

# **Camaraderie of the Leaf: An Ethnographic Exploration of Cigar Lounge Communities**

Elizabeth Segal  
Cultural Anthropology  
The University of North Carolina Asheville  
One University Heights  
Asheville, North Carolina 28804 USA

Faculty Advisor: Dr. John Wood

## **Abstract**

Just as drinking fine wine, tea, or coffee unites those who are passionate about these activities, so do cigars. Cigar smoking involves a specific set of rituals and code of ethics that tend to unify those who are willing to learn about them, particularly within establishments dedicated to providing a space to smoke and sell premium cigars. Conducting ethnographic research through observation, participant observation, formal interviews, and informal conversation within two cigar stores in North Carolina over a year long period has shed light on how community manifests itself within these establishments. Cigar lounges in the United States can provide a liminal space between work and home for people to relax, socialize, and partake in an act that requires specialized knowledge which bonds people not only to the cigars themselves, but also the communities that have formed around them. Despite their historical homogeneity amongst upper class white men, some cigar communities are becoming more accessible to and popular amongst women, people of color, and those within the working class.

## **1. Introduction**

As he does each morning, except Sundays, Mick Jones makes his way into Havana Phil's Cigar Company. He pulls up in his chocolate brown Buick SUV and unhurriedly walks to the front door, cane in hand. The retailers are there to greet him with a big smile and a roaring, "Mick Jones!" He slowly walks through the bright retail space into the more dimly lit Davidoff Lounge. He begins to settle down in his usual brown leather chair in the back section of the elegantly decorated members-only Davidoff Lounge. Mick, a 70-year-old white man with thinning white hair and pink cheeks, is sporting his usual outfit of a collared shirt with long pants and a brown pair of dress shoes. Now retired from his previous job as a scout for a Major League Baseball team, Mick has quite a lot of time on his hands, much of which he fills with smoking cigars and enjoying the company of his friends at Havana Phil's. After settling down, Mick takes out a cigar, cuts it with his cigar cutter, and begins the lighting process, all while Frank Sinatra plays quietly in the background. As usual, Mick is waiting for the arrival of his good friend Neil, a retired middle-aged African American man. About thirty minutes pass, and the once empty circle of chairs has filled up with Mick and Neil, as well as Tracy, a white man who works as an electrical technology teacher; Ari, an Ashkenazi cigar salesman; Randy, an African American man who is running for a local political office; and Renee, an African American woman who is an auditor for a local business. This lively group of people fill the room with smoke and laughter as they tell stories and poke fun at each other.

This scene from a morning at Havana Phil's Cigar Company captures the unique connection that many cigar smokers have with this seemingly trivial object. Many of the regulars mentioned in this encounter view each other as family, which highlights the close bonds that people within cigar communities often form. Cigar smoking is accompanied by a specific set of rituals, history, and code of ethics, which are some of the reasons as to why cigar smokers tend to assign such deep meaning to cigars and the people they meet through engaging in this lifestyle. In conducting

ethnographic research through observation, participant observation, formal interviews, and informal conversation within two cigar stores in North Carolina over a year long period, I seek to shed light on why people are attracted to these communities as well as how community manifests itself within these establishments. In this paper I argue that cigar lounges in the United States can provide a liminal space between work and home for people to relax, socialize, and partake in an act that requires specialized knowledge which bonds people not only to the cigars themselves, but also the communities that have formed around them. Despite their historical homogeneity amongst upper class white men, some cigar communities are becoming more accessible to and popular amongst women, people of color, and those within the working class.

## 2. Positionality

Before going into my current findings, I want to first address my positionality and my reasons for choosing to focus on this subject. My father, Phil Segal III, had a passion for cigars and founded a cigar store and lounge called Havana Phil's almost eight years ago. Growing up, my dad was a cigar enthusiast, and his decision to open Havana Phil's made me much more interested in cigars than ever before. I tried my first cigar when I was 16, just a few years after Havana Phil's opened, and I have been a cigar smoker ever since. Throughout these years, I have participated in my father's special cigar events, smoked cigars at Havana Phil's and other lounges, and I have also attended the annual International Premium Cigar and Pipe Retailers Association trade show. Cigar smoking is a subject that has been quite intriguing to me because of my active participation in the culture, which is what ultimately inspired me to pursue this topic through cultural anthropology.

This process of fieldwork and ethnographic writing has been a true test of my academic capabilities. It has also been a deeply personal and emotional endeavor. In December of 2017, I found out that my father was diagnosed with Stage 4 stomach cancer. I began studying the topic of cigar culture a few months later in my ethnographic methods class with the knowledge that my dad did not have much time left on this earth. Although I knew my dad's cancer was terminal, I did not know his fight would end so soon. In July 2018, after spending about two months working as a retail associate for my dad at Havana Phil's, he was rushed to the hospital because he suddenly developed speech and balance issues. After three days in the hospital, we found out that the cancer spread to his brain. Two profoundly painful weeks later, I watched my dad take his last breath. Words cannot capture the grief that my family and I experienced from this immense loss. After his death, I continued doing fieldwork at Havana Phil's until I had to go back to school for the fall semester. I knew that my dad would want me to keep going despite the pain and heartbreak I was experiencing.

In writing this paper, I aim to honor my father by illuminating the intricacies of cigar smoking, a subject that he so passionately introduced me to. Because of the personal nature of certain aspects of this paper, I have included a couple of poems that I wrote while conducting my fieldwork. The purpose of the poems is to illustrate certain aspects of my research that I could not convey as accurately through prose. I began my journey doing fieldwork at B&B Tobacconists in Asheville for about three months as a paying customer and cigar consumer, while I was taking my ethnographic methods class. After the semester was over and summer break came along, I moved on to doing fieldwork at Havana Phil's for about three months, this time as an unpaid employee. I have much more data from my time spent at Havana Phil's because I was there about 4 days a week for three months, whereas I went to B&B about ten times for roughly an hour at a time. For this reason, much of my demographic observations are based on Havana Phil's rather than B&B. I did manage to collect demographic data during each visit to B&B Tobacconists, and I also discussed this topic with both the manager and the owner of the store to gain a more informed understanding.

It is quite important that I recognize my potential biases as an individual with very personal connections to one of my field sites, and not-so-personal connections to the other. As the daughter of the founder of Havana Phil's, this cigar store has been an integral part of my life since its conception. However, I have discovered how much I did not know about this store upon conducting ethnographic fieldwork there over a three-month period. While the owner of B&B Tobacconists was familiar with my father, as cigar retailers often know other cigar retailers from around the country, my relationship with B&B was clearly not as intimate as the one I had with Havana Phil's. In my analysis, I recognize the vast differences between the two cigar stores, but I also try to emphasize the similarities. It is my hope that my inherent biases have not gotten in the way of the thorough anthropological analysis that I intend to present.

