

## Partner or Pariah? – Academic attitudes to history work by mill hands at Cooleemee, North Carolina.

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### Abstract:

Research by the author into the use of museums to restore community identity after industrial decline suggested working-class people's use of history was profound and far-reaching. It also showed that the working classes might be at risk of exclusion from this opportunity to regain identity, because the middle classes tended to assume that they lacked interest in history or would not 'appreciate' museum facilities. More worrying still, one case study museum – The Textile Heritage Center, Cooleemee, North Carolina – felt rebuffed by the academic community, other museums, and funding bodies, because of their association with, and championship of, a working-class, predominantly white community. If some groups are being given that impression, then it is time to revise academic attitudes towards the poor, and time to truly listen to the 'inarticulate'.

**Key words:** inclusion, exclusion, reciprocity, paternalism, community.

### Introduction

Social inclusion has been high on recent political and museological agendas; yet it seems some under-privileged groups remain more welcome working-partners than others. Peter Howard, in his time as Editor of the *IJHS* noted:

There still seems a remarkable emphasis by the academic writers...on particular groups ... and the almost complete absence of others. ...there is remarkable silence about those people ... divided not by ethnicity but by educational attainment (2006: 487).

This paper discusses attempts to provide museums for ex-textile workers in the small mill town of Cooleemee in central North Carolina. It addresses some of the obstacles Cooleemee's mill-workers met when attempting to tell their town's story. In particular, it considers a negative assessment of Cooleemee's effort written in 2006 by Leon Fink, Professor of History at the University of Illinois, and editor of *Labor: Studies in Working-class History of the Americas*.

Fink was associate Professor of History at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill from 1985-90, and Professor from 1990-2000. It was during this latter period that he visited Cooleemee, attending both the 1996 'Growing up on a Mill Hill' Conference, and that year's annual Textile Heritage Festival. The interviews on which he based his later article took place during 1997. At first excited by Cooleemee's harnessing of history toward revitalization, and proudly sporting a Cooleemee "linthead" T-shirt after the festival, Fink found his views growing increasingly 'complicated, and ultimately disturbing'. Ten years later, after moving to the University at Chicago, he published an article in which he alleges the community history movement at Cooleemee is naïve, nostalgic, and racist. Mill towns in North Carolina were, and largely remain, predominantly white towns. Telling such a town's story therefore tends to tell a white story. In the American South assumptions are inevitably made – some justified, others gleaned from Hollywood imagery and cultural preconceptions- that this story and this people are racist. While accepting the validity of many of Fink's concerns, this paper will propose an alternative interpretation of Cooleemee that questions some of his conclusions, and suggests

these might be a product of those societal and academic attitudes that tend to dismiss and exclude the working poor as a valid historical voice.

Founded in 1989 to combat spiralling social dislocation after mill closure, Cooleemee Historical Association (CHA) was spearheaded by Lynn Rumley, ex-civil rights worker, and her husband Jim, an ex-hosiery-worker and trades-union organizer. CHA opened Cooleemee Textile Heritage Center in 1993. This museum was conceived as an anchor and social centre for the town, and as the region's first centre for the study of North Carolina's cotton mill history. In 2005, Cooleemee opened its second museum — the Mill Family Life Museum. Other significant projects include the development of a school history program, and the start of history Summer Camps in 1997; the opening of 'Riverpark' — venue both for community fish-fries and for Summer Camps and history lessons- in 2003; the launch of a region-wide Textile Heritage Initiative in 2005, and the publication of a manual on oral history collecting in 2007.

Despite this success, and in a dramatic echo of Peter Howard's concern, Lynn Rumley feels she has been 'cold-shouldered' by the academic establishment — particularly that based around Chapel Hill- for her work with the Southern white working-class, and that in part this was a result of Fink's published criticisms. Cooleemeeans are stung by Fink's suggestions that their effort is racist, and there is lingering hurt about Fink's assessment of what they were trying to achieve.

Two mutually antagonistic stereotypes complicate any effort to tell the history of textile workers in the South. One is the automatic assumption that in the South white means privilege. North Carolina is a traditionally poor, rural state, that until late in the nineteenth century remained remote, its culture more 'Little House on the Prairie' than 'Tara'. Before the Civil War, a few whites were middle class, 'and the rest...fell into an unreliable lower class along with the free blacks and slaves' (Escott 1985:7, 9-10). When railways and textile mills penetrated the interior after the Civil War, capital was monopolized by a small group of entrepreneurs. Most people remained poor farmers, and were growing poorer. Almost one third of white Carolinians were landless. This created the second stereotype that paradoxically militates against the idea of 'white privilege', and yet has an even tighter hold on the American (and international) imagination: the idea of the 'redneck'.

Until the 1890s, freed black sharecroppers and poor white farmers were united by circumstance, and in politics through the Southern Farmers Alliance and the People's Party. The cross-racial unity of the working poor was ended only when laws codified in 1898 restricted the right to vote by property qualifications, thus eliminating the farming interest — both black and white- as a political force (Hall *et al.* (1987: 6-10,66-7). Keeping millwork closed to blacks divided worker power against itself and ensured the continuing dominance of a small business-based elite. Mill owners promoted mill village life as the 'salvation' of the poor white farmer, while keeping blacks largely trapped in agrarianism. Some mills maintained housing for a few African-American workers in separate developments on the outskirts of town. In Winston Salem, this was 'Colored Row'- in Cooleemee, 'Rag Row'. African-American men worked as janitors or yardmen, carters or boiler-stokers. Their wives were not permitted in the mills at all, but might take in laundry, keep house for mill employees or baby-sit children of mill-workers (see Hall *et al.* 1987: 66-7,157).

