

Oral History for the Women's group of the American Folklore Society
Folklore 530 - UW Madison
Interview with Pat Turner
Researcher - Rebecca Keyel

Rebecca: This is Rebecca Keyel calling from UW Madison

Pat: Hi Rebecca how are you?

Rebecca: I'm good, how are you, I just wanted to say thank you so much

Pat: No problem

Rebecca: Do you have any questions for me before I get started?

Pat: Nope, we can dive right in.

Rebecca: Let's start with some basics; since we're recording this, I'll do some introduction Today is December 15, it's a Thursday, the time is 10:01 am central time and this is an interview with Pat Turner for the AFS Women's Folklore Oral History Project and the interviewer is Rebecca Keyel. If you want to start with a little bit about where you grew up?

Pat: Sure, I grew up in Sag Harbor, which is on the Eastern End of Long Island in New York.

Rebecca: And is there anything you strongly remember about your childhood that you want to speak about?

Pat: In terms of in relationship to my scholarship, I guess I would say that my parents had ended up in that community of Sag Harbor and the neighboring of Bridge Hampton, which was where they started out. They were a part of the African American migration in the 1930s from the South, they were from Virginia and North Carolina and they were a part of a whole group of African Americans who migrated to the North to sort of get away from Jim Crow segregation. Usually when that migration is talked about academically the focus is on migration from one rural area to an urban area like New York City or Chicago or Detroit. I think that one of the things that gets left out is that some people migrated from one rural community to a northern rural community. That's what happened in my parent's case. They were like many others sort of, disinclined to hold on to a whole lot of traditions from the south. I've asked my older sisters about that, finally connecting to my work. None of us can remember our mother or aunts who were also a part of this migration being involved with quilting at all. Their sewing was all hems and putting on buttons and that sort of repair kind of sewing going on, but we don't have any recollection of our mother involved with quilting at all.

Rebecca: Is that what interested you in doing a larger ethnography on African American quilting?

Pat: In a way, I really trace my interest in African American quilting- and I often say I'm more interested in African American quilters, than I'm interested in African American quilts. That really was triggered by my work with Gladys-Marie Fry in the late 1980s when she was facilitating a group of black quilters from Alabama for the annual Folklife festival at the Smithsonian. At that time I had started some more generalized ethnographies on my own with family and community members and had been a little bit frustrated by a real reluctance on the part of many of my informants to want to talk about their childhoods and where they grew up and what Jim Crow segregation had been like and what their schools had been like and my father used to say why do you want to know, he deemed that sort of thing completely irrelevant. When Gladys and I were working with these quilters we were asking them a lot of questions about how they learned to quilt, how did they choose their designs, those kinds of things. Those questions could, we could then ask what their homes were like, the quilting became a vehicle for the larger story. It was much easier to get to a fuller rounder more satisfying kind of an ethnography by having this one tradition as the entre point. And so that's I think really what got me interested in using quilts as a vehicle through which to get African American women to talk more about their lives over all.

Rebecca: Has that technique informed your other ethnographies? Is that the approach you take to most of your work, to find an entry point?

Pat: Yes, absolutely.

Rebecca: Did you know as a child that you wanted to go into folklore, or was it something that came later on?

Pat: Oh, yeah, no I had no idea what folklore was as a child. I think that- you know I'm in that generation of women and particularly African American women whose aspirations for adulthood were fairly constrained. I mean I think that my parents thought that the best possible occupation their daughters could aspire to would be to be a nurse or a school teacher, and by school teacher they would have been thinking K through 12, and I was probably much more fixated on the education part of that because I was a nerdy little girl, and until I went to college, undergrad, I got a lot of positive reinforcement from faculty members suggesting that I ought to suggest going to graduate school and I ought to consider a career as a college professor and I didn't really even- they were the only college professors I knew, I had no role model in the profession to think about so I- but it appealed to me. I took two years off between finishing my undergrad and starting at Berkeley, and when I started at Berkeley, my goal was to find a dissertation topic related in some way or another to African American culture and history and literature. I hadn't really settled on anything and I was talking to one of my advisors at the end of my first year and he said, you know I really think you're interested in Folklore. You should go take the graduate course from Alan Dundes and see if that's what you're most interested in. So I went over to his office and introduced myself and said that I wanted to take his

graduate seminar on Folklore and he asked me what undergraduate courses in folklore I had and he said none. And he said you can't take the graduate seminar without any foundation, you'll just flounder, you won't succeed. He said you need to take the undergraduate courses first and he started listing all kinds of books, have you read this book by Zora Neal Hurston, have you read this book by Newbell Miles Puckett, and my answers were no to most of them and he said "you need to read these books and you need to read the journal of American Folklore and you know you can't just come into a graduate course with no foundation" and he gave me all the titles of these books and said "you enroll in the undergraduate course and then if you do well there you can take the graduate seminar next year." So the next day, I used to get to campus first thing in the morning, so I went over to the Dell library on the Berkeley campus and I was up in the GER section which was where the folklore books were and I was getting some of the books he was recommending to me and I turned the corner in the stacks and he was there and he looked at me and said "You're here! Oh my goodness, you can take the graduate seminar and the undergraduate class at the same time." So I did that I took the graduate seminar and the undergraduate class at the same time.

