AN INTERVIEW WITH SPENCER R. CREW FORREST C. POGUE AWARD WINNER

The following interview, with Spencer R. Crew, director of the National Museum of American History of the Smithsonian Institution and recipient of the 1996 Forrest C. Pogue Award, presented annually by OHMAR, was conducted May 13, 1996, by Martha Ross, who is a past president of both OHMAR and OHA.

ROSS: Tell me about what kind of a family you grew up in, so we have the context for your career later on.

CREW: Well, there were five of us, and I was the oldest of three children. I have a brother who's a couple of years younger than I am and a sister about seven or eight years younger than I am. I grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, and for most of my early life, I think through about fifth or sixth grade, we grew up in the city of Cleveland itself, right in the middle of the city, and I went to public schools there for a long time.

But then we moved to the suburbs, which was an interesting transition for me, because I went from a predominately African American neighborhood out to one of the suburbs, which had fewer African American students as part of it. So that was an interesting transition but a really important one because it exposed me to a different set of issues, a different set of learning styles, that I think probably has helped me a great deal in the time since then.

I can remember very clearly my interest in history getting stimulated by our travels, that we were a family who on weekends very often would take off and go traveling around in the state of Ohio, to different historic sites. I can remember getting in the car and going off to the houses of [President William] McKinley or down to the Shaker settlements in southern Ohio. But it left an impression on me in terms of the importance of history, historical settings, the people who lived there and how their lives unfolded and what all that meant. So I think that was critical in my own life in beginning to think about history.

I was an avid book reader, and I think the books that I loved the most were historically based books. I read all the juvenile histories, biographies of all the presidents, most of the historical novels around, and things like that. And all those were aspects, I think, of my growing up which were really important in terms of my interest in history.

I think it didn't really coalesce in my head until I got into high school. I can remember, in high school, having a world history teacher in tenth grade who was fairly new to the school, but who brought a very different approach to the teaching of history. She was not so concerned about learning all the dates and what war took place when, but she was really interested in the people and the culture and how all of those things fit together. And I think it was her approach to history that brought it alive and made it interesting and exciting and really pushed me down the path to become a history major. I think at that stage, I decided I really loved history and sort of pursued it pretty much from that point onward. So I think those two places were key.

ROSS: So when you began looking at colleges, you were thinking already of studying history.

CREW: Well, it's interesting. I did a little bit, but my father was a very practical man. He's a businessman and he said, "You can take history courses, but let me encourage you to take a major in international relations. That allows you to take history and economics and political science." He could see where that might lead to a practical career, as opposed to history, which was nondescript in terms of what the results might be for that. So when I first started college, I really started as an international relations major, but I soon found that history was where my love was and shifted to that pretty quickly.

ROSS: How was the experience of being a history student at Brown? Brown enjoys such a rich reputation.

CREW: It was terrific, and the reason why is, I think, in part because of the time that I was there. I was there in the late sixties and the early seventies, in the middle of the civil rights movement, as you know, in the middle of the antiwar movement, in the middle of the women's movement. There also was a curriculum reform movement going full force at Brown. There were lots of things going on, and in

all those activities history is critical, because history becomes the way in which people begin to define themselves and to find their role within the American society. And particularly for me, with the growth of the civil rights movement and I think the burgeoning interest in African American history, it was a really terrific time for self-definition, beginning to understand better the roles that African Americans had had in this country. So it to me was the right thing to do at the right moment, and it really helped me better understand who I was and how I saw my place in this really interesting country of which I was a part.

ROSS: Did you take an activist role in any of these movements?

CREW: I think I wasn't exactly one of the leaders in it but sort of one of the participants in a lot of things they did. The black students walked off campus when I was there, and I went with them. I was part of that group and part of the discussions going back and forth. We had a large antiwar march, I remember, and we participated in that. So I participated, but as a foot soldier more than anything else.

ROSS: Were there particular faculty members that were influential in your college years?