Since I began my fieldwork, a theme that I have been noticing and looking for is the way that gender is treated in cigar culture. Emerson et al. explains that by recognizing positionality, "the fieldworker may be able to write field notes that highlight and foreground issues and insights made available by orientation."<sup>1</sup> My identity and expression as a woman has allowed me to experience first-hand how femininity is treated within different cigar-smoking settings.

When taking into consideration the history of cigar smoking in the United States as a predominantly male activity, I am both an insider because of my personal connections, and I am also an outsider in certain cigar smoking settings because of my gender. The topic of gender will be discussed further, but it is crucial to first introduce basic cigar concepts that will allow for a greater understanding of the mechanisms through which cigar smokers are bonded to one another.

### 3. Cigar 101

#### 3.1 Brief History of Cigars

To most cigar connoisseurs, knowing the history of the industry and craft is considered to be a fundamental part of being a lover of premium cigars. Tobacco has been used for smoking purposes for thousands of years. There is evidence of Mayan tobacco consumption dating back to 100 C.E. With the onset of colonization in the late fifteenth century, indigenous peoples in Cuba were documented to have been growing, fermenting, and rolling tobacco leaves into cylindrical objects meant for smoking. By the beginning of the sixteenth century, using snuff and smoking tobacco pipes became popular in many European countries, such as France and England, and the knowledge of tobacco cultivation spread amongst European colonizers in Cuba and the Americas for their own usage as well as commercialization. In 1676, the cigar as it is known today, intact with wrapper, binder, and filler, was first created in Seville, Spain. Along with the birth of the first cigar, the cigar industry was born, and by the eighteenth century, cigar factories became commonplace throughout many parts of Europe.<sup>2</sup>

After a century of monopolistic control over Cuban tobacco, Spain legalized the production and sale of tobacco in Cuba in 1817, leading to the onset of the Cuban cigar industry. By 1905, seven out of ten men reportedly smoked cigars in the United States, but by 1929, the effects of industrialization and the acceleration of lifestyle pace led to a decline in cigar consumption and an increase in cigarette consumption. By the end of the Cuban revolution in 1959, a significant number of cigar makers fled Cuba to the Dominican Republic, Central America, and the United States. Many of these emigrants continued to produce cigars within these new places, and as a result, new cigar companies were established within these regions. In 1992, the birth of *Cigar Aficionado* led to a global “Cigar Renaissance” because of its impact on public perceptions of cigars and the “lifestyle” that smoking them supposedly promotes.<sup>2</sup>

#### 3.2 Basic Cigar Vocabulary

Any cigar aficionado knows quite a lot about cigar terminology and etiquette, and in order to understand certain aspects of this paper, it is important that I give a brief overview of some of these concepts and terms. First and foremost, when I refer to cigars and cigar smoking, I am referring to premium cigars, which are made exclusively by hand and from long leaf tobacco. Premium cigars are much different than machine made cigars, and both of the retailers that I studied sold exclusively handmade, premium cigars. When smoking a premium cigar, there are procedures that must be taken before actually smoking it. Cigars are stored in humidors, which are humidified boxes or rooms that are meant to ensure the cigars maintain optimal condition. If a cigar becomes too dry, the flavors are not as pronounced, and the cigar will most likely unravel.

Customers of a cigar store typically go into a walk-in humidor to choose a cigar, and this process can be quite overwhelming to a beginner due to the wide variety of shapes, sizes, and brands. The shape and size of a cigar is referred to as a “vitola,” which are determined by the diameter and the length of the stick. The diameter is typically referred to as “ring gauge,” and it is measured at the bottom, or the foot, of the cigar. Some of the most popular sizes, going from smallest to largest, are petit robusto, robusto, corona, toro, and churchill. Cigar smokers tend to choose the vitola based on how long they plan on smoking, as the larger ones take longer than the smaller ones; a churchill might take two hours, whereas a petit corona might only take thirty minutes.<sup>2</sup>

Another factor in cigar selection is the wrapper, as this contributes a large amount to the overall flavor composition. Some of the wrapper names include *double claro*, which is green in color; *colorado*, which is a sandy light brown color; *maduro*, which is a darker brown color; and *oscuro*, which is almost black in color. Lighter wrappers tend to be milder in flavor, whereas darker wrappers have heavier and more complex flavors.<sup>2</sup> Brand is also an important factor in cigar choice. There are far too many brands to even attempt to list, but among the most popular in the United States are Fuente, Padron, Davidoff, Romeo y Julieta, and Rocky Patel.<sup>3</sup> While cigar smokers do enjoy trying new or different brands, it is very common for people to favor specific companies.

### 3.3 Cigar Rituals

Once the cigar has been selected, the smoker uses a cutting tool to create an airway at the closed end of the cigar, also known as the head. This can be done with a straight-cut guillotine, a v-cut guillotine, a punch, or special cigar scissors, and this choice is ultimately up to the consumer's preference. Once the cutting tool is decided upon, the cigar should be held in one hand, and with the other hand, the cutting tool should be used to take off just the very tip of the cigar. If the whole head is cut off, this can result in unraveling throughout the smoking process which is undesirable. Once cut, the cigar is ready to be lit, either by a wooden match, a butane lighter, or an already lit piece of Spanish cedar called a "spill."<sup>2</sup> Again, all three choices are based on preference and availability. Lighting a cigar takes precision in that the foot should be evenly lit without charring any of the wrapper. This is done by rotating the cigar over the flame to light the center of the foot as well as the outer edges. As an added step to this ritual, many choose to "toast," or pre-light, the foot of the cigar to ensure that the aroma of the cigar is noticeable while lighting.<sup>2</sup>

Once lit, the cigar is ready to be tasted and savored by gently puffing on it, making sure not to inhale or let the smoke go past the throat. Flavor is determined by both the taste and aroma of the cigar. Without smell, taste would be difficult to perceive, as the two go hand in hand. The different tastes in cigars cause sensations in specific areas of the tongue: sour is sensed on the outer sides of the tongue, sweetness and saltiness on the tip, bitterness in the back, and umami all over. All of these tastes should be considered in terms of attempting to describe a cigar's flavor.<sup>2</sup> Strength and flavor are two different concepts that are important to distinguish, as both are highly considered factors in choosing a cigar. While flavor describes the taste and smell, strength describes the levels of nicotine that the body will absorb upon smoking the cigar. A strong cigar will provide a higher amount of nicotine than a mild or medium strength cigar.<sup>2</sup>

Ashing is perhaps the simplest cigar ritual. Generally, cigar smokers ash the cigar when the ash is about one to two inches long, however ashing is ultimately up to the preference of the individual smoker. The only reason to ash a cigar is to prevent it from falling onto an unpredictable location. A cigar should not be ashed like a cigarette. Constantly ashing a cigar will make the stick too hot, and this will cause an unpleasurable smoking experience. Instead of flicking the ash off as one might do with a cigarette, the cigar should instead gently glide against the interior side of the ashtray, so the ash almost falls off on its own. Once the cigar is finished, it should be left in the ashtray to naturally get cold. If a cigar is extinguished by crushing, a strong odor will be released. It is also seen as distasteful to crush a cigar because they are seen as handmade works of art.<sup>4</sup> The desire to learn about cigar rituals and history is a key aspect in gaining acceptance into cigar smoking communities, and those who are already well-acquainted with this knowledge are typically met with open arms by other connoisseurs. In understanding all of this specialized knowledge that accompanies cigar smoking, enthusiasts are bonded to one another.

