



French-Canadian Heritage Meets Polish Heritage in Minnesota

Cummings Sieracki Family

By

Charles Sieracki

Years ago, when I was visiting friends in Provence, France, we were enjoying wine after dinner on the veranda; and one of the guests commented, “Charlie, you have a Polish name, but you look French.” I answered that I am half French from my mother’s side. And then she smiled and said, “The better half.” When this happens in Poland, it plays out a little differently. They don’t say my better half is French. Of course, I am equally proud of both my French-Canadian and Polish heritages. My mother was born in Hugo of French-Canadian immigrant families, and my father was born in Winona of Polish immigrant families.

Just the names of my family are fascinating. The name Sieracki has never changed its spelling, but it is pronounced differently, depending on whether I am in Poland, in France, or here in the U.S. My mother’s mother was Marie Peloquin and her father was Alfred Cummings. My mother’s grandfather had changed the name from Vient, which it was in Canada to Cummings because most Americans had difficulty with the pronunciation. Back in France, the family surname was Jean; it was in Canada that the name was changed first to Viens, then to Vient.

Inevitably, people from the French-Canadian village of Hugo married those from outside the village. These first generation “mixed” families are an important part of our continually developing heritage, and analysis of the “mixed” family I grew up in – French-Canadian and Polish - reveals interesting parallels with both cultures.

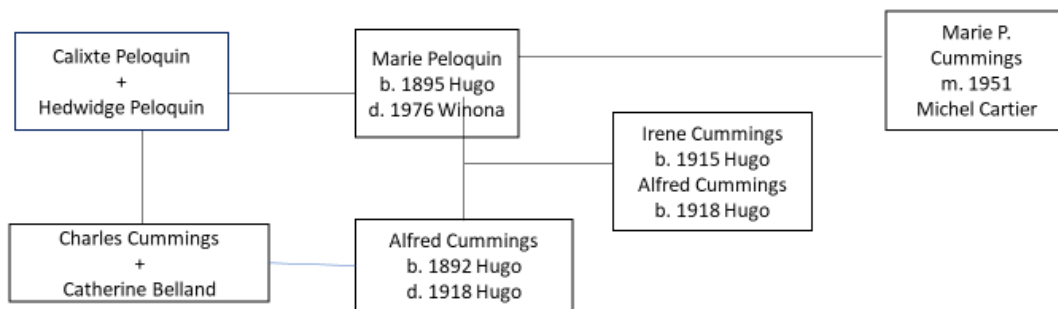
Minnesotans with French-Canadian ancestors deeply feel the value of our French-Canadian heritage. We sense a personal connection when we drive by the places named by or for our ancestors: St. Paul, Hennepin County, Roseville, Vadnais Heights, Lake Pepin, Lake Mille Lacs. We take pride in the role our French-Canadian ancestors had in exploring, settling and developing the New World. We admire their

courage, industry, and faith, and their devotion to their large families. Tapping into this vast culture leads us to our sense of self-worth, our identity, our values, and our responsibilities.

But the question is, “How do we participate in this cultural heritage?” How do we take in the reality and the significance of the dates and facts in our genealogical trees. As my sons tell me, “Dad, names and dates on charts don’t mean anything to us. A family tree book is just going to collect dust on the shelf.” I am an English teacher so from my point of view, sharing culture means sharing stories. Stories provide the lens or the frame by which our brain takes in and interprets our world. It is through stories that we can both learn about and absorb our culture.

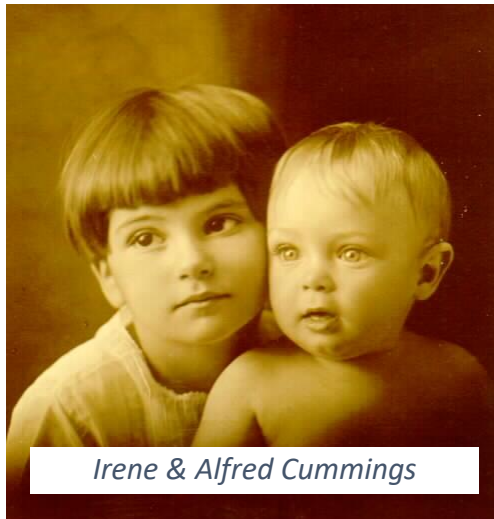
The Story of Mary Peloquin Cummings Cartier

The basic “family tree” facts of my grandmother’s life seem rather humdrum.