Also living on the outskirts of mill towns were those landless whites who clung to waning frontier lifestyles rather than migrate into millwork, and became known as 'poor white trash'. Even those at the top of Cooleemee's social pyramid — those whites who did enter millwork- were looked down upon by Carolina's non-mill whites. Mill-workers were 'lintheads' or 'cottonmill trash' — terms they may still use half-jokingly amongst themselves, but that are highly offensive when outsiders use them. Although the segregation practised by mill owners prevented the development of a unified working-class as a political force, Cooleemeeans suggest there persisted some social or economic unity. In interview, elderly African-American Genelle Watkins, who lived through both segregation and integration, ascribed what she perceives as a lack of racism at Cooleemee, to there being 'no other class of people ... we were all on the same level, pretty much the same, black or white, we were all poor'.

Already denigrated by occupation, in 1969 Cooleemeeans had even the dignity of that occupation taken away when the mill closed. After de-industrialization, industrial workers, miners, or fisherman all describe a world over-turned, and share a sense of betrayal,

powerlessness, stigma and marginality (see High 2007:26-27; Nadel-Klein 2003:169). Smith has described the devastating psychological impact when loss of an industry is experienced as an attack on 'community identity, cohesion and pride' (2006:2). Seeking out evidence of endurance and survival through history is a common response. The museum at Cooleemee was conceived to assert both a long history of overcoming adversity, and a more positive, proud identity. Workers today may be buffeted by market forces and battered by 'redundancy'; they refuse to believe they are 'trash' or that they should go quietly, and be forgotten. Rumley feels strongly that her work is not about race, or even class, but about preserving traditional cultural values in which both African-American and white workers share. Cooleemee's mill-workers assert very strongly that they are hardworking, ruggedly independent, proud people, and this is the story they wanted a museum to tell.

### **The Nature of working people's interest in history**

Though it is increasingly accepted that working-class people have a great interest in history, research (Wedgwood, 2007; 2009) suggests museums should not assume that working-class interests and goals necessarily coincide with their own. Museums have an obligation to do much more to discover what communities expect and need from them. Because of the associations with segregated workplaces, racism and 'trashiness' listed above, as well as the assumed 'ordinariness' of their experience, it may be hard for inhabitants of small, poor, Southern industrial towns, to garner support for the preservation of their 'culture'. Yet High (2007) has explicitly highlighted similarities of experience between the economically or educationally deprived and racial minorities. Post-industrial workers suffer from marginalization, exclusion, limited opportunities, fractured family life, loss of traditional lifestyles, and loss of identity.

One reason for not promoting museum work among these precarious communities has been that their enormous social problems make museums an irrelevant luxury (see Nakamura 2007: 148-9), another that they would not be interested. Work by Watson (2007) invalidated both these claims, uncovering a great thirst for history amongst the urban poor in Great Yarmouth, who were vociferous in their distaste for the established museum; emphatic about the new-style museum they wanted instead. Similar strength of feeling was uncovered by Rosenzweig and Thelen (1998), who in listening to 'the people who were being denounced for their ignorance', discovered 'ordinary' Americans felt closely connected to the past, but believed personal experience and memories, not established museums, were the most 'real' form of history. Respondents were strongly aware of bias, and appreciated both the value of research and the need to question. They tested and cross-referenced the history they read against the history they heard from family members and other eyewitnesses. They did not want teachers or interpreters, but a personal, unmediated experience where they could decide for themselves 'which history' to believe (1998: 20-23, 38, 90-96).

Through this unmediated debate with history, Rosenzweig and Thelen's interviewees made sense of their present. Common motivations were to discover 'where I came from' and 'why I am like I am'. From this, respondents constructed 'who I am' – deciding whether to follow in the family mould, or to overcome the past, and become an alternative person (1998: 45-6,77,83-4). Many used history to ask 'what difference can I make?' Far from 'uninterested', working people are approaching history in a sophisticated way, and through this they are empowered: 'our respondents saw themselves as independent actors with capacities to influence...larger developments.... Our respondents used terms like "pride", "shame", "guilt" and "commitment"' (1998: 38-9). At Cooleemee, this empowerment is seen in Lynn Rumley's challenge to textile families to tell their own story: 'How does history become "official?" How does a story come to be considered important? ... "What good is the past?" ... This is our chance to escape the category of "the inarticulate" (Rumley and Bryan 2007: 45).

### **Empowerment and controversy: Cooleemee, North Carolina**

Social exclusion has been defined as 'citizenship deficiency' (Newman et al 2005: 42-9). At Cooleemee, the decline of civic involvement as their town fractured was keenly felt. Townspeople wanted a museum that would give children 'pride', 'direction', 'a work ethic', and 'citizenship'



*Fig 1. Cooleemeean elder, Hazel Winfree, teaches first Graders about 'wash day'.*

(Wedgwood, 2007). Although CHA tackled social issues, including crime, vandalism, and substandard housing, Lynn Rumley explained by email that it was the children's programme, 'Discovering our Heritage' (**Fig 1**) that secured CHA community support: 'There is near unanimous approval for teaching local kids the history ...giving children some avenue for using their brains... visualizing a future for themselves and their community'.

