

Listen Up: Studying the American Labor Movement through Oral Histories

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Typically, students of American history first learn about the American Labor Movement through black and white photographs of young children working long hours in a factory. Students read that the life of a factory worker was often a dangerous one. Stories of the Triangle Shirt Waist Factory and the Pullman Strike often illustrate the treacherous and unrewarding life of a laborer. Students typically review lists of legislation and note the names of labor leaders. However, the individuals who worked in the factories during this era remain nameless, and little is known about their daily life outside the factory or about their perceptions.

The interview excerpts (found here in box inset, opposite page) personalize the history of this period. Listening to these interviews, we begin to better appreciate how dangerous life as a factory worker was. We also begin to understand how workers responded to the conditions, and how they felt about working in the factories. Without the personal stories, students might often wonder, as one 11th grade student recently did, “Why would someone work in a factory like that? Why not go get another job?”

Oral Histories in the Classroom

Oral histories are an exciting way to directly involve students in the act of historical inquiry. They assist students in personalizing history and relating



to the actual lives behind major events, names, and dates in history. As M. Gail Hickey writes,

Historians have long used oral history procedures to collect and preserve the memories of the living and their knowledge about the past. As a teaching technique, it helps to remove the remoteness of many historical concepts, bringing them to life by helping children to see them as integral parts of other people’s lives.¹

Walbert cites six benefits of using oral histories that other primary sources may not offer:

1. Oral history allows you to learn about the perspectives of individuals who might not otherwise appear in the historical record.
2. Oral history allows you to compensate for the digital age.
3. Oral history allows you to learn different kinds of information.
4. Oral history provides historical actors with an opportunity to tell their own stories in their own words.
5. Oral history provides a rich opportunity for human interaction.²

Unfortunately, many teachers do not use oral histories in their classrooms. A recent survey of local, 11th-grade social

studies teachers revealed that while teachers agree that their students would be excited and motivated to learn with oral histories, and that oral histories would help students learn history, the majority of survey respondents did not use oral histories in their classrooms. The teachers cited two primary reasons: (1) they didn't have the time, and (2) they didn't have access to collections of oral histories.³ New technologies, however, are now helping to overcome the question of access. Just as the web has democratized historical inquiry by providing access to millions of online print primary sources, we now also have unparalleled access to oral histories. Museums, libraries, and universities are now digitizing collections of oral histories and placing them online for users to listen to and to read. One such collection is "Oral Histories of the American South" (docsouth.unc.edu/sohp).

Oral Histories of the American South

"Oral Histories of the American South" is a new and growing collection within the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's *Documenting the American South* digital library. Work began in September of 2005, with support from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, to select, digitize and make available 500 oral history interviews gathered by the Southern Oral History Program. Since its inception in 1973, the Southern Oral History Program has conducted more than 4,000 interviews throughout North Carolina and the American South on a variety of topics, including civil rights, women's issues, politics, and environmental transformations.

Technicians have converted the tapes to digital format and made them accessible online. Transcripts are also provided for each oral history interview. The oral histories are categorized into six different projects:

- *Environmental Transformations*: A group of 21 interviews focusing on environmental issues across the state of North Carolina.

Jim Leloudis, interviewer:

Do you ever remember people getting hurt in the mill, or nearly hurt?

Alice P. Evitt:

Yeah, I knowed of them to slip on the floor and fall and get hurt. I got a scar on my arm where I fell out here in this mill. I was stooped over doffin' my frame down that way, and I fell. There was a casin' off of my speeder—metal, big old casin'—and the corner of it cut my arm. I got cut out here. That's when I was runnin' speeders.

Leloudis:

I was thinking of a story a woman told me about another woman getting her skirt caught in the belt.

Evitt:

Oh, I'd get my apron tore off of me in the speeder room—when I was learnin' to run speeders. I'd get my apron tore off of me two or three times a week. They'd wind me up, and I was just lucky I managed to stop 'em and didn't get my arms in them. Them fliers would break your bones.

Leloudis:

Did it scare you?

Evitt:

Yeah, it would scare me. Sure would. Sometimes I'd be a-cleanin' my gear and get my brush hung in there and tear down the whole frame ends. Yeah. Back then they didn't wear pants like they do now. Your apron—that big flier flyin' around that way, them fliers—they'd grab you and just wind it plumb up. I always managed to get it stopped. I know one lady—I didn't see her get it done—but she said she wore wigs and she'd got her hair caught and it pulled her whole scalp out—every bit of her hair. She had to wear...



Leloudis:

It pulled...

