

GEORGE C. STONEY: HAPPY COLLABORATOR

by

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The American Documentary Tradition

MLA 600

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March 24, 2008

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Fig. 1 George Stoney¹

Social reform has long been an integral part of the American documentary tradition. The work of George C. Stoney, one of the twentieth century's most noted documentarians, is no exception. Stoney was born in 1916 and was greatly influenced by the social reform movements of the 1930s. In the few short years between his graduation from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1938 and the beginning of World War II, he worked with some of America's leading social reformists. During that time, he held the following jobs:

- researcher for New York's Henry Street Settlement House, a well-known social reform settlement house²
- writer for *Survey Graphic*, often traveling with the photographer Lewis Hine on stories about the south, such as the poll tax, TVA, and the poor³
- field assistant for the Gunnar Myrdal classic study on Blacks in America, later published as *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*⁴
- photographer (a skill he learned from master photographers such as Jack Delano⁵) and information advisor for the Farm Security Administration⁶

Stoney's influence has been said to bridge generations and continents.⁷ No matter where and into what media his work has taken him, however, his focus has always been centered on social change. Just *how* he has been able to accomplish that social change is what sets Stoney apart from most social documentarians. I propose to show that the changes he has been able to facilitate lie not in his finished work alone, but in his desire and ability to collaborate with others in the making and use of his documentaries.

George Stoney once said that he wanted to be remembered as “a very happy collaborator.”⁸ When I first came across this quotation, I immediately thought of how he generously collaborated with his colleagues, freely sharing ideas and credits: former students worked with him on films that helped launch their independent careers; co-directors, cameramen, and editors are quick to tell of how he shared credit; his creative efforts on behalf of funding agencies and media organizations are well-known.⁹ The more I studied George Stoney and his work, however, the more I began to see that my initial understanding was superficial—his “collaboration” casts a far wider net than cooperation and generosity with colleagues. His vision of how films can be agents for social change is, in fact, grounded in this idea of collaboration. What goes on during and after a Stoney film has as great a social impact—if not more—than the film itself.

This paper will examine two broad ways in which George Stoney has used collaboration to create social awareness and promote social reform. One is in the actual process of making the film, emphasizing his sensitivity in the planning stage as well as his compassionate collaboration with the film's participants and the communities in which they live. The second has to do with use and distribution of his films so as to maximize their social influence. Two main works will be considered: *All My Babies* and *The Uprising of '34*.

As this paper will show, Stoney is a sensitive, compassionate, and patient listener—a characteristic that, in fact, seems to be at the heart of his ability to effectively collaborate. He once said that he knew right from the beginning of his filmmaking career that others could make better films than he could except for one point—they didn't listen as well as he did.¹⁰ Stoney's keen sensitive ear, often even hearing the unspoken, sets him apart. One film critic said of Stoney: "If a farmer didn't want to be filmed barefoot, even if his feet were never going to be in the shot, Stoney waited until the man put on his shoes."¹¹

All My Babies



Fig. 2. "Miss Mary"¹²

Of Stoney's more than fifty documentaries, *All My Babies* stands as a wonderful example of how he used the actual process of making a film to affect social change. The primary focus here will be on his strong collaboration with the cast and the community in which the film was made. But first, I would like to look at how even his planning began on a collaborative note.

By the early 1950s, most Black babies in the South were still being delivered by traditional, largely illiterate, Black midwives, who had little, if any, medical training. They were taught by older midwives within the community, with skills passed from one generation to the next. In an effort to improve the standard of care received by the 25,000 mothers and babies delivered by these midwives each year, Georgia's Department of Health commissioned George Stoney to make a training film for the state's Black midwives.¹³

Stoney was given a list of more than one hundred points that the film was required to communicate. Some were technical concerns (such as information on sanitation, examination of the placenta, care of a premature baby), but others were more theoretical in nature. Two in particular stood out. One was that the film must stress to the midwife the importance of cooperation with the health department; a second was that the midwife should be impressed with the dignity and responsibility of her calling.¹⁴ As Stoney began his research, he quickly found barriers in the existing system between the Black midwives and the white nurses at the health department that he knew must be overcome from the very outset if he was to accomplish his goals. The barriers were class-based and had to do with the midwives' dignity in front of the white nurses.¹⁵

