

## CHAPTER 27

# CASE STUDY: THE SOUTHERN ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

JACQUELYN DOWD HALL, INTERVIEWED  
BY KATHRYN NASSTROM

4. *South Today* 4 (April 1973): 2-3.
5. Jack Bass and Walter DeVries, *The Transformation of Southern Politics: Social Change and Political Consequence since 1945* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995 [1977]).
6. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, James Leloudis, Robert Korstad, Mary Murphy, Lu Ann Jones, and Christopher B. Daly, *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987); reissued with an afterword by the authors and a foreword by Michael Frisch (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000). For another prize-winning book by an SOHP staff member based on these interviews, see Allen Tullos, *Habits of Industry: White Culture and the Transformation of the Carolina Piedmont* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989).
7. Della Pollock, ed., *Remembering: Oral History Performance, with an Afterword by Jacquelyn Hall* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
8. This project has recently culminated in a book by two SOHP alumni: Robert R. Korstad and James L. Leloudis, *To Win These Rights: The Battle to End Poverty and Inequality in 1960s America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).
9. This event was spearheaded by then assistant director Spencie Love.
10. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1233-63.
11. <http://www.sohp.org/>; <http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohpf/>; <http://lcrim.unc.edu>. The SOHP's assistant director, Joe Mosnier deserves credit for leading us into the digital age.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Hall, Jacquelyn Dowd, James Leloudis, Robert Korstad, Mary Murphy, Lu Ann Jones, and Christopher B. Daly. *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000 [1987].

From its start in 1973 until 1999, the Southern Oral History Program (SOHP) was housed the history department at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC), rather than in the library or archives, where so many other oral history programs emerged. The SOHP is now part of UNC's Center for the Study of the American South, but it continues to play an integral role in the department of history. Concentrating on U.S. southern racial, labor, and gender issues, the program offers oral history courses, works with local communities, and uses interviews to produce works of scholarship, such as the prize-winning book *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987 and 2000). Jacquelyn Dowd Hall has directed the program since its founding. This case study was condensed from two interviews conducted with her in 2008 by Kathryn Nasstrom, a graduate of the program and currently associate professor at the University of San Francisco.

**Kathryn Nasstrom:** It would be hard to talk about the history of the program without talking about your life and career. If I'm right about that, then it seems to make sense to talk about how those stories are intertwined.

**Jacquelyn Dowd Hall:** I first got involved in oral history when I moved to Atlanta from New York, where I was in graduate school in the late 1960s. After I took my qualifying exams, I got married, and my husband and I decided to move back to the

South. We knew people in Atlanta who were involved in the civil rights, anti-war, and women's liberation movements, and we were reading Atlanta's underground newspaper, so we just threw our meager belongings in the back of our red truck and moved. Three civil rights activists, Julian Bond, Howard Romaine, and Sue Thasher, were starting something called the Institute for Southern Studies, which is still going in Durham, North Carolina. My then husband, Bob Hall, worked at the Institute while I got a job with Paul Gaston at the Southern Regional Council, organizing the council's papers for deposit. By sheer luck, those papers led me to the women's anti-lynching movement that became the subject of my dissertation and my first book!

The folks at the Institute for Southern Studies were trying to combine activism with analysis, trying to figure out how to take the spirit of the movement into a new era. But they also wanted to understand the past. I was doing interviews for my dissertation, and Sue Thasher, Leah Wise, and I started an oral history project on the southern radicals of the 1930s and 1940s. We tried (unsuccessfully) to raise money and just charged ahead, interviewing people. Some of those interviews eventually came to Chapel Hill, and I still consider them to be jewels of the SOHP collection. We were in the midst of putting out a special oral history issue of the institute's journal, *Southern Exposure*, when I took a job as the founding director of the Southern Oral History Program at UNC.<sup>2</sup>

Nasstrom: Coming up through the SOHP I always had a sense that it was unique for an oral history program to be part of a history department as opposed to a library or an archive. Is there a story to why it was done that way?

Hall: Yes, that was and is highly unusual, if not unique. I suspect that at the time the library was not particularly interested in housing the SOHP, but then neither was the history department, which made the whole thing pretty precarious.

The Southern Historical Collection in the University Library, where our interviews are deposited, has become one of our closest partners. It's that link between a major archive and a history department that has made this whole thing work. But when I first came here in 1973, there was a very different atmosphere, a different attitude toward these new kinds of sources and the kind of care they demand. Plantation records made up the heart of the Southern Historical Collection. Now our interviews are among its most heavily used sources, and it has vigorously collected twentieth-century manuscripts as well.

