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Voices from the Caroliniana - Spring 2008

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Voices From the Caroliniana



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

Greetings

Welcome to the fifth newsletter of the Oral History Program of the South Caroliniana Library. Often our work seems to echo broader themes in our life as an organization, so it is no surprise that a theme in one of our Carolina First interviews made precisely this point, when founder Mack Whittle remarked that “business is always cycling through periods of expansion and then consolidation.” So it is with the oral history program.

While our major digitization initiative continues to move ahead, we have been delighted with a number of recent additions to our collections. In January, radio personality Hazen Schumacker spent a lively couple of hours in the Library reminiscing with retired USC professor Ben Franklin about their careers broadcasting jazz. The recording that resulted adds a

nice capstone to the Ben Franklin Archive, explaining a major influence on Franklin’s approach to radio as an educational medium as well as his broader notion of how to broadcast jazz.

Giving voice to the voiceless is a phrase that echoes throughout the literature on

oral history, and women suffragists were one of the first communities targeted by oral historians. A collection of interviews with a wide range of narrators taped in the 1970s is one of our most exciting recent donations, representing years of work by historian and former USC professor Constance Myers documenting many prominent activists. That theme of remedy-



Hazen Schumacker, noted NPR radio host of the long-running “Jazz in Retrospect” show, being interviewed by retired USC professor Ben Franklin. See story, below.

ing a void in the record also describes a recent internship in the Oral History Program, devoted to creating an archive of the state’s GLBTQ communities.

More projects are unfolding than we can recount here, and a few more are detailed inside, but as always, if you have a question for us or an interview to donate, we’d love to hear from you.

Nicholas Meriwether

Highlights In This Issue:

- Jazz Studies on the Air: Reconstructing Two Radio Legends
- A Tour of Harvey Teal’s Kershaw County
- Drinkism: An Interview with Bluesman Drink Small
- The Constance Ashton Myers Oral History Collection
- Archival Processing and Oral History: An Overdue Collaboration

Jazz Studies on the Air: Reconstructing Two Radio Legends

“Jazz in Retrospect’ was a remarkable education in jazz, as well as an inspiration and model ...”

One cold morning in January, longtime NPR radio personality Hazen Schumacker spent a memorable couple of hours being interviewed at the South Caroliniana Library by his friend and colleague Ben Franklin about his years in radio. “Hazen’s show, ‘Jazz in Retrospect,’ was a remarkable education in jazz, as well as an inspiration and model for my own show,” Franklin explained.

“I thought that getting the two of us together to reminisce would bring back some of the themes and issues we encountered in the 45 years of jazz broadcasting our careers represent.” The warmth and camaraderie between the two radio veterans shines in the resulting recording, with anecdotes about improvising around the unexpected interleaved with serious reflections on the role that radio

played in jazz education and how that changed over the years. For the Caroliniana, the recording bridges Dr. Franklin’s archive of interviews (see Voices No. x, p.3) and his most recent project, a book tracing the history of his radio show, already under consideration by USC Press. With this interview, readers can hear these two avuncular, erudite voices warm to their subject, once again.

A Tour of Harvey Teal's Kershaw County



Scholar Harvey Teal, an authority on Kershaw County and South Carolina history, in front of the South Caroliniana Library.

On a memorable day in December, historian and longtime South Caroliniana Library researcher Harvey Teal took Library Director Allen Stokes and Oral Historian Nicholas Meriwether on a tour of eastern Kershaw County. Outlining the county's history over the course of an afternoon ramble, Teal provided an account that began with the county's geology and geography and traced its development back to the days of its earliest settlement.

A practiced storyteller as well as historian, Teal blended scholarly appreciation with his own reminiscences, peppering his account with some of the county's most memorable legends and anecdotes, many of which he is responsible for first publishing. Highlights of the

tour included visits to several mill sites, one of the last tree stands where turpentine had been practiced, and one of those curious South Carolina geographic anomalies, a Carolina bay.

