

The Digitizing of '34

Transcript

Kathryn Michaelis: In 1934, textile workers across the South walked off the job, demanding better working conditions and better pay. The New Deal promised protections against employer harassment and exploitation, but did not follow through. Most workers were blacklisted after the strike; some were met with threats and violence; a few were killed. In 1995, *The Uprising of '34* was released. A documentary film about the general textile strikes, it tells the story of the pain that lingered in these small southern communities, and the silences of the workers who had experienced the brutality of company thugs and the indifference of the National Labor Board.

Traci Drummond: Later in 1995, *The Uprising of '34* documentary collection was donated to the Southern Labor Archives at Georgia State University Library. Filmmakers George Stoney and Judith Helfand deposited the collections, comprised of transcripts and video recordings. While the documentary came in at roughly an hour and a half, the documentary footage they captured to make the film was over 200 hours in length. With poor access to the collection due to an unintuitive and incomplete inventory, and preservation concerns mounting for the 20-year-old videotape, grant funding seemed the best way to most easily solve both problems. In 2015, George State University Library was awarded a grant by the National Historical Publications & Records Commission in the amount of \$120,000 which would fund digitization of the videotape in several formats, creation of transcripts, and staff to make the content available online.

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Traci Drummond: Well it's something, because of the difficulty of access, *The Uprising of '34* collection is something that's always on my mind. Like how can we make this more easily accessible? How can we make this content easier to retrieve? And then of course the realization that there were also preservation issues involved. That we would really need to take definitive action on that at some point or else we were going to lose all of the content. And with over 200 hours of footage that was shot for the documentary, and the documentary only coming in at an hour and a half, that was way too much content to just let go.

Kathryn Michaelis: When Traci first brought up the idea of applying for a grant to have this collection digitized, I started looking into it. And I'm reading a little bit about it, and I was really surprised that I didn't really know anything about the events that were depicted in this collection. These strikes happened all over the south. It was a huge deal, hundreds and thousands of people were affected by them, and even in some places might still be affected by them. But I had never really learned about any of these events in school, and it seemed like it was a really important thing to sort of get out to the general public and something that a lot of people would be really interested in learning about.

Janet Irons: I was very much in the paper of the National Archives and other things, and I had done some interviews. I had done some oral histories. But I was not focused on the legacy of the failure and the pain as much as I was focused on the building blocks of this five- or six-year movement. And so I wasn't as cognizant of the need to understand the relevance of something that happened 60 years ago to, not just to the general public, but to the descendants of those people who were involved. And so Judy brought an intimacy to the story that I didn't have, you know, as a scholar. So I think that the book is very useful and what scholars have done about the '34 strike is important information, but the film does something that I don't know that any scholar has done. And that is to look at the question of pain and healing and generations and how you deal with the disconnect between the power of this movement and the total silence that followed afterwards. And it was partly George's, I think, genius to be able to make that the thing around which the story pivoted. And that's what makes people cry when they watch the movie.

Traci Drummond: So the South has been traditionally harder to organize than other parts of the country. You know, when they first started putting textile mills down here, it's because the people up North had decided to organize and to demand better wages. So they thought, "oh, it'll be easy, we'll find these places in the South, these small towns, middle of nowhere, where there aren't very many people to begin with. And we'll give these folks for the first time ever, they'll have indoor plumbing or they'll have electricity." So all of these mill towns were created around the South. It really was a way to control workers and to really sort of observe them at all times. Just not only have control of their life on the job, but outside of it because the company owned the store. The boss was in church every Sunday, and it was expected that everyone else would be there too. So to have this really close look into people's lives really helped the company control them even more. It was incredibly brave that they tried to organize in 1934. And it was shot down with so much violence that it silenced an entire generation of people from talking about it. In the documentary when, it's the daughter or the granddaughter of one of the mill workers, says, "how did this happen and no one knew about it?"

Janet Irons: Probably neither the work that I did and only partially *The Uprising* shows the point of view of the mill owner and how hostile they were to the strikers. How they felt that a) they were agents of an outside group. So one of the central tenets of the research that I did is that this was an indigenous movement. They dragged the union into the strike against the union's own better judgment because the union was used to running a strike with a big treasury. And these were people who were creating the union with their bare hands. They didn't care that there wasn't a big treasury. They had already built it out of nothing and they had a drive and a determination to succeed. They also thought that Franklin Roosevelt was behind them and was going to support them in what they did.

Kathryn Michaelis: It was easy to make the case for why this collection was important because the content is just so rich. That wasn't as hard as it could have been. One thing that was difficult was that the collection was not super organized, and a lot of the

finding aid that we had wasn't really accurate. A lot of the tapes, it wasn't clear whether if the box that the finding aid said that they were in, that that's actually where they were. The person that was on the tape might not be the person who the label said, might not be the person who's actually being interviewed on the tape, et cetera. So one of the challenges was that I actually took a couple of months when I was preparing the grant application and went through all the boxes and checked them against the finding aid and made an accurate list of all what tapes were in what boxes. I watched a lot of the tapes just to kind of get an idea of what was on them. I didn't watch all of them, but I would just pop them in and watch for a few minutes and then get an idea of the amount of content that was on the tape and whether it was labeled correctly and get an idea of the themes that people were talking about so that I could use those to frame the narrative for the grant application.