When I interviewed retired textile worker and third generation Cooleemee native, Leon O'Neal about the museum's role in his life, it rapidly emerged that he wanted to talk about reopening Cooleemee's swimming pool. He felt the mill's provision of a community centre and pool had kept his generation out of trouble, and something similar must be done for today's youth. He praised the museum for its similar function as a social centre for his town's children, but saw the museum's next task as campaigning to reopen the pool. Because working-class people experience history as something personal and integral to their whole lives, rather than as an objective academic exercise (Wedgwood 2009), Leon sees nothing odd in expecting a museum to make a difference to town life and take an active role in town affairs.

Because Cooleemeeans perceive Rumley as heading a social movement, she finds the museum 'on call' for people with problems ranging from swimming pool closure to crime, vandalism, and drugs. Far from resenting these calls, Rumley herself finds it impossible to separate the historic from the social mission. In interview Rumley told me: 'if a museum is in a historic community with social problems.... if the threat is drugs or crime...that has to be part of its concern'. And explaining her emulation of Ruth Abram's overt use of history for social change<sup>1</sup>, Rumley made one distinction: 'While Ruth Abram 'wanted' to perform a social mission, our existence depended on it'.

CHA inventoried mill housing from a social, as well as an historical viewpoint, delivering a report on the state of decay and level of absenteeism to the Town Board. They were instrumental in condemning properties, getting sites made safe and enforcing upkeep by landlords. In interview Rumley admitted that this high profile 'drew us into a can-of-worms and



controversy', but the groundswell of blue-collar support and good relations between staff and townspeople, are tribute to the Rumleys, for whom every interviewee expressed gratitude and affection.

Socially active museums like Cooleemee's could be perceived as resurrecting the Victorian paternalism of the mill village and of museums 'improving' the public morals. But far from perpetuating paternalism, Rumley explained by email, 'CHA, and thus the museums and public history programming, is indigenous ... these people have 'ownership'. They knock themselves out to put on our school lessons'. In March 2007 Rumley had apologized by email for her delay in responding to my research request: 'We've been up to our necks in community fundraisers to finish The Mill House Museum. Sold sausage-biscuits last Saturday, made by neighbors from those streets, with teenagers from those streets selling them at the shopping center' (**Fig 2**). The heavy blue-collar involvement at Cooleemee corroborates Watson's findings: that disenfranchised groups are interested in museums. When I asked her about the significance of their involvement, Rumley replied by email that 'these are generally not the type of folks who go to meetings...[yet] they have been a key segment in support of this effort, since its founding...it shows the potential, which I would contend is everywhere'.



*Fig 2. March 2007: Cooleemee teenagers sell food baked by residents in aid of the Mill House Museum Fund.*

Over 125 delegates, representing both academia and residents of twenty-eight mill villages met at Cooleemee in 1996. They agreed to begin collecting oral histories; agreed that mill people themselves needed to tell their story, and pledged to keep an open dialogue between community, museums, and academics. In April 2005, under a banner headline: 'Southern mill towns are rolling up their sleeves and answering the millwhistle's call for one more shift'<sup>2</sup>, delegates from five states met at the Textile Heritage Initiative (THI) Convention in Kannapolis, and resolved to lobby for a 'Textile Heritage Week', and a 'Textile Heritage Corridor' (**Figs 3 & 4**). When CHA thus expanded its vision for a single town into THI goals to reinvigorate mill towns across the South, it was deliberately egalitarian. 'The atmosphere ... should be such that anyone who worked in a mill or grew up on a mill hill... would feel immediately at home... not ... a "conference" but rather a REUNION' (THI planning report, August 2004).

If adults of lower educational attainment are one 'pariah' for museums and academics, unaccompanied minors tend to be another- assumed to be rowdy; uninterested; 'a problem'. Cooleemee leads the way in its approach to children as a community's best asset and most undervalued resource. 1997's first annual 'Kids Summer Heritage Camp' was fully subscribed within a week; children from this original cohort became 'Counsellors-in-Training' for later Camps. Children at the after-school 'History Club' worked for the museum, combining community service with history learning. Club kids helped raise money to buy land to build 'Riverpark', cleared rusted appliances from the river, and gave speeches the day Riverpark opened. Riverpark is now the venue for the Heritage Camps and schools programming. In



*Fig 3. THI Cottonmill Convention: trades-union style testimonies from the floor from ex-textile workers Corine Cannon and Gene Mills.*

interview Rumley recalled arriving late for 'Kid's Club', and meeting children calling: 'Quick, quick, we have a visitor! We've shown him round the museum, but now we don't know what to do with him!' Cooleemee's museum has given children confidence. It has empowered them through responsibility, and equipped them with new skills (**Fig 5**).



