Forrest C. Pogue Award Interview--Pete Daniel

Each fall OHMAR honors a distinguished oral historian with our Forrest C. Pogue Award for outstanding service to the field. This year, the award will be presented to Pete Daniel, a curator at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, and a scholar of the American South. Following are excerpts from an interview with Don Ritchie on January 30, 2003.

DR: What made you become a historian?

PD: Well, to cut directly to the chase, what made me a historian was taking a course taught by David Smiley on Civil War and Reconstruction. It was about my sophomore year in college, at Wake Forest. I don't think I had ever realized before how much layering, how much fun, how much controversy was involved in history.

I grew up in a world of absolutes. Absolutely, segregation had been settled. Absolutely, Christianity had been settled. All of these things had been settled. So I thought that when you read a book it was the truth. And then you get in undergraduate school as a history student and David Smiley was basically arguing with that in every way. It was like the Damascus moment. Your eyes are opened.

So I think that's where I got the interest to really become a historian, because I saw another level of history that I had never seen before. The history I had taken up to then was very much a chronological history, and a great person history, and a white history, the usual thing for the mid-'50s that you grew up with.

But when I reflect back . . . there were so many things that growing up in a little, small town, shaped my ideas about class, and race, and work. [From the workers at his father's saw mill] I learned about work, the poetry of work, and then the brute strength of work . . . Working-class people are much more complex, often skilled, and fascinating than what I was being taught in school. These lessons at the time were not apparent. But when I distance myself from it and look back on it, I can see how much I learned from these men, and how much I saw that, because I didn't know anything about oral history and I didn't have a movie camera or any of that, was lost.

The biggest loss was from a man named Neil Evans, who worked for my father in the woods. He didn't cut the trees, he snaked them, and snaking--for people who don't understand this terminology--is you basically pull the logs from where they fall and are cut into the length you want, up to where a log cart can take them and haul them out of the woods. Neil did this driving two horses. He drove these horses with his words and with his voice. He had a thundering base voice. He was a little man, about five foot six, a black man, solidly built, and talked to the horses in a language that he and the horses understood. It was a singing, chanting, musical type sound that still resonates in my mind, and this has been a long time ago. I just wish that somebody had known to film this or to record it. Or talk to Neil about where he learned it.

These kinds of things, in my mind, I think I learned about class and work. Of course, race was inherent, because I worked with black people and delivered papers to black people, and quickly learned that a lot of the black people I knew were smarter than a lot of the white people I knew, and in a lot of cases were more fun. So when I was told about segregation--and of course in 1954 I was just in high school--it didn't make any sense.

DR: How did you manage to take those life experiences and weave them into the professional history that you were doing?

PD: It wasn't until I got to [the University of] Maryland and was doing my dissertation where a lot of that came to bear. Of course, I was fortunate the second year that I was there to go work for Louis Harlan on the Booker T. Washington Papers, so the race thing was very much present in that. I learned a lot of history that I didn't have a clue ever existed, like I think any person who studied history in those days. It was before very many people knew very much about African

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Pogue Interview Continued . . .

American history, and Louis Harlan was one of the people who did know. When I started working with Louis and took a seminar with him, it was like another whole world opened up. I had studied Southern history from the white point of view, and you think you know something if you studied slavery the old way, and you studied the segregation movement and all the clichés that you studied in Southern history in those days, and then you turn around and look at it from the other side, from the black point of view. It's just another world.

DR: You interview people who have an idiom; has that shaped your approach to history?

PD: I don't know that the idiom has, because I grew up in a very idiom-rich culture . . . If I were to go to some of the more recent things we've done, like the people we interviewed for the Rock 'n' Soul Museum exhibit in Memphis, and people I've interviewed who were connected with the stock car world more recently, which we haven't done an exhibit on, the thing that impresses me: nearly all of these people are working class. Many of them never went to school beyond fourth grade. They are not educated people. To a person, I think I can say this, they were articulate; they knew how to tell stories; they had lived lives that are beyond the experience of a lot of people that I've known. They are interesting people. The idea that a lot of people have about working class people being one dimensional, sort of untalented, is wrong.

