



Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service

December 2008 | A Conversation with the Curator | James Deutsch

Jim Deutsch is co-curator of *The Working White House: 200 Years of Tradition and Memories*. Developed by The White House Historical Association and the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, this SITES exhibition examines the fascinating history of the men and women who work behind the scenes to help keep the White House running smoothly.

Reflecting his work as a program curator at the Center, Jim focused on the White House as a unique workplace with a distinctive work culture. Excerpts from his interviews with recently retired White House workers are featured in the exhibition's audio tour and video and may be downloaded from *The Working White House* exhibition page on SITES' website. (www.sites.si.edu/exhibitions/exhibits/white_house_workers/main.htm)

***The Working White House* began its national tour at the State Historical Society of Iowa in September 2008 and will travel nationwide through February 2012.**

Q. Define “occupational culture.”

A. Every occupational group—whether it is actuaries, biologists, cowboys, dishwashers, engineers, firefighters, gaffers, and haberdashers (to take just the first eight letters of the alphabet)—has its own “occupational culture”—the set of skills, specialized knowledge, and codes of behavior that not only distinguish it from other occupational groups, but which also meet its needs as a community.

There is only one White House, so the people who work there have a very specialized set of skills, knowledge, and codes of behavior. As with any folk group, these skills, etc., are shared and passed on, from one generation of workers to the next. In the case of doctors and nurses working in a hospital, some of their traditions will be part of a broad category of medical lore; some will be tied to the individual hospital in which they work; and some will be tied to their specific department. For instance, the culture of emergency room workers is quite different from that of endocrinologists.

Q: How many former workers did you interview? Did they say anything surprising?

A. We interviewed 10 former workers in the late summer and early fall of 2007, using the Georgetown home of Martha Joynt Kumar as our “studio.” Dr. Kumar is a professor of political science at Towson University in Maryland and a noted scholar on the presidency, so her home seemed a most appropriate venue.

The workers whom we interviewed represented a wide variety of occupational skills (chefs, butlers, ushers, electricians, housekeepers, etc.) and supplemented the more extensive series of interviews with former White House workers that had been done by my colleague Marjorie

Hunt in preparation for the 1992 Smithsonian Folklife Festival. Because I was very familiar with the content of those earlier interviews, I don't think I was particularly surprised by anything that was said in 2007. Perhaps that results from the sense of tradition and continuity embodied by these White House workers.

Q. What makes a good interview? Who determines when it's over—you or your subject?

A. I think the best interviews are ones that are free-flowing and conversational. I always try to start with basic questions that are easier to answer—such as how the interviewee came to work at the White House—in order to put them at ease, before moving into topics that might be more sensitive and difficult to answer. I do have some questions in mind before the interview begins, but I think what's most important is to listen very closely to what is being said, and to follow up on some of those points before going on to whatever your next question might be.

I think that the end of the interview should be mutually determined: when I have run out of questions and the interviewee has run out of things to say. There's also a fatigue factor, which usually occurs after 60 minutes or so.

Q. Give an example of how *not* to conduct an interview.

A. One example comes from a conversation with Lynne Cheney that I observed in 2005. When asked about her favorite presidents, Cheney named George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and James K. Polk. But instead of posing the obvious follow-up question—James K. Polk!?!—the interviewer simply looked down at his index cards and went on to the next question he had prepared. So my first three rules of successful interviewing should be listen, listen, listen.

Q. What tips can you give individuals who would like to conduct oral histories with family members?

A. Do it, and do it before it's too late! My mother's parents died when I was five years old, and I've been trying to find out where they came from. All we know now is that they immigrated from somewhere on what was the western edge of the Russian Empire in 1908. But that could have been present-day Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, or Russia; my grandparents' native tongue was Yiddish, which was spoken all over that part of the world. If only someone in our family had interviewed them, or had saved some of the relevant documents, I might now have the answers I am seeking.

Q. Your work, in combination with the audio and video documentation collected by Center curator Marjorie Hunt in 1992, now covers workers who have served presidents from Herbert Hoover to George W. Bush. Can we assume that interviews with White House workers will be an on-going project?

A. I would love for this to be an ongoing project, but it's hard to say what lies ahead. Hopefully someone in 10 or 15 years will realize that it's time to take another look at the culture of White House workers and will find the funding to do so. Fortunately, the White House Curator's Office conducts exit interviews with all members of the White House residence staff. Those interviews are recorded and transcribed, and will help us to identify the next group of workers to be interviewed.