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Oral History and Community Involvement:

The Baltimore Neighborhood Heritage Project

During the past several years, community history projects have sprung up throughout the United States. Although these projects differ widely, most share certain broadly humanistic purposes: the encouragement of cooperation between professional historians and lay people, the presentation of community history to the public, the use of history to build community identity and pride, and the encouragement of appreciation and rspéct for the participation of nonelite groups in the community's history. Some projects also adopt progressive social goals and give a historical perspective on current local issues in the hope of encouraging activism and change.

These are all laudable goals. Yet my own experience with the Baltimore Neighborhood Heritage Project persuades me that unless such local history efforts are firmly rooted in the communities being studied and have well-developed links with local institutions and organizations, these goals will be translated into a series of awkward public meetings, a collection of oral history tapes, or a photograph exhibit. Such efforts may for a time stir up some enthusiasm for the community's history, but they ultimately go nowhere. The project becomes a series of discrete events and products, not a process of enhancing the historical consciousness of the community's residents. This outcome is particularly likely when class differences separate the project organizers and the members of the community.

Developing links between a community history project and its community is difficult. Any such project that seeks to involve local people in producing their own history and to have meaning for the community itself must confront complex social relationships and problems of interpretation. I will address

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some of these difficulties by discussing my own and others' experiences working on the Baltimore Neighborhood Heritage Project (BNHP), a community history project that has tried to recover and present the history of six working-class and ethnic neighborhoods in Baltimore.

The BNHP began in 1977. Local activists and academics with an interest in local social history got together with city agency personnel to design and seek funding for a community history project that would focus on one of Baltimore's older working-class ethnic neighborhoods. The group wanted to democratize the historical record, both by documenting the daily life experiences of ordinary people and by working from "the inside," from the perspective of the people themselves; to nurture the self-respect of senior citizens, whose life experiences are all too often devalued by our culture; and to communicate to younger generations, especially schoolchildren, a sense of their own family, neighborhood, and city identities. Some of us also believed that if community residents began to connect their personal histories with broader social processes, they not only would be personally enriched but might feel that their communities were "worth something" and so be moved to take a more activist, critical stance with respect to their social and economic circumstances.

Although unsure about how to achieve these goals, we had some ideas. We did not want to limit our research methods to oral history interviews alone; but we felt that the process and products of interviewing could be a powerful tool for achieving some of our ends. We also knew that we wanted our research to have tangible products that could in some way be returned to the community we were researching. Lastly, we sought to involve neighborhood residents in every step of our project.

In early 1978 we received a grant from the National Center for Urban Ethnic Affairs to develop a project that would put some of these ideas to a practical test. The NCUEA, a national, nonprofit research, educational, and technical assistance organization, has been involved since the 1970s in efforts to catalyze neighborhood power. Recognizing that the majority of the country's urban working class is of ethnic origin and aware also of the potential value of bringing neighborhood activists together with university personnel; it has frequently supported town-gown collaborative projects that celebrate ethnic diversity. We began, then, by outlining a plan to develop an oral history program at a senior citizens' center in Highlandtown, a stable and rather prosperous white working-class neighborhood with strong Polish, German, Italian,

and Greek roots. We chose this area because it had a clear geographic and social identity and had developed, through a series of bitter battles with City Hall over the siting of a road, a certain self-consciousness as well as a public presence. In addition, a number of its leaders, who had a citywide reputation, were on our board and could, therefore, introduce us to the community. We hoped that this oral history program would catalyze a general enthusiasm for local history, train senior citizens in oral history methods, develop historically oriented public programs, help locate (often hidden) written primary source material, and encourage the publication of a popularly written local history. Initial staff was to include two Highlandtown residents who would be trained in the methods of oral history and then interview people at the senior citizens' center. These local oral historians would, we believed, be particularly sensitive to the details and nuances of the local culture and would encourage a community identification with the project from the outset. A history graduate student, who was to supplement the interviews with research into the written record; myself, who was to train the community oral historians and senior citizens in the methods of oral history; and the project director composed the rest of the staff.