Rebecca: And that's where everything started? Did you pick up on Zora Neal Hurston's footsteps when you were thinking about your dissertation? Did that inspire to take off running?

Pat: My dissertation topic was really as much a reflection of my interest in history and in literature as much as in folklore, I wrote about slave narratives. They are not authentic folk narratives in the way that we would have been talking about them in those days but they certainly had some characteristics, it was more of a- it was one of those dissertation topics that came about as a result of the papers I was writing in my seminars and one of the people at Berkeley at the time- they had these great American Slavery scholars throughout the campus at the time, Albert Rabotaeu who wrote about slave folk religion was on my committee, Lawrence Levine, Larry Levine who wrote *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* and had won a McArthur award and the national book award was there so it was a real rich time and the slave narratives were something I came to as a result of the seminars I was taking.

Rebecca: Were the people on your committee then the people that were the most influential during your graduate career? Did you have other mentors?

Pat: That's a good question. I think the people on my graduate committee really were the most influential. I certainly took seminars from other faculty, but as I'm remembering looking around the room, those really were the people that had the most impact on me.
Rebecca: And who was on your committee?

Pat: Larry Levine and Albert Rabotaeu, now Rabotaeu was on my committee and was supposed to sign off on my dissertation, now in the middle of my studies he took a position at Princeton and left Berkeley. He promised his students he would find advisors for them as appropriate through his colleagues on the faculty, so he was the one who introduced me to Levine and sort of handed me off to Levine when he left. And then Alan

Dundes was probably the single most influential faculty member in my entire education and so he was on my committee and then Daniel Melia from Rhetoric because my PhD is in Rhetoric: that was my entree point.

Rebecca: And then after that you went to Boston? Do you want to talk a little bit about your time there?

Pat: Yeah, that was where I was teaching in the late 1980s when I had the summer I happened to be working with Gladys Fry on the Mall of the Smithsonian. That was a good experience for me; it was a good place to start out as an assistant professor. It was-I don't know if you know the jargon of higher education, it was an access school which means that it didn't really have admission standards. If you applied you pretty much got in if you had a high school diploma or a GED so we had a huge student population of people in the area around Boston who wanted to go to college but perhaps didn't have the strongest intellectual foundations from high school but had a real eagerness to succeed. I had terrific students there, and it had a policy in those days, and again this is the late 1980s that anyone over 65, any senior citizen who wanted to take a course at UMass, if there was a seat available in the class room, in other words if they were displacing a student who needed the course, they could take the course for a 5 dollar fee. They couldn't matriculate towards a degree, in other words the things that cost the university money, record keeping and graduation and that sort of thing, but if you were interested for your own purposes in learning the subject matter of a course and there was a seat available you could have it for 5 bucks for the semester. So I had a fair number of senior citizens in my courses over the years there which created a terrific dialog between the 18 year olds and the 68 year olds and in teaching African American history in that decade in the 1980s we had people, I remember teaching about Paul Robson and one of the senior citizens in my class had heard him sing in the 1930s, so it was a terrific experience to have that access to someone who had been a part of the era we were talking about.

Rebecca: Did that impact your later work? Are you still teaching now, or are you doing more administrative work?

Pat: I try to teach one course a year, it's often a special topics kind of an honors course that doesn't have, it's not a big lecture with a couple hundred students course. I try to teach something every year.

Rebecca: Did your early Boston experience influence your interest in higher education administration?

Pat: I think so, I was involved in a lot of committee work there on issues related to access and preparedness and retention and those types of higher ed issues so I would say that that started there.

Rebecca: Once you left Boston you went to UC Davis and you've been there since then? Do you want to talk about your early time as a professor?

Pat: UC Davis had in the late 1980s decided to increase the number of faculty in all of these ethnic studies programs and departments, so we had African American studies, Asian American studies, Native American studies and Chicana Studies, and they made a concentrated commitment to faculty FTE to get them on a firmer footing so I was part of an influx in faculty members that all came in the early 1990s. It was a very good fit for me, very good students here as well although we're extraordinarily competitive campus when I went from one that was a complete access school to one where high school seniors with 4.0s get rejected routinely, it was a complete shift in some ways in student population. UC Davis also was able to provide better support for faculty members research interests, they had a better sabbatical policy than UMass had, they had resources you could compete for to use for travel to get your research done and that kind of thing. So it was a very supportive environment for me in the early years and I- you know I didn't have any particular problems. I came here- I hadn't gone up for tenure, I left UMass before it was time to go up for tenure, I didn't have any particular problems in fact I went up early, so it's been a real good fit for me.

