Lyceum 2000

Our Other Lives: Work and Creativity in the Calumet Region

TAI and the Indiana Historical Society hosted “a different kind of history conference” in the fall of 2000, one modeled after the lyceums common in the Midwest in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Like its predecessors, this lyceum brought residents of Indiana’s Calumet Region together for “mental, moral, and physical expansion combined with wholesome entertainment” (1912).

Participants and audience members left the lyceum, held September 30–October 1, mentally stimulated by lively roundtable exchanges, morally uplifted by the deep individual commitment to community or artistic practice, wholesomely entertained by the history of Gary as told in word and song and physically invigorated by a Sunday tour of churches, historic neighborhoods, and an international harbor. After the tour, two long-time Calumet Region residents announced they were canceling future trips in order to explore closer to home.

The Lyceum’s theme brought together chefs, musicians, artists, collectors, re-enactors, actors, community activists, and spare-time historians to reflect on regional, communal and personal meaning pursued through work and their creative “other lives.” Local residents and others across the state gathered to learn about the Calumet Region and celebrate its rich and diverse heritage. The music roundtable introduced an African American jazz musician and a Serbian/Croatian tamburitza musician, both from Gary, both musicians during an era of segregation. A friendship has grown from their common interests in preserving their musical heritage, and they continue to correspond by sharing information and photographs from Old Gary’s music scene.

We are in the planning process for the next Lyceum to be held in southwest Indiana spring of 2002. Plan to attend this engaging event; come explore Indiana’s vast regional diversity.
On the Road . . .

Voices of Perry County Project Winds Down
Over fifty Perry County residents and TAI staff gathered in November to listen, share, reminisce and reflect. Those present shared stories about their first jobs, and presenters shared slides and excerpts from interviews. The Tell City Historical Society hosted the evening as part of their monthly meeting.

Work and Life: Voices of Perry County, a community oral history project to document the county’s work traditions, successfully trained community volunteers, students, and teachers in the skills of oral history research and recorded nearly 40 interviews.

Two teachers from Perry County schools enthusiastically summarized their successful oral history projects — history lessons straight from those who lived it. Antoinette Kranning’s fifth graders at Perry Central Elementary explored the county’s small, independently owned general stores. Some only exist as memories. Students did their own research, invited storekeepers into the classroom, and created replicas of the stores using a variety of materials from Popsicle sticks to appliance cardboard boxes. In response to the community’s enthusiasm about the project, Kranning said, “It really makes the kids feel important. It just goes to show that the value of research is great.”

Joan Goble and Penny Hardman, teachers at Cannelton Elementary, coordinated a year-long oral history project called Echoes of Cannelton. After students received training from TAI staff and teachers, they recorded interviews on tape in the classroom with older residents. Visit their website at: <http://ftp1.att.virtualclassroom.org/vc_33/>.

Tapes, transcripts, and photographs from the Voices of Perry County project are being archived at the Indiana Historical Society, the Tell City Historical Society (TCHS), and the Perry County Museum (PCM). Funding for this project was provided for by Indiana Humanities Council, TAI, PCM, and TCHS. Project Director Chuck Poehlein and others plan to continue interviewing, using equipment purchased with grant funds.

From the Field . . .

[Excerpted from Inta Carpenter’s fieldnotes, recorded after the initial Lyceum planning meeting and informal tour of the Calumet Region.]

November 17, 1999
The most obvious impression is that this was a day of incredibly rich aesthetics — Milan [Opacich’s] shop, St. George’s Serbian Orthodox Church, John Cain’s [Director of Northern Indiana Arts Association] house, the Bakery restaurant (whose entrees came in swirls of color and motion). And yet, we were supposed to be in an “economically challenged” area of the state, where we were told we would more than likely fear for our lives than enjoy it. And indeed we have seen empty storefronts. But it is in some sense a folklorist’s dream and vindication: in fact, creativity is the common denominator of being human. But so is the possibility of corruption,
passivity, disregard rather than the kind of rebellion and agency that creativity entails. Milan repeatedly used the words “my hero” to describe significant people in his life. Others throughout the day also told us of personal heroes, other Regionites. We certainly have met people who are committed to this area, who feel and connect with its energy and the obvious benefits of living here. And we are lucky to have guides along the way, for there is much here to discover.

April 20, 2000

As I read back on these notes, I realize much I left undescribed: John took us to Crown Point to visit the arts center satellite there, to his main place for NIAA in Munster, to the Hammond “substation,” as he calls it, housed in an old building donated by NIPSCO, drove us through Hammond, where we saw the huge mural of the ministerial couple on the side of a Baptist church. Milan took us to St. Sava Orthodox church — grand and majestic. Ron Cohen [IU-N Professor] drove us around the next day — a sweeping tour that left the impression of continuity from one town to another. They all merged for me, but to Ron were distinct. He showed us remarkable architectural experiments, in both design and construction. I remember leaving the area feeling let down to be returning to the familiarity of Bloomington, to be leaving the urban complex with its overlapping and interlocking scenes.

C reating, C hanging, R enewing

Portraits of Indiana’s Traditional Artists

LadySax — Ernie Shelby
Merrillville, Indiana

Ernie Shelby’s first passion is music. Shelby was surrounded by the animated sounds of her mother’s Pentecostal church choir and the blues she and her brother would hear when her father sneaked them out of the house to a local gathering place. Now an accomplished alto saxophonist, owner of her own recording company, poet, songwriter, and singer, Shelby supports her music through her day-work as fiscal officer for Project Learn, a Chicago non-profit that administers fifteen daycare and Head Start centers. Through her company EDSAS, she also provides bookkeeping and tax preparation for a variety of churches, daycare centers, and individuals.

Shelby performs regularly with the Gary-based blues band Fabulous Kings and solos for weddings, churches, clubs. Currently she is producing a recording of female voices from the Calumet Region through her recording company Dimples Co, named for her distinctive dimples when she plays.

[Shelby participated in the Lyceum 2000. The following is excerpted from one of the roundtables.]

Inta Carpenter: Who were your role models?
Shelby: I figured only Liberace played the piano because I think I saw Liberace on Ed Sullivan. Granddad came by and he could play the piano. I figured we were descendents of Liberace. (For some reason, I felt all farmers were brothers and sisters. Whatever your occupation was, I felt you were kin-folk, because it looked like all the railroad guys were brothers, so all musicians, to me, all piano players were kin-folk in some kind of way.) When granddad came...
out and he started playing, it was like, “We belong on Ed Sullivan.”

And then after a while I found that Mom played. She’s my main role model because she’s a female. Every now and then when all the men-folk were out, she would tickle the keys. She got on that piano and I said, “My mother is Liberace’s sister!” And I would go to school and tell people, “We’re kin to Liberace!”

Finally I realized. I saw Fats Domino on T.V. and I said, “He’s really Liberace’s brother.” Finally I figured out by the time I was maybe five or six, just because you all do the same thing, you’re not brothers and sisters. And because I didn’t see black/white, I didn’t see old/young, I didn’t see north/south, I didn’t see anything. And I think that really created the love for music. You might say I wanted to be in Liberace’s family — was the main reason I got started. But it was in our home at all times and you couldn’t really avoid it.