Marie Peloquin is born in Hugo MN in 1895 of Calixte and Edwige Peloquin. She marries Alfred Cummings in 1913, and has two children – Irene Cummings born April, 1915 and Alfred Cummings born December, 1918. Widowed, she marries Michel Cartier and moves to Oregon. When her second husband dies, she comes to live with her daughter until her death in 1976. But if we tell the story behind these key dates, we not only learn about her as a person, we learn about her French-Canadian heritage as well.

After my grandmother and grandfather got married, they went to live on his parents’ farm to help with the farm work. Their first child, my mother, was born in Hugo April 16, 1915. My grandmother’s husband died on Armistice Day, November 11, 1918, a victim of the Spanish flu pandemic. And their second child, my uncle Alfred, was born the following month, in December, 1918.



With the life insurance money paid upon the death of her husband, my grandmother bought a small house, and, as a single parent, supported her family by doing housework.

Because the village of Hugo did not have a high school, my grandmother sent my mother, Irene Cummings, to attend high school in Winona, where my grandmother's sister was living in the 1930s. There my mother finished high school and promptly fell in love and married a man from the Polish East End of Winona -- and stayed in Winona to raise her family. My grandmother sent my mother from Hugo to finish her education and she never came back to live in Hugo. In 1942, her son, my Uncle Alfred Cummings, enlisted in the Army Air Force to become a fighter pilot and he never returned to live in Hugo. After the war, he moved to Montana to keep his job on the railroad.



During the 1940s, we used to visit Grandma in Hugo. At this time, Grandma was confined to a wheel chair. It all seemed normal enough because that is all I knew. When I asked my mother how Grandma came to be in a wheel chair, she said her mother was shot by a robber. It was only many years later that I found out the whole story. Grandma was not shot by a robber. She was shot in 1934 by a deranged man,

John Vollary, who fancied himself in love with her; and when he was told his love was doomed to failure, he shot her and then shot himself.



Source: Stillwater Daily Gazette

In 1951, my grandmother married a former resident of Hugo Michel Cartier and moved to his home in Coos Bay, Oregon. She spent some very happy years in Coos Bay until her husband died, and then she came to live with her daughter, my mother, in Winona until her death in 1976.

What a remarkable life. Of French-Canadian heritage, she marries at the age of 18, loses her husband at the age of 23, sees her daughter leave home forever when she is 36, loses her mobility to a deranged lover at the age of 39, and sends her son off to war followed by out-of-state work when she is 47.

My grandmother's unwavering religious faith led her to accept her fate as God's will and to forge ahead and meet her daily challenges with good will and cheerfulness. There was a never-ending stream of her handiwork - mittens, scarves, comforters and crocheted table cloths, supportive letters – whatever she could do for others with her limited means. Every day she would turn to her prayer book and rosary. She was a positive force in the lives of her children and grandchildren and she lived many happy years with her devoted second husband on the Oregon coast. She was smart, humble, deeply religious, and never uttered a word of complaint about the enormous difficulties she faced in life.

Telling her story reveals a remarkably resilient woman who persevered through calamity and hardship. She was able to rely on strong family ties with her siblings and children and her rock-solid religious faith to achieve a great deal of happiness and fulfillment. By her example, she taught us the values of our French-Canadian heritage: trust in God, work hard, love your family, and enjoy life.

Her life story is a lesson about our French-Canadian heritage. My grandmother's faith, perseverance, hard work and good cheer are characteristic of the lives of the French immigrants to Canada as well as the French-Canadian families that moved to Hugo. At great sacrifice our ancestors moved from Canada to build a community in

Hugo. They left the safety and fellowship of their Canadian communities to eke out a living as best they could. They hunted and trapped and fished, cut wood from the forests and cut ice from the lakes in winter to supplement their meager incomes while they opened up the land for farming. They met the challenges of learning a new language while searching for jobs or starting businesses.