*Fig 4. Delegates' lunch, Cotton Mill Reunion and Convention, 2005.*

By 2007, Cooleemee interviewees reported that children now felt ownership of their town, and had moved from feeling that they came from 'a bad place-all drugs' to believing they could change their future. This reversal of attitudes is a product of an approach that 'extends the mission of a museum to include responsibility for human dignity' (Fuller 1992: 328). Through the children, CHA reached out to parents and grandparents. When I interviewed Jennifer Godbey, Cooleemee teacher and CHA volunteer, she described seeing a boy running from the museum calling to his grandfather 'Come see, we're famous! We're in the museum!' On

entering, the elderly man was surprised and pleased to find his ancestors pictured in the museum's collections, and admitted he had never visited a museum before. Godbey commented

that in utilizing and involving all types of people in CHA projects, 'Lynn is a master of making people feel valued'. Another of Cooleemee's teachers, Karen Fleming, told me she got involved in CHA 'because I saw how much Lynn cared ... I was so impressed that someone would do that for our children - I felt I had to give a similar effort'.



*Fig 5. Preparing the Mill Family Life Museum, Cooleemee: high school masonry student rebuilds fireplaces; fifth generation Cooleemeean, Andrew O'Neal (aged 12) paints.*

Fink (2006:1) criticized the work at Cooleemee. By including white blue-collar workers, including those who might disparagingly be termed 'rednecks', Fink claimed CHA excluded and alienated Cooleemee's black-minority. Interview evidence (Wedgwood 2007; 2009) contradicted this, and Fink may have both over-stated, and misinterpreted the low participation rate of African-Americans in CHA projects. Cooleemee continues to have only a 5% black population, yet the *Cooleemee History Loom* includes a high level of participation through articles, letters, and photographs from African-American Cooleemeeans. Articles like '*The Flemings: Prominent African-American Mill Town Family*' by James L. Fleming Jr (*Loom* 42, Spring 2001); '*The amazing story of Mr. Will Hocht*' (*Loom* 56, Fall 2004), and stories about life on 'Rag Row', supply details that challenge racial stereotypes, and demonstrate the complexity of African-American experience.

An ex-slave and sharecropper from Georgia, Hocht was actively recruited to Cooleemee for his skills in cotton growing. It took three years for Erwin Mills to negotiate his release from indenture, paying off his obligation to his ex-owners, and paying the fares to move Hocht's family from Georgia. Grandson Rufus Hocht, who supplied this information, reported several other black Cooleemeean families were recruited from Georgia the same way. They received two-storey company farmhouses and more favourable sharecropping agreements, which enabled Hocht to save, and buy his own hundred acres. Fleming similarly was given a six-room company house; trading in oysters to supplement his mill salary, by 1943, he too had saved enough to buy a farm. A church Deacon who ran a recreation club for blacks in North Cooleemee, Fleming rose to Shipping Supervisor and mentored younger employees. Although his oldest children became domestic servants, the family was proud that Hocht's growing prosperity meant he could send his five youngest to college.

Although other black Cooleemeeans had less-positive memories - ghettoized on Rag Row and eligible only for the town's least salubrious jobs - this is also a complex picture because whites were so poor. Tom Vogler contributed the following memory of 'Rag Row': 'I used to go over there as a kid to saw wood for people ... I was a little white kid going over there. Got bit, once,

by a big old dog<sup>13</sup>. When I interviewed Genelle Watkins, one of the first female African-American Cooleemeeans to enter millwork after integration, she shared with wry humour having envied whites unnecessarily:

Well! That mill was the worst place I have ever been in my life... worst job I ever had in my life! But it was a milestone; a big milestone for African-American women because to us we'd always been kept out and we thought it would be so wonderful to be let in (2009).

What is perhaps most significant is that both black and white Cooleemeeans see history as a narrative of triumph over adversity that teaches hard-work, and service to community. Bryson Brown, grandson of a black 'water-boy' for white mill-hands, wrote: 'Learning about Cooleemee's history and my own family has made me feel proud.'<sup>14</sup> Watkins actively promotes black history in the town and her collection of photographs of the 'Colored School' is being added to the museum database. As one of the town 'elders' taking part in Textile Heritage Day, she tries to tell Cooleemee's children 'things about my childhood that might be a bit different with being African-American'. She explained being 'naturally drawn' to CHA by a life-long interest in history. Watkins visits the museum 'every chance I get, and talk...and I feel OK doing that... I had things I wanted to submit, and wanted recorded to show our history- what we did as African-Americans. The museum accepted everything I had'. Watkins explained her motivation thus: 'If you don't know where you've been, then you don't know where you're going'. She also wanted to recognize individual contributions to Cooleemee and particularly to recognize people of 'good character' that they 'might be an inspiration for a young person'.

The story told in the *Loom* is of two communities, but it stresses similarities between white and black experience, and the equal contribution of both. In *Issue 63* (Summer 2006) a feature about a teacher in the segregated black school, ran in parallel with the story of the town's white nurse. Both articles were front page, with pictures of the two women placed side-by-side. Both women were cited as strong community mentors, who shaped their town. In her article, 'The trait of persistence' (2003:7), Lynn Rumley explicitly unites black and white Cooleemeeans through a shared cultural trait. Persistence 'got them through the hardships – whether it was that first winter on the Carolina frontier, or the yoke of slavery, or the heat and lint of the cotton mill.' On one level, it could be criticized as trite to compare the hardships whites suffered to those endured by blacks as slaves. In such correlations, Cooleemeeans are attempting to find shared points of reference, similarities of character and experience that can unite the races in a common purpose. They focus on consensus, rather than on difference; on shared desires today, rather than on inequality in the past. In our interview, Watkins recalled organizing town celebrations of the life of a teacher from the 'Colored School':

She cared about the whole community. Long after she'd taught us she always knew about us, and was involved in all our lives. Everyone came out to celebrate her, and it was just a great time of sharing ...And that's what I would say to all that racial stuff: I don't think Cooleemee's like that. I think we all come together, black and white, and we celebrate together.

