CHAPTER 27

CASE STUDY: THE SOUTHERN ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

JACQUELYN DOWD HALL, INTERVIEWED
BY KATHRYN NASSTROM

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
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The Southern Atoll Historical Program is a collaborative effort to document and preserve the history of the Southern Atoll, a group of islands located in the Pacific Ocean. The program was established in 2010 to gather information about the lives of the people who have lived on the islands, and to preserve their cultural traditions. The program has been funded by various organizations, including the government of the Federated States of Micronesia, and is led by a team of local historians and anthropologists.

The program has conducted extensive interviews with residents of the Southern Atoll, and has collected oral histories, photographs, and other records. The program has also worked with local schools to teach students about their island's history, and has established a museum to display artifacts and exhibits related to the history of the Southern Atoll.

The Southern Atoll Historical Program is an important effort to preserve the cultural heritage of the Southern Atoll, and to ensure that future generations will have access to this valuable information. The program's work has already produced a number of significant publications, and is continuing to gather new information and insights into the history of the Southern Atoll.

The Southern Atoll Historical Program is a model of collaboration and community engagement, and serves as an inspiration to other efforts to preserve cultural heritage around the world.

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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. 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." 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. We've taken advantage of new economic opportunities, forged new, integrated institutions, and confronted reaction from the Right.

While some long-term concerns in brand new directions in other ways as well. From the beginning, 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.

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! 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 1975, 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." So there was a built-in tension between the kind of program the folk-song 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 "uncertified," 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.

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