# RECORDING LOCAL POLITICAL HISTORY IN ATLANTA

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The use of personal interviews in the study of Southern politics is nothing new. Forty years ago, V. O. Key's classic, *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, arguably the most influential work in the field, made broad use of oral sources "on the conviction that much significant political information could be obtained only from politicians themselves or their close associates." Forty percent of the project budget for *Southern Politics* was allocated for conducting and processing interviews. In the course of the study, over 500 individuals from eleven states were approached for interviews. Only three declined to participate. The success of the interviews prompted Key associate Alexander Heard to enthuse that "political scientists should tap more and more this great source of information about politics, the politicians themselves."[1]

Over the intervening years, political scientists, historians, journalists, and others have in fact utilized oral sources more and more to understand better the vagaries of Southern politics. In their important work, *The Transformation of Southern Politics*, Jack Bass and Walter DeVries explicitly drew upon the interview format developed by Key and Heard. A listing of such diverse books as William Chafe's, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, and Robert Caro's, *The Road to Power*, only hints at the variety of ways in which oral sources have been creatively utilized in the field.

Over the past twenty years, oral history practitioners have generally reached agreement about certain guidelines which are usually the hallmarks of successful projects. These guidelines--almost bromides by now--encompass the preparation, conducting, and processing of oral history interviews. An interviewer, for instance, should have developed a clear project design, conducted detailed research about the subject matter and the person being interviewed, and become familiar with the equipment used before going out in the field. Additionally, the interviewer should maintain "a sympathetic ear but a critical distance" from the respondent, be sensitive to the pacing and timing of interview questions, and avoid applying present day standards and assumptions to the matter being discussed. One ought to phrase questions in open ended language, seek details and specific examples, and avoid jargon. Both the content and the context of the interview should be reviewed as quickly as possible, and the interview appropriately transcribed, indexed, and accessioned.

Along with other public figures, politicians present both special challenges and opportunities for the interviewer. On the one

hand, they tend to be gregarious, are by and large comfortable with the microphone and tape recorder, and often have a fairly highly developed sense of historical consciousness, living in a world they have helped influence. On the other hand, their very "public-ness" can be a liability, making it difficult for the interviewer to get beyond stale statements, cliches, or generalizations. Especially when they are still in office, politicians often have public reputations to defend as well as political obligations, and may be reticent to discuss failures, mistakes, or other sensitive areas. Some older white Southern politicians, for example, might well deflect difficult questions pertaining to race and segregation.

This paper will explore some of the issues in doing oral history interviews on Georgia politics through a sampling from one project; non-commercial radio station WRFG's "Living Atlanta" series. Between 1977 and 1980, WRFG produced fifty half hour programs on Atlanta between the World Wars, featuring the memories of over 200 older Atlantans from all walks of life, and focusing on the complexities of life in a segregated city.

A sociologist with a radio background directed the project, while two historians, one black and one white, familiar with Atlanta history and interviewing techniques were the principal interviewers. They relied upon subject outlines prepared by local historians and others, in addition to their own background research. The scope and nature of the project meant that most of the respondents were interviewed only once, and by someone of their own race. The medium of radio dictated an emphasis during the interviews on narrative and story-telling, rather than analysis or the compilation of social data, for instance. The project's intent also was more to create a composite portrait of the city than to focus on particular individuals. While "Living Atlanta" did not necessarily set out to pave new historical ground, nevertheless much information gathered in the interviews significantly amplified or supplanted both existing sources and historical literature.

Programs that explicitly treated politics included shows on Mayors James L. Key and William B. Hartsfield, the Ku Klux Klan, the New Deal, blacks and politics, and the coming of the first black police. Respondents also talked about such topics as Atlanta's community power structure, woman suffrage, school issues, political patronage, and ward politics. Those interviewed included public officials and their relatives, activists, community leaders, New Deal staff members, and others.

For a variety of reasons, more information was gathered about certain subjects than others. Comparatively little was learned, for

instance, about Atlanta's community power structure. The narrative format of the radio series mitigated against systematic analysis of Atlanta's controlling elite. Urban historians and political scientists know well the methodological difficulties associated with the reputational studies of influence by Floyd Hunter and others. If anything, such difficulties are compounded with the passage of time. Then, too, hardly any of the community influentials cited by Hunter were alive and able to grant an interview by the late 1970s.[2]

When gathering information about community power structure, it often was in general statements about business influence on long-time Atlanta Mayor William B. Hartsfield. For instance, Harold Sheats, attorney for the adjacent city of East Point and later Fulton County attorney and member of the MARTA Board, related that Hartsfield:

> pretty much had a kitchen cabinet of businessmen who advised him. Frank Neeley [the president of Rich's Department Store]. A big influence on Hartsfield was Everett Millican. Everett was in City Council with Hartsfield, became the top man at Gulf Oil Company. He was one of his prime advisors. Bob Strickland, Trust Company Bank, he was a great builder for Atlanta. Bob Maddox, First National Bank. One of the vice-presidents of the Fulton National Bank was treasurer of the city of Atlanta. They had that type of a set-up at one time. They had tremendous influence on Hartsfield.

