

Fell's Point Out of Time



Richard Kirstel Interview, October 21, 2003

[Interviewer, Kraig Greff]

Tell me the stories of your various connections with Fell's Point over time....

[Richard]

Yea, I mean, it's not that long a story. I had been, of course, drifting down into Fell's Point and spent time here over the years that I've lived in Baltimore, but never felt myself to be specifically a part of it. And I never lived in Fell's Point. I lived in the mid-town Belvedere district and the lower part of Charles Village. But, in the last few years, especially since Cammy and Ed Kane have become a part of Fell's Point, I started to spend more and more time here with them. And then as Ed decided he had had enough of doing "The Dawn's Early Light" tours, and asked me to do it, I got involved with the whole history of the Inner Harbor, of course, largely through Ed Kane and his enormous amount of knowledge of Baltimore history. And started focusing more and more on Fell's Point as a costumed character doing this bosom's mate character for the Water Taxi. And then when, a couple of years ago, when Ellen had seen me do that costumed character as a bosom's mate, she asked me if I would do a character for the Fell's Point Society, which I did. At first, I did Robert Long, but then we switched it to Edward Fell and then I started doing the Ghost Tours. And then with the Fell's Point Society's involvement with the Immigration Project, they wanted to do a tour about Immigration into Fell's Point and the impact of immigration into Fell's Point after the steamship era started in Locust Point after the Civil War.

So I built a character from scratch, to an extent based upon my grandfather actually, and as a Ukrainian immigrant from the late 1880's and talked about the history of immigration and the impact thereof upon Fell's Point. So that's been going on for two to three years now, and I guess I've become highly visible around Fell's Point because I'm the guy that inhabits the costumes that are so recognizable. And of course myself I've gotten fascinated by and involved with the history and the whole attitude, the ambience, of Fell's Point. Ed Kane had said in one interview, and I've heard him say it at other times, that he always regarded Fell's Point as not so much a geographical place as a state of mind. And I find that particularly appealing as a thought.

[Kraig]

What are the parts of Fell's Point's history that you find most important and interesting?

[Richard]

Well, the notion that it is the oldest continuously operating, still working, waterfront community in the country still grabs my interest. We're not a fly preserved in amber. All that history is here and yet it's still a living, changing, growing area. And, that sort of idea of historical connections fascinates me. The sheer funky, run-down looking nature of the place, by American standards, and of course ...

[Kraig]

Not all stucco.

[Richard]

No, not all stucco. But there is formstone. And no lawns. No bloody lawns. And I really like being around the square. There's something about just strolling around the square – kind of gets to me. And as I said, mentioned, back to what I referred to before, the whole idea of it being a focal point of immigration, I find fascinating. That really engages me.

[Kraig]

Yet today.

[Richard]

Yea.

[Kraig]

Any other points about the history that you find important and interesting?

[Richard]

Well, I get a kick out of – not exactly the history – but, I get a kick out of telling the ghost stories. I really do. Because obviously they're fanciful. Mostly apocryphal, if that. But the idea that they're all, at least the stories that I tell, hooked into the history of Fell's Point. Hooked into descriptions of Fell's Point – is something that intrigues me. That's why I enjoy it so much.

[Kraig]

How do you see Fell's Point changing as it moves into the future? ...

[Richard]

That's really just about an impossible question for me to answer. I simply don't know. How do you balance and how will it be balanced – the notion of development ... the desire for the administration of the city and state to build a tax base – and still maintain the character of Fell's Point. I mean, I've been running away – being a city dweller and an artist all my life – I've been running away, just two steps ahead of gentrification for as long as I can remember. I don't know. I don't have atelic vision. I can't see that. My concern is how did we get to where we are, and then let's understand this. What we need. Do I have a guess? I have fears. I have fears ...

[Kraig]

Tell me about your fears. The scariest thing that could happen.

[Richard]

The scariest thing that's going to happen ... it will become so well developed, and eventually there'll be casino gambling located on the eastern end of the Inner Harbor, that easy access to the water

and easy access to the shoreline will be closed off to people who otherwise could just stroll through and enjoy the ambience. That's my worst-case scenario. How that gets balanced against maintaining a sense of the past

[Kraig]

That could be coming, too, with the current administration the way it is now. Does the current administration now reflect that? I see that it does, but tell me what you see, as being around here for ...

[Richard]

I think you're right. I think the Mayor's primary concern is to build a tax base. And, I think that his focus would be on development and still maintain some of the quality of Fell's Point, rather than focusing on maintaining some of the quality of Fell's Point and allowing a little development. If that makes sense. It should be the other way than I think the focus is. And I think there are a lot of interests looking to establish casino gambling. Slots, I'm afraid, will come in. That's a camel's nose under the tent. Three quarters of the revenue from all over the country comes from casino gambling anyway. So then, hoteliers and developers will start to say, "Well, look, you've already got it. Why not ...?" And this will seal people off from the kind of – the word is ambience – that makes Fell's Point what it is.