"Harvey has an encyclopedic knowledge of Kershaw County," enthused Allen Stokes afterwards. "For years, I've wanted to record him as he hiked those trails and drove those roads, but we haven't had a viable means of doing so." With the Oral History Program's new digital recorder, such a project seemed feasible, and to the relief of all, the recording turned out well. "Although it's not an oral history in the strict sense of the word, the recording is definitely the sort of aural document that oral historians covet,"

Meriwether explained. One possible use being explored is to use excerpts to illustrate an online interactive exhibit devoted to Kershaw County history, featuring Teal's narration, a map of his tour, and a number of his writings. With oral histories playing more prominent roles in museum exhibits nationwide, the Teal recording makes possible the first such exhibit for the South Caroliniana.

And by oral history standards, what Teal provided is a remarkable document on its own merits. "He leavens his scholarly understanding of the area's history with his own experiences," Meriwether remarked recently. "It makes him a wonderful tour guide—and an ideal oral history narrator."

The Constance Ashton Myers Oral History Archive

In 1972, when Constance Ashton Myers heard that a class in oral history methodology was being offered at Columbia University, she signed up immediately. Home of the oldest oral history program in the country, Columbia's Oral History Research Office was begun under the auspices of historian Allan Nevins in 1948, shortly after commercial reel-to-reel tape recorders made field recording practical.

"My first interest in oral history was awakened when I discovered that I could interview persons—elderly by that time—who had been active in the political movement of the 1930s," Myers recalled recently. "That was the subject of my doctoral dissertation." Myers enjoyed the work and went on to win a

grant from the Division of Research at USC, under Dr. John Duffy, to travel around South Carolina recording the testimonies of surviving suffragists.

Those tapes were later donated to the Caroliniana, where the transcripts have been consulted and cited by numerous scholars over the years. Several other institutions benefited from Myers' expertise, including Arizona State University, the University of Michigan, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, all of whom hired her to conduct oral history projects in the 1970s and '80s.

Recently, Myers donated the tapes of one of her most ambitious projects to the Oral History Program, a series of interviews conducted in conjunction with

the International Women's Year conference in 1977. With funding from two grants, Myers was able to hire consultants on the project, donating the tapes to the National Archives in early 1978.

"I had copies made to retain in South Carolina before submitting the originals to the N.A., however," she noted. Those are now being digitized by the Oral History Program. "We plan to approach the National Archives to see about a joint curation effort," explained Nicholas Meriwether, Oral Historian. "And we're excited at the possibility of partnering with them for the first time in this capacity." The results will enable scholars to hear and read Dr. Myers' interviews with these pioneers at last.

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“Drinkism:” An Interview with Bluesman Drink Small

One of the most interesting recent donations to the Oral History Program is a lengthy interview with famed South Carolina bluesman Drink Small. Conducted by former South Caroliniana assistant Timothy Landholt, the wide-ranging interview focuses on Small’s approach to the blues as a musical form, peppered by songs and musical phrases that demonstrate his musical philosophy and wide-ranging talents.

“I’ve been a fan of Drink’s ever since I was a boy,” Landholt explained recently. “When I saw him perform at a Five Points festival, I asked him afterwards about one of his songs and our conversation didn’t want to end, so he ended up inviting me back to his house.” Joined by local reggae musician Frank “Moses” Mitchell, the three

men spent a memorable and fascinating afternoon talking, singing and playing the blues, with Small expounding on his distinctive and virtuoso interpretation of the Piedmont blues style. Blues scholars will be especially interested in hearing how Small illustrates his points with songs and fragments.

Landholt’s interview makes a powerful and detailed addition to the earlier interviews with Small conducted by retired USC English professor Ben Franklin, whose interviews with South Carolina jazz and blues musicians comprise a vital collection at the Library. (See “Jazz Studies on the Air: Reconstructing a Radio Legend,” p.1) USC Press will issue Franklin’s interviews in a book slated for publication later this year, but the Oral History Program will continue to

add interviews with South Carolina musicians on an ongoing basis.

“We’re grateful to donors like Mr. Landholt who not only take the time to conduct these interviews but who also are willing to undertake the work to make them available to our researchers here,” Allen Stokes, Director of the Library, commented. Landholt transcribed the interview himself and also tracked down Smalls, who had moved, to approve his transcript before completing the Library’s accession process.

With this interview, music lovers can not only hear the legendary “Blues Doctor” explain his musical philosophy—nicknamed “Drinkism”—but also hear him demonstrate its expressiveness, vitality and enduring emotional appeal.