A serious problem arose immediately. Despite our board members' network of contacts, we could not find two community oral historians. Our inability to do so suggests that historians' enthusiasm for community history is not widely shared as a formal aspect of our culture—that people's sense of their own history is private, personal, and grounded in the family and therefore is not congenial to institutional frameworks. Repeatedly it took longer than we had foreseen to explain to people what we were trying to do and why, and to engage their support and participation.

In the first of many readjustments, we shuffled our staff so that the graduate student and I began doing interviews. Because little background information was available to inform our interviews, because we wanted to remain as open as possible to our interviewees' ways of structuring and interpreting their own experiences, and because we could not agree about how to focus the interviews, we did not develop a tight interview outline. Instead we followed a life-history format, eliciting chronological accounts of our interviewees' lives and then focusing on topics they seemed most willing to talk about. We used this general format throughout the project, though interviews emphasized more specific topics as we learned more about a neighborhood's history.

In fact, our entire interview collection suffers from a lack of focus that stemmed from a fundamental confusion about the kind of information we wanted. As historians, we clearly went after specific historical information—data—about family, work, and community life. Yet as any thoughtful inter-

viewer soon realizes, interviews are equally valuable as sources of insight into consciousness, and we—more intuitively than consciously—also approached interviewing from this perspective. So, on the one hand, many of our interviews contain valuable, but maddeningly spotty, information on standard topics of interest to historians. On the other hand, they have richly detailed ethnographic data suggestive of the beliefs, values, and perceptions of interviewees, but this kind of material is not explored as fully as it could have been.

My colleague and I began to visit a Highlandtown senior citizens' center, trying to build interest in the project and do some interviews. Though people were cordial to us, we found that they were not at all anxious to share what we thought were very rich life stories. They thought we were prying. But gradually, as we created a certain amount of trust, a few people agreed to be interviewed. These were uniformly warm encounters. But they were not consciousness-raising, at least for the interviewees; the interview process did not lead them to put those individual stories into any social context. People told me personal stories about hard times during the Depression, exploitative working conditions, and family difficulties. The meaning or interpretation they gave to the experiences of their lives was personal—generally a feeling of sturdiness, of pride in having survived difficult circumstances. If anyone's consciousness was raised, it was mine, for try as I would to get at feelings of outrage or exploitation, or some perception of broader social forces shaping their lives, I would always end up hearing some version of: "Times were rough, but we survived," or "Life has been a long string of experiences, but I've made it through for sixty or seventy or eighty years." In fact, people agreed to be interviewed in part because they wanted to communicate this sense of survival to me and others who would listen to the tapes. Ironically, this "insider's view" ran counter to some of our original ideas about community history's potential.

Why did this theme of survival figure so deeply in the two hundred interviews that the BNHP collected? The popular ideologies of independence, individual achievement, and respect for the "self-made man" have obviously stamped this perception on many Americans. In addition, the social position, closeness to the immigration experience, and age of our particular set of interviewees gave this notion of survival particular force. Though we were sensitive to class, sex, racial, and ethnic differences in choosing interviewees, they were an essentially self-selected group: sociable and open people with the time and energy to talk with relative strangers in a fairly intimate way; self-assured enough to feel that they had something worth saying; visible, available members of the community. Indeed, all were, within the context of

the neighborhood, survivors. We did not seek out those who had done less well. As first- and second-generation urban Americans, who still had strong memories of extremely hard times in the old country or the rural South and during their early years in Baltimore, they are proud of having coped with all of that, of having done well enough on their terms, of working steadily, of raising a family, of buying a home. Finally, our interviewees were all elderly, primarily in their sixties and seventies. Most people, but especially older people, seek to understand their past as meaningful and worthwhile. Memory tends to shape experience in this light, and our interviewees thus emphasized survival, defining it in the very terms that described their own experience: achieving enough security to be self-reliant in their old age; raising children who now felt a responsibility to help care for their elderly parents; maintaining the will and the vitality to "get around."

