

## Folklife Today

### February 2019: Civil Rights History Project

*From the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.*

John Fenn: Welcome to the Folklife Today podcast. I'm John Fenn, and I'm here with my colleague Stephen Winick.

Steve: Hi everyone!

John Fenn: We're both folklorists at the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress. I'm the head of Research and Programs, and Steve is the Center's writer and editor, and the creator of the blog *Folklife Today*.

Steve: On the Library of Congress website, loc.gov, you'll find over 140 oral histories with leaders in the Civil Rights movement, many of whom had not been well documented before. It's a fascinating collection called the Civil Rights History Project, and was brought into being by the US Congress through a 2009 law called The Civil Rights History Project Act (Public Law 111-19). The collecting project resulted from a joint effort by the American Folklife Center here at the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture.

John: In honor of Black History Month our latest episode dives into this collection. History often excludes those who do not actively produce a record of it. And in many narratives of the Civil Rights era, the perspectives of women and local activists, for example, have been left out. So, who did this collection document, Steve?

Steve: Luckily, we have a brief statement about that by one of the fieldworkers on the project, Joseph Mosnier. He made these remarks after completing the first 50 interviews for the project. He characterized who he had interviewed this way:

Joe M: They were nonviolent activists, who marched and went to jail. They were key movement strategists, who struggled to find a viable path forward. They were singers, they were musicians, they were journalists, who spread the word. And they were certainly also individuals encouraged to more radical positions by loss and violence and systematic oppression. On that list of 50 sessions, there are names, probably I would guess only three or four you might as a general audience recognize, people like Reverend Joseph Lowery, Reverend Charles Sherrod, Mr. Pete Seeger, Mr. Jack Greenberg. All the remaining names, I would think that it's unlikely that unless you knew the field of Civil Rights really pretty closely that you would have heard of these folks. It's just the nature, I think, of a vast movement involving many thousands of people in many, many, hundreds of places that we don't know their stories.

Steve: Again, that was Joe Mosnier, one of the fieldworkers for the Civil Rights History Project. And it's important to note here that that was the primary purpose of the Civil Rights History Project legislation—to collect, preserve and make accessible, the stories of the unsung heroes of the Civil Rights Movement. And the legislation required us to include interviews with leaders of the Movement, people like the ones Joe mentioned, who were revisiting their memories and in some instances telling new stories about what happened to them some 50 years ago. But listening to the interviews in the collection, you get a sense that many of these folks were too busy doing the work to worry about being recognized, and too personally humble to toot their own horns.

John: And that's why being able to bring these unsung heroes to the light, where they belong, really demonstrates why collections like this are so important. Let's listen to a clip from an interview. We'll hear in this clip a segment from historian David Cline's interview with Carlos Montes recorded in 2016. Montes is a founding member of the Brown Berets, young Chicano activists who organized in the 1960's against racial oppression and economic injustice in the Los Angeles area. Montes recalls the life-changing events and the major shift in his perspectives on the nature of the freedom struggle that occurred when he and other Chicano youth participated along with other ethnic groups in the Poor People's Campaign in Washington, DC, in the summer of 1968.

David Cline: And did you go down to Resurrection City?

Carlos Montes: We did. We went down to Resurrection City, we would go down there. We would--we didn't stay there, you know, and later on, when it started raining and flooding, and getting hot, we were saying man, good thing we didn't stay there, because it got flooded.

DC: Right, right.

CM: And it was really crowded, but we would go there. You know, we would go down there and have meetings with the blacks and the other groups. So we met a whole lot of different organizations. We met Puerto Ricans, met blacks from different organizations, different cities, whites from the South, and Appalachia, Native Americans. It was a major learning experience.

DC: So what do you think, I mean this might not be an easy one to answer, but what do you think the effects were on the Brown Berets of having participated?

CM: Well it definitely opened up our mind; you see there was a wider struggle, wider struggle in the US. Before that, we used to blame white racism and oppression on the white man. The white man is the enemy. The honky, the white man, the whitey, right? And to me, the beginning of the poor people's experience and all of that changed to say - it's not the white man, it's the one percent, that's used nowadays, or the corporate structure, or the rich people. And the rich corporations is

the enemy in that they monopolize and they discriminate. So, it was a major - I started seeing, I guess you could call it class analysis - it was the upper class and the working class, and that it was a wider struggle. It wasn't just LA or the Southwest, it was a national struggle. And even so that it was a worldwide struggle, the example of the Vietnamese, Africa, Latin America, against the U.S. domination of their economies, politically, and militarily. Like in Puerto Rico or Cuba, right? And so, it was a political transformation for me and many of the other Brown Berets. But I think not all the Brown Berets made that transformation.