First, he found that each month the midwives (in order to retain their licenses) had to have their bags and equipment inspected at the health department. He soon discovered that the midwives had *two* bags—one for the inspections and one for the actual deliveries. The midwives did not want the white nurses (hardly any of whom had even attended a birth much less actually delivered a baby) to see their chipped pans and old—though clean—rags. This deceptive relationship between the midwives and the nurses made Stoney decide that if his training film was to be effective among the Black midwives, he would have to have the teaching in the film done by one of their own Black midwives rather than by a white nurse. Otherwise there would be no cooperation and the duplicity would continue.¹⁶

Secondly, and for much the same reason—to protect the dignity of the Black midwives—Stoney paid special attention to the *shape* of the film. He had decided early in his planning that two births should be shown—one where conditions were poor and one where conditions were ideal. He knew that showing a dirty and poorly prepared house would

embarrass the midwives, so he structured the film so that the *first* birth shown was in clean, well-prepared surroundings—exactly as the Black midwives would have wanted it. After that ideal birth, he could safely show a less-than-ideal situation where the midwives could keep their dignity by triumphing over the poor surroundings to have a good outcome.¹⁷ Stoney was working to gain the cooperation of his intended audience long before the film was even begun.

Having grown up in the South, Stoney understood class and racial nuisances, and that the film's subject matter and interracial production would be a challenge. He knew he would have to keep everyone (midwives, nurses, and townspeople) informed and comfortable with what he was doing if his project was to be a success.¹⁸ The degree to which he collaborated with cast and community in a tense situation was nothing short of miraculous.

Collaboration with cast

Stoney once said, “I realized very early on that I was making a film about people in their lives and it would be far better if they could make the films themselves. And so, almost from the beginning, I began to work through them.”¹⁹ This was the essence of Stoney's collaborative efforts—he never felt that others were working *for* him, but that he was working *through* them. His style of filming, which was greatly influenced by post-WW II neorealistic filmmaking²⁰ in which simple stories dealing with social problems were reenacted on location using nonprofessional actors,²¹ was very much dependent on the people in the film. This made selection of cast critical.

Stoney said, “When you're making a documentary, it's a collaborative effort. And the first people you're collaborating with are the people in front of the camera...If you're not connecting, aren't resonating [with them]...then you're sunk.”²²

Stoney knew his first task was to find the right midwife for his film because that midwife would be the person most “in front of the camera.” She had to be someone respected by both the African-American midwives and the white nurses and doctors. She must also be someone with whom he could work well. He eventually selected Mrs. Mary Coley (“Miss Mary”), a highly respected Black midwife in Albany, Georgia who had been recommended by her county health officer.²³

Stoney almost didn’t use Miss Mary in his film, however. He was afraid that her 5’2”, two hundred and eighty pound frame would perpetuate the stereotype of Black women as “Aunt Jemima.”²⁴ He said that in the end, though, he kept thinking of how gracefully she moved and of her “proud eyes, her warm heart, full laughter.”²⁵ He obviously made a good choice—for both the film and his personal connection to her—because years after the film was made, Stoney gave Miss Mary high praise: “Miss Mary is today among my dearest friends as well as perhaps the most admirable human being I have ever met.”²⁶

Stoney let Miss Mary take the lead in their relationship from the very beginning. After talking with her about the possibility of using her in the film, he simply asked if he could accompany her on her daily rounds of after-care visits to mothers whom she had recently delivered, not even broaching the sensitive subject of accompanying her on actual deliveries.

He describes the progression of their tentative relationship:

It is amusing now to look back and remember how carefully we must have been watching each other during those first few weeks together. I found myself fascinated by Miss Mary’s skill, not just the graceful certainty of her hands as she bathed the infants but even more the ingenious way she had of persuading the mothers—and grandmothers—to abandon such harmful superstitions as anointing the umbilical stump with bacon grease, or keeping a mother on a diet completely devoid of green vegetables lest her milk be “tasty.” Meanwhile, she had a chance to find out how her patients regarded me, in many cases the first white man ever to come inside their houses, and certainly the first to be drawn into the intimacies of their family life. We never once discussed such things.

