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July 29 Blog Entry

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On Jul 29, 2011, at 5:43 PM, RUTKOFF Peter wrote:

We had all day to talk about the project.
That is starting at 5 am when we left Charleston!

The data: approximately 65 interviews, including four hours of seagrass basket weaving instruction, three sessions of low country cooking, a dozen traditional songs, an opening of a collective basket exhibition, and scores of people taking about their lives, culture, religion, and experiences.

Our teams of teachers were nothing less than spectacular---cooperative, innovative, responsible, diligent---with one group even going out on Thursday evening, our last night in South Carolina to "catch" an interview with a local pastor.

It is clear to us (Will Scott and me) that this is an unanticipated start to something with great promise: that is a much fuller oral history of St. Helena island. As our closest consultant told us yesterday, "you come back, hear. Now everyone wants to talk with y'all." The layers of that history are sometimes as obscure as a green jug with a conch shell for a ladle sitting in an elderly persons yard, and as obvious as the "patois" that turns islander's speech into song.

There are eight thousand residents of St. Helena---and each has a story to tell. We think the common theme is the miracle of survival of a coherent group of African Americans, of their language, their independent culture, of their traditional ways of life, from herbal healing to the shout (a dance actually). At the same time, the island, the ONLY place in the US where slaves were granted title to their lands, by General Sherman is the site of a complex social structure. There are dozens of small neighborhoods, probably 40 churches, shrimp fishers and cooperatives, a venerable history of small town baseball, grannies and kids talking under a life oak tree, all tied together by, as one woman remarked, "you must feel it when you cross the bridge. You've left that old world behind and come to some place special."

We did feel that spirit, what our old Yale mentor, Robert Farris Thompson called the "Flash of the Spirit," that amazing residue of West African customs and practices that remain embedded in American African American culture.

As we reflect more on this rich subject with and for you we will include video clips, lists of interviewees, and our own individual evaluations.

Till then.