

Roger R. Trask Award Lecture, 2013

The Roger R. Trask Award and Fund was established by the SHFG to honor the memory and distinguished career of the late SHFG President and longtime federal history pioneer and mentor Roger R. Trask. The award is presented to persons whose careers and achievements reflect a commitment to, and an understanding of, the unique importance of federal history work and the SHFG's mission. Pete Daniel, a curator with the Smithsonian's National Museum of American for 27 years and president of both the OAH and SHFG, delivered the Trask Lecture at the Society's annual conference at the National Archives at College Park, Maryland, April 4, 2013.

A Search for Historical Understanding

Pete Daniel

The Roger R. Trask award is a high honor and a reminder of friendships and causes over some three decades.

I considered a number of topics for today, but one way or another they all circled back to my search for historical understanding. The search has been conducted across a broad spectrum of institutions and has allowed me to work with brilliant people and some not so brilliant.

Over my career, I have had a foot in the academic world—three years at UNC Wilmington, six years in exile at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, a year at U Mass Boston, and another year at Emory University.

And in public history—two years as an aide to a U.S. Senator, and 27 years at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. I was tempted to vent on these disparate cultures, but I would undoubtedly have offended friends on both sides of the aisle. Today, with some exceptions, most academicians hold public historians in high regard, and, indeed, increasingly point their students our way, realizing that our work, our pay, and our feeling of accomplishment rival if not surpass the academy.



Before settling into a discussion of historical research, I want to mention my two years working as an aide to Senator Robert B. Morgan from North Carolina. The Hill experience proved invaluable in honing my skepticism, and Congress's recent history has sharpened it to a point. You are all familiar, I am sure, that Senator Morgan introduced the first Archives Independence bill and with the role that archivists and other federal historians played in winning independence for the National Archives. Federal historians also drafted guidelines for maintaining the scholarly integrity of museum exhibits that proved invaluable in confronting the Smithsonian leadership's eagerness to turn exhibits over to sponsors for trade showesque celebratory nonsense.

I also learned the insecurity of Hill employment. I took leave from the University of Tennessee in 1978 thanks to an NEH fellowship, packed all my belongings in a U-Haul truck, and moved to Washington. I took leave for tax purposes; I never intended to move back to Knoxville. I spent the year at the Archives doing research on southern farmers. Meanwhile, I was promoted to full professor. When I took the job with Senator Morgan, I resigned my position at UT. Then in November 1980, thanks to the Reagan landslide, Senator Morgan was defeated, and I was unemployed. I hold the record for the quickest descent from full professor to unemployed.

The search for historical understanding would be futile without archivists, and I could talk all day about the kindness of archivists and their essential role in enabling historians to find documentation. Even after Doug Helms had left his job at the National Archives, he pointed me to important files I would never have discovered otherwise. Jimmy Rush then took me over and eventually passed me to Joe Schwarz. In my many tours of the South, archivists have gone out of their way to help me find documentation. My talk about research, then, is also about archivists who made it possible.

My search for historical understanding has taken u-turns, hit dead-ends, occasionally sped along the Interstate, but most often moved steadily through archival sources. Research, analysis, and writing have often led to conclusions that contest notions of progress that are so deeply ingrained in the public consciousness. How I became a purveyor of unhappy endings, as friends and critics often remind me, is inexplicable given my regular attendance at B-Westerns in my youth, which invariably ended with the hero riding off into the sunset, villains jailed or shot dead. Gene Autry and Roy Rogers shared with Superman and Batman the notion that good defeats evil. My historical work, on the other hand, has not treated

celebratory history well. When I first began as a historian, I hoped primarily to get the facts in order, spell the names correctly, and place commas appropriately, but increasingly I was intrigued with understanding how the parts fit together and how the players moved through space and time.

Finding documents is only the first step, for they demand skepticism and analysis. When working on my M.A. degree at Wake Forest University, Professor David L. Smiley offered this advice. With newspaper stories, you know the reporter is lying; you need to figure out why he used those particular words for his lies. It has been my experience that a historian must extend this skepticism to all sources.

