

"Laws are like sausages:

it's best not to see how they're made"

Otto von Bismarck

And, as Alwyn Sambrook discovers, many weird laws are still in force...

'Six days shalt thou labour'...

For centuries, the old biblical instruction about taking Sunday off guided the tasks and timetables of Christian workers, ensuring the seventh day remained untainted. From the Pilgrim Fathers onwards, Puritan settlers in the New World compiled Sunday laws to keep alehouses empty and churches full. Throughout the US many of these edicts still survive.

In 21st-century America, it's illegal on Sunday... to sell toothpaste and a toothbrush to the same person (Rhode Island); for a man to sport a moustache that causes laughter in church (Alabama); for widows to undertake parachute jumps (Florida); to sell lettuce (Virginia) or ring-binders (Maryland); to use trombone players to advertise auctions (Utah); during church services, to stutter (Colorado) or allow your children to burp (Nebraska); to cross the road, 'unless absolutely necessary' (Minnesota); to pawn dentures to pay off gambling debts (Las Vegas); for a man to kiss his wife (Connecticut) or merely to scowl at her (Michigan); to buy beer after midnight – but you can buy it on Monday (supreme logic from Houston, Texas); to play dominoes (Arkansas); for snakes to bite humans - 'unless it's snowing' (which must keep Idaho lawyers busy); to interrupt a religious meeting by holding a horse race (Washington); or to use an elephant to plough cotton fields (N. Carolina).

Many such prohibitions were supposed to ensure people spent their Sundays in church (or, at least, not drinking), but services in some states are not all stiff and joyless. In Maine men are expected to take rifles to church in case of attack by Native Americans, while in otherwise-not-much-fun Massachusetts the only place where tightrope-walking is allowed on a Sunday is in church.

It's encouraging to know legality and levity can still remain a first priority on the seventh day...

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