Fink distrusted this use of what he felt was uncritical nostalgia. Cooleemee's oral history project did produce recurring 'sentimental' themes, most notably the claim that the mill village was 'one big family' – an image that excludes the African-Americans on Rag Row. However, although 'outsiders' like myself, or Fink, detect sentimentalism and selectivity in remembering 'one big family', this is the language repeatedly used by those who were there. Ray House wrote to the *Loom* after reading its account of mill village poverty. Enclosed with his riposte was a chubby-cheeked photograph of himself sarcastically appended: 'see this emaciated little baby?'<sup>15</sup> What matters here is not who is 'right' - whether mill towns were 'dark satanic' places or the happy family remembered by House- but that both Watkins and House care enough about history and authenticity to write to the *Loom* and to entrust CHA with their photographs.

When I asked her in interview about selective memory at Cooleemee, Rumley explained that this was due to community beliefs that bad things are best forgotten, and will not be repeated, but positives should be perpetuated. Watkins' interview confirmed this- asked about Fink's concerns about Confederate re-enactors or the Confederate flag, this elderly African-



American Cooleemeean explained, 'I take no offence at that kind of thing'. Her reasons were threefold: 'a lot of that is just tradition and people don't mean anything by it', it was 'way back in the past and has not been part of my experience' and most importantly:

I take people individually. I don't look at them as a group or what they did in the past. I look at the individual person here in front of me today and I see good people and I interact with them as who they are.

When people feel the degree of betrayal, rejection and loss uncovered by Nadel-Klein (2003), Smith (2006), and High (2007), attempts to regain a proud identity through museum work are more than simple nostalgia. 'As people reconstruct and perhaps romanticize their own past, they create a reality that guides and motivates them in the present... the basis for communal action and politics (Nadel-Klein 2003: 161). To focus as academics *only* on the alleged selectivity and nostalgia over-simplifies communities' complex relationships with history. Rosenzweig and Thelen discovered many people acknowledging the deprivations, hardships, and mistakes of their forbears to make themselves appreciative of their own situation. These researchers (1998: 159-60) reported that while blacks told a story of progress through struggle, it was hard to find a similar tale amongst whites. However, this is in fact what research unearthed amongst whites in Cooleemee. Interviewees explicitly stated that they were teaching Cooleemeean children history that they might:

- See how far they have come
- Appreciate all they have today
- Feel optimism for the future
- See citizenship as a privilege and a duty
- Feel their ancestors came through struggles and achieved something, and that means that they could too. (Wedgwood 2009)

Fink alleged the Rumleys 'played like Pied Pipers on the emotions of local townsfolk' to inculcate civic-pride. He quoted an ex-Mayor who claimed:

They hit a town where there's a lot of illiteracy; they knew these old people who lived in the mill houses never went beyond the third grade.... They talk to these people about their proud heritage and put their names ... in the newspaper and on bulletin boards. So all these people love them to death (2006:11-12).

This assessment is condescending. It is inaccurate since the Rumleys themselves are self-educated, non-museum professionals who left school at fifteen - and it underestimates Cooleemeeans. Although incomes, education-levels, and housing are modest, it is untrue to claim illiteracy. In these model mill villages, children attended school more consistently than in rural Carolina. Later, children of mill-workers went to college in high numbers. Ex-mill-workers interviewed for this project were highly articulate, and there is an active group of self-educated lay historians unearthing the history of their town. Nor is Cooleemee unusual: Ferryden fisher families interviewed by Nadel-Klein matched the same profile: 'The old folk were literate, if not highly educated in the formal sense'; they read history, collected books, poems, and leaflets: 'for these people, the past was hardly "a foreign country" ... but a well-known, often visited, and sometimes longed for second home' (2003: 104-5).

Paul Escott, Professor of History at Wake Forest University, met with lay historians at Cooleemee in 1990. Over dinner, they discussed his book, debated textile history, and Escott was interviewed for a documentary video. Today both Cooleemeeans and Escott himself remember this meeting warmly. In 1996 Cooleemeeans valued Escott's contribution as the keynote speaker at their 'Growing up on a mill hill' conference – the event at which Fink also was present. In 1992, Escott had written a supporting letter for a CHA funding proposal, again his assessment diverges sharply from Fink's:

What impressed me powerfully... was the depth of knowledge these activists had already acquired about textile history. Without losing their community-based

motivation and approach, they have absorbed all the best historical scholarship on the subject. A conversation with them on textile history takes place on a level found in few graduate-school seminars (1992).

When I contacted him recently about his interactions at Cooleemee, Escott retained very positive impressions of Cooleemeans in general and the Rumleys in particular. By email he expressed surprise that Fink is critical of their work, and stated that he received no impression of racism, exclusivity, or naivety.

Lack of opportunity should never be mistaken for lack of intelligence. Jim Rumley's tribute to an elderly Cooleemean acknowledges this, while demonstrating why Cooleemee's workers reacted warmly to the Rumleys:

Russell was a historian in his own right, although he never got around to writing it all down...and he had a broad grasp of his subject...He not only put up with hours of interviews, he insisted on driving me across the whole of Greater Cooleemee, four townships and North Cooleemee, just to be sure I understood (2001: xi).