## 4. Industry

Another factor that bonds many cigar enthusiasts to one another is knowledge about the industry. The premium cigar industry is quite small, and many cigar retailers and consumers are attracted to the level of intimacy they can experience with the manufacturers. Discussing individual cigar stores without any reference to the uniqueness of the cigar industry itself would be a grave misdeed. Running a cigar store requires intimate relationships not only with customers, but also the suppliers. As Havana Phil explained, "Relationships are also important in this business. We know 85% [of the cigar manufacturers we work with] are family-owned businesses. So, we are on a first-name basis with all of the patriarchs or presidents of the companies we deal with." *The Tobacconist Handbook* asserts that retail tobacco stores are typically small, family owned businesses which correlates with the high number of family-owned premium cigar companies in the industry.<sup>2</sup> This may be one of the reasons why relationships in the industry are so tight-knit and personable.

### 4.1 Camaraderie in the Industry

Relationships in the business are built through attending cigar conventions, the frequent visits from cigar company representatives who have face-to-face meetings in regard to product supply, as well as the semi-frequent visits from the higher-up ranks of the companies, oftentimes the presidents or CEOs. In spending three months working at Havana Phil's, I made note of meeting a cigar company representative or president ten times, but this number is quite low because I did not work every single day throughout these three months. According to Philip Michael, the new president of Havana Phil's, "cigar reps" from each company usually come in once a month, which would mean at least one or two reps come in per week. Additionally, at almost every special cigar event that Havana Phil's hosts, a president or

someone in a high-ranking position in the company will come to host the event, and these events occur typically once or twice a month.

Within *The Connoisseur's Book of the Cigar*, Zino Davidoff, the legendary cigar manufacturer, describes his first experiences working within the cigar business. Within his description, he is able to depict the close relationships between tobacconists and consumers within the cigar industry. Zino's father, a tobacco merchant in Kiev, urged him to go to the United States and Latin America to get a taste of the business by himself. Before leaving on his journey, Davidoff was given "letters of introduction" written by his father to give to the tobacco merchants abroad. These letters were very valuable because in the business of cigars, "friendship is not an empty word."<sup>4</sup> Zino travelled across the United States and Latin America, and learned about cigars, especially in Cuba. Davidoff goes on to say that during his travels, he experienced "that sense of community that unites all tobacco people--growers, merchants, and devotees--wherever in the world they may be."<sup>4</sup> Zino's experience demonstrates the closeness that can be observed between the manufacturers, retailers, and consumers, which is now reinforced through these frequent and semi-frequent visits from the various cigar companies. This strong sense of camaraderie in the cigar industry was apparent to me from the time I began my fieldwork, but it became very salient after my father's death.

## 4.2 Death and the Wider Cigar Community

Death is something that usually leaves a huge impact on a community. The death of my father was no exception. The outpour of support that my family received from the regulars at Havana Phil's as well as those who work in the cigar industry was astounding. It allowed me to see a side of the cigar industry that I had never seen before, a side that was emotional, loving, and extremely supportive. What follow are excerpts from my fieldnotes in response to the shock of my father's death and the overwhelming amount of empathetic reactions we received from the cigar industry and the regulars at the shop.

*If there is one thing that the death of my father has taught me about cigar culture, it's that this industry is not just about business, it is more so about family and interconnectedness and love. Tomorrow is my dad's funeral, and already so many head honchos from industry have flown in to be here for us, for my dad. My family keeps receiving messages from people who say what a loss this is for the cigar industry and cigar lovers around the world. One person on Facebook said that, "He created a truly national destination for all who love the cigar lifestyle." A cigar news website even wrote an article about my father. Everyone has been so lovely during such a heartbreaking time.*

*After the funeral I wrote: Yesterday was the funeral--so many people from the industry came--most notably, Rocky Patel and Matt Booth. Several of our cigar reps came as well, many of whom my family knows very intimately. As the Jewish tradition goes, everyone at the burial ceremony shoveled three scoops of earth onto my dad's casket. Many people put cigars into the grave before they shoveled the three scoops. This was so touching because I knew my dad would have really appreciated the gesture. After the funeral, about 50 people flooded Havana Phil's to smoke cigars and celebrate my dad's beautiful life. Everyone there took a photo at the putting green in front of the Havana Phil's sign, and Rocky Patel wanted to put it in Cigar Aficionado to honor my dad. Since that day, we have received flowers and kind words from so many different companies (i.e. Davidoff, Ashton, La Palina, etc.). Through this tragedy, my family is held up by the support of cigar lovers around the world.*

About two weeks after the funeral, I went back to work at Havana Phil's. It was quite difficult to go back, but it was comforting to be surrounded by the love of our loyal customers. After my first day back, I wrote a short poem to show how the dynamics suddenly shifted within the shop:

*Death falls upon us.  
Your exuberance no longer fills these walls.  
Everyone feels it.  
The air reeks of grief.  
We share stories  
of how you brought us together--  
one way or another.  
If it weren't for you,  
there would be no "us."  
It will never be the same,  
but we keep going  
nevertheless.*

This poem echoes the feelings and thoughts that were expressed by the regulars and staff at Havana Phil's after my father's death. Most people have described my dad as "larger than life," and I find this descriptor to be very accurate. Without him there, the shop felt quite empty, which is something I really tried to convey in this poem. Because my dad founded Havana Phil's, he was somewhat responsible for every relationship that has formed within those walls, hence why there would be no "us" if it were not for him. Things will never be quite the same in his absence. My mother has become the new owner and my brother the new president, but there will always be something missing. Death creates holes in communities, but without community, there would be no support during times of adversity.

When I interviewed Randy, one of the regulars, we were discussing the loss of my dad, and he told me that if I ever needed anything, he would always be there for me. This support was offered to my family and me by many of our regulars, which was truly touching. As Randy put it, "We're family here--when one of us hurts, we all hurt." This attitude of communal empathy can also be seen in the cigar industry as a whole. I was informed by a cigar rep that during the International Premium Cigar and Pipe Retailers convention this July, the news that my father passed away quickly spread, and business completely stopped for a while. He was well-known and loved throughout the cigar world, and this terrible news was shocking to all of his friends in the industry. The death of Havana Phil had a massive impact on the small community he created, as well as the wider cigar community.

