Jim Wilke

Jim Wilke’s great-grandfather settled in Los Angeles in the late 1800s. Born in Santa Monica in 1962, Wilke lives in Los Angeles and works as a historical consultant. “I advertise my services in a resource directory for filmmakers. If they need to know where to get a stagecoach or a vintage refrigerator, or what kind of food goes on the table for *The Age of Innocence*, I can tell them.”

WHEN I WAS A TEENAGER I collected old phonographs. It was a very curatorial thing: I had one, then I wanted to get another kind, then I wanted to get a different type, and then I wanted to get the same kind but by a different manufacturer. My big collection of records started when I got my grandmother’s record collection. There was something visceral about listening to the popular songs of 1905, hearing sound that had been made back then.

I had that collection for a while, but then I realized it was kind of kooky to have all those things in the house. I wasn’t running a phonograph museum, and my friends didn’t want to come over for a phonograph party. And I began to realize that objects can’t satisfy unless they’re something that you can really use, like an old car. If it’s not practical to use, then it’s clutter. So I sold them.

My parents didn’t really object to my collecting, but they didn’t encourage it. It wasn’t usual; it wasn’t average. Teenagers don’t go collecting old phonographs. My parents always knew I was unusual, and like most parents they very much wanted me to be as normal as possible, to help them present to the world a normal family. Everything that they liked was modern, and everything I liked was old. But now my taste runs pretty modern. I’ve still got old Craftsman furniture, but I’ve got modern things as well. I don’t want to live in a period house. I could do it easily, in a curatorial sense: assemble it room by room, with the right magazines and books, the right arrangement of things. But that’s for set decorators. I don’t want to live a replica life.

Some of the Victorian houses around here are rather kooky restorations, and their interiors are equally kooky, not very well done. They don’t really know much about Victorian, so they get a funny sofa and stick it in. No one really lived like that. But I’ve known some gay men who have restored older homes to within an inch of their lives and have made very accurate replicas of the past. They knew what life was like in the past; they understood and enjoyed the past. None of them were ever really going anywhere in terms of jobs or careers, but their knowledge of the past was priceless.
Intuitively they knew so much about the past lifestyles of “just plain folks,” as one of them put it.

Roger was the king of being “just folks.” I got to know him when I was seventeen, and his interests and knowledge were very much a siren for me. I met him at the Doo-Dah Parade, our annual Pasadena parade of kookiness. I was with a friend in his old car, and Roger had an old car and was dressed just right and impressed me. I was invited to his house. A good number of his friends were there, gay and straight, male and female. They were all characters, and in many ways they were misfits. Roger had a great house. The furniture was from as far back as the 1840s, but it was an 1890s house as it might have looked around 1920. Everything worked, including the gaslights. It’s now in the care of the Pasadena Historical Society.

I was really uncomfortable with traditional fagdom, but I was fortunate to develop friendships with a lot of gay men who liked old stuff. Roger was one of those people who wanted to see buggies go by when he stepped outside. I remember, in a book published in the 1970s, a picture of a man in high collar, period clothes, standing before a wall filled with piano-roll boxes. I think there was a phonograph there too. You could tell it was serious with him; he wasn’t just your house-museum docent dressing up. I’ve always felt a very strong emotional and sexual attraction to men like that—the idea of undressing such a man, removing a lot of things. I’ve had such a strong interest in old stuff myself since I was a kid that anyone who was like that, I wanted to know about him. I wanted to get into him, to figure out how he worked, to know the secret, to see. Of the people that I got to know who were early into preservation here in L.A., most were misfits. Bunker Hill, a downtown site that was once covered with mansions, was all rundown and slated for destruction by the 1960s. The types who wanted to preserve it were not Waspy, blue-blazer types, Dorothy Chandlers or Lady Bird Johnsons. They were all funky folk, mainly eccentrics, and older people who had lived in the area all their lives.