In the fall of 1978 I began teaching oral history to a small group of Highlandtown residents in the hope of recruiting local interviewers. This class included several of our initial interviewees, some of their friends, and a few younger people from the community committed to recording its history. Again, several problems arose. People apparently came to the workshops as much to talk among themselves about old times as to learn how to interview. My efforts to discuss good interview topics often led to long strings of reminiscences. Frustrated with their lack of focus and seeking to ensure some consistency in the interviews, I gave them an interview outline, an adaptation of the chronological and topical outline the project had developed earlier. As a result, I, not they, determined the historically "appropriate" interviewing questions. I did not let people do their own history.

Not that it mattered. The community interviewers usually ignored my outline and questioned people about what they thought was important. And so, in addition to the stories of struggles during hard times that seem so important to Highlandtown residents, these interviews are filled with descriptions of the area in years gone by as well as sentimental stories of family life. Topics of importance to historians—the workings of local institutions or the local political machine, the conditions and social relations of work, immigration and the process of assimilation or nonassimilation into American life—receive little coverage. Although most historians would find these community-produced tapes of limited value, the interviews do offer some clues into how Highlandtown residents view their own history.

The tension between professional and community historians' approaches appears here at two levels. The first is the difference in the information the two groups think is historically important. What do we mean when we say that we want people to do their own history? Whose version and definition of

the past are we seeking? A related methodological tension arises when community residents record their own history. These community historians have a stake in maintaining good relations with their interviewees, and since they share the same social world and world view, are unlikely to challenge them in any case. As a result, their interviews are uniformly polite and unchallenging, shaped by a reluctance or an inability to be critical of the collective neighborhood experience. These unresolved tensions in the case of the BNHP produced difficult historiographic and social problems, which were further complicated by the nature of the evidence that oral history interviews provide.

Early in 1979 we received Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) funds from a city agency to expand the project into five additional Baltimore neighborhoods. In order to select our neighborhoods judiciously, we had to be more precise about what we meant by a "neighborhood." Defining it in terms of bounded geographic and social space as well as a set of shared experiences, we decided to work in neighborhoods that were spatially self-contained and had a definite class, racial, or ethnic identity. We also sought to reflect the city's racial and ethnic diversity and to work in areas where previous community activism or scholarly research would give us some base upon which to build. Our selections included South Baltimore, a multiethnic community not unlike Highlandtown; Hampden, a community built around the textile industry; Old West Baltimore, the largest self-contained black community in the city; the local "Little Italy"; and Lower Park Heights, a lower-middle-class, primarily elderly Jewish community.

The choice of these neighborhoods led indirectly to a thematic bias in our subsequent work. The underlying question of our inquiry became: why have these neighborhoods remained stable in the midst of significant urban flux? We were savvy enough not to romanticize the neighborhood as a category, but we perhaps overemphasized the value of rootedness and stability. We did not, for example, interview many people who left a neighborhood, having for one reason or another found life there unsatisfying. And we did not pay enough attention to the centrifugal forces threatening and even destroying neighborhood life.

An even more fundamental problem, however, was the relevance of our notion of neighborhood to the local residents. On one level our definition was a reasonably accurate reflection of community perceptions: most people, when asked what made their neighborhood "theirs," talked first about certain

physical landmarks and then about the special "friendliness" of the people there. Yet "neighborhood," as a category of social experience, may not have been as significant to local residents as the overlapping communities shaped by family, church, work, and ethnic group. Indeed, the oral testimony shows the close integration among these realms of experience in people's lives. "Neighborhood" as the overall organizing concept for the BNHP may have been an artificial or at least an oversimplified construct.

With CETA funds we hired twelve oral historians, two per neighborhood; their job was akin to that of anthropological field workers. Using a local senior citizens' center as a base of operation, they were to get the "feel" of the neighborhood, conduct interviews with long-time residents, locate primary source materials, develop historically oriented local programs, and generally catalyze a formal, public interest in the area's history.

