

Opinions

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Never take your eyes off of your government

Attributed to Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821), the famous and often repeated sentiment that “People get the government they deserve” is claimed by Wikiquote.org to have been expressed in response to the excesses of the French Revolution. Be that as it may, I propose that public passivity is beyond question the biggest problem with government. That’s true whether it’s the national government or the government of Catahoula Parish. We get angry about it all, but we don’t channel and communicate that disapproval in productive ways.

When I criticize our Police Jury, as I frequently do, the problem’s not the individuals on the Jury so much as it is that the Police Jury model of government has serious flaws.

Number one, it lacks independence. This is why the most important person in the Police Jury meeting room is the Secretary-Treasurer, a point I have made here repeatedly. Apparently, however, it will have to be said many times more before the people realize that this unelected position IS Catahoula Parish government. In cooperation with the State of Louisiana, the Secretary-Treasurer tells the Police Jury what they have to do. Catahoula is far from unique in this among the majority of parishes

that still do not have their own home rule charter.

I suspect that on the matters of most significance, the Police Jurors get their instructions relayed by the Secretary-Treasurer in an anteroom away from the public prior to official meetings. I can’t claim to know for sure, but I strongly suspect that these private “meetings before the meetings” (if, in fact, they occur) are violations of Louisiana’s open meetings laws. I would love for someone to publicly deny this or correct me in these pages if I am wrong. Even if such discussions are held before the regular official meeting but in the Police Jury meeting room, they are still off the record and that would also, I suspect, still be illegal.

There is no place that a certain number of elected officials can gather to discuss the public’s business without there being a called meeting, the minutes of which must be recorded and published. Does this happen? One wonders. For example, a capital outlay request for \$100,000 for Duty Ferry Road breezed through on a motion by Deborah McCormack and a second by Brady Nelson without a whisper of debate. When were the merits of this rather large expenditure discussed? It wasn’t debated in the

meeting in which the money was approved. An independently elected executive with a veto power might have had a contrary opinion on the matter.

Number two, the Police Jury is a one-way street. By that I mean there is no local government officer with veto power to act as a moderating influence or a check on what the Police Jury does. This is to say, there is no executive branch.

Why am I complaining yet again about all this? It’s to remind you that these people, the Police Jury, despite a lack of “checks and balances” in our local system of government, have the power to tax you. In fact, they have done so just this past December by creating a \$12 per month garbage tax that, if unpaid, becomes a lien on your property. The amount of those unpaid taxes continues to climb.

The public must be more than passive observers. Otherwise, government has far less constraints on what it does, especially in a system like ours. Government is like a loaded gun lying on the table. Yet almost no one attends meetings unless they have a special interest in an issue.

You may need a mirror for this next question: Who is really responsible for this?

EDITOR’S NOTE

JEB Tales will continue to be featured in the Catahoula News Booster. But due to illness JEB will take a short break.

The good news is the introduction of LeRoy McMillin Jr.’s column. He has deep roots in Catahoula Parish and a love for writing. He is the son of Leroy and Dot Mcmillin Sr. Paternal grandparents were Tolbert Roy and Hazel Terry McMillin.

His maternal grandfather was Joseph Edward Sargent, owner and publisher of Catahoula News from the 1920’s to 1931, and his maternal grandmother was Nellie Irene Huff Sargent .



Leroy McMillin, Jr.



Joseph E. Sargent

About the book I was going to write Part 1

Somewhere during the period between my pre-WWII birth in 1941 in Ferriday, Louisiana, and age three, I decided I wanted to write. Not necessarily to write a book or essay or anything of the sort. I was too young to read anyway.

I just remember one time my Mom was visiting a neighbor who had a daughter about my age. She and I often played together on the screened porch. I may have been two or close to three years old.

Coloring books with crayons were presented to us to play with. Wonzy (not sure about the spelling) immediately started coloring the pictures in her book. As she colored she also began humming, like she was singing. Clearly, she was absorbed in her coloring play. I just remember her humming, but it has stuck with me all these years.

Looking back, she didn’t have a clue as to what she was supposed to do to color the pictures. While I, on the other hand, tried hard to color inside the lines, pressing hard to make sure the color stuck to the paper. I still insist on coloring that way when using a coloring book. I wasn’t taught to do it that way – it just came natural to me.

Later in life I heard someone say, “You don’t teach children how to color a coloring book.” I think that’s a true statement. Let kids be kids first, then adults.

But at some point in our play I turned to a blank page and there was no picture to color inside the lines. So I began to make marks. Straight marks, circles, cross-marks, zigzags, and so on, all in different colors and on top of earlier colors. I vividly recall the excitement I felt. This kind of coloring must have appealed to me because I kept at it until the page was a beautiful collection of colors with absolutely no design and hardly any white spots of paper left.

My mom praised me when she saw what I had done. And she asked what it was. I told her it was a book. That’s all I knew to say. And we went home. I guess one could say I wrote my first book that day.

