

The Process of Becoming an Oral Historian

Jennie Padgett Smith

Mention the fact that you are an anthropology major to the average person on the street and you will quite likely be met with a look that conveys extreme regard. The word anthropology sounds impressive and is likely to evoke glamorous images of learned men and women braving brutal elements and “barbaric” people in the lofty pursuit of academic knowledge. This perception is romantic, simplistic and, quite simply, mistaken. In reality, anthropology is the painstaking study of a most sensitive subject—people. The requirement that people must study themselves makes anthropology terrifically resistant to the objectivity required by most other sciences and therefore it is fraught with opinion and stabs at interpretation. If a human life is, at times, disorderly then anthropology at work is humbling, enlightening and, at times, completely disjointed.

Though the premise of collecting another person’s life history on a tape-recorder seemed rather simple at the outset, the reality of such an undertaking was quite complicated and the road to the finished product was a bit bumpy. As I charted a course of study in oral history collection, I gained a real appreciation for anthropology as it is practically placed into action. I find it remarkable that at this point in my study as a senior, I am much more aware of what I do not know about this science than what it is I do know. That said, I must ward off any misunderstanding and assert that I am not knocking my course of study or my instructors. I have a broad based understanding of anthropology, an intense appreciation for different cultures around the world and even an occasional burst of inspiration by way of excellent instruction and selected texts. It was one of these “bursts” that inspired this attempt to collect an oral history from an individual about his or

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her own life. The burst was the easy part but finding a willing and capable informant was surprisingly difficult.

In the course of my study of anthropology, I read dozens of ethnographies that brought to life different cultures and even individuals within these cultures. I envied Napoleon Chagnon's (1997) close friendships with Kaobawa and Rerebawa, wanted to know Marjorie Shostak's (1983) !Kung informant, Nisa, for myself, and was restless to begin the trip that would take me to the land of the Utku to live with Inuttiaq's family as Jean Briggs (1970) was fortunate to do in the mid-60's. In light of the difficulties that I experienced with my most recent project, of this I am certain: it is not enough to read ethnography and anthropological theory; one must "do" anthropology in order to know anthropology.

Anthropology applied

I am now well aware that "doing" anthropology can be awkward, humbling and even slightly embarrassing. Anthropology is a daunting pursuit in that it requires not only a professional investment of time, comportment and a certain level of expertise but also frequently calls for a personal connection to the subject at hand. The anthropologist seeks to understand the "other" and this "other" may be a neighbor from down the road or a native of a place from the other side of the world. Understanding the "other" requires more than the textbook knowledge that can be obtained at universities and colleges around the world; it requires empathy. This empathy requires a connection between the anthropologist and the other and, at minimum, a small piece of the anthropologist's heart. Although I have read the theories of anthropology's positivists like Herbert Spencer and Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, I remain unconvinced that one can study living people with the same level of objectivity that one might study a rock sample (McGee and Warms, 11-41). My conviction was recently reinforced as a result of my study when I realized that nowhere is this truer than within the pursuit of an oral history.

I began this project with a naïve idealism that frequently accompanies my grand ideas and ambitions. However, this has been one of the more humbling experiences of my education to date. In his essay, "Stories, Background Knowledge and Themes: Problems in the

Analysis of Life History Narrative,” Michael Agar defines a life history as “an elaborate, connected piece of talk presented in a social situation consisting of an informant and an ethnographer” (1980:223). Add a tape recorder to the social situation to which he refers and the record of an oral life history unfolds. I just assumed that locating an elderly person who would be anxious to talk into a tape recorder about his or her own life would be a rather simple task. After all, who doesn’t like to talk about themselves?

Sparks of interest

I have held a long interest in the African American residents of South Carolina’s barrier islands. Although the people of these islands share a common heritage via their African ancestors and a legacy of slavery, they have formed individual, close-knit communities with unique traditions in the isolation provided by each island’s rivers, creeks and marshes. In chapter three of her dissertation “Audience, Performance, and Meaning in the Gullah Sea Islands”, Lauren E. Smith warns researchers against “speak[ing] of the Sea Islands as a homogenous group of barrier islands” (2001:47). On the mainland, islanders carry “a distinct marker of reference [his specific island] among [...] themselves, locating each individual by place, kinship ties, and even specific cultural variety” (Smith, 47). Although I am not a native islander, I live and work in their midst and recognize their unique cultural system relative to American culture at large.