We now decided that our interest in using local people as interviewers was a false issue. It was not necessary that interviewers live in the neighborhood they were studying, so long as they had self-conscious social and political commitments to it. We tried to hire people with both a sensitivity to neighborhood values and some analytical distance from the neighborhood experience. Our best interviewers were generally younger people who had been born in the neighborhood they were working in or one similar to it, but who had left for schooling or a less circumscribed way of life. Unemployed community organizers, such as the former VISTA volunteers who seem to abound in Baltimore, proved to be particularly good interviewers.

Shortly after we hired our community oral historians, we received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) to hire professional historians and graduate researchers who would use written and oral sources to write six popular neighborhood histories, which could be made widely available to the city schools and the public. These histories were one way we hoped to return the history to the community. The project formed a research team for each neighborhood, consisting of the two oral historians, the professional historian, and the graduate researcher.

After a summer of work by the research teams, the entire staff reviewed the results and raised questions about the use of the oral history materials similar to those raised previously about the Highlandtown tapes. The professional historians felt that the interviewers lacked the historical background and analytical framework to pursue certain subjects in sufficient depth. In addition, they would at times let the interviewees ramble on about topics that were of little historical or ethnographic interest. These problems probably could have been remedied in time. If the professional historians had taken a hand in selecting the interviewers, and if research teams had met for more than just a

summer, perhaps the oral historians would have been more fully inducted into the craft of historical inquiry.

At the same time, the professional historians failed to appreciate the tapes' value. They used the oral testimony simply as a source of specific information, illustrative quotations, or interesting anecdotes that fit their own analytical framework. They were unable to penetrate beneath the surface of the informants' words. One project historian, for example, noted the lack of education among the residents of the mill community he was researching and concluded that education and, by implication, upward mobility were unimportant to them. But if he had listened more carefully to the stories of mill workers going to work at the age of fourteen or twelve or even ten, had heard their pride in their way of life, and had perceived the way the factory owners' paternalism had both satisfied and restrained them, his interpretation of their lack of formal education would have been more subtle. He would have understood that although upward mobility was part of *his* value system, it was neither possible nor particularly desirable for these millworkers.

I had a similar experience in my own interviewing, an instance in which the cognitive structure my interviewee used to interpret her experience simply did not correspond to mine. I asked her if she had ever worked outside her home for pay. She said no, and we went on to another line of questioning. Then, in another context, she mentioned that she had occasionally worked as a waitress in a local restaurant. Wasn't this a job, I asked? "No," she said. Although she did earn money at it, it wasn't really a job; she was simply "helping out" Helen, the restaurant owner and a friend of hers. I then asked her if she had ever "helped out" anyone else and found that she had had a number of such jobs. What she clued me into, of course, was an entirely different perception of work outside the home than I had expected, one in which work itself was primarily an extension of her role as a good neighbor and friend.

Oral history material must be used in much the same way as intellectual historians use their documents—as clues into the mind of a person or a group. Such information can then be coordinated with the data gathered from more traditional social history sources to provide not just an "insider's view" but a more powerful social analysis. Yet the problems involved in doing this are as much social as intellectual, for the historians on our project, like most historians, operated in the halls of academe, not in the streets. Their graduate training, professional identity, and relatively privileged social position created an intellectual framework that shaped their historical analysis. But the talk of ordinary people often fails to penetrate the professionals' world view in any meaningful way. Professional historians thus find it hard to give such interviews the sensitive interpretation they demand.

Our field worker–oral historians, though naive in history, were skilled social observers whose sensitivity and observations have significantly enriched the insight of the professionals. Their historical naiveté made them especially sensitive to interviewees' ways of structuring their own experiences. Although interviews should be a dialectic between interviewer and interviewee, they can be highly manipulative encounters. Interviewers often "lead the witness" to support their theses. Our oral historians, unlike the professional historians they worked with, had no such theses. They had to figure out how to get into the mind of each interviewee and were open to fresh insights and perspectives. Moreover, precisely because the oral historians lacked an in-depth knowledge of conventional categories of historical inquiry, which generally focus on the more formal, public aspects of experience, their interviews are especially rich in details about the more private dimensions of daily life, such as family dynamics or coping with limited resources. Admittedly, these details are often embedded in a meandering, anecdotal style of recollection, and it takes real effort to hear them amid all the words.

