

# Before Columbia: The FWP and American Oral History Research

By Jerrold Hirsch

**Abstract** This article compares and contrasts the approaches of the New Deal Federal Writers' Project and the Columbia Oral History Program in an effort to reconsider the paradoxical history of oral history research in the United States and its relationship to how many oral historians today look at their work and the history of their field. As it turns out, the theoretical and social concerns of the FWP projects are closer to current theoretical concerns of oral historians than the work Allan Nevins conducted in the early years of the Columbia project. The article also shows how awareness of the history of the intellectual and cultural currents that affect oral history projects in general, and the FWP's work in particular—interviews with former slaves, tenant farmers, industrial workers, and members of ethnic minorities—can help us analyze and use those materials. It argues that an awareness of continuity and discontinuity in the history of oral history makes it possible for today's oral historians to have a productive dialogue with their predecessors in the field.

**Keywords:** Federal Writers' Project, Columbia Oral History Program, History of Oral History, Allan Nevins, Intellectual History

Allan Nevins's plea in *The Gateway to History* (1938) for "an organization which [would make] a systematic attempt to obtain from the lips and papers of Americans who had lived significant

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lives, a fuller record of their accomplishments” appeared the same year officials of the New Deal’s Federal Writers’ Project (FWP) were dramatically expanding their efforts at collecting the life histories of ordinary Americans. The meaning of the terms “significant lives” and “accomplishments” have been contested ground for a long time.<sup>1</sup>

Today it is possible to look at the work of the FWP, call it oral history, ask about its antecedents, and question the common view that oral history began with Nevins and his Columbia University Program. Such easy revisionism, however, simplistically assumes that by arranging in chronological order evidence about earlier efforts—at what today might be called oral history—one will have discovered origins and traced influences. That approach, however, would create a false sense of continuity regarding the development of oral history research in the United States, an endeavor in which disjuncture and discontinuity are more prominent features than continuity.

The Federal Writers’ Project and the beginnings of the Columbia University Oral History Program are pivotal episodes in the history of oral history research in America. It is possible to locate each of these developments in relationship to the sense of ancestors—claimed and rejected—that those involved in these projects developed. It is more problematic to make assertions about which later developments have been influenced by either of these two programs. Similarities do not prove influence. They may testify, however, to persistent issues with which the very structure of modern American society confronts students of the history of the United States, both as scholars and as citizens. That the FWP had virtually no impact on oral history research in the 1950s and early ’60s is one startling fact. The rediscovery of the FWP’s pioneering efforts at oral history in the late sixties also begs for some explanation. But perhaps the most potentially illuminating question that can be asked is why the FWP’s efforts at oral history failed to affect scholarly historical discourse for so long. The more recent interest in these materials has not, for the most part, been accompanied by an interest in retrieving and understanding that discourse. Nor has it led to paying

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<sup>1</sup> Allan Nevins, *The Gateway to History* (Boston: Heath and Company, 1938), iv.

adequate attention to the efforts of FWP officials at interpreting their own work. Historians Roy Rosensweig and Barbara Melosh have lamented the lack of a history of the New Deal oral history projects, “one of the most massive oral history projects ever undertaken.”<sup>2</sup>

In a field in which so much discontinuity exists, the best strategy for placing the oral history efforts of Nevins and the FWP in an informative historical context might paradoxically be to start with the present before returning to the past. Who do oral historians today want for ancestors? And why? Few scholars calling themselves oral historians in the period from 1948 to the late 1960s wanted the FWP as an ancestor. The celebratory and triumphalist mood of the Cold War had encouraged little interest in either the types of people the FWP interviewed or in the FWP, which, by the 1950s, was associated with what had become unpleasant memories of the Depression, and with the somewhat suspect New Deal. Today those questions might engender a debate. Why is it possible to now make a case for the FWP as an ancestor?—mistaken as that strategy might be. By trying to address that question at the beginning it may be possible to answer it at the end in a way that illuminates not only what happened in the past, but also highlights underlying currents affecting recent trends in oral history research in the United States. These are trends that affect the very structure of oral history research and that reflect both the impact of a changing American social structure and an effort to affect that structure.

