The voices of poor and working-class people are only rarely heard in the halls of government, in the media, or in the history books. Least of all do we hear from African American workers, who lived under laws and customs that sought to silence them. Yet they did make history. In this book, they break the silences imposed by segregation and gain recognition as agents of social change. Covering a period of time still within the bounds of living human memory, from the 1930s to the present, in Black Workers Remember they tell their story.

My search for this history in a sense came out of my own family’s union, ethnic (Acadian and English), and working-class origins, which sensitized me to the economic roots of racial injustice. My work as a community and civil liberties organizer in Memphis and the South during the early 1970s also kindled a curiosity to learn, as songwriter and union organizer John Handcox put it, about “those who fought and died before.” As a witness to continuing racism in my own era, I became increasingly inquisitive about its roots: how deep they went, whether they could be untangled, who had sought to do so, and to what extent they had succeeded or failed. I continue to try to unearth the roots of racism and plant other roots, and my search for these hidden narratives became part of that continuing effort.
What was the role of black workers in labor history? In my early research on southern labor, I relied heavily on union leaders and organizers, who were much more informed than the histories or newspaper accounts I had read. Yet most people in leadership positions were white. They could not tell me the inside story about the lives of African Americans, who made up some 80 percent of the unskilled labor force in Memphis and comprised anywhere from a third to a majority of the workers in many Memphis factories during the 1930s and 1940s. I soon realized I could write a well-documented and plausible history, but without black voices it could be erroneous in many ways. As I began to locate black workers I learned that, indeed, history looked very different from their perspectives. It looked different from standard American histories, most labor and civil rights histories, and even most African American histories.

Because I could not rely on written accounts, oral history provided the only available method for uncovering an active black working class in factories and other workplaces. It is the oldest form of history, in which stories are passed down from one generation to the next by word of mouth. Capturing those stories for a written culture requires the participation of a collector who breaks the usual isolation between the world of books and the lived world of communities. I played the role of collector, while black workers provided the text.

Firestone workers became the key to creating that text. They worked in one of the largest factories in Memphis (fluctuating between three thousand and seven thousand employees), a place where black workers and race issues always played a central role. What went on in that factory, one of the most prosperous in Memphis, affected the entire labor scene in the city and the economic development of the black community. Workers from Firestone, as members of the United Rubber Workers (URW), acted as the weathervane for the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), the federation to which most factory unions affiliated. Firestone workers thus came to be among my most important informants about black history in the industrial unions.

Black workers, when I found them, told me a somewhat different story than had some white union officials, who tended to paint a picture of harmonious race relations. The first black worker I located, Firestone shop leader Josh Tools, spoke with me in 1983. Asked whether his union had led the way in improving race relations, as I had begun to think, he em-
phatically responded, "Hell no!" Some blacks at Firestone, I later discovered, regarded him as a yes-man to white union leaders, and yet even Mr. Tools still became angry when he recalled how timid those leaders had been on race relations. He felt union leaders had failed to educate white workers about racism, and despite the fact that their union constitution forbade all forms of discrimination, they had not moved to desegregate the plant. He told me that blacks at Firestone, in the wake of the Supreme Court's decision mandating integration of public schools in *Brown v. Board of Education*, had sued both the union and the company for maintaining segregation. He described how blacks struggled for years at Firestone, suggesting that black workers themselves, not white union leaders or federal officials, had led the way to desegregation. Although I had scoured many documents and had talked to many white unionists, I had found no account of this.

I soon discovered how precious the living memory of a person like Mr. Tools was: the next time I returned to Memphis to interview him, he was dead. Trying to find other informants did not prove easy. One black Firestone worker I located remained so upset about his work experiences that he refused to speak about them and angrily told me to leave him alone. Fortunately, by going to the union retiree's hall I found other black Firestone workers who were actually eager to talk. Oral history began to unlock stories and feelings long buried and events never asked about. In one session Edward Harrel, James Mitchell, Robert Matthews, Johnny Williamson, and Danny Davis told me about the workaday racism they struggled with all their lives—a conversation I have found impossible to capture on paper. Williamson, a gentle-seeming man in his eighties, remembered with some sense of amusement and irony how he worked a white man to an early death. "Hog Jowls," they called him in a matter-of-fact way, was trying to get Mr. Williamson off a machine and back into a lower-waged laboring job. Williamson, like most of the men I talked to, had worked on a farm and felt he could outwork anybody. He certainly did in the case of Hog Jowls, who had a heart problem and soon died from his exertions trying to out-produce Williamson.

