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An Interview with Linda Shopes, 1992 Forrest C. Pogue Award recipient.
by Joel Gardner
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GARDNER: Tell me something about where you grew up and when and under what circumstances.

SHOPES: I grew up in Connecticut. I was born in New Britain and lived there until I was about ten, and then we moved to the neighboring suburb of Newington. My parents still live there. My four grandparents were Catholic Eastern European immigrants, and my parents are part of that great upwardly mobile, lower-middle-class, Depression-era, World War II prosperity generation. My father has always been a white-collar worker. So I grew up in a home where we had all of life's necessities and a few of life's privileges; I got a college education paid for to a school that was not a good school but cost money. But I certainly grew up in a family that very much promoted the value of hard work, was not particularly risky intellectually or emotionally.

Upon graduating from college, I moved to Baltimore and lived there for the next twenty-three years of my life before coming here [to Harrisburg].

GARDNER: What took you to Baltimore?

SHOPES: Oh, I got married. What took most women of my age someplace twenty-five years ago? [Gardner laughs] I married somebody who was a student at Hopkins. So that's why I went there.

GARDNER: When you got to Baltimore, you started out as a teacher, right?

SHOPES: My first adult job was teaching high-school English, social studies, and religion at Mercy High School in Baltimore.

GARDNER: Is that where you developed a perspective towards oral history?

SHOPES: No. When I moved to Baltimore, a whole new world really opened up to me. I grew up in a world that was pretty insulated intellectually and socially. You know, I was a good Catholic girl. My husband at the time was a student at Hopkins and very much involved in the emergent antiwar student subculture. And, to me, that was when the scales fell from my eyes. It was so exciting to just stay up, drink beer, and listen, hear all these people talk about politics and ideas in a way that never even dawned on me. I lived in America, you know. I had no idea anything was wrong with this country. I didn't know anything about what was going on in the world outside of me. It was an exciting time to be alive politically and intellectually--this was the late sixties--and it was the right time in my life. That's the time in your life when you adopt your adult point of view on things. And so, [with] a combination of really unusual historical circumstances and my own particular life development, my mind just exploded.

So I got very involved in the antiwar movement. And I was in Baltimore in 1968 when Martin Luther King was assassinated, and the city of Baltimore burned. That, also, was a very pivotal, important event to me. It dawned on me, well, something is wrong with this country! You know, I didn't know we had a race problem. I had never seen a black person, practically, growing up. Of course, there were racial problems in Boston when I was outside of Boston, but I was far too much involved in my own private and personal life to really pay attention to that. But to see the city burning, literally from your roof, to see the National Guard on street corners, to not be able to go out at night, and to be involved in a social world that talked about this late into the night--it was one of two things: either you had to say that black people were all wrong or something was wrong with this country. And I chose the latter course. That, combined with emerging activities in the antiwar movement, combined with a growing interest in the women's movement, just really was a transformative experience in my adult life.

So what does all this have to do with oral history? This all happened very quickly in '67, '68, '69. And by the early seventies, I had had a child, and I had gone through a couple of teaching jobs. I was teaching in an alternative high school, and I had to make some decision about what I wanted to do next in my life. I didn't want to teach high school. There was a lot of restlessness in my brain.

There were other sorts of things going on, too. I had gotten involved in the women's movement, and I'm not ashamed to say this, out of real dissatisfaction with my own life. I was a graduate wife. I grew up with no expectation to be anything other than somebody's wife and somebody's mother. I had never looked beyond that, and that was extraordinarily unsatisfying.

I didn't want to be an upper-middle-class professor's wife. I didn't want to have more children; one child convinced me I didn't want any more. I also was on a path of what seemed to me upward mmobility. As I say, I came from a kind of lower-middle-class family with very deep connections to the ethnic working class. My parents, although they live this kind of modest, suburban, white-collar lifestyle, are deeply working class in their values, orientation, way of life, friends, and so on. So I was being thrust on this path of upward mobility, and I really didn't know who I was. What did I want?