Regarding the Federal Writers’ Project as an ancestor of current work in oral history is an appealing strategy. More than Nevins’s efforts at Columbia, the FWP seems to connect to current research trends. Clearly, oral history research is no longer as exclusively focused on the prominent and influential as it was for almost two decades after the founding of the Columbia Oral History Program. Works in social history using oral history research routinely win praise and prizes. What raised eyebrows in the case of *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton*

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<sup>2</sup> Roy Rosensweig and Barbara Melosh, “Government and the Arts: Voices from the New Deal Era,” *Journal of American History* 70 (1990): 596–608.

*Mill World* was that the book was multi-authored, not that it used oral history.<sup>3</sup>

It is now hard to read the historically significant but intellectually dreary symposiums that members of the oral history movement participated in in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>4</sup> It cannot be denied that in an inhospitable environment they defended oral history, worked to institutionalize it, and maintained their morale by aggressively insisting that they were engaged in a worthwhile endeavor. Nevertheless, after a few pages of this stuff, there is almost something refreshingly engaging in the agricultural historian Fred Shannon's dismissive, reactionary, and sexist remark that he was not interested in the "reminiscences of garrulous old men, not to say anything of old women," people who *merely* liked to talk about "Horseshoe chawin' terbaccer." The vast majority of oral historians today would reject Shannon's point of view; nevertheless, Shannon, unlike many of the oral historians of his time, at least focused on a key issue. Perhaps it comes as no surprise to learn that in the course of grappling with the question "Is Oral History Really Worthwhile?" none of the earnest advocates of oral history in a symposium published in 1958 defended the value of recording the voices of ordinary folk.<sup>5</sup>

There was only the most limited dialogue between folklorists and oral historians in the 1950s and 1960s. On various occasions folklorist Richard Dorson recycled his vague and fundamentally

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<sup>3</sup> Jacquelyn Hall et al., *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> See for example, Clifford Lord, ed., *Ideas in Conflict: A Colloquium on Certain Problems in Historical Society Work in the United States and Canada* (Harrisburg, PA: Association for State and Local History, 1958); Martha Jane Zachert, "The Second Oral History Colloquium," *Journal of Library History* 3 (1968): 173–78; Elizabeth I. Dixon, "Arrowhead in Retrospect," *Journal of Library History* 2 (1967): 126–28; Gould Coleman, ed., *The Third National Colloquium on Oral History: Held at the Center for Continuing Education, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, November 22–25, 1968* (New York: Oral History Association, 1969); Gould Coleman, ed., *The Fourth National Colloquium on Oral History: Held at Airlie House, Warrenton, Virginia, November 7–10, 1969* (New York: Oral History Association, 1970).

<sup>5</sup> Clifford Lord, ed., "Is Oral History Really Worthwhile?," in *Second Session in Ideas in Conflict: A Colloquium on Certain Problems in Historical Society Work in the United States and Canada* (Harrisburg, PA: American Association for State and Local History, 1958), 34–36.

innocuous thoughts on the relationship between folklore and oral history. Folklorist Roger Welsch offered his perceptive thoughts about folklore and oral history in a most deferential style at the National Colloquium on Oral History in 1968. Dorson and Welsch seem to have perceived that, for the most part, those who so earnestly promoted oral history were defensive and largely interested in interviewing the prominent to acquire more empirical data along the same lines as conventional historical studies that did not use oral history.<sup>6</sup>

Not only has there been a sea change regarding oral history “from the bottom up,” there is also a developing interest in questions about the social construction of memory, the relationship between what the interviewee says and the implicit ideology in the narrative structure of the interview. “Memory and American History,” a 1989 special issue of the *Journal of American History* (JAH), focused on questions about the relationship between memory and history, and John Bodnar’s contribution, a study of automobile workers, used oral history in addressing that question. In 1992, folklorist Barbara Allen contributed an article to the JAH on the value of identifying and studying stories in oral history interviews as evidence of individual variations on shared community attitudes. Perhaps conscious of the history profession’s past attitudes, Allen avoided using the word folklore.<sup>7</sup>