CREW: There were at least two or three, if not more, but history professors in particular were I think of great impact to me. There were two when we had the student walk-off. One of the things we wanted to do was to get more black faculty on staff, and we wanted more black history courses. So as a consequence of that, I think, they hired two junior faculty members. One was Rhett Jones; the other was Wilson Moses. And for me, they were wonderful, absolutely wonderful, because both of them were scholars, who believed in rigorous research, rigorous scholarship, a rigorous support of anything that you did, and they wouldn't accept anything less. So that was the one side of it. Then they very much believed in looking at African Americans in the context of this country, really looking at it seriously--sometimes radically.

Another person was William McLaughlin, who is, I think, the epitome of the activist scholar. He was always involved in student movements, the civil rights movement, the antiwar movement—he was just one of those faculty members that was always there. And I think he also believed that history had to be used in real sorts of ways. It wasn't just for the books, but there were lessons for one to learn from it that would help you think about and analyze your world. And I think those three people, as much as anyone else, really helped shape me as a historian, as a scholar, plus as a person who believed in the application of the things that you learn, not to have books and just go off in the corner. So it was a great stimulation for me, coming from a high school where, I think, the graduating class had 210 or so, and there were, I think, five or ten black students in that graduating class. It was interesting for me to come from that setting, where I had lots of friends and a wonderful time, going to Brown and beginning to think much more so about myself in the context of a society that was changing very rapidly.

ROSS: So after you graduated from Brown, what was the decision process by which you decided to go to graduate school, and how did you settle on Rutgers?

CREW: Well, it's interesting. Clearly, one of the things you're always thinking about when you're in history is, do you want to go to law school or not? And I finally decided it was not of interest and I really wanted to go on in history. I think I wound up applying to Rutgers and to Amherst and maybe the University of Pennsylvania, and I think more practically than anything else, Rutgers accepted me, and they gave me money.

ROSS: Ah!

CREW: And that sort of helped. Plus they had a good department. Seth Scheiner was there, who was one of *the* writers in African American/urban history, and I was really interested in urban history after American history, so that drew me there. The other thing is that I had met my wife at Brown, and we'd gotten married soon thereafter, and we were trying to find a place where we could both settle in. She was interested in elementary education, and they have an excellent early childhood program at Rutgers. So the two things sort of said, "This is the place to go." (Laughs)

ROSS: Was she in graduate school also?

CREW: Yes, yes. We both went to graduate school at the same time. We were in genteel poverty for a long time. (Laughs) It was great fun. I think we both look back on those times with great relish.

ROSS: Tell me about your experiences as a graduate student in history at Rutgers, about the academic side and your own growth and so forth.

CREW: I think that probably in graduate school more than any other time, I came into my own as a scholar and as a student. For the first time I was able to just focus on the classes that I wanted to take, and I think history began to excite me even more. The first year in a graduate school, you're reading like crazy, but you're then beginning to get a sense of the breadth of the scholarship, the breadth of the research, the variety of arguments that are part and parcel of the study of history, and that was really, really exciting for me. I just sort of felt like I was drinking in lots and lots of information.

I think also having the chance to go to these seminars and to wage very civil word battles with my fellow students was really very exciting, very stimulating, although I have to add that I think that graduate class was very civil, that we tended to try to be supportive of each other rather than sort of at odds with one another. So I think the word battles were always trying to stimulate and challenge the others to do better, to think better and not to carry grudges out of the classroom. So for me that was, I think, a very exciting time.

I also made some really wonderful contacts with faculty there. Besides Scheiner, who was my advisor, I had this wonderful contact with Richard Kohn, who is a professor of military history, something I thought I would never ever get that excited about. He really brought it to life. He's interested in *social* military history, not to get into the great battles, but what are the issues that go with being a soldier in a democracy, a soldier in a military complex in the middle of the Cold War? Plus he was a very warm, genuine, caring person, and he was a faculty member who I could go to and talk to. He would sit and listen and offer good advice and good suggestions. When the down periods came, he would sort of buoy me up, and when up periods came, he kept an even balance so it didn't get too much out of kilter. So for me he was a really important factor in those early years.