John: Again, that was Carlos Montes from the Civil Rights History Project collection here on the Folklife Today podcast. Building this collection wasn't an overnight process and it involved many people. We'll be including some of those people in this podcast. Betsy Peterson, director of the American Folklife Center, will discuss the policy side of things. Guha Shankar, Senior Folklife Specialist and the co-Director of the Civil Rights History Project, will talk with us about the experience of running the project, and Elaine Nichols and Kelly Navies from the National Museum of African American History and Culture will talk about the museum's roles in the project, fieldworker Joe Mosnier will weigh in, and members of the American Folklife Center's archive staff will talk about their roles.

Steve: And throughout we'll hear from civil rights activists interviewed for the collection. But let's begin with Betsy Peterson, otherwise known as...our director. And this is actually the first time that Betsy's been on the podcast. Welcome to the podcast!

Betsy: Hello!

Steve: Betsy, what was behind the Civil Rights History Project?

Betsy: Congress established The Civil Rights History Project Act of 2009 to do several related things. First, to survey oral histories of participants in the Civil Rights Movement across the country and to create a central database making those collections easier to find. Second, to use that survey to identify important people who had not yet been interviewed. Third, to record new oral histories of those voices that had yet to be heard from. And fourth, to make those new interviews freely available to the public. But I think it's also important to distinguish the various roles of the Library and the Museum and the ways that we worked together to develop and implement this project.

John: "Civil Rights" is a pretty broad term. Was there a specific focus for this project?

Betsy: The Civil Rights Movement, in this case, specifically referred to the push to secure racial equality in the U.S. for African Americans from 1954 until about 1968,

with the understanding that many of the elders who were involved had already passed on. And so, with this as a priority, in conducting the interviews was to make sure we reached those who were up in age. In addition to reaching those who were elderly, we also wanted to reach those who were in poor health. The Museum created a priority list to include all of the people who had yet to be interviewed, as soon as possible.

Steve: Who were the main sponsors of the project?

Betsy: The principal Congressional sponsors of the Project were New York's now-retired representative, Carolyn McCarthy, along with Georgia Representatives John Lewis, himself a civil rights icon, and Sanford Bishop. And this legislation was vital in providing unique insight into the experiences of those who were on the frontlines of the civil rights movement.

John: Well, thanks for coming in, Betsy!

Betsy: You're welcome. Thanks for having me.

Steve: You know, we also have a statement from back in 2012 by Elaine Nichols of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, which eloquently speaks to the project's aims.

John: Great, let's hear it!

Elaine Nichols: On behalf of our Director Lonnie Bunch, I bring you greetings. "No longer must we walk in our land our strengths unknown, our knowledge obscure, for we are heirs to historic roots. We've traveled far and we found our way. All of our dreams, our aspirations, have taken hold and have borne fruit." I've shared with you an excerpt from Mary M.C. Shorter's short poem "Their Walk Was Not Easy" because the Civil Rights History Project represents an important measure to ensure that the memories of those who have been heirs to historic roots, who have traveled far, had dreams and aspirations continue to bear fruit. The Civil Rights History Project has been a very successful partnership wherein the National Museum of African American History and Culture and the Library of Congress have diligently worked to support the 2009 Congressional mandate to capture the memories and reflections of unsung heroes of the Civil Rights movement.

We are indeed thankful to Representative Carolyn McCarthy, Representative John Lewis, and Senator Dianne Feinstein for assuming the leadership and making the legislation possible. The modern Civil Rights movement can rightly be associated with the period after World War II when many African-American soldiers returned from the battlefield fighting against Hitler's racism and imperialism to face ongoing racism and discrimination at home -- but it is much, much more than that. By the late 1950s, the movement had begun to establish full momentum and some major victories starting with the 1954 Brown versus Board of Education, the 1955

Montgomery Bus Boycott, and the 1957 desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. During the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, movement workers were involved in large scale direct action, marches, sit-ins, boycotts, and demonstrations. Public Law 111-19 says that "Those who participated in the Civil Rights movement from the 1950s and the 1960s are shining examples of the fundamental principle of American democracy: that individuals should stand up for their rights and beliefs and fight for justice. Participants in the Civil Right movement demonstrated this principle of action. They possessed an invaluable resource in their first-hand memories of the movement, and the recording of the retelling of their stories and memories will provide a rich, detailed history of our nation doing an important and tumultuous period."

Steve: That was Elaine Nichols, a curator with the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Her statement was made during a talk she gave for our Benjamin Botkin lecture series, and you can find a link to the full video over on the Folklife Today blog.

John: Now we'll bring on Guha Shankar, Senior Folklife Specialist here at the Center, who has been involved with this project since its inception. Guha, welcome!

Steve: Welcome!

Guha: Thank you!

John: Guha, can you tell us more about your role in the civil rights history project?

