### Historia oral del apartheid, la segregación y la integración, y la lucha contra el racismo. Parte 1

**Oral History of Apartheid, Segregation, and Integration and the Struggle Against Racism. Part 1.**

**CHAIR**
Sean Field

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**Tamara Kennelly** (US)
Exclusion and Identity: Claiming Civil Rights at Virginia Tech

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“Searching for joy, remembering solidarity, struggling against pain: Memory and the struggle for hope.”

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“Bennett Belles at the 1960’s Civil Rights Demonstrations in Greensboro, North Carolina”.

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**Tshepo Moloi** (South Africa)
“Contested memories about the apartheid-era black local government councillors: The case study of Caswell Koekoe, 1984-1995”.

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Exclusion and Identity: Claiming Civil Rights at Virginia Tech.

Tamara Kennelly
(US):

Resumen: Como la Archivista Universitaria de Virginia Tech, me enfoco en documentar la historia de la universidad, y asegurar que no se corta los raíces del pasado. La historia oral es una manera de descubrir la historia escondida de la universidad. El Proyecto de la Memoria y Narrativa de la Historia Negra tiene la meta de descubrir los cuentos de los pioneros de Virginia Tech quien reclamaron sus derechos civiles de una educación igual, y empezaron el camino a la integración completa de la universidad. Irving Linwood Peddrew III asistió a Virginia Tech en 1953 antes del Tribunal Supremo de los Estados Unidos declararon en el caso clave de Brown v. la Junta de la Educación que la segregación basada en la raza fue ilegal. El proceso de de-segregación siguió poco a poco en Virginia Tech, como en las otras universidades en el sur de los EEUU. La puerta se abrió que permitió que Peddrew asistió a los clases, pero se le excluyó de la participación plena en la vida de la escuela, y era aislado por la policía contra la integración social que vino de la administración. No se le permitió vivir en campus, comer en la cafetería de la escuela, ni participar en las actividades sociales. La YMCA era su única fuente del apoyo emocional, pero aun ellos le aconsejaron en contra de su asistencia al Baile de los Anillos. A pesar de su aislamiento, y la presencia insidiosa de discriminación racial que se afrontó, Peddrew sabía que se lo merecía estar en la escuela. El año siguiente, se dio el permiso a asistir a Virginia Tech a tres más estudiantes negros. El proceso lento de la integración había empezado.

Abstract: As University Archivist of Virginia Tech, I am concerned with documenting the history of the university and making sure that its roots in the past are not severed. Oral history is a way of discovering the university’s hidden history. The Black History Memory and Narrative Project aims to discover the stories of the pioneers at Virginia Tech who claimed their civil right to an equal education and paved the way for full integration. Irving Linwood Peddrew III entered Virginia Tech in 1953 before the United States Supreme Court ruled in the landmark Brown v. Board of Education case that racial segregation was illegal. The process of desegregation was incremental at Virginia Tech, as it was at other southern universities. The door swung open to permit Peddrew to attend classes, but he was excluded from full participation in the life of the school and isolated by the administration’s policy of no social integration. He was not permitted to live on campus, eat in the school cafeteria, or participate in social activities. The YMCA was his one source of emotional support, but even they advised against his attending the Ring Dance. In spite of his loneliness and the insidious undertone of racial bias he encountered, Peddrew knew that he deserved to be at the school. The following year three more black students were admitted to the Virginia Tech. The slow process that would lead to integration was underway.
As University Archivist of Virginia Tech, I am concerned with documenting the history of the university and making sure that its roots in the past are not severed. Oral history is a way of discovering the hidden history of an institution and filling in the gaps in the historical record. Through oral history interviews the Black History Memory and Narrative Projects discovered the experiences of the black pioneers at Virginia Tech who claimed their civil right to an equal education. Irving Linwood Peddrew III entered Virginia Tech in 1953 before the United States Supreme Court ruled in the landmark Brown v. Board of Education case that racial segregation was illegal. This paper explores his narrative and the incremental process of desegregating Virginia Tech and slowly moving toward full integration. It took ten years to convince Mr. Peddrew to release his interview and permit me to make it available on the Internet. His interview and interviews with other black pioneers at the university are available at:


The Timeline of Black History at Virginia Tech gave the project a chronology and provided a framework for making images, documentation, and transcripts available:


On March 29, 2003, as part of a yearlong celebration of the golden anniversary of the desegregation of Virginia Tech, a residence hall was named Peddrew-Yates Hall in honor of Irving Linwood Peddrew III, the first black student, and Charlie Yates, the first black student to graduate. There was an irony in the building dedication as neither Peddrew nor Yates was permitted to live in the dorms or to eat with his fellow students. During the early years of desegregation, the black students lived and boarded at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Hoge on Clay Street, about a mile from campus. Virginia Polytechnic Institute (VPI), as Virginia Tech was known at the time, had a policy of no social integration.

THE PUSH TOWARDS DESEGREGATION

In 1951, Everett Pierre Raney, a twenty-five-year-old veteran who had completed about three years of coursework at Hampton Institute and at the Norfolk Division of the Virginia State College, requested admission to VPI as a member of the junior class. VPI President Walter S. Newman wrote to Virginia Attorney General J. Lindsay Almond about how to proceed in this case. Raney’s application was denied on the basis that he sought a degree in business administration, which he could get through Virginia State College. Almond advised Newman not to admit the student because “our case before the Supreme Court was based on providing equal undergraduate opportunities in separate schools.”

Almond and Newman were closely watching the South Carolina case Briggs v. Elliott, which challenged segregation in Summerton, South Carolina. Virginia was preparing its own case for the defense in Dorothy E. Davis, et al. v. County School Board of Prince Edward County. The Davis suit began when Robert R. Morton High School students lead a strike against the school and demanded equal facilities to those provided to white students, as required by law. After the Reconstruction period, Jim Crow laws were passed in Southern States that mandated de jure segregation in all public facilities, including public schools. The Supreme Court’s 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson decision permitted state-sponsored segregation in public education with a supposedly separate but equal status for African Americans.

Newman was slated to be one of the witnesses for the defense in Davis. Initially, he thought that he could find evidence that Negroes had made progress in rural areas comparable to that made by members of the white race. He consulted with faculty members about the question of segregated education. Rural sociologist W. E. Garnett prepared a report for Newman on race relations. In his cover letter, Garnett said that the Negro lawyers in the South Carolina Briggs v. Elliott suit “rather made fools of the white defense force through the latter’s apparent lack of information of what was going in the race relations field. In the

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forthcoming Virginia case, those involved should have a speaking acquaintance with these forces and trends.” Garnett asserted that racial differences were “superficial and vastly out-weighed by the large number of physical likenesses.” He ended his report with a quote from Gunnar Myrdal, whose *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944) would be influential in the Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

The theoretical study of the Negro problem in all its... branches—from breadwinning and crime to institutions and cultural accomplishments—the negative results in regard to heredity and the positive findings in regard to milieu are ... of paramount importance. It means that when we approach these problems on the hypothesis that differences in behaviour are to be explained largely in terms of social and cultural factors, we are on scientifically safe ground. If we should, however, approach them on the hypothesis that they are to be explained primarily in terms of heredity, we do not have any scientific basis for our assumption.2

This was not the answer that Newman was expecting. He wrote to Archibald G. Robertson, county co-counsel with Almond in the *Davis* case that he did not think he would be a very good witness because he could not find data that would support the case’s position: “About the only thing then that I can fall back on is my conviction and opinion that at the present time in the public schools of Virginia the Negro youth would be better off if provided the facilities equal to the white.” Davis v. School Board of Prince Edward County along with Briggs v. Elliott on appeal were two of the five cases that were later rolled into *Brown v. Board of Education*. While the Robert F. Morton High School students initially demanded equal facilities, the *Davis* case that was filed challenged Virginia’s laws requiring segregated schools. *Davis* was the only one of the five consolidated cases that was pursued by students.

Newman also was pressed by the Negro Teachers Association of Virginia to define VPI’s policy regarding the admission of Negro teachers to graduate programs and to summer sessions for courses not offered at Virginia State College. Newman wrote to Dowell J. Howard, Virginia Superintendent of Public Instruction, that concerning the enrollment of Negroes at VPI, “I involved simply adhered to the law as it now exists.” He said the Board of Visitors’ position was that if any Negro student applied for admission on the undergraduate level, they would deny admission. “We recognize that should a Negro apply in engineering, he would probably win his case, but as I understand the Attorney General, he would want to fight the case.” Newman told Howard that the Board had not given him any instruction about making the campus dining hall and dormitories available to Negroes. He mentioned that over the past five or six summers a few Negroes, who were faculty at other institutions, were permitted to sit in on specially sponsored courses as visitors. “As for eating and room facilities,” he wrote, “these men were good enough to find accommodations in town.”4

Finding accommodations in Blacksburg would have been difficult since the local restaurants did not serve blacks. Beatrice Freeman Walker, who grew up in Blacksburg and would have been in her twenties when Peddrew arrived, said the town was a racist place. “Blacks couldn’t even eat in restaurants. They had to go to the back door if they wanted anything. They didn’t even want you to come in the stores. They’d follow you all over the store, made you uncomfortable, following you.”5

When Peddrew applied to VPI to study electrical engineering in 1953, Newman wrote to Almond, “We have carefully examined his credits and scholastic standing in high school and on the basis of these records, he is entitled to admission to the college.” Peddrew came well recommended. William M. Cooper, registrar of Hampton Institute, wrote that he was a “person of excellent character.” Hampton had offered Peddrew a scholarship of $300. Almond backed off from his more aggressive stance of fighting any undergraduate admission and instead proposed to the Board of Visitors a resolution pinning the situation down to the

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5 Beatrice Freeman Walker, interview by author, tape recording, Blacksburg, Virginia, 13 March 2013.
principle of the “equal facilities” rule of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. He referred Newman to letters from his office to Presidents A.D. Chandler of the College of William and Mary and Colgate W. Darden of University of Virginia regarding cases in their institutions. “I can only say to your Board that in any instance where an application is made by a Negro who is otherwise qualified, and there are not substantially equal facilities provided by the State on a segregated basis, then there is no legal or defensible justification for denial of admission.” Not wanting to ruin his chances at reelection, Almond suggested that “no reference be made to the Attorney General because of political considerations.” Thus, Peddrew was admitted because he wished to pursue electrical engineering, a curriculum not offered at Virginia State. Once admitted, he was not permitted to change his major from engineering to another course of study.

**HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Virginia Tech was founded in 1872 as Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College (VAMC), a land grant school established as a result of the Morrill Land Grant Act, which President Lincoln signed in 1862. The bill establishing the school provided that VAMC would receive two-thirds of the land grant funds ($190,000), with Hampton Institute, the Negro college, receiving one-third of the funds. From the institution of the college, military tactics were part of the curricula. Almost all able-bodied undergraduate males were required to take military training. Membership in the Corps of Cadets was mandatory until President T. Marshall Hahn’s administration made it a voluntary option in 1964.

VAMC had strong underpinnings in the Confederacy. Four of the early presidents and two of the members of the Board of Visitors served as Confederate soldiers in Major-General J. E. B. Stuart’s Cavalry Corps. Another prominent Confederate, Brigadier James H. Lane, was named the first Commandant of Cadets. The first cadet uniform was modeled after that of the Confederate soldier. Two slave-holding plantations were once located on campus grounds: Solitude, which is considered the home place of the university, and the nearby Smithfield plantation, which had been acquired by Col. James Patton’s nephew, Col. William Preston.

A review of early *Bugles*, the college annual, reveals a deep seam of racism. The “Pittsylvania Club’s, Devils and Order of Deviltry,” page in the 1896 *Bugle* had an image of a black man and young black girl cutting tobacco. The club’s motto was “Hang ‘em.” The Pittsylvania Club’s 1897 *Bugle* page gave the same club motto, but this time with an image of a black man hanging by his neck from a tree. The 1896 *Bugle* included a “K. K. K.” page with an image of a skeleton dressed in white and “Favorite Amusement: [Midnight] field sports.” Claudius Lee, a student, was listed as the “Father of Terror,” as well as High Arch Fiend for the Pittsylvania Club (1894-95). Lee, who earned his way through college as a gunsmith, became a member of the electrical engineering faculty in 1896 and served on the faculty for fifty years. A residence hall was named in his honor in 1968. The Klu Klux Klan [sic] page in the 1903 *Bugle* included an image of a skeleton strung up on a line.

John Kneebone, a historian of the Ku Klux Klan, is quoted by the *New York Times* (November 16, 1997): “To the best of my knowledge, there’s no Klan activity and there’s no Klan in that area.” He commented that identifying members by name was “very un-Klanlike.” Whether there was an operating Klan in the area or not, the images suggest a menacing, racist culture. O. M. Stull, listed as “Right Hand of Terror” in the K. K.K. page in the 1896 *Bugle*, won a school contest by writing the campus yell, “Old Hokie.” This yell was included in the 1905 *Bugle* with a Jim Crow type of depiction of a black man being attacked by a dog.

Later editions of the *Bugle* do not show such blatant racism, but symbols of the segregated South like the Confederate flag and the playing of “Dixie” persisted into the 1970s. The Student Senate authored resolutions in the early 1970s to end the display of the Confederate flag and the singing of “Dixie” at sporting events, but a football coach actually put an end to these practices because they were hurting...
recruitment of black athletes. Linda Edmonds Turner, one of the first black female students, recalled that she had to file the Confederate flag off of her school ring.

DESEGREGATION WITH NO SOCIAL INTEGRATION

Peddrew was not only the first black student at VPI but also the first black student admitted to an historically white, four-year, public institution in any of the eleven states of the former Confederacy. The desegregation of Virginia Tech happened quietly. According to the Radford News Journal of February 16, 1956, “the admission of Negro students has come with so little discussion and with complete lack of violence that not many persons are actually aware of the integration.” Peddrew already had a scholarship approved by the state legislature of Virginia to study electrical engineering at the University of Southern California and was planning to go there when he received a telegram saying he had been accepted at Virginia Tech. Before he was accepted, two school administrators visited his home in Hampton to make it clear to him and his parents that he must live and take his meals off campus with a black family. He was required to take certain tests not required of white students. He also was asked how he would respond if he were “called out of my name [indicating a racial epithet]. I remember that one question more than I do anything else that they ever said, the two gentlemen.” Peddrew replied that he felt he could rise above it and that he wouldn’t “succeed to it and be devastated.” The fact that the administrators asked this question indicates that they perceived that racism existed in the local community. They wanted to make sure that Peddrew’s response to any racism he encountered would be nonconfrontational. Peddrew commented, “They had a stereotypical concept of what I was supposed to be, which I could never give into. The stereotypical concept was not valid to begin with.”

Peddrew had never experienced racial confrontation in Hampton, but he expected things might be different at Virginia Tech because the town of Blacksburg is located in a rural area in the southwest part of the state. In contrast, Hampton in southeast Virginia was more progressive because of the military installations there. Nonetheless, he felt he had a right to his education at Virginia Tech. He was a resident of Virginia, his parents paid taxes, including poll taxes. He said he had basic middle class American values and never regarded himself as a second-class citizen. He knew that he was categorized as a second-class citizen, but he refused to accept that definition.

“I looked different superficially,” he said. “I understood that, but then again that was so stupid because I’ve got people in my own family who had passed for white. How stupid this whole thing of racial categorization is.” Peddrew did not care if people wanted to pass for white. What mattered to him was how he was viewed as an individual. He wanted to be respected for who he was.

Peddrew was not offered a scholarship to Virginia Tech. “The primary scholarship that Virginia wanted to give me was to keep me out of Virginia Tech and other white schools and to get me out to the West Coast,” he said. An honors student at George P. Phoenix High School in Hampton, Peddrew knew that scholastically he could handle the work and that he had the backing of his family and the local black community. However, he faced tremendous isolation as the sole black student in a student body of about 3,322.

The administration treated Peddrew and the other black students of the 1950s as marginal day students. He recalled the day his parents brought him to Blacksburg. After he registered and was measured for his uniform, they left him at the Hoges. “When I saw my dad and mom drive off, I said to myself, ‘What have I gotten myself into?’ That’s when it really hit me. I was really totally on my own. Although the black family

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9 Peter Wallenstein, “Black Southerners and Non-Black Universities: Desegregating Higher Education, 1935-1967,” History of Higher Education Annual, 19: 133-134. Wallenstein later qualified this statement to include only the twentieth century as the University of South Carolina actually had black students from 1873-77 while Republicans were still in power in that state, and a few black students earned degrees at the University of Maryland’s law school in the 1880s. Wallenstein, ed., Higher Education and the Civil Rights Movement (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2008), 2, 14-15, note 3.

that I stayed with was very supportive, very beautiful people, I knew basically that they weren’t going to class with me.”

As a member of the Corps of Cadets, Peddrew was expected to participate in military formations, although he was excluded from morning and evening military exercises. Peddrew said he naturally had a strong military bearing and enjoyed that part of being a cadet. He was asked to enter all the competitions for military bearing for his company and platoon. Because Peddrew lived off campus, he had to leave his rifle in the room of a white cadet and dress there for special events. He said, “It was tough living off campus and having to walk on and go to some guy’s room and impose upon him to help you get prepared because the guys all helped each other out. The roommates helped each other get ready. The way your belt squared away and your brass was shiny enough, and your shoes were right, and all of the things—the meticulousness of the military bearing—all of this was important because that is the essence of being a military school and being a cadet.”

Peddrew did not want to be beholden to his classmates. He wanted to function as an equal, but his living circumstances forced him to impose on other cadets’ hospitality to prepare for drills. He had to lug his equipment back and forth each day. The cadets had inspections every morning so they could not keep his equipment overnight. Peddrew was not subjected to the hazing that was part of the “Rat” system in which freshman cadets were called “Rats” and subjected to pranks and hazing by upperclassmen. Once he became a sophomore, a cadet was no longer considered a Rat and would in turn harass the Rats in the class below him. While it would seem to be a benefit that he missed such hazing with the potential for abuse, he also missed an important way in which esprit de corps was developed within a class. According to Corps historian Harry Downing Temple, “In common defense, each Rat was thrown immediately into an intimate bond with all of his Classmates and into a Class unity, the power of which endured beyond school days.” Peddrew had no opportunity to form such a bond. The Bugle lists his name with the companies in which he served, but he was not included in the group photographs.

He ate on campus only one time. After guard duty, he was marched into the dining hall for a meal with the other cadets on duty. The next day a memo was issued to the effect that no off-campus students could eat in the cafeteria at any time. Peddrew said he had a tendency “to drift off and think I was being accepted.” The experience shocked him back into reality.

Even though there were no outward incidents of rejection, Peddrew felt isolated. He said, “There was this insidious subsurface thing or feeling that I felt that I knew existed that was very prominent but not in the open…. When it’s covert or under the surface, it is sometimes more harmful and more insidious and more pungent, more powerful than if it were on the surface, and you were told you can’t sit here, you can’t do that. It was a sense of loneliness that I can’t adequately describe to others. All I know is that there was a feeling there that I had that permeated my whole being. That was a part of me that I felt when I got back to where I lived.”

When Peddrew and a number of northern students refused to stand when “Dixie” was played at football games, the other cadets would literally pick them up to make them stand. Peddrew did not seem as troubled by this as he was by other aspects of his life as a cadet. Perhaps it helped that for once he was not alone, and the northern students were being lifted up as well.

