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Living with Stories

William Schneider

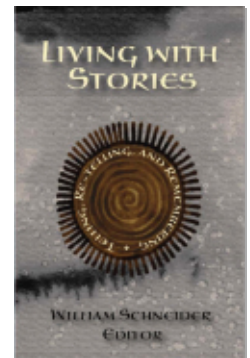
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Performance/Participation

*A Conversation with Lorraine McConaghy and
Karen R. Utz*

Lorraine McConaghy and Karen Utz describe how they create settings for retelling oral history. In contrast to the Kirin Narayan-Barre Toelken discussion, which centered on participation by cultural members in their own traditions, these authors focus on creating contexts for people unfamiliar with traditions to experience the stories. Their goal is to present aspects of the historical narrative in the words of the original narrators and thereby create a greater awareness of the fuller dimensions of local history.

SCHNEIDER: Karen, I know from reading about your work that you, like Lorraine, have used oral history to retell the story of the people who worked in the Birmingham blast furnaces. Do you see some parallels in the way both of you use stories to relate the experiences of people whose narratives have not been represented in historic interpretation?

UTZ: You know, like Lorraine said in her paper, a history museum needs to build community among its visitors. This particular site, Sloss Furnaces, depended for decades on cheap Black labor. African Americans were paid a lot better than they used to be as sharecroppers but they still weren't paid all that well. The work was brutal, and they were never allowed to have management positions until

Karen R. Utz is curator at Sloss Furnaces National Historic Landmark, where she conducts various research and writing projects and interprets the history of industrialization and technology in the American South. She is also adjunct history instructor at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Her work at Sloss highlights the social and economic conditions of life at the furnaces in the Birmingham Industrial District. Like McConaghy, her primary focus is presentation of history to the public. An example of this is her essay, "Goin' North: The African-American Women of Sloss Quarters" in *Work, Family, Faith: Southern Women in the Twentieth-Century South*, edited by Melissa Walker and Rebecca Sharpless (2006). Recently, she edited *Man Food: Recipes from the Iron Trade, Sloss Furnaces National Historic Landmark* (2007).

the 1960s. So, with that in mind, we now offer a variety of programs that give back to the African American community by giving voice to their experiences. Just as Lorraine has used oral history to record a broader and more representative history of Seattle, we are trying to tell a more inclusive story about the experiences of the actual workers who made pig iron and their wives and children who lived in company housing, shopped at the commissary, and were treated at the infirmary. Before I began work here, women had never been interviewed and I knew women had lived here; there were forty-eight company houses. So when I interviewed the women, I knew something had to be done with their stories. I took the traditional route of submitting an essay for the book *Work, Faith, and Family*, and that has been a valuable way to get the women's stories retold. We have relied on our school outreach programs and the character of Little Red, an African American man from Green County, Alabama, who worked at Sloss Furnace in the 1920s. One of our staff members, Ron Bates, visits classrooms and tells stories about what it was like to work at a blast furnace. Working from a script based on oral history, he impersonates Little Red. The teacher and students ask Little Red questions and he tells them about his work experiences. Little Red talks about the harshness and the danger in the type of work that was done breaking up the pig iron and tapping the furnace. He emphasizes how the workers contributed to the industry and the community that grew up in the company housing, known as the Quarters. Little Red was a great first baseman for the Sloss's Black baseball team, the Raggedy Roaches. Clarence Dean, a fellow who worked at Sloss for years and lived in the Quarters for over twenty years, once said that "Sloss had one of the best [Black] ball teams you wanted to see."

So what we are trying to show is that the average worker did work hard, grueling jobs and they contributed a great deal, such as developing some of the new techniques for breaking up pig iron. And most importantly, men like Little Red took a great deal of pride in their work and even though there was discrimination in who could hold which jobs, the big joke was once you got in the furnace area and you came out covered in soot and ash, no one knew who was Black or White anyway. Our job is to record, preserve, and find ways to retell those stories.

McCONAGHY: To me when the museum records an oral history, we are recording stories that have been told within a family and

now we are sort of freezing them in time, documenting them for the collection indefinitely. It's not as if we create those stories by documenting them. On the contrary, we document something living and then it ends up on the shelf. And what has been distressing to me was that this is the most vivid, extraordinarily engaging kind of reminiscence, points of view about the past that personalize these very large striding themes that are integral parts of the social history. It seems to me our responsibility is to get these recordings back out there where they had been before we put them in a jar on the shelf. That's why I'm excited about the work we are doing with the public readings. The readings get the stories back out.