Lynn Rumley is equally appreciative of the community's eager response, and the responsibility that places upon a museum: 'Any time the people of your community ...remove items from their scrapbooks, family photo albums, cedar chests and attics, it is a sign that they believe you take them and their heritage seriously' (Rumley and Bryan 2007: 34). The Rumleys being 'loved to death' was a criticism, yet is the result of mutually respectful relationships between museum and community members, and a mutual investment of time and effort. The level of community support and involvement puts the Rumleys in an enviable position amongst museum professionals. Nor is it credible that they achieved this by going into a long-established, insular community and 'taking over' as Fink's article implies. Not only do the above quotations belie this, such high-handed attitudes would more likely result in rejection than embrace. Criticisms may have more to do with established academic attitudes towards the poor and uneducated than with any paternalism at Cooleemee.

The Rumleys were taken aback by Fink's allegations of both paternalism and racism, the sting made worse because they had been Sixties activists with track-records in the Civil Rights movement and trades unionism. Two people who never dreamed their liberal credentials could be doubted, who embraced an inclusive museum dream, suddenly found themselves vilified for that. Fink seems to believe that the communist-influenced radicals who were the Rumleys in the 1960s, evolved into Southern right-wing Conservatives in the 1990s. I see far more continuity between the Rumleys' beliefs then and now, and see that the same issues of 'Southern identity' that plague them today caused the same controversies in the past. As a teenager, Lynn Rumley (nee Wells), though not a student herself was an organizer for the Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC). Michel (2004) has described how SSOC struggled with the complex dilemma of trying to appeal to and recruit white Southerners, and promote a 'Southern identity' while working for African-American civil rights. One controversial example was SSOC's use of clasped black and white hands superimposed over the Confederate flag.

SSOC members were anti-establishment, communist influenced, and they believed that poor and working-class southerners should unite across race lines against elite whites and against 'Northern aggression'. They resented attempts by the Northern dominated Students for Democratic Society to take over SSOC in just the same way that Cooleemeans later resented Northern government influence over their jobs and their water supply. Cooleemean history has been presented Fink found, as a story of stubborn resistance to outsider influence and outside threats- a story of small man against big government. Lynn's conviction today that Southern working people have a right to tell their own story, unmediated, echoes her feeling about the SDS-SSOC struggle of the '60s:

For some reason those people in SDS thought they were more radical than us... it rubbed everybody the wrong damn way. And we got thinking about it...What is it that they had that was so grand that they needed to deliver it to us like missionaries? It was arrogant, antagonistic, and bullshit' (quoted in Michel 2004: 199-200).

Rumley proved a massive asset to SSOC because she was 'thoroughly anti-racist but at the same time she had this populist tinge which made her really good at communicating with truck drivers and other white workers' (Klonsky quoted in Fink 2006: 4/24). Like many in SSOC, Lynn resuscitated ideas of Southern 'rebel' spirit found in attitudes to the Civil War, and tried to re-channel them. Southern white youths and workers would be a 'new kind of rebel' - 'a rebel against racism, a rebel against the [Vietnam] war'; there was even talk of moral and psychological 'secession' from an American society that kept white workers and African-Americans in oppression (Michel 2004: 190-99).

But using old rhetoric in a new cause is fraught with difficulty, and 'rebel' rhetoric by CHA members today rang alarm bells for Fink, as they would for many liberals. Another factor is personality. Friendly and personable, Rumley is also unafraid to be outspoken. Michel's assessment of her at 18 in 1967 applies today: 'While she inspired fierce loyalty from her supporters, she earned the enmity of those who disagreed with her tactics'. But Michel found enemies and admirers alike admitted Rumley's unrivalled talents as an organizer: SSOC's 'David Nolan lamented...' 'If we had had twelve Lynn Wellses, we would have been hell on wheels' (Quoted in Michel 2004: 138-9).

Another difficulty for Rumley is her genuine commitment to working people telling their own story. Leaving people free to say what they want means they are also free to say things that might offend. Inevitably, some elderly Cooleemeeans have made conservative remarks. Some had disturbingly positive memories of the Klan's role (Fink 2006:10/24). Some Cooleemeean rhetoric uses phrases like 'family values' that for liberal academics have troublesome associations with today's Christian right. Conversely, African-American Cooleemeeans too are contributing their memories, and the stories they are telling are filling a major gap in the Southern historical record. Additionally, African-American Cooleemeeans express the same concerns with crime, drugs, housing and declining 'family values' that white Cooleemeeans express.

Fink was right to worry about the 'segregation of memory'. But I dissent from his claim (2006: 1/24) that, 'history here ultimately appeared less to do full justice to the known historical record than to confirm and disseminate certain conservative and exclusionary political values of the project organizers'. We need a more nuanced understanding of both 'being white' and 'being black' in the South. Cooleemeeans are not trying to 'do justice to the known historical record': they are trying to *add* to that record, by adding the hitherto unknown. Perhaps an academic's first loyalty should be to the 'known record', though even there, openness to the 'unknown' would be appropriate- but a community group's first loyalty is to the *people*. For Cooleemeeans the goal is to liberate the voice of their town and region, past and present. Although I have chosen to look at their work in terms of class, and Fink considered it in terms of race, Cooleemeeans demur from both views, believing the important issue is culture.