My interest in oral history was sparked by a project I undertook in 2002 for my Languages and Cultures class at the College of Charleston in which I taped an interview with an oral historian, Nick Lindsay, about his book *And I’m Glad: An Oral History of Edisto Island* (2000). Lindsay did the world a favor when he decided to record the voices of Bubberson Brown and Sam Gadsden, life-long residents of Edisto Island. However, what struck me most as I reflected upon the book and my interview with Lindsay was the fact that, by merely listening, recording and transcribing the stories that these two men had to tell about their lives and the place in which these lives were lived, Lindsay was able to render these men extraordinary. This seems, at least to me, to be a tremendous power granted to the anthropologist in his or her role of an oral history collector.

Value in oral history

On the other hand rests issues of the value inherent in the collection of an oral history. Lindsay eloquently speaks to the value of oral history in the preface to his book. Lindsay explains, “But with enough telling and retelling of these true stories out of the past I am enabled to say, ‘Well, so there we are and there they were, two people responding in the same way, intelligent people doing the very best we know how’” (2000:6). In a world full of divisions, the equalizing factor inherent in sharing one’s own life history with another is not only valuable but priceless. In her 1990 book, *Composing a Life*, Mary Catherine Bateson notes that the subjects of her book provided not only material for her work but wisdom that was valuable in the context of her own life. Bateson declares, “The narratives about individuals provide a framework for musing about the shape of individual lives, about relationships and commitments, and about gender” (x). Bateson views the narratives she collected as valuable in that they act as reference material for others as they reflect upon their own lives.

The responsibility of the oral historian

As in any job, along with value comes responsibility and the responsibilities of the oral historian are numerous. They include the maintenance of a professional and objective distance, the protection of the anonymity of the informant in the case in which sensitive information has been shared, and the clear presentation of the informant’s words as he or she spoke them. It is also supremely important to recognize the informant’s words for what they truly are; the story of one individual in the context of his culture and not necessarily representative of the culture at large. In *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman*, Shostak cautions against the use of Nisa’s narrative as a model for !Kung culture when she writes, “Nisa’s narrative is just one view of !Kung life. Her history does not represent the whole range of experience available to women in her culture; the life stories of other women are often quite different. Also, it is not possible to take everything Nisa says literally, particularly her descriptions of her earlier years” (43). In his 1984 essay, “Life-Histories,” Vincent Crapanzano comments upon Shostak’s work with Nisa extensively and identifies yet another tremendous responsibility or “burden” as he

calls it. It is impossible for the anthropologist not to influence the course of the interviews as he asks the questions or at best, prompts discourse.

Furthermore, the life history usually must undergo “a transformation—the transformation from an oral product to a written product. It becomes a text and carries with it all the ontological and epistemological burdens of the text” (Crapanzano 957). In other words, the informant tells his story as he understands it, the anthropologist transcribes the information as he hears it and the text is disseminated as it is distributed for review and study. The meaning of an oral history is truly a collaboration between an informant, a writer and the readers and must be understood as such.

As a student of anthropology, I have accepted a responsibility to “protect the physical, social, and psychological welfare, and to honor the dignity and privacy of those studied” (Statements on Ethics, sec. 1). So that I might protect the social and psychological welfare of my informants and respect their privacy, I used pseudonyms throughout this paper. The only name that has not been altered is my own. Changing names was easy: dealing with an informant’s dignity is much more difficult. I took on the task of representing another human being and presenting his character and ideas to others. I am a young, white, college-educated, middle-class woman delving into the life of an older, black man. This undertaking necessitated the recognition of the historical and contemporary importance of ethnicity, class, gender, prejudice and discrimination in my informant’s life as well as my own. These factors shape and mold people and influence the way they think and speak. In that my ultimate goal in this project is to render a life as accurately as possible and paint a portrait with words that do justice to my informant, I decided to present opinions and speech as they were recorded. This decision is a result of my commitment to the Principles of Professional Responsibility as outlined in the American Anthropological Association’s *Statements on Ethics* (Statements on Ethics). The candid and truthful dissemination of my research results respects the dignity of my informant while it simultaneously recognizes that African American Vernacular English is as systematic and rule-governed as “Standard English.”

A first attempt: a humble beginning

For about a year, I thought that Bertha of Seabrook Island in Beaufort County, South Carolina, would be a fine prospective informant for an oral history project. My mother told the best stories about Bertha, or “Bertie,” as her friends and family call her. Bertie, an African American woman of approximately eighty years had lived on Seabrook Island for about seventy-five years and had worked for decades as a housemaid for a white family on Seabrook. I was primarily interested in two facets of her life: the dynamics of the relationship with the family that employed her for so many years and in part, continues to care for her, and her dabbles in “root” medicine. Our initial meeting went well; she appeared quite willing to meet with me on a regular basis, and I was sure I had her and my project “in the bag.”