As workers told me over and over, whites didn't want blacks to have "white" jobs, and in one near-riotous confrontation over this issue that this group remembered, workers, black and white alike, carried pistols to the union hall. Somewhat to my surprise, these black workers remem-
bered their past not with bitterness, but with a sense of humor and a feeling of ultimate triumph. For these former farmhands going through what seemed to me to be the disaster of proletarianization, life had improved. They worked harder than I can imagine, but not as hard as they had worked on the farm. They no longer worked for “Mister Charlie,” some white man who would steal their profits from sharecropping, and in the end they outlasted “Mister” E. H. Crump, the political boss who enforced Jim Crow in the city. At retirement, their wages were ten times higher than when they began. Through the union, they gained rights at the job that their ancestors never had, and they felt empowered by the lives they had led.

As I came to know a circle of black workers at Firestone, other kinds of testimony spurred my search for oral histories. In my archival research, I had discovered Thomas Watkins, a black longshore leader who engaged in a tumultuous, lifelong resistance to racism. He and his parents had fled sharecropping in the South, but their family disintegrated when they moved to the urban ghettos of the North. Watkins joined the army, only to be thrown in prison in Fort Leavenworth, Texas, and dishonorably discharged after he resisted abuse from a white superior. During the Depression, he rode the rails, worked in steel mills, slept in hobo camps, and ended up as a longshore worker in Memphis. In 1939 he led an extraordinary movement of solidarity on the Memphis docks during a strike in defiance of white union leaders, the city’s political machine, the Mississippi River barge companies, and the police. Some forty years later, I found his affidavit in Justice Department files in the National Archives documenting the brutal post-strike attempt by police and employers to murder him.

My search for Watkins following my discovery of his affidavit soon shocked me again into realizing how precious the accounts of a dying generation of black workers were. My Freedom of Information Act request showed that FBI agents, who considered him a dangerous radical, had followed Watkins to Portland, Oregon, and last interviewed him there in 1952. I imagined that he had surely died, and did not follow these leads until after I moved to the Pacific Northwest. Late in the summer of 1989, I discovered that Watkins had died less than a year before I came to the doorstep of his old address in Portland. My chagrin turned to anguish as I tracked down some of his friends, who told me that Watkins had aston-
ishing strength and an acute memory almost until he died. He told them stirring stories of his past, advised young black unionists, and remained widely respected among those who knew him well. This man had a story to tell.

My failure to locate such an obviously important protagonist in history prior to his death troubled me deeply. I imagined the details of Watkins's odyssey, but I could not ask him what his life had been like. Having lost one of the most important individuals I found in my research, I became desperate to locate other individuals like Watkins. My search led me to George Holloway. Numerous people in Memphis had told me he knew the "real" story of the labor movement and the black struggle for equal rights. I had reached him by phone at his home in Baltimore in 1986, but we failed to connect. I did not pursue him further until after my missed opportunity with Thomas Watkins goaded me on. When I finally found Holloway three years after first calling him, I discovered a man with a great story to tell, one which ultimately led me to write this book.

Mr. Holloway first introduced me to his kind wife, Hattie, and then we went down to his basement, not to emerge for about eight hours. He showed me his plaques, his awards, his union books, and photos. Here was a man who had met Martin Luther King, Walter Reuther, Bobby and Ted Kennedy, legendary union and civil rights leader A. Philip Randolph, and African American scientist George Washington Carver. More important, the man was a walking textbook, and he began to teach me black labor history.

Mr. Holloway had gone to college, completing several years at Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute, in Alabama, where he met Carver and other important African Americans. But in Holloway's era, college education for a black man did not open the doors to skilled employment; he was forced to work as an unskilled laborer in factories, where he marshaled all his education in the union struggle. As his life unfolded, Holloway became a master at his craft of organizing and in retirement proved to be a thoughtful analyst of his eventful union career and shop experiences. He had the history and the details all in his head, ready for a grand lecture that included exact knowledge of events, work processes, conversations, and political developments. His ability to recall addresses, names, dates, and descriptions stunned me, especially as both the specific stories and the general picture he presented matched my own research. In one eight-hour
interview, he gave me a dazzling view of the black union struggle in Mem- phis. Mr. Holloway confirmed the importance of finding individuals who could give reliable, first-hand accounts of the segregation era from the perspective of the working-class blacks who lived through it.