Over ten years later, Marguerite Harper Scott, one of the first black female students, had a much less forgiving attitude to being made to stand for “Dixie.” She said, “I remember someone punching me in the

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back at a football game and saying something to the effect about how I should stand. I looked at that
person, and I said, ‘You best not put your hands on me again.’”

In 1954, VPI accepted three more black students: Charlie Yates, Lindsay Cherry, and Floyd Wilson. President Newman and Dr. Paul Farrier, director of admissions, went to Booker T. Washington High School in Norfolk and met with the principal, the black applicants, and their families. Yates, who was Virginia Tech’s first black graduate and later served on the Board of Visitors and the faculty, said,

I think the concern of the administration at that point in time was to bring as little publicity to the
fact that black students were coming here as possible. Because in that way it was probably easier for Tech to go to Richmond to get some funds, and I think they didn’t want that to be an issue. So I think their purpose in coming to Norfolk was first of all, to let it be known that they did not wish us to live on campus.... There was no litigation associated with my enrolling here or Irving Peddrew the year before. On the other hand, foreseeing that eventually this would happen anyway, and therefore to avoid the publicity associated with blacks enrolling here—they wanted us to enroll quietly.

If the black students wanted to go to a movie at the Lyric, the local theatre, they had to sit in the balcony. One evening, three black cadets decided to go down from the balcony. They were escorted out of the theatre. Peddrew said, “We had an integration one day out of the time that I was here, and they showed Cry the Beloved Country. It was during brotherhood week that they showed it, and the blacks were allowed to sit downstairs. Any other time—I mean I was in cadet uniform—I had to march up to the top and sit up in the balcony with all the blacks.”

Peddrew could not get a haircut in downtown Blacksburg. Black friends of his ran the barbershop, but they catered only to whites. Cadets were required to get regulation haircuts, which would mean good regular business for a barber. Douglas Walter Bristol’s Knights of the Razors explores the complex duplicity of black barbers as they affirmed the racial and class privilege of their white customers in order to carve out a position of respectability and economic independence. It must have been difficult for Peddrew to find himself excluded from even the easy camaraderie of the barbershop. Vorris L. Nunley identified the black barbershop as an African American hush harbor, that is, a place where a black man could speak his mind and be himself and say what he would not say in front of white people. The spatiality of the barbershop was a place where “black men could be philosophers and fools, thoughtful and ignorant, progressive and sexist, but mostly where they could be everything that being human allows.” Peddrew was deprived of this harbor where he might have been able to relax and socialize without restraint. He and the black cadets that followed him had to get their haircuts after the shop closed or in private homes.

Barber Charles Johnson eventually desegregated the New Image barbershop in 1962. After cutting “white” hair all day without a meal break, Johnson said, “I was just tired.” When some black students lined up to wait until closing time for a cut, he said, “Come on in. From now on you get your hair cut between six and eight.” Johnson’s white boss never mentioned the change.

Peddrew said he chose a path of quiet acceptance rather than challenging the things he knew he could not do, “Why should I bust my head against the stone wall? I was here in advance of Brown vs. the Board of Education. I knew that I had to do certain things or incur the wrath of those that thought I was an inferior person and not able to be considered as one of the crowd, so to speak, or one of those who were entitled. I

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felt there was a quieter way of doing this, or a stronger way, a more convincing way, and that was my way.”

Some students requested Peddrew as a roommate for his sophomore year, but that request was disallowed by the administration. He said he could not count how many times he heard from white students, “You know, Irv, I’d like to take you home, and my parents would love to have you as a visitor, but it’s the neighbors.” Racism was so ingrained in the society of that time that it took a very brave person to stand up for racial justice.

As difficult as the situation was for Peddrew and as isolated as he felt, his presence changed the perceptions of some white students. Peddrew recalled a white graduating senior, “He was so blonde, blue-eyed, and a really nice looking gentleman, and he came up to me and said, ‘Irv, I want you to know one thing. There are no blacks in my community where I live. I didn’t grow up knowing any blacks. You possibly could imagine what I thought and what I’ve been led to think. But I want to tell you one thing. You’ve changed my mind.’ ”

Segregation feeds on fear. It emphasizes the otherness of racial groups and promotes fear of the unknown. When people have the opportunity to interact in a nonthreatening situation and see each other as individuals, they can begin to see their commonalities, which cut across physical differences.

RING DANCE
In 1956, Peddrew wanted to attend his class ring dance, which was the “biggest social event of a cadet’s education.” The cadets wore white dress uniforms and maroon sashes, and their dates wore white, floor-length gowns and elbow-length gloves and carried red roses. The cadets and their dates executed elaborate figures on the floor. The cadets marched down one side of the hall and their dates down the other, meeting under an arch. The young lady carried her date’s class rings during the figure, and when they met, she placed the ring on his finger and gave him a kiss. The juniors then formed a sabre arch under which the ladies passed.18

Peddrew said he wanted to go “not to encounter a lot of ugliness, but I was prepared for it because I thought that I had the inner fire to exist and to persevere.” Rumors were circulated that the local girls’ schools—Longwood and Radford—wouldn’t allow their girls to attend if Peddrew attended the ring dance. Although the rumors proved to be unfounded, Peddrew decided not to go and published a letter in the school newspaper about his decision.19

The following year, the class officers invited the black students to attend the ring dance. Yates said, “I felt good about that. Not because I felt it was so personal toward me—because it was progress that the students had made in one year.” However, Yates and Lindsay Cherry were called to President Newman’s office and told he did not wish them to attend the ring dance. Newman cited the Board of Visitors’ policy as the reason why they could not attend. The students assumed that if they flaunted that policy, they might be expelled.

Essex Finney (class of 1959) recalled going to see President Newman to discuss the desire of black students to participate in social activities on campus, “He was very gentlemanly, but he was also very firm that we could not do that. Once he said that was not possible, we went back to 306 East Clay Street and went back to work, doing our academic studies.”20

LEGAL PRESSURE
James Whitehurst, who was admitted to VPI in 1959, used legal pressure to claim his civil rights. When he attempted to join the varsity team in the fall of 1960, Athletic Director and Football coach Frank Moseley

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18 Temple, Bugle’s Echo, vol. VI, 4908-09.
denied him that right because he was black. Whitehurst appealed to Commonwealth Attorney for Montgomery County Julius Goodman, who filed an injunction with President Newman under the 1954 Civil Rights Act to show cause why Whitehurst was not permitted to play football. Newman then permitted Whitehurst to be a football candidate, but he was not allowed to use the locker room or shower after practice. He was forced to walk from his residence on Lee Street to and from Miles Stadium fully dressed in his football equipment. Whitehurst quit the football team in October and filed a grievance with the Washington, D.C. Civil Rights Office. Commonwealth Attorney Goodman and a U.S. marshal filed an injunction with Dean of Students James W. Dean to show why Cadet Whitehurst could not actively participate in all activities scheduled on the VPI campus and why he could not live and eat on campus.

In September 1961, Whitehurst was permitted to reside on campus and to eat with the Corps of Cadets. Newman instructed Dean Dean that Whitehurst must live in a room of his own on one end of Lane Hall with no other students living in that part of the hall. Dean also was told to appoint a resident advisor to live in a room next to Whitehurst and eat all three meals with him.

Whitehurst informed Dean Dean in March 1962 that he wished to attend the Junior Class Ring Dance with a young black lady from Radford, Virginia. Newman and the Board of Visitors said “No” on the basis that desegregation of VPI did not include the Ring Dance and that it might cause trouble. After another injunction, the Board of Visitors agreed to permit Whitehurst to attend the ring dance. They specified that he and his date must be accompanied by Dr. and Mrs. Dean and must sit apart from everyone else in the balcony. When Whitehurst and his date and Dr. and Mrs. Dean stepped out on the floor to dance, everyone stopped to watch and then burst into applause. Captain James L. Whitehurst became VPI’s fourth black graduate and the first black member of the Board of Visitors (1970-74).

YMCA

The YMCA was the one campus group that was supportive of Peddrew. When he discussed the ring dance issue with them, they convinced him that it was not a prudent move at this particular juncture. Peddrew later regretted his decision not to attend.

The YMCA, however, was under pressure from the administration. Newman viewed the desegregation of VPI as being limited to educational facilities only and not as an “opening wedge for later liberalization.” He tried to disband the Race Relations Committee, which formed in 1956 to improve race relations. The committee included the local black barber; black and white students; ministers; faculty wives; Stan Moore, YMCA student counselor; and Jerry Boney, assistant Presbyterian chaplain. Students who had attended a YMCA conference at Athens, Ohio were instrumental in organizing the committee. At a meeting with Moore, Boney, and Professor D. Lyle Kinnear on September 18, 1956, Newman said, “Any action on the part of any employee of the college which promotes the idea that the policy is (a) temporary (b) unsound (c) unfair (d) opening for further liberalizations would result in bitterness, confusion, misunderstanding, unhappy incidents, and unfavorable publicity which would hurt VPI and not help race relations.” Newman told Moore that he would “prefer but would not order” that Moore as associate secretary would not promote the further functioning of the Race Relations Committee. Moore agreed to sever his functional connection with the group. Newman asked Moore and Boney to “be circumspect and tactful in their contact with the students” and requested that “they would not involve the administration in a row with the student group and that they would so guide the group, if it met again, that the administration would not be put in a position of appearing to dictate student thinking.”

In addition to the Board of Visitors’ limited view of desegregation, Newman was probably responding to pressure from U.S. Senator Harry F. Byrd of Virginia’s Byrd Organization, which called for a policy of massive resistance to prevent public school desegregation.