### 4.3 Camaraderie Between Businesses

Shortly after my father died, an employee from B&B Tobacconists came to Havana Phil's because he found himself in Greensboro. He brought special B&B cigars and his condolences from the B&B community. Ed, the manager of Havana Phil's, gave the man quite a few special Havana Phil's cigars in return. Reciprocity and camaraderie between businesses also seems to be an intrinsic aspect of the cigar industry. In an interview with Charlie, the manager of B&B, he explained that their business is on great terms with the only other cigar lounge in Asheville. He noted that, "We are very good friends with them, and anytime there's something going on, like if they have a customer that comes in and is looking a little wishy washy and might be a threat, shoplifting whatever. We get a call and they say, hey somebody might be coming up, keep an eye on them. And we do the same back to them." This type of communication is quite unusual for competing businesses, but it suggests that the cigar industry operates differently than many other industries. It seems that in the cigar business, rather than being more successful than competitors, being on good terms is paramount.

Camaraderie within the industry and camaraderie within specific cigar lounge communities are inextricably linked. The closeness that many cigar enthusiasts have to those who work on the manufacturing side of the business is one of the many factors that makes cigar smoking a unique and attractive lifestyle. Cigar manufacturers show an impressive amount of attentiveness and familiarity with all consumers who are involved enough in the cigar realm. At one event that Havana Phil's had with Plasencia Cigars, I overheard Nestor Plasencia Jr., the CEO of the company, saying that he would prefer not to call this night an "event," but rather a gathering or celebration because he would like it to feel more personal. That night, I watched him interact with all of the people who came to the store, which was an honor for many of the customers, as Plasencia has been growing tobacco for the biggest companies in the business (i.e. Fuente and Rocky Patel) for many years. Nestor's words and actions that night illustrated the fact that premium cigar companies truly care about their customers and retailers. Because it is such a small industry, the manufacturers have the privilege to be very personable, and this is one reason as to why people might be attracted to cigar communities.

## 5. Acceptance

Once someone has decided to actively seek out a cigar community, acceptance is the next step. From my observations at Havana Phil's Cigar Company and B&B Tobacconists, I have gathered that acceptance in cigar communities is something that comes with time and practice. Having basic knowledge about cigars and cigar smoking or having a desire to learn is crucial. Most avid cigar smokers that I observed were welcoming to all, even newcomers, but it was also quite clear that knowledge and confidence go a long way in terms of gaining full acceptance into a cigar smoking community. At Havana Phil's and B&B Tobacconists, the owners and employees are eager to teach newcomers about the vast knowledge that cigar smoking encompasses, but it is also quite nice for them to have customers who know exactly what they are doing in terms of both choosing and smoking the cigar.

## 5.1 Acceptance with Knowledge

Upon conducting fieldwork at Havana Phil's one day, Philip Michael, my brother and the new president of the company, was complaining about a customer who claimed to know certain things about how cigars were grown and what that signified. The customer's assertions were false, and when he attempted to explain where they were wrong, the customer became completely uninterested. The customer's supposed arrogance and lack of knowledge caused Philip Michael to not be very "accepting" of this particular individual. In addition to having an awareness of the unique ways that premium tobacco is grown and cigars are manufactured, understanding the rituals and etiquette that goes along with cigar smoking is also another valued trait amongst many cigar smokers.<sup>4</sup> Knowing what cigar profiles one might prefer; knowing how to cut a cigar with the proper cutting tools, making sure only the very top layer is cut; knowing how to light a cigar by simultaneously puffing, lighting, and slowly turning the stick; knowing when to ash a cigar before it gets too long; and knowing how to gently puff, not inhale, a cigar are all things that can assist those wanting to enter the ritualistic realm of cigars.

## 5.2 Acceptance with Meaning

Many cigar smokers also assign value in having a meaningful connection to cigars, as Zino Davidoff so eloquently illustrates by saying, "The cigar has been my life. I owe it everything: my deepest pleasure and my anguish, the joys in my work as well as my leisure time, and, if I have acquired over the years some bit of knowledge and philosophical stance, again I am in debt to the cigar."<sup>4</sup> The assignment of deeper meaning can often be another bonding point for cigar smokers who share this sentiment. In an interview with Ed, the manager at Havana Phil's, he described his cigar smoking journey: "I bought two books just to learn about cigars--what to do, what not to do, just the whole etiquette--'cause there's a lot to learn. And just educated myself in the cigar world, and so, I got into it and loved it. It became part of who I am, you know?" While Ed's understanding of cigars differs a bit from that of Zino's, both of these interpretations point to the fact that cigars offer more than just an activity to engage in as a pastime, and they are often an essential part of people's lives. Those who assign deeper meaning to cigars are often more quickly accepted into cigar communities because it is a major bonding point over which enthusiasts connect.

I had no trouble with gaining acceptance at Havana Phil's because I was already a part of that community due to my position as the founder's daughter. However, I did struggle with acceptance at B&B. As I already had a meaningful relationship with cigars and understood the basic rituals, my problem with acceptance was not because of these criteria; and while my gender was a factor in my problems with initial acceptance at B&B, the more salient issue was that I was unfamiliar the norms and customs that took place specifically in this establishment. Upon my second visit to B&B, I was introduced to these norms and customs that I was unaware of before, and I began to understand the significance of the B&B community to those who are a part of it. The following excerpt from my field notebook underlines this shift in perspective.

*After purchasing my cigar this time, I sat in the in the arrangement of brown cushioned chairs that form a circle with the "Saturday Morning Liars Bench." Beside me were two customers: Rob, a grey-haired older white man with glasses and a cane, sporting neutral-colored pants, shirt, vest, and shoes--all different hues of brown and green; and Ben, a dark-haired white man with a young face and glasses, wearing a black button down and jeans. After a minute of sitting, carefully cutting of the tip of my cigar with my personal pink cigar cutter and lighting my cigar up by carefully puffing and rotating the cigar, Rob asked me what I was studying. I made it clear that I was surprised at his assumption that I was attending college, but he explained that the notebook and pen on my lap (my field journal) gave it away. I then told him that I am an Anthropology student interested in studying cigar culture.*