Evitt:

Pulled her hair all out—every bit of it. She said pulled the scalp off that way. I don't know what she meant that way.

Leloudis:

Did she have to wear a wig after that?

Evitt:

Yes, she wore a wig. People back then, they wore loose clothes, and they'd get caught. Them speeder rooms was bad to catch you. If they'd wore pants like they do now, they'd saved a lot.⁴

Alice P. Evitt was born in 1898 near Charlotte and began working at the cotton mills in Concord, North Carolina, when she was 12 years old. She worked 12 hours a day, every day except Sunday, and earned 25 cents a day for her work.

INTERVIEW

Oral histories help students more completely reconstruct the lives of mill workers. We better understand why workers endured the seemingly unbearable conditions. Listen to factory worker Ila Dodson (excerpted below), as she reflects on her burning desire to leave school and begin working in the factory.

Allen Tullos, interviewer:

And you say you had to get a permit?

Ila Dodson

A worker's permit. And Mama wouldn't even take me to town to get it. My daddy wouldn't go with me. And I said, "Well, give me the Bible, and give me a dime, and I'll go get it." 'Cause a nickel streetcar fare up there and a nickel back. I went up to the City Hall, they called it—they've tore that old building down now; it's got a big, nice building up there on Main Street—and I got the Bible because I had to prove my age. And I got that worker's permit, and boy, I caught that next trolley [sic] home—a streetcar, wasn't no trolley, a streetcar—five cents up there and five cents back. But Mama did give me the dime to ride.

Tullos:

Did they not want you to start work then?

Dodson:

No, they done everything they could, but I like to worried them to death. I carried my money to school for three weeks to pay for my books. And the teacher said, "Ila, I want you to bring that book money tomorrow." I said, "Yes, ma'am, I'll

bring it." I had it right then in my pocket, but I didn't want to give Mama's money away, because I had a feeling I was going to win out. And I just worried her, and every time Papa'd come in from work I'd start on him again. I never will forget, he said, "Bertha, she's going to run us crazy if we don't let her go to work. If you'll give her permission, I will." And Mama said, "Well, I've got to have a little peace around here. Well, we'll just let her go to work." So I won out.

Tullos:

Why was it that you wanted to work so bad?

Dodson:

I wanted to make my own money. I had done had two sisters go to work, you know, and I seen how they was having money, and so I couldn't stand it no longer. But I've never regretted it.

Tullos:

Did your mother and father want you to go on to high school?

Dodson:

They wanted me to go on to school, yes, but I couldn't see that. Back then, they didn't too many children go on to high school. It was just a common thing that when they'd get old enough, let them go to work.⁵

Ila Hartsell Dodson was born in 1907 in Buffalo, South Carolina, and began working in the Brandon Cotton Mill at age 14. Her mother, father, and all of her nine siblings worked for various cotton mills in North and South Carolina, and she met her future husband while weaving in the mill.

- *Southern Politics:* These oral histories stretch back to the very beginning of the Southern Oral History Project in 1973, and include many interviews with prominent politicians from across the political spectrum, such as Bill Clinton, Jimmy Carter, Andrew Young, Lester Maddox, George Wallace, and Jesse Helms.
- *Civil Rights:* While the topics of race and civil rights come up throughout all the projects, this particular group of interviews focuses largely on integration at Lincoln High School in Chapel Hill and the roles of African American employees at the University of North Carolina.
- *Piedmont Industrialization:* Textiles have long been a vital part of the southern economy, a fact reflected in these interviews,

but other sectors have also grown in importance over the past several decades. In addition to mill workers, interviewees include business leaders who have contributed to the changing business landscape in the South.

- *Southern Women:* These interviews reflect the influence of women in science, medicine, education, law, politics, activism, as well as in factories, where a significant portion of the workforce has been comprised of women.
- *Charlotte:* Integration is a major focus of these interviews. Many of the subjects were students at West Charlotte High School during its transition from a traditionally black school to an integrated one. Other important topics include business and politics in Charlotte.

The interviews may be browsed or searched. Searches may be conducted by topic, interviewer, interviewee, place, date, image, or topic. Biographical information, a brief abstract, and a transcription accompany each audio file

A Reusable Learning Object Approach

Despite teachers' enthusiasm about oral histories, time has continued to be a barrier. The growing number of oral histories alone has made the challenge of identifying those that might be most useful in the classroom daunting. The average length of an oral history recording is 75 minutes. Few teachers have time to listen to, or read through, the entire recording to find the excerpts that are most engaging or relevant. Moreover, when audio is digitized according to the highest standards from the original analog version, the recording is difficult

to hear without high-powered audio players or headphones, which are not readily available in most classrooms.