I was shortsighted. It appears that for several reasons, I turned out to be the wrong person to record her life story. I won’t say she failed me because she did not. Instead, she taught me the first lesson of this project: what may first appear to be an ideal anthropological situation for study often is just the opposite. Berate was, at times, impossible to access or contact.

Bertie lives alone in a small but comfortable cement block home that she owns. She is small in frame but large in voice. She does not own a car. Her property (about an acre) is completely surrounded by a substantial chain link fence six feet in height. The gate to her driveway is secured with dozens of small chains with padlocks, a complicated tangle of old electric cords, and twistings of coat hanger wires. For my purposes, she appeared to be neatly encapsulated in a controlled environment that beckoned the occasional interruption by a curious student.

The first day I visited her was a cold and windy Sunday in January. My hands and face were blue with cold as I waited more than half an hour for her to finish the work of unwrapping, untying and unlocking her “security system.” Immediately, I made a mental note to accommodate this time-consuming task in my future visits. I even recall feeling quite smug with this observation and my willingness to be flexible as I had yet to be humbled by the pitfalls of anthropological data collection still to come.

Pitfalls and problems

Bertie lives an hour's drive from my home and since she was without a telephone, I relied upon Sam Seabrook, a member of the family with whom she worked for many years, to facilitate our meeting days and times as he dropped by her home each week. I telephoned him (he lives an hour's drive from both Bertie and me) and suggested a few convenient dates and times in a week's span. He took this information to her and she agreed on a particular time that suited her. Then, he called me with her selection. Although the communication line was a bit cumbersome, I so badly wanted her participation in this project that I was willing to work with this system. Actually, I naively anticipated an eventual kind of synchronization between the two of us. I was certain that Sam, our facilitator, would only be necessary for a brief while, that Bertie and I would "click," and that eventually, we would establish our own routine. I assumed that the lack of telephones and the 60 miles between homes would cease to matter because we would be communicating with such potency that mundane details would cease to matter.

In retrospect, that idea of synchronization strikes me now as silly. Sam confirmed several appointments for me and he even watched Bertie write them on her calendar. I arrived a few minutes early for each meeting only to find her gate all bound up. At first, I just stood outside her gate looking, I am sure, like a stray animal. I paced, I peered, and periodically, I called her name. After about 30 minutes of this, my patience lapsed and I telephoned Sam on my cell phone. "What to do?" I asked. He suggested that I drive to her sister's home on the corner of her street and inquire as to Bertie's whereabouts. Her sister was at home but unaware of any reason for Bertie's absence. She reasoned that she must be inside her house, and told me to park outside her gate and to attempt to call her with repeated horn blowing.

I did as she suggested, but not for long. I felt like an obnoxious, ill-mannered idiot. I began to feel embarrassed and foolish and I imagined the neighbors (and maybe even Bertie) having a great laugh at my expense. After I blew my horn five times at five-minute intervals for 30 minutes, I left. I felt dejected and disgusted but somewhere along the drive home, I dismissed the day as "a bad start," but not bad enough to deter me. I immediately contacted Sam and requested that

he try again to secure a date for me. He did so and I returned to the same fortified gate, the same absent Bertie. As luck would have it, this time the horn blowing took on a life of its own: my car alarm malfunctioned and the horn blew every second for about 10 minutes. Finally I was able to disengage the alarm system, but Bertie never appeared.

I became quite dejected in the weeks to follow. Sam advised me to find another informant. Dr. Moore Quinn, the professor who agreed to sponsor my independent study, also suggested that I back up and start at square one. I felt like a failure but I was comforted by a few sentences in *Field Projects in Anthropology: A Student Handbook*. In the book's section dealing with the collection of life histories, Julia Crane and Michael Angrosino extensively refer to Clyde Kluckhohn's 1945 article, "The Personal Document in Anthropological Science." With respect to the selection of informants, "Kluckhohn [] warns that the person who is "capricious or unstable or characterized by highly ephemeral enthusiasms" should be avoided..." (Crane and Angrosino 83).

How well I know that now! Perhaps, if the logistics of the situation had been different, and had I lived within a short drive of Bertie's home, I could have worked with her. Alas, I had a project to complete, a deadline to meet, and no time to waste.

A second try

Fortunately, my dejection turned over to determination and I made several attempts to locate another person in my community who could claim the status of a native Edisto Islander. I repeatedly met with suspicious rejection that I attribute to the fact that, in the past fifty years, numerous researchers and authors have visited Edisto Island. Some have profited from its history and the stories of its people. There is even some debate as to the historical accuracy of some of these stories, because the vast majority of them are told from the perspective of a white, minority population. Although I issued the accurate disclaimer that I am a student performing research for a class project, I imagine that I was discredited because of my status. After all, I am a middle class white person; I, too, am poking around other people's lives. For this and maybe other reasons, I was suspect.