In line with our goals of developing the community residents' sense of ownership in the project and returning the history to the neighborhoods, each research team submitted a draft of its history for community review. Several residents read each draft; others heard informal oral presentations. These review sessions corrected certain factual inaccuracies, yielded some further information about each neighborhood, opened up additional lines of inquiry, and helped sustain community interest. But they also raised new problems. Many community reviewers disliked the essays' academic style. Historians writing for a popular audience obviously must adopt a clearer and more vivid prose style than they typically employ. More troublesome was the booster spirit many residents seemed to favor. Some noted the scant mention of locally prominent people in the histories, a deliberate omission intended to avoid the "hit parade" approach to local history. Others did not want the histories to include anything that might be construed as even mildly critical of the neighborhood. One woman, for example, objected to the mention of the local nuns' strict teaching methods. Handling such criticisms was a delicate matter. This defensive neighborhood pride has roots in the neglect many residents of Baltimore's older urban neighborhoods have experienced at the hands of the city. At the same time, we need to challenge the parochialism and ethnocentrism that runs through this assertion of identity, since it encourages a defensive withdrawal from broader urban

participation. Our popular histories ought to convey an understanding of neighborhood not as an isolated collective experience but as a collective experience that is part of, that has been shaped by, a larger urban process.

The publications resulting from the project have been partially successful in addressing these issues. The three neighborhood histories that were ultimately completed appeared in *Maryland Historical Magazine* in the spring of 1982. Lack of funds made it impossible to issue them as separate pamphlets. All three essays have an engaging narrative style: information culled from an impressive array of sources is organized around a loose chronological framework and presented in clear prose enhanced by details, anecdotes, and quotations. The subjects of the essays are the ones social historians typically address: work, family, community institutions, and neighborhood politics. The essays are predictably weakest in interpretation; themes of survival and stability, intra-community solidarity and extra-community conflict, are present but unfocused. Although the authors render the community histories with respect and sympathy, they fail to subject them to a clear social analysis. The essays are not exercises in antiquarianism, but neither are they particularly illuminating. The most serious problem is *where* the essays appeared—the *Maryland Historical Magazine,* the publication of the frankly elitist state historical society. Though the receptivity of the magazine's editors to these articles was commendable, their publication in this journal made the essays essentially irrelevant as popular history. The general public does not read the *Maryland Historical Magazine:* it does not even know it exists.

Much more accessible has been the project's widely distributed "picture book," *Baltimore People: Baltimore Places: A Neighborhood Album,* published by the University of Baltimore (1980), which contains photographs accompanied by brief quotations from the oral history interviews, organized around the same subjects as the narrative histories that appeared in the *Maryland Historical Magazine.* The book is self-consciously celebratory. It validates aspects of working-class culture, but since it makes no effort to examine that culture critically, it is an exercise in populist nostalgia.

Our major effort to return the history we gathered to the neighborhood was a theater production, *Baltimore Voices,* a series of neighborhood sketches produced and acted by a troupe of professional actors associated with Baltimore's Theatre Project under contract to the BNHP. *Baltimore Voices* was pieced together almost entirely from the actual words of our interviewees. During the winter and spring of 1980, it was presented at approximately thirty-five local neighborhood centers, churches, and schools, drawing audiences ranging from ten to two hundred people, from a variety of social groups—young and old, working- and middle-class, black and white. An informal discussion between audience and actors followed each production. An analysis of this play suggests clearly why community history projects need well-developed links with community organizations and institutions if they are to be effective.