But within a month she had volunteered an invitation for me to accompany her on delivery calls.²⁷

Stoney said that he never wrote a scene until after he had gotten input from Miss Mary; then the two of them decided together how the scene should be done. He had a general structure, but left it up to Miss Mary to help make the most important decisions.²⁸ “This was a collaborative venture,” he said, “and she had a very great hand in deciding what we should do and what we should avoid.”²⁹ One example is a scene in which he had planned to have her walk through a cemetery on her way back home from a delivery. She told him she would never walk through a graveyard at night, so he changed the scene.³⁰ Stoney gives Mary credit for much of the film’s success, even for reaching the initial goals of the project: “Miss Mary had, without knowing it, shown me how to translate almost every one of the 118 ‘teaching points’ into dramatic action.”³¹

Even the sound-overs done in Atlanta after the film was shot were controlled by Miss Mary. Stoney had thought the process would take one evening, but as he talked the script over with Mary and she added her suggestions, the process stretched to five nights. When she said something just didn’t sound right, Stoney trusted her intuition and changed the script. He accepted that she knew her audience better than he did.³²

Social change took place between Stoney and Miss Mary as they worked together. He hoped a similar change could come out of the film: “The two of us, granny midwife and itinerant filmmaker, had pierced the great wall of prejudice and fear that separates almost every Southern white person from almost every Southern Negro. We could communicate with open hearts. I dared to hope our film might share this quality.”³³

Stoney’s sensitivity and collaborative efforts continued as he cast the rest of the roles in his film from among the townspeople. Ida, the woman whose childbirth is fully shown in *All*

My Babies, was one of Miss Mary's real patients. Her husband had been injured in an industrial accident, and she was eager to do the film because they needed the money it would pay. Stoney, however, was concerned about her husband's response, so he arranged to show them another of his films called *A Concept of Maternal and Neonatal Care*, in which a white woman gives birth on screen. Stoney took his cameraman's wife (who was a nurse) with him to the meeting. Stoney felt her presence was essential, not because she was a nurse, but because she was white. By having her present, Stoney showed that this was something he would discuss in front of a white woman as well as a Black. Also, because the film showed a white woman giving birth, Stoney knew he was showing, without having to say so, that he wasn't asking her to do anything that he hadn't also asked a white woman to do.³⁴ This sort of nuanced sensitivity on Stoney's part showed how he gained the cooperation and respect of those he worked with.

Stoney was constantly getting feedback from cast and crew. One way he did this was to show screenings to them at a local theatre he had rented to use in the mornings before the theatre opened. Exposed film would be sent to New York for processing and then rushed back to Georgia.³⁵ Stoney was particularly interested in Ida's response since she was the one most physically and emotionally exposed in the film. He skillfully arranged the rough-cut so the first scene she saw when the screening began was her with her new baby. He was pleased as she watched herself and her baby on film—she even cooed and talked to the baby on the screen in front of her. Stoney was relieved. He thought to himself, *Ah, this is fine.*³⁶ But when they were leaving the screening, she lamented, "Oh, Mr. Stoney, how black I be." Stoney said those words "broke my heart."³⁷ This kind of empathy and sensitivity shows the kind of relationship George Stoney had with his cast.

Collaboration with community.

