

**EXCERPTS FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH
JOHN SCHUCHMAN
1990 Recipient of
the Forrest C. Pogue Award**

**Pamela Henson, Interviewer
Smithsonian Institution Archives**

HENSON: I thought we would just have you tell a little bit about your family background and your early years growing up.

SCHUCHMAN: I was born and grew up in the mid-West, in Indianapolis, Indiana. Spent all of my formative years there. I went to college initially at General Motors Institute of Technology in Flint, Michigan. When I was a senior in high school, I was smart enough to figure out who would pay me the most, so I went with General Motors. It was a cooperative engineering program, and I was fine in terms of coursework, but the coop feature was great in that it taught me that I would have hated to be an engineer. So I learned that very early, and I've been a supporter of practical, cooperative education ever since! I then went back home to Indiana and got my undergraduate degree from Butler University, then graduate degrees down at IU—Indiana [University] at Bloomington.

I'm a first generation American. My father and all of my aunts and uncles and grandparents are from Russia. The other unique thing about my family is that my parents were deaf, so I grew up as an only child of deaf parents. We call children of deaf parents CODA [Children of Deaf Adults]. I'm not a musician, but I understand that a coda in music is sort of the last piece—it's part of the music, yet it's separate, and that's the term we use to describe the hearing children of deaf parents. We're part of deaf culture, yet at the same time, we're different, since we're not deaf. And that, obviously, had a lot of influence on me growing up, and today, in fact, I'm active—there's a national organization called CODA.

So I went off to graduate school and pursued my work in history. My fields were constitutional and legal history. I did my dissertation in that area. Like a lot of persons, I think, that go into history, they're not sure whether they want to go into the academic life or they want to go into a more activist role. And that was true for me. I was never sure whether I wanted

to go into law full time or into history, teaching at the university level. So the bottom line is that I decided to do both. I finished all my coursework for the doctorate, decided that since my field was constitutional anyway and I had an interest in law, that I would pursue that. So I decided to go to Georgetown [Law School] here in Washington, DC.

There were a lot of reasons why I decided that. I had been an intern in the Library of Congress Manuscript Division in the summer of '63, was involved with civil rights activities, was doing picketing out in Bel Air and Bowie, against Levitt Brothers. In those days, Levitt Brothers didn't allow blacks into their housing developments, so I was out there picketing. Then I participated in the March on Washington [in August 1963]. I'm one of the many people who participated in the March on Washington who was not able to hear [Martin Luther] King's speech, (laughter) because there were so many people there that day and the noise and that sort of thing.

So I got married in there, so I was actually finishing my dissertation, and was in my second/third year of law school at the same time. The year I had been at the Manuscript Division at the Library of Congress, I ran into an employee who happened to be deaf. I remember the first day in the Manuscript Division, my supervisor was taking me around in the stacks, introducing me to people, and he sort of pointed at this individual over in the corner and said, "Well, that's Bert, but he's deaf and you won't be able to communicate with him." I said, "Well, I can talk to him." So I got to know Bert. Bert was a graduate of Gallaudet [University]. My own personal experience—the family, we were poor, so I had never really heard of Gallaudet as a child growing up. So that was my introduction to Gallaudet.

I didn't actually think much of it on my first visit, but when I came back later to law school, I remembered, "Ah, here's a source of money for a law student trying to support his wife and family!" My senior year, actually, I was finishing ⇨

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my dissertation, teaching three undergraduate courses at Gallaudet, and finishing up my senior year at law school I don't have a lot of patience with people who tell me they don't have time!

Then I liked Gallaudet and I went there, and Gallaudet was small enough in those days that it just afforded a lot of opportunity. I joined the faculty in '67-'68, and then, oh, I think within three years I was a dean and then I just moved up in administration and stayed in administration for fourteen years.

I didn't know it at the time, but [for my dissertation] I actually did an oral history interview. But I didn't know it, and all of the things that you think are wrong, I did them! I actually did an interview on a napkin!