I am at a loss to explain my methodology, driven, as it is, by hints, hunches, frustration, and luck. In 1968, when searching for a dissertation topic, I was reading the NAACP's *Crisis Magazine* on the fifth floor of what is now the Library of Congress Adams Building and came across an article on peonage, of which I knew nothing. Curious, I went two floors down to the Manuscript Room and found two boxes relating to peonage in the NAACP Papers. Since most of the correspondence was with the Justice Department, my next stop was the National Archives, where Donald Mosholder, a quiet-spoken and keen archivist, assured me that there were substantial peonage records. The first boxes he sent to the search room contained letters from barely literate people complaining of being forcibly held to work out debts, U.S. Attorney summaries of special agent reports on involuntary servitude, and case files that seldom indicated successful prosecution. With just this glimpse, I had a warm feeling that this was my topic. I spent over a half-year buried in these records and searched for additional documentation from Alabama and Georgia to New York. This was the first time that I recall having a topic invade my consciousness and come to life.

When I discovered a significant Supreme Court case involving peonage, I went to the Law Library at the Library of Congress. I still recall approaching a staff person with a citation to the Supreme Court case and asking where I might find the volume. At that time the Law Library was in the Jefferson Building, and the staff desk elevated. This stern man looked at my citation, grimaced, looked over my head, and told me to turn around and go to the shelf marked *U.S. Reports*, find volume 211, turn to page 455, and I would find my case. With a sense of mortification mixed with excitement, I found my case, which was full of footnotes to other relevant cases. With the same citation, I learned, I could call for briefs and records. It turned out that involuntary servitude, peonage, had a complex legal history that was documented by sources in Justice Department records, dozens of federal district cases, and a half-dozen Supreme Court cases. Intrigued by a

murder case in Georgia dealing with peonage, I wrote to the clerk in Newton County, Georgia, asking if there were a transcript. After a lull of six months, he replied that there were three trial transcripts and I could drop by anytime it was convenient. I humbly asked if they could be Xeroxed and sent to me. With peonage, the poorest and most vulnerable people—sharecroppers, wage hands, and immigrants—were enslaved by what to most appearances were respectable folks, who corrupted local law enforcement officials to do their bidding. No cowboy hero rode into southern communities to set things right.

When I completed revisions to my dissertation, I submitted it to a publisher. It was rejected, I was told, because my last chapter insisted that involuntary servitude continued after World War II. Of course it did. There were two Supreme Court cases during the war. I also had friends in the Justice Department who were smuggling me additional documentation. In 1988, 16 years after *The Shadow of Slavery* was published, another peonage case went to the Supreme Court, *U.S. v. Kozminski, et al.*, (108 L. Ed. 2nd 806-7). I revised my manuscript, found more documentation, and the ending turned out even less happy but historically accurate. After this experience, I became suspicious of book publishers and their desire to change history to sell books. Beware of publishers. This experience served me well in museum work when funders pressured us to tilt the exhibit with success stories.

After *The Shadow of Slavery* was published in 1972, I co-authored with Ray Smock a book on the photographer Frances Benjamin Johnston and wrote a book on the 1927 Mississippi River Flood. Increasingly, I became intrigued with why change had come so rapidly to the southern countryside at mid-20th century. When I left for college in 1957, my hometown of Spring Hope, North Carolina, was flooded with farmers on Saturday as they shopped, bought haircuts, watched movies at the Joyce Theater, shared a beer, shot pool, and roamed the streets socializing. On Saturday nights there was a major square dance at the WPA-built community building, about a hundred yards from my house, and cars parked in the field across the street. In addition to incredible country music, screeching tires, and loud mufflers, there was liquor and sex, the residue of which we discovered Monday afternoons when we cleared the field of liquor bottles and signs of sexual activity so we could play ball. The Baptist preacher finally shut down the dance. By the time I went to the University of Maryland in 1966 to work on the Ph.D., my hometown was deserted on Saturdays and most other days.