22 YMCA Black History Papers, Kinnear memo, 18 September 1956.
The Race Relations Committee eventually reappeared in the guise of the Human Relations Council. Marguerite Harper Scott said, "It was an organization that the first year I don't think we got approval to be a campus organization because—as somebody said—we were rather subversive. The 'human relations' didn't sound right. By the next year, people had come to their senses and said, that's fine to have a Human Relations Council." The organization first appeared in the 1968 Bugle with no explanation, but simply an image of a black hand clasping a white hand.

PEDDREW'S VISION
Peddrew went to California as a member of the YMCA sponsored Students in Vocation. He enjoyed this experience of racial and international integration and decided, with the advice of the YMCA administration, to leave VPI and continue his education in California.

Peddrew’s father was a member of a prestigious social club in Hampton, which only had black members. When he came back from California, Peddrew recalled asking his father if his Caucasian roommate could belong to that club, "He said, 'Oh, no,' and I said, 'Why not?' He said, 'Well they don’t accept us in their clubs.'" Peddrew said that after his own experiences he could never belong to something that was not open.

He went on to say that although he respected Virginia Tech’s Office of Multicultural Affairs, he hoped that in the future such an office would not be necessary. "I’d like to see every student come in here [to Virginia Tech] accepted as an individual, and there not be a need for a department that addresses the individual needs or the collective needs of a particular group of students with a particular ethnic background."

FROM EXCLUSION TO COMMUNITY
Known as the Magnificent Eight, the black students of the 1950s struggled to claim their civil rights as students at Virginia Tech. The administration’s determination to limit desegregation to educational facilities and to exclude black students from dining halls, dormitories, athletic teams, and social activities slowed but could not stop the movement towards equality opportunity. Quietly at first and later armed with legal challenges, the early black students worked to gain racial equality for all as they pursued their own individual educational goals at Virginia Tech.
Searching for joy, remembering solidarity, struggling against pain: Memory and the struggle for hope.

Jonathan Grossman  
(South Africa):

Resumen: El testimonio sobre la supervivencia y la lucha contra la opresión se trata, necesariamente, del dolor y la maldad. Sin embargo, existen momentos y situaciones creadas que incorporan alegría y belleza - lo mejor que pueden crear los seres humanos, no lo peor que son obligados a sobrellevar. Existe la colaboración, la generosidad, la compasión, la solidaridad, la felicidad de la gente entre sí misma y a través de sí misma. Existe la elación del desafío y de la lucha, la alegría de la esperanza, el colectivismo de la esperanza y la esperanza del colectivismo. Esto se encuentra en la experiencia vivida cada día por la clase obrera dentro del capitalismo, y en la resistencia específicamente organizada y movilizada en contra del capitalismo. Estos son recursos de la vida cotidiana, fundamentales para la lucha contra los cambios cualitativos que ocurren todos los días. Pero muchas veces son recursos despreciados porque son los recursos de gente denigrada. En este papel, estoy interesado en identificar a través de testimonios estas memorias tantas veces suprimidas y/o ignoradas. Para hacer esto, he revisado testimonio existentes que fueron usados para otros propósitos y he investigado mi propia memoria y la memoria de otros. Este proceso de re-investigación ofrece montos que iluminan la alegría y la felicidad, particularmente de la solidaridad en la lucha. Algunos de estos son demostrados en este papel.

Ernst Bloch afirma que “ser humano es en realidad tener utopías”. Un aspecto central de nuestro tiempo es la aguda sensación de inseguridad y alejamiento - algunas veces a causa de la ausencia de seguridad humana y solidaridad, algunas veces a causa de la perdida de estas. Las memorias de la supervivencia y la lucha en el pasado nos ofrecen visiones de esperanza y experiencias de alegría en compartir y cuidar - solidaridad humana, colectivismo, camaradería. Necesitamos una historia oral sobre la esperanza y la alegría de estas posibilidades que han sido creadas aun en el contexto de la supervivencia cotidiana y la lucha contra las realidades de opresión y explotación. Esto no tendría que reemplazar relatos de dolor y sufrimiento, tampoco al costo de una revelación mas completa de las realidades inhumanas del capitalismo. En cambio, su objetivo debería ser ayudarnos a conocer y a entender mejor la lucha contra el dolor y el sufrimiento, para poder usar de mejor manera los recursos ya creados en la vida cotidiana para transformarlos. El mundo no va a ser cambiado por historias [narrativos] orales ni por historiadores orales. Las millones de personas comunes que van a cambiar el mundo a través de su organización, acción y solidaridad van a ser reesforzadas por el legado y los recursos de alegría y felicidad compartida que ellos ya crearon en medio del barbarismo capitalista.

Abstract: Testimony about survival and struggle against the oppression and exploitation of capitalism is necessarily about pain and evil. Despite this, there are created moments and situations which embody joy and beauty – the best that human beings can create, not the worst they are forced to endure. There is sharing, generosity, compassion, solidarity, happiness of people with each other and through each other; the elation of defiance and struggle; the joy
of hope, the collectivism of hope and the hope of collectivism. These are resources of everyday life, located both in working class lived experience of capitalism, and in the specifically organized and mobilized struggle against it. They are very often neglected because they are the resources of denigrated people. In this paper, I have revisited existing testimony used already for other purposes and searched my memory and that of others to identify such often suppressed and/or ignored memories. This process of re-investigation provides moments which illuminate the joy and happiness, particularly those of solidarity in struggle.

Memories of everyday struggle offer visions of hope and experiences of joy in sharing and caring – human solidarity, collectivism, comradeship. We need an oral history of the hope and joy of these possibilities created even in the context the oppression and exploitation of capitalism. It should be about helping us to better know and understand the struggle against pain and suffering, to better draw on the resources already created in everyday life to transform it. The world is not going to be changed by oral histories and oral historians. Millions of ordinary working class people are going to change the world through their organization, action and solidarity and will be strengthened by drawing on the legacies and resources of shared joy and happiness which they have already created in the midst of capitalist barbarism.
INTRODUCTION

In the now current orthodox political-speak of the new South Africa, we are facing a problem of “lack of skills and lack of capacity”. We are assured and reassured that this is a global problem, particularly acute in the developing world, but facing the advanced economies also. This might well be true. The paper which follows is based on a different view: that the key problem we are facing is a lack and systematic suppression of compassion, solidarity and collectivism – and of the human joy which is embedded and generated by these. Further, that this is not an absolute lack, but a constructed lack based on the suppression and denigration of the capacities and skills for compassion, solidarity and collectivism which are already located in the everyday of ordinary working class life. It is not an absence then, nor actually a lack – it is a denial and thereby a waste of what is already there. The challenge to oral historians and those drawing on oral history is to bring into vision and hearing the evidence and expressions of these skills and capacities.

I have worked in different ways with domestic workers since 1988. I have never once been amongst them without hearing loud conversation and moments of laughter. Yet it is commonplace to read well-intentioned account after account of the “silence” of domestic workers and the need to “give them voice”. It is important to do this with the trust and knowledge that we are not dealing with the problem of silence – but rather with the problem of silencing; not the problem of those who appear silent, but the problem of those who impose silencing and will not or can not hear. It is not then simply about a denial of capacities for compassion and solidarity – but the active theft, suppression and trampling of these.

Accounts of the everyday of working class life and struggle are properly and necessarily accounts of pain. Despite this, there are created moments and situations which embody joy and beauty – the best that human beings can create, not the worst they are forced to endure. There is sharing, generosity, compassion, solidarity, happiness of people with each other and through each other. There is the elation of defiance and struggle, the joy of hope, the collectivism of hope and the hope of collectivism. These are located both in working class everyday lived experience of capitalism, and in the specifically organized and mobilized struggle against it. These are resources of everyday life, crucial to the struggle to fundamentally qualitatively change that everyday. But they are very often neglected resources. Why? It is easy to identify processes of silencing and unwillingness to hear amongst the oppressors, exploiters and their supporters and agents. More important for us is to identify the ways in which our own ears and eyes might be desensitised to hear and see.

In previous oral history conferences, without the same clarity of approach or purpose, I used stories and writings from workers and youth to present accounts of struggle and visions of hope held in the past. With the views outlined above guiding me and shaping my approach, I have revisited testimony which I have previously used to document pain and struggle against evil. In the first part of this paper I want to re-present some of that, simply to show accounts and memory of moments of joy and happiness described in the context of imposed pain and evil. In the second part of the paper I return to the question of what is happening to us so that we too often reflect the pain of the struggle but not its hope and happiness. I use these two parts to develop and address a call for an approach around the title of this paper: Searching for joy, remembering solidarity, struggling against pain. Memory and the struggle for hope

PART 1: SEARCHING FOR JOY, REMEMBERING SOLIDARITY.

The history of the workers movement is a history of sustained processes of oppression and exploitation. That makes it a history filled with many moments of pain. It is also a history of recurrent struggle and ongoing survival. There are moments of joy and happiness which are parts of that history. If they are there in the history, they are there, somewhere, also in the memories of that history. But they may be suppressed because the hope which was their active element is trampled, and they may be ignored because people are looking for something else. What follows is a set of snapshots of the kinds of moments and episodes which that simple search for happiness in accounts of struggle and even pain reveals. They are presented as an attempt to illustrate, rather than an attempt to prove.
In 1988 a group of hotel workers were dismissed for taking part in the then biggest stay-away in South African history. They met every day for six months to struggle for re-instatement. (cf. Dismissed workers collective. 1990)

- One day, the dismissed workers were visited by a group of municipal workers. In the racialised divisions of the old and new South Africa, the council workers would be called coloured, and the dismissed workers African. They had different first languages and different “cultures”. The council workers were awkward and even shy. The account from the workers, included in a booklet, reads like this.

