

Stetson Kennedy and the pursuit of truth

By Paul Ortiz

Stetson Kennedy passed away on Saturday, Aug. 27, 2011. He was 94 years old. Stetson died peacefully in the presence of his beloved wife, Sandra Parks, at Baptist Medical Center South in St. Augustine, Florida.

Stetson Kennedy spent the better part of the 20th century doing battle with racism, class oppression, corporate domination, and environmental degradation in the American South. By mid-century Stetson had become our country's fiercest tribune of hard truths; vilified by the powerful, Stetson did not have the capacity to look away from injustice. His belief in the dignity of the South's battered sharecroppers, migrant laborers, and turpentine workers made him the region's most sensitive and effective folklorist.

Stetson was so relentless, so full of life, that some of us thought that he would trick death the way that he had once fooled the Ku Klux Klan into exposing their lurid secrets to the listeners of the "Adventures of Superman" radio program in 1947. As recently as April, Stetson gave a fiery speech to hundreds of farm workers and their supporters at a rally in support of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers in Tampa. Standing in solidarity with Latina/o and Haitian agricultural workers affirmed Stetson's ironclad belief in the intersections between labor organizing, racial justice, and economic equity.

Stetson Kennedy has been called Florida's Homer. He was an epic bard of the South, and his prose was fiery and uncompromising.

In the now immortal *Southern Exposure* (1946) he waged war on the "hate-mongers, race-racketeers, and terrorists who swore that apartheid must go on forever." Reading *Southern Exposure* 65 years after its initial publication is an electrifying experience. While the South's lickspittle politicians presented the region to northern capitalists as a place to exploit people and resources, Stetson understood that real economic development could not occur until Jim Crow had been smashed. *Southern Exposure* was a declaration of war against white

supremacy and corporate rule in the South. Sandra Parks aptly observed “Stetson Kennedy was a walking around reminder of the principle...that people’s basic decency outweighed the customs, laws, misconceptions and violence of racism. Although millions of white Southerners were uneasy about segregation, Stetson was among the few who took the risks of direct action against it.”

In assessing the scope and scale of Stetson Kennedy’s life, it is clear that he was one of the outstanding personalities of U.S. history. Over the course of his illustrious career he worked with many of the giants of the 20th century including Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, Richard Wright, Lillian Smith, Woody Guthrie, Zora Neale Hurston, Myles Horton, Virginia Durr, Alan Lomax, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Erskine Caldwell (who edited his first book) as well as Florida’s beloved freedom fighters and martyrs Harry T. and Harriette V. Moore.

Throughout his career as a folklorist, author and community organizer, Stetson posed tough questions to authorities that made even many of his friends uncomfortable. He insisted upon a level of accountability from elected officials unheard of in the one-party South, and he demanded justice for the oppressed. The legendary oral historian Studs Terkel put it best when he said: “With half a dozen Stetson Kennedys, we can transform our society into one of truth, grace and beauty...”

Stetson Kennedy personifies what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was trying to get at when he stated, “Education without social action is a one-sided value because it has no true power potential. Social action without education is a weak expression of pure energy. Deeds uninformed by educated thought can take false directions. When we go into action and confront our adversaries, we must be armed with knowledge as they are. Our policies should have the strength of deep analysis beneath them to be able to challenge the clever sophistries of our opponents.” In the writings of Stetson Kennedy, education and social action are constantly joined. Generations of human rights advocates have used Stetson’s investigative reporting and research to improve the conditions of agricultural workers, women, Latinos, and many others. The onetime southeastern editorial director of the Congress of Industrial Organization’s (CIO) political action

committee blew the lid off of the worst aspects of American life even as he magnified the best: the cultural strengths and solidarities of the working classes regardless of race, creed, or color.

One of the consistent threads in Stetson's work is the exceptional attention that he gave to the relationship between humans and the natural environment. His environmentalism was grounded in connecting the fate of turpentine and phosphate laborers to the degradation of the lands that they worked for low wages and in dangerous conditions. This was a working-class environmentalism, and it is a philosophical stance that underpins the organizing being done today against mountaintop removal and environmental racism.