Obviously, mechanization and chemicals had a lot to do with this, as did the appearance of shopping malls, but I discovered that I had not properly factored in agrigovernment, the USDA and its broad reach into rural America. My notions

of the transformation of southern agriculture changed drastically, and the process was far more nuanced than I had suspected, and far more interesting.

After Senator Morgan's defeat, I ended up in the fall of 1981 at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, then housed in the Smithsonian Castle, wrote a draft of *Breaking the Land*, and then found a home in the National Museum of American History in 1982.

Why have I often focused on farmers? Perhaps because my grandfather was a tobacco farmer, and I heard him bitch and moan about USDA policies when I worked for him during the summers, too young then to really understand why his tobacco acreage allotment was reduced every year. I have written primarily about poor farmers, black and white, most of whom were ultimately devoured by agribusiness and agrigovernment. As my analysis has matured, my interpretation of bureaucratic deviousness has become more biting.

The USDA was infused with a notion of modernism that swept across the world during the years surrounding the turn of the 20th century and in this country was epitomized by the Progressive Era Country Life Movement and faith in progress through science and technology, a concept that matured during the New Deal years. The Soviet Union fondly embraced modernism, and landowners and skilled farmers were eliminated (that is, killed), and the government set up communes and furnished tractors and implements (27,000 bought from the United States), envisioning what anthropologist James C. Scott labeled "rural high modernism." Experts from the U.S. helped this experiment along, excitedly experimenting and implementing large farm operations that used machines and organization structures they could never attempt at home. While the Soviet road to modernism sacrificed (that is, again, killed) between 4 and 20 million farmers, the New Deal's Agricultural Adjustment Administration provided a platform to support mechanization and scientific agriculture by subsidizing more successful farmers, the very class that the Soviets eliminated. In the United States it would not be the government that bought tractors, implements, and chemicals, but rather successful farmers subsidized by the USDA. Subsidies were passed down from Washington to states to counties, where committees composed of wealthy farmers disbursed funds and implemented policy that favored their class. It was county elites that implemented USDA programs that reconfigured the countryside to suit their ambition. Along the way, millions of poor farmers left the land.

Agricultural policies are so opaque that I doubt 10 people in the country could explain the hundreds of programs, many of them contradictory. The dense

regulations hide shameless favoritism. In 1995, the nonprofit Environmental Working Group analyzed how much of USDA payments had gone to county committee members and office staff over the previous decade. The EWG set the figure at \$2.3 billion. Committee members, the analysis found, received on average over \$14,000 per year; employees some \$8,000; while farmers outside the offices \$7,000. Farmers elected these county committee members, and the USDA declared this program the epitome of democracy, although as I conclude in *Dispossession*, the elections were flawed and undemocratic. Present USDA programs continue this system without apology, and at great expense.

Museum work often left little time for scholarly research, but, at the same time, I found that some projects pushed the boundaries of my usual historical inquiry. Research for the exhibit “Science in American Life” led to an article on fire ants and later the book *Toxic Drift*. Our team turned up new sources and raised serious questions about pesticide toxicity and radiation sickness. Our sponsor, the American Chemical Society, leaned on us to focus on the glory of science, which we did, but we also featured troubling issues with the Manhattan Project, nuclear testing, and pesticides, and added what I labeled “The Rachel Carson Shrine.” Although the curatorial team met regularly with a panel of scientists and historians of science, the ACS charged that the exhibit was flawed, biased against science. I remain proud of this exhibit, especially of not yielding to pressure to change history to suit the sponsor. More important, I would never have written on pesticides had I not worked on the science exhibit. Nor would I have gotten to go to Hanford, Washington, to look at the first reactors, go inside one and have a man who ran it during World War II explain its operation. We collected one of the control panels, then in sad shape, and the Hanford folks refurbished it for the exhibit.