Professional help enlightens research

During the course of this project, I found myself returning, again and again, to Shostak's book about the !Kung, and her work with Nisa in particular. Shostak uses Nisa's story to illuminate specific cultural aspects of a !Kung woman's life. For example, Shostak selects a topic such as "Family Life" and offers about five pages of ethnographic detail about !Kung society as an entity. Then she cleverly illuminates her ethnographic foundation with a soaring structure that Nisa builds with her own personal narrative. The foundation of ethnography is important, but Nisa's life stories make the ethnographic data applicable to a specific person. Although the ethnographic data is clearly presented, Nisa's stories provide the reader with the opportunity to understand a !Kung woman within the sphere of !Kung culture. This is a testament to the power that an oral history can evoke. Whether the words rest on tape or are transcribed to paper, a specific individual's life story likely evokes empathy, and via that empathy, brings a culture to life.

While Shostak's book offered me comfort in the midst of my trials with Bertie, the project was originally grounded with help from Edward D. Ives' 1985 book, *The Tape-Recorded Interview: A Manual for Fieldworkers in Folklore and Oral History*. Ives writes about the favorable consequences that result when a researcher leaves himself open to information that is not part of the "official" project outline. Ives advises "the principle of serendipity [...] will always work in your favor, if you let it" (52). The appearance of serendipity exists to some degree in all research and the trick to its effectiveness is the ability to recognize it as potentially beneficial and not inconvenient.

The anthropological principle of serendipity was certainly at work for Shostak. When I imagined synchronization between an informant and myself, I conveniently forgot Shostak's forty-five page introduction, wherein she clearly explains the numerous difficulties she experienced in her quest for an informant who might reveal aspects of a woman's life in !Kung society. I also forgot that, in twenty months of fieldwork, Shostak extensively interviewed nine women other than Nisa. Some of these women were sought out by Shostak, and a few of the relationships appeared somewhat spontaneously. Ultimately, what is most remarkable is Shostak's admission that her initial opinion

of Nisa was negative. She found her voice “unpleasant, [...] loud, sharp, somewhat frantic and constantly seeking attention” (29). Nisa, however, was unflagging in her pursuit of Shostak’s ear. Fortunately, Shostak “decided that since [she] had to listen to her anyway, [she] might as well get her to talk about something [she] wanted to hear” (29).

Serendipity at work

To say that I eventually found my “Nisa” is a bit of an overstatement. However, I was able to locate an informant not only willing to talk to me, but interesting to hear, record and study. Serendipity graced me when my friend, Olivia Queeney, someone who has followed my anthropology projects with interest, suggested that I drop by a vegetable stand in the small community in which she works to get to know the proprietor, Mr. George Patton. Mr. Patton was always entertaining Olivia Queeney with tidbits of stories, and she was fairly certain that he would enjoy an audience.

I dropped by Mr. Patton’s vegetable stand late one afternoon on my way to town. I introduced myself to him as a neighbor, a student, and a person with a family connection to his community of Pluff Mud. My mother’s father lived in Pluff Mud over seventy years ago and operated a produce packing warehouse about a mile down the road from Mr. Patton’s stand. As luck would have it, Mr. Patton knew who my grandfather was and commented that he was a fine man and good to his neighbors and employees. My grandfather has been dead for more than forty years but he served as a link between Mr. Patton and me. The seeds for rapport were planted.

My initial methodology involved the creation of a checklist of chronological life stages and questions that would evoke information about each stage. I began a conversation about Mr. Patton’s early childhood memories, but he veered slightly to the left when he launched into a discussion of the food that his family ate while he was growing up. When I attempted to elicit information about local folklore and superstitions, he refused to humor me and he dismissed those subjects as inconsistent with the teachings of the Bible. Taking the cue, I decided to let him lead the conversations and ultimately, I noticed that if he was talking about the things that

interested him, then he was engrossing and much more generous with his gestures, expressions and words.

Mr. Patton and I continued to build a rapport to such an extent that he contributed materials that interested him and he appeared to prefer our interview time over visits from his family and friends. In one of the final taped interviews, when we were discussing the Bible, a friend dropped by the vegetable stand for a visit. Mr. Patton, clearly irritated by the interruption, shooed the man away. He told his friend that he was busy “being interviewed,” but despite this, the man lingered. Mr. Patton asked the man if he knew “what an interview was” and told him he could wait but he must sit quietly until we were done. I, of course, offered to leave and come back, but Mr. Patton said, in a commanding tone “No, you stay right there.” I felt slightly uncomfortable that Mr. Patton’s friend was so abruptly dismissed, but I also felt flattered that Mr. Patton held our work in such regard. I felt a small thrill at this point because I realized that a relationship was established and my informant and I were in accord.