During the many months when Stoney went on rounds with Miss Mary, gaining her confidence as well as that of her Black patients and their families, he was also actively laying the groundwork necessary for the white community's acceptance of his project.³⁸ He said, "Because this was South Georgia at a pretty rough time, I knew there would be suspicions of any white movie crew working with Blacks. If problems came along, of course we could just leave town, but what damage were we doing to the Black people whom we persuaded to be in our film?"³⁹

This concern for those who had trusted him was nothing new to Stoney. Years earlier, at age twenty-four, when he'd done research for Gunnar Myrdal's project on Blacks, he'd expressed concern for the safety and dignity of the people who'd taken him into their confidence. Always aware of the volatile social and political atmosphere of the South, at one point he wrote to his supervisor, "Please remember to keep these things strictly confidential. Many have opened their hearts to me here—the local situation would turn anyone's stomach—and it would be a very real tragedy if they should be spread around."⁴⁰

As soon as he arrived in town for the making of *All My Babies*, he began talking to the townspeople about what he was doing. He spoke with the desk clerk and manager at the hotel where he stayed, with taxi drivers, with store clerks, and farmers, gas station attendants, even with the "elderly gossips" who hung around town.⁴¹ He explained to everyone he came into contact with that he was in town "to make a movie that would help train the colored midwives so they could do a better job of looking after their own."⁴² In addition to talking with local people on the street, he also wrote an article for the local newspaper.⁴³

As a result of all this groundwork, Stoney found that the whites in the community began to take a genuine interest, later even helping when needed. A local hardware merchant refused to take pay for portable stoves he provided for a shack where part of the filming took place, an electrical supplier drove to Atlanta one night when a supply of light bulbs failed to arrive, and the wife of a druggist in town furnished baby clothes to some of Miss Mary's new babies from her own children's clothing.⁴⁴ Stoney's collaboration with the townspeople certainly seemed to lead to social changes within the community.

Stoney's *All My Babies* had definite social impact. Stoney felt that the most important immediate effect of *All My Babies* was the change in the white physician community. Suddenly, after the film came out, "a different quality of doctor began volunteering to take the clinics."⁴⁵ Not only was the self-esteem of the midwives raised, but their status within both the African-American and the white communities was elevated.⁴⁶

The effect of *All My Babies* continues to trickle down. It has now been seen, and used in training, around the world by health care providers in places such as India, Thailand, Venezuela, Sweden, Brazil, Lebanon, Costa Rica, and Tanganyika.⁴⁷ Stoney found its use in India by the Minister of Health particularly rewarding—and ironic. When the Minister requested use of the film, he told Stoney that a translated version would not be needed because all his doctors and nurses spoke English. Stoney explained that the film was intended to train midwives. "No," the Minister answered, "it's for my doctors and nurses. My problem is that midwives are looked down on by the doctors and nurses [in India]. I want to show them that in the U.S., where they have very fine medicine, the doctors are not ashamed to work with the midwives."⁴⁸ The social reform benefit of *All My Babies* is widespread indeed!

The most recent effect of the film was the establishment of an endowed scholarship at the University of Albany in honor of Mrs. Mary Coley, set into motion by members of her family who only recently discovered her role in the film. The first scholarship (given more than sixty years after *All My Babies* was released) was awarded to a young black woman who wanted to study to become a midwife and establish the first mobile midwife's clinic for rural Georgia.⁴⁹

All My Babies was made as a medical training film, but it has become far more than simply a teaching aid for midwives. It is art, as shown by its selection at the Edinburgh International Film Festival.⁵⁰ It is history, as shown by the fact that it was chosen by the Library of Congress to be included in the National Film Registry for preservation as an historical document.⁵¹ But most of all, it is a film that has left its mark as a social reform documentary.

The Uprising of '34

Of all the work that George Stoney has done during his lifetime, none demonstrates more vividly his vision of collaboration to affect social change than his 1995 *The Uprising of '34*. This film, with its extensive social impact, serves as supreme support of my thesis—that Stoney affected social change not only through his finished film, but also by collaborating with subjects, community, peers, media, and a vast array of organizations in the conception, the making, and the distribution of that end product.