ROSS: Now, at some point in this period, I believe you were presenting and publishing papers on Camden and Elizabeth [New Jersey]. How did you get into that work, and what role did that research play in your scholarship?

CREW: Well, as I said, I had come to Rutgers with a focus on African American history and urban history, and I think one of the visions that Seth Scheiner had was to get a group of graduate students beginning to study the urban history of New Jersey. That is probably one of the most urban states in the United States but one of the least studied states, so that I think all of us who were graduate students began looking around for topics in the New Jersey area that would be of interest to us. I was particularly interested in and beginning to look at the development of African American communities in the secondary cities rather than New York and Chicago and Philadelphia. What's going on in the next-level size city and how does that development process parallel or differ from the bigger cities that were getting all of the study in the books at that time? And as we looked around New Jersey, we settled on Elizabeth and Camden, one because Elizabeth is sort of in the shadow of New York and Camden is in the shadow of Philadelphia, but they were slightly different cities in terms of kind of industry they had there, the size of the city and just a number of factors.

It was a nice chance to sort of compare two different places simultaneously to see if the development process for those communities were the same as they were in the big cities--were they sort of parallel in secondary cities, or are there significant differences between the two? You tend to get a much more southern orientation in Camden, as you do with Philadelphia, than you do with Elizabeth and New York. So I was also trying to see who were the people who were coming there, how are they settling, and how's that going to unfold. And the other part of it was that it was during the time frame when statistics was the big issue, and the nice thing about New Jersey is they had state censuses for 1905 and 1915 at a time when you could only get the U. S. Census, I think, 1890, because the 1900 one had been lost in the fire. So it gave me a chance to get census material up through 1915 that you couldn't have got in other states. So it was a really nice set of information to use for analysis, to understand the people who were coming there, a variety of things that are probably pretty boring these days but at that time seemed very exciting.

ROSS: I wanted to ask you, since you've done so much work in the black migration and you have alluded briefly to the fact that more southerners perhaps were in Camden than in Elizabeth, would you expand on that a little bit? Was this the first time you began to look at migration patterns?

CREW: Yes, it was, although I think we were all sort of aware of them in the larger context because in the course of studying African American history, you learn about these migrations, and that migration to the cities during World War I is a very well known one. But I really hadn't looked at it in specific kinds of ways, and that's what was interesting about looking at Camden and Elizabeth. And also, by looking at the time frame from 1890 to 1920, you began to see how the waves came, and you began to understand chain migration, how people would go to other places where they had family or friends or kin in the same place, as a way of having a friendly atmosphere when they arrived there. So for me it was very interesting to see that happen and to look at the nature of the cities as they began to grow.

What happened was that Camden's black population just took off, like a train rolling down the tracks. It was just lots and lots of people coming there very early on and just built up to 1920. In Elizabeth, it was a lot slower process of people coming in. They were largely southerners, but what you could see in Camden is that you'd have a lot of people from one state beginning to come and then congregating together, and you have this growth of the black community in Camden at a much faster rate than you ever did in Elizabeth. That was part of the interest of the study, that you do have different size populations and trying to sort through why they're growing faster or slower in the two different places. Who were emerging as the leaders? Were they southerners? Were they northern-born African Americans—all those issues. Those were different between the two cities, with Elizabeth having a much more northern orientation to it and Camden having a much more southern orientation.

I don't think there's any definitive conclusion that came out of that, just the nuances and the differences were sort of nice to track. Prior to that, there weren't that many studies of smaller cities, so this began to say there're some parallels but so many differences that one needs to be aware of when they're doing that kind of research. And it did carry over directly to my work after that because, by looking at those populations in terms of the individual families and people, it made me think more and more about what that meant in the larger context of the United States, and I sort of carried that interest with me even after I finished graduate school.

ROSS: Did you have an opportunity to do any interviews in connection with this research?

