the example of the magazine *Fine Woodworking* which did not feature a woman on its cover until as recently as 2020 despite the featured artisan being active for decades. She reflects on a pattern of women engaging with woodworking during historic labor shortages, as in times of war, withdrawing again when more men returned to the labor force (Visser, p.104-105).

Historian Len Kuffert, noting the influence of these same hobby magazines on reinforcing traditional masculine norms, relates that, “References to the plight of the “wood widow” or “workshop widow” in hobbyist publications normalized at least a partial male retreat from spousal company” (2024). He attributes this to hobbyist publications selling men on the idea of the workshop as a separate space. Those who were serious hobbyists and wanted to see their work featured in a magazine or as the winning entry in a contest could become obsessive, finding the fascination with perfecting their work increased isolation and mildly anti-social behaviors (Kuffert, 2024).

However, in his study of chain carvers (habitual makers of free moving, interlocking chains whittled from a single piece of wood), Simon J. Bronner argues that this retreat into whittling established personal space and time which preserved identity. He labels the workshop as an “individualistic, masculine space” where the carver sought to reconnect with self and transcend his worries (Bronner, 1983). And Gebler writes that hobbies in the 1930s were promoted as a way for men to make friends with other men, selling the practice as a remedy for isolation by participating in hobby clubs or by simply making the person more interesting to others (1991). Research into the Men’s Shed Movement in Australia supports the idea that communal male spaces where woodworking is discussed and practiced on shared equipment contributes to building stronger relationships through shared skills, resulting in a greater sense of self-worth (Culph, 2015). In a similar way, there are now available many all-women and gender

non-binary woodworking classes and workshops which allow individuals historically excluded from the hobby to learn and master the skills in a welcoming and social setting (Lanteigne, 2025).

Regardless of gender, an important aspect of enjoying a hobby is performing the activity at a time of one's own choosing, for a duration of one's own choosing, in a space perceived as comfortable, engaging and inclusive which, for most individuals, are qualities which do not align with labor and employment. Here we have that state of neither work nor play yet both which Gebler attributes to hobbies (1991). And this mingling of control, engagement, and freedom facilitates the ability to achieve a state of flow, generating confidence and personal satisfaction.

Cognitive, social and psychological benefits of whittling

The benefits of whittling activity are mentioned repeatedly across the literature. W. Ben Hunt was considered an authority on whittling as an artist, an educator for the Boy Scouts, and a writer with Boys Life magazine. He pointed to sensory and emotional regulation as well as fine motor development and noted whittling offered an outlet for self-expression which had become less and less available in the mechanized labor of industrialized occupations (Hunt, 1945).

Whittling can be fully engaging, providing visual, auditory, olfactory tactile and proprioceptive stimulation: the sight of the shavings as they curl and drop softly to the ground, the whispering sound of metal slicing through wood, the feel of the wood in the hands as it changes from rough to smooth, the distinct scents of varying types of wood, and the sensation of tension and release as the hand moves the tool moves through the medium. The activity is slow, repetitive and gently focused much like a meditative practice.

Ortiz writes that whittling engages what is known as a state of flow, originally proposed by Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2010). "The experience is the same across lines of

culture, class, gender, and age, as well as across kinds of activity” (Snyder, 2011, p.90).

Csikszentmihalyi listed several criteria believed necessary to achieve this state:

1. activity that stretches existing skills without being perceived as too hard or too easy
2. proximal goals that provide a sense of progress and accomplishment informed by immediate feedback
3. intense, focused concentration only on an activity happening in the present moment
4. a merging of action and awareness
5. a sense of control and knowing how to respond from moment to moment
6. distortion in the perception of the passage of time
7. experience of the activity itself as rewarding and the end goal as an excuse for the process

These criteria can be observed across the literature when carvers and whittlers speak about their hobby and how it makes them feel. Repeatedly, whittlers relay how there is no room for other intrusive, worries when they are focused on their hobby. The state of flow has been suggested helpful not only for reducing anxiety, but also for combating behaviors deemed unhealthy (Snyder, 2011). And in some ways, this echoes earlier ideas of hobbies encouraged as a way to control the way people use their leisure, either to promote activities society deems good, or to discourage activities society deems bad.

As an example, Adolph Vandertie, also known as the Hobo Whittler, an artist and *Grand Duke of Hobos* who dedicated himself to the documentation and preservation of American hobo culture, spoke of the ability of whittling to combat aspects of addiction:

I needed something to keep my hands and mind occupied and to keep from incessantly clawing at my pocket for a cigarette that wasn't there. I soon developed the habit of

reaching for my pocket knife and a piece of wood, thereby developing another addiction—that of whittling (Vandertie, 2020, p.2).

And W. Ben Hunt reinforces this saying, “I have seen gum chewers forget to chew and smokers forget to puff while whittling” (1945, p.183).

Historically, whittling’s benefits were seen through the lens of occupational therapy. This has been defined by the American Occupational Therapy Association as:

the art and science of directing man's participation in selected tasks to restore, reinforce and enhance performance, facilitate learning of those skills and functions essential for adaptation and productivity, diminish or correct pathology, and to promote or maintain health. Its fundamental concern is the capacity, throughout the lifespan, to perform with satisfaction to self and others those tasks and roles essential to productive living and to the mastery of self and the environment (AOTA, 1983, p.824).

