


# Using “The Uprising of ‘34” to Link the Classroom to the Community



“The Uprising of ‘34,” a documentary film released in 1995, tells the story of the General Textile Strike of 1934, which involved hundreds of thousands of workers, mainly in the South. The film combines excerpts from dozens of oral history interviews with former workers and managers, newsreel and other film footage from the period, still photographs, and letters from textile workers to President Roosevelt and National Recovery Administration officials.

Throughout the process of making the film, we actively sought community input, which proved crucial to our understanding of what the strike, its context and its memory, signified. In addition, we never envisioned “Uprising” as merely a movie, to be seen passively; rather, from the beginning, we were most concerned with what occurred “after the lights came up,” seeing the film as a vehicle to foster a critical dialogue about history and memory, class, and power. Accordingly, we have adopted a grassroots approach to distribution and outreach, working closely with community groups, labor unions, and schools.

When the lights come up at screenings in the southern cotton mill communities and cities where the strike took place, the first responses are consistently the same. “Why didn’t I know about the strike?” “Why didn’t my grandma tell me about this?” “I’m a high school teacher, and I didn’t know.” “How do we get a film and the stories of working people into the schools?” Underlying all of these concerns was a larger question that rose to the surface like cream in a bottle of milk: “Whose responsibility is it to impart labor history to the next generation?” The answer was clear. The responsibility resides with a community and cannot solely fall to a teacher in a classroom working from a book.

The following discussion of the use of “The Uprising of ‘34” is the result of our collaboration with classroom social studies teachers and community educators and organizers. The curriculum will conform to both the National History Standards and the standards set by the National Council for the Social Studies, while having its foundation in experiential hands-on learning, direct outreach, and interaction with the local community.

The full running time of “The Uprising of ‘34” is eighty-seven minutes. It is structured in three parts (“From the Mountain to the Mill Village,” “A Revolution of Hope,” and “The Consequences”), each about twenty-five to twenty-eight minutes; it can easily be used in several fifty-minute class periods. Yet, even at a community screening in a theater, library or union hall, we almost never show the film all the way through without stopping, talking, and starting again. We brought this same interactive approach into the classroom. The exercises, stopping points, and questions are, to some extent, based on our experiences from using the film with diverse audiences in the field.

By way of introduction, I explain to each class how we will work with “The Uprising of ‘34”: “This film is essentially about a labor strike that took place throughout the textile industry in 1934, and we focused on the southern cotton mill communities. Throughout the research and production, we found that many of the people involved were reluctant—or even afraid—to talk to us

about their experiences in the mills or during the big union effort of ‘34—even though it all occurred over sixty years ago. Soon we realized that we were not just making a film about a strike or an industry, but that we were making this movie to help individuals and communities to talk to each other. The ground rules for viewing the film are: if you laugh, cry, squirm, or yell at the screen, than I as a facilitator will stop the VCR and ask, ‘Why? What does that person or statement make you feel or think about? Likewise, if you want to share your response to what is shown or said on the screen then raise your hand, and I’ll stop the VCR.”

To begin, I generally use the opening of part one, “From the Mountain to the Mill Village.” This section is great for helping students find concrete ways to talk about the intersection of memory, history, the economy, point of view, and, most important, the construction of history. It runs about twenty-seven minutes total. There are five places where I know that I can effectively stop the VCR, ask questions, and engage the class in a discussion. But, I do not feel compelled to show “the whole thing.” Just before I turn on the film, I always remind the class that there are no wrong responses and that no one is being judged; we can learn the most from first impressions.

One exchange that has particularly stayed with me took place in an eleventh grade Advanced Placement history class in Charlotte in September 1995. It has informed every classroom and workshop experience since. After showing the opening three minutes of the film (montage of interior mill footage and voice over bites of owners, management, workers, young descendants, each adding a memory or comment about life and work in the mills), I stopped the tape and asked, “What is different about this?,” expecting to talk about the novelty of not having a narrator or the impact of hearing a story told by multiple and often disagreeing voices.

One girl offered, “Well, they are real country.”

“Well, we’re real country,” responded another.

“No, they are really country, no one in my family talks like that.”

“Well, my whole family talks like that, so I guess we are real country.”

A third girl broke into the discussion. “What’s different about this is that they don’t show red-necks on television anymore.”

I asked, “Why not?”

A boy sitting in the back of the room took his sweatshirt hood off his head and replied, “Because people think that they don’t have anything to say that is important, and besides, they weren’t the victors.”

“Well, let’s see what they do have to say,” I suggested, and I turned the film back on.

We viewed the next section, a four-minute montage of retired and young cotton mill workers who speak about why the history of the ‘34 strike in the South is not known. I stopped the VCR again. I asked two boys [white], why they were making so much noise while the woman in the film, who was missing some front teeth, was talking.

The two boys looked at each other sheepishly and then one said in between embarrassed giggles, “Because she looks like what we were saying

before, red-neck, you know, white trash.”

I asked him, “Well, do you remember what she said?”

They both looked taken aback when they realized that they didn’t know what she had said.