The defensive discussions about the validity of oral testimony and assertions about the various ways that interviews could be useful that were so central to conferences about oral history in the 1950s and 1960s have begun to recede. It is difficult to imagine their playing such a large role in any future

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<sup>6</sup> Richard Dorson, “Oral Tradition and Written History: The Case for the United States,” in *American Folklore and the Historian* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 129–44; Richard Dorson, “Oral Literature, Oral History, and the Folklorist,” in *Folklore and Fakelore: Essays Toward a Discipline of Folk Studies* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 127–44; Remarks by Roger Welsch at the panel Philip Crowl chaired on “Interdisciplinary Views on Oral History” in Gould Coleman, ed., *The Third National Colloquium*, 19–24.

<sup>7</sup> John Bodnar, “Power and Memory in Oral History: Workers and Managers at Studebaker,” *Journal of American History* 75 (1989): 1201–22. This special issue on memory was later published in book form as David Thelen, ed., *Memory and American History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); “Story in Oral History: Clues to Consciousness,” *Journal of American History* 79 (1992): 606–11.

colloquiums on oral history. How validity is determined is now treated as a more complex question and highly contested issue than it was when validity was linked to an allegedly impartial historian's noble quest for objectivity. No longer do as many researchers engaged in oral history projects feel compelled to assert that oral history is a valid source solely because it can help us secure objective information if obtained by an impartial interviewer with an appropriate background in history—guild certification. The issues surrounding subjectivity and the construction of narrative have again become the major concerns that they were to some FWP officials.<sup>8</sup>

Work on the cutting edge of oral history has moved on to new questions—questions that are part of a larger discourse among contemporary historians, scholars in other fields, and occasionally among the people who have been interviewed. Many of these questions make it seem extremely unlikely that those engaged in oral history research will advocate, as they routinely did in the not so distant past, that once tapes are transcribed it would be cost-effective to reuse them. The voice of the past is now heard as constituted in a spoken language that is inherently different from what can be obtained in any written transcription. Ironically, directors of FWP oral history programs—who did not have tape recorders—better understood this point than did Nevins and the archivally based oral historians who, with tape recorders in hand, followed in his footsteps.<sup>9</sup>

The institutional base for oral history research within the historical profession is more solid today (although still probably

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<sup>8</sup> Important examples of this trend are the essays in Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), xvi; Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, eds., *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Ronald Grele, ed., *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History* (New York: Prager, 1992); Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1991), viii.

<sup>9</sup> Joel Lieber, "The Tape Recorder as Historian," *Saturday Review*, June 11, 1968, 98, noted that "One of Columbia's rules of thumb is that, except for a few fragments, tapes are erased and reused—'much to the horror of psychologists with their interests in speech slips and inflections.'" Lieber is quoting Louis Starr, Nevins's successor as director of the Columbia University Oral History Program. Starr could not imagine developments that would make historians as interested as psychologists and other social scientists in the actual language of the interviewers.

more subject to drastic cuts in hard economic times than other aspects of a history department's mission) than it was during the period of the Federal Writers' Project or for more than two decades following the creation of the Columbia Program. Major oral history programs are now based within the history departments of universities. Americans engaged in oral history research have their own scholarly *Oral History Review*. And since 1987 the *Journal of American History* once a year provides articles reviewing new developments in oral history and various established fields of research. *The Public Historian* treats oral history as a central concern for large parts of its readership.