The history department has changed as well. Many of the students who apply to our graduate program in U.S. history cite the SOHP as one of the things that draws them here. Faculty members are using oral history to study everything from the history of fascism to rape in Bangladesh to the baby boom generation in Russia, with no sense of being part of a righteous but beleaguered movement (which is more or less how we saw ourselves in 1970). Those changes reflect the larger trajectory of how oral history is seen and used.

But in 1973, the department was a contentious and difficult place. A group of newcomers who saw themselves as modernizers in a backward institution were pitted against what they saw as an old guard of Southerners, which included George Tindall, who had secured a grant from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation to start

that oral history has flourished and the SOHP has flourished with it. I'm also grateful that, although the SOHP is still dependent on gifts and grants for all its major projects, it finally has the base of financial security and predictability that we've struggled toward for so long. Yet, when I look back, I have to admit to a tiny underflow of nostalgia for the old days, hard as they were. We've accomplished what we have because of people who had a passion for this work. As we scratched and crawled our way to having some money and some stability, I'm sure there's been a certain routinization of the program such that we're more like other centers and programs in the university than we used to be. Also my role has evolved. I mainly provide intellectual leadership, raise money, mediate between the program and the university, and keep us plugged into the historical profession and the main currents of scholarly thought. I'm less intimately involved than I was in the early years.

Nasstrom: When I hear that, my instinct is to say that I presume for better and worse. What is the better, and what's the worse?

Hall: The better is that we *should* have decent institutional support by now. It would be ridiculous for so many people to have worked so hard for so many years and to have accomplished so much and for the SOHP to still be crammed into a couple of rooms and relying so heavily on soft money. But what has been lost? Well, I worry that it's harder for the graduate students who work for the SOHP to have a feeling of ownership, to be able to put their stamp on the program.

That's a critical point because the program's creativity has come from the generations of smart people who have passed through our doors. I wish I had the space to name them all. They have become outstanding scholars. Just as important, they've left here with a broad vision of what it means to practice history, and a striking number of them are leading oral history and public history programs and working as historians outside academe. More than anything else, it's what those people have done that makes me feel very lucky that a cascade of contingencies led me to land and stay in this place.

## NOTES

1. <http://www.southernstudies.org/>; Paul Gaston, *Coming of Age in Utopia: The Odyssey of an Idea* (Montgomery, Ala.: New South Books, 2010); *Revolt against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983 [1979]).
2. Sue Thasher, "Circle of Trust" in *Deep in Our Hearts: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement*, edited by Constance Curry et al. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 207–52; and Sue Thasher and Leah Wise, eds., *Southern Exposure: No More Moaning! Voices of Southern Struggle* 1, nos. 2/3 (Winter 1974).
3. George B. Tindall, 1921–2006, served on the history faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill from 1958 to 1985. He was president of the Southern Historical Association and a distinguished historian of the American South.

That period culminated in one of the SOHP's high points: our twentieth-fifth anniversary celebration and the 1999 National Humanities Medal, awarded by President Bill Clinton for work that has "deepened the understanding and broadened the public's engagement and access to important resources in the humanities." People came or wrote from far and wide.<sup>9</sup> The medal went to me, but it was really a tribute to the collective work of the SOHP.

Also in 1999 we got a sizable grant from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation for a project we called "Listening for a Change" to indicate that our aim was to use oral history to affect how people in North Carolina understood the past and made choices in the present based on that understanding. "Listening for a Change" was different in that the individual projects were led mostly by independent scholars, and each project had a strong civic engagement component. For instance, we did a community-based project on tensions between blacks and new Latino immigrants and created a documentary based on those interviews. We worked with prisoners, led teachers' institutes, and did a project on school desegregation and resegregation.

The project on the public schools led to our major focus today, a study of "The Long Civil Rights Movement: The South Since the 1960s."<sup>10</sup> For me personally this effort is something of a return to the question we were asking during those Atlanta years: "Where do we go after the fall of Jim Crow?" Barack Obama's election makes this project all the more poignant and important. He stands on the shoulders of the movement generation, of course, but he and his election also exemplify what happened next, as people pushed through the doors the movement opened, took advantage of new economic opportunities, forged new, integrated institutions, and confronted reaction from the Right.