I had found Mr. Holloway none too soon: within months, he had died from a massive heart attack. But, as he had fervently hoped, his story has survived. For this I am extremely thankful. Over a period of years doing oral histories, the sense of loss has jolted me repeatedly. Leroy Clark, an astute organizer and political leader, also opened up new worlds to me in one short interview, but he died before I could meet with him again. As the years have passed and the lives of people I interviewed and came to know have ended, the obligation to pass on the stories of a dying generation of industrial workers has seemed ever more important.

None of those stories proved more impressive than that of Clarence Coe. Like Holloway, he had retired from factory work, yet retained a cogent and insightful knowledge of the past. His story in particular pointed me toward trying to understand the emotional and personal impact of racism and segregation. I reached Mr. Coe by phone one night while I was in Memphis, at the suggestion of one of his acquaintances. I had tried for days to find him. He did not really want to be found, I sensed. Many of his experiences in the factory had been painful. A sensitive and intelligent man, he had endured years of racial affronts from whites. He had tried to put these incidents behind him, and now here was a white stranger reopening the wounds once again by asking about the past. Yet even over the phone, once Mr. Coe started telling his story, it was as if he could not stop. He poured out his past as if it had happened yesterday.

The next day, I found him at his home and he graciously consented to continue. Although it obviously upset and pained him to do it, in about three short hours the man had hurtled us back through forty years of history. He told me of the terrors of growing up during an era of lynching law in the countryside and of the daily hardships he faced, including how white workers tried to hurt or kill him for trying to break down job segregation. In a commonsense but brilliant manner, he explained the political economy of racism, how it worked and who benefited, and summed up the lessons of the labor movement for white and black alike.

He was an extraordinary storyteller and analyst, a scholar of his own life. The power of his remembering came in part from the deep pain of his encounters with racism, and in part from the profound meaning the
story held for him. Here was one of the souls who had staked his life on the chance to break down the walls of Jim Crow through the American labor movement, and the scars of his struggles remained very close to the surface of his memory.

Yet neither Mr. Holloway nor Mr. Coe stood alone in their abilities to tell history from a first-hand perspective. Over and over, I found black workers who joked, became angry, upset, or turned coolly reflective as they recounted harsh circumstances and moments of triumph. Leroy Boyd, Matthew Davis, and others I spoke with carried lifetimes of stories in their heads. Women workers Irene Branch, Evelyn Bates, Alzada Clark, Susie Wade, Rebecca McKinley, and Ida Leachman opened up yet another round of inquiry. Last hired and first fired, and for me the hardest to find, these women offered a female- and family-based perspective on the hidden history of black working-class struggle and endurance.

A Deepening Perspective

Such a history could never be recounted with such clarity by anyone who had not lived it. The power of remembering is that, instead of generalizations, we dealt in specifics. The stories in this book tell us more than a sociological survey or archival study could. Graphic details of encounters with segregation on the everyday level allow us to feel and imagine a buried part of our collective past in new ways, and reveal the subterranean history of what ordinary people did to resist racism and to build their own lives in spite of it. These work-centered accounts may be among the most reliable oral histories we can find. Black workers like Clarence Coe might wish they could forget some of the daily details of life under segregation, but these remained seared in his brain. According to oral historian Steven Caunce, the “details of everyday life [are] worn into the brain by constant repetition and are not subject to anything like the same uncertainty as memories of unusual events.” Because black workers lived Jim Crow day in and day out, the oral histories of this particular group allow us, as Caunce suggests, to “examine life at a level of detail that would be quite impossible to achieve for whole populations.” The combined testimonies of such “witnesses” present an indelible portrait of black life under segregation from the perspective of workers, part of a group that made up the great majority of the black community.

What it all meant in a larger sense emerged and deepened as we con-
continued to examine the details. These oral histories not only allow us to access a hidden history, but provide a crucial element of perspective. These interviews often gave black workers their first real opportunity to recount and reevaluate their past. One black mother told interviewer Robert Coles that in the period of segregation, southern blacks normally had to hide their knowledge, “store it in the bones, way inside,” and as a result, “the colored man, I think he has to hide what he really feels from himself.” In these accounts, by contrast, people take their knowledge and memory out of storage and try to make sense of their lives. The opportunity to do this can provide a new way to come to terms with the terrible or sad aspects of one’s life and also create a new perspective for the written record.

As Susan Tucker noted in her interviews of southern black domestic workers and their white employers, revising the past in this way allows people to acknowledge and incorporate its painful legacy. Instead of feeling victimized by the past, people come to see how they survived and grew. “For black women, revision made possible the discussion of ‘bad times’—injustices and even cruelties—with a spirit of strength,” Tucker noted. In a similar way, as Clarence Coe recollected the hurts and humiliations of Jim Crow, he also put them into a larger context and took pride in his triumphs. “I was determined to get completed what I set out to do. And I did, I did.” As these workers speak to us from the present as witnesses to their own lives, their memories reinforce the truth of their experiences and deepen our understanding.

