

Introduction

I suppose that there are some intrepid and creative souls that pull their ideas from the air, so to speak, out of some kind of primal generative essence. I wish that I had their gift. Some of my best ideas come from admittedly riffing on the ideas of others. To a degree the Louisiana Studies Conference is a case in point. In early 2009 I was trolling the Internet looking for inspiration and lo and behold I stumbled across an intriguing announcement on Maida Owens' Louisiana Folklife Program website. In 2003 Tulane University's Deep South Regional Humanities Center sponsored a five state high school essay contest with the prompt "What Does It Mean to Be Southern?" Immediately I wondered, why not Louisiana? How would Louisiana high school students respond if asked specifically about Louisiana? What is it that makes Louisiana unique, and to what degree can such a question be answered in the first place? I jotted down several prompts that I felt would catalyze interesting responses, and fairly quickly settled on "What aspect of your Louisiana heritage is most important to you?" (a question clearly reflecting my disciplinary worldview as a folklorist). Looking for support (read, funds for prize money to induce students to submit essays), I approached Dr. Lisa Abney, then Dean of the College of Liberal Arts at Northwestern. She thought it was a great idea, but this didn't solve our funding problem. Lisa suggested a conference. In fact, what about an annual conference? We could pay the essay contest winners out of the registration funds from the conference presenters. As I was hoping to make the essay contest an annual event with a new prompt each year, this seemed to make sense. From there it didn't take long for Dr. Abney to suggest the 2009 conference theme, "Cane River / Red River History and Heritage," subjects already dear to her heart. And so a Contest and a Conference were born.

The Conference took shape quickly, with many folks at NSU and elsewhere taking a hand in bringing things together. From the intimate gathering of scholars that I initially envisioned, the conference eventually featured nearly fifty participants. Cecile Elkins Carter of the Caddo Nation came down from Oklahoma to give the keynote address. Her participation was made possible by a generous grant from the Cane River National Heritage Area. We were also joined by Morgan Bulliard, the winner of the 1st annual Louisiana Essay Contest. Morgan and her family drove up from New Iberia so that Morgan could read her essay to the assembly of Conference participants. She read her essay "Mais sha, I'm Cajun!" with a finesse and presence beyond her years. As I pointed out to her that day, I hope that she will consider NSU when she graduates. Also included are fine essays by two other contest winners: Maria Hefte's "A Diverse Heritage" and Jennifer Grunder's "My Louisiana Sky."

As you can tell from the Table of Contents, not all of the Conference presentations address the theme. The guiding criterion for the Conference Selection Committee was simply that the presentation deal intrinsically with Louisiana Studies, and that they do so with creative or scholarly rigor (or, as in many cases, both). In fact, I believe that the strength of the Conference is in the diversity of topics and approaches presented so ably by scholars from journalism, history, folklore, education, linguistics, heritage resources, and literary studies, as

well as a plethora of other disciplines, each of which added to not one but many engaging and energetic conversations throughout the day.

The cover of this Proceedings volume is a drawing titled "Portrait of Joseph Roque" by Shreveport artist (and Conference participant) Michael Graham. This piece was part of Graham's exhibition "Cane River Back Roads." Thank you, Michael, for this beautiful piece. Another of his works will grace the cover of the upcoming issue of the Louisiana Folklife journal.

There are many more people to thank for so many things. As Conference Programmer Dr. Julie Ernstein did a spectacular job of fitting so many presentations on disparate topics into a wonderful kind of sense. Dr. Abney wrote the grant that provided much needed funds. The Louisiana Folklife Center angels, Sharon Sweeters, Chris Callahan, Eugene Edwards, and Robert Tummons provided key logistical support, from fighting rebellious electronic devices to making coffee (a lot of coffee). Finally, this Proceedings volume looks as classy as it does because Sheila Richmond is responsible for getting it done. If you want to get something done right, give it to Sheila to do. So I did.

The Conference was a lot of fun, and the contents of these Proceedings will reward every minute that you take to peruse them. Thanks to everyone that participated in the Conference in 2009. I hope to see you all again in 2010 at the 2nd annual Louisiana Studies Conference when we'll discuss, among other topics, "Louisiana on Film." Yep, it'll be fun.

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