Guha: Sure. I am the director on the Library's side for the Civil Rights History Project, and in that function my work covers a wide range of tasks. One central task is to work in conjunction with our partners on the project - the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture - to jointly coordinate the production of interviews, manage the resulting collection materials, and to ensure that the interviews which we store at the Library are shared with the museum for use in its own programming and research activities – as you know, the collection is jointly curated by both organizations. Over the course of the last six to seven years that has meant working closely with my counterparts at the NMAAHC, including Elaine Nichols and Kelly Navies, on the collections and on a range of outreach efforts that have resulted from this amazing initiative.

I've also worked with the documentation crew of public historians and filmmakers while they were in the field conducting interviews to identify logistical and technical challenges, like finding the nearest Fed Ex office in rural Mississippi so I could get them hard drives overnight for recording the next batch of interviews!

Steve: So we've talked about both the American Folklife Center here at the Library of Congress, and the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. Which institution does what in this project?

Guha: That's a good question. Both institutions had input into the legislation, and worked with Congress so the law would play to each institution's strengths. At the time, the National Museum of African American History and Culture had been established within the Smithsonian Institution, but it was very new to the extent that it didn't even have a building. But they had some great people with great expertise. The Library of Congress has great staff as well, and we also have the infrastructure of the world's largest library. In particular, the American Folklife Center is one of the world's premier archival repositories and leading institutions for setting technical documentation standards – that is, in terms of recording, preserving, sustaining and providing access to audio-visual ethnographic documentation. Accordingly, we split up the tasks so that the Museum directed and coordinated the collection of the oral history interviews, and the Library managed the collection including all the tasks of processing and providing access to the collection. Along those lines, one of the things that I have been very happy about is that I wrote the technical specs so that the oral history interviews were captured as born-digital files, that is, recorded directly to digital hard drives rather than on tape, which was a first for the Library's documentary collections.

John: So how did that work out?

Guha: Well, my estimation was that it was a great success. The museum contracted with the Southern oral History Program at UNC Chapel Hill, where Seth Koch, a public historian, oversaw the organization and production of the interviews. He hired a fantastic filmmaker and camera operator, John Bishop, who, in his own right, has made dozens of ethnographic films over the course of his long career, including working with people like Alan Lomax and John Marshall. John shot the majority of the 145 interviews working in tandem with several leading scholars on the topic of the freedom struggle. These would include Emily Crosby, David Cline, Hassan Jeffries, and Joe Mosnier whom we've already heard from. Overall the team conducted interviews in twenty-six states and the District of Columbia.

Steve: The legislation also requested a survey of repositories from around the country, right?

Guha: Yes, and a primary goal of that survey was to help us avoid interviewing individuals who had already been well-documented elsewhere. We were guided in this aspect by recommendations from an Advisory Committee composed of leading activists in the freedom struggle and Movement scholars – legendary folks like Bernice Reagon, the late Julian Bond, the historian Taylor Branch, and several others of that stature.

We contracted with the American Folklore Society to manage the data collection, and they established a work plan that involved a web-based portal developed for the project by Washington State University's Center for Digital Scholarship and Curation. The portal enabled researchers working remotely to populate a comprehensive bibliographic database. We figured we were going to locate about 250 collections and we ended up identifying over 1,500 collections in over 600 repositories, and the results are still available for consultation on the AFC website. As far as I know, there is no single other source that has aggregated this amount of data on the movement in one place.

John: And by repositories, you're referring to museums and universities and other institutions?

Guha: Yeah, exactly. As we employed the term, repositories can be anything—an individual, a place or a corporate entity--that has a collection of civil rights materials. The researchers looked for individuals who have tapes and films and photographs from the movement, as well as more formal collections held by large institutions.

An important take-away here is that we need to understand that historical records on the freedom struggle aren't contained in major libraries and museums alone. They're housed in local organizations, such as the Wisconsin Historical Society or in people's homes, like the late filmmaker and photographer Glen Percy—who's collections from the Selma to Montgomery march we were able to acquire by networking with scholars like David Cline, who knew Glen. Amplifying the centrality of local institutions in maintaining cultural memory was very much part of the research and discovery process. So in addition to uncovering interviews that would help shape the project, another function of the survey was that it gave large national institutions like the Library and the Smithsonian a practical means of exercising some real collegiality with small-scale institutions. We did this by publicizing and drawing attention to their resources through this national portal that we established at the Library.

Steve: In addition to giving priority to older people, what were some of the other criteria for selecting interviewees for the Civil Rights History Project?