Initially, the FWP's location within the federal government might seem impressive to those who do not know what a weak base that proved to be. By contrast, the location of the Columbia and other early oral history programs under the aegis of libraries and archival institutions was relatively more secure. The FWP and the Columbia Oral History Program's respective institutional bases provided one way of paying the special bills that oral history engenders. And Nevins has left a vivid account of the need for most oral history programs to solicit donors. The FWP and the Columbia Program's institutional locations placed the work of these two groups on the outside, or at best, on the periphery of the discourse about the past that professional historians thought mattered, although a basis in the world of libraries and archives gave oral historians access to the *Wilson Library Bulletin* and *The American Archivist*. However, unlike the later archivally based oral historians, FWP officials did not see themselves as primarily collecting records for professional historians to use. They saw publication for a non-scholarly audience as the ultimate aim of their oral history projects.<sup>10</sup>

The directors of the Federal Writers' Project neither sought the support of the American historical profession, nor expected much help from historians in the kind of oral history research they were pursuing. While the New Deal and the Depression lasted, national FWP officials had a base in the unemployment

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<sup>10</sup> Allan Nevins, "Oral History: How and Why It Was Born," *Wilson Library Bulletin* 40 (1966): 600–01.

programs the Roosevelt administration sponsored. They found no way to permanently institutionalize their projects. The FWP gradually faded away as the unemployment crisis declined and the administration, the Congress, and the nation focused on the war effort.

As a professional historian himself, Nevins provided early efforts in oral history research with a link to scholarly circles—a tenuous link. Not only Nevins’s advocacy of oral history, but also his efforts to encourage historians to aim for a more popular audience than they usually made the effort to address, were greeted with skepticism by many professional historians. His efforts on behalf of the Society of American Historians and in establishing *American Heritage Magazine* were not universally supported by his colleagues. His criticism of dry-as-dust academics alienated some of them. The beachhead for oral history programs in the Columbia mode was the university library, occasionally the private corporation or foundation, and in time governmental bureaus, but only much later in the history departments of research universities. One can still easily rattle off the names of prestigious history departments that have no one offering a course in oral history.<sup>11</sup>

What would today be called public history was at the heart of both Nevins’s and the FWP’s efforts. In *The Gateway to History*, Nevins talked about the need for historians to address a general audience, and after World War II he sought, through *American Heritage*, to achieve that goal. For both Nevins and the FWP oral history was linked to concerns over the development of national identity. Memory was a central concern. For Nevins, collective memory, in its role in helping to constitute bonds of shared nationality, was implicitly treated as unproblematic. The validity of individual memory, however, had to be determined in relationship to canons of scientific history defined as the search for the objective truth. For FWP officials, however, American identity was problematic. For them, oral history was central to what they treated as contests over whose experience was considered valuable in constructing America

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<sup>11</sup> John Higham, *History: The Development of Historical Studies in the United States* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1965), 80–84, 121, 206.



and which individuals and groups should play a role in helping to construct a sense of the American past.

Those historians interested in oral and public history tend to be familiar with Nevins's call in the preface to his *The Gateway to History* for a popular historical magazine and for oral history projects. The underlying assumptions about history that frame *The Gateway to History* receive less attention. Nevins, himself, listed "frames of reference" along with "patterns of culture" as incomprehensible "pseudo-philosophic jargon" that was distancing professional historians from the ordinary reader. Nevertheless, Nevins's own frame of reference and self-expressed lack of interest in patterns of culture reveal a great deal about his view of history in general and oral history in particular.

The idea that history was "a branch of literature" and that "it is first a creator of nations, and after that, their inspirer" were central and intimately related themes in *The Gateway to History*. Nevins portrayed history as literature that actively helped constitute a nation: "By giving peoples a sense of continuity in all their efforts, and by chronicling immortal worth, it confers upon them both a consciousness of their unity, and a feeling of the importance of human achievement." He maintained that "the strongest element in the creation of any human organization of complex character and enduring strength is the establishment of common tradition by the narration of its history."<sup>12</sup>

For Nevins, national tradition and identity are not something simply inherited, but something constructed by the act of narrating the past. He may have seen "Americans who led significant lives" as potential narrators about the period from roughly the end of Reconstruction to the appearance of *The Gateway to History*. He certainly saw them as providing data for an account of "a period in which America has been built into the richest and most powerful nation the world has ever seen, and socially and economically has not only been transformed but re-transformed." The plot for such a history is the rise and triumph of America. This suggests an epic theme along the lines of the nineteenth century American