The Story of Irene Cummings Sieracki

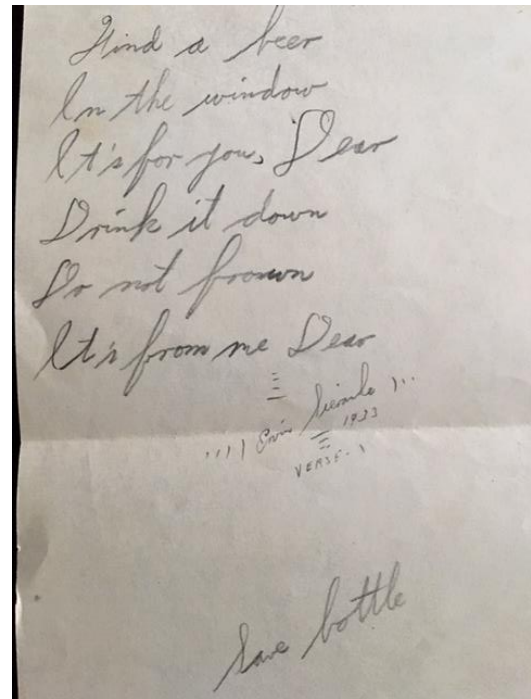


Irene Cummings Sieracki

Inevitably, the descendants of the immigrants begin to marry those from outside the village, as did my mother. Irene Cummings Sieracki lost her father when she was three years old and was raised with her younger brother by her mother in her little house in Hugo, a village filled with large families, devoutly Catholic, of French-Canadian descent, including her grandparents, numerous aunts and uncles and dozens of cousins. While attending high school in Winona, she met, my dad, Ervin Sieracki, who came from a Polish family in the Polish East End of Winona. My father fell head over heels in love with this dark-eyed, French-Canadian beauty; and my mother was irresistibly attracted to this life-of-the-party Polish man who had three charming sisters and four handsome brothers – and a steady job.



Ervin to Irene



Love Notes

They soon found themselves married, living in the Polish East End and starting a large family of their own. A huge act of faith for them. My mother had been attending Winona High School, far from her hometown of Hugo; she was eighteen years old, four months pregnant; and she committed to living in the Polish East End and raising a family with a young man from a Polish family who had only a ninth-grade education.

On the international scene, Poland has always enjoyed a unique relationship of friendship with France. Geopolitical reality is the driving force to this relationship with Poland on one side of Germany and France on the other. The Polish national anthem refers to the Polish soldiers who fought under Napoleon in the hope that his victories would ultimately lead to an independent Poland. Polish emigres fleeing repression and annexation often found their way to France to live. But in the 1870s, thousands of Poles from the Kashubian region of Poland sold their meager possessions to buy passage in steerage by ocean liner to New York and then by train to Winona.

So how did this historical connection between the two countries play out in Minnesota in 1934? My mother, a descendent of the French who immigrated to Canada in the 17 century and then to Hugo in the 19th century married to my father, a descendent of the Kashubian Poles who emigrated to the Polish East End of Winona in the 1870s. It turned out remarkably well, perhaps because there were some supportive cultural affinities between the French-Canadian village and the Polish East End of Winona.

To be sure, there were some gaps in the cultural heritage. I did not get the benefit of either the Polish language or French. My father could speak Polish but he found it more expedient not to. My grandparents spoke French as a maternal language. But

my mother retained only a few expressions from her youth. “Comment ça va?” a common greeting. Or “Du lait,” her instructions on what to ask for when she was sent to a cousin’s farm for a pail of milk. There was no Polish cuisine in my home because my mother never learned to cook Polish dishes. There was no haute cuisine either. We ate the food that was produced locally and as it was prepared locally.



St. John the Baptist, Hugo



St. Stanislaus, Winona

But what my mother did find very familiar was the devout practice of the Catholic religion. Attendance at Mass on Sunday was mandatory along with the Catholic feast days, abstinence from meat on Friday, fasting during lent, observance of all of the sacraments. The Church really was the religious and social center of the community. The Polish immigrants built their first church, St. Stanislaus, in 1872. A bigger structure, built to accommodate the rapidly-growing parish replaced it in 1895 with what is now a minor basilica. The central role of the Catholic Church was a defining characteristic of both Polish and French-Canadian immigrants in Minnesota. And long before the Winona Diocese felt the influence of the Polish immigrants, it was French explorers and missionaries who first introduced the Catholic faith to Minnesota. The earliest record, in the form of a 1672 map, documented the visit of the French missionaries to the confluence of the Mississippi and Chippewa Rivers just north of Winona.