Guha: The concept of civil rights is expansive, and it has clear relationships in many realms of social justice. In alignment with the legislation, the Civil Rights History Project focused on documenting the personal experiences of interviewees in the well-known events like the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, the Freedom Rides, and the march from Selma to Montgomery, for example. Additionally, interviews focused on people's experiences of local sit-ins or voter registration drives in out of the way places in the South. For example, we wanted to know what happened during desegregation efforts in the Florida Gulf Coast or voter registration campaigns in Hattiesburg, Mississippi? These sorts of local interviews were a direct

outgrowth of our interests in documenting the experiences of hometown activists, of young people, of women, and that of ethnic communities like Chicanos active in the Brown Power movement, whose work often goes un-mentioned in standard histories and textbooks of the era.

John: Yeah, definitely important work there. Were you able to sit in on any of the interviews?

Guha: Yes, I really had a great privilege in being able to do so. During the first two interview phases in 2011 and 2012 the bulk of the interviews were coordinated by the Southern Oral History Program in locations across the country. However, several interviews with activists in the DC area occurred in the Library's recording studios—where we are right now--and I was responsible for getting those produced on-site. Later on, in 2015 and 2016 I went out with the production crew to several locations in Mississippi and California, as well as to locations in D.C. That basically covers all of the last 36 interviews which we did for the Civil Rights History Project, and those will be available and going online sometime the spring of 2019. So that's how I spent my time.

Steve: Well, we really encourage listeners to go and listen to these interviews on the Library of Congress's site. But for the moment, are there any particular interviews that really stuck with you, or any favorite moments?

Guha: Well, John has already turned us on to one of them, which is the one with Carlos Montes, which was in the last phase of interviews. But among the very first interviews I remember hearing was the interview with Chuck McDew, one of the first secretaries of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating committee. In the interview, McDew, who has now passed, sad to say - relates the ambivalent, even contradictory responses of young college-aged activists to Dr. King's call for non-violent direct action when the SNCC was formed in 1960.

Charles McDew: Got a letter from, uh, Dr. King at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference that there would be a meeting of students, um, at, um, Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina, to discuss the student sit-ins.

That took place in April, 1960. I attended that meeting as a representative of the South Carolina State students. And uh, and we were there discussing the Movement with students from all over, uh, the South. Um, during that meeting, uh, Dr. King felt we should all join SCLC.

Um, I disagreed, because Dr. King felt if you joined, if you used the practice nonviolence, uh, that you should accept nonviolence as a way of life in your life.

I disagreed with that, because I said, “Yes, I use nonviolence, and we use nonviolence, but it’s –” for me, it was strictly a tactic. And I didn’t believe – and personally, I didn’t believe it would work. It was a tactic that I think had a – I felt had a short life and wouldn’t work. My position was when, uh, when Gandhi, uh, tried nonviolence in South Africa, uh, he was beaten, jailed, and run out of the country. As I said, in the United States, uh, nonviolence won’t work.

Because when Gandhi used, in India, the tactic of having people lay down on railroad tracks to protest, I said, “and it worked.”

I said, “But if a group of black people lay down on railroad tracks *here*, in South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Texas, Louisiana, any of these Southern states, a train would run you over and back up to make certain you’re dead. You cannot make a moral appeal in the midst of an amoral society.” And I said that it was not *immoral*. We lived in a society that was *amoral*, and as such, nonviolence was not going to work. And so, I said I couldn’t and the people with me could not join Dr. King. And, uh, “Thank you, [laughs] but no thanks.”

And then, said, “Those, you know, people who said – who agree, who think like I do, we’ll have a meeting down the hall and talk about it.” And that meeting we had down the hall became the first meeting, was the genesis of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Uh, it was at that meeting at Shaw in Raleigh, on the Shaw campus, in April 1960, that we went down the hall and talked about forming a new group.

And at first we were going to call that group the Student Coordinating Committee and we were just going to exchange ideas between campuses. But there were some people in the group [clears throat] who still greatly believed in nonviolence and the viability of nonviolence and the practice of nonviolence, um, and we felt they should be a part of the group. And most of those students were from, uh, Nashville, um, and had been taught by Jim Lawson. And I knew Jim Lawson, and he was an important person to me. And so, we thought that was a good – it was a good thing to include nonviolence in our title. And so, we created this new group and called it the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

John: Great, and is there another interview that stands out for you, Guha?

Guha: Yep. Another is the interview with Ruby Sales, who in my view presents as eloquent a summation as any to be had, regarding the grass-roots elements and especially the leading role of women who comprised the bedrock of the freedom struggle.

Joe Mosnier: Can you talk a little bit about, um, your perspective on the ways that – even here, our team from the Museum arrives, talking about a Civil Rights Movement Project, rather than a Southern Freedom Movement Project. Can you talk a little bit about the way you've conceptualized these?

Ruby Sales: Yes. I think that, um, I prefer to call it, in retrospect, the Southern Freedom Movement, because it was not only a movement for civil rights, but it was also a movement for human dignity. It was also a movement to abolish the violence and terrorism that whites executed against black people for more than a hundred years during segregation. It was also a movement that – where we wanted to move from the small spaces that segregation pressed us down into into larger spaces that gave us expression: creative, political, and social expression.