We're taking long-time concerns in brand new directions in other ways as well. From the beginnings, we wanted to make oral history accessible and useful beyond the academy. Now digital technologies are making that possible in ways I could not have imagined forty years ago. In collaboration with the UNC Library we have digitized almost six hundred oral histories originally recorded on cassette tapes, synchronizing sound with transcripts in a new way; providing commentary that situates interviews in historical context; and making them more easily searchable than ever before. This effort continues as we make interviews that are "born digital" available on line and work to bring more and more of our analog tapes on line as well. We're also in the midst of a collaboration with the Library, UNC Press, and the Center for Civil Rights at the UNC Law School, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, aimed at experimenting with digital technologies to document and publish new work on the long civil rights movement.<sup>11</sup>

We've also made another big move: from being part of the history department to being part of a relatively new Center for the Study of the American South, and from two cramped rooms in one of the ugliest buildings on campus to offices in a beautiful renovated house on the main street through town. Definitely the start of a new era.

Nasstrom: How do you feel about where the SOHP stands today?  
Hall: First of all, never in my wildest dreams did I think that oral history would blossom in the way that it has. And so my main feelings are surprise and gratitude:

the SOHP.<sup>3</sup> On top of that, the first real cohort of women faculty was just arriving at the university, and battles were raging over affirmative action, pay equity, tenure, and the like. I and the SOHP were caught in the middle of all this conflict. On the one hand, I was brought into the department by the supposed old guard. On the other hand, I was a woman doing oral history, women's history, and other new fangled things. The problem was not so much outright hostility as mutual incomprehension. I didn't identify with either of the department's factions: their issues were not my issues. And, with some important exceptions, neither side particularly got nor cared about what the SOHP was trying to do.

One sign of the precariousness of the situation was that, although I had been hired in a tenure track position, my salary was coming out of start-up grant money that would run out after five years. In 1975, two years after I arrived, the department brought in some of the major oral history leaders—Willa Baum, Ron Grele, and Charles Morrissey—to do a full-scale review of the SOHP. In the end, the department decided to keep me and the program. It also said in no uncertain terms that it saw me, and would judge me, first as a historian and only secondarily as the director of an oral history program.

So that's an important dimension of what it meant for the SOHP to be in a history department. It meant that the SOHP has never had the benefit of a full-time director. But it has had the benefit of being deeply involved in the teaching and research mission of a strong history department and in close communication with the larger world of historical research.

Nasstrom: Rewinding back to that moment in 1973 when you arrived, did you come with a certain vision in mind?

Hall: I did come with what you might call a vision. I know because I recently ran across an article I wrote for *South Today* in 1973, the spring before I came to Chapel Hill. The title pretty much says it all: "Oral History Movement: Seeking Out the Voices of Women, Blacks, Radicals, and Workers for a Better-Balanced Story." I mentioned the new program at UNC and quoted George Tindall as saying that it would "focus initially on interviews with prominent individuals," but that, once established, it might launch projects on the "inarticulate."<sup>12</sup> So there was a built-in tension between the kind of program the folks who started the SOHP had in mind and my orientation, which was a "history from the bottom up" approach that traced back to the Federal Writers' Project and the documentary tradition of the 1930s. Still, a "better balanced history" was the operative phrase. That was the core of my vision for the SOHP. I wanted it to focus on what Studs Terkel called the "uncelebrated," but also on the movers and shakers. One didn't preclude the other; a cross section seemed right to me. That seemed like what an oral history program at a public university should do. So there was a tension, but it was a creative tension, a refusal to think in either/or's.

Another tension was between creating sources for an archive, which is clearly what UNC had in mind, and the use of oral history in forwarding social change. The SOHP has always tried to take oral history to the public, engaging citizens in documenting their own histories and bringing a historical perspective to bear on

contemporary issues. That mission has become stronger and stronger over the years, primarily because of the students and staff members who have taken on the job of creating a major archive and, at the same time, keeping our face turned to the outside world. Beth Millwood, our chief administrator and outreach coordinator stands out in that regard.

There was a third "creative tension" as well: between creating archival sources and moving directly to scholarship ourselves. Most oral history programs see themselves mainly as the creators of primary sources for other people to use. I see that as our job too. A huge amount of our time and money goes into laboriously creating and processing those sources. But, again, in part because we were in a history department, our job was not just to create sources. We were also teaching young scholars to use those sources, to ask, "What does all this mean? How can we make historical meaning out of these individual stories?"