Logistical dilemmas

Every project has its problems, but mine were less theoretical and more practical. The fact of my being a woman interviewing a man precluded certain lines of inquiry. There was a certain deference I observed with respect to Mr. Patton’s age. These two factors somewhat inhibited me but were obviously a result of some of the rules for behavior and conversation in the culture that Mr. Patton and I share. Although Mr. Patton and I spoke the same language, there were times when he pronounced a word in such a way that I did not understand it or used a particular word in a context that confused me.

In addition, the location of our interviews, his roadside vegetable stand, was, at times, inconvenient. For example, the roar of a big truck passing by occasionally obscured the quality of recording. On the other hand, the location allowed me the opportunity to observe Mr. Patton in his own social world interacting with customers who periodically interrupted our conversations. It was on those occasions that I was able to meet some of his friends and family as they dropped by to check on him during the day. These interruptions allowed a glimpse of a man who is friendly to strangers, respected in his

community and loved by his family.

Interpreting the process

Upon reflection, I am thankful for the dose of humility I earned via my first informant's repeated rejections. When I surrendered the oral history collection process to the principle of serendipity, I was liberated from my own misconceptions about fieldwork. Furthermore, the recognition of the futility of controlling the circumstances of anthropological research was enlightening.

I am extraordinarily humbled by the time and trust with which Mr. Patton honored me over the past weeks. I am grateful for his words and thankful for the time he shared with me. I enjoyed being his audience and, in retrospect, I am pleased that my general outline of questions about Mr. Patton's life was, for the most part, tossed to the side. In fact, the original concept of a neat, chronological timeline of Mr. Patton's life sounds pretty dull at this point in the process.

Instead, I have been blessed by small doses of serendipity. Although the course of the conversations with Mr. Patton did not take the track that I had originally intended, what finally emerged was interesting. These conversations tell a bit of the story of a senior member in the community of Pluff Mud, South Carolina.

Life is, at times, a chaotic business and much like the initial stages of this project, it is burdened with twists and turns and even the occasional dead end. The ability to navigate one's own life and know when to back up, turn around and even stop and ask for directions is critical to a successful journey. In her book, *Composing a Life*, Mary Catherine Bateson aptly describes life as "[an] act of creation that engages us all" (1). If this is true, then an oral historian is collecting unique creations, one story at a time.

Talking with George Patton: A narrative interrupted with transcripts of actual conversation

George Patton sits solidly, like a fixture, underneath the shelter provided by a plastic tarp stretched across the roughly framed vegetable stand. When the vegetables are piled high on the tables that surround him, he is hidden from view. However, I know he is on duty when I see red tomatoes, green cucumbers and yellow squash.

He moves slowly when he must move at all. He is burdened with bad knee replacements and the weight that years of eating well have bestowed. He appears to be a large man in both height and girth but he is stooped over in pain: therefore his size is somewhat diminished. Decades of hard, physical labor made him muscular and strong but the legacy of that labor is pain. His left hand is gnarled as a result of an injury sustained in the War and he suffers from chronic bronchitis courtesy of his work sandblasting ship hulls at the Charleston Naval Shipyard.

His smile is quick and his laugh is contagious. His eyes are bright and his skin is a leathery brown. His stubbly beard is white but a cap covers his head and hides his crown. If he still has his hair, I have yet to see it. He is a demonstrative talker and uses his hands for emphasis.

General George Patton is unmatched. He isn't really a General but some of his vegetable-stand customers call him "General" and the nickname suits him well. He inspires respect via his demeanor, and he sounds almost profound as he utters bits of hard-earned wisdom in the course of everyday conversation. Mr. Patton has the charming ability to appear demure, but it is obvious, in some ways, that he considers himself special: perhaps specially blessed with a deep religious faith; perhaps specially lucky, because he survived years as a Navy gunner during WWII; and perhaps specially well fed in that he often talks about never having been hungry.

Mr. Patton was born in 1925 in the tiny, rural community of Pluff Mud, South Carolina. With the exception of four years with the Navy during WWII and a brief nine-month stint as a cook in New York City just after the War, he has lived in Pluff Mud his entire life. Mr. Patton actually lives on the "outskirts" of Pluff Mud in an even smaller community called Magnolia Hill. Pluff Mud is a poor community within the wealthy county of Charleston. It is merely a spot on the map with one caution light. Each year, thousands of people speed through it on their way to the nearby vacation resort town of Edisto Beach. It is a community of unemployed and underemployed. The city of Charleston is 30 minutes away by car and Pluff Mud has just two convenience stores, a school, a post office, a juke joint and a number of churches.