And the reason why I say it was a Southern Freedom Movement, on the other hand, is that the results of this movement not only humanized black people but it had the possibility of opening up the world for white people so that they could lead a more meaningful life. And I – the other part about being a movement is that this was not an event. This was a dynamic process that was connected to many events that had happened in the black community, like the student movement, uh, the Southern Negro Youth Cooperative in the 1940s. So, we just didn't spring up out of nowhere. And so that, the other part about the Southern Freedom Movement is that there was a direct connection between the aims of southern black education and the ultimate explosion of the Southern Freedom Movement.

And I think that when you limit it to “civil rights,” you obscure, first of all, the horrors of segregation. You do not have to come to terms with the violence. You do not have to come to terms with the economic oppression. You do not have to come to

terms with white people who wanted to turn black schools into plantations. You do not have to come to terms with the fact that no black girl was safe from rape in that society. *No black girl was safe from rape in that society.* You obscure all of that. And, at the same time, you obscure the long hard years of black struggle and the blood and the sacrifice that we have poured into that struggle. I think that it does not do justice by limiting it to – and it’s really not *accurate* to limit it to the Movement.

And one other point I want to make about that is that, when we look at Rosa Parks, people often think that she was – she did that because of her civil rights and wanting to sit down on the bus. But she also did that – it was a rebellion of maids, a rebellion of working class women, who were tired of boarding the buses in Montgomery, the public space, and being assaulted and called out-of-their names names and abused by white bus drivers.

And that’s why that Movement could hold so long. If it had just been merely a protest about riding the bus, it might have shattered. But it went to the very heart of black womanhood, and black women played a major role in sustaining that movement. And so, that’s why I think it’s really important to see the larger context. I don’t think a civil rights movement could have lasted as long as this movement did without the cultural nuances of God, without the theology, without the intimacy, without the connections, and without the strong desire to be first-class human beings.

Steve: Now, I said the word “listen” before but, of course, these are videos and we encourage people to watch them on the Library of Congress website.

John: Indeed. Thanks for your time, Guha.

Guha: Thank you guys very much.

Steve: Thanks very much.

John: As we’ve heard, the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of African American History and Culture is a key partner in the Civil Rights History Project. We’ve invited a staff member from the museum to join us. Kelly Navies is the Museum’s Specialist in Oral History, and is here in the studio with us now. Thanks for coming, Kelly!

Steve: Yes, it’s great to have you here.

Kelly: Thanks for inviting me. I’m glad to be here.

Steve: Can you describe for us your role in the Civil Rights History Project?

Kelly:

As the Museum Specialist in Oral History at NMAAHC, I coordinate all aspects of the oral history program and that includes the Civil Rights History Project. Essentially, when I came on in 2016, I picked up where Elaine had left off as the

(Co-Director) of the project. By that time, the bulk of the interviews had been completed. Elaine Nichols had worked closely with Guha Shankar since the inception of the program. She contracted the SOHP to conduct the interviews and attended several of the recording dates. She also worked closely with Guha to convene the Advisory Board. One of the duties I have taken on is monitoring the passing on of our interviewees, so that Guha can update the website. We have lost several of the participants just in the past two years, including noted photographer Simeon Booker and SNCC activist, Luis Zapata. I also make sure that our curatorial staff is aware of the resource so that they can utilize it in their research. Finally, I make use of the interviews in my own research and outreach work for the oral history program.

John: Do you have anything to add from the museum's perspective to what Guha told us earlier about the criteria for selecting interviewees?

Kelly: Mainly, we wanted to insure that we covered a broad range of experiences. We wanted to interview people who were involved in direct action, sit-ins, boycotts, marches and demonstrations. And we wanted to find people who supported the movement. That is they provided food, shelter and money for the work of the movement. People like, Gertrude Jackson in Marvell, Arkansas was one of the few people that we found who provided support. She and her husband, provided food and housing for the Civil Rights works in and around Little Rock.

We also wanted to make sure that we had expansive representation regarding gender, geographical locale (south, north, west, and east). We wanted to address issues that limited the Civil Rights Movement to only the South. It was an American experience that happened all over the country

Steve: Given the work you've done on the project, you must have come across some moving oral histories. I wonder if you have a favorite interview you can share with us.

Kelly: I don't have ONE favorite interview. This is such a rich and varied collection of stories. One of my favorite interviews is with the noted educator Dr. Freeman Hrabowski III. Currently, the President of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, he grew up in Birmingham, Alabama and was arrested for participating in the Birmingham Children's Crusade in 1963. In this clip that we are going to share, he discusses his memory of the bombing of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church. I especially love this interview because he gives such a moving account of these historic events as well as a detailed and nuanced description of life for middle-classed blacks in Birmingham prior to and during the Civil Rights Movement.

