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/sanitarians, 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... the EH professional is there doing his or her work, day in and 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.

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’ last 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!

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’ sheered of dyin’, but ol’ man river, he jes keeps rollin’ along.

The EH professional is there doing his or her work, day in and day out!
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 prom-
ised land of retirement.

I can speak for myself. I enjoyed the 35
years I spent actively working. I got to in-
spect 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 regu-
lated is a challenge, and it gives you a new
perspective of how a regulator ought to oper-
ate! I had a chance to work with a lot of peo-
ple who cheerfully toted that barge and lifted
that bale every day. They kept on inexorably
toward the goal of providing a better commu-
nity 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 roll-
ing along.

My apologies to George Gershwin for ap-
plying his lyrics to something altogether dif-
ferent from what he had in mind when he
wrote them.

DICK PANTAGES

Did You Know

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