  One day – it was a Friday – some coloured workers came into our hall. They were carrying bags of food. And they told us that they got this food because they were working extra. Then they discussed with each other and decided: ‘We are not going to take this food to our families at home. We have got a family also at Community House. And they are very hungry. So we will take this food to them’.” Workers, this food was not so much. It couldn’t even fill our stomachs. But it made us feel full with strength. And you shouldn’t think we were only thinking and worrying about ourselves…..You must know this. So that when there is another struggle you will remember that even words from a comrade can fill the heart and stomach of workers who are hungry and tired. And next time, we can be ready with solidarity action also.”

I like to think that they went home that night and somehow shared something better than normal because they were happy and proud that they had been able to give something and reach others. It is about the generosity of sharing in the context of struggle and poverty.

- The dismissed workers were talking about the pain of the struggle. Their account reads like this.

  “One com (comrade JG) said: ‘The worst pain is when I must see my children and know that I can not give them the things they need”. Another com answered like this: ‘That is a terrible pain. But think also about the future. In ten years time, what do you think your children will say? Will they say ‘I am cross and do not respect you because ten years ago you could not buy me the things I needed?’ No. They will say: ‘My mother, my father, I am proud of you. Because at the time of the stay-away you were there…In the workers’ struggle against apartheid and the bosses capitalism, you were there.

The dismissed workers were happy that day, and happy together. History would know and remember them with respect. They were not only struggling for their jobs. They were struggling for their children. Not just bread, but roses. (cf. Oppenheim. 1911).

- In 1998, after years of campaigning, domestic workers won some minimal sectoral legislative protection. A group produced a pamphlet aimed at informing employers about workers’ rights. It was a situation containing pain – the very need for the legislation reflected indignities, oppression and exploitation imposed on the workers. In a general meeting of a domestic workers’ forum, workers were discussing the reaction of their employers. A section of the transcript of that meeting reads as follows:

  “I greet you comrades. Eh, with my employer I handed the paper, and she took the paper and read it. Eh, I remember that day; she left a paper on the dressing table. I met her, in the gate leaving with [for] the school. She greeted me, she asked me even how are you, I just said I’m fine, yourself? She said I am also fine. She left. She came back again, she greeted me again, and she asked me: “How are you?” I said “I’m fine and yourself?” She said: “She is fine”. And really she was very, very kind, and the phone rang, she went to the phone. She said: “I am coming back to you”. She went and picked up the phone and she came back she greeted me. She again asked: “How are you?” [And people are now laughing.] (My emphasis. JG) [General Meeting 27 March 1999]
The ordinary story of a domestic worker is very often a story of employers treating her “as a thing”, “worse than their pet dog”, ignoring her as a person. This is a story of the worker’s bemused bewilderment at what happened when an employer encountered minimal legal interference, with the employer floundering in her search for an unconvincing, unconvinced pseudo-respect. There are many things to hear in the transcript. When the worker told the story, she was talking to other workers. They understood the situation. They laughed together. It would have been so easy not to hear the collective laughter.

- Adelaide worked as a domestic worker. She was also a local government councillor when interim councils were introduced during the transition before South Africa’s first democratic elections in 1994. As a councillor she trained other domestic workers in procedures of how to vote before the elections. On the day of voting, her employer called her and addressed her with patronizing ignorance: “Adelaide, today is voting. Do you know about voting?” Adelaide chose silence – an ordinary response amongst workers who sometimes mask their knowledge by assuming mantles of the same ignorance the employers presume of them.

I like to think that she chose that silence as an assertion of her dignity; that instead of the pain of indignity, she took pride in her dignity and pleasure from her knowledge that she asserted it in the face of the employers’ ignorant denigration. She did not tell me this story in an interview. I listened, as she told the story to other workers. They could affirm her and knew about what she was saying. It allowed them some joy in seeing their own version of the same story – moments of the triumph of their dignity against denigration in the account of her’s.

**PART 2: STRUGGLING TO HEAR JOY IN THE STRUGGLE AGAINST PAIN**

It was not and it is not difficult to find the kinds of happiness I am talking about. It is sometimes much more difficult to find them expressed directly and affirmed directly in words. They have to be read into situations and drawn out of other words, silences, actions and inactions. I like to hear those things in retrospect – but unfortunately, even when I had the opportunity, too often I did not ask. I wish now, for example, that I had asked Adelaide to speak about dignity – a particular humane pride - and joy in dignity. Because then I would be able to say these things using her words. And part of the reason I did not ask was that my vision was focused elsewhere so that I could not always see what to ask. In each case, there are different ways of hearing and seeing. In each case, the problem, I would suggest, is with the hearer and the viewer.

Oral history often uses transcripts of interviews and conversations. How does one capture emotions which are not necessarily spoken? They may be represented by gesture, expression, silence – rather than by words. What is the orality of joy, happiness, hope, pride amongst the victims of capitalism? What do they sound like? These are emotions. The emotions can be named and expressed in words – but the words can be spoken without the emotions. There may not be words spoken, but the emotions can be real and felt without the words. There may be silences which mean that the emotions are not there – and silences which are there precisely because the emotions are also there. And there may be sounds and words which need to be heard and understood if the emotions embedded in them are to be identified. Whatever else is involved, memory always has an element of construction in the present of what happened in the past. It makes it all the more important for the oral historian to be acutely aware of what it is of the present, and **how** it is that the present is shaping memory of specific aspects of the past. Similarly, the oral historian must be acutely aware of what it is of the present and how it is that the present is shaping what we hear and how we hear.

Why is it so easy for collective memory of trauma to remain articulated even amongst those who did not live the trauma, but not collective memory of hope and joy, even from those who lived the hope and joy? Why is it so easy to recognize the depth of pain involved in a denial of human worth and pride, but apparently so hard to identify the depth of hope and joy involved in its assertion? What does the memory of joy and solidarity have to do with the struggle for hope?
Hope is an active element of memory of joy and happiness. It is the necessary basis for memory of the joy and happiness of solidarity and collectivism of past struggles, to be shared as knowledge of these things amongst generations who did not live those past struggles. I doubt that it can be captured or understood by those who do not know the taste of hope in the present and who do not draw from that for hope about the future. But it is precisely a lack of hope which characterizes so much of the melancholy of the post-everything commentating and writing of the (former) left.

I doubt that joy of and in processes of struggle can be appropriately captured and reflected by people who are bitter, cynical and miserable about those same processes. It is part of a paradox, which I am unable to explore here, that some of the depth and reality of the pain of everyday life is also lost when it is chronicled by those who can only see pain. Nor are they, we, going to be overwhelmed by a tumultuous cacophony of joy from the agents of those processes of everyday survival and struggle. It is necessary to recognize the absence, loss of hope as a core part of the pain of the present. In relation to the working class and its organizations in South Africa, I have elsewhere described the process as the theft of hope. (cf. Grossman 2000, 2006) Memory of happiness gets silenced and suppressed – when it is embedded in moments and processes which have later become, been made sad and bereft of hope. What once was, and once was real seems fantastical in a context in which it was either part of what has been rendered “unrealistic”, and/or rewritten into something lesser and poorer than it was.

In talking about an everyday life and struggle of pain, ordinary working class people also sometimes talk with joy. But it is not that as often that they talk about joy. And it is seemingly not that often that they are asked. If they do and are, it is more likely to be in the context of refugees from everyday life, rather than as agents shaping and struggling to change it. Furedi (2006) writes about how “the politics of happiness makes him mad”. He does so with exasperation – which I share – for the bourgeois moralizing of the British political establishment. He writes, understandably, out of observations of some of the self-indulgence and self-preoccupation of the professional middle class in advanced capitalist society. There is little in that approach which can recognize and appreciate the liberatory assertion in the ordinary life and struggle of the working class of dignity, the generosity of sharing, the joy of giving in the lived experience of the oppressed and exploited of our world. It is a view which too easily reduces happiness to an individual psychological state of “self-fulfillment”, without recognizing a happiness which is embedded in the exercise of agency, as an essentially collective, shared activity of human solidarity. There is something particularly galling in the reality of a working class subjected in more and more of every component of daily life to the totaling vision of capitalism – and then to middle class post-everything’s expressing their personal disappointment with totaling vision per se. Sometimes, this is compounded by the (Western) romantics of the rural social movements and their liberated zones. So much more exciting to spend “30 days in a rural liberated zone” than to find joy and hope buried in the everyday of the urban working class, just down the road.

There is little hope that from such a perspective, the search for happiness in memory that I am talking about can be successful. But I think that search is crucial, and I think that the resource of happiness is there, in the history and accounts of the history, as it is here in the present of everyday life. The more I have tried to make sense of some of these issues, the more I have been returned to basic writings of Marx around alienation. It seems that whatever else is happening, we are in a reality of the capitalist everyday which is characterized by precisely the sets of alienations that he identified: from nature, from self, from the product of our labour and from each other. Working class history is the history of many moments of such alienation in the context of oppression and exploitation. It is also the history of the struggle against these. And in that history, there are repeatedly and pervasively moments where something better and richer and more humane than that alienation is achieved – a solidarity, togetherness, collectivism which bring their own joy and which tell us about a future which can truly be different. Oral history and oral historians have the possibility of capturing some of those moments. With the possibility comes a challenge and responsibility.
I believe that if we are to rise to the challenge of this work, we need a visionary approach which:

- Refuses to become lost in the cynicism of post-modernism and the refugee status of crude nostalgia
- Recognizes the seeds of the problems of today in the movements of struggle of yesterday; recognizes the seeds of the better future of tomorrow in the movements of struggle of today
- Respects and affirms the liberatory agency of ordinary working class people
- Can see and hear struggle at the barricades of everyday life, understanding that the silence of ordinary working class people is very often a problem of those who can not hear; that the ‘passivity’ of ordinary working class people is very often a problem of those who can not see
- Understands that we have to politicize happiness and joy, as much as we politicize pain and sadness (cf. Colectivo Situaciones. 2007)
- Recognizes that the best of the past has to be made real and used as part of the struggle of today and that the newness of struggle of today has to be enriched with the best of struggle of yesterday
- Can imagine what it would otherwise never capture: a joy and happiness in collectivism, inclusive solidarity and shared humaneness which are in revolutionary opposition to the competitive individualism and oppressive and exploitative relations of private ownership and capitalism in all its forms.
- Which seeks to find and affirm the struggle for roses in the midst of the struggle for bread (cf. Oppenheim, 1911)
- And draws from Marx in understanding that philosophers have merely interpreted the world in various ways: the point is to change it.