[Kraig]

Do you think it could be another Atlantic City where the central core is all neat and polished, shiny and new, and everybody wants to go there, and one block outside of the new is just devastatingly poor, run down? Do you see that with Fell's Point?

[Richard]

Yea. And it's one of the problems that happen with tourist development everywhere. How do we balance that? The tourism is necessary. Building an income and having people come and spend their money, maybe, is necessary to the viability of the area. At the same time, it always seems to create the run-down and poor worker, low-income worker syndrome on the fringes. Atlantic City you mentioned. But it's also like that in other cities. They're complaining about that in New Orleans – the same syndrome, casino gambling. I don't know. I really don't know – how does one avoid it? I don't know.

What is critical, at the core, is keeping a cadre of really concerned neighborhood people. That becomes the necessity. And, I don't know how many there are that really feel that way.

[Kraig]

Do you see some type of balance? Do you think some kind of balance or maybe something can coexist – say they have the gambling – do you think we can still maintain the history, the preservation, the quaintness that really is Fell's Point, the working waterfront and all that and the gambling? Or is it one or the other?

[Richard]

I don't think that the a ... that quality of "Fell's Point"ness will last, will really sustain in the face of casino gambling resorts. I think that'll dwindle away, and there'll be a house here or there that will be preserved. I think it could be maintained I low-rise condos or an appropriate kind of hotel were built, but I think that if it also led to a gambling area and resort, I think we'll find the quality of Fell's Point sustained only in a faux commercialized sort of way.

[Kraig]

The Disneyland of the East Coast?

[Richard]

Yea. A minor version of that. I think real Fell's Pointers will start to move out and dissipate, and the fringe will be for, as you suggest, a kind of low-income workers' area, service area.

[Kraig]

How did you arrive at "Fell's Point Expert" status? At what point did you "get the reigns" to become ... because there's three or four guys in this town, when they think of experts and knowledgeable people, you're one of the names that always comes up. Eney and you and Ed Kane Is there any time when you felt like "hey, I'm one of those guys" or did you just find yourself there or is it something you don't even want to admit to?

[Richard]

Well, I don't know if it's a question admitting to it. Actually, I'd love to be able to claim it in a way. Because, in my experience, people that are really modest usually deserve to be. I don't give good humble. But, I cannot claim maven status. I really can't. What I know of Fell's Point started by playing these living history characters. Every actor, and I'm an experienced actor, knows what it means to build a back-story. And in building a back-story for my characters – my back-story was the history of Fell's Point.

And then, of course, I had a great tutor, the late Ed Kane. Ed and I were very close. Ed has a profound interest in history and historiography anyway, and particularly focused locally on Fell's Point and his love of Baltimore City and his fascination with the harbor. So I had a tutor and in that sense, although he didn't think of himself as actively tutoring, and that was all part of building the back story. And I look and I think, "Wow, somebody thinks I'm a Fell's Point maven." I'm an actor who built a back-story, and in order to do that I had to learn the history. In order to learn the history, I had to sort of feel the place. To use a, I guess, a dated word from the late '60's, I had to learn to grok it.

You don't remember that word, do you? The science fiction writer Robert Heinlein wrote a book in the 60's called Stranger in a Strange Land. And it became THE cult book, you know, one of the cult books.

[Kraig]

Remember the book River World, which is one of my favorites. Was that along the same time?

[Richard]

Yea, I think so.

[Kraig]

They just had a movie out. It was horrible compared to the original. That started me into science fiction. Now science fiction, of course, sucks. Some of the great writers

[Richard]

Well, I think science fiction went into a kind of techie ...

[Kraig]

Then science fiction was like you could be there. You could really imagine yourself there. That's what I like about old English novels. Now, it's like they really spell it all out ...

[Richard]

Did you ever read A Canticle for Liebowitz? That's the best of them all...

[Kraig discussion with producer]

[Richard]

Taciturnity and terseness are not one of my strong points.

[Kraig]

Talk about Fell's Point and how the artists moved ... kind of a brief history of how that all happened.

[Richard]

In that sense, Fell's Point has, over the years, followed a pattern that happened in other cities ... Greenwich Village and then the Lower East Side, which somehow became the "East Village"; Old Town Chicago; North Beach in San Francisco; here in Baltimore, Fell's Point. This is a pattern that develops on cities. There's some funky old neighborhood which is inexpensive, and so artists move in because one can afford the space needed. And, artists start to attract, again, a faux hip crowd, weekend escapes, and eventually some of them decide to move in. Prices go up. Lofts get renovated. Buildings get fancified. And eventually the artists find another old neighborhood. And what is left behind becomes an upscale, gentrified, kind of updated, romanticized past. I've been dealing with this, as I said, being a city dweller all my life, it's been one of the problems ...