Even as we were busily putting together the “Science” exhibit, I was invited to give the Commonwealth Fund Lecture at University College London in 1992. I was at a desperate loss for a topic. As the clock ticked and my nerves frayed, a friend returned a New Deal legal study analyzing the status of sharecroppers as it related to government payments. Paging through this 40-page study before I filed it, I became curious about how New Deal agricultural policy might have changed farmers’ relationship to law. I went to the Law Library and began reading through relevant cases of farmers settling their disputes in local courts before a jury of their peers. When the Agricultural Adjustment Administration created county committees, these men (they were all white men) heard most disputes and basically usurped traditional judicial prerogatives. I had a correct hunch that law

reviews would comment on this change, and those leads exploded into a wealth of information.

Moving farmers out of county courts with a jury of peers and systematic record keeping and into county agricultural committees and ad hoc decisions ended accountability. Even in the 1980s, attorneys seeking to challenge county agricultural committee decisions were forced to secure committee decisions and appeals through Freedom of Information actions and go through them one by one searching for a line of consistency. Unlike highly organized court records, these decisions were not in systematic order, filed by precedent, nor were they consistent. Favoritism, some might argue fraud, ran through county committee decisions. As I went deeper into the law, I discovered that government acreage allotment policy ultimately became commodified and increased the value of farmland and eventually could be rented and sold. The Commonwealth Fund lecture, in my estimation, was one of the most original I've given. Had not that New Deal legal study returned so opportunely, I expect the lecture would have been a rehash of earlier work.

What turned out to be the "Rock 'n' Soul: Social Crossroads" exhibit took a decade to mature, and before it was over our team had done video interviews with nearly a hundred people connected with the music business in and around Memphis. When I grew up in the small-town South listening to Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Rufus and Carla Thomas, and hearing about Sam Phillips' Sun Studio and Jim Stewart's STAX, it never crossed my mind that I would sit across from them one day and ask about their careers. Because the American History museum never raised funds for the exhibit, Memphis supporters lured it there, and it opened in 2000 and still thrives. I used some of the interview material in *Lost Revolutions*. When the Atlanta History Center asked me to help curate an exhibit on stock car racing, I eagerly signed up. Although funds were never raised to install the exhibit, we interviewed some 50 men and women connected with stock car racing, including Junior Johnson, Richard Petty, Daryl Waltrip, Benny Parsons, Louise Smith, and Ned Jarrett. I used the same excellent video team that had done the Rock 'n' Soul interviews. Oral history has always been an integral part of my research.

Oral history was also crucial to my latest book. Dwayne Cox, archivist at Auburn University, mentioned that Willie Strain was still alive and living in Tuskegee, and this lead proved crucial in understanding the "integration" of the Federal Extension Service. I interviewed both Willie Strain and Bertha Jones, both of whom had worked in what was called The Negro Extension Service located at

Tuskegee University until it was “integrated” in 1965. Then they went to Auburn, where they were assigned offices, shunned, and given nothing to do. Bertha Jones had headed the 4-H program for African American girls, and Strain had edited *The Negro Farmer*, a newspaper featuring 4-H news, articles on farmers, advice, and reports on functions relevant to African American rural life. It was no longer published after the summer of 1965, as if news about African Americans was no longer important. The Alabama Cooperative Extension Service deemed these two top administrators of the Negro Extension Service irrelevant. To make a long story short, Strain sued and brought the Alabama Cooperative Extension Service to its knees, and the suit set precedent for other African American extension workers in other southern states to file suits.

When the history department at Louisiana State University asked me to deliver three Walter Lynwood Fleming lectures in 2004, I focused on pesticides. As I plunged back into archives research, I read a 1960 telegram that tingled my skeptical nerve. It was from the head of the Delta Council, an organization of Mississippi planters, asking for expert testimony from a scientist at the Mississippi experiment station in a case alleging pesticide poisoning. The telegram warned that the “outcome of case could have influence on cotton insect control program in future years.” Curious, I followed the trail that led me to the Library of Congress Law Library where I found that the case, *Lawler v. Skelton*, had gone to the Mississippi Supreme Court, which had reversed the jury verdict. The decision indicated perjury, a physician erroneously not allowed to continue her testimony, misinformation from expert witnesses, and other flaws that led to the reversal of the jury verdict. More curious, I went to Jackson and read the three-volume trial transcript, later found invaluable plaintiff lawyer’s records in Sunflower County, interviewed several people connected to the case, and began expanding my research to include other cases. *Lawler v. Skelton* was extremely important and complex and attracted the interest not only of the Delta Council but also the Farm Bureau Federation. Nationally prominent expert witnesses traveled to Indianola to dismiss the toxicity of pesticides. Yet, the case generated no press coverage, for planters wanted to mute any discussion of pesticide toxicity.

