Kropp’s last case study, Olvera Street, is a “Mexican” marketplace built in the 1930s in downtown Los Angeles by activist Christine Sterling, with local government and booster support. Olvera Street, built on the site of the eighteenth-century Spanish settlement, required that local Mexican Americans, encouraged to rent retail space to sell Mexican wares, present a version of Mexican culture as a continual fiesta, with costume regulations consistently enforced. Kropp contrasts this controlled presentation with the revolutionary themes of a mural by Mexican artist David Alfaro Siqueiros, painted on a nearby building, but quickly painted over at Sterling’s order.

Kropp concludes that during her period of study, “ethnic Mexicans and California Indians may have chipped away at the Anglo consensus, but they did not make serious, immediate inroads into the dominant culture” (13). Her examination of their participation in the Spanish colonial revival, however, sets up the powerful activist movements of subsequent decades.

Kropp’s analysis of the inherent politics of control and domination in these preservation projects contains some discomfiting implications for public history. Public historians would like to see our own work as distinct from the more unsavory aspects of the cultural projects of our predecessors, but our projects are also intimately connected to larger cultural, economic, and political trends. As professionals who often work closely with communities to identify, study, preserve, and protect the buildings, landscapes, and stories that make up their pasts, we are consistently faced with choices that determine, to some extent, what that past will look like in the present and the future. Every time we design a walking tour, landmark a building, or identify the subject of an oral history we employ the notion of authenticity, though many of us know that an understanding of the “real thing” changes with time. Public historians produce great projects when guided by a recognition that the cultural power of what we do comes from its potential for openness and inclusiveness. Kropp’s dissection of a historical rhetoric used by southern California’s early-twentieth-century boosters in large part to decorate, organize, control, exclude, and ignore should inspire public historians to create projects that acknowledge, complicate, illuminate, and empower.

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Southern Farmers and Their Stories: Memory and Meaning in Oral History
by Melissa Walker. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2006; xiv + 324 pp., bibliographic essay, index; clothbound, $45.00.

Melissa Walker, associate professor of history at Converse College, has written an ambitious, important book that attempts to unravel the meanings that ordinary southerners have created to make sense of changes in rural life in the twentieth-century South. Although focused narrowly on the rural South, Walker’s book is more broadly meant to serve as “a case study in how ordi-
nary people construct and use memories about the personal and national past in their daily lives” (3). As such, it contains much that should be of interest to public historians.

To investigate what others might call the “collective memory” of rural southerners, the author borrows the concept of “communities of memory” from sociologist Robert N. Bellah. Such communities, according to Walker, develop through internal conversations, as members of a group create a “shared understanding of the world in which they lived and the characteristics that make them different from others who did not live in that world” (5). Her project, then, applies this idea to the rural South: “Through the stories that rural people tell about their lives,” Walker writes, “we can begin to discern elements of their common experiences that created the context for their sense of belonging to a distinctive community of farming folk” (78).

Walker’s work is informed by the growing literature on collective memory, but her prose is not burdened by theory. As an oral historian, she is following the lead of Alessandro Portelli and others who look to storytelling form in oral history narratives. “The very act of telling stories about the past,” she argues, “is a way of making meaning—of interpreting and explaining” (2). To her mind, then, the “challenge for the historian who uses oral narratives and other memory-based sources is not simply to sort out the truth from the falsehoods, but rather to consider the shape of the memory stories and to explore what the shape of those stories tells us about the storyteller and his or her world” (3).

Her method for this study involved careful review of oral history interviews with over 500 rural southerners, most born before 1930. She used existing oral history collections throughout the South and focused especially on collections containing interviews “intended to record details about the nature of rural life” (11). More than half of the interviewees were women, about one-quarter African Americans, and slightly more than half were landowners. The largest numbers were from Alabama, Texas, and North Carolina. But how to find the “shape” of their stories? It is perhaps worth quoting the author at length:

“When asked to talk about farm life during the twentieth century, individuals focused on several categories of shared experiences, including rural self-sufficiency, a strong work ethic, persistence through hard times, neighborhood mutual aid, an attachment to the land, and the relative equality of rural folk. Often, perhaps most of the time, narrators made statements that revealed the characteristics shared by members of their community of memory spontaneously rather than in response to particular questions. Sometimes a narrator returned to an element of identity over and over during the course of the interview. The spontaneity of these recollections and the recurrence of similar themes in interview after interview indicate the importance of certain elements to narrators’ sense of shared identity. (78)

Even a nonspecialist in the history of the South will dive into this work with fairly predictable questions in my mind: How could anything like a very broad and biracial rural “community of memory” be said to exist in the ru-
ral Jim Crow South? How fully could a landless black sharecropper be said to share a common culture with a landholding white farmer in the 1930s South? Perhaps to counter such reader skepticism, Walker’s first chapter examines the stories of three quite diverse narrators: a white, landowning “self-made” (54) male farmer from Tennessee; a widowed, white female peach farm owner from South Carolina; and a Georgia-born male African American sharecropper. Through her analysis of these narrators’ stories, she makes some headway in implanting an appreciation for the ways rural southerners “saw themselves as different from people who did not live on the land” (34).