To facilitate educational use of the oral history recordings, the staff of the Southern Oral History Project has begun creating a series of learning objects with supporting instructional materials. For the purpose of this project, “learning objects” are defined as digital learning resources designed to be reused in various learning contexts.⁶ Each web-based learning object focuses on a historical time period, event, or concept. A brief historical narrative provides context for the digital primary source materials (including oral histories and related manuscripts, documents, and images), which are embedded throughout.

To further support classroom use, the recordings are pre-selected and “chunked” down into 3- to 5-minute excerpts. The audio files are accompanied by the corresponding transcripts, formatted in Microsoft Word for easy reformatting by students and teachers. Finally, the audio files are “boosted” to increase audio output and make it easier for students and teachers to hear.

Each learning object can be consumed directly by individual learners or can be incorporated into different instructional contexts through teacher-directed activities or assignments. In addition to providing lesson plans, the learning objects also provide links to other supporting instructional materials, such as interactive activities, timelines, and links to related digital primary source collections. Depending on the pedagogical objectives of the teacher, the learning object can be used to deliver background information to students (in lieu of, or in addition to, a traditional textbook), or it can be used as a resource for students to compare various perspectives, analyze historical evidence, and construct new knowledge.⁷

Implementing “Oral Histories of the American South” in the Classroom

Oral history recordings are an excellent resource for tackling controversial issues in the classroom. Hearing accounts from people with varying opinions and experiences can help students make up their own minds about social and historical controversies. Oral histories also bring



into the classroom voices that are often marginalized. The “Oral Histories of the American South” project has developed a series of curriculum materials that identify recordings appropriate for the classroom and outline suitable teaching strategies.

One such example of a lesson that presents the voices of those typically marginalized is one that was developed using oral histories from North Carolinians who experienced public school desegregation. During this lesson, students learn about the history of the “separate but equal” U.S. school system, the 1971 Swann case, which forced Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in North Carolina to integrate, and the recent decision to discontinue busing for racial integration in Charlotte-Mecklenburg. Students compare and contrast neighborhood schools with schools integrated through busing, and listen to oral accounts of students who have experienced both types of schools. Through discussion with classmates, students then create a list of the negatives and positives of both neighborhood and legally desegregated schools. In an argumentative essay, students explain

which type of schools they would support, and must defend their argument using evidence from the oral accounts and their own research. After listening to the recordings, the issue of desegregation will no longer just be something to read about in a textbook: students will be able to relate history to the experiences of real people and make connections between others’ experiences with desegregation and their own.

The three oral histories excerpted for this lesson come from residents of Charlotte and were recorded in the late 1990s. Teachers may want to encourage students to listen to the full testimonies, and others in the collection, for more information. The first excerpt is from Arthur Griffin, an African American man who attended segregated

schools in the 1950s and 1960s. He discusses the ways students can benefit from desegregated schools. The second oral history is from Ned Irons, a white student who attended desegregated schools in the 1990s. He talks about ways stereotypes can be reexamined and challenged in desegregated schools. The third oral history excerpt comes from LaTrelle MacAllister, an African American woman who attended West Charlotte High School in the 1970s. MacAllister discusses her ambivalence about busing for desegregation and some possible benefits of neighborhood schools, such as creating a sense of community.

Along with exploring controversy, oral histories can also help students understand social conditions in the past and empathize with others’ experiences. The Documenting the American South collection holds a series of moving oral accounts about the experiences of former child workers in the cotton mills of North and South Carolina during the early twentieth century. Recorded by historians and sociologists at UNC in the late 1970s and early 1980s, these testimonies paint a vivid picture of the long

Digital Oral History Collections Available Online for the Classroom:

Alaska and Polar Regions Collections
www.uaf.edu/library/oralhistory/index.html

American Life Histories, Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1940
memory.loc.gov/ammem/wpaintro/wpahome.html

Archives of American Art, Oral History Collections
www.archivesofamericanart.si.edu/oralhist/oralhist.htm

LBJ Presidential Library Oral History Collection
www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/oralhistory.hom/com_ohlist.asp

Library of Congress, American Memory
lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html

Civil Rights in Mississippi Digital Archive
www.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/index.html

Oral History Online!, Regional Oral History Office
bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO

Rutgers Oral History Archives of World War II
fas-history.rutgers.edu/oralhistory/orl-hom.htm

Social Security Administration Oral Histories
www.ssa.gov/history/orallist.html



hours and dangerous conditions child workers faced, as well as the strong sense of community that developed among workers of the mill villages.

