



In the PINES

By T. Lee Brown

Cakewalk

I loved cakewalks as a kid. Local people in our area of small farms and ranches in Lane County would bake cakes. It was a chance to show off decorating skills or get a favorite recipe out into the community.

Cakes stood proudly in the church's youth chapel or the elementary school's gym during holidays and school carnivals. Tickets were sold. Each contestant walked around a circle of numbered chairs while music played. When the music stopped, you'd freeze and sit in the nearest chair. A number was pulled from a hat, raffle-style.

If you were sitting in the right chair? You won a cake. Though I rarely won, I absolutely loved the game.

Thus I was bummed to

hear that some folks consider the word "cakewalk" racist. Some are calling for "that takes the cake" and "piece of cake" to be removed from the vocabulary, too. I took a break from seasonal Sisters Country matters such as getting children to rake pine needles and watering our COVID Victory Garden (which has been victorious only for the aphids) to follow up.

Searching anonymously through Ecosia.org, I clicked through on the top link. Here a conservative blogger complained about CNN publishing a list of racially dubious terms. They mocked the news station for considering the term "master bedroom" potentially offensive when it has is no etymological link to slavery. (Etymology is the study of word origins, an activity considered thrilling to nerdy people such as writers, who probably need to take up another hobby. Baking cakes, let's say.)

Cakewalk was not so benign. Before it became a staid and simple church game, it was a dance performed by Black slaves for their White owners in the American South, sometimes with a slice of cake as a reward.

Oh. Even the sarcastic right-wing blogger admitted they'd learned something from this one.

Thus began what I

figured would be a quick bit of research. I'd confirm that CNN and Snarky McBloggerton were correct; I'd grieve the innocent cakewalks of my youth; I'd excise the term from my vocabulary.

What I uncovered was more nuanced, which is an elitist way of saying "too complicated for my little pea-brain." Starting around 1850, slaves lampooned the formal ballroom promenades of White plantation owners, incorporating African dance steps. Somehow this became a contest, with Whites "inviting" slaves to participate and then judging their moves.

Making artful fun of someone who could have you or your loved ones whipped or killed sounds nerve-racking and complex to me, but the word cakewalk came to mean "easy" after Emancipation — because Black Americans now performed it at their leisure.

A dance called the cakewalk achieved popularity via minstrel shows — first Black shows, then Whites wearing blackface makeup, and then, in a dizzying mis en abyme, Black Americans performing the dance while wearing blackface makeup.

Minstrel shows? Blackface? No contest: Retire all those cake words immediately. Right?

Not so fast. On Yehoodi.com — hardly a bastion

of White supremacy — I learned that to American social dance fans, the cakewalk is important. I browsed posts like "Why White dancers need to honor the Black roots of Lindy Hop" and watched a video of Rik "Rikomatic" Panganiban, whose father immigrated to the U.S. from the Philippines, and Manu "Spuds" Smith, a Black American man, discussing issues of sexism and racism in their majority-White swing dance scene.

Panganiban posted cakewalk footage from 1903, noting, "There is some subtle cultural referencing going on here, being both a satire of the affected manners of White high culture and an expression of Black pride and joy by the performers. For a people enslaved, enacting a cakewalk right in the face of their oppressors might be understood as a prideful middle finger."

"For now, whenever you hear the expression that 'takes the cake' or something is a 'cakewalk' remember

how brilliant Black slaves employed the cakewalk as a subtle but powerful anti-racist tactic," he suggested.

Intrigued, I got in touch with Panganiban. "I don't have strong feelings on whether or not the terms 'cakewalk' or 'taking the cake' should be retired from contemporary usage..." he told me via email. "I do feel that the cakewalk is an important grandparent of lindy hop, and should be taught about and understood."

Rikomatic believes dancers shouldn't perform cakewalks anymore, "since they are tangled up in several layers of racist stereotypes and oppression. Certainly not a non-Black dancer. The only exception would be for illustrating the history of dance, within a sensitively presented context."

Fair enough. But what if taking the cake didn't originate in African American slavery — or in America at all? Tune into our next episode of "In the Pines" to find out.

\$3.6M for water fixes in Warm Springs

SALEM (AP) — As the Warm Springs reservation goes without safe drinking water into the fourth week, Oregon state lawmakers have approved millions in emergency funding for repairs.

The Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs issued a boil water notice June 25 after drinking water system failures left some residents with no running water at all, Oregon Public Broadcasting reported.

The reservation has issued more than a dozen such notices in the last year alone. Oregon's emergency board unanimously on Tuesday approved \$3.58 million from state reserves to start addressing the issue.

The aid request originated with Rep. Daniel Bonham, R-The Dalles, whose district encompasses the reservation.

"Today's action by the Legislature's Emergency Board doesn't magically fix the water crisis within the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs but that shouldn't diminish the important work of today," Bonham said in a statement.

Last year, he successfully pushed to earmark \$7.8 million in state lottery bonds for reservation water projects. Last week, the promise of that money disappeared, the *Bend Bulletin* reported.

The next day, Warm Springs' utility manager Travis Wells sent Bonham a list of critical projects needed to ensure clean water and to bring the reservation into compliance with the federal Safe Drinking Water Act.

Orders from the Environmental Protection Agency have threatened the

tribes with costly fines since October.

Thousands of public records obtained by Oregon Public Broadcasting since 2018 show that tribal, state and federal officials have been aware for years of the risks failing water systems pose to human and environmental health in Warm Springs.

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