THE ORAL HISTORY REVIEW
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MEDIA REVIEW
The People's Recorder
https://www.peoplesrecorder.info/

In 1939, Zora Neale Hurston and Stetson Kennedy, folklorists hired by the Federal Writers' Project (FWP), traveled to a forced labor camp in rural northern Florida to record the testimonies of detained workers. More than seventy years after slavery was legally abolished, turpentine camps throughout Florida continued to hold Black Americans in captivity without legal recourse. By the time they arrived at the turpentine camp, Hurston, a pioneering African American anthropologist, had already published several books, including Mules and Men (1935) and Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), while Kennedy, a White author and human rights advocate, served as a columnist for notable progressive publications of the time. (He would later become known for infiltrating the Klu Klux Klan and revealing its operations to the public.) Together, Kennedy and Hurston convinced the turpentine camp operators to let them speak to the laborers held there, indicating that they merely wanted to document the workers' plantation songs. Under the cover of night, around a campfire, fellow laborers stood on the lookout while a worker named Cull Stacey described the five decades he had spent in the camp and why he had never left—anyone who attempted escape would be shot.

This anecdote is just one of many from the FWP unearthed by The People's Recorder, a new podcast series released by Spark Media. The People's Recorder surveys the "giant listening project" that constituted the FWP of the 1930s, a singular undertaking in American history that

in part laid the foundation for oral history efforts today. At its peak, the project employed more than seven thousand writers who documented the lives of everyday Americans and published more than sixty state and city guides, in addition to hundreds of other books—a body of cultural production that, as the podcast states, "introduced America to itself."

Hosted warmly by Chris Haley, an archivist, activist, and writer, The People's Recorder is produced with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Stetson Kennedy Foundation, and the statewide humanities councils of Florida, Virginia, Wisconsin, California, and Nebraska. Each episode explores an underrepresented aspect of American history, addressing a wide range of issues from different locations across the country. From Virginia, we learn of researchers with the Negro Studies Project who recorded the testimonies of nearly three hundred formerly enslaved people; in Florida, we follow Zora Neale Hurston's efforts to preserve the previously undocumented history of a violent act of racialized voter suppression; and in Wisconsin, we hear how Oneida historian Oscar Archiquette rescued his community's Indigenous language from the brink of extinction. Additional episodes include efforts by the visionary conservationist Aldo Leopold to protect the environment at the peak of the Dust Bowl and the artist Miné Okubo's documentation through illustrations of World War II–era Japanese detention camps, among other stories.

If the work of the FWP was to make visible American histories and life stories that would otherwise be overlooked, The People's Recorder successfully positions itself within this genealogy, building from the legacy of the project and continuing its work in ensuring that our collective history is not lost—including, in this case, by sharing the stories of the FWP workers themselves. The podcast also undertakes the ambitious objective of connecting each historical story with twenty-first-century concerns. For example, the third episode traces the history of the Lost Cause, the myth that sought to reframe in honorable terms the national conversation on slavery and the Confederacy in order to help White Southerners assimilate their defeat after the American Civil War. Illustrating the influence of Lost Cause mythology on White FWP workers, the episode bridges that history with contemporary political battles over how American racial history is taught in public schools today. In the seventh episode, on Leopold's conservation work in the early twentieth century, we see how his efforts laid the path for climate change activism in our era. Weaving together past and present narratives, the podcast argues for the value of oral history research as a necessary tool not only to understand American history but also to address the most pressing political, social, and economic issues of our time.

As a survey of an oral history project, The People's Recorder is most evocative when it draws directly from its archival source material, making full use of the affordances of the audio narrative format while also contextualizing its selected historical material with commentary from contemporary historians, scholars of oral history, and other experts. To engage the FWP's written material, the podcast employs hired actors to voice its selected quotations; this is an effective

solution to the challenge that one aspect of the FWP poses for an audio-based program—namely, that many of its interviews were recorded exclusively in writing, as audio recording equipment, though available at the time, could be hard to come by. It does not seem far-fetched to imagine that enthusiastic listeners, after hearing excerpts from interviews with a rodeo clown, a sex worker, or a one-hundred-year-old formerly enslaved woman remembering the freedom songs of her youth, might be encouraged to explore the FWP archives for themselves. The website that accompanies the podcast also functions as a valuable resource for those seeking to learn more by providing listeners with transcripts (necessary for accessibility purposes and helpful as a teaching tool), reading recommendations, archival photographs, and links to further resources.

To its credit, the series does not paper over the many contradictions and tensions that shape oral history as a research methodology. It describes explicitly the racist bias of many FWP interviewers, the understandable reluctance of many Black Americans to participate in a project of disclosure orchestrated by the federal government, the discriminatory hiring practices of the FWP that limited the participation of people of color and women among its ranks, and the contested quality of the state guides' published material— including histories that revealed the truth of American racial oppression, which editors removed from final volumes. A listener of The People's Recorder should take from the series a better understanding of how struggles for truth, power, and autonomy constitute the history of America—and the history of oral history itself.

While the range of topics covered by the series is impressive, especially given the vast quantity of archival material the producers managed and the meticulous research they executed, the series' breadth may also be its weakness. Podcasts carry the particularly heavy burden of maintaining their audience's interest; this show may be one in which a listener becomes lost in the range of stories told and voices heard. The eighth and ninth episodes, in particular, could have benefited from more judicious editing. Despite this reservation, as an introduction to the FWP, and to the practice of oral history, the series is a valuable resource—one that may be especially useful in a classroom setting. Just as the FWP state guides sought to "help acquaint Americans with Americans," so too does The People's Recorder bring us one step closer to knowing ourselves.

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