UTZ: That's a very good point and you did it in such a creative way and you did it in a community way. These stories are inherently interesting and people are eager to learn about and identify with the people and events described. Our approach has been less participatory and more directed at interpreting the history to an audience. In our reenactments, the visitors meet the characters and interact with them but they are not asked to directly take on the persona of the character. For instance, the city of Birmingham had something they called Discover Birmingham, where the public could go to different museums around town. Well, the last stop at eight o'clock at night was an historical ghost tour of Sloss Furnace. It was dark and we lit the place up with candles and we had various characters at different stations: we had Little Red down in the tunnel reenacting the activities of that place, and I was Sarah Jowers, the wife of Theo Jowers, a White worker who lost his life when he fell into the top of the furnace while changing the charging bell, so the story goes. It's called a bell because of its bell-shape design, but it is a device located at the top of the furnace that keeps the gasses from escaping. Theo must have slipped while working on it. (To understand the full impact of this death, you have to recognize that many of the visitors recognized how dangerous work was at the furnace and the image of a man falling into the furnace is a terrible thought, but not one hard for our visitors to imagine.) So, they had these tours of thirty-five in a group that would come down in the tunnel, and the character portraying the worker would talk about what he went through. Then they would go through the blowing engine building, the oldest building on site, and the last stop was me. As Sarah Jowers, I told the story about what happened to my husband. In retelling

this story, I was building on several sources. The Jowers did settle here, and he did fall into the top of a furnace. The account was reported in the book *The Ghost in Sloss Furnaces* by Kathryn Tucker Windham [1978], and, the story goes, over the years, as each blast furnace shut down, workers swore they saw his image at their site. I've interviewed various sound-minded workers and that's what they say. They are very serious about this. Sloss was the last furnace left in Birmingham. The story goes that Theo's ghost came here in the fifties, and to this day, as you walk around here, you supposedly can see his image. So when I played the role of Sarah, it was a good way for me to personalize the story of Birmingham as a center of iron production. This was heavy on interpretation and it took place in the furnace, so the setting was authentic.

SCHNEIDER: So, in your portrayal of Sarah Jowers and in Little Red's reenactment you are drawing on the written and oral sources, but what else do you draw upon to bring the stories to life. Does Little Red dress the part?

UTZ: Absolutely. I don't think a lot of these kids in the schools see people in overalls and leathers. Leathers are pieces of leather you strap around your calves in order not to get burned when you tap the furnace. I think he occasionally takes the pair of wooden shoes once used by the workers. If you are going to work around pig iron you've got to have these wooden-soled shoes. And I think because he dresses in this manner, it just gives it more credibility and gets the kids to sit up and take notice a bit. The clothing makes all the difference. I also think the dialect helps a great deal. Little Red speaks in a regional dialect, the area he is from, and he says: "I always get questions when I leave. 'Do you really talk like that?'" Then he explains that his grandparents who came from Green County actually did talk that way.

SCHNEIDER: Lorraine, Karen is using a lot of props and background to retell her stories, but yours thrive on the power of the narrative.

McCONAGHY: Well, I think the thing that was most fun for me was that our audience, the visitors to our galleries, pushed our project further and further along by telling us, "If that's a performance, then I'm a performer," or "If that's history, I've lived history"; they wanted to participate in reader's theatre. They told us that. So it was step by step. As I point out in the paper, it is an imperfect experience at times because English is a second language for some of

our visitors and some are embarrassed about how well they read. But when it works, it works extremely well, and people say it was really neat to be in someone else's shoes.

SCHNEIDER: That's an interesting point because we think oral history is built on a relationship between the narrator who tells their story and an audience. In the case of one-on-one interviewing, there is a give and take between the narrator and the interviewer, with the interviewer seeking clarification or elaboration and in some cases guiding the interview. In the case of a narrator who is addressing an audience, he or she may be building on a speaker who spoke before or may have in his mind the need to speak in reference to and at a particular occasion. But what you are describing, Lorraine, builds solely on the strength of the story as revealed in a written transcript, no background research by the speaker, no props to convey an identity, no context. Your readers are coming at this totally cold. Nowhere are they told how to read the script.

McCONAGHY: Yes, and I don't want to suggest that I have no respect for the oral history interview as a document. I do. We work very hard to videotape all our interviews because we have so much respect for how people express themselves. In a sense this is an *application*, one product of dozens that one might imagine from the basic oral history document. The video remains there as the ultimate reference. It's just that this is an edited use of these oral history experiences. They are true statements about the experiences of individuals, experiences that we can imagine but that are different from our own. When we put the stories in the mouths of people who didn't experience the events described, we create an opportunity for them to take on someone else's point of view. That is what is most exciting to me. You know, when a Japanese American girl reads the memories of an African American man, this is where performance and participation blur and where that girl may begin to imagine and take on, in a small way, the reality of the African American man's experience. These stories can have a vivid life in someone else's mouth! But without good oral history, this program goes nowhere; oral history is the grist for the mill.

SCHNEIDER: While both of you are creating public spaces for the retelling of stories, the interesting thing to me is that the stories you are retelling are ones that have not been afforded the recognition nor given the public space before. Lorraine, you are correct that

good oral history is the foundation of the work, but I would also add that both of you have recognized through the oral history that there is a bigger story than has been told before, and you have been effective in not only bringing that to light but also giving visitors a chance to experience the story. Both approaches, the participatory approach that you use, Lorraine, and the interpretative approach you use, Karen, offer equally effective but different types of experience for the visitor or classroom student.