CONCLUSION

The study of the history of the workers movement is a study of many moments of pain and suffering and few moments of joy and happiness. For some of us lucky enough to be involved in periods of historic upsurge in mass working class struggle, moments of solidarity and happiness in struggle came, for a while, to seem ordinary. In retrospect, and particularly the retrospect of our times today, they often now come to seem extraordinary. Sometimes, for some of us, they are shrouded by too many layers of our own lost hopes. And yet, even in retrospect, there was something profoundly ordinary about them – they were created by millions of ordinary people as part of a vision of how things could be. There was another crucial dimension of that ordinariness – it was about what could and should and did happen in everyday life. This was about transforming the lived experience of that life, creating moments in the everyday of the here and now which showed the possibilities of a different everyday in the future. As much as it was about getting away from the oppressions and exploitation of everyday life, it was not simply about the escape of refugees and exiles – but the construction of something different and better. It was about changing everyday life – not just moments of escape from it. To be the best you can be, there have to be places and moments in life where there is more hope than fear; more trust than doubt; more joy than sadness. That will allow you to share and draw strength, so that you can be better able to fight in the world for a world in which there is more joy, more hope and more trust. To fight for a world which is grounded on practices and processes of caring and sharing which makes that possible. Time and again, ordinary working class people have made the workers movement such a place, and made moments in it such moments for themselves, each and other, and anyone else who can live without oppression and exploitation.

The struggle of the working class was and is surely about that – about ordinary people together taking history into their hands and making the solidarity, compassion, humaneness and happiness that capitalism has rendered extraordinary an ordinary part of everyday life. Ernst ‘Bloch argues that “to be human is really to have utopias” (Quoted in Aronson, 1999, p2). A central feature of our times is a pervasive sense of insecurity and alienation – sometimes as an absence of human security and solidarity, sometimes as a loss of these. Each working class assertion of liberatory opposition, each act of struggle and each defiance of denigration is a counter to this – today and in the past. Memories of survival and struggle in the past offer visions of hope and experiences of joy in sharing and caring – human solidarity, collectivism,
comradeship. We need an oral history of the hope and joy of these possibilities which have been created even in the context of everyday survival and struggle against the realities of oppression and exploitation. This should not be instead of accounts of pain and suffering, nor at the expense of the fullest possible exposure of the realities of the everyday inhumanity of capitalism. Instead, it should be about helping us to better know and understand the struggle against pain and suffering, so that we can better respect the resources of ordinary working class people already created in everyday life to transform it. The world is not going to be changed by oral histories and oral historians. The millions of ordinary working class people who are going to change the world through their organization, action and solidarity will be strengthened by drawing on the legacies and resources of human solidarity, collective, shared joy and happiness which they have already created in the midst of capitalist barbarism.
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Bennett Belles at the 1960’s Civil Rights Demonstrations in Greensboro, North Carolina.

Dena Scher and Gwendolyn Bookman
(US):

Resumen: La presentación documenta las experiencias de mujeres del Bennett College durante la década de los 1960 en manifestaciones pacíficas en Greensboro, Carolina del Norte. El movimiento de derechos civiles causó trastornos sociales y políticos en el Sur de los Estados Unidos y gran parte de la historia de este movimiento está documentada. Sin embargo, el impacto de las mujeres del Bennett College no está incluido o no es explorado normalmente. Varias graduadas del Bennett College proveyeron historias orales de sus recuerdos y participación en los eventos que desembocaron en las manifestaciones pacíficas. Extractos de las entrevistas sugieren que las semillas de protesta incluyeron reuniones de planificación tempranas, discusiones en las aulas, orientación de los padres y el asesoramiento del Presidente del Bennett College. Los recuentos en primera persona de las Bennett Belles contribuyen al registro histórico y cultural del papel que jugaron las mujeres en la toma de decisiones de conciencia social y como esas decisiones tuvieron impacto en el compromiso continuo al cambio social. Las entrevistas a las Bennett Belles figuran en el archivo John Novak Digital Interview dentro de la biblioteca de Marygrove College.

Abstract: The presentation documents the experiences of women from Bennett College in the 1960 Sit-In demonstrations in Greensboro, North Carolina. The civil rights movement caused social and political upheaval in the US South and much of the history of this movement is documented. Yet the impact of the women of Bennett College is not typically included or explored. Several alumnae of Bennett College gave oral histories of their remembrances and involvement in the events leading up to and including the sit-in demonstrations. Excerpts from interviews suggest that the seeds of protest included early planning meetings, discussions in the classroom, parental guidance, and mentoring by the President of Bennett College. The first person account of Bennett Belles contributes to the historical and cultural record on the role of women in making socially conscientious decisions and how those decisions impacted their continuing commitment to social change. The Bennett Belle interviews are contained the John Novak Digital Interview Archive within the Marygrove College Library.
In this paper, I will talk about the nuances of history. We know that history is nuanced with subtleties provided by the viewer. We also can agree that the simplification of historical events is common, particularly in the growth of electronic and constant access to worldwide events. With our common viewpoint assumed, I am going to break off one small part of history and enhance that history by adding a different viewer and more subtleties. As I hope to demonstrate my little bit of history fits in well with our conference theme, Democracy as Political Tool and further adds to another of the conference sub theme, cultural heritage.

In 2003, my students and I began to collect oral histories about the migration (within the US and from outside the US) of people to Detroit. In 2007, that collection became the John Novak Digital Interview Archive in the Marygrove College library.

The Novak Archive is primarily a collection of oral histories of migration to Detroit and is a growing repository of family histories and the collective experiences of African-American journeys from the South to Detroit and of immigration to Detroit--this part of the Archive is the Detroit Journeys Collection.

Today I will concentrate on a subset of that Archive that is not about migrations to Detroit—the Civil Rights interviews. The Civil Rights Experiences interviews were collected with women who are alumnae of Bennett College in Greensboro, North Carolina. It is a small collection within the Novak archive. These interviews were collected by me and are the recollections of Bennett College alumnae. Bennett College is located in Greensboro, North Carolina. Today this small college (about 800 students) is one of a very few colleges that enroll only women. It is a historic black college having been founded in 1873 as a school for recently freed slaves at the conclusion of the U.S. Civil War. Yvonne Revell’s was the first interview in 2004 and was followed by four other interviews of Bennett College alumnae in 2010 and 2011. Bennett College alumnae refer to themselves as Bennett Belles.

**BENNETT BELLES**

The first person accounts of Bennett Belles contribute to the historical and cultural record on the role of women in making socially conscientious decisions. The activities of the Bennett College women are nuances to Civil Rights history that has been overlooked and overpowered by the simple story. This is how the story of February 1, 1960 in Greensboro, North Carolina (a medium sized town in the Southern United States), is told: Four boys from A & T college went down the Woolworth’s Five and Ten store in Greensboro, North Carolina, sat at the whites-only lunch counter expecting to be served.

In William Chafe’s preface to his significant 1981 book, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, he writes,

> Twenty years ago four black students in Greensboro, North Carolina sat down at a Woolworth’s lunch counter and demanded the same service as that given white customers. Their action remade history, inaugurating the civil rights revolution of the 1960’s ……The students acted because they believed in American democracy. (Chafe, 1980, Preface).

But this is an incomplete story. In *Civilities and Civil Rights*, Chafe details the events and social history leading up to February 1, but that background seems lost in the simplification of the narrative. The sit in by 4 students from A & T is credited by most as the start of the Civil Rights sit in demonstrations that launched the integration of public facilities in the US South. Similarly when the story of Rosa Mae Parks is told, the usual narrative is that a tired older woman sat down in the whites only section of a Montgomery, Alabama bus on December 1, 1955 and when asked to move she did not. Rosa Park’s arrest is credited with galvanizing the fight against the city and state’s segregation laws.

Both stories are true but they are not the history. History is made of bits and pieces that weave together into a complex narrative. In this presentation, we will explore the nuances that get lost by a simpler media narrative. Four young men sit in and refuse to be denied service; An older woman sits down at the front of the bus and refuses to move for white passengers--Is there more to the story? Of course there is. Rosa
Parks had been an activist in the Civil Rights movement, joining the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored Persons) in 1943. The lunch counter event in North Carolina was preceded by voter registration campaigns, NAACP organization, the atmosphere at two Historic Black College: A & T and Bennett College, the gathering awareness in the country of civil rights, the ascendency of Martin Luther King.

In this presentation, my particular focus will be on the women of Bennett College--their participation in the sit-in demonstrations and their near invisibility in the simple media narrative. Oral histories of Bennett College alumnae will be the medium for explicating the complexity of the historical narrative. The sit in movement was more complex than four upstart young men and Rosa Park’s motivation and actions went beyond tired feet. These two stories share in common the protests of the 1960’s Civil Rights movement; they also share a narrative that simplifies and minimizes the role of women.

By examining the recollections of Bennett alumnae, we come to understand that not only were Bennett women present in numbers at the demonstrations, but that Bennett College served as a critical incubator for their understanding of segregation and their power to resist. The ethos of a historic black college, the image of a Bennett Belle, the separation of the college from the city, the existence of the NAACP organization, and the leadership of Willa Player, the President of the College are the influences that are heard in the voices. By listening to them the narrative becomes more nuanced. Then the historical record is enlarged to recognize the role of women.