More fruitful were interchanges about specific practices, mechanics, personalities, events, and developments of local politics. For instance, city worker Alec Dennis provided a vivid picture of elections in Atlanta's working class Fifth Ward:

> They named that the Bloody Fifth. The reason they named it that, every time there'd be an election there'd be three or four fights. It was pretty bad. If you wasn't for that man that the most was for, you'd better keep your mouth shut, because you'd be liable to get in a fight.
> If I was running for mayor, alderman, councilman or clerk or anything like that, I'd try to pick some men that I felt like had influence, pay them if they was working people, just pay them. Pay them what you

felt like would win them. And that went a long ways in carrying a ward.

I know one time there was an election, this old man was going to work for this politician. He had done got up pretty high by that time, he was going to get fifty dollars, I believe, for his day's work. Well, ordinarily he didn't make over seven, eight dollars [a day on his job]. He'd take about ten campaign workers out of Exposition Mill and they'd darn near carry that election. But one time, this fellow said, 'We've got to get that ward, regardless of cost.' Went and changed this old man around. He got around two hundred dollars that time. Well, that was big money for then. His poll workers got about ten or fifteen dollars apiece, and they carried the election that time. I was sitting in the office when that flip was made and they switched him over. I seen it.

Similarly, Dennis and other municipal workers were able to shed light on local patronage. Atlanta had a comparatively weak mayoralty form of government, with the committees of City Council possessing great control over the everyday affairs of city life. Particularly powerful, and controversial, was the Police Committee, which reviewed promotions and other aspects of police operations. Chairing the Police Committee for many years was grocery store owner, G. Dan Bridges. "He really took over and run the Police Department," recalled Herbert Jenkins, who became police chief in 1947. "He helped select all the police officers, make the promotions, and he was a powerhouse there for a good many years. If you lived in Bridges' district and made an application to the Police Department, you were pretty certain to get on. They were pure and simple old-time ward-heeling politics." "All them policemen went to trade with him," related policeman M Y. Rutherford. "He done a good business with that police department because, boy, any time you worked a beat out there, you passed Dan Bridges' store, you'd see anywhere from one to two to three policemen hung around there all the time, day or night. They just hung around Dan, trying to get promotions and such as that." "He was a great man, he was a great man," enthused policeman Sanders Ivey. "Somebody was just saying to me this morning that he put on more police and firemen and promoted them more than anybody else. Everybody knew who was boss."

Officer Ivey, a former Ku Klux Klan member, also described how patronage extended to the Klan, arguably the most significant

force in municipal politics during the 1920s:

> You'd have about five men on the Fire Committee [of City Council], and, if three of them were Klansmen and a fellow that was a Klansman was up for nomination against another fellow that wasn't a Klansman, why if they went according to the Klan, the man that was the Klansman would get the place. I know a fellow that got on the fire department through the Klan. I know another fellow, he got to be an officer in the Klan, and he got a job in City Hall, in finance.

Not surprisingly, mention of the Ku Klux Klan brought a range of reaction from respondents. Reflecting a pattern that existed about racially sensitive matters throughout the project, black respondents, along with some white liberals, tended to be comparatively specific in their recollections of Klan-related incidents. One involved a youth during a Klan parade down Auburn Avenue in the 1930s, witnessed by barber Horace Sinclair:

> The boy's name I don't remember, but he was crippled, he walked like he had a short leg. He made this expression, 'I reckon I'd do almost anything to get me enough money to go to that dance tonight.' Well, Iron Pete, he heard him, said, 'What'd you say?' 'I'd do anything to get me enough money to go to that dance tonight.' 'Well, if you get me one of them hoods'--they were still passing through--'off one of them Ku Klux, we'll see that you go on up there in grand style.' And everybody laughed, nobody paid the boy any attention, they just thought that it was a statement being made. He toddled over out there and caught a Ku Klux by his hood, it was tied around his neck like a bonnet, and like to pulled him out of that jeep. But he got that hood. And the procession did not stop. He brought that hood back and dropped it on the sidewalk, said, 'Here it is.' And how much money he got I don't know, but I know he got somewhere about ten or fifteen dollars, because boys just kept throwing down half dollars and dollars. And I didn't want to be in no riot because I was a little kid when the Riot of 1906 was here--I remember it very

vividly. I got my hat and coat and caught the streetcar.