The heart of her analyses unfolds in chapter 2. Here she explores the half dozen or so categories of shared experience that she sees as the boundaries of this rural “community of memory.” Some of these are more convincing than others. Her evidence is best for the shared values of self-sufficiency (which her narrators call “living at home”) and neighborly mutual aid (83). That she can only muster a mere three paragraphs to explore the idea of “love for the land” suggests this was not the strongest analytical category (98). Throughout, however, she is duly attentive to fissures created by class, race, gender, and generation, and she successfully interweaves memories from various southerners—black, white, landowning and sharecropping, male and female—to support her interpretations.

It would have been nice to hear a bit more from those millions of displaced southerners, black and white, who headed to northern cities during this era (the extensive oral history testimonies of white migrants collected by Chad Berry come to mind). This might have sharpened her perspectives on the themes of town versus country life and farmers’ attachment to the land. Then again, it’s perhaps unfair to ask for more from an author who has already consulted over 500 oral history interviews.

Aside from the ever present warping influence of Jim Crow, Walker finds nothing uniquely “southern” in these narratives. She frames her project as “as much a rural study as a southern one,” and one believes she is right in suggesting that “memories of rural folk” elsewhere in the U.S. might echo the stories told here (10). Still, it is interesting that she uncovers no southern theme despite the fact that, as she acknowledges, the strands of romantic agrarianism in her “community of memory” have roots in the controversial 1930 southern manifesto of the Southern Agrarians.

This work deserves a far broader audience than its subject matter might suggest. Public historians in various lines of work may be especially interested in Walker’s work as a model for unlocking the interpretive potential in existing oral history collections, on either a local or regional level. The author has absorbed and analyzed a large body of wide-ranging interviews with great care and intelligence. That she could do so while consistently attending to the in-

herent complexities of the narratives of women and men, of sharecroppers, renters, and landowners, of whites and blacks, is truly impressive.

Others scholars reading the same material might have reached slightly different interpretations of the boundaries of this “community of memory,” and, as a nonspecialist in the South, I remain skeptical of how historically meaningful it is to talk about southern blacks and whites as being part of a singular “community of memory” in the Jim Crow era. Still, one comes away with a sense that Walker has an exceptionally good ear for her subjects, their views of the past, and the contours of life in the rural South.

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Richard S. Hobbs has written a long anticipated and wonderfully thorough volume on bridging the Tacoma Narrows. The disastrous collapse of “Galloping Gertie,” the first Tacoma Narrows Bridge, on November 7, 1940, ranks as a major twentieth-century engineering disaster. Hobbs tells the story of Galloping Gertie’s construction and failure and its replacement bridge’s design and construction. He also captures the early project development work for the third Narrows bridge, which, at the time of his writing, was rising from the Narrows’ swift currents where it would soon serve alongside its immediate predecessor.

Since the 1880s, residents of the southern reaches of Washington’s Puget Sound sought to connect Tacoma with its hinterlands to the west. Travel to nearby Kitsap Peninsula and the Olympic Peninsula involved long drives around the Sound’s southern inlets or passage on slow ferries from Point Defiance. The Narrows was less than a mile wide and the logical place for a bridge. Its 200–foot depth and treacherous tides, however, posed difficult barriers to construction. Nevertheless, local boosters in the 1920s campaigned for a bridge. By 1928, acclaimed engineer Joseph B. Strauss proposed a steel cantilever, much like the Carquinez Strait Bridge, then under construction in California. In 1929, the accomplished engineer David B. Steinman envisioned a suspension bridge for the crossing. His St. Johns Bridge was then under construction in Portland, Oregon. Other plans followed, but funding was elusive.

In 1938, the New Deal’s Public Works Administration agreed to grant 45 percent of construction costs, with the rest funded by a federal loan. The U.S. War Department could make the case that a Narrows bridge would have military functions. As a condition of the funding agreement, the PWA required the Washington State Toll Bridge Authority to hire federally designated outside consultants to design the bridge instead of completing the project in-