(Laughter) But one of the things I was trying to get at was why the United States Solicitor General's office had prepared its briefs in a certain way. One of the summers when I was in law school, I worked for the Criminal Law Institute at Georgetown, and one of the attorneys there, finding out what I was doing, said, "Oh, I know somebody who was the Assistant Solicitor General on those cases," and anyway I managed to get a lunch arranged, and we went off and I did an interview, and I picked up a lot of insights that way. Even though I didn't know what it was called, that was actually my first oral history interview. And I still have that napkin in my notes!

HENSON: How did you become more formally interested in oral history?

SCHUCHMAN: I thought about that when I knew the interview was scheduled. Again, we have a cabin up in Front Royal, Virginia, sort of a place for us to get away. So you do the kinds of things you do with a cabin and 23 acres: you buy *Foxfire* books (laughter) because you learn all these little country-type things that you can do. At that time, I was very interested in how you could make sumac jelly out of sumac trees. We bought that place, I guess about '73 or '74. Then in

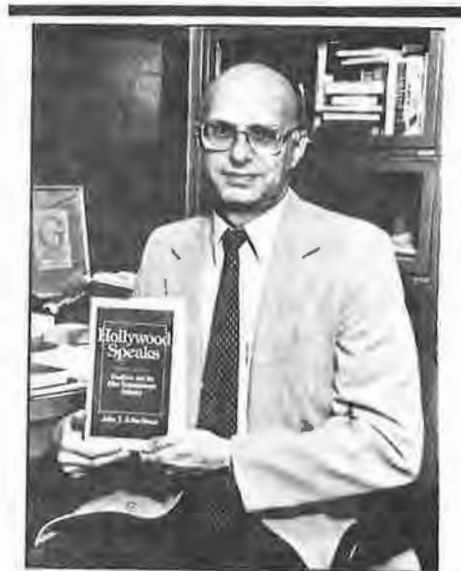
reading *Foxfire*, being a compulsive reader, I read the foreword and all that, and I start reading this debate between Eliot Wigginton and Richard Dorson. It turns out Richard Dorson was at Indiana and was on my master's degree examination committee. So I had a natural interest in anything Dorson would be doing. Although at the time, I knew Dorson as an intellectual historian, I didn't particularly know him as a folklorist.

So that whetted my interest, and I started reading more about oral history. Then around 1980, I began thinking about how one could take techniques of oral history, applying them to the deaf community. Because one of the things I was

concerned about by 1980 was the absence of much historical study of a community I had brought up with. So in 1980 I decided to try to do oral history interviews with deaf persons. The first group that I did a series of interviews with was a senior citizens' group here in the Washington area called "The Happy Hands Club." One of the nice things about the Washington area, in terms of the deaf community, is because of the presence of Gallaudet, the deaf people who are in the Washington area very often come from other places and then opt to stay here, not only because of Gallaudet but because of the federal government. The federal government, at that time, and it's probably still true today, is the primary employer of deaf persons in the United States. And then Gallaudet

is the second employer of deaf persons in the United States.

So I did that first set of interviews, and that got me into things like, "What am I going to talk to them about?" and then how was I going to do it? The "how I was going to do it" meant video, and in 1980, '81, not many people were doing video. Tom Charlton down at Baylor [University] was doing it; I think Joel Gardner had done a little bit. There weren't too many, you know, you could take the people who were doing it and sit on one couch at an OHA [Oral History Association] meeting, sharing your techniques.



Dr. John Schuchman

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I applied for an NEH [National Endowment for the Humanities] grant; got a small grant, essentially for equipment; actually, got an NEH grant and then we applied to a foundation, which I think is called the National Home Library Foundation, and with that money we were able to set up a room at the library at Gallaudet, which we now call the self-study TV room, but was essentially a room where you conduct an interview like this but in addition to the pen that you're holding in your hand, you have a little control which controls a television/vidco set-up which takes two or three television cameras and then puts the signal into the box so that you can end up with either one talking head or a split screen so that you can see both the interviewer and the interviewee. Again, in 1980, that was novel. In fact, it's still so novel that I can't afford to do it today, but that's another story.