For various reasons, many whites tended to minimize Klan violence and intimidation, emphasizing rather the fraternal and charitable aspects of the organization, and to deflect questions relating to personal membership and responsibility. The exceptions generally were those who had left and renounced the Order, like Police Chief Jenkins.

One ex-Klansman who did not mince words was attorney Harold Sheats. He stated:

> Everybody in the courthouse belonged to the Klan. Virtually every judge down there, the prosecuting officers belonged to the Klan. The mayor of East Point did. That's the reason I joined. I became city attorney and, by golly, I wouldn't join the Klan, I was an idealistic young man. I became city attorney and found all the police, the mayor and the councilmen all belonged. 'Why don't you join, Harold?' Okay, I did.

Sheats had been identified as a Klan leader by another respondent, a streetcar man. In keeping with generally accepted oral history practices, Sheats was not asked potentially sensitive questions about the Klan until well into the interview, after he and the interviewer had established a rapport. Sheats detailed various Klan activities, including the 1938 beating of a local labor organizer:

> There was a fellow named Toney, P. S. Toney, who was a CIO agitator for the Scottdale Mills. The Stone Mountain Klan was having an oyster roast. The members of the Stone Mountain Klan said to the East Point Ku Klux, 'We've got a fellow out here that's a trouble maker. He just stirs up all sorts of trouble. We wish you'd take care of him' They went by the fellow's house. A Stone Mountain man went with them and pointed him out. And they got him in the car and brought him all the way to Ben Hill, a deserted spot over there, and turned him over a stump and flogged him, carried him back to the car line, gave him carfare, and turned him loose.

The bubble burst on the Klan when a white barber died after

a Klan beating in 1940, bringing on a series of celebrated flogging trials. Harold Sheats related in his interview:

> Now I represented a lot of those fellows. Acquitted most of them, actually acquitted them. There was a man who was chief deputy clerk in the courthouse. He would meet with us over the weekend and give us the names of all of the jurors for the next week who belonged to the Klan. That's one reason we came out as well as we did.
> Almost invariably they [the prosecutors] got the wrong man. They had the wrong theory. They would go into a community [where a flogging had taken place] and indict some local man. But they never did understand that the local crowd never had anything to do with it. They always turned it over to some foreigners.
> Several of the men went to prison, served a little time. They were paroled as soon as [Eugene] Talmadge was governor. He took advantage of every opportunity to turn them loose, and did.

Another highly charged area of questioning concerned police practices in the black community. Oral sources revealed the existence of an informal curfew, recalled by policemen, blues musicians, hotel workers, and others whereby black Atlantans on the street late at night had to present a work pass when stopped by the police or risk beating or imprisonment. Police officer M. Y. Rutherford stated:

> Shoot, boy, you'd better get off that street when midnight comes,. It was the police law. Them police didn't allow them to walk the street or nothing after midnight, unless if he worked somewhere, say if he was a janitor in some building uptown and didn't get off until one or two or three o'clock in the morning. Well, where he worked, his boss had to give him a letter stating that he worked late at night. And he'd carry that letter all the time. You'd catch him down on the street and say, 'What you doing out?' Says, 'Just got off from work.' 'You got a permit from your boss?' 'Yessir.' He'd hand it to you, and we'd read it. But, if he didn't have nothing to show like that, you'd lock him up. The judges would fine him for it, being out that time of night, would say, 'You ought to be

home in bed, you've got no business out,' which he didn't have.

Police insensitivity had long been a sore point within the black community. Since immediately after the Civil War, black Atlantans had sought representation on the police force.[3] Demands for black police stepped up in the 1930s, after black involvement in a special recall election helped keep Mayor James L. Key in office. Herbert Jenkins, who served as Key's chauffeur from 1933 to 1937, related:

> On this particular occasion, the Mayor told me to be in his office at 2:30, and at 2:30 in come this group of people, about a dozen of them. They was really the black leaders in Atlanta. As I recall, there was only one white preacher in the group. And they came in and requested the mayor of the city of Atlanta to employ Negro police. His reply to them was that their request was very reasonable, but it could not be done at this time, it would create impossible problems. 'Now, before you can do that, the white population as well as the black population must be educated to the point where they are supportive. You go back and educate your people and I'll help you with the white people, and when the time gets right, you come back and I'll authorize the employment of black police.' After they left, he said to me, 'I'm getting to be an old man. I'll never live to see Negro police in Atlanta. But unless I miss my guess, you being a young rookie, the day is coming when you're going to have to work with Negro police.' At the time I thought the old man must be off his rocker, talking about employing black police officers. That was in '34.