In a way, I thought my color drawing said something important because it was important to my mom. She instinctively knew that I didn’t need lines to color inside of. Without knowing what to say with my voice or with my inability to write, I had managed to say something that meant something to both me and my mom. I liked that she liked what my colors said, almost as if they told a story – a beautiful story.

At home, she hung the picture on the wall with a tack. It was there for a long time.

As I grew older, I learned that my Mom’s father had been the Publisher of the Catahoula News, a weekly newspaper printed right there in Harrisonburg. It still prints papers to this day, but in Jonesville.

Her dad died long before I was born, so I never got to know him. I somehow felt slighted that he was dead and I didn’t have a grandfather on my mother’s side like my grandfather on my dad’s side - especially, a grandfather who published newspapers.

We later lived in the back of the old printing office while my dad remodeled the front part to be a grocery store and meat market. I was about five and now had a baby sister.

My Mom had grown up right there in Harrisonburg in the Sargent house. Dad had grown up on a farm seven miles away. And he wanted to do more than just continue the hard work of farming the rest of

his life. My mom had inherited the old building, and a family friend loaned them \$300 to get started with the grocery store. It turned out to be a good investment. The store was successful and we lived a good life off that success.

Even at that young age, I was a curious explorer and snooped into lots of places as walls were moved and floors rebuilt. I found a lot of old lead newspaper type. I kind of knew what it was from photos of my grandfather sitting at a big Linotype machine setting the type for the next paper. But to me, the treasures I found were just a momentary fascination of something which I soon tossed. I wish I had kept it. My grandfather had used that type to say what he thought needed saying.

Later on when I learned to read well enough to read some of his old newspapers, I discovered a joy in reading what he had written. In a way, it was like he was talking to me. I wished he could show me how to print newspapers so I too could say what needed saying.

I didn’t know what all the words meant, so I would ask my mom about them. I’m sure she sometimes made up what they meant because some stories were just too hard to explain, or maybe too sad to read, like when someone died. But some stories were full of excitement, and even joy, especially when someone got married or had a baby, or maybe someone visited from a far away town.

I would have enjoyed watching him write the stories and print the papers. He was a ‘story-teller.’

I loved the advertisement pictures for \$800 cars, and funeral homes, banks, and people selling something. I especially liked reading stories about places and people far away or long ago. The newspaper was like a window to an outside world I couldn’t wait to become part of. I just didn’t know what part.

In high school, when the girls took home-economics class and the boys took farming and livestock raising classes, I decided to take typing. And not only did I excel at typing, I could see that my future would involve typing, perhaps even as a newspaper man or maybe as a writer of books – a story teller.

Also, about that time I was starting to develop a really strong interest in reading books that had already become classics. Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn probably did more to excite my imagination than anything else I read, but so did history books about early America or Indian uprising like Last of the Mohicans. I loved history. And with WWII still fresh on everyone’s mind, I was able to see Audie Murphy win the war single-handedly on the big screen, or what seemed like a million other books about “The war to end all wars” come to life as movies. Movies gave writers a way for readers to visualize the stories they wrote. I liked that. Maybe I could write a movie.

I now wanted to write more than ever, but I had no idea where to start. Of course, I needed a typewriter to do it right. So I bought one. And I needed to know how to write properly and spell correctly and use the right words and punctuation marks and know when to shut up.

Someone once called me a ‘story-teller’ and meant it as a compliment, not a fibber. I loved being

a story teller and tried hard to tell stories that people would find interesting or entertaining.

For some reason I was able to recall details of my stories long after those details were forgotten by everyone else. I saw colors in my dreams, people’s faces and even bad teeth tucked behind big smiles. I could almost make out the numbers on the very first new car someone was proudly showing off to anyone wanting to ‘smell’ a new car, which I found interesting until I smelled it myself. There’s something about a new car smell that makes people feel good. They smile.

I even took stories I grew up hearing and made them longer, more exciting, and full of twists and turns before getting to the end. Those listening to me telling it had the look of anxious anticipation on their faces. They were enjoying it so much that I took extra liberties with the King’s English and injected words they never heard before. It was fun, but I didn’t see it as a step to becoming a writer, at least not until years later.

I tried to take advantage of my English Class in school, but my mind was always a thousand miles away. No doubt my teacher was frustrated with my short attention span in class and my low scores on exams, but she never once gave up trying. She must have known I liked words because of my growing reputation as an imaginative story-teller. Yet, she never once set me down for a one on one discussion as to why I didn’t try harder to learn what she was teaching.

I know it’s my fault, but for some reason I wanted to blame it on her for not recognizing the potential I had as a story-teller, or as I later learned to call it: a ‘wordsmith.’ I took that to mean someone who is good at using words that enhance a story. And perhaps just as important, when and how they are to be used in a story. Now I wanted to be a ‘wordsmith.’ Perhaps it would make me a better writer.

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