I’ve never really gotten along with most people socially. Trains were my friends. I have liked trains since I first saw Petticoat Junction on television when I was four. I didn’t care about the show; I just watched it for the train. I’ve always liked only the very early wood-burners, from back in the days of the Civil War. They’re not fast; they’re not high-charge muscular. They are slow, grand, high, and beautiful machines—magnificent, really—their physical proportions, the concept of the culture that built them, and the colors. They were not just big black things; they were opulent. I’m also interested in stagecoaches, wooden ships, and other vehicles that all have that one thing in common: large, spectacular, slow, gracious beauty, like a really incredible float rolling down a street.
It was after I had been working as assistant curator with the Autrey Museum of Western Heritage that I rekindled my love of trains by going to a museum that had restored several early examples. I started attending railroad symposiums and met an entirely new crop of people, including my best friend, a gay man who is the editor of a locomotive and railway preservation magazine. In 1993 and 1994 I got to redo the colors of two replica steam engines at the Golden Spike National Historic Site at Promontory Summit, Utah. They’re essentially steam-powered Mayflowers, interpretive things. They had been painted red by a Disney artist in 1978, so they looked like toys, things that should be under a Christmas tree. The original color schemes had since been discovered, and with some help from friends at the Smithsonian and the National Park Service, we repainted the locomotives.

It’s not just an interest in railroads but, I would like to think, a way of preserving history. It feels good to see people go up to the steam engines and ooh and aah, smell them and watch them run, and see that one’s burning wood and the other’s burning coal. One of the engines that we repainted in Utah was named the Jupiter, originally built in upstate New York in 1868, standard wood-burning, beautiful machine. Bright red, as by the Disney artist. We redid it according to a newly found newspaper article that described it as being blue and crimson. I had a whole squadron of die-hard railroad historians against this blue engine, even though we found tons of evidence.

My interest has not been on the inner workings of steam engines as much as the outer trappings, the beauty of the color and ornament, period aesthetics. I know how they work, but boiler pressures and shaft lengths have just never interested me, and I’m not mathematically inclined. A gay colleague of mine in Ohio is just the opposite, almost all technological. Paul, a gay friend, is really into railroad track. When we look at a photograph together, I’ll say, “Ooh, look at that engine!” and he’ll say, “Ooh, look at that track!” If there’s anything aesthetic about track at all, I don’t know, but Paul sees a certain type of switch or a certain height of rail and, boy, he’s into it. Another gay friend of mine is really into museum conservation and preservation, and another is into the ornamental aspects of locomotives, like I am. A friend of mine in Pennsylvania just sent me fragments of an 1856 locomotive. That’s the kind of fraternity we have.

I’m taking my 1975 Scout apart bit by bit, cleaning all the little parts, and putting it back the way it ought to be. I drive it around too. I think it’s a cool-looking car. It’s orange and has oversized white wheels with big tires. I just like the guyness of it. I mean, it really looks like a giant Tonka truck. They’re great cars, made out of steel, but what they really are is the biggest boy-toy you could get. They’re not very common, so we Scout drivers acknowledge each other on the street.
I like to take it apart and see how it works, and then it’s a big challenge to put it back together again. I’ll shell out the dollars to have someone repair the transmission for me. But I do simple things like take off the door panel, get the rockers back in shape, clean up the risers, replace parts that are missing. I love to get away from my desk and get my hands dirty doing that kind of stuff. One of the first things was cleaning off all the junk that previous owners had put on it, paring it down to what is genuinely real, then taking that apart to see what’s underneath it, then putting it back together, like a house.

In the 1950s a lot of people collected Model A Fords. Mostly they were people who had driven them when they were younger. But the prizes for the restored Model A’s were usually based on the number of accessories they had, like whitewalls, things that the average Ford never had. The way the Fords really were was not the way the owners or judges really wanted to remember them. You see the same phenomenon today with over-restored Chevy Bel Airs and with hyper-cutesy old houses, the Laura Ashley kind of past. Some of these Victorian houses have been so dolled up. They were never like that.