Research on toxic chemicals ultimately evolved into a book, *Toxic Drift*, an expanded version of the Fleming lectures. Despite rich sources, I had failed to discover personal information on Charles Lawler, the man who was poisoned. The trial transcript indicated that he managed a cotton gin near Indianola, Mississippi, and in 1956 a crop duster sprayed him with a mixture of malathion and endrin, plus some solvents. He was kneeling down welding, and the plane swept by the gin and the pilot turned on the nozzles, and the chemical cloud hit the cement

slab and then bounced under Lawler's welding mask. He choked, almost passed out, went home, was nauseous, and the next day went into a coma. The doctor treated him with atropine, the antidote for organophosphate poisoning, but on the witness stand testified that he thought Lawler's complaint was due to a heart condition. Lawler survived, but his health was broken, and he lost his job and was ill the remainder of his life. In 1960 he sued the landlord, tenant, and owner of the plane—and lost, but, as I mentioned, the Mississippi Supreme Court reversed the jury verdict. Unfortunately, there was no second trial, either because of Lawler's poor health or that the African American eyewitness could not be located. I could never find how long Lawler lived or what happened to his family, despite calling people named Lawler in east Arkansas, the Mississippi Delta, and west Tennessee.

I drove down to Baton Rouge in the spring of 2004 for the lectures, stopping off in Memphis to dine and spend the night with my friend Jim Lanier. That afternoon we drove by the Velsicol chemical plant whose endrin runoff in the early 1960s had poisoned millions of fish in the Mississippi River (not to mention poisoning surrounding land and streams). I took photos of the plant. The Memphis library had a devastating clipping file on the plant's activities, and there were photographs and documentation in the ARS papers here [at the National Archives].

David and Angela Less came to dinner that evening. David, an ethnomusicologist, worked closely with me on the "Rock 'n' Soul" exhibit that had opened in Memphis in 2000. As we chatted over dinner, Angela, who is from Arkansas, began, not uncharacteristically, to talk about family. Their daughter, Emma McGuire Less, was almost named Emma Lawler Less, she said. I felt a hot blush of incredulity. Trying to remain calm, I interrupted, "Angela, the primary person in my talk at LSU is Charles Lawler who sued for being poisoned." "Oh, Uncle Charlie," she continued. "He was poisoned. He was on oxygen for the rest of his life." I drove on down to Baton Rouge with the answer to Lawler's last years and knowing the sad story of his family's travails after he lost his job.

My latest book, *Dispossession*, reveals encompassing USDA discrimination aimed primarily at African American farmers but also at women, Indians, Hispanics, at all small farmers. Most of the documentation for this book was right here [at the National Archives]. Joe Schwarz called my attention to a Record Group 16 civil rights entry and later found 1,140 uncatalogued boxes of ASCS records.

One of the most significant aspects of researching and writing *Dispossession* was discovering the role of people who had not previously been recognized by

historians. It fascinated me that the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) inspired not only other protest movements of the 1960s but also some of the first statements on the women's movement. Willie Strain took on the Extension Service and set the precedent for other suits regarding discrimination. The 1999 *Pigford v. Glickman* decision dealt with discrimination since 1981, when the Reagan administration's USDA office of civil rights stopped investigating complaints. It also suggested to women, Indians, and Hispanics a means to seek redress for USDA discrimination. These significant historical contributions have had little historical scrutiny, and in *Dispossession I* attempted to call attention not only to USDA discrimination but also to the unheralded people who fought back.

But history is no B-Western. No hero has ridden down the halls of the USDA and driven out the rustlers, and there is no tombstone marking the final resting place of discrimination.

Photograph by Chas Downs