CREW: I only had a chance to do one interview at that time, and it was the interview of a woman in Elizabeth who had lived there since the early part of the century. Her family had been there a long time, too. I had a chance to interview her for a couple of hours about the community in Elizabeth, which was very helpful in terms of sort of situating it. Her life was so unique, though, because they were very middle class. She was the first black schoolteacher in Elizabeth, so therefore I think her experiences were different. But it raised a lot of issues that I then did follow up in other places. She talked about the fact that the children in Elizabeth for a long time prior to there being a black school there—colored school, as they called it—had gotten their schooling elsewhere. That for me was sort of interesting, to figure out where they went to do their schooling. Later on, I found out that they were going to Newark for a while, which is nearby but not real close by, to have to go to get their schooling. So it raised a question of how many kids were actually getting schooling and then how did they get back and forth. I could never quite figure that one out, but the interview was very stimulating in that sense to understand the lengths to which people had to go to get their education, and the challenges that she faced. I could find the school on the census, and it kept moving, and then it disappeared. I was just following the lives of those schools and having an individual I could link to it in a certain kind of way was very good. I have to admit I was not as good about getting down to Camden and doing interviews there. I can't remember why, in part because I just had a harder time making the links. But also it just didn't quite work out in the ways that I'd hoped.

ROSS: How did your job search go? Or were you plucked out immediately?

CREW: Well, no. It was very interesting. It was sort of this bittersweet experience because all through graduate school, I had been teaching at Douglass College, which is one of the subsets of Rutgers, and had probably spent about four years in teaching, going from a teaching assistant to actually getting a job as an instructor, I think in part because they wanted to offer more African American history courses. I was happy to do that because it was a way of, I think, reinforcing the work that I was doing already. And about the time I was nearing completion, they had a job opening come available. So I interviewed for that job. The interview went very well, but then they selected someone else, which was interesting, to say the least, and disappointing.

So I then had to look elsewhere to see what other possibilities there were, and I think what happened is that we wound up coming to the University of Maryland/Baltimore County because my wife is from Washington, DC, and we were expecting our first child and consciously wanted to settle into a place near one of the two sets of grandparents. For us the grandparent/grandchild connection was so important that we wanted to make sure that our children would have that experience. So that, plus the fact that I liked very much the University of Maryland/Baltimore County, the faculty there, and I was going to get a joint appointment, which I very much wanted to be in American history and in African American history. So that led us down this way. That's largely how we wound up here.

It's always interesting how choices unfold. At the time I was very much disappointed that I wasn't going to be in New Jersey for the rest of my days, and now I look back at it and think that someone was watching out for me. (Laughs)

ROSS: So tell me a little bit about your experience, both in the classroom and any research that you were able to follow up on when you were in Baltimore.

CREW: Coming to UMBC was really wonderful in many ways. On the heels of Douglass College, it was a much different group of students. It is a campus in which there are a lot of commuters, a lot of students who work and go to school at the same time, an awful lot of students for whom it was their first generation going to college. So they came with a much different perspective, a much different attitude about education than I had experienced at Rutgers and at Douglass College, where I think that was just sort of an expected part of one's life. So I found it extremely stimulating that the students asked different kinds of questions. They came from all kind of political positions, so we had some terrific conversations, sometimes ones I didn't expect. There was a nice give-and-take that I found really exciting.

The other part of it was that I had a chance to sort of stretch myself a little bit in the kinds of courses that I was teaching. When I came down, I think I wound up teaching a course on urbanization there, which was fun. I think the one I enjoyed the most, though, was a course I got to teach on African American history in Maryland, the State of Maryland.

ROSS: And of course it was ongoing at that time.