Meanwhile, a friend of mine who taught at a local community college had turned me on to some of the work of Tamara Hareven and family histories that she was doing twenty, twenty-five years ago, and he was using this in his classroom teaching. And I thought this addressed something of what I was interested in. It's trying to not deny a working-class past, but also recognize that the present is different and make connections between it.

So I decided I would enroll in the American Studies Program, get a graduate degree at College Park. I thought, "Well, this is what I can do." You know, I've always been able to go to school and do my homework. [Gardner laughs] That's a manageable activity for me to do.

This is all codified after twenty years of thinking about it, but I wanted to understand about class, race, and gender in our culture. I thought if I could understand where something came from, I would have a better grip on what's going on now. That's not a schooled

analysis; that's the kind of person I have always been. If you can understand how something got somewhere, maybe you can't do something about it in the present, but at least you can have a better grip on what's going on in the present.

Anyway, in the listing of course offerings my first sememster at Maryland, I saw Martha Ross's oral history course, and that was my first formal step into oral history. And I thought, "I have to take this course." It was exactly congruent with what my pretty unformed but pretty powerful gut-level instincts were. So I did.

GARDNER: What kinds of oral histories did you do either as part of the class or after you had taken the class? What did Martha's teaching inspire you to pursue?

SHOPES: For Martha's class, we were working on a project on the antiwar movement at College Park, which I just thought was great. I just thought it was great that something that I knew from my own experience was being dignified as history. The same fellow who had turned me on to Hareven had been a graduate student at College Park, so I interviewed him about his involvement in the antiwar movement when he was a graduate student at College Park. The first interview I did, the tape recorder didn't work. [Gardner laughs] He was very gracious. He was a pretty nice friend of mine, and we just did a repeat of the interview. What that class did, I think, was provide me with a set of tried and true techniques and a set of formal procedures that helped channel a sort of enthusiasm. She was able to systematize that enthusiasm in ways that have held me good stead.

GARDNER: What was the first major project you got involved with after your graduation with the degree in American Studies?

SHOPES: I worked on the Baltimore Neighborhood Heritage project. I was the project oral historian. It was an NEH-funded project to document six neighborhoods in Baltimore. The collection exists at the Maryland Historical Society. It resulted in the play Baltimore Voices.

GARDNER: How did working on that project influence the way you thought about oral history?

SHOPES: There was so much going on in that project that was unattended to. There was so much money being thrown around in this grand democratic effort to create people's history. And I was disgusted. I felt there was a very simple-minded approach: "Let the people speak, and this will democratize history." I realized there was something else going on here. I think the chaos of that project, the administrative chaos and especially the intellectual chaos, alerted me that something else was going on. And in my own sort of relentless way, I seized upon that and tried to figure out what was going on. I saw the way bona fide historians couldn't deal with oral history materials and the way a living source was treated as just a source of little quotes. And I saw that "the people" weren't speaking unadulterated truth. And I became alert, I think, to what I still feel is the profound, profound, profound class difference between the academic scholar and, if you will, the "ordinary folk" that we often interview.

I started teaching at UMBC, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, in '76. I taught in the American Studies Department there part time and then full time starting in 1980. I developed courses there on the history of the family and the history of childhood, and I did a course on the history of Baltimore. I always did the Intro to American Studies seminar, which I loved doing.

GARDNER: Did you incorporate oral history into your teaching?

SHOPES: Oh, yes. I taught a course on the history of the family in the United States. The major assignment for my students was always to do a history of their own family, and the major research tool was oral history. I got them into the documentary sources, too, but they did oral histories with their family. In the intro course, I always had people do an oral history. So I've always used it as an assignment.

GARDNER: How do you teach oral history? Is there a certain perspective you bring to it? A certain way of teaching? Are there certain influences? People whose work influences the way you teach?

SHOPES: I don't think my most creative work in oral history has ever

come from my teaching. I think more of my creative work has come in consulting work and in writing. But I would say that in teaching I always try to tell people to stay out of the emotional system, keep your distance, view the narrator with dispassion, view the documents with dispassion.