Some of the challenges that we've dealt with since beginning work on the grant have been learning how to use the OHMS, the Oral History Metadata Synchronizer software.

Christianna Huber: So the Oral History Metadata Synchronizer is a way for us to bring together all the component parts that go with the interview that you would find online. It allows us to put all of the metadata, sort of the information about who's in the video, where it was shot, and where it's being hosted online, all in one spot. And then it also allows us to take a YouTube video and the transcript that we've prepared and make it so that we can search the transcript but also have it so that we have points, time markers, along the side that allow you to fast forward through the YouTube video. So you can scroll through the transcript but have the YouTube video and sync them up. So as a researcher, if you're looking for something and you're keyword searching or Control + F'ing your way through the transcript, you can just fast forward to that point in the video and get all of the information, not just from the text from the transcript, but the contextual information of vocal inflections and pauses and the way in which the narrator and the interviewer are relating to each other. Really give you a rich, deep experience with the source material.

I would definitely use by place. We make sure to put all of the places into our metadata so you can search if you're doing research on a particular mill or a particular place in regards to 1934. While the collection does focus on the 1934 strike, it's really, really a rich trove of 57, 58 years' worth of textile worker history because these people are placing the strike within the larger context of their lives and their careers. So you get a really great sense, pretty much from the early 20th century up through the 1990s. We have a lot of interviews regarding unionization at the Fieldcrest-Cannon plant in Kannapolis, North Carolina, that while is not directly related to the 1934 strike, is definitely being contextualized within that strike and the culture it has created in the mill communities in the South. So don't just think of it in terms of the 1934 strike. There's also a lot of information about home life, there's a lot of information about childhood, about familial relations. So there's a lot of depth to this collection beyond just the 1934 strike.

Kathryn Michaelis: It's interesting, because I look at the people being interviewed in their homes, and a lot of their homes look just like my grandmother's house, and my uncle's house. The places they're talking about are places that I have gone to a lot as a child and growing up. The things that they're talking about, and also just the way that these people talk, it's interesting because it's the way that I hear a lot of my family, just the cadences and the expressions that they use. It's not something that you hear so much nowadays with people who are younger. Yeah, it's been interesting.

Christianna Huber: I was expecting a lot of the strikers to have really defeatist attitudes, because the strike did ultimately fail and many of them were blacklisted and put out of their work and lost their careers. And oftentimes, because they lived in company housing, lost their homes. There are people who talk about literally living in ditches with their children. But the pride that they have that they stood up and took a stand, I think is really blowing me away. There is bitterness, but there's also a strength that came out of something that a lot of us would not want to get back up from.

Traci Drummond: A few years ago I was at the Society of Georgia Archivists' conference, and I was talking to Steve Smith, who is with the Spartanburg Public Library, Spartanburg County Public Library. He and I were talking about the uprising and I mentioned to him that we were thinking about putting this grant together and submitting it. And he said, "Well, since Spartanburg and the area surrounding Spartanburg was one of the locations for some of the worst violence done during the uprising, that story is of ongoing interest in those communities there." He said, "Maybe we can work on something together." And I loved the idea. As important as I think it is reaching out to the research community, if we are able to go into the communities and just talk to the everyday folks that live in these communities who maybe had relatives who were part of the uprising, who participated in it from whatever point of view, to continue to get these stories, but share these stories with the communities that were most impacted by it, I think that that is one of the most important things we can do. Archives are often considered to be only for serious historical researchers, but if we can't use the archives to teach communities about their own history, I feel like we're failing.

Kathryn Michaelis: My hopes for the collection now that it's available to the public are that I want people to find it, and I want people to feel connected to it. I really want people to learn about the strikes, if they don't already know about them. And I think most people probably don't. I really want people to use these interviews as a way of connecting with just an important part of the South's history that is being erased all the time. The prevalence of the cotton mill in the small Southern towns, you don't really see that so much now as you used to, but I think it's just such an important part of the way that our communities used to be constructed that I think it's really essential for people who want to understand how the South is today to understand how it used to be.

Christianna Huber: I've enjoyed this project because I get to go listen to ghosts all day. These people for the most part have passed along and it's this, this is the only record a lot of them have. It's really interesting and fascinating to get to hear these

people talk about their lives knowing that they no longer have the chance to. I love having the duty of care of making sure that their stories are accessible to the world, and are accessible to researchers. So that these stories and these lives become a more important part of the historical record and help our understanding of working class culture in the South across state and racial lines. I think it's incredibly important that that's documented. And that this activism that happened in the 1930s is remembered because so often it is completely written out and people don't think there's a labor history in the South. There's a deep labor history that needs to be told.