Baltimore Voices was potentially the best tool for political consciousness-raising that our project produced. An interview is essentially a private act, as is reading a local history. The play, however, brought people together to share a collective experience and reflect upon it afterward. It could have catalyzed or been part of a broader community dialogue about both the value of the neighborhood and the larger social forces to which it has been subjected. For a dramatic production is an especially powerful means of arousing community consciousness, putting before people's eyes the literal drama of their own and their neighbors' experiences and rendering those experiences publicly meaningful.

I am not certain that *Baltimore Voices* worked this way. Admittedly the people in the neighborhoods loved the well-written and well-acted production. People were touched and moved by it and made to feel important. Reminded of their own experiences, or those of their parents and grandparents, they left the play with a sense of well-being and expansiveness. Furthermore, as people in one neighborhood caught a glimpse of how people in other neighborhoods lived, the play may have helped break down neighborhood isolation and broaden people's consciousness of the city as a whole.

But like the interviews on which it was based, *Baltimore Voices* largely emphasized the theme of personal survival. This theme was conveyed not only through personal vignettes about the Depression and World War II but also through the vitality and wit of the people as portrayed by the actors. Certain political themes were touched upon—union organizing, racial tension, and housing displacement—yet always in personal terms. No links were made between individual experiences and broader historical processes. Despite the play's tone of "the neighborhood" versus "the powers that be," the resolution of this conflict was always presented in terms of self-help and not social change. Finally, the form of the play, focusing for about twelve minutes on each of the six neighborhoods we worked in, made any sustained exploration of issues impossible. Thus, although *Baltimore Voices* celebrated the city's working-class culture and the people with whom we worked, it did little to move people beyond themselves. And the half-formed feelings and ideas that might have been roused by the play were left half-formed. There was no mechanism for following up on them or shaping them into some new form.

There were other problems too. *Baltimore Voices* was a fairly informal play with little distance between actors and audience and a very simple set, but it was still a big production that toured the entire city. Though neighborhood

representatives previewed the play and offered comments and criticisms (in much the same way as they were invited to review our popular histories), people still viewed the play as entertainment staged by the BNHP. Some residents felt that they were able to "help out"—as numerous interviewees put it—but they continued to lack a feeling of ownership in the play or the project. Though the cast of *Baltimore Voices* and the entire project staff were quite down-to-earth in dealing with all kinds of people, considerable social distance remained between the professional staff and the people whose history we were producing. Moreover, because the play was such a big production, it required technical assistance as well as substantial planning, coordination, and publicity. A good bit of this work fell to our oral historians, and it effectively kept them from developing small neighborhood-based programs within the communities. Their efforts, too, ultimately turned on *Baltimore Voices*.

Like most critics, I am surer of the problems than the ways to solve them. But it does seem that the development of links between community history projects and community organizations can help resolve many of the problems *Baltimore Voices* and the BNHP have faced. Such links can help give a political edge to the historian's work and some perspective to the community organization's concerns. By working with activist community organizations, historians might learn how to integrate the "we survived" theme in working-class culture with an analysis of the social and economic structures that have surrounded and shaped that culture. I am not suggesting that history projects necessarily embroil themselves in community politics, nor that they only pursue themes and issues of immediate local relevance, though they certainly may do these things. What I am suggesting is that a neighborhood's history is a broadly political story—a story of power relationships, between, for example, neighborhood and city, or employee and employer. To ignore these relationships and focus only on survival continues to support a very privatized, individualistic sense of one's place in history. The purpose of community organizations, however, is to move people to take seriously their dissatisfaction with existing conditions and to bring them together in public action against the status quo. This perspective can be especially instructive, indeed challenging, to historians unfamiliar with working-class life who, anxious not to patronize, tend to celebrate the humanity of working-class people at the expense of social and political analysis.

These links can also bring historians and community residents into a more sustained and broad-based interaction than oral history interviews provide.

