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Kenneth Bindas. *Remembering the Great Depression in the Rural South.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007. 184 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-3048-7.

Reviewed by John Hayes (Department of History, University of Georgia)

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Hardship and Kindness

“My mother would always try to have something to give to everybody that come here,” Joe Johnson recalled of the hoboes and beggars who knocked at his family’s door in the 1930s, “even though we didn’t have enough to eat ourselves” (p. 139). Johnson’s delicate balance of severe poverty and generous self-sacrifice is a driving theme in Kenneth Bindas’s oral history, *Remembering the Great Depression in the Rural South*. Through thematic presentation, interweaving of a volley of voices, and running interpretive analysis, Bindas skilfully demonstrates that the Depression experience involved not just privation and crisis, but a distinct “collective consciousness” that left an enduring imprint on those who came of age during the hard years of the 1930s (p. 145).

The monograph is based on over 500 oral histories conducted by Bindas and his students over a four-year period (1989-93). The interviewees—women and men, white and black—were all born before 1920, and many grew up in sharecropping, tenant, and textile mill families. The majority are from central and western Georgia, but other southern states are also represented. Bindas begins by crafting a thesis that frames the panoply of personal remembrance: he argues that the Depression decade marked a watershed in national culture as the “pioneer ideal” of individualism and self-help was displaced by a new ideal of cooperation and collective support (p. 2). Franklin Roosevelt and his New Deal ethos resonated with much of the population because he embodied this new ideal.

The first three chapters thematically portray the re-

gional context in which this new ideal was forged. Bindas weaves together individual voices to present extended treatment of regional labor patterns before and during the Depression, popular views of Roosevelt and New Deal programs, and the new possibilities of consumption opened up by the New Deal’s infusion of capital. Chapters 4 and 5 allow the interviewees to speak at much greater length, and these chapters evoke the critical importance of family and community networks, and the nuanced dialectic of “privation and hope” that is basic to the people’s memory of the Depression (p. 114). Throughout, Bindas ties the memories to the context established by the historiography of the rural South, and to arguments that historians of the national scene have made regarding such issues as consumption as a new civic duty, and the unequal labor demands placed on women in the Depression crisis. He also skilfully frames the narratives through periodic reflective discussion on the complicated nature of oral history, its fusion of valuation, device, and tangible detail.

Bindas’s monograph contributes to a slowly growing body of scholarship—collaborative endeavors such as *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (1987) and *Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell about Life in the Segregated South* (2001), and works by historians like Wayne Flynt, Rebecca Sharpless, Melissa Walker, and Mark Schultz—that adeptly use oral history as revealing social history.[1] These social histories are doing much more than simply showing ordinary people’s experience of well-known phenomena; they are prompting significant revisions of established historio-

graphical wisdom derived from writings left by a privileged, powerful elite.

But, despite its merits, I am not sure that Bindas's book adequately expresses the pathos of poverty in the rural South. There is some serious conceptual ambiguity on what exactly counts as "rural South," with small cities like Rome, Georgia and major ones like Atlanta being included in the treatment. Such places did experience poverty in the Depression decade—as did places like Sheboygan, Wisconsin and New York City—but the poverty of the truly "rural" South, the densely populated countryside, was far more longstanding and, perhaps, even more heartbreaking in the constricted 1930s. Including the voices of "urban" (town or city) people like industrial workers, domestics, and small merchants obscures the notable social divisions of the New South, divisions in which "rural" and "urban" generally denoted significant differences of wealth and income. Almost everybody suffered in the decade, but surely the millions of already-poor rural southerners of both races suffered the worst. As Harry Crews, who grew up in tenancy in the 1930s and 40s, put it in his memoir *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place* (1978), "the world that circumscribed the people I come from had so little margin for error, for bad luck, that when something went wrong, it almost always brought something else down with it." [2] Carefully paying attention to a speaker's New South social position—as Bindas sometimes does, but not rigorously enough—would allow more of this distinct, circumscribed, rural world to come through.

Poverty had begun to blanket the southern countryside as early as the 1870s, and rates of tenancy rose notably for the next sixty years, until the Agricultural Adjustment Act inaugurated a quiet revolution in which rural laborers became newly superfluous as federal capital transformed the region. Thus Bindas is not convincing when he argues that the financial crisis of 1929-30 "created fear" for most rural southerners; many, white and black, had ample reason to fear such familiar things as chronic indebtedness and the volatile unpredictability of world demand for cotton long before the national Depression (p. 118). Vivid images from the era—bankrupt men jumping off buildings, endless bread lines, "bankers and professors and everybody [with] holes in the bottom of their shoes"—were no doubt real and profound in their imprint, but this poverty that touched both urban South and larger nation was simply not jarringly new for millions of rural southerners (p. 116). Perhaps they had already developed cultural resources for coming to terms with poverty, long before the 1930s.

A critical resource that Bindas's analysis does bring out is a communal ethos of neighborliness. Over and over again, the speakers recall how families and communities looked out for their members, thus cushioning the burdens that fell on individuals and providing the strength of solidarity in the face of severe hardship. But was this a new consciousness, a "new ideology of social cooperation" embodied in Roosevelt and the New Deal, as Bindas claims (p. 3)? Again, I am not sure that this spirit of cooperation was that new of a cultural reality for rural people. In his 1976 *Democratic Promise* Lawrence Goodwyn described Populism—that farmers' movement in response to the initial hard times of the 1870s and 80s—as a "cooperative crusade," and many a folk gospel song that circulated throughout the rural New South lauded self-sacrificing neighborliness and vilified liars, ramblers, and backbiters who either destroyed communities or never helped to build them. It is more likely that the communal solidarity that the elderly people recall was neither new in the 1930s nor inculcated by the liberal ideology of the New Deal, but rather a dominant older theme manifest in the Farmers Alliance, Populism, and local rural churches.

Indeed, it was rather strange to read a book on the rural South and find religion so minimally mentioned. Perhaps the questions put to the interviewees did not prompt significant religious discussion. Thirty years earlier in his own remarkable fieldwork, Robert Coles repeatedly listened to rural southerners who "can't help going from 'race relations' and sociology to theology." [3] Coles' monograph, published in 1971 as *Migrants, Sharecroppers, Mountaineers*, provides ample testimony to the fact that religion was central to rural people's sense of identity and to the ways that they confronted poverty. This is suggested in Bindas's interpretation, but remains very much on the periphery.

Bindas—and the many elderly people his students listened to—steer a careful, delicate line between nostalgia and celebration of deliverance from hardship. No one wants to return to the severe poverty they experienced, but many express a sense that something has been lost with widespread prosperity. Their paradoxical recollections in the fifth chapter of the book are its strongest and most arresting part. "I didn't see no sad people walking around," one person remembers, and another laments a present in which in their wealth "the people have gotten meaner and don't care" (pp. 136, 138). That is a strange mindset, upsetting a dominant contemporary assumption that prosperity must be an unambiguous benefit, and it is precisely from such a strange sensibility that many today, not only historians, could learn by listening

to its bearers while they are still with us.

Notes

[1]. Wayne Flynt, *Poor but Proud: Alabama's Poor Whites* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989); Rebecca Sharpless, *Fertile Ground, Narrow Choices: Women on Texas Cotton Farms, 1900-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Melissa Walker, *All We Knew Was to Farm: Rural Women in the*

Upcountry South, 1919-1941 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Mark Schultz, *The Rural Face of White Supremacy: Beyond Jim Crow* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

[2]. Harry Crews, *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 40.

[3]. Robert Coles, *Flannery O'Connor's South* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1980), 3.

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