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<sup>12</sup> Nevins, *The Gateway to History*, iii–iv.

and European romantic historians Nevins so greatly admired—an epic that celebrated past heroic deeds and that accepted and justified present social arrangements. For Nevins this conservative romantic view of the American experience as triumphalist historic epic is reconcilable with respect for “proper [historical] standards.”<sup>13</sup>

Although Nevins clearly stresses the value of history as literature, he is not so much challenging the ideal of a scientific, objective, and impartial history as he is trying to reconcile a popular romantic nationalist version of history with scientific history, the “proper standards,” as he terms it. For him, oral history is useful because it creates for the recent past the types of documents that he—and countless others since—argued will increasingly be lacking in the modern age. Two decades after the beginning of the Columbia Oral History Program, Charles T. Morrissey aptly summarized Nevins’s position: “Nevins had long felt that much knowledge of historical value was being lost to future historians because no one was recording it. Telephone conversations and air travel were two obvious reasons why men of power and decision in this century tended to carry their files in their heads.” Neither Nevins, nor the majority of the individuals active in the early archivally based oral history movement, viewed oral history interviews as contributing to a new approach to the past, but rather as a means to make it possible to continue writing traditional history with the traditional historical actors, while claiming in the face of the skeptical Fred Shannons of their world, that they were not challenging the tenets of scientific history.<sup>14</sup>

Like Nevins, key national FWP officials were romantic nationalists. They, too, saw the key role of tradition, history, and language in constituting national identity. They differed, however, in emphasizing the experiences of daily life, in a concern with social problems, in a fascination with folklore, and in trying to reconcile romantic nationalism with pluralism. FWP officials were more interested in the new social classes modernity created than they were in how technology was destroying the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., iii, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., iii, iv, 342–54.

records those traditionally regarded as prominent and influential individuals usually left.

After a long delay, the FWP oral history materials that existed before the Columbia Oral History Program began are increasingly finding their way into scholarly and popular discourse. No common pattern distinguishes the way these materials have emerged. Anthologies of unpublished Southern life histories, like *Such As Us: Southern Voices of the Thirties* (1979) and *Up Before Daybreak* (1982) have preceded the use of these sources in scholarly monographs. At the same time, it is clear that work in the new social history has led to efforts to review and publish previously unpublished FWP work. Enough of the material has now appeared and the new social history has become so much a part of historical writing that both these developments encourage new efforts to publish and analyze FWP oral history projects that had for many years been neglected. Given increasing interest in the history of the lives of ordinary Americans and the variety of unpublished FWP materials, there is little chance that the scholarly or popular interest in these materials will abate any time in the near future.

The anthologies that have appeared share most of the assumptions that led Writers' Project officials to initiate these programs. They emphasize that people not usually heard from are gaining the chance to speak. They dignify the ordinary. They attach importance to the common person's view. In the best of these anthologies of FWP materials, the editors provide an historical context for the interviews. They also reflect on what new perspectives these interviews offered on aspects of the American past. In *America, The Dream of My Life: Selections from the Federal Writers' Project's New Jersey Ethnic Survey* (1990), David Cohen insisted that the social-ethnic studies "represent for immigration history what the more famous Federal Writers' Project collection of slave narratives has meant for African-American history." In selecting interviews from unpublished FWP social-ethnic studies for his anthology, *The First Franco-Americans: New England Life Histories from the Federal Writers' Project, 1938-1939* (1985), C. Stewart Doty thought he was providing readers with an account of these people that did not treat them as an "anonymous mass or . . . filter Franco-American experience through the perceptions of Francophone

elites.” He maintained that the publication of these interviews “accelerates the development of a new kind of Franco-American history.” By having made it possible for voices from the past to reach later generations, the FWP has helped enrich and democratize the dialogue Americans can have about their past.<sup>15</sup>