We interviewed these bootleggers up in Wilkes County, North Carolina, who not only make a fine product, which they shared with us, but who really understood machines. When we interviewed Clay Call, who was a bootlegger, we interviewed him in his garage because it had a dozen liquor cars in there. These beautiful '39 and '40 Fords, black, shiny, and he collected them. But those cars were prepared by these mountain people who knew all about performance parts. They knew the West Coast racing culture. They knew which engines they could make go faster; how to set up the suspension to haul liquor; and how to outrun all the law. All of them served time. All of them are now millionaires. And all of them are pillars of the community. This is working class history! It's not dull. It's actually very exciting.

DR: When you were writing Deep'n As It Come, *you went down the Mississippi interviewing folks. Can you tell me a little bit about that trip and what you were after?*

PD: What I was doing was going around interviewing people for a book on the flood of 1927, and fortunately in 1975 there were a lot of people still alive who had vivid memories. I had written ahead to historical societies and had tried to line up a series of interviews that were officially sanctioned, and what I learned was that many of these people were telling the community story, which they had coopted as their story. They were telling stories that I later read in newspapers told by other people. That's the way it happened.

So what I did was I broke out of that and just went looking for people. Leslie McLemore's brother, Eugene, who was living in Greenville at the time, took me over to a bar in a little place just outside of Greenville. The bartender was in the flood, but he said, "I was just a baby. My mother, who lives over in Greenville, took me away from where we were." So we went over to Mrs. Cora Lee Campbell's house. We introduced ourselves. Eugene, of course, is African American, so that was a great entree. . . So Eugene and I went up to Mrs. Campbell's door and knocked. I think her son had called ahead to warn her we were coming. We introduced ourselves and I said, "Well, I'd like to know about the flood, what you remember?" She started off, she said, "Well, I believe it was Thursday-." And her recollection was vivid the way many people's memories were vivid because it was one of the most powerful things that ever happened in their life.

About a week later, I was going up a road along the Arkansas River on a Sunday morning, Memorial Day weekend. There were four black men standing out after church service, standing in the

church yard. I rode by and I thought: they look old enough to remember. So I turned around and went back. And three of them did. We stood there in the church yard, and I said, "Where were you during the flood?" One of them pointed across the field and he said, "You see over there? That's where the levee broke." And then he told this vivid story, and so did two others, just standing out in the church yard. See, this was unfiltered by prepara tion or by being the spokesperson for a community. It was just spontaneous, and it was rich. So I learned a lot about memory, the way the people who were the community spokes- people recalled, and then the way when you happened upon somebody like Mrs. Campbell or these three men out in the church yard remembered things.

DR: People shared their scrapbooks of pictures of things like cars sitting on front porches.

PD: Yeah, that particular picture of the car sitting on a porch-I'm just remembering the woman's name, Myrtle Staples-she just had those. She took them as a kid. She was a teenager and she was out in the flood. So when I interviewed her, she made those available to me. So did a man along that same river road out in Arkansas. Everybody told me this guy C.D. Dupree was just a real bad person. He owned a bar in Watson, Arkansas. Of course, that only whetted my appetite to talk to him! As you would too, Don. So I ended up there talking to him, and he was just charming. I went into his bar and I introduced myself, chatted a little bit. I said, "I understand you have a lot of photographs." He said, "Yeah, I do," and he pulled them out from under the counter. He had a nice big scrapbook of pictures. We went over to a booth, there was no business in the early after noon. I had my camera and as we went through there I said, "I'd like to copy them." He let me copy his pictures, and as I copied, he was telling me what they were. It triggered his memory. He knew who the people were. He remembered a lot of incidents that happened in Watson. It was just delightful.

