

Summer 2007

Voices from the Caroliniana - Summer 2007

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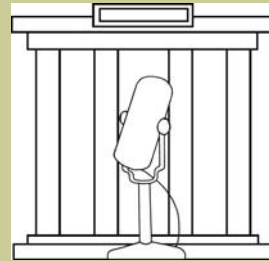
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Voices From the Caroliniana



The Newsletter of the Oral History Program at the South Caroliniana Library

Greetings

Welcome to the fourth newsletter of the Oral History Program at the South Caroliniana Library. Spring is always a busy time for both the Library and the Oral History Program, and while we're grateful for the exciting directions that so many of our projects are taking us, this can also make fixing them in prose for a newsletter a little difficult, which explains why this publication has been pushed back until now. With so many events happening, from extant projects moving into new stages to new collections coming in, compiling news from the Caroliniana sometimes feels more like photographing a kaleidoscope than painting a picture.

Pictures are made to be seen, though, just as our oral histories are intended to be heard, and the Oral History Program has been busy with outreach efforts all over the state. In addition to our collaboration with USC-Lancaster (see *Voices*

From the Caroliniana, no. 2), we are pleased to be working with several new partners, including the Spartanburg Public Library (see story, below) and Middleton Place, as well as addressing interested groups, most recently an NEH Seminar conducted by the Public History Program here on campus.

Several new collections continue to keep us busy as well, including the Dunbar letters, recordings taped thirty years ago documenting life and work in Africa (p.2), and an exciting addition to the Amelia Wallace Vernon Collection (see *Voices*, no. 1), adding to our knowledge of famed South Carolina-born African American painter William H. Johnson (p.2). Dr. Thomas Crosby has been adding to our African American interviews as well with a set of fine interviews



Debra Hutchins, Local History Librarian, works with Nicholas Meriwether on the trial run of the Spartanburg Public Library's digitization station for oral history. See story, below.

completed, and more in progress (p.3). We're pleased to report ongoing progress as well, with two books nearing publication and a complex digitization project approaching completion (pp.4-5) As always, if you have a question or interview to donate, we're eager to hear from you.

Nicholas Meriwether

Highlights In This Issue:

- Oral History Program Outreach Extends to Spartanburg
- Letters From Africa: The Loretta Dunbar Peace Corps Archive
- Remembering William Johnson and the 'Girl In Green'
- Honoring Inspiration: The Thomas Crosby Oral History Collection
- Digitization Project Exhibit Welcomes Colonial Dames

Oral History Program Outreach Extends to Spartanburg

"It was a tremendous advantage to be able to tap the Caroliniana's expertise to get us started."

Ever since Debra Hutchins, Local History Librarian at the Spartanburg County Library, attended a PALMCOP (Palmetto Archives, Libraries, and Museums Council on Preservation) workshop conducted by Nicholas Meriwether, the idea of launching an oral history project had been on her mind. But it was not until she received a telephone call from local radio personality Bill Drake that the

idea took shape. "He had dozens of interviews that he had recorded over a span of nearly thirty years," Hutchins explained, "spread over more than a hundred tapes." All of them were fragile, so Hutchins contacted Meriwether at the Caroliniana to see what could be done. Using the Oral History Program at the Caroliniana as a model, Hutchins and her supervisor, Steve Smith, Director of

Reference Services, formulated a plan. With Meriwether providing on-site training, they built a digitization station and began work. "This is the first time we've ventured into oral history," Smith explained. "It was a tremendous advantage to be able to tap the Caroliniana's expertise to get us started." The Oral History Program looks forward to seeing more of this kind of collaboration in the future.

“As a first-time Peace Corps volunteer, I had no idea that these tapes might be saved for posterity . . .”

Letters From Africa: The Loretta Dunbar Peace Corps Archive

When Loretta Dunbar left Texas in July, 1971 for her first Peace Corps assignment, she knew she was embarking on the adventure of her life—she just didn’t know that it would be the first of many. Over the next thirty years, she would spend time in exotic locales around the world, several in the service of the Peace Corps, before settling in Aiken, S.C. But it was the first few years spent in Africa that made the biggest impression. “That was such an interesting time to be in West Africa,” Dunbar recalled recently, reflecting on the seismic changes sweeping that part of the continent as the 1970s unfolded. “That’s true on a personal level as well, since that’s how I met my second husband.” An expatriate from Scotland,

Dunbar’s future husband happily consented when Dunbar suggested they record their impressions of their life and work in West Africa for her relatives in the U.S., and over the next eight years, the couple recorded nearly fifty hours of tapes, almost all of which have survived.