The Rumleys and their community felt betrayed by Fink, feeling he had been welcomed into their homes, given free access to material, and then turned on them. This sense of betrayal, which echoes the sense of betrayal working-class communities already feel towards government and big business, only widened the gulf between working-class and middle-class. It created an uneasy relationship with academics that set up barriers to future collaboration and research. Although CHA works closely with select academics and with Wake Forest University in collaborative archaeology, academia in general is treated warily. For my research I met guarded enthusiasm - Cooleemeeans had learned to question my motives, agenda, and ethics. It was felt that uses had been made of their interviews by Fink of which they could not approve. They felt remarks had been taken out of context, and allegations made without opportunity for rebuttal. Fink himself has expressed regret for the irrevocable and bitter breakdown of an initially collaborative relationship. He also admitted that the Rumleys felt he had strayed from his 'originally-stated focus on the CHA project into an investigation of their personal pasts' (Fink 2006: 17/24).

The best way to counter the distrust that could have impeded research was to share my ideas at every stage. Lynn Rumley requested that I not quote her, except with her verification that nothing had been changed, misrepresented, or taken out of context. In making use of someone else's words this is only ethical and courteous, but that it was felt necessary to ask spoke volumes about the level of distrust created when relations with just one academic are soured by miscommunication. Cooleemeeans were dedicated to representing themselves,

very wary of being misrepresented by outsiders – particularly academics - and very wary of how their efforts might be received by the wider society. This wariness was a product both of a heritage of exclusion, and their perception of their recent experience at the hands of academia.

Lynn Rumley warns that when working with communities we are invited into their lives and history as guests: 'some stories are bound to offend modern sensibilities', but equally our language or assumptions may offend them. Most importantly, we must ensure that where we do condemn a belief, we do not condemn the person who expressed that belief. 'Remember that you're there to listen, not to convince...You're under no obligation to pretend that you approve' but 'just as doctors...remind themselves...' "First do no harm", it's good for us to be especially cognizant of how we relate to interviewees' (Rumley and Bryan 2007: 13, 18-19). Staff attitudes like those at Cooleemee welcome local people as experts, and the poor or uneducated as equals. This goes a long way to encourage true reciprocity, restore human dignity in devastated communities, and to advance historical knowledge. As academics entering such communities, we too must remind ourselves, 'first do no harm'.

## Conclusions

In Yarmouth Watson asked: 'Are people not entitled to high-quality museums just because they are poor and badly educated?' Since Fink's criticisms imply poorer whites have no business in museums because they are (allegedly) bigoted, similar questions must be asked in Cooleemee. It is wrong to criticize Fink's assessment of Cooleemee's blue-collar historical movement without admitting, and rectifying, our own academic or 'middle-class' presumptions. The lessons Cooleemeeans are handing down to their children about ancestors, 'neighbourliness', hunting and fishing, care of the land, all replicate values Native Americans might pass down. Yet there is a strong likelihood that our image of Native Americans telling such stories to a new generation is more reverential than our image of white hunter-fishermen doing the same. As products of *our* culture, there are differences in the way we perceive the two: differences in our assumptions about their intellectual ability, the validity of their effort, the importance of their heritage, and their right to a 'culture'.

Poorer whites in the Southern States have consistently been denigrated by other white groups, and termed 'cottonmill trash', 'white trash', or 'rednecks'. In his novel about Carolina textile workers, Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist, Doug Marlett wrote that: 'In our age of political correctness, of mandatory sensitivity, of well-scrubbed and well-policed social discourse', such epithets are used 'with an impunity I found appalling, given the tenor of the times and the poverty, powerlessness, and marginalization of my people (2001: 28). Southern novelist Sharyn McCrumb suggests that because of the negative image of the South in the national consciousness, to gain inclusion it is almost necessary for Southerners to reject their forbears and become 'heritage orphans'. White Southerners may, she suggests, enter the wider society, or cling to 'heritage', but not both (2003: 144). Since we have seen that working people buffeted by global market forces *need* a sense of historic identity to make sense of their lives, this pressure to reject all the values associated with Southern ancestry creates a greater gulf between rich and poor, academic and amateur, politician and factory-worker, 'liberal' and 'red neck'. Rejected by the wider society, equipped, as a reaction, with inverted snobbery, Southern working people begin to promote their own history.

Cooleemee's lower-class whites are some of its founding families. By rejecting their involvement, CHA would have reinforced and perpetuated the processes of exclusion. Through listening to a range of voices, museums can hope to increase tolerance between different economic, educational and racial groups. In her work for the Center for Democratic Renewal (previously the Anti-Klan Network), Rumley noted the 'alarmingly natural ease by which genuine frustrations are diverted into a populist brand of racism... There is a 'white movement' out there. It exists and the Klan has entered it... Every worker's racial culture... must be respected if racism and racial misunderstanding are to be pulled out by their roots' (quoted in Fink 2006: 7/24).