CREW: Oh, yes! Absolutely! Exactly. But what was even more fun for me was the way I set up that class. I really wanted us all out and about, and I really wanted them doing hands-on research in a much more concrete way, so we took several field trips. One was into Baltimore to see some of the historic sites. I think one of the neat trips we had was to go up to see the Oblate Sisters' complex up near Baltimore. So the kids really had a chance to learn more about the area in which they lived. I had a lot of kids from Baltimore who really hadn't traveled much beyond the city itself, so it gave them a chance to get out. I had them meet historians, sort of community historians. I had them go back and look at back issues of *The Afro-American*, and I had each of them assigned a decade. They'd go through and talk about what they saw, looking not only at the news stories but the advertisements and the classifieds, just to get a sense of what those communities were interested in and about.

It probably was indirectly my first introduction to more of a public history orientation, and I had a lot of fun with that, doing that. I also had a chance to teach a minicourse—we had minicourses between December and February—on family history. And I was able to have a couple of people and do presentations about their own family history. It was not a very formalized oral history experience, but it was a chance for people to see how important it was to conduct those kinds of interviews to learn more about themselves and their own families. So I had a terrific time in many ways at the University of Maryland/Baltimore County. It opened up new ways of thinking about history and different questions getting raised in my contact with the students. And good faculty and colleagues who I thought were stimulating and enjoyable to be around.

ROSS: Obviously, this gave you and your students a sense of the importance of the personal point of view, personal recollections, to supplement the documents.

CREW: Absolutely. I think for the students it was a chance to see history come alive in ways they might not have had before. It wasn't just in the book that you brought to class, even if you had read books that had some personal recollections in it. It was a chance to see it unfolding and hear people talk about it in a very intimate way. I assume —you never know with students, whether they're taking it

in the way you want them to, that they really began to feel differently about how history could have an impact on their own lives and understand their place in society.

ROSS: And then to have them do this individualized research—you mentioned that you assigned different decades of *The Afro-American* to different students, so that they don't feel that they're doing a routine kind of assignment where everybody can do the same thing. Everybody has to do his own thing.

CREW: Not only that. I made them do reports back to their fellow students so that everyone could benefit from their work and do some comparison. And then I also gave them the opportunity to do some intern work with other places. I know I had one student who went down to Annapolis and worked with a small black museum there, helping them go through their archival buildings and organizing it, and for her it was a great chance to get a sense of how these records look and how you begin to work with them to make them accessible to other people. So I think it gave them a lot of opportunities to see history in action, in ways they might not have before.

ROSS: So how did you make the transition from Baltimore to Washington?

CREW: I wish I could say it was very clearly thought out and a very smooth transition. I'm not sure it was that. Largely, I think what was going on were a couple of things. One is that while I loved the University of Maryland, the pay scale was not too terrific and, for a person who had a young family, it was a problem that I had to think about. And I really had to begin to think whether or not I could continue in that line of work or if I had to think about other kinds of possibilities. I had just begun to explore that, and one of the wonderful things that happened is that I met a new colleague, Jim Horton, who works at George Washington University, and he became someone I could sort of talk to about issues and think them through. I was beginning to think maybe I needed to go into administration, that that might be the path to follow in terms of sort of staying connected with the university but in a path that had more remuneration connected with it.

Well, oddly enough, what happened is that the American History Museum got a new director, Roger Kennedy, I think in 1979, and Roger came with the idea that he wanted to put into this museum new historians, new blood, just a different orientation, more connected to his which is focused toward social history. He came from the Ford Foundation and he particularly wanted to add more African Americans to the staff here. There was a shortage, let us say, at that time, and he was able to get funds from the Ford Foundation to hire some people to come on board. One of the people that he first interviewed was Jim Horton, but Jim was too far along in his career to even think about switching from that to come into this place. But I was in that moment where I wasn't tenured yet, didn't have a lot to lose if I switched careers, and he suggested I come here for the interview. I interviewed, and I got the job, the first time I'd even thought about working in a museum.