As a collection, the tapes provide a remarkable series of first-person reflections on West African culture, folkways and politics, as well as a host of related issues, from the experience of working as a Peace Corps volunteer to the associated culture shock that they experienced in Ghana and later in Nigeria.

Through it all, the tapes show the growing bond of respect and obligation between the couple and their hosts, as well

as the deepening relationship between Dunbar and her husband. Best of all, the existence of the tapes was a surprise: when her step-father presented her with the collection in 2006, Dunbar had thought them lost. It was a loss made more poignant by the death of her husband a few years earlier, whose melodious brogue and sense of humor provide so much of the warmth and humor of the recordings.

Now in the process of being digitized and restored, the tapes not only bring those voices back to life, they also provide a fascinating modern take on one of the Library’s most cherished literary forms, the letter. With the Dunbar Archive, the Library now has oral epistles as well.

Remembering William H. Johnson and His “Girl In A Green Dress”



Gwendolyn White Robertson holds a book of William H. Johnson’s paintings, showing the page with the famous portrait of her mother, “Girl In Green.”

Amelia Wallace Vernon has devoted more than four decades to documenting the African Americans of the S.C. community of Mars Bluff (see *Voices From the Caroliniana*, no. 1). “I wanted to record as much of the African-American culture that made this part of South Carolina such a vibrant area, and I was afraid that much of it might be lost,” she explained.

Vernon was keenly aware of how much of that cultural memory was being lost as children emigrated and parents died, and her dedication produced more than 100 hours of oral histories. Some narrators had achieved fame, but many had not, so it was especially interesting to hear of a Florence resident, Gwendolyn Robertson, whose mother, Bertha Brooks

White, had been the subject of a noted painting by the area’s most famous son, noted African American painter William H. Johnson (1901-1970). At the urging of her daughter, Vernon recorded a lengthy interview with Robertson earlier this summer. “I just prompted her to do what she’s done for so many years, which is record an interview,” Jane Vernon recalled recently. “My mother has done so much to record often little-known voices, and here was a chance to capture details about someone who left a major impact.”

Stories about Johnson still circulated when Robertson was growing up. She has her own stories as well: when she was six, he came back from New York to collect the paintings he

had left behind. Robertson vividly remembers seeing his paintings as a child: one of his most famous, “Still Life,” occupied a place of honor over her grandmother’s mantle for many years.

But it was Robertson’s mother who played a noteworthy role in Johnson’s work, serving as the model for the painting “Girl In A Green Dress.” Considered one of his landmark works, the painting indicates the nuances and complexity of African-American life in the area, and demonstrates the community ties that fostered Johnson’s art in his formative years. Now, with Vernon’s interview with Robertson, another facet of Johnson’s rich legacy has been preserved.

Honoring Inspiration: The Thomas Crosby Oral History Collection

“One theme in my life is being inspired by teachers and learning.” That’s how Dr. Thomas Crosby explains how his latest passion, conducting oral history interviews, came about. Now with more than a dozen interviews completed, Crosby is well on the way to creating a fascinating and unique oral history archive documenting African-American education in South Carolina, as well as a host of related issues.

A native of Blair, S.C., Crosby attended Sims High School in Union County and went on to earn his B.A. from Allen University. Going north to continue his studies, he eventually earned a Ph.D. from Pennsylvania State University and taught biology at Morgan State University in Baltimore, retiring in 2003.

“I came back to South Carolina to teach at Allen then,” he explained. After teaching biology

at his alma mater for three more years, he retired again in 2006.

Retirement did not mean inactivity, though, and Crosby already knew what he wanted to do with his hard-won free time. Working with Dr. Val Littlefield, Professor of History at USC and a member of the African-American Studies Program, and Nicholas Meriwether, Oral Historian at the South Caroliniana Library, Crosby set out to document aspects of African-American education in South Carolina. His two main areas of inquiry are Rosenwald schools and several noteworthy pre-integration high schools, although the topics covered branch into many related areas as well.

“I had read an article on the Rosenwald schools and the idea had stayed with me over the years,” he remembers. “It

struck me that this was an important story that had not been fully documented yet.” It was a connection he felt personally: his own career reflected the caliber and dedication of the teachers who had guided him. “These schools had great teachers and produced outstanding graduates, though we never remember the names today,” he adds, somberly. “It just seems as if they’ve been forgotten.”