While Cooleemee retains problems associated with a racially-segregated past, it demonstrates valuable lessons in meeting a working-class community on equal terms, with a view to moving towards a better future. Townspeople also make a convincing case that social relationships in these small towns are more complex, and less racially charged than cultural



preconceptions suggest. In modern-day Cooleemee, the town's incorporation did not include some outlying areas, which remain the areas where more African-American Cooleemeeans live. Some complain this perpetuated their inferior access to town services, and left them insufficiently policed, but others- black and white- prefer the independence of not being fully part of the town (Fink 2006:11/24, 14/24; Watkins 2009). Watkins, one of the African-Americans interviewed for Fink's research, expressed surprise and sorrow that her words could have been used to suggest CHA projects were racist or exclusionary. A CHA member since its founding, Watkins was adamant that she has never experienced any sense of racism and kept repeating, 'He can't have spent any time here, I don't believe he can really have known us or understood this type of place. I think sometimes people come in with their outside expectations and see what they expect to see' (2009).

Cooleemeeans clearly demonstrate the use of a history of hardships to equip them for life in the present and future. Instead of condemning them for telling a largely white story, academics could endeavour to show how segregation and racism can be a part of that narrative of hope triumphing over suffering. In addition to the parallels already being made between white and black struggles; white and black family values, it could be stressed as a source of pride that while their ancestors were segregated, today all Cooleemee's children learn about the town's history together. Today black and white Cooleemeeans hear each other's stories, and share their memories and photographs in the pages of the *Loom*. Watkins' testimony suggests the town's unity behind historical and regenerative projects is already a source of quiet pride, but that all Cooleemeeans – black and white- coming together in celebration is so taken for granted by this community that they do not express that explicitly enough to please visiting academics.

Academics tend to believe that there is a need to tell and confront the 'darker stories' of history (see Shriver 2004; Carnegie 2006). Fink raised questions about rose-tinted depictions of exclusive pasts- an issue that is particularly problematic in the Southern States. However, for those to whom these dark events happened telling those stories can be emotionally upsetting. Some want to speak out; others feel placing those experiences in a museum is an invasion of privacy (see Carnegie 2006). In interview, Lynn Rumley explained local history can be very personal- and as such sensitive or hurtful. There was one story of a local tragedy that 'everybody knew' but no one thought appropriate to share with strangers, and thus was omitted from the oral histories. As an 'incomer', Rumley herself was not told this missing story for many years.

In Cooleemee, the preference of both racial communities is to imitate the good things from the past, and not dwell on the bad. Again, it might be that communities do repudiate the bad, but since this is an unspoken understanding, they see no need to express that explicitly enough to satisfy academics. This is particularly relevant when a museum is established primarily 'for' a town, not for external consumption. African-American town 'elder' Genelle Watkins explained: 'what I always say is it's all about *you* – how *you* act, how *you* think, how *you* feel about yourself and what *you* decide to be. I always tell all our children that'.

In a living community, distasteful aspects of the past continue to resonate through the present. This history is 'unfinished', living, and personal. Avoiding the 'taint' of racism by treating poor white workers as pariahs, and refusing to discuss their views or accept their memories should not be an option for museums. It would also be no less 'selective' than communities choosing to commemorate the 'good' history, and treating past wrongs as a community taboo. The work of Watkins in Cooleemee, and her collaboration and friendship with Lynn Rumley should benefit inter-racial understanding and inclusion.

For academics and museums, inclusion should embrace *all* groups - not just the 'picturesque', and not just those who have no skeletons in the community closet. This means economic or educational minorities also have a place in museums. Inclusion also means taking the trouble to find out what people want and expect from their museum – learning history may be the smallest aspect of some wide-ranging, life-changing, and life-affirming aims. Museums must approach source communities as humble partners, willing to learn. 'No one has the right to 'define' anyone else, to tell them who they are, or where they fit in' (Ames 1994: 100-101).

At Cooleemee a push to establish a museum was taken to the heart of an economically deprived community, while largely unsupported by any government funding or professional help. In the absence of support from the historical 'establishment', untiring 'amateurs' had no other option but to educate themselves and learn how to maintain collections, perform research,

and create documentation. Had the academic community been more closely involved and less critical, a valuable exchange of ideas, knowledge and *constructive* criticism could have enriched both sides. Some academics – Escott, Freeze, Bryan and others have been very involved and their contribution is spoken of warmly in the community. This is not because they have ‘agreed’ with everything the amateurs said, but because they listened. Their respectful interactions with this community demonstrate the mutual benefit when there is good communication, and resultant trust, between lay historical movements and academia.

Researchers and museums professionals must put aside preconceptions and prejudice, and humbly listen to the voices of the ‘inarticulate’ who given the opportunity, may prove very articulate indeed. We do not have to agree with every voice raised. We do have to listen, and endeavour to understand the complexities of experience that lie behind each voice. Escott believes that popular culture ‘over simplifies and distorts’ history, and that although most stereotyping is a product of culture, not academia, academics are a product of that culture, and some have failed to look for greater complexities or have been afraid to court controversy (King 2009). Escott’s belief is that rigid academic attitudes and iconographic cultural pre-conceptions do a disservice to history. I believe that such simplified history also does a disservice to people who are as complex, nuanced and sophisticated as their history. The first step towards healing communities – whether damaged by economic, educational, or racial divisions, or a combination of all these- is to listen to the underprivileged voices and move on together in a spirit of enhanced understanding.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Abram, R. (2002)

<sup>2</sup> Millwhistle 2 (2) (May 2006)

<sup>3</sup> Loom 59 (Summer 2005) 10

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.learnnc.org/media/bestweb/textilecenter/story.pdf>

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