In *First-Person America* (1980), Ann Banks concentrated not on a particular group or place, but instead sought to introduce Americans to a wider variety of FWP social-ethnic and living lore interviews than any other anthology had attempted. In her book one can find interviews with C. I. O. supporters who worked in Chicago’s back-of-the-yards packing houses, North Carolinians who made their living from tobacco, monumental stone cutters in Barre, Vermont, and jazz musicians among others. Banks wanted new generations of readers to benefit from the way “The Federal Writers’ Project pioneered the collection of first-person narratives by people who would not otherwise have left a record.”<sup>16</sup>

All the editors of these anthologies point out that a key part of the appeal of the FWP materials they include in their books is the narrative power of these interviews. Tom Terrill and I argue that “through these stories [in *Such As Us*] the impact of facts, trends, and forces can be felt as well as understood, felt as they were felt by those whose lives they helped to shape.” Ann Banks made the “story” aspect of FWP social-ethnic and folklore studies a central part of her introduction to *First-Person America*. In trying to explain Botkin’s outlook, Banks could not help but discuss the relationship among memory, history, and folklore as embodied in the first-person stories in her anthology. She referred to Botkin as “the man most responsible for the stories in this book.” In the new 1990 edition

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<sup>15</sup> Charles Morrissey, “Oral History as a Classroom Tool,” *Social Education* 32 (1968): 546.

<sup>16</sup> David Steven Cohen, ed., *America, The Dream of My Life: Selections from the Federal Writers’ Project’s New Jersey Ethnic Survey* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 1; C. Stewart Doty, ed., *The First Franco-Americans: New England Life Histories From the Federal Writers’ Project, 1938–1939* (Orono: University of Maine at Orono Press, 1985), 2; C. Stewart Doty, “Going to the States: Testimony From the Franco-American Life History Narratives in the Federal Writers’ Project, 1938–1939,” *Contemporary French Civilization* 7 (1983): 275–92.

of *First-Person America*, Banks concluded that “American historians have become more sophisticated in their approach to the workings of memory during the decade since the book first appeared.” Recent psychological research, she noted, looked at “remembering [as] a process of creative construction, not merely of replication . . . a storyteller is not the sole author of his tale; he collaborates with his audience in shaping the story. Every story, in other words, is a conversation, even when only one person does the talking.” Banks pointed out that “none of these findings would seem new or startling to . . . Benjamin Botkin.” This growing interest in memory promises to balance the initial tendency to discuss the validity of these FWP interviews largely in terms of whether the nuggets of data historians might extract from the material were trustworthy. As David Thelen, a former editor of the *Journal of American History*, has observed, for some purposes “the social dimensions of memory are more important than the need to verify accuracy.”<sup>17</sup>

Nancy J. Martin-Perdue and Charles L. Perdue, Jr. have spent over two decades making a treasure trove of materials from the Virginia FWP available to both scholars and the general public. *Talk About Trouble: A New Deal Portrait of Virginians in the Great Depression* (1996) is, at the moment, the capstone to their valuable endeavors—more volumes are promised. What makes the Perdues’ volume especially rewarding is their attention to these FWP oral history interviews’ ethnographic and folklore value. Nor are they simply interested in itemizing customs. Rather, they are concerned with what they refer to as “collective narratives of memory” and how experience is narrated. Drawing on their knowledge of history, folklore, and anthropology, they are able to set their FWP materials in a rich context that presents a full picture of folklife in the region. Among the many valuable anthologies of FWP materials, the Perdues’ work may come closest to achieving the goals of FWP officials.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ann Banks, ed., *First-Person America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1990), xx.

<sup>18</sup> Tom Terrill and Jerrold Hirsch, eds., *Such As Us: Southern Voices of the Thirties* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), xiii; Ann Banks, *First-Person America*, i–ii; Thelen, as quoted in Banks, *First-Person America*, ii.