A girl [African American] sitting in the very front of the class spun around in her desk and said, “That’s because you were too busy laughing at her, but what she said was very meaningful.” Verbatim, she repeated the lines: “My daddy could talk about the war and people being blown to bits but he couldn’t talk about his own neighbors being killed. And it’s like somebody is trying to hide a dirty secret about their family, like they’re ashamed of what happened to their families. They ought to be proud of ‘em, they stood up when other people wouldn’t.”

I asked, “What does her statement and our discussion make you think about?”

One boy offered, “Well, she makes up in wit what she lacks in appearance.”

“Well,” I asked, “what does that say about history?”

The same boy in the back of the room [African American] who had spoken earlier, again pulled the sweatshirt hood off his head and said, “It means that we only know the history of people that look good or are rich. And we don’t ask regular people about their history, because we don’t even think they have one.”

At this point, we had seen just six minutes of the film.

As a way to extend this to the “regular” people who make and keep our local history, we are encouraging teachers, in conjunction with other community leaders or organizations, to coordinate a community screening of “The Uprising of ‘34.” Bring together a social studies or history class, with parents or family members, working people, trade unionists, clergy, librarians, archivists, local historians, and retirees to view the film and talk. Interrupt the screening for discussions. Identify “hidden” labor history in your family or community, past or present—something no one talks about, but everybody knows about, something you know as a one-liner or myth, something misunderstood, something that is off limits for teachers. The point of this is for people to see themselves in an industrial and historical context, and to make real connections between their families, home community, and the story of the southern textile communities that are featured in “The Uprising of ‘34.” □

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## *Oral History on the World Wide Web*

### **Oral History Association**

The Oral History Association headquartered at Baylor University offers several World Wide Web resources including the *Publication Evaluation Guidelines for Oral History* as well as information on Oral History Association membership, the OHA listserve, regional organizations, conferences, teacher workshops, and publications. <http://www.baylor.edu/~OHA>

### **Oral History Resources on the World Wide Web**

This is the most comprehensive listing of World Wide Web resources for oral history. The list is maintained by Jeff Charnley at Michigan State University and the the Michigan Oral History Association. <http://scnc.leslie.k12.mi.us/~charnle2/ohlinks.html>

### **What did you do in the war, Grandma?**

“What did you do in the war, Grandma? An Oral History of Rhode Island Women during World War II” is the World Wide Web version of a publication written and produced by students in the Honors English Program at South Kingstown High School. In addition to the student oral history projects, see the comments by their oral history teachers, Linda P.

Wood and Judi Scott. [http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/WWII\\_Women/](http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/WWII_Women/)

### **Resources for Oral History in Education**

This site, developed by Marjorie L. McLellan at Miami University, makes available a collection of instructional materials including syllabi, lesson plans, reading lists, and assignments for both pre-collegiate and post-secondary education. <http://www.muohio.edu/oralhistory/>

### **Oral History as an Instructional Methodology**

This is an oral history guide prepared by Barry Lanman to accompany the Discovery Channel resource for documentary film, “The Promised Land” (1995). Lanman is co-author of the Oral History Association’s publication, *Oral History in the Secondary School Classroom* (1988). This site provides background on the cognitive and affective goals addressed by oral history as well as a sixteen-step plan for implementing oral history projects in the schools. Enter this web page through the Discovery Learning Community at <http://school.discovery.com/learningcomm/promisedland/teachandlearn/oralguide>

# “The Uprising of ‘34”

Strategies for class discussions and student oral history activities with “The Uprising of ‘34”

After screening the film segment with Opal McMichael in part one, “From the Mountain to the Mill Village”

Consider: How many generations back do you have to search, or to how many relatives or neighbors do you have to until you find someone who left the farm to work in industry, who left their native town or country for another because of economics or politics—because they needed another way of making a living?

Interview someone in your family, community, church, synagogue, or apartment building who recalls the day he/she and their family left home and one way of life for another.

Why did they have to leave home? How did they feel about leaving home? Can they describe the day that they left? Can they give you an image, a taste, or a smell that they brought with them? What object did they bring with them and why? What was the last thing that they did before getting in the wagon, car, plane, or boat or leaving on foot? What was it like when they first came to their new home, new country, new town, new city, or a new job? What were the differences between their old job and their new one? Pluses and minuses?

Transcribe the interview and your thoughts about the process; answer the following questions:

How much of their past did they tell their children? If they are your parents or grandparents, did they ever tell you this part of their history before? If no, why not? If yes, what do you know now that you didn't know before? Do you feel different about yourself or your family or your community because you know this story? How would you feel if they never told you this, if this was not a part of your background as you know it now? Where else could you find this exact story and piece of history?

What stories do you think are generally told? What stories and pieces of history are not told? What does that mean about history or the way history is told, taught, or handed down?

What do you think the impact of not knowing your family or community history can have on you and your future?

Consider: write the interview out as if it was a first person memoir or story, looking back. Read it out loud for the class. Have them guess who that person is to you.

Topics: *industrialization*  
*state history*  
*migration/immigration*  
*oral history techniques/methodology*  
*construction of history/what is history*