

Urban History: Community of Communities

Clifford M. Kuhn, Harlon E. Joye and E. Bernard West,
Living Atlanta: An Oral History of the City, 1914–1948.
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Review by James H. Morrison

People in the southern United States used to say that when they died they wanted to go to Heaven. People in Georgia say that when they die they want to go to Atlanta. This volume, however, is about a living Atlanta and its oral history between 1914 and 1948, crucial years in the history of this southern state capital. Atlanta plays a part in the consciousness of North Americans from the headquarters of Coca-Cola, to the setting of *Gone with the Wind*, to the birthplace of civil rights leader Martin Luther King. However, *Living Atlanta*—using over four hundred hours of taped recordings—documents the common people, the unwritten experiences and the commonplace occurrences that have shaped the history of this city and its citizens. Many of these events are still reverberating throughout Atlanta and the United States.

Living Atlanta by Clifford M. Kuhn, Harlon E. Joye, and E. Bernard West is a classic oral history study of a major urban centre in the southern United States. It addresses the uncomfortable issues of racism, anti-semitism and police corruption directly, yet doesn't become so immersed in them that a fair account of the city cannot emerge. The story is so well told that one hopes there will be a volume II for the second half of the century as a follow-up.

The study of a city entails a far different effort in oral research than for a rural community, a small town, or a group of individuals who share an experience. A city, after all, is not a community, but a community of communities, a tremendous variety of cultural, economic, and political threads that may bind some communities together and at the same time exclude others altogether. The German theorist, Ferdinand Tönnies, was convinced that rural life was for the most part *Gemeinschaft*, relationships which are intimate and enduring, while urban life was *Gesellschaft*, relationships which are impersonal and calculative. Certainly, in *Living Atlanta*, the variety of communities show an intimacy and an endurance within themselves and at times towards others that provide further evidence together with Richard Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy* (1957) and H. Gans's *The Urban Villagers* (1962) that such

paradigms are not valid.

In Atlanta there are the obvious rifts, ethnic, social and cultural, and of course the large chasm between Black and White. This study provides the genesis of the civil rights movement, which doesn't begin with the marches of the 1950s, but with the pressure for better schools in the 1920s. In 1923, for example, there were 11 469 Black children registered for school, but only 4 822 seats available. Somewhat surprisingly, the Black community had the support of White Mayor James L. Key, who sought the Black vote in a number of issues. The sword of political activism was being tempered on the anvil of local school issues. The issue of school improvement spread to pressure for community improvement and better jobs, until by the end of this study (1948) eight Black policemen patrolled the streets of Atlanta for the first time.

In addition to the Black-White conflict, there was also discrimination against Catholics and Jews. A Jew, Leo Frank, who ran a pencil factory, was accused of murdering a female employee and was lynched before he came to trial—a lynching that was caused more by Frank's being a Jew than by the crime itself. The authors note that the discrimination and the Frank case gave rise to two national organizations—the Ku Klux Klan and the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai Brith. As was the case in both Canada and the United States, Catholics and Jews were excluded from various clubs and organizations.

Leisure and recreation receives a chapter of its own as it highlights the leisure class, its clubs, activities, and tastes. For example, country and western music was not allowed in the houses of the elite, because it was considered low-class. Other chapters include transportation, commerce, education, health and religion, politics, and World Wars I and II. There is no separate chapter on women, for the authors have included women throughout the text, from a leading role in the church as it carried the fight for racial integration to an examination of women in private enterprise and in the war industries.

The volume is superbly organized in that it examines

Atlanta through a chronological approach, but is also able to highlight numerous themes as well. The two are crossed skillfully, so the reader is not faced with a jumble of themes in each chapter attempting to adhere to a chronological thread. For example, the police force is examined through time in terms of the law, prostitution, and prohibition, yet its activities also reflect how the police treated the various ethno-cultural communities in Atlanta. Each topic is well served, each has a solid integration of both the oral accounts as well as a broader historical perspective, using documentary and written sources. The intrusion of the academic input is nicely done. There is a fine balance between oral and documentary sources, with the oral history accounts weighing in with a greater input and thus enlivening the book.

Almost two hundred interviews were carried out, and excerpts from virtually all of them are included in this volume. Several photographs add immeasurably to the text and an index is also of great value. Why cut such quality in 1948? The authors have brought the history of Atlanta up to the period just before the civil rights movement begins to sweep through the southern United States in the 1950s. Obviously, the tenor of this

study will change drastically if the 1950s are included. In addition, with the end of World War II, there is a growing diversity in the population of Atlanta. There are new settlement patterns and a large influx of non-Atlantans. After 1950 there is increasing pressure on the old guard, the landed elite, to loosen their control of the reins of power. There comes a different memory and a different sense of the city than was there in the first half of the century. Yet *Living Atlanta* makes the point that the sense of the "communities" is still there and the hope for positive change is still evident. With the recent political move to the right in the United States, a book like this bears reflection and demands a reading in terms of its analysis of what the journey has covered and how much further there is to go.

Excellent books based on oral history try to find the essence of an interview—a word, phrase, or sentence that stands out. It is pulled free, the husk stripped away, and the kernel of a thought—a perception of the past—remains. This book has gathered a harvest of perceptions about Atlanta in the first half of this century. In and of itself, it is of value. As it clearly points the way for any future urban studies using oral evidence, it is invaluable.