

Delta Sources and Resources

In Memoriam

“A Stately Progression of Spirits”:

Remembering Carol O’Connor and Grif Stockley

by Guy Lancaster

The other aspect of spirit’s emergence, history, is a knowing, self-meditative process of becoming: spirit externalized in time. . . . This process of becoming manifests a stately progression of spirits, a gallery of portraits each of which, endowed with the full wealth of spirit, moves so slowly just because the self has to penetrate and digest this, the entire wealth of its substance.

–G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*
(translated by Peter Fuss and John Dobbins)

The study of local and community history, in both the Mississippi Delta region and the wider world, has been shaped for the better by “a stately progression of spirits,” two of whom have recently departed this world: Carol O’Connor and Grif Stockley.

Carol O’Connor joined the faculty of Arkansas State University in 2002 as a professor of history, along with her husband, Clyde A. Milner II, who had taken the post of director of the Heritage Studies program. She was born on February 14, 1946, in Evanston, Illinois, but grew up in Scarsdale, New York, which was the subject of her first scholarly monograph, *A Sort of Utopia: Scarsdale, 1891–1981* (SUNY Press, 1983)—a book that remains influential and in print. She graduated from Manhattanville College and then received her PhD from Yale University in 1976 before moving with her husband to Utah State University, where they stayed for twenty-five years. She co-edited, together with her husband and Princeton



Carol O’Connor ca. 2011.

Courtesy of University Communications,
Arkansas State University.

University professor Martha A. Sandweiss, the *Oxford History of the American West* (Oxford UP, 1994). While at ASU, she and her husband also co-wrote *As Big as the West: The Pioneer Life of Granville Stuart* (Oxford UP, 2009). After retiring in 2012 and then relocating first to Albuquerque, New Mexico, and then to Tulsa, Oklahoma, Carol died on November 10, 2022, of complications from Lewy body dementia.

Carol specialized more in community studies than she did the Delta region specifically, but she employed the same critical tools she had used in researching and analyzing other parts of the coun-

try as she taught students at ASU how to do community and local history. Local history can sometimes feel such a provincial enterprise, but she recognized in it the fascinating tapestry of human interaction that permits us to ask the same questions we do of ancient kingdoms and modern nations. Moreover, she had a real rapport with people across disciplinary boundaries and recognized when her students needed to stretch beyond their usual confines. I was pleased to be one of those students. I took a community history course under her, and she directed my dissertation committee, recruiting, besides another historian, a philosopher of race to direct my research into sundown towns. “As you well know,” she said, with her characteristic smile, “small towns can be grist for the bigger questions we want to ask.”

The one non-professor member of my committee also recently passed away. Grif Stockley was born on October 9, 1944, in Memphis, Tennessee, and grew up in the Arkansas town of Marianna. He graduated from what is now Rhodes College and went into the Peace Corps, after which he was drafted into the U.S. Army, before going to study at the University of Arkansas School of Law. He spent more than thirty years in civil law representing the poor and indigent and was involved in one case, *Walker v. Department of Human Services*, that resulted in the whole of Arkansas’s juvenile justice system being declared unconstitutional. After a long time spent writing in his spare moments but failing to find a publisher, Grif published his first novel, the legal thriller *Expert Testimony*, in 1991, followed by five more novels. In academic circles, he is most well known for *Blood in Their Eyes: The Elaine Race Massacres of 1919* (U of Arkansas P, 2001), a groundbreaking work of scholarship that brought national recognition to the Elaine Massacre. He followed this up with a biography of activist Daisy Bates, a history of race relations in Arkansas, and *Black Boys Burning: The 1959 Fire at the Arkansas Negro Boys Industrial School* (UP of Mississippi, 2017), the first book-length account of a fire that killed twenty-one boys in Wrightsville, Arkansas. By that time, however, he was beginning to experience the effects of a diagnosis of dementia, and he soon moved to Virginia to be near his



Grif Stockley speaks at Arkansas State University’s Annual Delta Studies Symposium in 2011.

Photograph by Richard Burns.

daughter, dying on January 4, 2023.

Grif eschewed the label of “historian,” feeling himself not quite the equal of “trained” academics, even though he broke more ground than many credentialed historians. Self-deprecating to a fault, he seemed amazed that anyone should ever invite him to an academic conference or consult him about their own research. But that humility obscured a fierce and incisive mind passionate for justice. In early 2020, before COVID-19 hit Arkansas, and before he moved to Virginia, a group of students from Meridian High School in Mississippi came to Little Rock to perform at the Mosaic Templars Cultural Center a play, *Death by Design*, which told the story of the boys who died at Wrightsville. The theater teacher invited Grif to say a few words on opening night, and he had the chance to talk with those students afterwards. “Guy,” he said later, “I finally feel I’ve really done something.”

In the closing pages of his *Phenomenology*, Hegel writes, “Although in thus turning inward spirit is immersed in the night of its own self-consciousness, its bygone existence is preserved therein, and this superseded presence . . . constitutes a new existential presence, a new world and embodiment of spirit.” And that is what Carol and Grif have left behind for us who write about the Delta and beyond—a new world, a new embodiment of spirit, going forward to discover itself. ▲▼▲