Legendary South Carolina Bluesman Drink Small performs on the campus of USC, circa 1985.

An End to Silence: The GLBTQ Oral History Archive

Oral history archives often must devote most of their resources to curating donated interviews, not initiating projects. As a result, most oral history collections reflect what is accessioned, not what an oral historian charged with a particular mission might record. Internships offer wonderful opportunities to remedy this imbalance, and one this fall enabled the South Caroliniana Library to help address one often ignored aspect of South Carolina society: its sexual diversity.

Prompted by an enthusiastic Public History student, the Oral History Program supervised a series of interviews with prominent gay and lesbian activists in the state, forming the core of a broader archive devoted to sexual minorities in the state.

“While we have several collections that feature sexuality as a theme,” noted Henry Fulmer, Curator of Manuscripts, “until now we have not been able to assemble materials specifically focused on sexual diversity issues.”

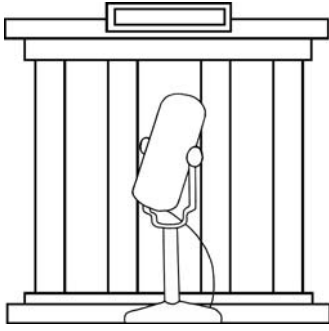
Although the Palmetto State has a long history as a haven for tolerance and eccentricity, its relationship with sexual diversity has not been easy. But the response to an appeal by Nicholas Meriwether, Oral Historian at the Library, and Jefferey Makala of the Thomas Cooper Library, broadcast on Rainbow Radio, a program oriented toward the state’s gay and lesbian communities, was quite positive. Other events that generated community awareness included a presentation to the

Harriet Hancock Center in Columbia and a table at the annual Pride Parade in Columbia.

“The South Caroliniana has always had a policy of representing every aspect of the state,” explained Allen Stokes, Director. “Unfortunately, we are limited in what we can collect ourselves, so we are especially grateful to have the opportunity that an internship like this offers.”

With more than fifteen interviews with a broad array of activists completed to date, the collection already has significant research value. “We plan to build on this vital nucleus,” added Meriwether. “We hope that the GLBTQ community will see this as an ongoing, collaborative effort to ensure that their voices will not be silenced.”

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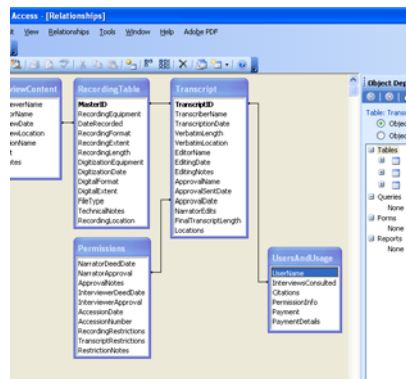
Archival Processing and Oral History: An Overdue Collaboration

When Duncan Buell, the Dean of the Computer Sciences Department, attended a luncheon featuring Nicholas Meriwether, he was surprised to hear about the Oral History Program's software efforts. In discussions afterwards, Buell was intrigued to learn that the Program was actively evaluating two nationally known open-source software packages. "That kind of real-world computing experience is exactly what we want our students to have," enthused Buell recently. "Working with the Oral History Program to implement, adapt, and assess this kind of software provides students with a wealth of experience they would not otherwise encounter."

The experience was illuminating for everyone involved. By the time a suitable intern had been

identified, the Oral History Program had already evaluated and rejected one major software package. With Jim Salter's assistance, the Program began to explore the Archivist's Toolkit, a Mellon Foundation-funded project involving a number of high-profile archives and institutions. "Our thinking was that if a package could handle the disparate and demanding needs of our oral history accessions, then it could handle everything in the Library," Meriwether explained. But over the next few months, more and more issues kept cropping up. "As soon as we resolved one set of bugs, another batch emerged," Salter recalled. Ultimately, Meriwether wrote that once the development cycle was complete, the Archivist's Toolkit would probably emerge as the best option

for tracking archival processing, the conclusion of his 25-page summary of their findings. In the meantime, with Salter's help the Oral History Program's in-house system has been enhanced and upgraded. And interestingly enough, other archives have already expressed interest in the new database.



A screen showing the relationships in the Oral History Program's in-house database system, under development.