Fig. 3 Labor Day Marchers in 1934⁵²

On Labor Day, 1934, nearly half a million workers walked off their jobs in textile mills all across the South, demanding improved working conditions and better wages, which they believed were guaranteed under New Deal legislation.⁵³ This General Textile Strike of '34 lasted only three weeks and ended in total defeat for the workers.⁵⁴ After the death of six strikers, the government stepped in and helped “negotiate” an end to the strike. The workers got none of their demands, but were guaranteed there would be no retaliation against anyone who had participated in the strike; all workers would be reinstated without reprisal. The mill owners completely ignored the terms, refusing to rehire strike leaders and blacklisting whole families, making employment at nearby mills difficult if not impossible. Even after multiple appeals to the federal government, nothing was done about non-compliance by the mill owners. The strikers felt not only humiliated by the defeat of the strike, but also intensely betrayed by the New Deal government.⁵⁵ The defeat, humiliation, and government betrayal made *union* a hated word among Southern mill workers and set back the union cause in the South for decades.⁵⁶

A shameful silence about the events of the Strike of '34 fell over much of the country, especially across the South. One writer said, “Those who lived through the event, and paid a high price for their participation, found little reason to remember or recount their experiences. The story had disappeared both from public memory and official histories.”⁵⁷

Onto this scene came George Stoney. He collaborated with Judith Helfand, one of his former students, to uncover the suppressed history of the strike and to tell of its events and consequences in the voices of those who had lived through it.⁵⁸ The goal was to help the community heal from the scars of that strike. This monumental task could only be accomplished by skillful collaboration, beginning with the planning and research of the film on through its production and distribution.

The film was to be based on personal testimony from those who had actually experienced the strike, but there seemed to be a determined silence among those who had been there. Stoney called it a sort of “forced amnesia.”⁵⁹ Many had, in fact, convinced themselves that it never really happened—at least not as they remembered it. So Stoney and Helfand’s first job was to bring validity to the people’s suppressed memories, allowing those memories to fully surface and be talked about. They ran an article in the *Charlotte Observer* explaining that they were looking for “hidden labor history” and asked “people with a story to tell” to call.⁶⁰ Responses came in; Stoney and Helfand eventually conducted about eighty interviews.

Helfand describes their task:

As documentary filmmakers, we found ourselves in the position of interlocutors—bringing the physical evidence of unionism into the Piedmont towns where it had been forged and then forgotten. The trunk of our rental car was weighed down with proof: cardboard file cabinets, organized by mill and by state, filled with copies of letters from mill workers to the Roosevelt administration demanding that their rights as workers and citizens be protected. We also brought a file full of comprehensive collection of photos of the 1934 strike...For many strike veterans, our visit was the first time that they had seen these pictures and letters.⁶¹

I was impressed by the extensive feedback Stoney got from viewers and participants even as the film was being made. He screened rough-cuts of the film to labor groups, churches, teachers’ groups, as well as to those he interviewed in the film. Their feedback was then incorporated into future cuts of the film. A perfect example came from comments about

the troubling absence of Black mill workers in early screenings. As a result, a section on African-Americans was added to the film.⁶²

This feedback from test audiences was nothing new to Stoney. We saw how he used this in *All My Babies*. Also, in an interview about a documentary he made on Canada's welfare system, he talked about how he used pre-screenings to change the outcome of that project. After several Canadian pre-screenings, he realized all the audiences were missing the point—they were talking about the *characters* in the film rather than the *issues*. So Stoney cut out all the scenes that simply added to character information and sharpened the issues. He then retested and found that the audience now focused on what he intended—the issues.⁶³

When the production of *The Uprising of '34* was nearing an end, Stoney made a fine-cut version of the film and set up group screenings and included those who had been involved with its making. Diverse, but supportive audiences, including union and anti-union, Black and white, activists, teachers, and journalists, were included. The screenings were followed by workshops called “Taking the Film Back Home,” which taught the participants how to use the film back in their own communities.⁶⁴ Nothing was left to chance. Stoney even wrote a viewer's handbook for these groups. In it, he clearly stated his goal: “The object is to get divided communities to come together and talk.”⁶⁵ Public showings in places such as libraries, community centers, schools, and churches brought together labor people, social activists, educators, and other dissimilar groups.⁶⁶ Social change was underway.