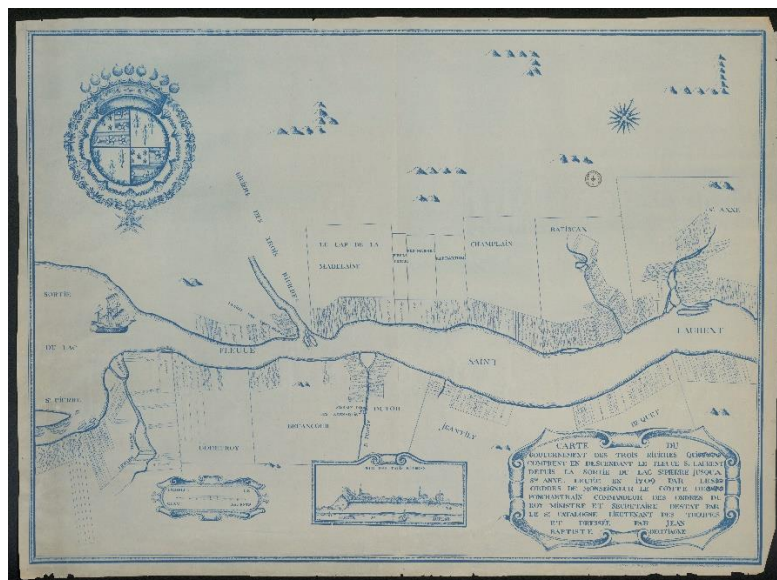


Prudent Vient Family



Ervin Sieracki Family

My parents had a big family, typical in the Polish East End. My grandfather and grandmother Sieracki had nine children, and great-grandfather and great-grandmother Sieracki had seven. Big families were also typical in Hugo and in Quebec. My great-great-grandfather Prudent Vient and his wife Edvige had nine children. Long ago in Quebec, land was owned in strips with one end of the strip fronting a river or lake. Big farming families often owned many of the strips so family life was close knit. In 1700, my ancestor Francois Peloquin was granted title to a farm on the shore of Lake St. Pierre, three acres wide and forty acres deep. (Lake St. Pierre is a naturally occurring widening of the St. Lawrence River between Sorel and Trois Rivières – not unlike the formation of Lake Pepin.) And it was not uncommon for elderly parents to sign over property and goods to one of their children in return for their care in the home. In 1696, my ancestor Vivien Jean and his wife ceded to their daughter and son-in-law all their earthly goods, and in return the couple agreed to take care of their needs while alive and see to the burial after their death. Family long-term care is a virtue shared by both cultures.



Map of Ribbon Farms on the St. Lawrence River

Source: Bibliothèque et Archives Nationales du Québec

After my grandfather Nicholas Sieracki married my grandmother, he built a big house on East 2nd Street in Winona. One block down towards the river on 559 East Front Street was the tiny house where my grandmother grew up with her brother and mother. When my grandparents built their home on Second Street, they moved the little house from Front St. to the lot on Second Street and incorporated it into the new house. The two rooms from the little house were built in behind the kitchen, and in these two rooms came to live my grandmother's mother and brother. Nowadays, we call this a mother-in-law suite. Upon marriage, my grandfather not only got a bride, but a house, a mother-in-law and a brother-in-law. Fast forward now to my parents and their growing family. In the 1940s, my father bought this big house on Second Street from his father and moved in. But my grandfather and his brother-in-law still lived in the house along with two of my father's brothers. So in this case, my mother got not only the Sierackis' big house, but the Sieracki family as

well. My father's brothers moved out when they were drafted in WWII, but my grandfather and great uncle lived with my parents until they died.



I asked my mother how she felt about having such a multi-generational household of interesting personalities and housekeeping duties. She said she didn't mind at all. She remembered one of dad's brothers, unasked, helping with the dishes. Or an occasional pat of encouragement on the shoulder from dad's uncle. Once when dad returned home inebriated and late for dinner from a union meeting, he asked my mother what was to eat. She was furious. His uncle, just finishing supper at the table, retorted, "Hot tongue!"

Similar aspects of the Polish and French-Canadian cultural heritages worked to sustain the family life of my parents. A strong faith in the Catholic religion and participation in a Catholic neighborhood parish that is at the center of community life and customs. A desire to have a large family and devote one's life to it and to maintain close ties with other members of the family – brothers and sisters and numerous cousins. Acceptance of hard work as a natural condition of life. And a spirit of *joie de vivre*, a spirit of happiness and enjoyment and meaningfulness.

Here is a light-hearted way of showing that both families shared similar cultural attributes. My father's family is from a particular region of Poland called Kashubia. Joe Hughes, a professor of Classics who researches Kashubian immigration, had this to say about Kashubians: "Anyone who is Kashubian, or has spent a lot of time among Kashubians, knows that there is a distinctive Kashubian personality." A wall mural at the Polish Museum of Winona lists the following traits.