The first person interviewed was Bennett College alumnae, Yvonne Revell. I will tell you how she came to be interviewed. The college annually supports travel seminars that are both within the United States and also international. Ms. Revell’s interview was collected as the result of a Marygrove College travel seminar in 2002 to Greensboro, NC. Ms. Revell and Roslyn Smith, alumnae of Bennett College spoke to the group about the sit in demonstrations at the Woolworth’s lunch counter in 1960. Ms. Revell spoke of not being able to eat in the city restaurants, the fear she felt at the lunch counter, the participation of the president of Bennett College in supporting the female protesters who were jailed, the jubilation that the demonstrators felt at the closing of the Woolworth’s store, and the impact of these experiences as she became the first black teacher in a white elementary school. The student group was mesmerized listening to Yvonne Revell and Roslyn Smith. At the end of the session, Ms. Revell said it was the first time she had spoken about those events outside of her family. For over forty years, her participation had not been part of the record. The activities of Bennett students were known within the college but not outside of the college or in the documentation of events.

AT THE DEMONSTRATIONS

I returned to Greensboro in 2004 to record the recollections of Ms. Revell. Yvonne Revell was a Bennett College student, living at home, during the sit-in demonstrations at the Woolworth’s lunch counter.

Here is how she recalls the last day of the demonstration:

*I’ll never forget that the lunch counter was rounded with bar stools and they kind of had it roped off. But the four young men that started it and others had gotten a chance to get in to the lunch counter to get at seat which meant we didn’t get a seat. We were just rounded and lined up around them. I was so frightened because I looked behind me and I saw all of the white men with the crew cut hairstyles and they had chains in their hands and they were screaming racial slurs. My parents had protected me for years from this. But here it was the real life you know and I’m saying oh wow but we stood there straight and tall. I remember one heckler getting right in my ear and he actually burned a hole in my coat…with a cigarette. I didn’t move I stood really still. The chains started but I saw the chains moving behind me and I didn’t know if one was going to hit me or not. I was so relieved when the announcement, it was the very last day that was so tense for me.*
BACKGROUND OF RACIAL SEGREGATION & PARENTAL TEACHINGS

Let us remember the times in the Southern US before the Civil Rights Movement. This was the time of racial segregation, which started with the so-called *Jim Crow* Laws 1876 [end of Reconstruction period after the Civil War] until Civil Rights, 1950-1965. The *Jim Crow* laws were the segregation laws that enforced the separation of blacks from whites in schools, public transportation, theatres, restaurants, city swimming pools, public bathrooms and even water fountains.

As an example, in Greensboro, NC in 1914, the city has an ordinance that blacks could not buy homes on streets where most homeowners were white (Chafee, 1980, page16). The Bennett Belle interviews give a personal perspective.

Yvonne Revell recalls going downtown on the weekends:

> We had allowances every Saturday and my sister and I my mother was teaching us to sew so we would spend our money on fabric and we couldn’t wait to get home to make our skirts and blouse and whatever. To think that we were in line with our money but we knew to wait until somebody else had been waited on and then we would ask. ..Then I could buy. I don’t think anybody, the A&T students or anybody else felt what I felt because I was from Greensboro and had had to stand back all of these years.

Yvonne Revell

We’d go downtown with our ten dollars apiece and we would pass there was a huge store called S&W huge restaurant on the corner. And I remember walking past there and just looking and peeking in the window at people eating and wondering all of these skills I learned at Bennett where was I going to practice them. Putting the napkin in the lap. Nobody would let me eat.

Woolworth’s had two eating counters one in the basement and one upstairs. So we bought our fabric down stairs and there were people down there eating and also if you get upstairs there was a bar like where you ate. Which is where the sit-in started at the upstairs.

**DS:** But you couldn’t eat in either of those places?

**YR:** Either of those places no I could not.

Another Bennett alumnae, Roslyn Smith who grew up in Princeton, West Virginia, speaks of how the women of her family [her grandmother, her mother, her aunt] taught her about “her place”.

> Princeton and as it represents West Virginia, there are very few blacks in West Virginia. So I knew what segregation was all about long as a child because my grandmother and my mother and my aunt they would always explain to us quote “what was your place.”

**RS:** Can you give us some instances of that so that people in the future will understand what that meant in a daily way?

**RS:** What “your place” meant at that time for example, when you took the city bus any place, you got on you paid your fare, you just automatically understood as a black person, called a Negro then; that you had to go to the back to sit down. That was a given, so we understood that.

**DS:** When your family told you “your place” was it with a sense of fear? What was it they were trying to communicate to you?

**RS:** Looking back I don’t think it was to indicate a sense of fear. I think it was to help us understand what our place was at that particular time and that if you ran afoul of it that there were consequences maybe not from everyone but you never knew where it would occur. And another example was, my mother worked for an eye doctor and my grandmother had also worked for the same family so and my oldest sister did too and my uncle did. And we as children also helped my mother out with special activities like bridge parties, etc...etc....so we knew that when we went anywhere, to the home of a white person, we were expected to go around the back. We wouldn’t dare go to the front. So that’s another example of segregation. One thing that we did not have to do in my hometown, ...we never had to step off the sidewalk if a white person was on the sidewalk. We never had to do that, thank God because I know some of my classmates who have
had to do that kind of thing and probably had some worse kind of situations in terms of segregation.

DS: So they taught you what the boundaries were
RS: Yes

Parents protected their children by teaching them the mores of the segregated South as we heard from Roslyn Smith. Parents also shielded their children by avoiding the indignities of segregation. Esther Terry speaks of her mother’s approach to going or not going downtown,

ET: There were theaters at the time when you walk in to see a movie, you would walk downstairs and as a black person I would have to go upstairs. My parents forbade our going to movies. We didn’t go to movies.

ET: We went into town on Saturday’s to do shopping and my parents kept us out of town as much as she possibly could. We rarely went to town because at town we couldn’t find places to go, if we had to go to the bathrooms, restrooms. So we didn’t do a lot of those things in my own personal family. My mother made our clothes because she tried to keep us from the insult of not being allowed to try on a dress or whatever. My mother learned, my mother sewed, so most of my clothes were sewn by my mom or by....

DS: Did you find out later that she, that they did that to protect you or did you know at the time that there was something different? It wasn’t danger you’re saying it was ....it was the indignity...

ET: No, no it was not dangerous to go to town. People did it. Where there has been money merchants have always been allowed. Merchants always found ways to get money. So it wasn’t a danger in that sense. I don’t want to romanticize this. It wasn’t dangerous for us to go into town on Saturdays. It was forbidden by my mother who said, "You don’t go into town because if you can’t drink water from water fountains you’ll stay home where you can drink water and you’re good as anybody else."

THE ETHOS OF A HISTORICAL BLACK COLLEGE

From the previous passages, we can see that these young women arrive at Bennett College aware of the limitations placed on them by race. But they are not fearful and seem to have a keen sense of the differences between dignity and indignity. For instance, it is dignified to address an older person as Miss and it is an indignity to be called by your first name by someone younger than you. When they come to Bennett College we see how this theme of dignity versus indignity plays out in the turbulent experiences of the Civil Rights protests. All of the alumnae speak of the sheltering presence of the college and how it was both an education and a finishing school. As in the following passage also from Ms. Revell:

My parents and had I made the decision that Bennett College was the school for me. I got to Bennett and found that I was surrounded by all girls. It was an all girls’ school. We were actually in not only a college setting, but in a finishing school. We learned an awful lot about how to dress the proper way- manners in general. One of the things that has stuck with me throughout my life with Bennett was the vesper services. Three days a week, we were due in this.... beautiful chapel called Pfeiffer. It was wonderful, Dr. Player was our president at that time. We had a speaker Monday, Wednesday, Friday. We were assigned seats. There was a person sitting up stairs that was checking every seat to see if you were present....Four years of going to vesper services. Listening to speakers, speakers telling you how, what life is about, and how you can live it and how to succeed as a women, as a Black woman. It was very important to me.

The rules were very strict. You had to wear hats, you had to carry a pocketbook, you had to also surprisingly wear your gloves or at least carry a pair. Bennett girls indeed could not be seen around town off campus. If you went downtown to shop, even though you were treated as second-class citizens, you still had to wear your hat, pocketbook and gloves.
Roslyn Smith also comments on their dignified dress when they left campus:

RS: Well, yes we were. We had dress codes. We had to wear hats and gloves any time we went off this campus except when we went to dances at A & T State College now a University; always you had to wear a hat and some gloves. So usually the hat would be something like a tam and regular white gloves, something now we would call usher gloves. On Sunday you may have had a dressed up form of gloves because we went to church.

In the previous passage, Pfeiffer Chapel and the President of the College, Dr. Willa Player are mentioned and they deserve some explanation. Annie Merner Pfeiffer Chapel is at the heart of the school and dominates the small campus and the history of this building is more imposing. In the 1940’s, the progressive and controversial wife of President Franklin Roosevelt, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt spoke in this chapel to an integrated audience, a true rarity at that time in the segregated South. And in February 1958 (two years before the sit in demonstrations), the President of the college, Dr. Willa Player invited Dr. Martin Luther King to speak in Pfeiffer Chapel. Dr. King had become the leader of the fight for civil rights and it was considered dangerous to have him speak publically in a Southern white town. There are four other colleges in the town, all of those colleges refused the NAACP request for a venue for Dr. King as did many churches [Brown, 2013, page 10].

PRESIDENT WILLA PLAYER’S INFLUENCE
Dr. Player’s influence was critical in Bennett Belles involvement. I want to give some examples of her influence. Talking about Dr. Player also allows me to demonstrate a special feature of the civil rights interviews. These particular interviews in the Novak Archive can be accessed as fully searchable stories using technologies developed from research at Carnegie Mellon University Informedia. When the IDVL site is searched, we can see across all of the interviews and note Dr. Player’s influence as is displayed here.