Jenkins of course was an extremely public figure, whose tale is closely intertwined with Atlanta's emergent reputation as a citadel of racial moderation in the 1950s and 1960s. He had also previously written about this event and others discussed in the interview. These facts should not necessarily detract from his account, corroborated at least in substance by black community leaders who spoke of visiting Atlanta's mayors throughout the 1930s and 1940s to seek the integration of the police force. Indeed, personal stories relating to broader social and political transformations are often among those most clearly remembered by respondents.[4]

Though black Atlantans could, and invariably did, take part in recall and other special elections, they were, of course, effectively excluded from voting where it counted by the poll tax, white primary, and other restrictive measures. While there had been local voter registration drives and organizations in the 1930s, it was only in the 1940s that Atlanta blacks began to develop significant clout, as the long legal campaign the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People had launched to overthrow the white primary began to bear fruit. In March of 1944, the Supreme Court handed down the landmark *Smith v. Allright* decision, outlawing the Texas Democratic white primary on the grounds that it was a mechanism of the state, and therefore could not be racially exclusionary.

"That was Texas," stated Atlanta University historian Clarence Bacote in his "Living Atlanta" interview. "Georgia, on the other hand, said it didn't apply to her." A student of Atlanta politics, Bacote had also been a leader in registration efforts of the 1930s and 1940s. He continued:

> In fact, a few of us tried to vote in the July 4th [1944] primary, thinking that the case of *Smith v. Allright* entitled us to that vote. We had at that time, I suppose close to 4,000 votes, 3,000 or 4,000. And we couldn't back down at the last minute. Those of us who had been talking loud and saying, 'We've got to vote,' couldn't back down.
> And on the 4th of July--that was a heck of a day to have a primary. You could have someone shooting a firecracker; you'd think they were shooting a gun at you. But, we went over to this barber shop over on Bankhead to vote. I remember Colonel [Austin T.] Walden, and Mr. E. M. Martin, the vice-president of the Atlanta Life Insurance Company, and a fellow named Hodges, who was the assistant editor of the *Atlanta World*, and I went to vote. Whites lived in this area, they were all lined up on the porches, looking down, seeing these Negroes drive up. *Life Magazine*, the press had their photographers there to take a picture of these blacks who were attempting to vote. We went in there, and the clerk went through the motions of looking for our names. 'Your name's not on there, Mr. Walden. Your name's not on there,' talking to me, 'Your name's not on there,' talking to

> Hodges. The crowd by that time had surged all up against the windows. So we walked across the street. We got in my car, and about five minutes later, I said, 'Let's drive back to see what has happened.' We drove back, there wasn't a person there. I'm just showing you the excitement created by the efforts on the part of a few blacks to vote.

Ever the practical politician, Mayor Hartsfield also took note of the *Smith v. Allright* decision, as Herbert Jenkins remembered:

> I was in his office and he picked up the paper. He said, 'Have you read this?' And I looked at it, and it was the case that came out of Texas where the Supreme Court said that the white primary is a practice that's unconstitutional, that you got to let blacks vote where it will count. I said, 'Oh yeah, I glanced at it.' He said, 'Well, you'd better go back and read it two or three times and digest all of it, because what the courts have done is give the black man in Atlanta the ballot. And for your information, the ballot is a front ticket for any-damn-wheres he wants to sit, if he knows how to use it. And Atlanta Negroes know how to use it.'

Still, Hartsfield did not heed the demands of black community leaders until they demonstrated substantial voting strength. "I remember very distinctly," related Reverend William Holmes Borders, "I, along with Warren Cochrane, John Wesley Dobbs, A. T. Walden, C. A. Scott, and M. L. King, Senior, going to Mayor Hartsfield and asking for black police. And he told us, without the slightest blinking of an eye, that we'd get black police in Atlanta about as soon as we'd get deacons in the First Baptist Church, white." "When we first went to him," adds Warren Cochrane, director of the Butler Street Young Men's Christian Association, he wouldn't even see us half the time. But finally we cornered him, and he said, 'When you get me ten thousand votes, I'll listen to you.' A story, incidentally, that in one form or another has become part of Atlanta political legend.