- Love music, wake up singing
 - Are very intuitive
- Easily offended, but carry hurt silently for years
 - Are very close to their faith
- Are too soft spoken and polite to win arguments, but argue in their heads for weeks afterwards
 - Have an indomitable spirit
 - Alcohol is not their friend

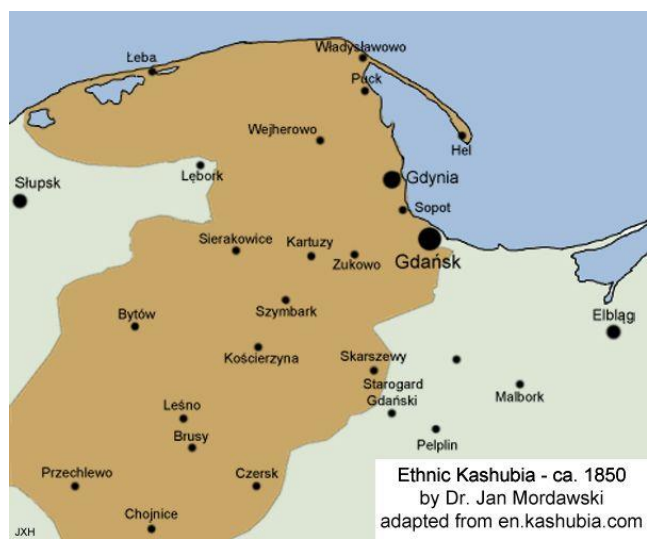
I don't really think that there is such a thing as a Kashubian personality or a French-Canadian personality. Nevertheless, I do find that many of these characteristics were alive and well in my father's family, if not Kashubians in general. And if you close your eyes and think of what might be the French-Canadian personality, some of these traits would find their way into the list.

A Journey Within and a Journey Without

Our cultural heritage comes into focus when we tell the stories of our ancestors. However, to tell their stories, we have to take charge of our own story. Appreciation of our cultural heritage is a journey we take to discover what is within us. We have to plumb our memories and our feelings about the significant events in the lives of our family members. And it involves journeys that we take to explore other places.



Europe Map Source: Wikipedia.com



Ethnic Kashubia Source: kashubia.com

The journey can be as short as across town. Not long after my father died, I asked my mother if she knew where in Poland the Sieracki family came from. It had occurred to me that I knew nothing of the family's history. "Go see your cousin Paul Libera," she said. Paul explained that he and I were descended from Marcy Anna Sieracki who came with her family from Wiele, Poland. Paul introduced me to his mother, who was the granddaughter of Marcy Anna Sieracki and my grandfather's first cousin. As a young adult, I had never met anyone of my grandfather's generation. This opened the door to discovering earlier generations of my family and contemporary cousins in Poland. I learned just enough Polish to get around in Poland. Years later, while I was visiting the Mayor of Bytów, a town near Wiele, he happened to notice on his wife's family tree that her uncle married Ewa Sieracki. A little research on both sides revealed that Ewa Sieracki and I are descended from Szymon Sieracki born in 1755. I had discovered my family roots and contemporary cousins in Poland.

I asked my cousin Paul how it happened that a single mother emigrated from Poland in 1873 with her two sons and daughter and their families. The independent

existence of Poland ended in 1795 after a series of invasions and partitions of Polish territory by Russia, Austria and Prussia. Poland did not regain its independence until 1918. Prussia occupied the northwest part of Poland where my ancestors lived, and they were subjected to severe political and economic oppression. Poles were subject to be drafted into the Prussian army. My great-grandfather's brother Franciszek had to serve 14 years as a Prussian soldier. During the 1870s America welcomed Europeans to immigrate and work in her burgeoning industries and vast farmlands. Some 4,000 Poles from the Kashubian region of Poland made the move, and they came to Winona, Minnesota and then cities beyond. It was an important event in the history of American immigration, and Winona earned the title of the Kashubian Capital of America.

After I left home and got married, I asked my mother if she would like to go to Sorel, Canada, where her mother's family emigrated from. Her immediate response was "Yes!" This was back in the day when computers and the internet were not used for genealogy. So we cruised the town, checked out the historical museum, and then the cemeteries. Walking among the tombstones, my mother found the names of many of the families in Hugo. We stopped at the rectory to see if we could talk to someone about researching my mother's grandfather, Calixte Peloquin, who was born in Sorel. We knocked on the door and in my halting French I inquired about family information.