Creating a Shared Authority

Remembering in a historical sense occurs not only through the voices of history’s participants but through the work of the collector of stories. To elicit, organize, and set oral testimonies in a context without interference or distortion is no small matter. How the collector gathers and then uses stories necessarily becomes crucial to how they are told. In the time available, which varied greatly and ranged anywhere from two hours to a full day, I would begin by asking my informants general questions about their lives and family backgrounds and then focus in on their experiences as workers and union members. A few leading questions in most cases elicited a great deal of testimony. Once the narrator started, I adhered largely to the “open ended” format: people chose to speak about
what they thought was important and could easily recall, I followed up with questions as best I could.

The result appears in some ways to be part of an older style of labor history based on factory and union conflicts, with family, church, and community issues seeming in some cases to become secondary. But the “old” labor history might in this case be what we needed to talk about. Through this method, the experience of work and the struggle to improve conditions through unions emerged as a central theme of the narratives.

Of course, our collaboration was no simple matter. Race shaped our interactions; how could it not? Most if not all of their encounters with white men had been far from rewarding. At the same time, they had long ago broken through racial conventions, and they all demanded respect. They sometimes commented on my “whiteness” or my outsider status as a northern academic, and they puzzled out how much I understood about racism. Yet my “outsider” status also meant I had no entangling alliances with the black community or the same prejudices one might expect of local whites. To the extent that they knew about it, my past history in Memphis as a civil liberties and civil rights organizer boded well for collaboration. Not just polite exchanges but the sense of friendly acquaintance that comes from exploring personal histories often emerged from our interactions.

Still, I wondered at their willingness to tell me about their lives. I found it remarkable, after many conversations, that black workers would open up to an outsider such as myself. In a real sense, by consenting to be interviewed these workers took a gamble, and I am eternally grateful to them for doing so. I myself did not know at the time what would become of the interviews, and we never discussed payment for their participation for the simple reason that I had none to offer (I was a graduate student or searching for a job during much of the period spanning these interviews). These workers had nothing in a material sense to gain, yet with few exceptions they welcomed the opportunity to tell me their stories. Why?

The main reason these black workers proved so willing had to do with their own objectives. This was their story, in their own words, told from their point of view. They wanted the world, or someone, to know about the struggles they had waged and the conditions they had endured. Most of them expressed surprise and pleasure that others cared to know about their lives. George Holloway told me in no uncertain terms how grateful
he was that someone had recognized that he and his fellow workers had been makers of history. They could only go on faith that something good would come of our explorations, but clearly they wanted this story to be told. Without the tape recorder, they knew their stories would never go beyond close friends and family, if even that far.

After generously giving of their time, these workers even more generously gave up control over the use of their words and trusted me to find a way to use them in the best way possible. This has placed a large responsibility on me. My objective was to be faithful to what the people I talked to said and to try to make the significance of their stories as clear as possible. These two objectives have required a lot of editing and writing and taught me the great complexity of creating printed stories from the spoken word. I did not know that once stories told orally had been taped, years of work in transcribing and editing lay ahead. And trying to get these narratives into book form has been far more difficult than I would ever have imagined.

It also required other forms of collaboration. To begin with, getting the word from the tape recorder to the page required a great deal of work from skilled ethnographers and stenographers. These included primarily Patti Krueger, Janette Rawlings, and me. Each of us sought to stick to the content and speech pattern and style of the speaker, but at some point we removed the redundancies of normal speech, and in some cases merged my questions (appearing in some cases as bracketed interpolations) with the speaker's narrative. We have not tried to preserve speech patterns exactly as heard, which would have made the text difficult to read. With a few deviations from standard English, we made the speaker's meaning as clear as we could but have not imposed a uniform style for all transcriptions.

Second, to create a text that unfolds in a logical sequence required considerable reorganization of the transcription. This necessity sprang from the nature of the interviews themselves. Most people don't talk in a straight line but circle around their subject. When it comes to the printed word, however, most of us would like to speak clearly, with detail, and in a logical sequence. I tried to make this possible by merging different parts of an interview or interviews with a person and moving texts around, providing bridges (in brackets, or if not in brackets, using the speaker's own words) and deleting excess words. I have tried to make the narratives as
straightforward as possible without altering meanings or dramatically changing the speaker's style or train of thought. The reader should not be under the illusion that the workers spoke these narratives exactly as printed here. Yet each interview is as true to the meaning and rhetoric of the speaker as I could make it. (Original taped interviews will be placed in a university research library for public use.)