So I developed that system and then tried to deal with the problem of how one translates from sign [language] into written English, and that was a problem—as anyone who's dealt with foreign languages in an interview knows. It just drove us crazy. In fact, today, I don't try to do the translations anymore for transcripts; I basically prepare a set of finding aids and then let people go to the tapes themselves. Not that it wouldn't be ideal to do, if you had the money and the personnel, but most of my work today is as an independent researcher so that I simply can't afford to do those kinds of things. We tried to do it in the beginning by getting volunteer student interpreters, and it was just more work than the student could handle.

The other thing I did, of course, was evolve the topics that we were going to talk about. The two general areas that I wanted to examine in those projects were (1) the experience of deaf people who lived through the Great Depression, but before the creation of what we now call the safety net of services that many disabled persons are eligible for today.

Then the second area was to talk to them because of their age, most of them would have been anywhere from twelve to twenty at the time of the transition from silent movies to talkies. That was the other topic that I wanted to cover with them.

The thing that surprised me in those interviews was the paucity of information about their own heritage in the area of silent film. It's one of those classic examples of what you don't get is sometimes more important than what you do get. I had deaf people, for example, telling me correctly the names of the technology of the time. They were able to talk to me about the various hearing silent stars of the time and actually act out some of their moves and that kind of stuff.

In preparation for those interviews, I had gone back and read all of the contemporary deaf community newspapers of the time, and I knew that there had been deaf actors, for example, who had performed in silent films. I was surprised that no one could tell me. They couldn't give me any names; they couldn't tell me any of the films. The closest they could get was they identified Lon Chaney, who you may not know was a child of deaf parents. That was about it, and so I became intrigued with that and decided that when I had the opportunity, I would pursue that, and so I did in '85. I

left administration at Gallaudet and went full time into the history department again. I proceeded to get as much information as I could about, primarily, film in the deaf community. And in a nutshell, I produced this monograph which is a history of the relationship of the film industry and the deaf community from 1902 to 1986, and that's my book, *Hollywood Speaks*.

HENSON: To me the most striking thing is how an improvement, purportedly, in technology, would leave a segment of the community behind, and you just don't think about it

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from that perspective if you're not part of that community. ⇨

SCHUCHMAN: At Gallaudet, we now have an office of technology assessment, and one of its roles is to examine how new technology will impact [upon] deaf persons. I think the disability community in general now is insisting on this. The other thing that happens is that technology that helps one disability group can penalize another one. The whole business of speech synthesizers that's going on with computers: that helps the blind, of course, but is a problem for the deaf community.

HENSON: I wonder if you could talk a little more about the role that oral history can play in adding the deaf community's viewpoint to the historical record.

SCHUCHMAN: Yes. As I said earlier, one of the things I was concerned about as a historian was that there wasn't much of what we call deaf community history. There was a book published in 1981 called *A Narrative of Deaf America*, written by Jack Gannon, which is really the first attempt to come up with a national history of the deaf community. Since that time, more and more has been published. There's probably now a dozen solid monographs that have been published in the 1980s. In fact, this coming summer, we're going to sponsor an international conference on deaf community history, bringing over some of the Europeans who have begun to do some historical investigations.

But there's no question in my mind that this increase in historical awareness is correlated very closely to the awareness of the deaf community of themselves as a minority group, and this really is the last twenty years. As the deaf community has begun to assert itself in terms of its connection with minority status that we've seen this interest in historical information. It's not that there wasn't any history; it's just that it tended to be written by what some of us call the elite deaf—

which in the deaf community pretty much meant late onset, English-speaking, pretty good speech, deaf persons, which is one type of deaf person. But they were the ones who tended to be the editors and publishers of deaf community newspapers, which again were printed in English. Oddly enough, if you look at all of the presidents of the National Association of the Deaf—one of the oldest such organizations in the United States; it goes back to 1880 I mean, think about when the American Historical Association was established. But if you look at all of the presidents of the National Association of the Deaf, they tend to be late onset, good speaking deaf persons. So there were articles written by those folks and about those folks, in newspapers and magazines, and a few church histories. But not a lot beyond that. So the '80s have really made that difference.

