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Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

TRAVELS AROUND LOUISIANA WITH SHORTY.

Shorty and I hit the back roads throughout Louisiana last week. My six-year-old yorkie kept me company as I drove hundreds of miles on two-lane country roads. And small-town folks from rural areas, north and south, have a lot to say: about Mardi Gras, the war in Iraq, Social Security, and just about every other issue that's being analyzed by the pontificators and national political commentators.

I was on a weeklong book tour dropping my new book off at pharmacies, small-town museums, gift shops, even truck stops. Most authors, particularly with their first book, wouldn't take the time or have the ability to put their book on display and for sale at these rural retail locations. One of the nice things about having been in public life for 30 years are the friendships made, the relationships developed, and the ability to be welcomed with a smile of recognition when you walk in the door. It was a great way for me to spread my book throughout the state.

You just don't walk into Flurry's Pharmacy in Winfield, or the Old Fashion Shop in Opelousas without stopping for coffee, local gossip, and listening to a cross-section of opinions on what makes the world go around. And many of the locals have a lot to say about dealing with good times and bad.

Social Security was often the subject at many of the stops I made. At least in the rural areas, the president's claim that we must privatize Social Security to avert an imminent crisis fell on deaf ears. At New Parrino Drugs in Bunkie, a local truck driver expressed the view I heard time and time again. "I have a hard time keeping my bank account straight and balancing my checkbook each month. How am I gonna be able to figure out how to invest the little money I have? Do I have to go get me a financial planner?"

At North Caddo Drugs in Vivian (north of Shreveport almost to Arkansas), the owner of a local hardware store had similar concerns. Even I know that Social Security isn't just a retirement program. I don't have any disability insurance. If something would happen, even before I'm 65, all I would have to turn to is Social Security. I just feel like I'm taking too much of a chance if everyone makes their own decision as to how to invest their money."

I ran into a local insurance agent as I left the Louisiana State Oil and Gas Museum in Oil City (just north of Vivian). "When anyone buys insurance, they don't tell the insurance company how to invest their proceeds. They are expecting the insurance company to get the best possible return. Why can't the government get the best possible return? Does the average person have to become a financial expert, and start studying the stock market every day? If the system is broke, and the

government is inept, what are we sending all those fellows up to Washington for? Why can't they straighten all that out?"

The war in Iraq was also discussed a lot. Most of the people I talked with had conflicting concerns. They were worried about future terrorist attacks, and were unanimous in their support of our troops. "But how many soldiers will be killed, and how long will this continue to go on?" These thoughts were recurring, and the issue became more personal as I traveled into the southern part of the state.

In New Roads at Satterfield's "Main Street Market," the gift shop there has been run for years there by Pat Anderson. She talked at length about how the whole community was in mourning over the recent death of national guardsmen Christopher Ramsey from the local community of Batchelor. "I watched Chris grow up. He was so polite; really a fine young man. There's so much sadness here. A lot of young men from the Louisiana have been killed." More Louisiana national guardsmen have lost their lives in Iraq than from any other state in America. Fourteen young men. More than California, New York, and all of the other much bigger states.

The Palace Café in Opelousas, right across from the courthouse on Landry Street, is the local gathering place for morning coffee. The locals there also talked about Louisiana soldiers who lost their lives. "Look, I voted for the president and I'm for cleaning out all those thugs in Iraq. But then what would we do? Do we go into Iran? North Korea? There are a lot of countries full of thugs who have a beef with us. Just how far do we go? I don't know, but a lot of us are worried about it." The rest of the group around the coffee table agreed.

After coffee at the Palace, I spent some time visiting with Wanda Juneau, who owns the Back in Time gift shop also across from the St. Landry Courthouse. We talked about Mardi Gras, and she bemoaned the fact that we complain so much about our weaknesses, but don't accentuate all the creative talent that is found in Louisiana. "Some people think we shouldn't be celebrating with the war and all going on. But it's what we do. Mardi Gras is an expression of so much talent we have here Louisiana. Parades take place in Shreveport, Monroe, and just about every place in the state. We've got to make the best of what we have, and I think we have a story to tell about a wealth of talent here."

Wanda has a point. Louisiana has to be, hands down, a state with proportionally the largest number of creative people in the country. Pick your field and the list becomes long. Musicians? Van Cliburn, Pete Fountain, Al Hirt, The Neville Brothers, Fats Domino, Wynton and Branford Marsalis, Tim McGraw, Faith Hill, Britney Spears, Master P - these are just a few of the big Louisiana names, and the list can go on and on.

Athletes? There are more professional football players in the NFL that come from Louisiana than from any other state. Chefs? Where do we begin? Paul Prudhomme, Emeril Lagasse, John Folse, and Don Bergeron are the big names. And who can contest that

Louisiana food and cooking surpasses anywhere else. Artists? New painters receive national recognition regularly. Ever heard of Don Cinconie? He's an African-American artist from Monroe, whose paintings on the Champs Elysees in Paris go for \$40,000 dollars.