One lesson that utilizes these oral histories requires students to listen to accounts about life in the cotton mills, and learn about the “muckrakers” of the Progressive Era who exposed social evils like child labor, tenement living conditions, and conditions in the meatpacking industry. Students become muckrakers themselves, investigating child labor in the cotton mills through the primary sources in the *Documenting the American South* collection. Students gather quotes from the testimonies of mill workers and select photographs of child mill workers from *Child Labor in the Carolinas: [A]ccount of Investigations Made in the Cotton Mills of North and South Carolina, a social reform pamphlet distributed by the National Child Labor Committee in 1909*. These photographs were taken by social reformer Lewis Hine and vividly illustrate the plight of child mill workers. Students then use this information to write news articles, giving details about what they have learned and illustrating the lives of child laborers.

Before writing, students hear three oral history excerpts. The first excerpt is Ila Hartsell Dodson (a sample of which appears on page 132), who began working in a South Carolina cotton mill at 14,

explaining her strong desire to drop out of school and work despite her parents' objections. The second excerpt is from James Pharis, who began working in an Eden, North Carolina, cotton mill as a small boy of eight. He describes the day, when he was nine, that his hand was injured while working in the mill. The final excerpt is from Alice P. Evitt (pg. 131), a woman from Charlotte, North Carolina, who began her career in the mills at age 12. She describes the oppressive heat mill workers endured during their 10- to 12-hour workdays. Teachers may encourage students to listen to the full recordings from these and other workers for a more complete picture of the lives of child workers in the cotton mills.

Additional Classroom Activities Using “Oral Histories of the American South”:

- After listening to past accounts about child labor in Southern cotton mills and researching child labor around the world today, students brainstorm ways to stop child labor, such as letter-writing campaigns to public officials, boycotting products made using child labor, and supporting anti-child labor organizations.
- Students learn about the labor union movement through accounts



The Story of Child Labor in the Cotton Mills



Pause Slideshow

Resume Slideshow

The textile industry spread like wildfire across the South in the years following Reconstruction. Dozens of mills across North and South Carolina drew workers from rural and mountain farms, who traded in farm life for life in the mill village. There, workers lived in homes rented out by the mill, shopped in stores run by the mill, and went to church and school in structures built by the mill. The mill owners often tried to cultivate a sense of family in the mill village. This "family" included the children of the village, who very often left school to work in the cotton mills alongside their parents and siblings. [Continue the story...](#)

in the Piedmont Industrialization oral history collection. After hearing the risks and benefits workers incurred for belonging to a union, students reflect on whether they would choose to join a union and then write a speech either encouraging or discouraging unionization.

- After listening to recorded excerpts in which mill workers discuss their income both before they moved off farms and after (while working in the cotton mills), students research costs for rent, food, clothing, and other necessary items and then create a budget for a farm family and a mill village family.
- After listening to testimonies from Hurricane Floyd survivors living in Eastern North Carolina, students analyze the nature of bureaucracy based on the survivors' experiences with FEMA, the Small Business Association, and other government agencies.
- After hearing accounts from North Carolinians who have seen their rural ways of life change as

towns and suburbs expand, students examine the impact of development on communities and the environment and then research and create a development plan designed to maintain a sense of community and preserve environmental resources.

"Oral Histories of the American South" is an exemplar of technology being used to help students learn technology in a way that was not possible before the Internet. Teachers and students now have access to primary-source material that once was reserved for scholars who had the means to travel to a museum or library that housed oral history recordings. Not only are these recordings now available online, but they are being prepared in formats that are accessible and user-friendly for classroom learning. 🌐

Notes

1. M. Gail Hickey, "And Then What Happened, Grandpa?: Oral History Projects in the Elementary Classroom," *Social Education* 55, no 4 (1991). 216-217.
2. Kathy Walbert, "The Value of Oral History," Online serial: www.learnnc.org/articles/oh-value0406. Retrieved December 19, 2006.

3. Cheryl Mason Bolick, *Thinking, Listening, and Learning Historically*, Unpublished Manuscript.
4. Interview with Jim Leloudis, July 18, 1979. Southern Oral History Project, UNC.
5. Interview with Allen Tullos, May 23, 1980. Southern Oral History Project, UNC.
6. Rory McGreal, *Online Education Using Learning Objects* (London; New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2004) Retrieved December 17, 2006, from www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip0410/2003023345.html.
7. L. Ilomäki, M. Lakkala, and S. Paavola, *Case Studies of Learning Objects Used in School Settings* [Electronic version]. *Learning, Media, & Technology* 31, no. 3 (2006): 249-267. Retrieved September 12, 2006.

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