*This clearly intrigued both of the men beside me. Ben told me about how much he loves cigar culture and how he wishes he was born in the 1930s, back when it was more popular. Rob seemed to be intrigued in a different way; he began to give me advice about studying the culture specifically at B&B. Apparently Saturday mornings from about ten to twelve, there are a bunch of characters who come in-- "old, fat, white guys" like Rob. He then went on to explain that all of these men are "has-beens:" doctors, lawyers, military men, and policemen. He was excited to tell me about all of the frequent customers because are all indeed "has-beens" and, according Rob, the only thing worse than a "has-been" is a "never was." This is why it is good I have direction in my life, Rob explained. He then went on to say that all of these "has-beens" who come on Saturday mornings talk about a variety of subjects ranging from politics to storytelling.*

*While we were on the topic of B&B, I decided to ask him what the "Saturday Morning Liars Bench" in front of me was all about. Before, I assumed it might have something to do with men lying to their wives, but it turned out that my*

assumption was incorrect. According to Rob, back when the father of the current owner, David, owned B&B, there was a group of regulars who came in every Saturday morning and sat on that bench to “tell stories,” but these stories typically involved some sort of lying or exaggerating, a custom that has carried over through the generational shift. Rob then explained that there is a wall towards the entrance of the store that has all of these regulars’ pictures hanging on it. There is a line on that wall and those below the line have passed away, so there is a saying amongst the current regulars that “if you’re below the line, you’re good.” Rob then told me that his picture is hanging up on the wall, and Ben sadly complained that his picture, although framed and ready to go, had yet to be hung up on the wall.

of all of the intricacies of the store’s dynamics. It seemed to be a place that he often went to for relaxation and socialization, an opinion shared by many of the regulars that I had the chance to interview at Havana Phil’s. In a later interview, Charlie, the manager of B&B, informed me that this wall of regulars that Rob was referring to is called the Wall of Un-Usual Suspects. He expanded on Rob’s explanation by saying:

This place has been here long enough that some of those faces have faded away. And we have a rope, you’ll notice there’s a rope and there’s a row above that rope. Well the saying here is, if someone asks how you’re doing, ‘well I’m below the rope, everyday below the rope is another day.’ Everybody above the rope is no longer with us, and the past year and a half has been rather difficult, we’re about to add another row above the rope. But it’s a big part of the shop. These guys are all a big part of the shop.

As seen with Havana Phil, death affects the entire community, and members within cigar communities often hold one another up during times of grief and heartache. David Barnes, the owner of B&B, explained that his former partner Mike Booher is a photographer, and for years he has been taking photos of the regulars and putting them up on the wall. According to David, the regulars must be asked to have their picture taken, not the other way around. After my interview with David, we walked over to the wall to discuss it further, and he pointed out a photo of his father who started the business and passed away several years ago, as well as two of his dogs, one of which had passed away. This wall symbolizes the tight knit community that has formed at B&B, a community that has formed through the love of premium tobacco and the culture that goes along with it. Through my work at both field sites, I have found that two unique communities have formed at each cigar lounge, both possessing their own norms, customs, and histories. Regulars come to these establishments to relax, smoke a cigar or two, and engage in conversation with fellow cigar enthusiasts.

## 6. Informal Public Life

In Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone*, he dedicates a whole chapter to “Informal Social Connections” in which he labels those who continuously engage in informal social activities as “*schmoozers*.”<sup>5</sup> According to Putnam, *schmoozers* participate in a range of social activities every day, such as throwing dinner parties, frequenting bars and clubs, and visiting with family and friends. Later in the chapter, Putnam asks, “How about *schmoozing* at the real-life equivalent of *Cheers*, the neighborhood bar ‘where everybody knows your name?’”<sup>5</sup> Aligning with the main argument of his book, Putnam explains that even these sort of informal social connections are declining in the United States, just as “American community” as a whole is declining. This argument is quite interesting when looking at it through the lens of a cigar lounge community member.

### 6.1 Contradicting Putnam

Frequenting a cigar lounge would certainly fit under Putnam’s list of the various activities that *schmoozers* might engage in. While smoking a cigar by oneself does occur, it is likely that it will occur in a group setting, especially if the cigar smoking is taking place in public. Within the past few decades, cigar sales have risen a significant amount<sup>6</sup> and since 2012, cigar lounge revenue has increased by almost three percent, which can be seen as an effect of the overall increase in demand for premium cigars, as well as a decrease in public spaces where smoking is permitted.<sup>7</sup> As seen within many accounts at both B&B and Havana Phil’s, cigar lounges are environments that tend to provoke a sense of camaraderie, particularly amongst people who frequent these lounges. Therefore, Putnam’s argument might remain sound in terms of American communities as whole, but not when looking at cigar communities specifically.

Cigar stores, such as B&B Tobacconists and Havana Phil’s, are prime examples of environments where *schmoozers* from around the city come to smoke cigars and engage in informal social connection on a regular basis. For example, the Saturday morning regulars at B&B that Rob introduced me to are a group of *schmoozers* who meet at least once a

week to smoke and converse. Informal social connections similar to those made at B&B and Havana Phil's can be probably be found throughout most cigar lounges in the United States. This inference is based on the tendency that people have to smoke in groups when in a cigar lounge full of fellow enthusiasts, and also the inclination that people have to engage in conversation when sitting in groups such as these. Informal social connections are certainly a major feature within the cigar smoking community at Havana Phil's in Greensboro. What follows is a series of interactions that I observed during my first day of work at Havana Phil's Cigar Company this past summer, which highlights the everyday informal social connections that are forged within this establishment.

*I find myself sitting in a circle of dark brown leather chairs in the back part of the Davidoff Lounge. Within the circle are a few of the regulars: Mick Jones, "Pauly Paul," and David Herrera, who keeps popping in and out of the room. Before any sort of significant conversation takes off, Havana Phil walks in. His boisterous personality immediately fills the room, and he begins to joke around with Mick, which involves a series of play-fighting and cussing about this and that. Upon noticing that I am taking notes on this interaction, Paul explains that Havana Phil's is an interesting site to study because, "You can sit in the middle of this lounge and say, 'I need a doctor, I need a lawyer, I need a plumber,' and you can find all of these without even leaving the lounge." Havana Phil chimes in and adds, "A lot of these guys have made lifelong friends here." David, observing this situation as he pops in again, comments that "this place is like Cheers."*

A few months later in an interview, David Herrera elaborated on his *Cheers* comparison, "I think that one thing that's cool about places like this is people who go to lounges regularly, people I hang around, become family. Like half of these people who come in here, I'd never hang around them if I never came to a place like this, but they're like family." In another interview, Havana Phil shared similar sentiments to David Herrera's:

To me it [cigar culture] means camaraderie, the equalization of class when you walk into a cigar store. You've got doctors and lawyers and judges and politicians, and you've got street sweepers and laborers, and everybody's on an even plane. Everybody talks to everybody, nobody's better than anybody because everybody's got something in common, which is that they love to smoke cigars. So that's what is really cool about this business, and since we've been open about 7, 7 and a half years, I can name twenty plus very close friendships that have been formed in our business, and these people would not have otherwise known each other.

