

TEACHER'S CORNER: THE CAROLINA-WASHINGTON CONNECTION IN THE CLASSROOM

[Editor's Note:

One teacher's involvement in her students' lives provides an inspiring model of innovative teaching and the ways such teaching can lead to new insights into the migration connection between rural Black families in the Carolinas and in Washington, D.C. On March 28, a teachers' workshop and symposium will be held at the Ward Circle Building at American University to highlight the continuity of Carolina culture within Washington, D.C. The workshop will be conducted by Patricia Rickenbacker whose teaching methods are described below.]

In the 1970's Patricia Rickenbacker taught art in a small town in South Carolina but found her job extremely frustrating. Depressed by her students' utter disinterest in the fine arts, she decided to look closely at their lives for clues on how to make art meaningful to them.

Ms. Rickenbaker was astonished to discover that each summer more than half of her rural students traveled to New York City. There they visited kin, participated in urban life, and revitalized a powerful connection linking extended families stretched between the two places. Those students who remained often received kin visiting from the north.

With a grant from the South Carolina Humanities Council and a donation of cameras and film from Kodak, Ms. Rickenbacker transformed her students' family connections into an ingenious arts project. She asked her students to keep journals and take photographs recording their summer experiences. Taking photographs helped the students to develop technical and artistic skills and to produce tangible souvenirs of the summer. In the journals, the students recorded complicated and conflicting feelings about their families and the New York-South Carolina connection. These words capture a great deal of the pain that accompanies the displacement of families from the land; the exhilaration and sometimes disappointment that follow families to the city; the ambivalence that many feel between loyalty to kin and a desire to be free of them; and many other tensions that families experience in trying to cope with poverty, migration, and change.

Patricia Rickenbaker became her students' personal confidant as she read and responded in writing to the entries in their journals. She watched for themes, and several powerful ones emerged. These included a chronology of the journey to New York; conflicting feelings about being a rural southerner in the big city; the difficulties of navigating problems such as teenage sexuality, romance, and unemployment; and the sense of being part of a huge

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dispersed kin group. Cutting and pasting from the journal entries, she put together an original play, written in her students' own words, tracing one person's summer sojourn to New York. The students then produced this play, accompanied by original music, for their community. The students loved working on this project, and town residents were enormously moved.

Last March the D.C. Community Humanities Council invited Patricia Rickenbacker to Washington to talk about her project, not only because it demonstrated a creative blend of ethnography and the arts in the classroom, but also because she had discovered something of extraordinary promise for the D.C. schools as well. Her project speaks to one small part of the migration corridor linking the Carolinas to Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York. Many Carolina families who migrated to Washington came from the Piedmont region and the coastal plain. Many of these families preserve their Carolina connections to family, church, land, and community while other families rebuild Carolina traditions in the city. The Council decided to build on Ms. Rickenbacker's experiment through including testimony from other generations, through probing for the reasons Washingtonians decided to migrate here, and through exploring why and how residents make Carolina culture a vital part of urban life.

On March 28, 1987, a day-long series of programs, funded by the D.C. Community Humanities Council, will explore the complicated Washington-Carolina connection. Hearst Elementary School in N.W. Washington, the Anthropological Society of Washington, and the American Studies Program at American University are jointly producing the program, which will take place on the American University campus. Patricia Rickenbaker will come from South Carolina to lead a teachers' workshop. She will talk about her own

project and will share with other teachers the many possibilities for drawing on the Carolina-Washington connection in the classroom. Workshop topics will include gathering family histories; building cultural-historical maps based on students' own experiences of migration, travel, and visits; and developing photo exhibits or school gardens.

In part, the program will look at ways that the Carolina connection contributes to Washington's identity. Washington is often portrayed as an isolated, bureaucratic, mythical city, where no one really lives. In reality, Washington is rooted firmly in the culture, history, and economy of its region. A 19th century hospice for Black families fleeing the deep south, Washington in the 1930's and 1940's welcomed many Carolina residents who could no longer support themselves on farms or in industry. During the post-war years, the federal government and the growing city of Washington offered many jobs. Those who were able to find steady work, buy houses, bring up other kin, and establish communities during these good economic times very often worked hard to preserve Carolina traditions.

The March 28 program will also feature a panel of anthropologists and historians discussing various economic and cultural forces that brought migrants to Washington and in many cases tied Washingtonians to the Carolinas. Yvonne Jones will look at the plight of small-scale Black tobacco farmers in the Piedmont; Karen Sacks will talk about the low-wage economy of the Piedmont and a union drive there sparked by migrants returning from D.C. Vernon Burton and Carol Stack will discuss the ways in which political forces have influenced rural Black family life and the decision of some Black families to leave the city to return to the Carolinas. This panel should offer a vivid sense of Washington's place within its region,

the response of Black families to local economic and political forces, and of the ways these people try to deal with these larger forces in their everyday lives.

Complimenting the teachers' workshop, anthropologist Tony Whitehead will coordinate a health care workshop. Dr. Whitehead is an experienced mediator between health care professionals and Carolina folk medicine practitioners who preserve traditional medicines and techniques. Dr. Whitehead will talk to D.C. area health care workers about understanding cultural practices (such as pork feasts) and traditional health care systems (for example in treating arthritis) that doctors and nurses sometimes see as interfering with their own medical services.

The day's program will also include a number of participants knowledgeable about Carolina folk traditions, including those practiced in D.C. Several traditional healers will demonstrate medicines and healing practices in a workshop coordinated by Dr. Arvilla Price. Skilled gardeners, cooks, and fishers will talk about how they find, grow, and prepare Carolina foods in the city, and they will offer many free samples. Musicians representing powerful artistic styles such as gospel, Piedmont blues, and old-time mountain string music will offer concerts and workshops coordinated by music scholars Glenn Hinson and Dick Spottswood. Everyone from the Carolinas will be encouraged to bring photographs, share stories, and mark their birthplace on the large Carolina maps, which will be on display. Finally, Joyce Walker and the Hearst PTA will offer all-day child care and special programs celebrating children's folk traditions in Carolina and D.C.

Many Carolina traditions--the collard greens and squash in alley gardens, the herring that fishers net each spring and salt down to eat

through the winter, the barbecues and feasts that bring families together on holidays, the souse loaves that neighbors exchange, the gospel music that enriches Washington's churches-- have been powerful, vital forces in making Washington lively and unique. Such traditions have gone almost unrecognized in popular stereotypes about this city. In addition to celebrating the real Washington, the program should offer teachers the chance to learn about these traditions, and the ways they testify to family creativity in coping with the large problems of making a new city their own. Today, many of these traditions are seriously at risk in Washington. Hard economic times are displacing residents from neighborhoods like Mount Pleasant, where the traditions thrive, and are creating feelings of despair among many youth who see a future of limited possibilities.

Exploring the Carolina-Washington connection offers one way to appreciate the rich, textural complexity of Black-American cultural traditions. While Black Americans share a great deal, they are not homogeneous. Nor is Black culture monolithic. Those who have migrated from the Carolinas to Washington have preserved ties of family, friendship, and history in the South; stamped a new destination with their own meanings; built communities and new urban traditions here; and navigated cultural bridges between their old and new homes. Their efforts reveal a great deal about the creativity and flexibility of cultural processes.

Drawing on the Carolina connections can enrich school curriculum and provide an opportunity to incorporate anthropology in the classroom. For further information on the March 28 program, write: Brett Williams, American Studies Program, American University, Washington, D.C. 20016, or call (202) 885-1830.

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For further reading:

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Edith Shimkin et al. The Black Extended
Family. Mouton, 1980.

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Brett Williams
President, Anthropological
Society of Washington