Fables of the Reconstruction

In 1942, Stetson published the book *Palmetto Country*, which focuses primarily on Florida history. This book contains some of the most remarkable chapters on the history of Reconstruction published between W.E.B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* in 1935 and John Hope Franklin's *Reconstruction After the Civil War* in 1961. To understand how revolutionary this chapter was, however, we must move forward in time to 1964, the year when the state of Florida chose William Watson Davis' *The Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida* as one of 12 books to celebrate the state's 450th anniversary. Davis' book had originally been published in 1913. He was a student of historian William Archibald Dunning, who was sympathetic toward slave owners and opposed voting rights for African Americans.

Dr. Du Bois characterized Davis's book as "standard, anti-negro." A reviewer noted that Davis "finds that for nine years the State was wracked by political wrangling, violence, and mutual suspicion. The attempt to found a commonwealth government upon the votes of an ignorant [N]egro electorate proved a failure. It made the Solid South." In other words, this was the standard narrative of venal carpetbaggers, race traitor scalawags, and sub-human African Americans. The state of Florida officially promoted Davis's racist analysis of Reconstruction over 50 years after its original publication, and esteemed UNC-

Chapel Hill history professor Fletcher Green wrote an introduction for the new edition of the book.

Stetson's view of the Civil War and Reconstruction in *Palmetto Country* was radically different. In it, African Americans were treated with dignity and respect and judged by their actions, not by their racial background. So-called Redemption is depicted as a horrific tragedy, not as a progressive, inevitable fact. Class differences between whites were carefully examined. The Civil War is no longer covered with the self-destructive myth of the "Lost Cause" but instead becomes "A Rich Man's War, and a Poor Man's Fight." Equally important, Stetson paid attention to the role that Northern robber barons played in corrupting Florida politics into the Gilded Age, thus anticipating C. Van Woodward's *Origins of the New South* (1951) by several years.

Stetson deepened this analysis in *Southern Exposure*, noting, "Prior to the Civil War, the despoilers of the South were the small class of slave-driving large planters. Since the Civil War, the parasites who have enriched themselves beyond measure through the impoverishment of the South's people are predominantly corporate interests, the main body of them being situated outside the South, with tentacles sucking at the region through Southern 'representatives.'"

Not surprisingly, the state's premier historical publication, the *Florida Historical Quarterly*, did not review *Palmetto Country*. To have done so would have meant to call into question the existing academic interpretation of Reconstruction in the United States. Stetson recalled "My first book, *Palmetto Country*, appeared at the outset of the war. Charged by someone to pick it to pieces, Florida academia concluded sadly that it could find no error."

Anticipating a major argument of his *After Appomattox: How the South Won the War* (1995), Stetson demonstrated the culpability of the academics in perpetuating racism and bolstering interpretations of American history that helped keep the racial and class status quo in place.

Southern Exposure

In the immediate aftermath of World War II, Stetson Kennedy played a critical role in the labor and civil rights movements by exposing injustices that most Americans took for granted. His work with the CIO in Atlanta began during the war, and he immediately sought to educate rank-and-file workers on the evils of the poll tax and the importance of building interracial industrial unionism in the South.

It is too easy to forget the types of risks that Stetson's generation took in challenging American apartheid. In a letter to *Southern Changes* published in the 1990s, Stetson recalled, "Back then, no hint of dissent, no matter how slight, could take refuge behind the liberal shield, but was promptly branded as arch-radical and positively subversive. The Klan said the Bible said that Jim Crow was God's will and therefore eternal, and anyone, white or black, who dared say nay thereby made themselves a likely candidate for social, economic, and even rope lynching."

Southern Exposure is considered to be a milestone of the early modern civil rights movement era. In this book, Stetson demonstrated that "prejudice is made, not born," and he drew upon African-American voices and experiences to prove that segregation was both separate and unequal. Racism was immoral, and it culturally damaged all Americans and undermined Southern economic development. He also carefully teased out the connections between racial inequality and economic injustice.

