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AN ACQUISITIONS & PRESENTATION PROJECT

Reflections on Memory and History:

Collecting New Oral Histories of the Civil Rights Movement

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Project Manager, Civil Rights
History Project



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12:00 NOON - 1:00 PM
Pickford Theater
Third Floor, James Madison Building
Library of Congress
101 Independence Avenue, SE
Washington, DC

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Reflections on Memory and History: Collecting New Oral Histories of the Civil Rights Movement

What remains to be learned about the U.S. civil rights movement? Plenty, it turns out. Together with a videographer, historian Joe Mosnier journeyed in 2011 to twenty states to interview fifty individuals who, primarily as teenagers or young adults, joined the civil rights struggle. This testimony - urgent and immediate, but also refracted by memory and time - compels a fresh look at "the movement," confirming, upending, and reaching beyond the considerations that define the received civil rights narrative.

These recent interviews are the first installment in a five-year national research initiative, the "Civil Rights History Project," supported by an act of Congress and jointly led by the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. Interviewees include non-violent activists who marched and went to jail, key movement strategists who struggled to find a viable path forward, singers and journalists who spread the word, and those encouraged to radicalism by loss, violence, and systemic oppression.

Taken together, what do these oral histories teach us? In these accounts we find confirmation of core aspects of movement history as currently argued by historians: for example, the necessity of conceptualizing the movement's origins and early protest character as a "Southern freedom struggle," the indispensability of women's contributions to the movement's basic viability and key achievements, and how the movement's course must be charted in a complex interplay of top-down and bottom-up pressures and contributions.

We also are alerted to the need to rethink some basic issues. We are reminded that the movement did not spring up whole in 1960, but had its roots in a long pattern of earlier protest and organizing. Our contributors talk, for example, of sparks struck in the prior decade in places like Oklahoma City and Money, Mississippi. And certainly "the movement" had no neat conclusion with the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the King and Robert Kennedy assassinations in 1968, or Nixon's presidency in 1969. If the South and the rest of the nation were indeed profoundly transformed, still no promised land drew into sight; our contributors repeatedly call out the enduring racial, class, and other forces that continue to perpetuate black oppression. They remind us that far too little is yet known of white reaction, of its endless capacity to absorb, deflect, or destroy threats to the prevailing racial and economic order. They talk of COINTELPRO, of the Philadelphia and Newark police departments, of compatriots shot dead, and of fleeing the country.

Our interviewees also insist that we take up new questions. How, for example, might we gauge the complex legacy of trauma and violence, and thus account fully for the heavy costs borne over ensuing decades by activists and by their young children? How might we properly reconfigure the movement narrative so that Malcolm X and the Black Panthers might be understood as less radical in their critique and vision, and Martin Luther King Jr. more so? We are also instructed that the civil rights story cannot be fully appreciated without detailed accounts of movement history in such relatively unheralded locales as Bogalusa, Louisiana; St. Augustine, Florida; and Columbia, Maryland. We are thus alerted to many new threads that must be incorporated into a broad tapestry.

These interviews resonate with an extraordinary immediacy, as if this complex, roiling history in far distant places happened not fifty years ago, but fifty minutes ago. The experience of giving oneself over as a teenager or young adult to the movement honed a sharp moral conscience, a disposition toward lifelong active engagement with social justice struggle. It made our interviewees who they are.

The study of such exceptional lives might shape us, too. It is that prospect that motivates the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture to undertake this new research and to share these riches with scholars and the museum-going public.

Dr. Joe Mosnier is Lead Field Investigator and Project Manager for the "Civil Rights History Project." Joe has worked in academic oral history for more than fifteen years, including as Associate Director of UNC-Chapel Hill's Southern Oral History Program, which is conducting this national oral history research initiative under contract to the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. With a co-author, he is presently completing a book on civil rights attorney Julius Chambers and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund's national litigation campaign, 1964-1975.

The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to "preserve and present American Folklife" through programs of research, documentation, archival preservation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Center includes the American Folklife Center Archive of folk culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Please visit our web site: <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/>.

