

President's Message

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Ol' Man River... Must Have Been an Environmental Health Specialist/Sanitarian

Not too long ago, I was attending a performance by the Fremont Symphony Orchestra. A baritone from Ohio named Brian Keith Johnson was singing "Ol' Man River." That has been a favorite song of mine since childhood, which was a long, long time ago! As I listened to the lyrics, they made me think that they could apply to environmental health specialists/sanitariums, too.

So I went online and downloaded the lyrics from the Paul Robeson version of "Ol' Man River." As I looked them over, I became even more convinced that the lyrics are relevant for us. Also, when you have to write one of these columns every month, and you feel the need to make it different and interesting, you grasp at things like this. From the top, here goes!

Dat ol' man river, he mus' know sumpin', but don't say nuthin'.

This makes me think of the efforts that we make to get the EH profession known to the public, governing bodies, and others in the public health and environmental protection fields. We *do* know a lot, but we find it difficult to get our story out there. The first reason, I believe, is that as a profession, we don't "toot our own horn." Secondly, it's because it's a hard profession to market. There aren't many of us, and we can't agree what our name should be. So publicizing the EH profession is somewhat like saying, "buy a car," but not being able to specify a brand name. The fact that there aren't that many of us makes providing funding for publicity relatively expensive.

He jes' keeps rollin', he keeps on rollin' along.

This reminds me that the EH professional is there doing his or her work, day in and

*He jes' keeps
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and day out.*

day out. We're out in the hot weather; we're out in the cold weather; we're out in the rain, snow, sleet, and whatever else. We're out after the floods, after the tornadoes, after the earthquakes, after the wildfires, and after anything else that comes up. We're always out there, where the day-to-day work of EH takes place. We just keep rolling out to respond to complaints, to do surveys, to do routine inspections, and to do whatever needs to be done.

You an' me, we sweat an' strain, body all achin' an' racket wid pain, tote dat barge! Lif' dat bale! Git a little drunk an' you land in jail.

We go out and do our daily work, and we do it well. When we do it well, nothing happens. But if we slip up, miss something, or make a mistake, sometimes the consequences are severe. If we make a mistake in siting an on-site sewage disposal system, the resulting pollution can be serious and very costly. If we miss a critical item in a food facility inspection, the results will be very serious indeed.

If we're rude to the public, the consequences can be very unpleasant. If the public is rude to us, we usually have to quietly take it.

Ah gits weary an' sick of tryin'. Ah'm tired of livin' an' skeered of dyin', but ol' man river, he jes keeps rollin' along.

Sometimes we get sick and tired of the job, and we get worn out trying to keep on doing it, but we realize that, from a personal perspective, we need to have a job, and from a public perspective, the public relies on us to do our jobs well and without complaining. We've been in difficult situations, where we've had to tell someone news about their livelihood or their property that they don't want to hear. I've had a gun pulled on me; I've been threatened; I've been treed by a bull; and I've been in some dicey situations when inspecting jails. But you keep on doing it because it's your job—it's your profession! Especially in the current economic situation, those of us that have jobs are fortunate. In spite of it all, we just keep doing our jobs.

Don't look up an' don't look down, you don't dast make de white boss frown. Bend your knees an' bow your head, an' pull dat rope until you' dead.

Fortunately, today all the bosses aren't white. But we still have to work for a person, or people, who are our bosses, as well as for the governing body of our agency, plus all the public. Sometimes they're good bosses and sometimes they're not, but it's still our job to do what needs to be done to keep the environment safe for the residents and visitors in our jurisdictions. Sometimes things aren't fair. But, if you believe that life is somehow supposed to be inherently fair, you probably believe in the Tooth Fairy and Santa Claus, too!

*Show me dat stream called de river Jordan,
dat's de ol' stream dat I long to cross.*

At the end of our careers, we hope to be in good health, and sound mind, and to be able to collect our pensions and live in that promised land of retirement.

I can speak for myself. I enjoyed the 35 years I spent actively working. I got to inspect jails, rubbing elbows with some pretty famous inmates. I got to start new programs, which was fun and, at times, very infuriating. Going from being a regulator to being regulated is a challenge, and it gives you a new perspective of how a regulator ought to operate! I had a chance to work with a lot of people who cheerfully toted that barge and lifted that bale every day. They kept on inexorably toward the goal of providing a better community for the citizens of our county.

As we all toil in our jobs, we need to keep an eye on the fact that what we do is very worthwhile and beneficial to the residents and visitors to our cities, counties, parishes, boroughs, states, and nation. Without us at the vanguard, protecting the air we breathe, the water we drink, bathe in, and brush our teeth with, and the food we eat; assuring that solid and liquid wastes are properly handled; and the million and one other jobs that we all do from day to day, our civilization would be sent back to the Dark Ages.

Thank you all for toting that bale, pulling that rope, and, most of all, for keeping rolling along.

My apologies to George Gershwin for applying his lyrics to something altogether different from what he had in mind when he wrote them. 🐷

Blisk Pantazo

did you know

The 2010 NEHA AEC
& Exhibition will be
in Albuquerque, New
Mexico, June 5-9.