The pace of black political activity quickened in early 1946. Clarence Bacote recalled:

> On February the 12th, we had a special election to succeed Congressmen [Robert] Ramspeck. And this

election involved nineteen candidates. The man who was expected to get Congressman Ramspeck's seat was named [Thomas] Camp. We had extended an invitation for them to come out and talk to us at the YMCA. Of those nineteen candidates, five or six accepted our invitation. But the man who was expected to win, Camp, ignored our invitation.

The one candidate that impressed us was Helen Mankin. She was a member of the legislature, she was from a very distinguished Georgia family, her attitude on the race question was fair, and she was willing to talk to us. She'd meet us at the YMCA under the cover of darkness. You couldn't afford to come out there in the open, that would have been the kiss of death for a candidate. And in the end we decided to support the woman--she was the only woman in the race.

We made our announcement in a mass meeting at Wheat Street Baptist Church on February 11th, and we made it at 11:15. Why did we make it at 11:15? The news had gone off--we didn't have TV then--the radio news had gone off. Consequently, they wouldn't be able to put it on the air. We didn't want to kill Mrs. Mankin. And right then it spread like wildfire: 'Vote for the woman.'

For the first time since I don't know when they had Negro clerks. Colonel Walden was the manager of the precinct at the E. R. Carter School on Ashby Street, I and Dr. Miles Amos and Prudence Herndon were the clerks. I can always remember the count. There were 1,040 votes cast at that precinct, of which 1,039 were black. Only thirteen were spoiled. Around 8:00 o'clock--the polls closed at 7:00--8:00 that night we heard a banging on the school door, saying 'The election depends on the outcome of 3-B.' They were the reporters. 'Do you have any idea how this precinct voted? We hadn't even started counting, we were hungry, we were understaffed as far as clerks were concerned. We didn't get through letting them vote until 8:00. We told them we didn't know any way to make this short.

When they started counting, in the first fifty ballots Mrs. Mankin had about forty-six of the votes. And

they immediately rushed to the phone: 'Mrs. Mankin is in,' because Camp came out there with a lead of 156 votes, and he needed to carry that precinct to get his victory. He didn't get it. Mrs. Mankin got 963 votes, and Camp, the man who ignored us, got about eight.

Six weeks later, a federal court ruled the Georgia white primary unconstitutional, paving the way for a massive black voter registration drive across the state, an effort also kindled by the gubernatorial race between Eugene Talmadge and James Carmichael. In Atlanta, black leaders launched a highly successful campaign, as Professor Bacote, who chaired the undertaking, recalled:

> We put all of these organizations that had been conducting their individual registration campaigns under the auspices of the All Citizens Registration Committee, which was sponsored by the NAACP. The Committee was directed largely by the Atlanta Urban League. Under Mrs. Grace Hamilton, the executive secretary, and Mr. Robert Thompson, the industrial secretary, they had the know-how in organizing the community. Bob Thompson discovered there were over 1,000 blocks in which we had blacks living. To make the thing a success you would need 1,000-some-odd black workers. We weren't quite that successful. We did have at the peak of our effort, around 875 workers who would make weekly reports as to the progress that was being made.
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> The YMCA was our headquarters. Everybody was activated. The preachers, the schools, the businessmen, Atlanta Life--very important. You'd be surprised at the number of business organizations that made contributions, putting out, paying for handbills. Atlanta Life would give us a lot of free printing and so forth. This was a community effort.
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> This effort lasted for fifty-one days. We were able to increase the registration of blacks in Fulton County from about 7,000 to 24,750. And that's when we were recognized.

The 1946 voter registration campaign helped bring the first black police on board by 1948, and permanently changed the local political landscape. It also demonstrates just one example of how oral

history interviews can significantly enhance understanding of central themes and developments in Georgia politics. As the number of individuals who personally witnessed and took part in the state's dramatic transformation over the past half century dwindles, it seems imperative to record the memories of these most valuable sources on Georgia's rich and complicated political heritage.

## NOTES

[1]V. O. Key, Jr., *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949); Alexander Heard, "Interviewing Southern Politicians," *American Political Science Review* XLIV (December, 1950), 886, 889, 891-2.

[2]Floyd Hunter, *Community Power Structure* (Chapel Hill University of North Carolina Press, 1953).

[3]Howard N. Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 41.

[4]See, for instance, Kim Lacy Rogers, "Memory, Struggle and Power: On Interviewing Political Activists," *Oral History Review* 15 (Spring, 1987), 165-184.