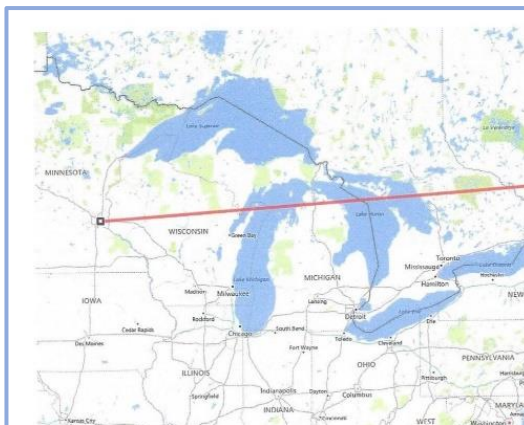


Père George Cournoyer simply asked, "What family?" And our answer, Peloquin, pleased him. He was a passionate genealogist who traced all of the major families of Sorel back to their hometowns in France. And Peloquin was among them. He invited us in to review his research of our family. In an instant, we had a view of every ancestor back to François Peloquin born in 1657 in Niort, France. We invited Père Cournoyer to dinner and had a delightful evening with our new-found cousin. As he pointed out, we shared a common ancestor in Canada.



Source: The Royal Canadian Geographical Society

The founding of the Canada colony along the St. Lawrence River by Jacques Cartier was not followed by a rush of emigrants from France eager to improve their lot in life. The advantages to be gained by life in Canada were not outweighed by the daunting challenges of the wilderness, fierce Indian tribes intent on protecting their land, the short growing season, the cold winters, the expense. Seeing the settlement going nowhere, King Louis XIV took control of the colony and appointed a governor and military commander who subdued the Iroquois and Mohawk tribes. My ancestor Vivien Jean was in a contingent of soldiers recruited and brought to Canada for this purpose by the King's minister Jean Talon. The defeat of the Indian tribes was followed by a wave of 3,000 colonists in the 1660s. Recognizing that a colony made up of mostly men was not going to populate the New World, King Louis XIV and his minister Colbert recruited about 850 girls of marriageable age, mostly between 12 and 25 years old, and paid their way to Canada with a trousseau and often a small dowry. The young women would find a husband of their choice either at Quebec City, Trois Rivières or Montreal. Most French-Canadians have a relative or are themselves descended from a "Fille du Roi." My grandmother Mary Peloquin is a descendent of Felix Peloquin, whose grandmother, Françoise Lemoine, was a "Fille du Roi."



From Sorel to Hugo



From Wiele to Winona

Google Maps

The history and culture of my family is the culmination of two waves of immigration. One from France to Canada and then to Minnesota, the other from Poland to Minnesota. Journeys that thousands of families dared to undertake. These two cultures shaped the identity of my family.

To appreciate the values of our culture, we must journey within ourselves and without. If we live in the same environment and never leave it to learn about others, then our understanding and appreciation of our heritage will be limited to the perception that this way of life is a given and there is nothing special about it. When I grew up, I thought it perfectly natural that grandmothers should be in wheelchairs. This is all that I knew.

Windows to the past inevitably close when we do not share our experiences and what we have learned. The cultural inheritance weakens and disappears if we don't. First and most obviously, the language disappears. Then the religious centrality of the parish community, then the family customs and rituals and the close connection among relatives. When we learn the stories of others, appreciate them and pass them on, we are also writing our own story. If we see and understand the experiences of our ancestors, we understand better who we are, what circumstances ended up with us being the way we are. We have a better idea of how we are indebted to them and what our responsibilities are to those who come after us. We honor our ancestors and fulfill ourselves and descendants if we make their stories and their contributions come alive. It is our opportunity to make a journey of self-fulfillment and preserve our cultural heritage for future generations.

Lord Byron, a character in Tennessee Williams' drama Camino Real says: "Lately, I've been listening to hired musicians behind a row of artificial palm trees instead of the single pure stringed instrument of my heart. For what is the heart, but a sort of instrument that translates noise into music, chaos into order. Make voyages, attempt them, there's nothing else." Source: Camino Real by Tennessee Williams

There is a lot of noise in our world. A voyage into the history and cultural heritage of our family leads our heart to play its music.