Mr. Patton was one of eight children born to Minnie Grivner and William Patton.

- JS *How many children did your mother have?*
 GP *Eight head.*
 JS *Eight?*
 GP *Eight children.*
 JS *How many boys?*
 GP *Four boys and four girls.*
 JS *Four girls... yeah? Are they all alive today?*
 GP *Ah, no. There ain't but...there isn't but three of them of the eight.*
 JS *So five have died? And do the three? It's brothers and sisters? Who is still here?*
 GP *All of them live right around here.*
 JS *Yeah? Are you the oldest? Youngest? What order were you?*
 GP *The baby boy.*
 JS *You were the baby?*
 GP *Baby boy.*
 JS *Wow.*
 GP *And of the four boys, I the only one keep the Patton family going cause the rest of them ain't have no children.*

The pride that Mr. Patton evidenced in his statement that he was the only child in his family “to keep the Patton family going” rests in the remnants of a patriarchal system that connects family members first and foremost via a common family name. Although his sisters had children related to Mr. Patton via a blood-line, these children carry the names of their fathers’ families, not their mother’s.

Mr. Patton’s mother died in childbirth with his sister. His father remarried a woman that raised the Patton children with a stern hand. Mr. Patton’s step-mother eventually provided daycare service for his children. I detected a distance between Mr. Patton and the woman who reared him given that he never mentioned her name. He did say she was strict and that “she was a pretty good step-mother.” He spoke

of his father with fondness and great respect.

Mr. Patton completed the fourth grade and went to work on Charleston's shipping docks when he was just fourteen. When he volunteered for naval service he was so young (seventeen) that his father had to sign for him. Mr. Patton's desire to join the Navy was fueled by two factors: he saw no other opportunities available for work and he was afraid of the company he was keeping. He served his country throughout WWII on a series of cargo and battleships. During this period Mr. Patton traveled around the world yet he still remains unimpressed with the faraway, exotic places he visited. He sustained a serious injury to his hand when it was caught in a gunner but he recovered and returned to his ship.

After the War ended, he returned to Pluff Mud and began to court Lydie Morrison, whom Mr. Patton married in 1947. Today, he and his wife live within a mile of the site of the home in which he was born.

JS When you came back from New York, that's when you married your wife?

GP Yeah, back in 1947.

JS And how old was she?

GP She was 16.

JS Can you think back about what you felt back then about her? What she looked like to you...

GP Well, She was beautiful, I know that.

JS Did you date?

GP Well, in fact, when I went to New York we was courting and I just went up there to see if I could get me a little bank roll to come back home and do what I want to do.

JS Did you ask her father if you could marry her?

GP Oh, that's the only way you could marry then.

JS And they liked you, her parents?

GP Oh, yeah. They liked me pretty good. First thing they asked me "who was my parents?" Back then, when you go to courting, that was the first thing they asked, "Who your parents?" and if you didn't come from a

*good family, people didn't want you around none.
That's mostly what they used to go by, your parents.*

Mr. Patton and his wife have been married fifty-five years and he is looking forward to number sixty. He still remembers their anniversary each year.

- JS Do you bring her [your wife] a bunch of flowers?
GP Yeah, I do that. Oh yeah, flowers, always do that
and we always have a big eating, mostly every
anniversary.
JS What do you like best about your wife today?
GP She care for her children, I know that.
GP She's a good person until you get her out. If she don't
like it then she get mad and she terrible.*

Mr. Patton said his wife was a “Christianfied” person and used the word “out” to mean mad. These are a few examples of a bit of confusion in our conversations despite the fact that we both speak English.

- JS How many children did you have?
GP Well, I got seven living. I had eight too.
JS You had eight too?
GP But one of them got killed in an automobile accident
back in the 60's. And I still got seven, four boys,
three boys and four girls.*

Later, Mr. Patton clarified the fact that one of the girls died as an infant so he has three boys and three girls living today. Four of his children live within a radius of a few miles from their father; one lives in the next county, and his oldest daughter lives in West Palm Beach, Florida. He and his brothers and sisters inherited 15 acres of land in Pluff Mud from his father's estate and since he was the only one willing to pay several thousand dollars to an attorney to perform the long and tedious process on heirs' property title search, ownership of this land eventually came to rest solely with him. He has divided the acreage

up between his six children and two of his grandchildren.