Then oral history, by definition, picks up the vast community, the deaf community, because there are all kinds of deaf persons. I used to tell people that, "Yes, I work at Gallaudet, but I grew up in the real deaf community," meaning my parents and the working class for example. Oral history allows those individuals to share those kinds of experiences.

The deaf community, like other communities shares some of the characteristics of the society at large. Women are a very tiny voice in the deaf community. In the last couple of years, that's beginning to change. Most of the history of the deaf community would see women in very second-class status, position, whatever, even more so with black deaf persons. So, all of these communities, then, are good candidates for oral history. People ask me, "What kinds of things can you do with oral history?" Well, there are all kinds of subjects, and I hope these will come in the future.

I've been working with some students at Gallaudet on various projects, and one that I'm very excited about is a Peace Corps project. There have been deaf volunteers in the Peace Corps, going back I guess to the origins of the Peace Corps. She's a Peace Corps volunteer herself, and she'd doing a series

... you can end up with either one talking head or a split screen so that you can see both the interviewer and the interviewee.

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Schuchman Interview (continued)

of interviews with deaf ex-Peace Corps volunteers. They tend to go to foreign deaf communities, where they work as activists. She was in the Philippines, I think. That's an exciting project, and I'm looking forward to seeing the results of that one.

HENSON: Have you used oral history at all as a teaching tool in the classroom?

SCHUCHMAN: Yes. I happen to teach the methods class at Gallaudet, research methods in history, and one of the specific tasks, objectives, for the students is they must produce an oral history tape, including finding aids and transcript. I've just built that into the course so that all the normal things that you have, at least in our research class, that you have to produce. We have a series of things from book reviews to papers to oral history interviews, and all those kinds of things, at an undergraduate level, the student has to produce. I've built that in.

I use [Edward] Sandy Ives's [instructional] tape. As you can imagine, most people don't caption things for deaf people, so I have a practice when I find a tape I like, I write to the producer and I say, "I can arrange for it to be captioned here at Gallaudet, if you'll give us the permission." So they now have a captioned version for people who are interested in getting the written English on the screen or whatever.

As people learn about my work [in oral history], they come and ask, and I've done a lot of consulting, in that sense. So it's spreading.

HENSON: How did you first get involved with OHMAR?

SCHUCHMAN: I think I got involved with OHA first. As I said, I had done these interviews in 1980-81, so I wanted to share that information. I think the first meeting I went to

was the meeting in San Antonio [in 1982]. I did my presentation there, and once I made those kinds of contacts, I became aware of OHMAR. The first OHMAR meeting that I went to was the one at College Park [Maryland]. I think Bruce Wilson was the president then.

I don't know how I got suckered into being treasurer! Someone must have caught me at a weak moment. I was perfectly willing to be in the back doing the nitty-gritty kinds of stuff that no one wants to do. See, that's my constitutional history. I've always remembered James Madison's knowing that it really was the secretary of the [Constitutional] Con-

vention who had all the power, and I've known since that, if you really want to be in an organization, that you volunteer to either be the secretary or the treasurer, not the president or vice-president (laughter) because that way you have the real power.

HENSON: What need or role do you think a local society like that fulfills for the professional community?

SCHUCHMAN: I think contacts more than anything, network. I have increasingly become—what?—unhappy with national organizations. Most of the nationals that I belong to have simply become so big and so specialized that they just don't meet my needs any more. In fact, after many,

many years, I finally opted not to belong to the American Historical Association, which was funny because the next month they asked me to do a review for them. (Laughter) But I think the networking that occurs at the local level is quite important. I also like, in terms of OHMAR, the interdisciplinary types of contact that I think has helped me. So I think that a local organization really can be quite helpful for the local individual who is trying to get information, just nuts and bolts kinds of things, trying to find names of individuals who might be able to help. I think that's the real strength of OHMAR, and that's why I belong, for that reason. □

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