And these contacts can lead to a mutual appreciation of how each group—historians and community residents—thinks. The BNHP's oral historians tried to gain insight into the local social world and world view by talking informally with people at the senior citizens' centers and by hanging out, as much as time allowed, with others. This approach was practically inefficient and intellectually limited; it took a great deal of time and was extremely random. Broad-based community organizations, however, can provide a convenient means of introducing historians to diverse local groups. Community organizers, moreover, though certainly not without their own blinders, are frequently able to provide a succinct description of local social groups and processes, again facilitating historians' work both practically and intellectually. Finally, because these organizations are oriented more toward social change and less toward social service than senior citizens' centers, they seem to connect with people who are especially aware, thoughtful, and enthusiastic about the community's history, people who will, in fact, encourage historians to make a social and political analysis.

For a community history project to link up with a community organization—to share office space with it, for example—can also lead to a greater local identification with the project, a greater investment in it, and more long-term interest and participation. The history group's products and programs would likely be on a smaller scale than *Baltimore Voices*, but they would have a more lasting connection to the community. Furthermore, though senior citizens are certainly the best sources for a neighborhood's history, they are often the least interested in community history projects, for they already know the history. Community organizations can provide a wider audience for a project than the senior citizens' centers where the BNHP based much of its work.

Finally, links between history projects and community organizations can provide the practical mechanisms by which feelings of identity and pride stirred up by projects can be channeled into the ongoing lives of communities. Community history projects could be part of a much broader local organizing effort or of modest community improvements. Our oral historians, for example, found numerous wonderful storytellers but lacked a way to arrange for some of these storytellers to visit local schools and talk with young children about life years ago. An established organization could easily have set up such a project.

My experience with the BNHP has tempered my rather naive initial enthusiasm for community history projects. It has also made me aware that if such projects are to be intellectually and socially responsible, they require time, commitment, and substantial grounding in the community itself. The fate of

the project since the conclusion of *Baltimore Voices*' 1980 neighborhood tour both confirms this perspective and further suggests the serious obstacles to the long-term collaborative efforts I am advocating. By the fall of 1980 most of the project's work had been completed. Both NEH and CETA funds were running out. The project staff was sharply cut. The survivors spent most of their time processing the oral history tapes and photographs according to proper archival procedures. Some efforts were made to do more public programming with material already developed, and an additional grant was received from the Maryland Humanities Commission to develop a slide show on the history of local waterfront laborers. *Memories*, a film documenting the work of the project in the neighborhood of Hampden, was completed after two years of production. With the end of our NEH grant, the *Voices* company ceased its affiliation with the BNHP. The company revised the play for broadcast on local public television in the fall of 1982 and over the next two years secured its own grants to develop theater pieces based on local social history in cooperation with neighborhood groups and labor unions. Most of these activities felt like steps toward shutting down shop, the closure of what had obviously *not* become a permanent local history project. By 1982 the BNHP had effectively closed up.

The onset of Reaganomics in early 1981 was central to the project's collapse. CETA's termination and NEH's reorientation toward more traditional forms of inquiry cut our major sources of funds. Moreover, the project had not established enough of a community presence to make local support possible. In fact, the production-oriented activities that NEH and similar funding agencies required had undercut efforts at developing that long-term community presence. We had been funded to develop an oral history collection, a photographic archive, a theatrical production, and traveling museum, not to work with people to develop new forms of historical consciousness.

But the deepest impediment to sustained collaboration between the project and the community was profoundly social. Few historians, including those who were affiliated with the project, think of themselves as community members with specific skills and insights to share. Rather, our primary affiliation is with a nationally organized profession. This social disjuncture between professional historian and local resident erodes long-term community-based historical work. Historians are not likely to feel much social commitment to a specific locale. Colleges and universities give little support or recognition to faculty members who operate in the public arena. We are under constant pressure to engage in other, more rewarded professional activities. Given our level of training, historians are also apt to be impatient and discouraged with popular historical ideas and attitudes.

The BNHP was instrumental in developing a climate of respect for popular community history, both locally and nationally. It also helped develop a loose network of people with an interest in neighborhood history these interests in the city, and several of us associated with the project have continued our involvement with public history. Yet in retrospect I am struck by the ephemeral quality of much of our work.