These observations, made by regulars within the community, as well as the founder of the establishment, implicate that Havana Phil's is yet another cigar smoking community in which *schmoozers* from around the city come to socialize and smoke cigars. Putnam argues that places with *Cheers*-like atmospheres are becoming obsolete, but this is clearly not the case when looking at cigar lounges in particular.

## 6.2 Cigar Lounges as "Third Places"

The cigar lounge can be seen as an example of what Ray Oldenburg has coined as a "third place." Third places are defined by the characteristic that they are neither the home nor the workplace, and more importantly, they possess a strong sense of community. Oldenburg argues that third places are an integral part of the health of individuals as well as the wider communities in which they live.<sup>8</sup> As David Herrera and many other regulars at Havana Phil's have described, the shop is a place where they have found a "family," or a group of friends that care deeply about one another. Having an alternative family provides another network of social support for people who may not have a family in the traditional sense, people whose families live far away, and even for people who have a family in town but feel they need other social connections to stimulate their lives.

Third places often provide benefits to peoples' lives that cannot possibly be provided solely by work or family. As Oldenburg puts it, "In the absence of an informal public life, people's expectations toward work and family life have escalated beyond the capacity of those institutions to meet them. Domestic and work relationships are pressed to supply all that is wanting and much that is missing in the constricted life-styles of those without community,"<sup>8</sup> hence the importance of third places in terms of someone's well-being. Informal social connections within third places provide an opportunity for people to gain what they might be missing within their family and work lives. Cigar communities, such as Havana Phil's and B&B Tobacconists, can be seen to provide this "missing piece," and while American community as a whole might be declining, cigar communities are surely not lacking participants, as seen at B&B Tobacconists and Havana Phil's.

## 7. Diversity

In analyzing the significance of cigar communities, some significant questions that came up during this process were: What do these communities look like? Who is accepted in these communities? Who feels comfortable here? These questions arose as I was conducting my fieldwork at B&B because of the many times I had to assert myself in order to be considered a fellow cigar enthusiast by all of the male regulars. As a woman cigar smoker, I became interested in any remnants of exclusivity in the cigar world. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, cigar smoking in the United States was overwhelmingly an upper class, white male pastime. Up until the 21st century, cigars in the United States and Europe were seen as a symbol of male domination and wealth. Women who smoked in these regions in the 20th century were viewed as “deviant in other aspects of their lives and a danger to the stability of their households.”<sup>9</sup> Women of color in particular were depicted in tobacco art during this time as “exotic” and were often the hypersexualized focal point of many cigar wrappers, boxes, and advertisements.

Unfortunately, exploitation of women has continued into the 21st century within cigar advertisements. LaTour et al. explains that women in the contemporary United States experience an interesting paradoxical relationship within cigar culture. “While some have publicly used [cigars] to display their independence and liberation, the cigar industry itself has and continues to use women as sexual images to sell their products, in ways that would make many feminists balk.”<sup>6</sup> Today women are still hypersexualized in certain cigar advertisements, as seen within popular magazines like *Cigar Aficionado*.<sup>6</sup>

Despite these current and historical limitations for women cigar smokers, there has been a significant rise in female cigar consumers. In a 1995 *Cigar Aficionado* article, the author explains that:

Increasingly, women are starting to smoke cigars, or are coming out of the closet as longtime cigar smokers. They're enjoying the aroma and taste and ritual--and why shouldn't they? It's not an anomaly or a coincidence [...] At trendy clubs such as Manhattan's Le Cigar at Tatou and Cigar Bar, at Big Smokes where traditionally the only women were mini-skirted "spokesmodels," and at George Sand Society events, where women outnumber men three to one, cigar aficionadas are a visible new presence.<sup>10</sup>

From my ethnographic research, I found that many of the women I was able to interview had a variety of opinions in terms of why they smoke cigars, and how they are treated within the cigar world. I will begin this analysis by presenting an excerpt and a poem from my fieldnotes that accentuate the initial struggles I had with acceptance as a woman at B&B Tobacconists.

*At about 3:30 on January 27, I walked into B&B Tobacconists for the third time in my life. As soon as I opened the door, a slew of smoke poured out. The store itself, located in a very old house on one of the main streets in Asheville, seemed to be stuck inside a time capsule from the 1970s--the floors were all hardwood, the walls were brown and some wood paneled, the chairs and couches were all brown, and there was a built-in bench against the window facing the street. Above the bench hung a sign that read, "The Saturday Morning Liars Bench." I began to ponder what that meant--who are the "liars" lying to? To their wives perhaps? Whatever it meant, I was not sure I liked the sign.*

*The gray-haired cashier, who is the owner of the establishment, began by apologetically asking me for my ID--he explained that most men who he IDs often get offended by this question. I smiled at this, immediately noticing his inclination to comment on my gender. He then told me that he appreciated me as a female cigar smoker because most women who come into his store do not "stick around," as the cigar world can be quite intimidating for women. Although this could be considered a problematic statement, I could certainly see where he was coming from because I was quite intimidated to even walk into this store by myself. I then proceeded to tell him that my dad owns a cigar store in Greensboro--Havana Phil's--and he exclaimed, "No way! That man is a legend." Flattered, I told him I would notify my dad of his apparent reputation.*

*With my newly bought cigar, I sat down on the large leather rocking chair and began to cut and light on of my Camachos. As I was doing this, the owner asked if Camacho was one of my favorites, to which I responded a list of my favorite cigars while including Camacho in the mix. After this brief interaction, I began indulging in my cigar. The older white man sitting beside me on another cozy-looking chair commented on the size of the cigar wrapper on my cigar because it was unusually long. By that time, I needed to take this label off, as I was about halfway through with the stick. I answered him, and he asked where I was from and then a series of other small-talk questions. This conversation led me to wonder about the possible demographics of the customers at B&B. Judging from my observations of the four or five white middle aged men sitting in there, my guess was that primarily white, middle-class, middle-aged men frequent this store--hence why my appearance seemed to be so surprising. At around 4:05,*

*the owner began closing up shop and around that time, my cigar was conveniently coming to an end. I grabbed all of my things, thanked the owner, and told him that I would certainly be back.*

After this experience, I constructed a poem about the emotions and thoughts I was having:

*Smoke seeps outside,  
My body wanders in.*

*Melodic laughter surrounds me  
As I enter the small, damp box  
Full of boxes. Boxes and sticks.  
Strange yet familiar here;  
The cedar smell seduces me.*

*“Welcome, welcome, welcome.  
Women are welcome.”  
Am I? Welcome?  
Or merely an anomaly,  
An outsider with connections?*