I don't know why people tell these stories about people. In Greenville, I was down at the levee commission office interviewing a bunch of people and they were sort of the official things, and somebody said: You really need to talk to this other guy, Herman Caillouet, who did a lot of rescuing. I had heard people say, "He's pretty eccentric." It was an incredibly good interview. A lot of times I think you have to realize that people that you're told not to talk to sometimes have a much more interesting slant than the official people.

DR: Between the interviews, and pictures, and writing style, your books stand apart. Now you have moved into a three-dimension presentation of objects. How did you get into the museum world?

PD: ....The museum thing started in 1980 when I was working for Senator Robert Morgan, who was defeated in that election in 1980 and I was basically unemployed. [Having left a tenured position at the University of Tennessee to join the Senator's staff.] I got invited over to a party at [the National Museum of] American History. It was while I was there that I saw Gary Kulik, who I knew, and he said, "We're doing this exhibit on Franklin Roosevelt's 100th birthday and we need somebody who knows documentary photography." Since I had done a lot of work on that, I got hired for the summer of '81. Then I was fortunate to have a fellowship at the [Woodrow] Wilson Center for a year. When that was coming to an end, it just turned out that Terry Sharrer [an agricultural curator at the Museum of American History] was going away for a year on leave, and since I had been there working on the Roosevelt exhibit, they hired me to replace him for the year, since I knew something about agriculture. And then when Terry came back, they just kept me. So there was no clever planning to end up at the Smithsonian, it was just total luck, like a lot of things that have happened to me.

So ending up in the museum world was a total accident, but what I found out when I got there was that a historical background like I had

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was the perfect preparation. I think as much as anybody there, I see how you can combine research, collecting, and exhibits.

DR: You worked on the Rock 'n' Soul Museum in Memphis, can you tell me a little about that, particularly in terms of using interviews?

PD: That project we had hoped would open at the Museum of American History and travel. We never raised any money to do it at the museum, but the people in Memphis raised money. So we did it totally there, for them. It was a Smithsonian-conceived and executed exhibit done for Memphis, the Rock 'n' Soul Museum....

You sit there and you talk to someone like Sam Phillips or Billy Lee Riley, or Carl Perkins, or any number of other people we talked to, and I had to learn some interviewing techniques for myself. Because Lee told me that in any interview that you are going to use possibly for reproduction: you never cover the person talking's voice; you always allow them to finish their sentence before you say anything; you never say "Uh-huh," as you well know; you never do grunts and groans and laughs or any other noise. You're absolutely quiet.

But how do you get somebody to quit talking? At first, I couldn't say anything. I felt totally restricted on this. Because some people would really go on and on. They had great stories but they could go so far and you had to get them to stop. So I finally found out that the way you get somebody to quit talking when they're going on with a story is you start with sign language: a raised hand, a quizzical look, an open mouth like you want to talk, finally you can intimidate them into shutting up-without saying a word, it's all with sign language....

So I learned a lot about interviewing, and I have to say I feel honored beyond almost anything that I got to talk to these people. These musicians and stock car drivers were so inspiring that it was just a magic time. I feel fortunate that I got to do that.

DR: And the videos are being shown in the museum? What was the intention for them?

PD: The intention was to produce videos for the exhibit. We produced three videos for the exhibit. Of course, we had hundreds of hours of film, but for the exhibit one of them is a ten-minute and there are two five-minute videos. They were produced professionally, and they get the job done. It's magic the way these people can take the interviews that you've conducted, take the clips out, and through the manipulation of vision and sound they come off as much bigger than what the original product was. They were produced into those three films, and our hope is that with the stock car interviews we can do the same thing. We had hoped also that we might do an hour PBS documentary, and indeed the rock 'n roll interviews were used for a radio series on Memphis music, using just the audio parts. Now the interviews for Rock 'n' Soul are at the Smithsonian Archives and are in the public domain. The interviews for stock car drivers, about fifty of them, are at the Atlanta History Center, which was basically paying for that interview project against the day when we hope we can do the exhibit and use them.

DR: Museum resources have been slim recently. If that wasn't an issue, what exhibits would really like to do?