But it was exciting. I think working with Roger Kennedy, who had this vision of social history as an important part of what he was doing, the fact that I got plugged in with one of the more established curators in the museum [Bernard Finn], working with him, as I call it, as a management trainee, and I give him a lot of credit for giving me a number of tasks early on that gave me exposure to a wide variety of people in the museum. I think the very first task he gave me was to do a small exhibition, and that forced me to get in contact with various members of the staff around the museum, from curatorial to design to the exhibits production staff, and to talk with them about how you in fact do this. And I think what was smart on his part was that it also made me come to them asking them for information, and not presenting myself as someone who knew it all, who had a Ph.D. and they should listen to. I think that allowed me to come in as a new person and to establish myself as a colleague as opposed to someone who had been hired by the director. I think it made a big difference in terms of my education to the museum world, because I not only began to see all the intricacies that went into it but also gained acceptance as a member of the staff who was willing to learn and to pay attention to people who had experience. So that was a good launch for me, and I think it made a difference in terms of just my getting comfortable at the museum pretty quickly.

ROSS: And it introduced you to a spectrum of museum staff and in the most agreeable way.

CREW: Absolutely. I think I couldn't have gotten started better than through that device, and I think it just sort of built from there on.

ROSS: What was the exhibition?

CREW: At that time, the Smithsonian cosponsored an exhibition with a country in the world, and I think each of the museums would do a small exhibition on that country. That year it was Egypt. We began by looking at a series of books/manuscripts that had been crafted when Napoleon had led an expedition to Egypt about the early part of the nineteenth century. And while they were there, they had scientists and artists and a whole array of nonmilitary people capture their impressions of Egypt: the vegetation, the animal life, the soil, the weather, the people, the climate, everything—in these wonderful sketchbooks. Initially, the idea was just to show the results of those studies and open these books up and let people see them.

Well, what evolved through my conversations with the rest of the staff was to do an exhibition that looked at the impact of the Egyptian motif in the decorative arts in the United States. And so we began to look at where this began to show itself more and more. These books had a revival in the latter half of the nineteenth century that suddenly began to see variations on Egyptian architecture and decorative arts and other things, showing up in American products. So you had glassware, you'd have architecture, you would have clothing and jewelry and just a wide array of things that would have this Egyptian motif in it. So we began to show that throughout the collection in the museum.

What started out as a two- or three-case flat exhibit turned into this larger exhibit in which we had several cases that had different kinds of objects in it that sort of showed how the study resulted in an impact upon the look of a wide variety of things in American society. So it was a lot of fun and gave, I think, a number of the curatorial units a chance to highlight some of their neater objects and became a wonderful collaborative effort.

ROSS: Is there a philosophical umbrella under which Smithsonian museums operate, or are you each on your own?

CREW: No, no. I think each one is on their own. I think what is true in the museum field is that this movement towards the team approach tends to be the newer ground rather than the unusual, and I think people adopt it to varying degrees depending upon where they are in their own development, in their own culture, and how willing people are to really share ideas and share these personal focuses on particular topics. I think some people are easier about that, and others resist it more. It's also a matter of who's in charge of the museum and what kind of approach they like to employ with it. So no, it's not necessarily the norm. It's not abnormal either, but I think each place has its own style of crafting and generating exhibitions, although I think there are great parallels, if you think about the fact that we also very much focus on science and technology, and what we've I think agreed to as a museum is that we're really interested in how society and individuals and technology interact with one another. It is that those areas where they come in contact that are really interesting and exciting for the visitors to learn about. I think more and more they are looking at the social context in which the arts have been produced or at least trying to translate back, so that it's a growing interest I think of all museums just how quickly they take this on.

ROSS: At what point did "Field to Factory" begin to brew and simmer?

CREW: I think it wasn't until about two or three years into my time here, and I had had a chance to work on probably three to five or six different exhibitions during that time—small-size up to large-size—in various capacities, sometimes serving as the chief curatorial presence for an exhibition, other times serving as the sort of chief curatorial assistant, as a way of learning more about the process.

ROSS: You know, everybody has always until recently considered that the Smithsonian had bottomless pockets, and to hear about the Smithsonian doing fund-raising, we've kind of had to ease our consciousness into that. Tell me about this: how does it happen?

