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Race reform group's history in two parts

Rival accounts: SNCC members' memories of activities don't always match documents from that era.

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When civil rights movement veterans and the historians who write about them get together and discuss the pivotal events of the early 1960s, inevitable differences quickly emerge. The human memories of those who were there and the old but contemporaneous documents relied upon by scholars sometimes offer very divergent portraits of the people and organizations who spurred the racial reform of the American South.

How the writers struggle to square what they "know" happened with how those who took part now remember what occurred involves an insoluble human dilemma in which both parties ought to constantly remind themselves that their version of history may be both selectively incomplete and sometimes downright wrong.

Two weeks ago, dozens of veterans of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC --- universally spoken of as "Snick") assembled in Raleigh to mark the 40th anniversary of SNCC's founding in April 1960. SNCC sprang out of the lunch-counter "sit-ins" that black college students began in Greensboro, N.C., on Feb. 1 of that year, and which quickly spread to city after city all across the upper South. Ella Jo Baker, an experienced organizer who was then the temporary executive director of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s nascent Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), took the initiative of calling for a Southwide conference of student sit-in leaders at Shaw University. Out of that gathering came SNCC, which more than any other civil rights organization served as the cutting edge of black activism in the crucial years from 1961 through 1965.

Sitting in the row behind me on the first morning of the Raleigh reunion was Virginius B. Thornton III, who had been at Shaw 40 years earlier as a student activist from Petersburg, Va. Just to my left were two young editors from the Martin Luther King Papers Project at Stanford University, Kerry Taylor and Adrienne Clay, who had brought with them a binder of photocopied documents, unearthed from Baker's files in the SCLC Papers, listing the people who had been there at SNCC's founding. As I leafed through the binder, not only was Thornton's name readily visible on the roster from 1960, but lo and behold, one of the brief reports recounting the 1960 discussions was carefully signed "V. B. Thornton, Recorder." I quietly passed the binder to him --- the first time he had seen the minutes since the day he took them.

That happenstance vignette perfectly captures the unspoken tension: Can the youngsters (and some of us not-so-youngsters) who weren't there but have immersed ourselves in the surviving

documents actually know more about what happened 40 years ago than the people who were there?

Hardly a half hour went by before one SNCC veteran, Judy Richardson, seemed to answer that question with a resounding "yes." In the 1960s, she served as an assistant to SNCC's executive secretary, James Forman, and took the minutes of innumerable meetings. Those minutes are invaluable for anyone who wants to understand or write about SNCC, and Richardson seemed to agree that those documents are a more detailed and dependable historical source than the people who created them. "I don't remember these meetings even though I took the notes for them," Richardson said.

Carmichael's joke

But she, like most of the women veterans of SNCC, both black and white, do not believe that the historians should rely on the documentary record when the activists have clear memories of particular events. Their favorite and most notorious example involves a much-quoted statement made in 1964 by the now-deceased Stokely Carmichael, who two years later became SNCC's chairman.

Carmichael's remark, that the position of women in the movement was "prone," came one night at a SNCC retreat following discussion of an anonymously authored SNCC "Position Paper" on "Women in the Movement." The paper catalogued a number of insults and putdowns --- all-male decision-making bodies, references to female staff members as "girls," and how women almost always were asked to take the minutes --- while underscoring that "most women don't talk about these kinds of incidents."

The two authors --- Sandra Cason "Casey" Hayden and Mary King, both white --- withheld their names because they feared derision, and most historians who have examined the issue, find Carmichael's joke --- playing off the "Position Paper" rubric --- derisive in the extreme. The women's paper made the parallel between racism and sexism explicit: "Assumptions of male superiority are as widespread and deep rooted and every much as crippling to the woman as the assumptions of white supremacy are to the Negro."

Among historians, the conclusion that sexism was a major issue within the movement, as exemplified by Carmichael's crack, has been universally accepted for more than 20 years. As Clayborne Carson wrote in "In Struggle," his excellent history of SNCC published in 1981, Carmichael was just one among many SNCC men "who regarded the charges of sexual discrimination as a bothersome intrusion" upon more pressing civil rights issues.

Bonds across gender

In Raleigh in April 2000, however, the SNCC women insisted that the historians' perception of intense sexism within the movement was grossly overblown. "I was nurtured as much by the men as I was by the women" in SNCC, Richardson declared. The historians' acceptance of widespread sexism, she added, "denigrates" the SNCC women and "the power that we felt within

the organization." "Absolutely," seconded Penny Patch, a white staff member who worked in southwest Georgia.

Hayden herself lamented how infamous Carmichael's joke has become and bemoaned how people who were not there in 1964 "can't understand why it was funny." "We had bonds that transcended gender conflict," she explained, and among them was a "transcendent humor" that accepted and laughed at Carmichael's witticism.

A young black woman graduate student from Howard University in Washington asked Hayden and several of the other white female veterans to address the question of tensions between white and black women within SNCC, but she got little response.

That evening two female writers, both of whom have interviewed scores of SNCC veterans, and I privately compared notes on the day's events. We all expressed regret at the extent to which the SNCC women, whom we deeply respect and admire, seem to have purged their memories of many of the unhappy incidents and tensions recounted in the surviving documents.

At least to me, our conversation embodied the presumption that we historians know best, irrespective of what those who were there might now remember and relate. However, those of us who write about the movement ought to be more appreciative, and more tolerant, of the emotional selectivity of human memory.

When Theresa del Pozzo, also a white female SNCC veteran, spoke in Raleigh of "how much fun" the movement was, and how those years had been "the defining experience of my adult life," those of us who weren't there 40 years ago need to accept the emotional truth of such recollections.

Time and again the surviving documents detail how, as one Raleigh participant put it, "we fought like dogs." But scholars must adopt an attitude of critical humility toward how complete are the truths we can derive from the thousands of old letters, minutes, and reports.

Richardson reminds us that SNCC was "very much a family," and all the documents in the world may fail to show how, as another veteran poignantly put it, "people who didn't even like each other loved each other."

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