Freeman Hrabowski: And we're in church that Sunday in September, and all of a sudden the pastor gets a note. At the pulpit. He stops preaching and tells us that the other church, our sister church, where relatives of sons and daughters and fathers and mothers, had been bombed – and didn't know how bad it was. It was just a shock. And he said, "Please. Don't, don't rush out." But it was the first time we'd ever seen church stop in the middle. It had to be bad.

People started driving in that direction. Mother and Father took us home, because we didn't know whether that meant the next church was going to be bombed or whatever. And, um, as it turns out, I thought back to different friends, one of whom was Cynthia [Wesley]. And I'd seen her on Friday, and I've said this before. I remember so well, um, she was always very kind to me, because I was younger than other classmates. She was always very nice to me. So, if I was twelve, she was fourteen. And – and, uh, she said, "Bye, Freeman." Oh, God. We said, "Bye," and it seems to me it was she who said, "See you Monday." See you Monday. Yeah.

And I knew she went to that church. So, all these names – I mean, she was one of them, but I saw her face there at the school. And, uh, when – one of the girls had been given a ring that morning by her father. And they were not able to find her and then found that hand. And we all– everybody knew that hand with that ring. We had nightmares for years. It was like war. It was just awful.

Uh, my parents said to me, when I asked if I could go to the funeral, that I could. And [clears throat] I'll never forget, uh, I was to leave school, my parents had given me a notice, and my principal saw me. And this is education at its best. He came up to me and he said, "You're representing us today." And he looked at my tie, and it was not dark enough. At that time, you really were supposed to wear dark ties to funerals. And, uh, he took his tie off and took my tie off. He *tied* his tie on me. It was, uh, amazing: the small things people can do to make a child feel special.

And I'll never forget the three coffins, with the niece's, the youngest of the three – I think she was eleven – McNair, in the middle, smaller. I'd never seen a coffin that small, that small. Uhm. It was awful. It was just awful.

John: Thanks for sharing, Kelly, and thanks for coming in to the studio!

Kelly: It was my pleasure. Goodbye!

Steve: An important aspect of this collection on the Library of Congress website is how accessible it is. So let's talk about that for a minute. We have with us another Kelly, our own Kelly Revak, who can tell us a bit about how that works. Hi Kelly!

Kelly: Hello!

John: As an archivist here at the American Folklife Center, one of your responsibilities is making sure that people can find our materials. So how do we make these video interviews discoverable to users?

Kelly: So, if you're searching for a video online that only works if there's text somewhere that your search tool can read, to determine if the person or subject features in a particular video. So in this collection, each interview is fully transcribed, and the transcript accompanies the interview. That provides the complete text, but we also want specific subject terms that are standardized but may not be mentioned in those exact words in the interview. For example, if someone says "Dr. King" in the interview but means Martin Luther King, Jr., we want the interview to be findable under the full name too. So AFC archivists look over the transcripts, proofread them, apply standardized subject headings and

controlled vocabularies, create catalog records, and then even make summaries for the individual catalog records. All that information--which we refer to as metadata-- is linked up and attached to the interviews.

I worked on this process for some of the videos in this collection. That means that when you search for something as broad as “civil rights history” or something as specific as “Chuck McDew” the appropriate videos will be returned with your search results.

Steve: Yeah, it’s pretty amazing and easy to use, and that’s all thanks to the archivists. In order to do this, did you actually have to watch every single video?

Kelly: I didn’t personally get to watch all of them, though I would’ve loved to! There’s about 75 hours of videos just in the new set of 30 or so videos I’ve been working on. I did watch many of them though, and interns helped a good deal with that part of the processing.

John: So in all that work of going through the videos, is there a particular interview that moved you?

Kelly: The interview with Worth Long. He was a field secretary for the movement in North Carolina, Mississippi, and Alabama, and was actually imprisoned several times for protest-related activities. And he’s also a folklorist! He talks a lot about how the Civil Rights movement was about more than just African Americans—it was about all the people who’s voice wasn’t being heard.

Worth Long: Phew. Everybody’s voice is important. Most every culture says that. They don’t do that, but they say it. They say that everybody’s voice is important. Well, people who watch television, they say, “Well, why isn’t my voice heard?” Until the internet, and then some people who can’t afford one, a smartphone or a phone, there was no way to be electronically communicated to [laughs] a larger world, except to be on the evening news for having done something dastardly.

Emilye Crosby: And you’re talking about African Americans.

WL: I’m talking about our poor people.

EC: Oh, poor people.

WL: Are more important. The silent folk. I’m not talking about the majority.

EC: People that don’t have access.

