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Seeing future through eyes of past

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Wherever I go, I always look for ghosts. It's not that I haven't taken my medications, I'm just curious about what came before in every place I've ever lived. How did people grow their food? Build their homes? How did they raise their children? How did they celebrate joyous occasions and mourn their losses?



Given that everything is shipped in from thousands of miles in today's world and "convenience" is the mantra, it's considered odd to care about the past. Yet I believe the glue that connected society for hundreds if not thousands of years was the wisdom that was passed on through the generations. Wisdom that is rapidly disappearing and being replaced by electronic gadgetry.

I first began my cultural explorations when I moved to South Florida. My grandparents had wintered there for nearly 30 years. I walked the paths they strolled in Miami Beach to better understand the life they lived. They were poor and certainly would not spend a dollar they didn't need to spend.

Many people told me my journey was useless. South Beach in those days was called "God's Waiting Room" by outsiders. Others called it "Varicose Beach" or the "Mausoleum by the Sea" since, back in the days before "Miami Vice," it was a mecca of elderly Jews and Cubans. Many assumed they were all waiting to die.

I launched an oral history project to investigate. I hoped to create a "memory project" that would share that history with the next generation. What I learned was that South Beach from the 1920s to the 1970s was anything but a sad place. With eight Yiddish theaters, half a dozen Yiddish radio stations, dozens of music circles performing on the white sand, literary groups, political programs of all stripes and religious organizations across the spectrum, it was a vibrant place. From dawn to dusk, there were scores of programs and activities to carry on their cultural legacy. The elderly of South Beach weren't waiting to die, they were there to live!

That's when I realized the importance of uncovering and sharing these cultural gems that were disappearing before our eyes. When I lost my grandparents, I hadn't just lost cherished elders and mentors who meant so much to me, I had lost a connection to history. And no portable electronic device or Google search would ever replace their knowledge, their wisdom and their worldview.

Soon the oral history project grew to become a documentary film, and I was heartened that film festivals around the world clamored to screen it at their venues. Ultimately a number of PBS stations jumped in as well, allowing tens of thousands to share in the joy of an era that could now live again.

This launched a journey for me to reveal the historical stories that give a community a true "sense of place." People often think historical preservation is about plaques on buildings and signs on street corners. That's nice. But for me, what's more important is to learn about the people who built those buildings, lived in those homes and

traveled those streets. It's people who make a community. And it's people who must strive to reawaken the value of the past if our future will truly be meaningful.

Many sacred places in our country have become tourist sites, a place to buy a T-shirt or have a "Kodak moment" to show our friends that we had an "authentic experience." However, the track record of tourist sites keeping alive the memories of a community is not very good. Too often, buildings are demolished and communities perish to make way for the natural "cashing in" that follows tourism. Before long, a town with a sense of history becomes just another place to check off on an AAA itinerary with little substance imparted to the tourist and nothing left for the native.

What makes Hendersonville and Western North Carolina special are the people, who against tremendous odds built a railroad and farmed in rugged territory under difficult circumstances to create a home, a community, a special place. I hope to capture this history with a new project I've begun under the auspices of the Center for Cultural Preservation, titled "The Mountain Elder Wisdom Project."

We're launching an oral history project that focuses on mountain people and African-American and Cherokee elders. I hope to tell their stories and make them accessible through an online database, produce a documentary film that's suitable for airing on PBS and ultimately a public programs project that will bring the film and the stories of our elders back to the communities where they belong.

I can't do this alone, and fortunately I have many partners who are helping, including our own local Heritage Museum as well as a number of cultural centers throughout WNC. Although we are blessed to have some skilled volunteers who've agreed to lend a hand, we need more help to make this project a success.

If you are interested in learning to do oral histories (training provided), to help catalog or transcribe our interviews, or you have photos or film you'd like to share, please contact me at the Center for Cultural Preservation at 828-692-8062. We also are accepting tax-deductible donations to help us produce the film at www.saveculture.org.

I hope you'll join us to help us make history, once again.

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