Something that I came across years and years ago that I've always found really helpful is family-systems theory coming out of Murray Bowen and other family therapists. It's a psychotherapeutic mode that has people literally do histories of their own families. They're as much emotional histories as they are social histories, and they have you go back as far as you can. The whole point is to position yourself in your family constellation with some degree of dispassion, so that you're not made crazy by your family. And I have always found this a very attractive sort of theory, an attractive approach to historical work, to the interview dynamic, not to become enmeshed with what's going on but to keep distance from the system, watch what's going on.

I have to say that intellectually--and personally, too--it's been very enlarging to work with Mike Frisch on the Oral History Review and the Journal of American History. Early on, I was attracted to the stuff that he wrote and thought, "This guy is somewhere on the same wavelength as I am." So it's been very interesting and very expanding intellectually to collaborate with him on various activities.

And I've always been really appreciative of the things that Ron Grele has written and articulated. He doesn't let people get away with intellectual sloppiness, and I really appreciate his rigor, because there's a lot of sloppiness in people's enthusiasm--and, I think, a justified enthusiasm--for oral history. I really appreciate his rigor and what he's written and what he has to say about things.

GARDNER: You mentioned that you feel some of your most creative work came out of your consulting. Could you explain that?

SHOPES: Consulting on oral history projects, particularly community-based projects, usually means somebody calls you up, and they say, "We need some help." You not only have to give them some help, but you have to tell them what sort of help they need in the first place. I think I've developed a sort of formula that is manageable for groups

without too many resources and without enormous sophistication that nonetheless helps a project be better than it could be. I think there are two things that I've worked out that I think are useful and helpful. One is to alert people to the fact that oral history is not the truth. Oral history really is highly subjective, highly positioned in time and space, an account from one person. The other is to alert people to the complexities of what they're doing without overwhelming them with the impossibility of ever doing it, telling people they need to understand the historical contexts in which their narrators have operated. They need to know something about the subject before they go and talk to somebody, because what they're going to hear is just one person's version. And they'll be floundering, disoriented if they don't know where that person is at least somewhere positioned in time and space.

So many people want to do oral histories in well-intentioned but extremely naive ways: to get the interesting stories, to get the anecdotes, to get the colorful stories, to get the cute things. People don't want to confront the fact that history is a very difficult story. I mean, it's not just intellectually difficult. Human history has not been easy; it's a trial, you know. The history of any local community has been shot through with all sorts of human conflicts and profound inequalities, all of which get worked out or not worked out in the public realm. You know, it's not a happy little story of days gone by. I think I'm able to alert people to the fact that the substance of history and the questions that they therefore need to ask, and the people they need to ask them of, is not simply in service of a happy little story.

GARDNER: I get the sense from the way you describe what you enjoy doing, in terms of consulting and working with the field, that you get a lot of satisfaction from that part of your present job as historian for the Pennsylvania Historical and Museums Commission.

SHOPES: When I come away from one of these workshops--and I get to do two or three or four a year--I say to myself, and I know this sounds corny, "This is what I was put on earth to do. I can really do this. It really works." I've done it enough now so that I have a command of the situation, and I'm not distracted by my own

nervousness about it. I still have a passionate belief in the worthiness of the endeavor. I'm not burned out about it or cynical about it.

The other thing I would really want to talk about is my work on The Baltimore Book, even though it's not specifically oral history. Some of the articles have oral history, including my own, at least as part of their research base. There are interview excerpts in that book based on oral histories that we and others have done. They're not sophisticated uses of oral history, but the larger point is that this book comes out of the same intellectual, political, and personal commitments I have as my work in oral history. To me history is not just a job; it's not just an academic enterprise. It really is a way of making us better people--not morally better, but more expanded, better able to understand one's self and one's community, the sort of world one knows.

To understand yourself in that relationship is, I think, liberating. And my work has really been directed towards trying--in very modest, imperfect, and often pretty halting ways--to work with people to see themselves in that relationship.