

Talking Before the Talking: Oral History as an Important Tool for Historical Dialogue

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The Winter Institute has used oral history documentary work in an effort to archive personal accounts of local Mississippi civil rights history, and our collection serves as a tool for researchers, teachers, and students. We have recordings archived in the University of Mississippi Special Collections, and many are available for anyone to watch via websites we've created, including a site on Mississippi civil rights history in each of the state's 82 counties. This archival, educational purpose is reason enough for us to collect oral histories in many of the communities we serve. But we also believe oral history projects can be an effective component in helping us achieve our mission to support a movement of racial equity and wholeness.

That is, it helps engage community members in meaningful dialogue. A cornerstone of our work involves creating safe spaces for people to tell the truth about both their community's history and its current state of affairs. We call the trust-building dialogue process we follow "the work before the work." And so, I'm drawing from that phrase to call this pre-dialogue oral history work we've done "the talking before the talking."

Much of the Institute's work, particularly in the first several years, was located in places with deep wounds from violence that occurred during the 1950s and 60s. Places like Sumner, in Tallahatchie County, where Emmett Till's murderers were tried and acquitted; like Philadelphia, in Neshoba County, where three civil rights workers named James

Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner were murdered by klansmen; and like McComb, in Pike County, where many people working for voter registration were threatened, beaten, and arrested. During 1964, McComb held the title “bombing capital of the world.”

When we’ve been invited into communities with such intense scars, we’ve faced the challenge of trust building. This is a particular challenge with older community members who feel like their personal stories have been left out of the history and conversation, overshadowed by savior narratives and media or historians with no personal connection to the local region. Many African Americans suffered great personal harm during the Jim Crow era and Civil Rights Movement, and many took huge risks to bring about change, yet their stories have never been validated within or outside of the local community. What has dominated are the stories of those given hero status, like Dr. King and Mrs. Parks. While those stories should certainly be shared, local voices have often long been ignored. So some people who were witness and participant are concerned that historians, filmmakers, and younger activists want to appropriate and profit from their experiences and, often, their trauma.

Overcoming skepticism is also a challenge for older white people who often feel like the histories of their communities are more complex than what’s told through the major media or that they are one-sided, making the assumption that all whites were bad.

So community-based oral history projects have played an important role in building trust in the Winter Institute as an organization. We are usually invited into a community by a small group of individuals who have traction in their local area and who also know enough about the history there to know who to invite to participate in an interview. They are the ones to provide entree and convince people to show up. Still, there has often been significant skepticism. Usually, that skepticism begins to melt when they've seen our multiracial team work together with genuine respect and affection for each other. And with a prepared interviewer, knowledgeable of local civil rights history, the narrator of an oral history understands that we take their voice seriously and acknowledge that they have an important role in portraying the community's history—that they are a valuable contributor being asked to share an authority that only they have. For many people who have never been acknowledged in that way, it is a transformative experience—one that even shows in their manner and physicality.

This transformation goes well beyond establishing a sense of trust in the Winter Institute team's motivations and credibility. The oral history interview serves as a kind of catharsis for some interviewees, particularly those with an especially painful history. For some, it is the first time they've ever really talked about their experiences, and it allows them the benefit of historical perspective. Many have said, "My grandchildren don't even know that story about me," or "I've never told that story before."

Jacqueline Martin, a community organizer with the Winter Institute, came to her work with the organization through her experiences as a community member in McComb, in south

Mississippi. She was a teenager during the 1961 Burgland High School student walkout, which galvanized many in McComb's African American community to support the movement there. After leaving the state for higher education, she returned to McComb and worked for many years in city government, and she was one of the local people who introduced the Institute to McComb and was a key person in getting the city to begin commemoration and civil rights education programs. She was vital for helping the Institute's oral history work there and was probably the main person who helped identify and invite participants.

She believed in the power of oral history because of what she had seen happen from an earlier project as part of a Civil Rights Veterans reunion. She described a local teacher's personal transformation from participating on a panel and an oral history interview.

"Before that, it was bitterness. The panel was his first time to talk about it, and his whole demeanor changed. You could see the physical change. Later, students filmed him, and he became a different person after that."

While the reunion had a single-event focus, the Winter Institute's work is designed to offer a sustained presence in a community, as well as engaging a variety of local stakeholders—not only civil rights veterans but also those who might have been outside or in opposition to the movement's goals. Jacqueline Martin's guidance with the Institute's oral history project brought not only participants who could give a first-hand account of events that impacted the local African American community, she was able to convince white leaders of the 1960s to be interviewed, including a former mayor and the newspaper editor. She said,

“The Winter Institute started doing oral history interviews, and it started people talking about it. That increased the dialogue across the community. It lifted the cloak of silence.”