Rebecca: When did you decide to get into the administration side, did it happen or was it something you consciously chose?

Pat: I would say it just sort of happened. I think that once I made it to the full professor rank, there's a tendency on campus to pull the newly minted full professor into whatever kinds of service obligations people can, and I think that a lot of committees and task forces and such bodies, they would always want diversity. So if they were looking for rounding out a committee with a woman and a member with an ethnic minority and someone who was already full professor it got you down to a fairly small number of people on campus with 2000 faculty members so I got pulled into a lot of things and at one point I remember thinking that the common denominator of the kinds of projects that I would say yes to were all about undergraduate education but I had had at Oneonta as an undergrad had really prepared me for the competitiveness of a graduate school like Berkeley that if I had anything administratively it would be toward trying to have our undergraduates have a good foundation from this institution.

Rebecca: What would you say is your most proud accomplishment? Is it your research or your undergraduate work, or maybe something else?

Pat: I think in terms of professional accomplishments, I guess I lean a little bit more towards my scholarly contributions than my administrative contributions. You know I've never thought about that question before, and so I need to think about why I think that is. I think that many of us have a particular ego invested in our scholarship; you know as an administrator I have to do a lot of writing. I have to write letters and task force reports and all kinds of things that have to get vetted by multiple people I always say when I'm sending a draft to someone, make whatever suggestions you want I don't have any ego in this we just have to present this in the best possible way. I don't think about anything I write as an administrator in personal kinds of terms I think very rhetorically about it. In terms of my scholarship I do have a lot of ego invested and when I share a draft of a chapter with a colleague or something I'm obviously prepared to make changes or I

wouldn't be sharing a draft in the first place, but I'm much more caught up. I think maybe when I look at my scholarship, I can say you know *Crafted Lives*, my book, the way it is, the way my other books are. Other scholars might have tackled these topics, but they wouldn't have written these particular books. They wouldn't have done the projects this way. When I look at what I do administratively, if you've taken a campus from not having an undergraduate research center to having an undergraduate research center, other talented administrators could have done that and have done it on other campuses. There's very little I can look at here and say "Only Pat Turner could have created that entity," so I think that could lean me toward being a little more proud of my scholarly accomplishments.

Rebecca: I only want to ask you questions that you're comfortable answering but is there anything you're really not proud of that you'd like to talk about? Or anything that didn't turn out as well that you thought was an important learning experience?

Pat: That's another really good question. Let me think. I don't know that this is a particularly big thing. I moved from working on the slave narratives that my dissertation was on to working on contemporary legends and rumors for my first book *I Heard It Through The Grapevine* and I never went back. I don't regret moving and spending the time on what became *I Heard It Through The Grapevine* because no one else was writing about that at the time and other people were writing about slave narratives so it was absolutely the right thing to do to do *I Heard It Through The Grapevine*, but I never went back to the slave narrative material so I've never gone back and taken any of the chapters and turned them into articles, at one point my plan had been to do the work that became *I Heard It Through The Grapevine* and then go back to the dissertation and do something on the slave narratives but I've just always been attracted to something else and never gone back and done that so, it's not anything that keeps me up at night. But I guess that's a bit of a regret.

Rebecca: Is it something that you might want to look at eventually?

Pat: It's possible, but I haven't kept up on the literature, it would be like starting with a blank page at this point. There's been so much written in the past 25 years on the topic that I would have to start fresh all over and I don't know if I'm engaged enough to want to do that.

Rebecca: Do you have a particular approach to political and social issues that you take in your work or administrative life?

Pat: Political strategies?

Rebecca: Or at least a way to approach those.

Pat: Yeah, I guess my approach is to try to be as accommodating as I can be of another way of looking at what ever I'm looking at. So an example of that would be, in *I Heard It Through The Grapevine* and *Whispers On The Color Line*, my books on rumor and

legend there's a lot of really volatile material there. It would be very easy and people have, to write in polemical ways about why African Americans might believe that drugs were intentionally put in inner city communities as a mechanism of genocide. I try really hard with my language and when quoting from my fieldwork about this to present the informants in a way that's respectful and that acknowledges the world in their point of view, and I try to do that as well in terms of the people who are so nonplussed that anyone would believe that drugs were put in the black community and they're just using that as evidence of what's wrong with the way African Americans think. I try to be really measured with both sides. I've gotten both praise and criticism for that approach. Mostly praise. But some criticism from people who would prefer that I be more overtly political and show my own colors a little bit more. I think that would lose the audience, and I don't want to lose the audience.