*I can feel the stares,  
The curiosity,  
The confusion.*

*“Who is she?”  
“What does she know?”  
“Why is she here?”*

*Blend in.  
Act natural.  
Cut, light, puff.  
Suddenly at ease.*

## 7.1 Initial Interest in Gender

What this account and this poem seem to point out is B&B Tobacconists’ status as a community with a male majority, a community in which I immediately felt the need to establish my position as the daughter of a cigar store founder in order to feel comfortable. Based on several experiences within this field site, it is strange to many of the regular customers at B&B that a young woman would have any interest in smoking cigars. For example, upon my third time conducting fieldwork at B&B, an older gray-haired white man with a veteran hat on asked me how long I had been smoking cigars, to which I responded, “since I was 16.” His immediate response to this was, “Why?” He wanted to know why a woman--especially of my age--would be interested in such an activity, an activity predominantly enjoyed by older white men in the United States. Of course, I explained to him that my father owns a cigar store, which sparked my interest in smoking. This answer seemed to satisfy him, but what if I had not told him about my father? What if my father did not teach me about cigars? How would the man have interpreted this information without a “sufficient” answer?

When I interviewed Dawn, a middle-aged African American woman who is a regular at Havana Phil’s, she told me that she has never felt she was treated any differently as a woman in cigar smoking settings. She specifically noted, “I feel the same, like one of the guys. You know? ‘Cause I’ve been in the game since 1999, I can usually smoke a guy on the table, I mean the stronger the better.” Feeling like “one of the guys” was also expressed by Renee, who is a middle-aged, middle class African-American woman regular at Havana Phil’s. Women might choose to take on more masculine roles in a male-dominated community in order to gain and maintain acceptance. While I had my position as the daughter of the founder of Havana Phil’s to fall back on, Dawn and Renee might also have needed some sort of crutch to feel more accepted. Renee also mentioned cigar smoking to be a “boss move,” and Dawn echoed this opinion by explaining that cigar smoking means “power.” She further explained by noting that, “Back in the day when we could smoke in public in bars, I was smoking and selling real estate, and I would fire up a cigar and I swear it was the

power of the cigar. I got more leads sitting in that stool with a cigar and a drink on the rocks.” In other words, Dawn used her cigar smoking to wield power and attract clients with her confidence as a woman partaking a male-dominated activity.

Renee expressed similar sentiments to mine about being treated as an outsider in certain cigar smoking settings. When I asked Renee about her experience as a woman cigar smoker, she explained that she is treated differently depending on what cigar smoking venue she is at:

I will throw this out there, I went to Charlotte Cigar, and it wasn't very woman-friendly. It was more guy-friendly, so that was a little interesting to me. But I also realize that smoking cigars for a woman is still very taboo because it's always been a guy thing. And women smoking cigars is like, almost like you're trying to take a role of a man. So, it kind of makes it a little bit harder, but I'm one that likes to press up against the grain, so I'm going to do the things that people say, okay, you shouldn't do. So yeah, as a woman smoker you get treated differently regardless, unless you're in a very open, diverse community. It's diverse here, but when you go outside of here, it's really not that diverse.

From Renee's point of view, Havana Phil's is much more diverse than some other cigar lounges, which is perhaps one of the features that has kept her coming back. Although Havana Phil's is still a community with a male majority, according to Renee's comments, there is an element of openness that might not be found at some other cigar smoking establishments.

## 7.2 Effects of Environment on Customer Demographics

Renee's observations suggest that not all cigar communities are demographically uniform, despite the historical homogeneity of cigar culture in the United States. While some cigar-smoking communities, such as B&B Tobacconists, attract the stereotypical bunch of mostly middle-aged white men, others, such as Havana Phil's, seem to attract a more diverse customer basis in terms of race and gender. Despite the homogeneity of B&B in terms of race and gender, the regulars there are quite diverse in terms of economic class. The diversity of the cities that each of these cigar stores are located in certainly plays a significant role in the customer basis of these establishments, but another contributing factor is the environment created within these cigar lounges.

The environment at B&B is quite old-fashioned. In fact, they pride themselves in being “Western North Carolina's Legendary Old-Time Tobacco Shop.” The business itself was founded in 1979, and it is located in an old house on one of the busiest streets in Asheville. The front porch is filled with rocking chairs, and upon entering the front screen door, the two other smoking arenas are visible: to the right is a rectangular room with dark brown furniture and a ceiling filled with empty cigar boxes, and to the left is the retail space with the Saturday Morning regulars' infamous smoking circle. In both of these spaces, the walls are filled with signs that have been collected over a long period of time with various quotes and sayings on them, and there are also TVs that typically play muted sports games. According to Charlie, the manager of B&B, most of the furniture, trinkets, and wall decorations have been collected overtime as donations from the regulars, hence why many of these items look dated. The air throughout the store is constantly clouded with smoke, despite the ceiling fan and cracked window used for ventilation; and the walls, floors, and furniture are all different shades of brown.

In contrast, Havana Phil's has a more modern atmosphere, which could be one reason for its less uniform group of regulars. Located on one of the busiest streets in Greensboro, Havana Phil's is a tan building lined with dark brown wood paneling with a large animated sign on the front that says, “Havana Phil's Cigar Company.” Below the sign is a small putting green that is mostly used for photo opportunities. The retail space is filled from head to toe in signs, art, cigar accessories, jewelry cases, and another small humidor that is meant mostly for flavored cigars. The air in this room has no smoke whatsoever, as smoking is not allowed in the retail space in order to accommodate non-cigar smoking customers. In the background, a steady stream of 70s hits is played in order to promote an exciting and vibrant mood for customers.

There is a glass door off to the side, opposite of the humidor, that leads to the Rocky Patel lounge, which is open for public use. The Rocky Patel lounge is meant to be relaxing and playful, and The Beatles are always played in order to contribute to that mood. Right past the retail check out space is a door that leads to the La Bodega patio, named after Ernest Hemingway's favorite hangout spot in Havana. Two live palm trees and one faux light-up palm tree surround the patio gates. La Bodega is supposed to have a tropical, vacation-like environment, so Latin Jazz is the music genre of choice in this arena.

The entrance to the Davidoff lounge, which is located at the front entrance of Havana Phil's, has two tinted glass doors with a card scanner to the right side of them. This scanner is for the members' only cards that allow access to the lounge after retail hours. Entering through these doors, there is a brick-walled hallway on which a couple of unique art pieces are hung, including a metal sculpture of a flying human that has a spotlight shining on it to cast a shadow of the sculpture onto the wall. The soft sounds of Frank Sinatra and other related artists are always playing, which is meant to contribute to the classy and relaxing atmosphere of the lounge. Some of the main features of this space are a circular window that overlooks the busy street; a gas fireplace, above which hangs the "Davidoff Lounge" sign; five televisions that display a constant stream of sporting events; six bubble-like light fixtures; a white granite bar which is lined with burnt orange cushioned bar stools; as well as several clusters of smooth brown leather chairs and squeaky clean black side tables with white Davidoff ashtrays on them. In addition to the city's general demographics, the more contemporary features at Havana Phil's can be seen as another contributing factor to its more diverse crowd in terms of both race and gender.