So here again, whittling has been viewed as a way, not only to eliminate bad habits, but to intentionally cultivate social virtues like patience, focus, emotional calm, and industriousness. Hunt adds to these an appreciation for beauty, applied it to both to the completed objects themselves, and also to the beauty of the materials, with the hobbyist developing an appreciation of “good wood and good steel” (1945, p.183).

Despite the repetitious movement of the knife, whittling is not monotonous. Every cut is different and lends the object continuous and surprising change (Hunt, 1945). The hobbyist has an idea of what they want to create, but they cannot know how it will turn out. What is eventually revealed from the subtractive process is in many ways a safe encounter with the unknown and an exercise in trust where persistence and patience are rewarded with a positive

outcome. Additionally, the process can be picked up or put down for any length of time without impacting the project, allowing for a sense of autonomy and control.

The Great Outdoors

Being commonly practiced outdoors, often in nature using found wood, has added to whittling's reputation for promoting calm and wellbeing. Similar to the benefits ascribed to hobbies, time spent outdoors has long been promoted as a type of therapy for cultivating physical and mental wellbeing. Sweden has recently passed a science backed initiative call the *Swedish Prescription* which allows for a general practitioner to prescribe hiking in the forest as a medical therapy (Kaye, 2025). Likewise, Japan has famously promoted the restorative practice of Shinrin-yoku, translated to forest bathing, in which people connect to nature and self through sensory immersion into the forest environment, easing the stressors of life and resulting in measurable positive health outcomes (Li, 2022). And historically, before the advent of pharmaceutical treatments, doctors advised patients with asthma or tuberculosis to rehabilitate at sanitariums in mountainous areas like Colorado and California for clean air and sunshine away from the noise and pollution of industrial cities (Morrison,2022).

Mindfulness and Digital Overload

In our current era, whittling can also be viewed as a mindfulness practice, “a state of non-judgmental awareness that is characterised by decreased attachment to thoughts and emotions” (Schutte, introd., 2023). Flow and mindfulness are closely associated. Examining this intersection, Schutte and Malouff point to some research suggesting increased mindfulness can increase flow (2023).

Gebler, in noting the similarities and dissimilarities of hobbies with work and play, relates that a hobby has historically been considered a remedy for both overwork and idleness, “While

non-working people needed hobbies to give structure to their lives, working people suffered from excessive structure and needed the balance provided by hobbies” (1991). And while, in the past, whittling was recommended as an activity to ease the stressors of overwork, today it is touted as a remedy for what is known as *digital overload*: psychological stress experienced from use of technological devices which inhibits information processing and use (Schaaf Tools, 2025). “With regards to smartphone usage, digital overload may result from simultaneously receiving information across multiple sources within the same device, such as text messages, phone calls, and notifications or alerts from mobile apps” (Smith, 2021). Several studies noted by Smith et al, conducted among college students, found correlations with reduced focus and self-confidence along with increased stress and anxiety. Whittling, as a mindfulness practice, allows for a period of intentional disconnection from devices, commonly called a digital detox, which helps the mind regain focus and calm.

Further Exploration

Aside from a few excellent papers, some quite dated, there is limited scholarly discussion around whittling specifically. Though one of the earliest and most widespread of humanity’s crafts, it remains quite a niche subject. The literature tends to focus more broadly on woodworking or wood carving as material culture, or else on the study of hobbies and leisure in general. In the case of woodcarving, most scholars have focused on cultural groups outside rather than within the United States or on acclaimed artists. A lack of research around whittling likely reflects the ordinariness of the practice, its broad accessibility, a degree of class and social bias against the pastimes pursued by those in underserved communities, as well as its steady decline since the mid-20th century.

Typically, whittling has seen more coverage in popular sources meant for a general audience. Materials and documentation have also been produced and collected by whittlers themselves for an audience of their peers which, per Stebbins, is a hallmark of the serious leisure participant (2008). Kuffert, in his research on the influences of woodworking magazines on enthusiasts, reveals that many of these sources have been 20th century popular science magazines aimed at a male audience and meant as marketing devices for tool manufacturers. They encouraged serious leisure as a means to leverage the sales of tools, accessories, and workspace furnishings with the promise that these would help the hobbyist achieve a more elevated output. These were meant to convince men that they too could produce prize-winning carvings just like their peers featured in the magazines if they were simply willing to invest more money in the hobby (Kuffert, 2024).

With more attention building on the study of leisure, which is a relatively new area of focus in the Social Sciences, and with periodic resurgences in woodcarving spurred by social media and social networking, perhaps in the future more scholarly research focused to whittlers will become available. Qualitative research on whittling is available but generally uses smaller samples. Quantitative data for whittling is limited and generally looks at hobbies more broadly. But, as the audience for whittling continues to diversify, and woodworking becomes more openly accessible for women, girls, and LGBTQ individuals through groups like the newly inclusive Scouts BSA, Hopscotch Girls, DIY Girls, and several others, a fresh perspective will grow and evolve the hobby in unexpected ways, perhaps leading to an interest in documenting these shifts. Trends around health and wellness practices, especially as they relate to stress and coping with the impacts of technology and digital overload, may continue to build interest in whittling. Other adjacent hobbies like stick collecting and display, as seen on the TikTok channel StickTok, may

also have an impact in leading people to experiment with whittling from a place outside of narrow, traditional practices. Finally, as it often utilizes scrap or reclaimed wood, whittling is considered a hobby of thrift and repurposing, so it may see renewed popularity in connection with sustainability practices or as a result of economic downturn. Any changes which lead to a sustained resurgence in popularity have the potential to spur an interest in further research.

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