With interviews covering Booker T. Washington High School, Allen University, Columbia’s historic Waverly neighborhood, and more, the Thomas Crosby Oral History Collection captures a wonderful array of voices describing many facets of the African-American experience. Thanks to his efforts, those voices and their stories will not be forgotten.



Dr. Thomas Crosby has completed twelve interviews as part of an ambitious project documenting African American education in his native South Carolina.

Oral History Program Collaborates On Two New Books

Curating an oral history is akin to producing a book, but two recent projects undertaken by the Oral History Program have gone on to produce actual books: Dr. Benjamin Franklin’s oral histories of South Carolina jazz and blues musicians, and *Carolina First: A Twenty-Year Crusade*. Both are in final stages now, with USC Press planning for publication of Franklin’s book in 2008, and *Carolina First* slated for publication by R. L. Bryan this fall.

“We’re excited to see these interviews in book form,” commented Henry Fulmer, Curator of Manuscripts at the South Caroliniana. “While all of our interviews benefit from a kind of meticulous processing that constitutes a form of publication in itself,” Fulmer added, “a

book reaches a much wider audience.”

In keeping with the stories they collect, both projects emerged from a series of happy accidents. When Franklin, now retired from the USC English Department, contacted the Library in the spring of 2005, he was simply inquiring about the disposition of some old interview tapes. “I had no idea that I was embarking on a project that would produce a book,” he reflected, with a chuckle. (See *Voices*, no. 1.)

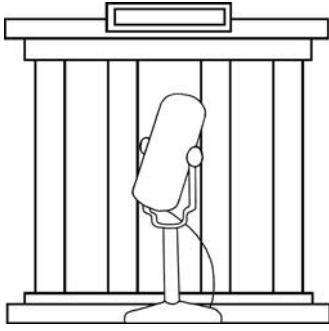
Likewise, when *Carolina First* founder Mack Whittle contacted the Caroliniana about conducting a few interviews, he set in motion a series of events that would culminate in a book documenting the bank’s first two decades, tracing its path

from scrappy start-up to one of the largest banks in the country. (See *Voices*, no. 1)

In both books, the oral histories are the most prominent feature. With Franklin’s, each chapter is an edited interview, and with *Carolina First*, the interview segments not only provide the color but often the core facts as well. “You can only get so much from the documentary record,” Meriwether explains.

“Regardless of the subject, whether music or business, so much history resides in the memories of the people making the decisions and doing the work—and those details often don’t make it out on paper.” With these books, those details are now preserved for generations of readers to come.

“... so much history resides in the memories of the people making the decisions and doing the work ...”



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Digitization Project Exhibit Welcomes Colonial Dames

With nearly half of the necessary funds raised, work on the Colonial Dames Oral History Collection has begun and is well underway. (See *Voices From the Caroliniana*, no. 2.) “We’ve now passed the first milestone,” Nicholas Meriwether, Oral Historian at the Caroliniana, announced recently. “All of the tapes have now been successfully digitized, and we’ve begun the process of restoring them.”

A collection of interviews created by members from all over the state in the 1980s, the archive at the Library spans more than thirty tapes. All were in badly degraded condition when work began. “We’ve used every trick in the book to retrieve a signal,” Meriwether explains. “In fact, we had to invent some new ones to handle some of the challenges these tapes posed.”

Members of the state’s chapter had a chance to see some of these techniques when they visited the Library in April for a tour. One exhibit in the Reading Room was devoted to the digital restoration project they have so generously supported.

“Our next big challenge will be to have the CD’s transcribed and complete the curation process,” Dr. Allen Stokes, Director of the Library explained recently. “Traditionally, transcription is the most costly part of oral history work, although this project has certainly challenged that .”

Fortunately, the Library was able to raise emergency funding in order to complete the digitization process. And once the final funds are secured, the stories that will emerge will cast

light on everything from Gullah folk stories on the coast to World War II reminiscences from the upcountry. “The Colonial Dames have made so many contributions to our state’s history, heritage, and cultural inheritance,” Meriwether noted. “This collection provides even more proof of that spirit.”



Part of the exhibit in the reading Room that welcomed the Colonial Dames in April, showing one of the stages of digitization.