

Mountain People, Mountain Lives

“The invisible people need to be made visible”—Anne Woodford

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INSTITUTIONS THAT SERVE

In 2016, Lin Forney, Director of the Pigeon Community Multicultural Development Center in Haywood County lamented that the history of the modern civil rights movement in western North Carolina has not been properly acknowledged. She and her father, Hilliard Gibbs, endured Jim Crow and massive resistance and worked to overcome the daily challenges and lasting legacies of these eras. Gibbs stared down the Ku Klux Klan and City Hall bureaucrats to become the first African American business owner in Waynesville. Both celebrate such victories but regret the decline of communal bonds forged out of struggle. Her family’s past animates Forney’s work as she rekindles community and civic awareness among a different population. Housed in a building that opened as an African American elementary school in 1957, the Pigeon Center’s mission confirms its connection to the past and present. Drawing from the 1960s Freedom Schools’ model, its all-volunteer staff offers year-round educational programs for children and adults, runs an emergency food pantry, and partners with churches to promote racial understanding. In addressing the current, increasingly Latino, community, Forney transforms her sense of community, her roots in a segregated past, and commitment to racial justice to sustain an institution that addresses poverty, immigration, the historical preservation of African Americans, and diverse community needs.

“Sometimes in a small rural area like we live in, people tend to not have a bigger sense of the world, you know? So, with other people coming in and bringing their vision and their ideas, and you know, their life stories, I think it’s opened up a lot.”—Lin Forney

At the Pigeon Community Center, we try to get that bond back to where community is family and taking care of each other and helping each other out when need be.”- Lin Forney



“Well, I try to give up myself as much as I can because God...brought me a long way. So I am going to do what I can [translating at the Good Samaritan Clinic and for the county transit] as long as He...gives me life.”-- Rita Hooper, East Laporte Community Church



PRAYER AND POLITICS

Churches have deep roots in Jackson County, NC. Lacking the physical space and cultural interest to accommodate and fill modern mega-churches, the area and its inhabitants tend to worship in smaller, more intimate spaces. Various strands of Baptist churches line main streets, side streets and the end of winding, gravel roads. Their cornerstones show founding dates stretching back to the 1890s and earlier. The names of local families fill church registries, baptismal records, and headstones. Oral histories reveal that these churches do not just deepen but also broaden a sense of community. Within their doors, Vietnam veterans bow their heads alongside conscientious objectors. Each Sunday and most Wednesdays, many congregants continue a spiritual and physical journey set by their families while others have moved away from the faith of their forebears as they travelled thousands of miles. These gathering places host NAACP meetings, house debates over inclusiveness and identity, and offer counsel to those in need. The result of these interactions have often, but certainly not always, contributed to an expansive vision of and commitment to the place where these people live and worship. Each of these individual experiences and stories testifies to the dynamic coexistence of continuity and change within this most traditional of Appalachian institutions.

TAKEAWAYS

Scholarly:

- Oral histories in western North Carolina suggest that Appalachia is not a region or a people defined by isolation.
- Our Appalachia is a boundless place with an identity not limited by geography, race, religion, class, politics, sexuality, or nationality.
- Reflect the futility of the dichotomies so often employed: isolation v. cosmopolitan, white v. multicultural, rooted in place v. adaptable and vibrant; conservative v. liberal
- These dichotomies fail to describe or encompass the history of the institutions or the people who built them.
- Western North Carolina is shaped by national and international trends of in and out migration that have long reflected a global population in a rural mountain region.

Methodological:

- High School students trained in oral history are particularly well-situated to record a rural community’s history.
- Collaboration between local residents, high school students, and university faculty strengthens community bonds.
- Their work assists other agencies in recording their history—the Pigeon Center, Liberty Baptist, the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indian, and local historical societies, providing an experience in civic service.

INTRODUCTION

For seven years, students from Smoky Mountain High School in Sylva, NC have worked with history faculty at Western Carolina University on the Mountain People, Mountain Lives Oral History Project. They have listened to and recorded the stories of longtime residents, recent immigrants, African Americans, Latinos, politicians, nurses, preachers, teachers, veterans, entertainers, activists, old farmers, and young professional athletes. These men and women tell of migrations, great and small, that took people to and away from Appalachia and across the world. They describe the global, local, and personal resonance of the modern civil rights movement. They explain how long-standing struggles for inclusion, equality, and justice have played out in school classrooms and playgrounds, local diners, family-owned businesses, and international non-profits. Overall, they testify to the depth and breadth of this Appalachian community providing intimate, honest and meaningful descriptions of its development, its erosion, its expansion, and its importance.

OVERVIEW OF PROJECT:

- 6 Years (on-going)
- 74 Oral Histories
- 42 High School Participants
- 2 University Faculty
- 6 counties: Jackson, Haywood, Macon, Clay, Swain, Graham
- Housed at WCU’s Hunter Library



WORK AND COMMUNITY

Discussions of work structure many of the oral histories. For Randy Hooper, Bryson Farm Supply meant employment as a high school student and skills to support a career in agriculture. There, he also found his wife—the daughter of the store owner. Later, he employed insiders—family members and longtime residents. He continued to hire interested high school students. His store was a meeting ground for old-timers and newcomers, farmers and laborers, those selling extra eggs or buying organic beef. In the 1990s, he hired a Mexican immigrant who had done seasonal work on Christmas tree farms. At first, some shunned the new employee, exhibiting a too familiar racism. Years later, Hooper shook his head as he remembered those customers, even though they now felt differently. He reminisced about a community where agricultural work was valued and where folks sought out expertise rather than Lowes’ low prices. But his store spoke to the resiliency of local businesses in a globalized economy, a slow change in racial attitudes, a democratic business structure, and new communities forged among those who worked on their yards, gardens and farms--whether they be citizens or strangers, insiders or outsiders. His store became a community space representing a Nuevo Appalachian South where stories of families, farms, and struggles from south of the Rio Grande to the Smoky Mountains were shared and shaped.

So you work with somebody everyday and you learn them. ---Randy Hooper Bryson Farm Supply