Rebecca: Are there specific political issues that you feel personally that you'd like to talk about?

Pat: I think that, again coming back to my own experience, you know I think we're at a moment, and it's born out in the occupy movement, the gulf between the really affluent and the working class is increasingly pronounced and a so much more dramatic difference from the era that I grew up in. I see access to the university was the structures we have now and the revenue streams we have to support working class students don't nearly approach what it takes to go. A friend of mine at UC Santa Cruz did some research that in 1989 in order to pay the fees for the whole year at UC Santa Cruz you could work a minimum wage job in the summer for 40 hours a week or something, and you would have enough money in the summer to pay the Santa Cruz fees. Now the Santa Cruz fees, and we're all on the same fee system, he just happens to be the person who did this, now in order to pay the fees you would have to work 40 hours a week for two years at a minimum wage job or something. So just that the gulf between what it takes to go is something that I feel very strongly about.

Rebecca: Does that inform your academic life, in campaigning for your undergraduates?

Pat: Yeah in terms of, one of the things that, well, looking at the emails I opened before getting on the phone with you. We're trying to decide how much to charge for summer session this year, how much per unit to charge. The university has lost 40% of its budget from the state over the past two years, so part of the revenue that pays everybody's salaries and keeps the lights on comes from the money we make in summer session. On the other hand, that means some student has to pay that money. So how much more do we charge for the summer of 2012 than the summer of 2011? How do we balance that need to pay the salaries of the secretaries in the office with the fee structure. And so that is the kind of thing that it's tedious and it's not intellectually stimulating but it is the kind of thing that somebody needs to spend time on and I'm willing to spend time on.

Rebecca: Are there are things that guide the way that you make those sorts of decisions in your life? Are there beliefs or philosophies about life that you have that guide the way research goes or your administrative duties?

Pat: I don't know that I have a guiding philosophy. I like to, in my administrative duties and my research I'm a pretty data driven person. I do like to have- I do pretty thorough literature surveys before starting a new project and I'm looking at data all the time in terms of my administrative decision-making. It's sort of the standard academic approach to really inform what it is I do.

Rebecca: Are you working on any new projects?

Pat: Most of my time is focused administratively, I've been doing some papers in the past couples of years on the rumors and legends and actually on the rumors the legends and the quilts on Hurricane Katrina and the election of Barak Obama so I have all of these sort of AFS papers on various related topics that I'm going to try to coalesce into a larger project but I don't get to spend a lot of time on that.

Rebecca: Is there a really memorable moment in your life, something that influenced you strongly or stands out to you strongly?

Pat: I think in terms of academics, when my books came out. *When I Heard It Through The Grapevine* came out; it had a very large influence for a university press book for an academic book. It was reviewed by every major newspaper in the country. It was the subject of a segment on 20/20, I was in the rolodexes of a lot of reporters for a long time, and they still find me from time to time. I think it's very satisfying when, a lot of academics work really hard and you publish a book with a university press and only the other academics and their students who are interested in that arena really find your work, and so there's something very satisfying. At one point I got a letter-you hear from people too- I got a letter from a nurse who talked about having read the chapter of my book on what African American AIDs victims think about how they got the disease and she was able to use that information to help her convince patients to pursue a particular drug therapy, knowing what their suspicions were enabled her to make the case to them, you know this is the early days of the AIDS cocktail, that this would not accelerate the speed at which AIDs spreads through their body and so-forth. The notion that something that you wrote is used by somebody for something good is very satisfying.

Rebecca: I have one more question, is there a central theme or idea that runs through your entire life? In the kind of work you do or something in your personal life? Is there a pattern that you see?

Pat: I suppose both in my scholarly work and in my administrative work I focus on bringing attention to communities and individuals who have a lot to offer but don't have a lot of power. And so, the individuals who circulate the rumors and the legends, it was very important and this came up in an earlier answer for me, that it was very important to treat them and treat what they believed them with a kind of dignity. So that leaders could look at them and say "Oh I kind of understand why someone would believe this in spite of the fact that the evidence is so scant." And in an institution like Davis which is very research oriented where so much of the resources go to graduate students not

undergraduate students but we have an undergraduate student population that's really smart but a significant 67% of our students qualify for financial aid, they're not an affluent student body by any stretch I wanted to have a voice in the meetings to remind the other administrators that they're here and that they deserve a few small classes and that kind of thing. I think the theme that connects the things I do administratively and what I do in my- I don't want to say in either case that this a powerless population, I don't think that's a good characterization, but these are populations that don't have as much respect and as much people looking out for them as they deserve.

Rebecca: I think that's all my questions, is there anything else you'd like to add?

Pat: You know I think you and your colleagues did a really good job with the questions, I can't think of anything you didn't cover that I feel the need to contribute.