



In the PINES
By T. Lee Brown

Taking the Cake

Word on the street is this: Readers urgently want to know whether expressions like “cakewalk” and “taking the cake” are racist or not. It’s nice to know you guys are reading my column. But the answer isn’t a simple yes/no.

A few weeks ago we talked about how mid-19th century slaves in this country performed cakewalks for their owners. After Emancipation, cakewalks were performed at minstrel shows, influencing the development of American social dance and the lindy hop.

But guess what? “Taking the cake” goes back to waaaay before the atrocity of American slavery. It symbolized victory back in Ancient Greece.

How did it acquire its current, semi-sarcastic meaning — the kind accompanied by a rueful shake of the head, a sigh of exasperation, or a belly-laugh of disbelief?

I found a reference in “Patriotic Sketches of Ireland,” published in 1807. Here’s a little context for the time: settlers from Great Britain had confiscated lands belonging to the inhabitants of the isle of Éire (a.k.a. Éireann or Ireland). Many of Ireland’s Indigenous people and their Irish-Norman descendants had little choice but to become peasants on what used to be their own land.

They often lived on scraps and potatoes, forfeiting their labor and the land’s bounty to their English and Anglo-Irish overlords. The English tried to break the spirit of the Irish, expunge their culture, eradicate their language, and convert the majority Catholics to Protestantism.

“Patriotic Sketches” was written in Connaught by Lady Morgan, a.k.a. Miss Owenson. Perhaps because her father was Irish Catholic, she showed compassion toward the poor wretches in her writing. Condescension, too.

She described “the lower Irish, passionately fond of dress, and without the means of gratifying their dominant passion” decked themselves out in “ornamental finery” on Sundays.

During the working week they were “worse clothed than the poorest mendicant in England.”

Their food on Sundays seldom rose beyond “the accustomed potatoes and milk,” she writes, but “some few halfpence are always spared to purchase the pleasures which the Sunday cake bestows.” The Irish would then erect a distaff, a kind of long pole used in the wool-spinning process, in the middle of a field.

On top of this they’d place “a large flat cake: this cake is the signal of pleasure, and becomes the reward of talent. The young and old of both sexes, for miles round the neighbourhood, hasten to enjoy the pleasures of the cake, which is sometimes carried off by the best dancer, and sometimes by the archest wag of the company.”

What the Sam Hill is an arch wag? Well, he’d be a jester, probably a bold and clever fellow with a mischievous streak. I bet he’d arch his eyebrow knowingly as he filched the cake right under everyone’s noses. Some would shake their heads in disapproval; others would laugh and clap at his derring-do.

This waggishness was part of the tradition. Thus the gosh-durn-it feeling behind “Well, that just takes the cake!”

(Owenson also describes the old expression of paying

the piper. A short distance from the cake-on-a-stick sits the piper, “who is always seated on the ground with a hole dug near him, into which the contributions of the assembly are dropt... At the end of every jig, the piper is paid by the young man who dances it.”)

So whose cakewalk is it? Who takes the cake — or a piece of it? The Greeks? The Irish? African-Americans?

As a descendant of both the “lower Irish” and the English who displaced them, as a descendant of both African slaves and white slave owners... I honestly don’t know.

I do know that many people of color are asking white and mostly-white folks like myself to “do your research” these days. We know there’s racism, we want to help; often, we want friends, acquaintances, and leaders of color to do all the work. Tell us what to say. Educate us about racism. We’ll just

sit here and look woke.

For me? Becoming a true anti-racist ally is going to take a lot of work. I’ve done some of that work over the decades, but recent events made me realize I have a long way to go.

In this case, I literally did the research after finding “cakewalk” on a CNN cheatsheet of potentially offensive words. You could say I wasted hours on this. But it was incredibly valuable. I learned about the twisted subtleties of slavery and the daring humor of the oppressed. I saw clearly how my brutalized ancestors brought a culture of brutality to the Americas with them.

Watching antique film footage of African American cakewalks, reading details about Irish ones, I felt a great surge of warmth toward humanity. Yes, we conquer and enslave. Somehow, we also find joy in the most miserable of circumstances.

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