PD: Well, I want to do something on what I've written about. Ever since I arrived at the Smithsonian I've lobbied to do an exhibit on Southern rural life. I just put in an exhibit proposal last fall on a major look at Southern rural life from George Washington to Jimmy Carter. Of course, that's a little overly ambi tious, perhaps. A lot of it, especially the twentieth century, is based on my research, but I also said it could be based on the research of many of the fellows who come through our museum. There are a lot of people who have studied

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there who have gone on to write prize-winning books, and who have written about Southern rural life. I listed those in the proposal. So you solve a lot of problems here. You have a built-in panel of experts who have been in the museum, know you, know the kind of things we do in museums; and you have a subject that's compelling, and that I've done a lot of work on and know where I want to go with it. I've collected material, especially twentieth century material on Southern agriculture. So that's at the top of my list of things that I really want to do because it draws on my research, my collecting, and my career....

The other one, right now that I'd like to do is stock car racing. The exhibit we had was titled "Speed and Spirit: NASCAR in America," which takes stock car racing from World War II basically up to the present. Although stock car racing goes way back, to the first time probably there were two cars. Organized stock car racing goes back to the teens anyway in our country. All over the country there were tracks. There were wood tracks. They used to race on wood tracks, dirt tracks, all kinds of things. It's a rich heritage. We made contacts with people. We interviewed a whole group of people. We located objects. We were all ready to go. We just needed money.

Going back to resources, when the federal government cut our budgets and was no longer funding exhibits, the way exhibits got done changed a great deal. If you go out trying to raise money for an exhibit, you're not going to be able to do controversial things, or cutting-edge things in a lot of cases, because corporations as a rule don't want to take risks. It's built in. That's how they are what they are. So if you come up with a proposal to do something cutting edge, you're not going to get it funded. That already cuts down on the number of things you can do...

Funding really changes the way museums operate. If you were a conspiratorial person you would say, this makes it clear now that there are not going to be things that are cutting-edge or particularly challenging, because those things could threaten the status quo. You're going to do things that are regurgitations of old themes and rehashes of things. They'll be well done--I could mention some cases--but they won't be challenging. They'll be pretty. They'll be vapid. They won't have any edge to them. People will go through them and they'll come out the other side and they won't be scratching their heads and saying "What can I read?" They'll be saying "Wasn't that pretty." And that's not what we're there for. That's part of it, you want a nice exhibit.

DR: I wish this were a full life-review, but we're doing this interview because you've received this year's Pogue Award and you'll be speaking at the meeting in October.

PD: I knew Forrest Pogue, who was at the museum. I didn't know him well, but of course he was well-known. Everybody knew who he was. I'm extremely honored to receive the prize.

DR: He took pride in his connection with the Smithsonian, and he was a Southerner from Kentucky. So I think Forrest Pogue would say we've made the right choice.

PD: Well, thank you. The bottom line is I feel so lucky to be able to do what I do everyday, because I really love it. I get up in the morning, like today, I've been writing this morning. I get lost in it. I could have easily missed our appointment because sometimes you just don't want to leave. Having a career like that, where you get to work in a museum like the Smithsonian, and have friends, you know, I've worked here, I've worked in places that are very interesting, I've worked in places that have taught me that I really do know how lucky I am to be doing this. So I would think that what I could say to people who are maybe younger is to always believe in yourself and believe that you can do things.

People should not get discouraged but believe in their talent and push it. I was lucky that I was there in that seminar. It was the first year Wake Forest started an M.A. If that hadn't happened, I don't know where I'd be today. Not here.◆

Books By Pete Daniel

The Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South (1972, 1990)
A Talent for Detail: The Photographs of Miss Frances Benjamin Johnston, 1889-1910 (1974).
Deep'n As It Come: The 1927 Mississippi River Flood (1977, 1996).
Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures Since 1880 (1985).
Official Images: New Deal Photography (1987).
Carry Me Home: Louisiana Sugar Country Photographs (1990)
Standing at the Crossroads: Southern Life in the Twentieth Century (1996).
Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s (2000)

OHMAR Spring Conference 2004 Preview

The OHMAR spring conference 2004 will be held on Friday, March 19 & Saturday, March 20, 2004 in the Archibald S. Alexander Library on the the New Brunswick campus of Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. Due to the overwhelming response at the OHMAR spring 2003 conference, a full day beginner's workshop is being offered on Friday. Take advantage of the one day experience to learn best practices from professionals in the field, get hands-on experience with equipment, and be exposed to current standards and practices.