CREW: What I've found, especially with "Field to Factory," which was my first real major involvement in fund-raising, was the fact that you would sit down with the development person in the museum and they could help frame it, but a lot of calls you had to make yourself. That was a real learning process for me, to get used to making calls to people you never met before, who had no reason to want to talk to you, and then try to convince them about the merits of the work that you're doing and try to set up a further meeting in which you could make more of a sale of the idea. So it's a challenging experience to go through, very humbling, I think, because you're really dependent on someone else's good will to think about whether or not they would fund something that you think's important, that you're

very passionate about and that they may agree at one level but they may not have the money to do it, or with all the competing additional projects out there, this may not be the one they choose to do. It's a little hard at first because you just know this is important and that people should be in love with it, and when they're not, you're sort of feeling that you've done something wrong personally. So it's a good experience. If you can just have the money appear on your doorstep, it's much easier than doing fund-raising.

ROSS: What was the origin of the concept of the exhibition, "Field to Factory"?

CREW: A couple of different places. One clearly was the dissertation work that I'd done in graduate school, and that had sort of whet my appetite. The other part of it, though, was my revelations as I began talking to family members, about the fact that my own family had had experience in this migration. And the more I talked to other people, they had family members who were part of it, too, and I think this very human side of the story is what really captured my attention. Early on, I was able to—as we were working on the project—conduct some interviews with members of my family as well as members of my wife's family, who were very typical participants in this. My wife's family moved to Washington, D.C., and other parts of them moved to other parts of the East Coast, right in the 1930s-1940s period. They're from the South, so it 's a very typical pattern.

My own family moved in the twenties from the Carolinas to Atlanta to Cleveland, Ohio, by way of Cincinnati, so their experiences also very much paralleled the things I'd been reading about in the books. So the chance to sit down with some of them and talk about their experiences was really terrific. Personally, for me, the chance to have contact with my own family and to interview them and finally to learn things about the family that I hadn't had a chance to hear before, in part because I was always considered, you know, the youngster, not quite an adult. But now you're coming in a different way. It was really a wonderful opportunity to understand better my own family history and how it connected to the larger American history, but also how I fit in to what they'd done and experienced, and to understand who I was and sometimes what some of these traits were that I had that I couldn't see in my own father but might spring up in other parts of the family and, more important, to begin to recognize some of the traits that my children had were coming from other parts of the family, too. It's sort of nice to make those connections and understand the kinds ...

ROSS: It's not all your fault. (Laughs)

CREW: No. No. Nor can I take all the credit either. It's really a lot of fun. The other part of it was the chance to interview some other people around the country and to make use of so many interviews that had been done. So oral history very much became a base upon which a lot of other things sprang. Clearly, you have to read all the general literature that's done, but the oral histories begin to give it life and different insights than one might have found in the traditional sources. So for me it was the interviews, plus there were a number of repositories around the country that had interviews with people who lived during this period, that really helped to enliven the research and the presentation we were able to do.

ROSS: Was this your introduction to oral history?

CREW: Formally, yes. I mean I'd sort of done informal things before, but it really got me involved in OHMAR, and in talking with people who were skilled in this and understanding the techniques and the planning that goes into doing good interviews. So you're absolutely correct: that was my first interview thing, involving formal oral history gathering.

ROSS: How did you locate these repositories that had information that was of interest to you?

CREW: I think there was an oral history guide that I turned to for starters. But then the other thing we found was that a lot of organizations for the Bicentennial in '76 had interviewed older residents of their communities. So we began searching for those kind of interviews. And we would find that almost invariably that was the right age for them interviewing people who were young enough to be part of the migration in their earlier days, so that in the 'teens, the twenties. and the thirties, that was just the time they were beginning to move from one location to another. So many people that were interviewed in '76 for northern communities were migrants, so if you went back to those interviews, you were able to learn more and more about their own personal experiences, which helped us understand the migration experience better.