What Is History Good For?

I want to begin with a thought experiment.

If you're older than forty in this audience, picture your high school yearbook photo.

If you're younger than forty, then picture any photo from your parents or grandparents wedding album or from the early years of their marriage and childrearing (traditionally, by the way, where photos are densest — as someone who has spent a lot of time browsing other people's photo albums).

How much are you like that person in the photo?

How much do you want to be like them?

And how much are you glad that either you have changed or times have changed?

Photos are great reminders, markers, of the past.

But they are terrible indicators of the present.

This place we're in now, Vermilionville, is one giant photo album,

capturing a moment in our potentially collective past.

But that's all it is. A photo album.

And one not without its problems.

First, it's not really our collective past, but only one facet of it.

Vermilionville leaves out the two largest ethnic immigrant groups in south Louisiana:

Germans

Africans

Second, the photos have been photoshopped, changed to fit our imagination of what the past may have looked like, which is not necessarily what it actually looked like.

This is rather like keeping the insert in the photo frame you buy at Target and saying it's your family because, you know, you too have a spouse and two kids.

Why begin with this cautionary tale?

Because this tendency to sacralize the past, especially only one version of the past is dangerous and keeps us, even those of us who are really Cajuns and Creoles from seeing ourselves as we really are

and the value in who we are,

and the value in what we do.

What I want to leave you with today, if I leave you with nothing else, is just how much you yourselves are part of history

and that you and your friends and your family are part of history

And you should treat yourselves and them with the same seriousness that you treat history

And, because we are in south Louisiana where serious play matters, that you should treat history as something to be played with.

This isn't how I imagined this talk, but I had an interesting experience last weekend.

I was at the Wooden Boat Festival in St. Martinville.

I had spent the morning in the dappled light of the banks of the Bayou Teche.

The christening of the wooden pirogue.

Official boat of Louisiana.

Pirogue is not French.

It's from the Spanish *piragua* and they probably first used it to describe dugout canoes they encountered in Africa.

To be honest, the dugout canoe exists around the world.

They aren't special.

At the other end of the park from the newly-christened pirogue, however, was a twenty-six foot, sleek, aluminum-hulled craft with U. S. Coast Guard markings.

The thing was magnificent.

Two two-hundred horsepower engines hung off its stern.

The welds along the hull were beautiful.

They have to be, the boat maker, Jimmy Gravois, told me.

The Coast Guard is so finicky about the welds on its board, he makes sure that each weld line is done by one man, so that the welds are consistent. If there are two parallel welds, he puts two men on the hull.

How many do you make? I asked Gravois.

I have to make one a week, he replied.

Wow, you must have a number of people in your shop.

120.

Now, think about that for a minute.

Everyone there was gathered around a wooden pirogue.

Heck, there was a video crew there recording the christening and there to film the parade of the putt putts.

No one was paying much if any attention to Gravois.

But he pays 120 people full-time salaries to make aluminum boats that are shipped all over, it turns out, all over the world.

Now, let me ask you this:

How many of you own a wooden boat?

How many of you drove here today in a wooden car?

Anybody here wearing wooden shoes?

(By the way, the French name for those are *sabots*, and if you want to protest your working conditions, you throw into the

mill gears, making things literally grind to a halt. When you throw your *sabots* like that, you have engaged in *sabotage*.)

You see where I am going with this?

Why is it we like to valorize useless old things when we have so many powerful things in our present?

Powerful things that come from us.

That we make.

That we imagined?

Case in point: the crawfish boat.

Or, let me put that another way:

you wanna know what makes Louisiana special?

It's this.

There is no other place on this planet — on this planet! — where you can drive down a highway and find yourself passing a boat, going down the same highway

The boat is not in a nearby canal

The boat is not on a trailer

The boat is on the damned road and there's a guy driving it.

And, if you're patient, you can watch him turn into a rice field and float.

That is crazy.

That is an example of the kind of wild imaginative thinking

Of problem solving

Of paradigm-shifting

Of any other jargony word about creativity that you can possibly imagine.

It's a damn boat that goes on land and water.

It's like something out of a fairy tale?

(And, in fact, it is.)

If you ask these guys how did they come up with this crazy-ass idea,

they'll look at you like you have lost your mind.

Ted Habetz and Maurice Benoit co-invented the hydraulic boat, though they were preceded by a period of wild experimentation.

Tiller foot.

Gerard Olinger moved the drive unit to the back and added front wheels.

"Going down the road..."

Kurt Venable made it a business.

Please note that I am not suggesting that everyone here should give up their professional lives and become farmers and fabricators.

Not at all.

But you can take your inspiration from them, draw from their wisdom of this place.

It's what poets do. Why not you?

To return us to the present moment, sitting here in Vermilionville:

Think about it this way.

The Village is maintained at a historical moment of something like 1870.

But when you hear music played here, the earliest it's going to be from is the 1920s,

(when commercial recording began)

The music you here is a magical combination of French words and melodies set to African rhythms and harmonies.

Indeed, there's reason to believe that the pentatonic scale that dominates American music is African in origin.

And the food you eat here, and perhaps in your own home, that you call Cajun and Creole, is a wonderful mix of a lot of cultures:

Here along the Teche, most of us enjoy especially the garlic-orientation given to us by the bayou's Italian immigrants

But music and food are but two facets of our lives.

Important ones.

Expressive ones.

But let's not forget that the French peasants who were first taught to clear marshes by closing them up with levees were in fact taught by Dutchmen, brought down for that very training.

And let's not forget that the explosion in commercial ricing agriculture came with the Palatinate Germans at the end of the nineteenth century,

who were themselves escaping an essentializing of what it culture,

of what it meant to be German.

Let's not turn anyone away.

Let's not turn ourselves away.

What do I mean by that?

I mean spend more time with your parents and grandparents.

I mean let your dad tell that damned favorite story of his one more time.

I mean let your too large Aunt Betty give you one more too wet kiss.

I mean make up songs to sing with your kids and spend time singing with them.

Or make up songs to sing with your partner or spouse.

How the heck do you think culture gets made?

Don't come here looking for it.

And don't come to my class hoping I'll give you instructions on how to be a proper Cajun.

I ain't gonna do that.

I am going to tell you to start paying better attention to your world.

To draw inspiration from it.

To appreciate it for what it is.

To appreciate the people around you for who they are.

Thank you.