Nasstrom: That brings me to the question of how teaching fit in.

Hall: At its best, I think the SOHP has created an environment where students could resist some of the competitive, narrowing pressures of graduate training, bond with one another, and hold on to ideals of collaboration and civic engagement. A lot of my teaching has involved learning-through-doing and by example. But I've also been heavily involved in graduate student advising, and I've always taught an oral history seminar that's been absolutely central to our work. Those seminars have been the seedbeds for some of our best projects, and they've produced some of our great fieldworkers.

Nasstrom: How did you first take the vision we've been talking about and carry it forward?

Hall: We immediately got a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to do two projects. One focused on the transformation of southern politics since World War II and included interviews with newcomers such as Bill Clinton, in his first campaign, and the young Al Gore, along with more established politicians.<sup>5</sup> The other project focused on women in the South who had been activists and intellectuals in the decades after 1920, when women won the right to vote. So right from the start, we were interviewing men who wielded power and women who didn't, albeit women who were remarkable in their own right.

Nasstrom: Can you talk about the evolution of the SOHP over time?

Hall: I'd say a new era started in 1978, which is when we got a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) for a project on the industrial revolution in the South. That project led to the writing of the book *Like a Family*. Among the people who laid the groundwork for that project were Brent Glass, then a UNC graduate student and the first assistant director of the SOHP and now director of the National Museum of American History. We had a keen sense that the new working-class history of the 1960s and 1970s was ignoring the South and that historians of the South were ignoring workers. Our plan was to take advantage of the fact that in the South, unlike in much-studied New England, the industrial revolution had occurred within living memory. We wanted to interview members of the first generation to move from farm to factory and explore both the region's hidden history of labor conflict and the story of family, work, and everyday life.

My first step was to teach what turned out to be an especially memorable oral history seminar. I focused on Bynum, a mill town south of Chapel Hill, where the company still owned the houses and the same families had lived there for generations. We built the industrialization project out from those student interviews, stretching the NEH money out for years and interviewing more than five hundred people.

Nasstrom: Where did *Like a Family* come in?

Hall: I wanted a publication to come out of the project eventually, but just getting so many interviews done and into the archives was such a huge effort that I figured we'd have to stop there, at least for awhile. But as has so often happened, a next step emerged out of the creative energy of a group of graduate students who happened to be drawn together by the SOHP: Christopher Daly, Lu Ann Jones, Robert Korstad, James Leloudis, and Mary Murphy, all of whom have gone on to become distinguished scholars in their own right. As we finally got the interviews processed, we took a deep breath and said, in essence, "We did these interviews, we met these people, we're invested in their stories, and the stories are so touching, so rich with meaning. They're there to be used by other scholars, but we should take the first crack at saying what they mean, at least what they mean to us." So we decided to write a book, which UNC Press published in 1987 and then republished in 2000 with a self-reflective afterword.<sup>6</sup>

Of all the good things that came out of that project, one has given me special pleasure. Della Pollock, a new faculty member in performance studies, fashioned a student performance project based on the book. We authors traveled with the performance to mill communities around the state. Della and I have gone on to collaborate on other performance projects and to teach oral history and performance courses together. I've learned so much from her, and she has brought a whole different dimension to the SOHP's work.<sup>7</sup>

Nasstrom: Where did the program go over after that?

Hall: We spent a lot of time on outreach projects based on *Like a Family* and the industrialization project. As that wound down, I felt that we needed to be a bit less absorbed in thematic projects for a while. We needed to raise our profile as a program that also interviews notable individuals. I also thought it was important and politic to increase our attention to the history of the university. As our contribution to UNC's bicentennial in 1989, we completed three hundred interviews and an exhibit featuring everyone from service workers to students to chancellors. We have an especially rich collection on the food workers' strike of 1968-1969, a major event at UNC. We've continued to build the university history project ever since.

I hate to use money as the yardstick, but I'd say that the next era began in 1994, when Walter Royall Davis, a major benefactor of the university, created a fund to support oral history research. These were expendable funds, and with them we did a whole series of projects focused on the post-World War II transformation of North Carolina, concentrating on politics, business, women's leadership, Latino immigration, the impact of the military on coastal North Carolina, and the North Carolina Fund, a precursor to the War on Poverty.<sup>8</sup> We were also able to award student stipends for independent oral history research for the first time.