While Stoney and Helfand were eager for the finished film to be broadcast nationally so that the suppressed history of the strike could be put out into the open and into the larger public memory, they also believed strongly that the television program should be seen in

groups—that only through discussion and collaboration among viewers would it be fully effective.⁶⁷

In order to accomplish group viewing, Stoney and Helfand organized a program called “Labor to Neighbor” which linked the first national PBS broadcast in June, 1995 with numerous local community groups where discussions could take place.⁶⁸ In these “Labor to Neighbor” events, union members were encouraged to invite friends and neighbors into their homes to watch the broadcast and to lead discussions about it. Stoney even supplied these labor leaders with a discussion guide to help them. Some unions sponsored brown bag lunch discussions the next day so their members could share what it had been like to watch the film with neighbors. There were twenty-five such “Labor to Neighbor” events across the country.⁶⁹

One of the most interesting ways that Stoney got the community talking together and involved in healing came about because of the way in which he took advantage of a controversial situation. The public television station in Charlotte and those throughout South Carolina refused to air *The Uprising of '34*, feeling it was too controversial for their audiences.⁷⁰ There was a public outcry over the refusal to show it in those cities. Stoney saw it as a perfect opportunity to spark even more discussion. Because he had spent time establishing good relationships with local newspapers while the film was in production, they understood what he was trying to accomplish with the film and gave balanced coverage to the controversy. There were hundreds of articles and editorials in local and regional newspapers as well as coverage on radio call-in shows, all of which triggered “lively debates about unions, history, and the politics of memory.”⁷¹ This was exactly Stoney’s goal, and he accomplished it because of his collaboration within the community.

There was a huge ripple affect to Stoney's extensive collaborative efforts on *Uprising*. First, by using his very personal, subject-centered, and sensitive method of interviewing, he connected to, and collaborated with, those who had participated in the strike of '34 and helped them, their families and the whole community—indeed the whole South—heal by bringing to the surface long-buried and painful memories. He then produced a much more far-reaching film by listening to those who pre-screened his cuts. Because of the way he coordinated viewings of the film, along with the distribution of group discussion packets, he brought together people with opposing views and opened up communication between them. Finally, because of the controversy over it *not* being aired in some places, the ensuing public outcry and extensive news coverage (as a result of networking he had set up while doing the filming), resulted in more attention and sparked more in-depth discussion than it would have had it simply been aired in those locations.⁷²

George Stoney, like so many other twentieth century documentarians, feels that film has a mission—that film can and must change the world.⁷³ Stoney and his films have certainly left their mark for social change on our world. But the changes he has brought go far beyond the finished films themselves, far beyond what simply seeing the films could elicit in his audience. His films' social impact has to do with the man behind the camera and how he works through others to make a difference. He sees himself as a happy collaborator—and therein lies the key to how he has changed the world. By joyfully connecting to his peers, his cast, and the communities in which he works, by enthusiastically enlisting others' input and feedback, by compassionately trusting the intelligence and intuition of those around him, and by actively seeking the widest and most appropriate venues for distribution and dissemination

of his film, he creates a network of social influence that makes the films themselves almost pale by comparison.

After reading what Stoney has written and what others have written about him, after watching several of his documentary films, and listening to his commentary on them, I ask myself what it is that makes this man engender such respect and admiration from his peers, from his subjects, from his audiences—and from me. Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that Mr. Stoney exhibits such a compassion and generosity of spirit. Thank you, George Stoney. You are the essence of American documentary tradition.

NOTES

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62. Abrash and Whiteman, 92.

63. Marita Sturken, "An Interview with George Stoney," (January, 1984), *Video History Project*, Experimental Television Center LTD, <http://www.experimentaltvcenter.org/history/people/pview.php3?id=2&page=2> (accessed January 17, 2008).

64. Abrash and Whiteman, 91.

65. *Ibid.*, 94.

66. *Ibid.*, 92.

67. *Ibid.*

68. *Ibid.*, 92-93.

69. *Ibid.*, 93.

70. Reginald Stuart, "South Carolina Denies Uprising," *Southern Changes* 19, no. 3-4 (1997): 34.

71. Abrash and Whiteman, 93-94.

72. Stuart, 33.

73. Alan Rosenthal, "Moments with George: A Memoir," *Wide Angle* 21, no. 2 (March 1999): 44.

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