After that, when she called upon community members for panels and presentations, she said white people started volunteering themselves. “They would show up. They would even disagree [with others on the panel] because they didn’t remember things the same way, but they would talk, and they would show up. There had been little pockets before, but when the oral history recording part started, it opened it up, escalated it. I didn’t have to beg people anymore.”

In McComb, this oral history work led to a partnership between the Winter Institute, the local school administration, and the Washington DC-based nonprofit Teaching for Change. The recognition of the power these local stories have become the basis for a civil and human rights curriculum at McComb High School, where there’s now a class called Local Cultures that focuses on local history and community oral histories. There’s also an after school program that leads oral history and documentary work, as well as a web site that presents students’ oral history work. While the school struggles in some areas, its oral history program has become a model and has offered students the opportunity to present at conferences and National History Day competitions.

In Neshoba County, in east central Mississippi, bringing people to the table was an even bigger challenge, with even bigger stakes. In 2003, a multiracial group of town leaders in nearby Newton County, the birthplace of Medgar Evers, had asked the Winter Institute to

assist with a commemorative event in Evers' memory, with Myrlie Evers-Williams as the featured speaker. It was the first event of its kind and was considered a large step forward in East Mississippi. At one point, a man involved in the Evers commemoration commented, "I never thought I'd see this happen here, but when you get an invitation from our neighbors up the road in Neshoba County, then I'll know we've *really* come a long way."

Within a few months, that call came. Two of them, in fact. It started from two separate entities that later joined forces to help their community change. The first was brought about by a friend and board member of the Institute, Dick Molpus, who is from Neshoba County. He connected two younger men still living in town with Institute director Susan Glisson. One was Leroy Clemons, the black president of the local NAACP chapter, and the other was Jim Prince, the white editor of the local newspaper, who had gone to high school together. Both were aware of the approaching 40th anniversary of the Neshoba murders and wished that the local community would have some level of control in telling its own story, rather than sitting by as the media continued to portray it through a 40-year-old lens. They wanted a community-wide commemorative event, but they weren't sure how to proceed, and they needed to garner a larger alliance of community members to support it.

The other call came from Kay Rowell and David Vowell at the recently formed tourism office, along with Alex Thomas from the Mississippi Development Authority. They were eager for help in creating a civil rights driving tour and brochure of notable local civil rights figures, with the idea that instead of hiding from the history that had kept people scared to

visit Philadelphia, they would address the history head on and highlight the heroism of local people.

But the tourism council, run by white people, had not gained the trust of local black people who held the knowledge needed to create the tour and brochure. Kay Rowell said, “We put an announcement in the paper and on the radio, asking for people to attend a public meeting at City Hall. But no one came to the first meeting.” They convinced two important local activists, Nettie Cox and Eva Tisdale, to join them for lunch. But, as Kay recounts, “Miss Eva blew her top when we told her our plan. She said, ‘You are *not* doing that!’ because she feared that we were getting into their business.” Put simply, she feared that the tourism council would whitewash the real story.

It was time to call the Winter Institute. Two people that Nettie Cox trusted vouched for Susan Glisson, so while Nettie remained unconvinced the intentions for the tourism project were good, she cooperated with Susan as the liaison. Soon after the Winter Institute began meeting with both groups—the tourism group and the one focused on a commemoration—the Institute suggested an oral history project there in Neshoba County. Institute staff and interns coordinated the project, which served as a bridge between the two groups that had convened separately.

Nettie Cox and three members of the Mt. Zion United Methodist Church were vital for the oral history project. Mt. Zion was one of two open sites of memory in Neshoba County. It held a yearly memorial for James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner

because it was the burning of that church by klansmen that had brought the three young men to Neshoba County for the visit when they were killed. Jewel McDonald, a lifelong church member, was a child when her family was beaten by klansmen as they set fire to the church. She was crucial to suggesting and inviting interview participants for the project, and to soothing fears that some people still held from the Jim Crow Era. She was able to say to them, "It's ok. Nothing's going to happen to you for speaking up."

Kay Rowell believes that for Nettie Cox, the oral history project "was a turning point for her. To realize that the white people weren't trying to make any money from this. They were trying to tell the real story."

I do not wish to imply that the oral history project was the most crucial part of what happened in Neshoba County. Nettie Cox carried her skepticism into the group meetings of what became known as the Philadelphia Coalition, and it was the power of the conversations and her eventual conviction that most people in the coalition had the right intentions that created a transformation for her. She said in a coalition meeting some months later, "I haven't always been really, really positive when it came to Philadelphia because the experiences I had received had made me not feel that way. But I think in some respects I'll have to change my attitude to have a more positive relationship with this group."

Both Philadelphia and McComb still face significant challenges from the residue of their histories, but both have been transformed from towns with just a bad reputation to places

that now serve as models for the rest of the state and beyond. People there took control of the narrative of their towns, through the power of oral history and embracing local stories, and they have set themselves on a new path through it.