All of his children graduated from Baptist Hill High School in Hollywood, South Carolina. His daughters went away to different colleges and earned degrees. His grandchildren and great-grandchildren are numerous. I believe that he has sixteen legitimate grandchildren, but he has many other grandchildren or great-grandchildren that were born out-of-wedlock. However, since he disapproves of premarital and extramarital relationships, he refuses to place them on his family tree. While Mr. Patton acknowledges the children's existence, he insists that he "ain't going to own them" and therefore I was uncomfortable with the prospect of attempting a biologically accurate kinship chart. This is one of the most significant issues to arise from this project. Is a family tree determined by the accident of birth or the rules of proper behavior set forth by an individual responding to his or her own cultural norms?

Mr. Patton is a moral man. His morality is practical and never sounds sanctimonious. He has a gift for explaining everything in such a way that it sounds so simple and perfectly logical.

- JS Did any of the men that married your daughters come to you and ask you if they could marry your daughters? I'm trying to figure out when that [tradition] changed.*
- GP Well, not in so many real words but my baby daughter, she... I had more trouble with her than any one of my other children. She and her boyfriend come to me one day and they said that they wanted to ... she packing up her bags and I say "Where you going?" [she replied] "Me and Harry going to Summerville"... she had wanted to go and live together to see if they were going to make it. I say, "What is you, a piece of furniture or an automobile to try out or something like that? I said no, no. If you go, don't come back."*

Harry and Mr. Patton's baby daughter, Jocelyn, set a wedding date and married shortly after the incident detailed above. Six months later, Jocelyn was diagnosed with leukemia. She nearly died but her life was spared as a result of a bone marrow transplant donated by her sister

Rebecca. Jocelyn and Rebecca traveled to New York City for the treatment. The medical bills were astronomical. Fortunately, Jocelyn's husband was an insurance agent for Liberty Life and had good health insurance benefits. Mr. Patton was certain to point out to Jocelyn that if she had gone ahead with her plan of just living with instead of marrying Harry, she would not be the beneficiary of his health insurance benefits.

For Mr. Patton, morality is not some abstract code of rules that *should* be obeyed lest you face the consequences for noncompliance. Morality is practical, useful and makes sense; like traffic lights and road signs.

There is still some farming in Pluff Mud and the surrounding areas but, on any given day, one can find dozens of men standing in front of the community's busier convenience store across the street from Mr. Patton's vegetable stand. These men play loud music on their car stereos and, at times, the ground vibrates with the music's beat. They talk with loud voices and drink beer all afternoon.

During our interviews, this scene frequently addled Mr. Patton, who declared that "idleness is of the devil." Such a statement caused me to consider that in Mr. Patton's view, modern day Americans just may have it too easy for their own good.

GP *They ain't going to get no better. I don't, I don't feel it's going to get any better. I thought it might...but according to the Bible, according to God's word, things ain't going to get no better.*

JS *So, in your 78 years, you've seen things get worse.*

GP *Oh, yeah! Oh, sure, because all this bunch of hanging around on the corner and drinking — there wasn't none of that. They was in the fields working and no, there was none of that bunch of hanging around. You had to work.*

JS *Yeab?*

GP *No loafing around. Back then, even the police would lock up for vagrancy.*

Mr. Patton is a religious man. He attends the Methodist church

a few books from his home and has been an integral part of that congregation. He was a preacher, church trustee, Sunday school teacher and an assistant Sunday School Superintendent. Mr. Patton is now known as the “man with the wisdom” by his fellow Sunday school students. He is the oldest man in the church and arrives each Sunday to a standing ovation. He has been designated as an advisor to the current Board of Trustees. He speaks with great pride about his activities in the church with a congregation that has grown from about twenty members to more than two hundred in fifty years.

JS Today is Friday April 11th and I'm with GP in his truck because it is chilly outside. We sit in here to talk...it's nice and quiet so I love sitting in here, it's comfortable and I thought we would discuss the Bible because you have mentioned specific passages from the Bible frequently when I have been talking to you and I know this is a book that not only do you find important but it helps you makes decisions. Is that right?

GP That's right.

JS Yeah?

GP Oh, yeah.

JS And you live by it.

GP Try to. Near as I can.

JS Try to... that's a good way of putting it.

GP [laughs here]

JS It's a pretty awesome book to use as guidance and you've mentioned some passages to me on tape and off of tape and I guess I wanted to know if you could call out any specifically that you like or that make a lot of sense to you...

GP Well, one scripture that I love, I love several of them but one of them is Peter 224.