The site address is http://www.idvl.org/JohnNovak/
All of the interviews speak of President Willa Player and her influence. For instance, Yvonne Revell recalls Dr. Player’s messages at Vespers:

When you had those vespers and Willa Player would talk, what kind of messages would she give?  
YR: Oh well, she would talk about how we as ladies should carry ourselves and how life was going to be hard. She always told us that, and that we, if we acted like ladies we would be treated like ladies. She was a perfect example she never lowered her head, she always was a beautiful woman in spirit and in feature, body.

And she had a firm hand on us. We actually had to keep our rooms, they were checked every day, we had duties in the cafeteria….You didn’t go to class by your clock. There is a big bell in the middle of campus. That’s why we are called Bennett Belles. Those graduates are called Bennett Belles because this big bell still rings today. But they ring us in and out of every activity that we went to. If it was time for dinner you heard the big bell, if it was time for vespers you heard the big bell.
Esther Terry similarly recollects the teachings of Dr. Player:

Our president, Willa Player’s philosophy was that the end of a good liberal arts education was that you would find that you needed to be involved with your community, would connect you with your community and the up-lift of the community; else what else was a good education for? ...we thought she was wonderful....She was elegant, she was restrained and she was cultured in her language. She was exquisite in her approach to things and she was determined. How did she communicate that she supported it? She didn’t put out the word, “My young ladies are to come home.” That’s how we knew she supported us when she didn’t call us back. She didn’t call us back and she did not call us. She did not say no. She expected us to do our homework.....

So the young women of Bennett College know that they are in a location with history and a college that has vowed to shape them to have dignity and respect for themselves. The white gloves are a tangible symbol of that respect. And their president is a person to emulate and supports their actions. If you are not a Bennett Belle, you probably have never heard of Dr. Willa Player or her role in the shaping of these young women who took the next step to dignity and individual rights in February 1960. When Dr. Player was asked about her decision to let Dr. Martin Luther King speak on campus, she is quoted as saying: “I told them...that this is a liberal arts college where freedom rings—so Martin Luther King can speak here.” (Chafe, 1980, page 80)

How curious that the woman who invited Dr. King to speak in Pfeiffer Hall, who modeled how to be dignified and resolute, who embodied the aspirations of a Bennett Belle, who negotiated with the city’s political establishment, and who did not flinch from visiting “her girls” in jail is not included in the usual narrative of the Civil Rights Sit-In demonstrations in Greensboro, NC.

FALL 1960 MEETINGS
When the girls arrived in Greensboro, they were coming to a college that was talking about Civil Rights, in Vespers at Pfeiffer Chapel and in their classrooms. Their professors’ highlighted revolutions for individual rights and some professors were active in the local NAACP.

During the Fall of 1960, there started to be meetings in the evenings on the second level of the Student Union on the Bennett campus to plan a demonstration. Gloria Brown, President of the Student Government would relay the planning for the demonstration to Dr. Player. By Roslyn Smith’s account there were about 10 people and usually professors, Dr. Edwin Edmonds or Rev John Hatchett, would be in attendance as well as students from A & T College. Woolworths was discussed as the target and chosen because it was “the most logical point...we spent most of our money at Woolworth’s. Woolworth’s was also a national chain” (page 12). A non-violent response to insults was also discussed. This type of reaction would have been consistent with the training the women received to maintain a regal and dignified posture and to carry themselves with pride as Bennett Belles, particularly when they went into the downtown and mixed with the white supremacy culture. With or without white gloves, the Bennett Belles had the moral fibre to stand tall and resolute despite taunts and implied violence as we heard in the opening voice of Yvonne Revell—she was frightened as the crew cut guy clanged chains and brandished a lit cigarette, but she carried herself as a Bennett Belle.

Initially, the planning group on Bennett’s campus thought to picket the store in November, however a suggestion from Dr. Player, President of Bennett College, delayed those plans.

As Roslyn Smith explains in her interview, Dr. Player gave strategic advice: ,

Dr. Player indicated it became that not a good time because it was close to Thanksgiving and people went home.... At that time, a lot of students from Bennett were from out of state, so what was the point you would have accomplished? Picketing, stop, go home.....you’d have to rev back up coming back.
It is noted that the President of the College did not try to dissuade the students, but rather gave them strategic advice.

In the historical accounts of these demonstrations, the actions of the four young men from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University (A&T) who were the first to “sit in” are publically recognized. On the second day 25 male students from A&T and four women demonstrated. By the third day (February 3, 1960), there were 60 student demonstrators with one third being women from Bennett College. For the next three days the number of demonstrators increased in size until the store was closed. This particular narrative is taken from the website [http://www.sitinmovement.org/history/greensboro-chronology.asp](http://www.sitinmovement.org/history/greensboro-chronology.asp) of the International Civil Rights Center & Museum, located in Greensboro, NC. The museum is on the site of the Woolworth’s store.

IT’S ALL OVER, WE CAN EAT!
Let’s return to how those women felt when the store closed because of the demonstrations—-I started with Yvonne Revell sitting at the counter and heard the chains moving behind her and did not know if those chains would be hit her:

The chains started but I saw the chains moving behind me and I didn’t know if one was going to hit me or not. I was so relieved when the announcement, it was the very last day that was so tense for me. But I just remember the very last day and that day to me will stand forever in my mind. I actually walked into the store stood in my place heard the hacklers and when I looked there were hundreds of people, you could not move.

**DS:** Black or white?
**YR:** Mixed. You had a mixed group but the people that were around the counter, the front of the counter were blacks. The whites were behind us there. They made an announcement over some kind of microphone that everybody was to clear the store, and they were saying that, they didn’t give use a reason they just were asking everyone to leave the store. Of course we had been advised not to do so, no matter what happened we were to stay there. Then they came up with a very good reason that the Greensboro Fire Department had considered it a fire hazard to have that many people in the store with no room to move around. They were having to close down and so they asked us to quietly leave out and we did that. They actually did that and locked the store that was both white and black. And that was the last day that was the day that we were allowed thereafter to eat there and I shall never forget that. We got into the street, Elm Street, is not like it is now but it was much wider.

Hundreds of students that were there that last day to participate marched down Elm Street, headed back to A&T’s campus. The shouts of joy and relief, I shall never forget, “It’s all over; we can eat! It’s all over.” That was all the way down on Market Street, it was like a marching band going down. I didn’t realize the significance of that until they reopened the store. The day that I went in to sit down and eat my first meal and the joy that I felt. After going and traveling and going to other places and feeling...

So Bennett College was an institution with a history of civic responsibility and a knowledge base of the civil rights agenda in the country. Combined with their parents teachings on how to deal with indignity without losing a sense of self respect, the Bennett College alumnae made socially conscientious decisions and along with fellow students from A&T, they used democracy as a powerful tool for change. The sit in demonstrations spread from Greensboro to many other Southern cities. In April of 1960, there was a second wave of demonstrations at another lunch counter where 13 Bennett College students were arrested, jailed, and released. Thru the summer, students from the local black high school, Dudley High School, continued the demonstrations and in July, African-Americans were served at Woolworths lunch counter. At Bennett College, students launched a successful voter registration campaign called Operation Door Knock. Yvonne Revell went on to become the first African-American teacher in a mostly white
elementary school. Gwendolyn Mackel Rice earned master’s in a social service administration and became a community activist in the Chicago area, Roslyn Smith is active in the alumnae association. Esther Terry had an academic career at the University of Massachusetts Amherst where she founded one of the first departments of Afro-American Studies. Dr. Terry recently completed a term as the Interim President of Bennett College. All of the interviewees speak of Bennett as critical in their formation as independent and socially conscious women.

Why are they left out of the history? A recent book, *Belles of Liberty*, by Linda Brown argues that gender dynamics plays a role. The sit-ins were before the US Women’s Rights Movement of the 1970’s, so the standard for a respectable woman was to be behind the scenes and submissive. Besides knowing your “place” as a black person, a woman also had a place or way of being related to her gender. As Brown states, “….It is simply that the traditional ‘place’ of African-American women in the Black community made the male privilege of taking ‘first place’ a comfortable, easy, and acceptable thing to do.” (Brown, 2013, page 25)

And then there is the tendency to create the easy myth, to simplify the history. There is one more example of how a narrative can be simplified to leave out the nuance. In this example, it is also ludicrous:

About a year after the sit-ins, four girls from Bennett College went to integrate a local movie theatre, The Carolina. They bought tickets and walked in through the front door, not up the steps to the Colored entrance in the balcony.

I will let Gwendolyn Mackel Rice tell you about what happened and how it was understood in the news report:

We went down and we were let in. I almost passed out, but I kept moving. (laughter) We went and sat down. We saw Butterfield Eight with Elizabeth Taylor. That’s all I remember. I remember Butterfield Eight and Elizabeth Taylor, and whatever happened in the theater I don’t know because I was waiting to be hoisted out.

The next day a whole crowd of folks went and they wouldn’t let them in. So we said, “You let us in.” They said, “Oh you all were. No.” They told the newspaper, “Those were Eskimos.” They said we were Eskimos. The only thing that make us look close to Eskimos. I had a tan Kashmir camel hair coat with a raccoon collar. And a couple others had the parkas with the, you know the furry collars. And we did that and then…But I remember Dr. Player…… we had gone that time and she called us into her office. Into her home really. And she said, “Young ladies. You get some of those men to go down there with you. Don’t go down there by yourself anymore.” So we made a promise that we would.

So there you have it, four Eskimo women went down to the Carolina Theatre and saw the movie, Butterfield Eight with Elizabeth Taylor or was it that four young women from Bennett College went in the white entrance and broke the barrier that separated whites and blacks in public theatres?
REFERENCES:


Based on Interviews retrieved from the Novak Archive at Marygrove College:
http://detroitjourneys.marygrove.edu