My selection, arrangement, and commentary also strongly influence how these stories are told to the reader. In the following pages I stitch black workers' stories together into what I hope is a logical sequence. I have introduced testimonies in each chapter with some historical context while framing them in a coherent narrative structure. I could have let each account stand alone in its entirety, but this would have produced huge chapters in some cases and very small ones in others. Moreover, the narratives would have repeated topics and constantly ranged back and forth chronologically. To avoid these problems, I grouped interviews thematically and to some extent chronologically, and connected them with information and analysis intended to explain and emphasize the significance of what they are telling us. And I have not shied away from coming to some conclusions about what the narratives tell us in the larger sense. Based on the conversations I had with these workers, I feel that they would want me to do this; not to speak for them, but to speak with them about this history, and to organize the material as coherently as possible.

No doubt, this long process of transcribing, editing, reorganizing, and placing the narratives into context to some extent transforms the original interviews. The narrative presented here thus becomes a joint creation of the workers, the interviewer, the transcribers, and the historian, creating what historian Michael Frisch calls a "shared authority" over the oral history text. In fact, there is no single authority when writing history, but this method of construction makes that all the more obvious. On a practical level, good reason exists for the "shared authority" of a text such as this one. The people whose stories are collected here are retired, and some are not in good health; many have passed away before publication of the book. None of them was in a position to write his or her own story. Without shared authority, there would be no text.

Our shared authority became very real at the personal level. Limited as we were by time constraints, we searched together for the past in less-than-ideal circumstances. The clash of dishes being cleared off the table,
phones ringing, grandchildren running through the house punctuate many a taped recollection. But in the comfort of someone’s home, in an unheated car, or in an old union hall profoundly human exchanges occurred. Especially if the narrator was telling a story for the first time (or perhaps for the first time to a historian), it could be deeply moving for both of us. This too shaped the nature of the text we present in this book, which attempts to convey people’s feelings and sense of their times as much as it tries to lay out the facts of black working-class existence.

The present deeply shaped their accounts of the past, providing the advantage of hindsight and perspective developed over lifetimes. Time dims the memory, of course, but it also allows people to select from various truths of history as they lived it. How we as individuals understand our past is influenced very much by how life has turned out, and the process of remembering also produces both new information and a new perspective. This is how we come to terms with our past. Remembering also provides some measure of healing. Although these workers looked back in horror sometimes, they were proud of what they made of their lives. They wanted the world to know how they struggled to change things and what they transcended.

The story told here is a highly personal reflection, yet it is not only personal. As testament to the hidden realities of American history, perhaps these memories will open new doors to readers not familiar with the history of black labor. By coming to know, indirectly, a few people who lived these particular experiences, readers might reconsider the broader picture of the past and think about how the past bears upon the present. These stories are as separate and distinct as the individuals who tell them. Yet they compose a collective memory, one which personalizes the tragic and heroic struggles of a larger group. It provides a “bottom-up” and working-class perspective on the many ways that African Americans in the Jim Crow era creatively shaped their environment and laid the groundwork for the advancement of their children and grandchildren.

Many know that Martin Luther King, Jr., gave his life in a battle for the dignity and rights of black workers and the poor, but few know of the struggles of black workers themselves. In this book, some of these workers stand at King’s side as agents of social change. Without testimonies from ordinary people, it sometimes appears that events are directed from the top. Yet people who to others seem content may actually be resisting,
and communities that appear static may be undergoing fundamental shifts. *Black Workers Remember* shows that working-class blacks were indeed a force in history. Their testimonies contradict glib assertions that the search for profit in a capitalist market economy will eliminate poverty; instead, they suggest the importance of labor organization to our collective well-being. They also show that we still have much to learn about the interconnection between racism and economics.

These workers are, as George Holloway describes himself, “witnesses” to a hidden history of struggle for freedom. It is a bitter history but one they are proud of. Far from being neutral or “objective,” the history told here is a group story that allows us to feel and understand the experiences of individuals and to see how they altered their lives by taking action. The power of remembering, we might hope, is that it helps us to understand how the world in which we live came to be, and how we too might change it. It is these workers who deserve the credit for this book. For without their sometimes astonishing willingness to tell about their experiences, and without their grace, humility, and steadfastness in the struggle for a better life, there would be no story.