### 7.3 Demographic Analysis

Within my ten visits to B&B, I never saw a woman sitting in either of the lounges to smoke a cigar. However, upon asking Charlie the manager about how women who are regulars, he informed me that, "The lady who was just in, she comes in about every week. I've got many. And it's trendy, even right now with the reps, there's a lot of female reps. Jaxx and Carolee, I've got a few. It's nice to see." He also told me that one of their regulars is a transgender woman, who often comes and sits at the main smoking circle in the retail space. While Charlie said that he has "many" women who come in as regulars, I am a bit skeptical considering the fact that I was treated as a rarity within my first few visits to the store. Additionally, I only observed one person of color sitting in the lounge within my ten visits. The overwhelming majority of white regulars probably has to do with the fact that the city of Asheville is 82% White and only 12% African-American.<sup>11</sup> Another factor might be B&B's "old timey" environment, which seems to attract middle-aged white men. Despite the lack of diversity in terms of race and gender, B&B does have a large variety of regulars from different class backgrounds. David Barnes, the owner, described his customer basis by saying, "Well it's eclectic because we've got millionaires and we've got people that work for minimum wage in the kitchen up at Greenlife. And we've got all kinds of retired people, attorneys, doctors, there's just all kinds of folks." From my experiences in the field and talking with the regulars on Saturday mornings, this assertion seems to be quite accurate, and the more modest, relaxed atmosphere in comparison to other lounges could be a factor in this.

Demographically speaking, the regulars at Havana Phil's are more diverse than B&B, particularly in terms of race and gender. Although I never managed to get exact statistics, according to Havana Phil, "People from different countries, of all ethnicities [come into the store]. Obviously, your white and African-American populations in Greensboro are most prevalent, and I would say, I couldn't tell you I have more African American customers or more white customers, but it's probably close to even." Of the ten regulars that I managed to interview, half were white, and half were African American. Within my fieldnotes, I often noted that there were mostly white and African-American customers in the store, and typically it was about half and half, perhaps a few more white customers than African-American customers at any given time. These observations seem to correlate with Greensboro's general population, which is about 40% African-American and 55% White.<sup>12</sup>

Gender diversity at Havana Phil's is a lot better than other cigar stores, such as B&B, but it is still certainly lacking. From my observations over the course of the three months I did fieldwork at Havana Phil's, I came to the conclusion that there are only about four women who come in often and are considered part of the "regular" crowd. From the perspectives of the three women that I was able to interview, the regulars at Havana Phil's are almost like a "second family" to them, indicating that these women feel they have gained a high level of acceptance within this group. According to estimates made by Philip Michael, the new president of Havana Phil's, there are about forty people who are a part of the regular crowd, coming in anywhere from one to nine times a week. This would mean that women make up about ten percent of the regular crowd, which is a very significant percentage when considering the historical limitations for women in terms of publicly smoking cigars.

Another demographic area that I looked into is that of education levels. Of the ten regulars that I interviewed, three had master's degrees, five had bachelor's degrees, and two had associate degrees. In other words, many regulars at Havana Phil's have some form of college education. Additionally, of the ten people that I interviewed, none worked blue collar jobs, although a lot of them were in the sales field or were teachers. All of the ten interviewees were members of the Davidoff Lounge, which costs 500 dollars per year, and most people who are members of the lounge are middle or upper class because these social locations allow for extra time and enough money to be spent on luxury

items, such as cigars and alcohol. With this information in mind, it would be unreasonable to expect a large number of working-class people to be members of the exclusive Davidoff lounge.

Despite the class disparities in terms of the Davidoff Lounge, in many interviews with both regulars and people who work at Havana Phil's, it was mentioned that the customers there come from a variety of different occupations and class backgrounds. One of the regulars, Neil, explained that, "You have people who walk in here and if you didn't know about it, you wouldn't know that they're running a multi-million-dollar corporation. Or you have people who just came from surgery, or they just came from digging a ditch or painting a house [...] But everybody interacts like we're just on the same plane, the same level." This idea of equality amongst cigar smokers is significant, and it was echoed by many of the other regulars and employees that I spoke to.

## 8. Conclusion

From evidence at B&B and Havana Phil's, it seems that no matter the class, race, or gender of a cigar smoker, the only aspect of identity that ultimately matters in terms of acceptance is that they are interested in cigars. As Ed, the manager of Havana Phil's, said in an interview, "Cigar culture is a great unifier. In this day and age where it seems like people draw lines in the sand--I'm left, I'm right, I'm this, I'm that. Cigars bring everybody together." Cigars often serve as a social glue, bonding those who partake in the act, no matter their social status. While this has not always been true in the United States, evidence from my fieldwork shows that cigar culture is changing in that it has become more accessible to and popular amongst women, people of color, and those within the working class.

Cigar lounges in the United States can be seen to provide a liminal space between work and home for people to relax, socialize, and partake in an act that requires specialized knowledge which bonds people not only to the cigars themselves, but also the unique communities that have formed around them. Community amongst cigar smokers is forged through historical knowledge, ritual, technical knowledge (i.e. how tobacco is grown, rolled, distributed, etc.), symbolism or meaning, and quite obviously the act of smoking cigars. While there is still room for improvement in terms of making these communities more welcoming to people who are not white upper-class men, it seems that there has been a significant amount of positive change in terms of diversity. Not only are these communities diversifying, but they are also expanding in size.

With the rise in cigar lounge revenue within the past couple of decades, cigar stores have increasingly become environments where *schmoozers* from around the city come to smoke cigars and engage in informal social connection on a regular basis. Unfortunately, there is growing concern for the survival of the premium cigar industry, but clearly not because of a lack of consumers. The fear stems from the rise in FDA regulations, as they have been increasing taxes on premium cigars at a substantial rate in order to discourage tobacco use. In *The Tobacconist Handbook*, Jorge Armenteros notes that beginning in 2009, "Business and brand consolidations continue in the cigar and pipe tobacco industry as the culture war against smokers continues to grow. Taxation and denormalization of smokers are reaching new heights, which threatens the industry, consumers, and basic freedoms."<sup>2</sup> Not only does the industry feel under attack, but so do the loyal consumers. While this shared oppression may be another bonding point for cigar enthusiasts, it is certainly not viewed as a positive bonding mechanism. If the cigar industry were to be made extinct, cigar smokers would be robbed of an activity that has provided so much meaning to their lives.

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