The Saturday conference sessions are divided into a morning theme and afternoon round-table talks. The morning's focus will be on military oral history. Hear about regional and national projects from scholars and researchers from the Rutgers Oral History Archives of WWII, Korea, Vietnam and the Cold War, as well as from the Library of Congress Veterans History Project--the largest oral history project in the country. In the afternoon, tackle current issues facing oral historians in a round-table setting. In the company of other professionals, discuss ethics, privacy, dissemination, and the methodology of collecting "contemporary history."

This not-to-be-missed conference is being organized by the staff of the Rutgers Oral History Archives, including Sandra Stewart Holyoak, Shaun Illingworth, and Tom Frusciano. Conference details will be available in fall 2003 on www.ohmar.org, and in the Februrary 2004 OHMAR newsletter. For questions, about the conference, contact holyoak@history.rutgers.edu or illingwo@history.rutgers.edu. For questions about the Archives, call (932) 732-8190 or go to the project's website at http://fas-history.rutgers.edu/oralhistory/orlhom.htm.◆

OHMAR Membership Form

Sign up TODAY to become a new member of, or renew your current membership with, the oral history organization that keeps you informed of regional issues, events, projects and professionals.

Membership is for one calendar year. Member benefits include the newsletters, advance notice of OHMAR events, and reduced fees to the annual conference and workshops. In addition, individual, student and life members may vote, hold office and serve on committees.

Individual	($25)	________	NAME:
Student	($10)	________	ADDRESS:
Institutional	($50)	________	
Life	($1,000)	________	EMAIL:
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Please make your check out to "OHMAR." Please send your check to "OHMAR c/o Kelly Feltault, 415 E. Wayne Street, Silver Spring, MD 20901." Any questions? Please contact Treasurer Kelly Feltault at cultural.xings@mindspring.com.

FOR THE RECORD

Oral History in the Mid Atlantic Region (OHMAR) Newsletter *Summer/Fall 2003*
www.ohmar.org

Oral History Association Holds Annual Conference in Maryland This Fall

The Oral History Association invites all OHMAR members to attend the OHA Annual Meeting at the Besthesda Hyatt Regency Hotel from October 8 to 12, 2003. The conference program has lived up to the call for "presenters to take up the challenge of how oral history can illuminate the ways people weave the cultural mosaic of our society by creating communities in diverse settings and locales."

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Free Software for Historians (see page 3)

The conference begins on Wednesday, October 8 with a variety of workshops that will appeal to those new to the field as well as to experienced practioners. Full day opportunities include a workshop for beginners and another for those interested in using oral history for radio documentaries. Half-day sessions focus on oral history in the digital age, and oral history and the law.

Conference sessions begin officially on Thursday, October 9. In addition to papers sessions, there will be an all-day "Community Showcase" room that will highlight many local grassroots groups who use oral history within their communities. Thursday's keynote speaker, Barbara Franco, is the executive director of the City Museum of Washington, D.C. Ms. Franco will explain how the City Museum's new home will be a site to educate the public on the many neighborhoods that comprise America's capital. Conference attendees will then have a first-hand

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Letter from New OHMAR President Roger Horowitz

I am very honored to have been elected OHMAR President at the spring 2003 meeting. Since joining the OHMAR board in 1996, I have been deeply impressed with OHMAR's commitment to grassroots oral history and the tremendous level of activitiy by OHMAR members in the oral history field. Oral History is expanding in many directions and our members are active in a wide variety of organizations, from state agencies and museums, to libraries, archives, and independent

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