[Kraig]

Something I want to know just personally here, when you have gentrification ... you talk about gentrification and then the artists move out, but without gentrification, you don't have a tax base... How do you see that?

[Richard]

Well that becomes the balance point of the necessary tax base behind gentrification and how artists can afford an area. How do you balance that? Oh, wow. This is something that city planners should be thinking about. The point of a city is density. The point of living in a city is variety and diversity within that density. Jane Jacobs has pointed this out. How do you balance that in a way that it simply doesn't drive the culture makers away by the culture vultures? I don't know. I'm not a city planner. But it is something that we should be concerned with for the health of cities, and not depend entirely on what has been termed "edge cities", you know, suburban sprawl that turns into cities. They manage to do this somehow within Western European cities. Why do we have so much trouble within here? I think one of the problems is ... one of the basic problems is the automobile. We've got to do something about that. Most American cities completely neglect or only pay minimal service to the idea of effective transportation. So everything gets choked off by automobiles, and the most valuable areas downtown become parking garages.

[Kraig]

That's why jazz always came out of New York – you could go from one jazz club to the next, and you could take public transportation. Here, you have to drive, find a parking spot Same thing here, if they had better public transportation, you could get to Fell's Point, get to downtown, and stuff, and you wouldn't have to go to that big hassle to get to the cars ...

[Richard]

Our deification of the automobile is self-destructive and strangling. And our addiction to oil is kind of loony. We have these marvelous, great cities and we turn them over to cars. We should be doing something, well the way London did recently, not allowing cars into the inner city. Or, maybe somebody could design a city car, electric cars just for the city... I don't know. But this becomes an important part of the problem. Every time somebody proposes – and I remember this from when I was active in the community association in the midtown Belvedere area when they were first proposing the School for the Arts there in the old Alcazar – the first complaint that came out of people was parking spaces. Oh, all these kids going to school, they will take up parking spaces. I heard this here in Fell's Point. The first concern that people had when they heard there were going to be development planning concerns for the Broadway Pier were not "How do we maintain our history?" but "What will we do about parking spaces?" It's kind of a lunatic orientation. I think something has to be done about that – public transportation, electric cars, jitney buses like they have in Asian cities that I've been in – would supply that need. I don't really know how that can be planned.

[Kraig]

Even the trolley car in San Francisco. Something.

[Richard]

And the trolley car is not only useful; it has become a tourist attraction. As I said, in Asian cities you can get all over Manila side streets and so forth with these little jitney buses, or small sized, miniature sized trolleys. And they work because there are so many of them. And it keeps the street clear of a lot of cars. What you said about New York becomes important because you do walk from one place to another, and the public transportation is there. I think that's one of the biggest problems cities have. Not only in terms of the flow of people, but also of air quality. I mean, that's part of it. I'm always fascinated by how people who make such an issue of, say, second-hand smoke, even out in the fresh air, seem to drive two great big cars, one of which is an SUV.

[Kraig]

But don't get near them with a cigarette.

[Richard]

Yea. And that doesn't seem to bother them. I suppose the campaign against tobacco or guilt over a ten mile per gallon SUV. I think that's a major problem. And keeping people on the streets. Keeping people walking on the streets – that becomes critical. Maintaining the small businesses, offices, stores, neighborhood bars, coffee houses, all the things that make for a lively, active street. I think that's important. Now, you can't expect that of every street in the city. But you do want to see that mid-town, Inner Harbor area, downtown, and especially here. This is a neighborhood made for walking. The streets are narrow. Houses are close together. It's got that very scent of history in the air. It is such a boon to life to be able to walk down an old street ... feel the connection between the now and the then ... to the harbor and just do some water watching for a while.

[Kraig]

That's one of the things I can't take about LA and some of those cities. That does not exist there. Not in any form whatsoever. It drives me nuts. I'm there four or five days and ... I miss that ... this is sterile here. This is nothing. You don't do anything.

[Richard]

You notice those areas where people are most anxious to retire to, like Phoenix or South Florida or Southern California, are usually areas that nature did not design well for people? It's almost as if nature did not intend people to live in the middle of a hurricane belt or a desert or that kind of aridity. Even the palm trees in Southern California had to be imported.

[Kraig]

You're one of the few people I know that know that fact. They're not indigenous to Southern California. They're all brought in. Every palm tree there was brought in.

[Richard]

Immigrants for appearance.

[Kraig]

This is my question: What is the most memorable, as an example, shocking, heart warming, whatever, event you've experienced since you've been living in Fell's Point or coming to visit Fell's Point? Maybe a few things that you remember as like "Wow." Even like Ed Kane's death ...