As long as it took for historians to turn to the FWP slave narratives, it took them even longer to give attention to the social-ethnic studies, the living lore materials, and the Southern life histories. The appearance of studies of slave culture in the 1970s using the FWP slave narratives, and in the 1980s and 1990s of anthologies drawing on the FWP social-ethnic studies materials, follows, in part, the development of black power in the late sixties, and the ethnic revival of the seventies. Such a conclusion would fit historian I. A. Newby's analysis of recent historiographical trends. In *Plain Folk in the New South: Social Change and Cultural Persistence, 1880–1915* (1989), Newby maintained historians' "recasting of the history of slaves, ethnic minorities, and other groups, including women, is a recent example of the way they respond to current events." He held "that example suggests that sea changes in historical treatment of social groups occur only when basic improvements take place in the status of the groups themselves." Historians, Newby insisted, have given Southern plain folk relatively less attention than these other groups because there has been so little improvement in the status and treatment of people often dismissed as "rednecks." "Even today," Newby laments, "[plain folk] are one of the few recognizable social groups that the media can and do present in negative, stereotypical fashion, and that academics and liberals can and do disparage by name." Nevertheless, Newby does see a change occurring among scholars and in the media.<sup>19</sup>

In *Plain Folk in the New South*, Newby uses the FWP Southern life histories to give people who have been "alternately disparaged, patronized, and ignored . . . what every group is entitled to—a sympathetic look into their history that seeks to understand them in their own terms." Newby's views about the historical and cultural treatment of Southern plain folk differ little from the justification W. T. Couch offered for initiating the FWP's Southern life history program. It was the desire to change the treatment and status of the disparaged and

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<sup>19</sup> Nancy J. Martin-Perdue and Charles Perdue, Jr., *Talk About Trouble: A New Deal Portrait of Virginians in the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 22.

ignored groups of Americans that led FWP officials to initiate interview projects.<sup>20</sup>

The public history and scholarly uses of these emerging FWP materials have hardly been exhausted. They will continue to enlarge our experience and understanding of the American past, as both scholars and lay people listen to the interviewees with new questions in mind. Newby demonstrated in *Plain Folk in the New South* the value of the Southern life history collection to a study of a part of the Southern plain folk who experienced the transition from an agrarian world to the textile mills. In *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920–1960* (1987), Jack Kirby employed the FWP Southern life histories to examine the experience of a wider variety of Southerners. These FWP materials can speak to questions that FWP employees had not actually considered. Jacquelyn Jones demonstrated in “‘Tore Up and a-Movin’: Perspectives on the Work of Black and Poor White Women in the Rural South,” that the Southern life histories offered insights into the differences and similarities in the situation of Southern white and black women, and the significance of gender, race, and class in their lives.<sup>21</sup>

If Newby is right about the relationship between social change and the work of historians, the belated rediscovery of the FWP’s interview materials is an ironic vindication of a program that was first disparaged in its own time and then ignored by later Americans. It had been the hope of national FWP officials that the interview projects could create a new sense of shared nationality that would help diminish the stereotypes about, and low status of, African Americans, industrial workers, ethnic minorities, and ordinary Southerners. They could not have envisioned that it would take between thirty to fifty years before an ever-increasing number of Americans would express interest in these interviews. Nor could they have envisioned that, before the publication of this material would take place, significant improvements in the treatment and status of these

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<sup>20</sup> I. A. Newby, *Plain Folk in the New South: Social Change and Cultural Persistence, 1880–1915* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 9.

<sup>21</sup> Jacquelyn Jones, “‘Tore Up and a-Movin’: Perspectives on the Work of Black and Poor White Women in Rural South, 1865–1940,” in W. G. Haney and J. B. Knowles, eds., *Women and Farming: Changing Roles, Changing Structures* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988), 15–34.

groups would have had to occur. As optimistic New Dealers, they had hoped to make a difference in their own time. Their assumption that the work they were engaged in focused on vital American realities has been retrospectively endorsed by subsequent social and scholarly developments that make the FWP interview projects increasingly important. Now that these materials are no longer ignored, historians have turned their attention to determining how to assess and use them.



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