Wanda's point is that we need to accentuate what resources and talents we have. And give credit to both Gov. Blanco and Lt. Gov. Mitch Landrieu for pushing the marketing of this talent. Look on Mardi Gras as a vehicle to promote. Where else can you do it?

Lunchtime midweek. If you are within 30 miles of Lecompte south of Alexandria on US 71, a stop at Lea's for lunch is a must. Mr. Lea Johnson died a few years back. His wit and wisdom landed him on the Johnny Carson show. His daughter Ann runs the restaurant, and gladly put my book on the front counter. Several farmers joined me to visit over baked ham and sweet potatoes.

"I see they're still at it in Baton Rouge, and things haven't changed much. What's all this stuff about the free tickets at football games? I pay for my tickets. Why can't those legislators pay for theirs?" Another fellow chimed in. "And what about that fellow Benson, who owns the Saints? Are my tax dollars paying for him to own a big yacht? I can see putting up a little money to fix up the Superdome. Heck, every big city wants a pro football team. But I never heard of payin for the guy's yacht!" Someone else chimed in. "The Governor wants the Saints to open up their books. If she's going to give them any tax dollars, I couldn't agree more."

A side note. As I was filling up with gas outside Opelousas, a local reporter stopped to visit. She had followed the fall congressional elections with great interest, and commented on some of the follow-up. "You know, since the December election, I've gotten one press release from Senator David Vitter. Something about opening up a regional office. Now I'm up here in the center of the state, a long way from Congressman Bobby Jindal's District. Yet a day does not go by what I don't get a press release. That's true. I get something from his office almost everyday. Is he still running? Or, what else is he running for?"

Another side note. Interested observers, who attended the Washington Mardi Gras ball last week made comparisons of congressional offices. Vitter and Jindal are both balls of fire in Washington, continuing to make big splashes back home as to their new importance. You don't hear a word from some of the old hands like Congressmen Jim McCrery and Richard Baker. But take a look at their offices. Baker and McCrery both have palatial views of the nation's capital, rivaling any panoramas pictured on television. 20 foot ceilings, massive plaster moldings, and huge office space. Vitter, Jindal and newly elected Democrat Charlie Melancon? Cramped office space, low ceilings and "interesting" views of the parking lots. Seniority counts and it sure makes a big difference when you have hung around for awhile. Louisiana took the big hit with the retirement of Billy Tauzin and John Breaux. Capitol Hill newspaper Roll Call released a survey showing that Louisiana's congressional clout drop from 21st to 37th.

Another recurring theme I heard a lot. We just don't see our public officials much anymore. At Stelly's truck stop in LeBeau, a local sugar cane farmer said it's not like the old days. "I we used to see all the big shot politicians come through here regularly. They were always making a speech somewhere. But the only time you see a senator, our congressmen or even some of our legislators is on TV. They don't seem to know what we're thinking, and what we have to say. They need to get out of those big offices and get back in touch more."

Shorty and I learned a lot on the road. I probably could have sold more books if I hadn't stopped to visit for so long. But I have a much better feeling of what's on a lot of folk's minds. And you know what? There's a fair amount of wisdom out there in these small towns. It's great to do your job in a fancy office, whether in Baton Rouge or Washington. But staying in touch, face-to-face, is an important part of the job. I was around public life for 30 years, and I still learned a lot over the past two weeks. Keep an eye out for me. I'll be making a lot more stops in the weeks to come.

This week marks the 60th anniversary of the freeing of thousands of people from the Auschwitz concentration camp. One and one half-million people, including over a million Jews, met their death at Auschwitz. One of the hideous atrocities was that in the penal colony of Auschwitz, the Jew was not condemned because of his old or new beliefs, but because of the blood that flowed in his veins. It was biology. Back in the Middle Ages, the Jew was killed for what he believed. But not during the Holocaust.

A significant concern today is the failure of our society to educate our young people of the horrible tragedy that took place during the Holocaust. Remember Prince Harry's antics wearing the Nazi uniform a few weeks ago? Even a possible future king had not been appropriately educated as to the horror that took place in the concentration camps.

One of the most important books written about the Holocaust was by Nobel peace laureate Elie Wiesel, called "*NIGHT*." It's one of those "must read" novels you should read and have your children read. If you'd like more information about Wiesel's thoughts on the Holocaust and his important book, I write about it at length on this 'week's blog that can be found on my website at <http://www.jimbrownla.com>. You can also take my latest poll on this site concerning the Saints yacht being paid for with state funds.

"Oh, you hate your job? Why didn't you say so? There's a support group for that. It's called EVERYBODY, and they meet at the bar."
--Drew Carey

"I think that's how Chicago and Detroit got started. Bunch of people in New York said, 'Gee, I'm enjoying the crime and the poverty, but it just isn't cold enough. Let's go west.'"

--Richard Jeni

Peace and Justice.

Jim Brown