[Richard]

Gee. That's kind of hard to pin down. Because some of the things that matter most to me seem to be trivial, I guess. And also, an actor's concern ... there have been times when I've been in costume telling a story about Fell's Point and I'm getting a really focused, interested attention from my audience right out on the streets. It's sort of wonderful thinking I'm performing this story and my set is all of Fell's Point. And I can feel it that way. Story telling is, I think, critical. I think arguably the most important phrase in the English language is "Once upon a time..." We live our lives by the stories that we tell each other, tell ourselves, tell our children. Felling Fell's Point to be able to tell stories about it on those occasions when I've got that intensity of response.

[Kraig]

Along those lines, I remember with my Mom and Dad, one of the best remembrances about my Dad was things my Dad said or stories my Dad told or these are some of the things my Dad did... He told an anecdote like "don't do this because..."

[Richard]

We live our lives by that. And feeling that in Fell's Point. Faulkner, when he got the Nobel Prize, one of his remarks was "The past is not dead. It's not even past." And I think one can feel that in this neighborhood. And, of course, in terms of a specific, memorable event, although an unhappy memory, was the memorial service for Ed Kane. Unhappy – we were close and it was grievous to me to see him go – but the memorial service was, as had been mentioned there, a celebration of his life, not an *oi vey* kind of thing over his passing only. And the way the whole community seemed to turn out for it. And the way people who hardly knew each other except to pass on the street and nod good morning or didn't know Ed very well nevertheless felt impacted upon by the nature of the ceremony and the kind of incidence of neighborhood bonding that that memorial celebration afforded. I found that to be memorable and important.

[Kraig]

Some of my own questions come to mind, I guess. Do you see a replacement for Ed Kane, a young Ed ... or, like they said about Elvis, who's gonna fill his shoes – an old George Jones tune... But, is there somebody that's gonna step up to the plate?

[Richard]

Somebody will. I don't know who, but somebody will. As has been said, "Cemeteries are filled with irreplaceable people." There will be somebody. I don't know who. I can't foresee that. But, leadership emerges and somebody's influence will be felt. Yea. It'll be different, but nobody's irreplaceable. Nobody. What is irreplaceable is the mood, the ambience, the very zeitgeist of Fell's Point. And that's important to sustain. To keep that sense of a dynamic past as part of our present.

That's what really is important. Hopefully, there will be people who will be able to galvanize action amongst the citizenry to sustain that. Who? I don't know. Somebody will. I hope.

[Kraig]

Now with you going out of the country and moving, will you miss Fell's Point? How will you feel about that? What will you take with you out of Fell's Point?

[Richard]

I don't really know. I don't know. Ask me that question three years from now, or so. I've lived in several different cities, usually in what have been very interesting neighborhoods until I couldn't afford them any more and, I'm sure, there's something of Chicago, something of LA, a lot of New York, even Rochester's still with me. So, I don't know yet. Three or four years from now, I'll start to realize what mattered most. There's no way for me to project that.

[Kraig]

Take a guess. What do you guess?

[Richard]

I really much enjoy just strolling back and forth looking at, directly at the water. And, knowing what I do know of the history of Fell's Point, seeing with my third eye tall ships coming into Brown's Wharf or what is now the Broadway Pier ... And it seems to me that kind of imaginative or fanciful memory will stay with me.

[Kraig]

Any anecdotes or any words of wisdom that people moving into Fell's Point or people living in Fell's Point ... things to watch out for ... just sage advice from someone who's already been here. Or say like me – I've been here for ten years – but talking to you, you know a lot more about it than I do. Give me some advice.

[Richard]

I don't know that I have anything sage or particularly wise to say. I would again just flash that back to quoting Faulkner. "The past is not dead. It's not even past." And hopefully as younger people, as newer people move into this area, they will become sensitive to, hopefully even suffused with, that sensibility of history that does permeate the place. And not be anxious to lose that. Hopefully, they'll find that strolling down Thames Street is a much richer experience than looking for a parking place.

[Kraig]

That could be the title of the entire movie. ... Richard, you're hot. Thank you.

[Richard]

No, thank you.

You know, when I was teaching, the students used to have little informal contests on mimicking me. And they always thought I didn't know that. I used to peak through the keyholes and watch them do it.

[Kraig]

I do it right to your face. "I am Richard Kirstel."

[Richard]

What really got to me was, after I left teaching and I went into acting ...

[Kraig]

What'd you teach?

[Richard]

Mostly at the Maryland Institute

[Kraig]

Oh, photography

[Richard]

And after I left teaching and went into acting, over the first few years, I'd run into former colleagues and former students who would ask me, "What are you doing now?" And I told them I was acting. And nobody was ever surprised. So I figured that I must have been one hell of a ham.