WL: People who do not have access because basically, that's what the civil rights movement was for me. It was the included and the excluded. It was about inclusion and exclusion. People who are in, [laughs] and people who were out. I went to school with a guy, Al Isabell, and he became Al Bell of recording things, CEO of a recording company. But one of the things he said was he said, "Well, people keep talking about these 'isms.'" He said, "The only thing I'm concerned about is, 'Is I'm in or is I'm out?'"

Steve: That was Worth Long, a folklorist and activist, from a Civil Rights History Project interview. It was one of the favorites of our great archivist, Kelly Revak. And I understand you've brought along another favorite?

Kelly: Yes, I was really moved by several moments in Timothy Jenkins' interview. He talks a lot about his political involvement in the Civil Rights movement as an African American lawyer. And one thing that really stuck with me is how many really important, pivotal things happened—or didn't happen—that aren't really covered in the history books. It's really in these personal accounts from people who were there that you can really get a sense of what it was like. So, after Medgar Evers was assassinated, Mr. Jenkins traveled to Jackson for the memorial march after the funeral. In this clip he talks about something that no one really knows about because he prevented it from happening.

Timothy Jenkins: The private side of that was a role that I played that had never been exposed. And that was while I was at that demonstration I was informed that there were a group of black veterans who were armed and were on the buildings surrounding the line of the march with an intention for violence. I was told that I'd better get up there or something was going to happen. And I went up to the roof overlooking the marchers just at the moment when John Doar, who was the assistant attorney general for civil rights, stepped out in front of the crowd, and *Eyes on the Prize* captures his statement, "I'm John Doar, you know I stand for what was right." But from up on the roof they couldn't hear John Doar's words, and they didn't know who John Doar was. And they thought that he was acting on behalf of the local police to contain and squelch the student protest! They had telescopic rifles, and they had John Doar lined up in their sights when I got to the roof. And I remember coming out there, saying, "Stop, in the name of Medgar." And they stopped. That-- Can you imagine what the history of civil rights would have been if black veterans had assassinated John Doar?

Steve: Wow, that was a great story told by Timothy Jenkins as part of a Civil Rights History Project interview. It was brought to us by our great archivist, Kelly Revak. Kelly, thanks for joining us!

Kelly: You're welcome!

John: And now we have another member of our archival staff, Julia Kim, a digital assets manager. Julia, what was your role in the Civil Rights History Project?

Julia: Sure, so my job is to safeguard all of the files that come out of this project. So that not only means what is publicly available online through the website, but also thinking about what will happen in 5, 10, or even 15 years with these files. That means, in this case with video, thinking about what is being playable and useful now, but forecasting really—thinking to the future and trying to think about whether or not I need to change those file formats. And, if there's loss...thinking about all these technical aspects as well.

In addition to that, what people enjoy are the videos, but I also have to work on all these other ancillary file types. So these include transcripts in PDFs and text files. Obviously this is very important in allowing people who may not be able to view the born-digital videos access to the full content of the interviews.

Given the whole range of files now, there's obviously a lot of manipulation of them to get them up online. Each file can be anywhere between 100 to 250 gigabytes a piece, and one interview can be upwards of a terabyte.

John: Wow.

Steve: So, presumably the version streaming on loc.gov is not the highest resolution video that we have.

Julia: Absolutely. It's a fraction of that size, and that does not lead to any perceptible loss. And that's also simply because what we're shooting is something for preservation. It's not for viewing. And, it's to give us, in a sense, room, to make those changes later down the line when we need to manipulate or modify the files. So, it has not visible effect for viewers on their websites. It actually makes it easier for them to see it, so it's not just always loading, loading...

John: Buffering!

Julia: Yeah.

Steve: So, how has this collection gotten you to think about archival practice?

Julia: This was a really interesting collection to work on, not only because of the amazing content but it really challenged our workflows. It was a partnership with Smithsonian NMAAHC, so thinking about what that means, the challenges of working with another institution. How we can better use...who's going to back up what, since both of us are backing up the assets. It also exposed some of the issues that you have when you have a project running this long. I don't know how long this has been—10 years? Multiple staff people came before me that have left, that I have not overlapped, who have worked on this. And there are people all over the country, at different institutions, who have worked on this. It actually means handling hard drives, passing them around. If you think about dropping a hard drive...shipping them in the mail—any number of bad things can happen! And some of these things can be perceptible. So, working with my colleagues at NMAAHC we were able to discover some of these issues, and sort of go back and think about the workflow, think about how we can work together to remediate and fix these issues. So that was a great learning sort of project, in that way, and we were able to present on this collection and those workflows at a previous conference.

Additionally, I thought a really important component of this collection is the extreme public importance of it. Being able to talk about these more technical issues and their impact [on] this amazing collection is something that I was also really happy to participate on. I was able to write a Smithsonian Folklife magazine article about these, sort-of, behind the scenes technical aspects with some of my colleagues—sort of explaining some of these issues and why it's important to think about them when we are documenting amazing people and what they are doing, to make sure that we are able to maintain that, right?