Mr. Patton is referring to the Second letter of Peter in the Bible, the second chapter and the fourth verse. While this passage deals with the terrific power that God wields against false prophets, it also speaks to the fact that God will rescue the righteous. Mr. Patton

is full of wise words. In fact, he told me that his Sunday school teacher loves to see him come to class and always asks him to speak a few words about the lesson at hand. She has named him, “The Wisdom Man.” The nickname suits him well. In a conversation about my almost 20-year quest for a college degree:

- JS I've finished all my course work and I should get a diploma.*
- GP Well, that will be real good.*
- JS It's taken me a long time.*
- GP Well, nothing easy comes, anything good don't come easy.*

When I questioned the worth of a college degree in a dismal job market, Mr. Patton's experience in a farming school just after WWII was just what I needed to hear:

- GP One of my teachers been from Ruffin, South Carolina and he told me something I always remember—he tell me it's better to have and don't need then to need and don't have.*
- GP That means everything, that education and everything else, you don't know what you going to ... I got a trade I pick up on. I didn't thought I would need it until lately... it's always better to have...*

I was feeling daring one day, so I asked Mr. Patton if he was afraid of dying. He responded in a manner I have come to understand is typical of his conversational style:

- GP I don't see much reason to worry about dying. I'm too busy worrying about living.*

In the United States, socio-economic status, gender and race are all factors that can inhibit an individual's access to various opportunities such as jobs and education. Mr. Patton is a black man

born seventy-eight years ago in a poor community in South Carolina. Although he has a fourth grade education, he only has 16 months of publicly funded education to his name. Mr. Patton said that back in the thirties, the children in his community only went to school for four months each year. These children were needed at home and in the fields. Although I believe that his choices in life were limited by his race and residence, he refuses to view his life in that way.

JS Have you ever felt victimized by discrimination?

GP No, it didn't bother me.

JS No, I mean, it's never caused you to not do something or be able to get something that you thought you needed or wanted?

GP Well, I couldn't get the job that I wanted but it still didn't bother me because I knew a day is coming when ... I feel like a day is coming when all that will be over with anyway.

JS It didn't make you mad?

GP No. I think it was God's will. That's the way I feel it will be. Everything that happen happens for a reason and a purpose.

In fact, not only does Mr. Patton eschew any bitterness with respect to any opportunities that may have been denied him based upon the color of his skin, he turns discrimination around and places it in his favor. I asked that he recall the first time he voted in a public election. He told me that after WWII, in South Carolina, a black, male, property owner was allowed to vote only after he proved that he could read the United States Constitution. I was aghast at this information but when I asked him if this made him angry, he said no. Mr. Patton reasoned that if a person cannot read, then he cannot understand for himself what it is that he is voting for or against. He understood the reading test as logical while I jumped to the conclusion that it was discriminatory. The emotionally charged and volatile issue of discrimination has always seemed like a matter for quick judgments of right and wrong. I have never considered that such an issue could be relative to an individual's perspective.

Concluding remarks

I consider oral history important precisely because it provides a conduit between the past and present. Mr. Patton's perspective on family, education, religion and society is enlightening and is shaped by his seventy-eight years of life experience. The example of the reading test that was required prior to voter registration is a perfect example of Mr. Patton's ability to illuminate an issue that I was confident I had mastered. Mr. Patton is not only my informant, he is my teacher.

In the final paragraph of *Nisa*, Marjorie Shostak writes that "almost every experience I have in life is enriched by the !Kung world and the way that Nisa looked at it" (371). I understand this sentiment now. My feelings about Mr. Patton are complicated. I understand him to be a moral man, a caring father and an upstanding citizen. I realize that I have idolized him a bit but I still feel jealous that I cannot call him family. I am humbled by his trust in me and grateful to him for sharing his feelings and thoughts with me. I am proud to know Mr. Patton.

Although the experience with my first potential informant, Bertie, was frustrating and disappointing, I am grateful for the lesson in patience that it offered. In fact, one of the aspects of Mr. Patton's personality that I most admire is his endless patience with the world and those who call it home. I have learned that patience is serendipity's partner and it is only in patience that one can reap the benefits that serendipity offers.

The conversations that I have transcribed for this paper were selected because they do a good job of highlighting aspects of Mr. Patton's character that I found striking. In retrospect, I wish I had transcribed each tape within a few hours of the actual conversation. Additionally, I should have kept a written journal that recorded my side of our relationship. I was always reflective after my interviews with Mr. Patton and his perspective often inspired me toward profound revelations. I have realized that in the chaos that I call my life, I rarely take the time to do what I know to be good. As a result of my time with Mr. Patton, I have resolved to slow down and spend more time whiling away the hours at a vegetable stand, listening to a man talking about a most remarkable subject: his life.

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