



The Invasion of the Couch Potatoes

This underground cult of inert TV watchers is threatening to turn vegetative viewing into an art form

By Jerry Camarillo Dunn Jr.

20

"My girl friend was over, but I sent her away 'cause she almost knocked the supper off my TV tray. Bring a load'a RC Cola, TV dinner, A plate of Twinkies. . .

*My girl friend's sweet, she ain't like no other, Lets me spend all day in front of that 24-inch color. . . **

* "Get a Load of This," an early anthem of the Couch Potato movement, by Armstrong and Dodge. © 1974, Yellow Bee Music.

Friends, do you suffer intellectual guilt while watching television for extended periods? Is a melted Three Musketeers bar your idea of chocolate mousse? Do your associates annoy you with half-baked theories that television viewing is a waste of time?

If your body conforms to the shape of your overstuffed sofa . . . if you know all the words to the theme song from *The Patty Duke Show*, then you should know about the society for prolonged television viewing—The Couch Potatoes.

"The name is perfect," explains Bob Armstrong, one of nine Couch Potato

"elders." "Potatoes have many eyes. They're tubers. It came to us in a cosmic revelation."

Armstrong recently was host of a gathering at the lodge's "rural retreat," a small farmhouse hidden in a cornfield in Dixon, Cal. The area not only gets decent TV reception but is located near a Couch Potato Mecca, the city of Davis, where Couch Potatoes claim, the TV dinner was invented.

Eight sets are stacked against the far wall of the living room opposite the couches. One uses an aluminum TV-dinner tray for an antenna. "It works very fine," Armstrong explains, "kind of like a miniature satellite dish." Its developer, member Jack Mingo, lowers his eyes modestly but only for a moment, since his favorite show, *Leave It to Beaver*, is flickering on set No. 4 and he doesn't want to miss a second.

Most of the sets are black-and-whites; one has a sepia-tone picture that Mingo calls "19th-century TV"; most others glow in out-of-whack color. The TVs were cast off by friends—an act incomprehensible to a true Couch Potato.

Lodge members, who number almost 1000 nationwide, have been called put-ons, pranksters and missionaries. Their claim is that they raise viewing to an art form. Fine cuisine, of course, is crucial to the Couch Potatoes' art. Elder Allan Dodge, known to Potatoes as "Chef Aldo, the Station-Break Gourmet," prepares one of his specialties at tube-side, using the "Couch Potato's second-best friend," the toaster-oven. Today's treat is Snack Mate cheese cemented into generic white bread with Hershey's chocolate syrup.

In a week of viewing, the typical Couch Potato eats his or her own weight in snacks. "For stamina," Chef Aldo advises, "always eat from all five major food groups: sugar, salt, grease, carbohydrates and alcohol."

Like the others at this gathering of the brethren, Aldo has donned an official Viewing Tunic—a T-shirt with the Couch Potato emblem and motto ("Sic Semper Potatum Reclinus") de-