Steve: Well, I think you are doing a great job explaining it to us, so thank you so much.

John: Thanks for being with us!

Julia: Thank you !

Steve: Alright, let's welcome back Trelani Duncan, one of our first round of Bartis Interns here at the American Folklife Center. Prior to joining us here at the Library of Congress in D.C., Trelani gathered oral histories in Savannah, Georgia's Gullah Geechee community. Trelani, welcome!

John: Welcome!

Trelani: Thank you!

Steve: Can you start out by explaining, briefly, what your internship consists of here at the AFC?

Trelani: Sure, so, my primary project consists of podcast development, including this episode. So in addition to reading Folklife Today blog posts that you and other staff members write, I also peruse our collections for material that back those blog posts and assist in the developing of podcast episodes like this one, which was, by far, one of my favorites.

John: Alright, so why would you consider this one of your favorites?

Trelani: Well, back in Savannah, I interview African American elders over the age of 80. Many of them were involved in some way or another—whether an out-loud, front and center role, or a more behind the scenes one. Before beginning my internship here at AFC, or even considering it, I'd already been utilizing the Civil Rights History Project's online collection for inspiration in that aspect of my work.

John: So we were present in your work even before you thought to come and be here with us?

Trelani: Exactly!

Steve: So, I have a question, and actually it's more like a two-part question. One: Did you have a favorite moment in the process of working with this collection? And two: Do you have a favorite interview within the collection?

Trelani: Hmm, good questions. So, for the first, I'd have to say that one of my favorite moments in researching this collection was interviewing the staff who were involved in the process of creating it and making it more easily accessible to the public. It's one thing to see the final product, but it's another to see all the minds and hands that went into producing it. And for the second question, I'd have to say Mrs. Ellie Dahmer's story stands out. She's from Hattiesburg, Mississippi and played an integral role in the movement as a cook and volunteer for whatever needed to be done, in her words, to keep the wheels of the movement oiled and moving.

Steve: Great, so let's hear from Mrs. Ellie Dahmer herself.

Emilye Crosby: Can you tell me what you remember about Freedom Summer?

Ellie Dahmer: I did not participate in nothing but cooking, getting food out there for them to eat, and helping with whatever needed to be helped with.

EC: Did people stay at your house?

ED: I don't remember any of them staying and keep with us. Most of them lived in town, because they could get around better down there than they had out here, because they didn't have no trans --. If you didn't have a car, there wasn't no way people --. They'd walk from house to house down there. But they did come out here for the picnic, and we cooked food for them. We were the ones that fixed the food. They had a lady to fry fish for them, and I was fixing all the potato salad and all the other trimmings for them. I was doing all that by myself.

EC: Now did you do --. Was this picnic for all of the volunteers?

ED: All the volunteers that came down here to work.

Trelani: Feeding the frontline activists wasn't her only responsibility. She still led a life outside of the movement. Yet, the immense time, energy, and resources it cost to drive the movement beckoned her and other women in "mothering the movement," if you will, in addition to their already-heavy workloads. Mrs. Dahmer is an excellent example of how the Civil Rights History Project showcases sacrifices and commitments made to the cause of freedom and why it's important to have projects like these funded so that they can be preserved and publicized.

Steve: Trelani, thank you so much.

John: And, thanks for the fabulous job you've done on the podcast series, too!

Trelani: You're so welcome. Thank you!

John: The Civil Rights History Project has been one of our most important initiatives at the American Folklife Center for the past few years, and Steve and I have been thrilled to share it with you.

Steve: We have indeed, and we also have a bunch of people to thank for their roles in the project and this podcast. The people who shared their roles in the project included Kelly Navies and Elaine Nichols from the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture; Joseph Mosnier, who did many of the interviews, and AFC staff members Betsy Peterson, Guha Shankar, Julia Kim, Kelly Revak, and intern Trelani Duncan.

John: We should also give thanks to the Civil Rights advisory committee members. The full list of those individuals includes: Thomas C. Battle, Mia Bay, Julian Bond, Taylor Branch, Millicent Brown, Tracy E. K'Meyer, Clement A. Price, Bernice Johnson Reagon, Patricia A. Sullivan, and Patricia Turner

Steve: On the production side, we thank our engineer Jon Gold, and Mike Turpin for the use of his studio and equipment.

John: Valda Morris also gives a lot of time to the project. And some people who have left AFC contributed greatly to this project during their time here, including: Maggie Kruesi, Bert Lyons, Kate Stewart, David Taylor, and Peggy Bulger.

Steve: Last but not least, Thank you, John!

John: and you, Steve! As always, thanks to our listeners! We'll see you next time on Folklife Today!