Equally important, Stetson showed the myriad ways in which Northern capital profited from Southern poverty and racism. The research underpinning the book is awe-inspiring. Stetson developed a special skill in mining hundreds of pages of statistics, obscure government reports, and other records to illustrate his points. Several decades later he recalled "No matter how you looked at it, the 1930 Census was a revolutionary document. Not only the statistics, but the bowlegs of pellagra attested that the American South was one of the major hunger areas of the world...The honest observer had no choice but to characterize the South as a feudalistic, colonial, undeveloped, largely illiterate,

disease-ridden Jim Crow apartheid society ruled by a racist one-party white oligarchy. (And so I did.)”

Southern Exposure was rooted in a radical tradition of Southern truth-telling that included T. Thomas Fortune’s *Black and White: Land, Labor, and Politics in the South* (1884), Joseph C. Manning’s *Rise and Reign of the Bourbon Oligarchy* (1904), and William H. Skaggs’s *The Southern Oligarchy* (1924). With the publication of *Southern Exposure*, Stetson helped to transform what had been thought to be a series of “regional” problems (racism, poverty, economic underdevelopment) into a national crusade to save the American dream. A reviewer in the *Boston Chronicle* observed, “As Uncle Tom’s Cabin became one of the greatest single forces in the eventual overthrow of slavery, so can *Southern Exposure* play a major role in freeing the country of segregation.”

The Jim Crow Guide: A Landmark in American Literature

Stetson Kennedy paid dearly for his investigative journalism: His home was firebombed, and his life was repeatedly threatened. Powerful forces ranging from U.S. Senator Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi (author of the book *Take Your Choice: Separation or Mongrelization*) to *Forbes Magazine* despised Stetson because of his stance against corporate interests. It is rumored that arch-racist Bilbo’s very last words in 1947 involved a lament that Stetson Kennedy and Lillian Smith were undermining the white South.

It is easy to forget that when Stetson first infiltrated the Ku Klux Klan it occupied a storied place in the white American imagination. Hollywood films from “Birth of a Nation” to “Gone with the Wind” promoted reverence for the “Hooded Americans.” Stetson revealed an organization that was in fact based on racist and anti-labor violence as well as municipal corruption. Noted journalist Drew Pearson called (Stetson “our Nation’s No. 1 Klan-buster.” Historian Gary Mormino notes, “Stetson Kennedy is lucky to be alive...He was one of the most hated men in America.” After feeding the Klan’s secret codes to the 4.5 million listeners of radio’s “Adventures of Superman” in 1947, one of the KKK’s leaders famously stated, “Kennedy’s ass is worth \$1,000 a pound!” Stetson did as much as any writer or activist in history to thoroughly discredit the Klan and to

demonstrate to the public that this was an organization dedicated more to the principles of Nazism than Americanism.

Stetson Kennedy had the intelligence and the wherewithal to become a successful businessman, a respectable journalist, or a writer living a comfortable and safe middle-class life. Instead, he cast his lot with the impoverished, the people Herman Melville called the “meanest mariners, renegades, and castaways” of American society. His writing on behalf of oppressed minorities cost him dearly, and Stetson had to flee the United States in the 1950s due to threats of physical violence and the increasing pall of McCarthyism. This was not a man who ever quietly went into the night, however. In France, Kennedy earned an audience with the philosopher and Nobel Laureate Jean-Paul Sartre, who in turn helped Stetson publish *Jim Crow Guide to the U.S.A.* Simone de Beauvoir was the book’s editor.

The *Jim Crow Guide* was published in 1956. This guidebook, based in large part on oral history field work in Florida, was an uncompromising polemic against white supremacy and for universal human rights. Sartre enthused that this was a “history of the United States that is ‘almost incredible’—sensibly different from that put forth by official manuals.” A European critic added, “Books such as this oblige us to look and think...It is impossible to remain indifferent after reading [it].”

In the *Jim Crow Guide*, Stetson demonstrates that white supremacy was aimed at Latinos as much as it was aimed at African Americans. In fact, I would count Stetson along with Ernesto Galarza as one of the pioneering scholars of Juan Crow. Certainly, the *Jim Crow Guide* deserves to be treated as one of the key texts in U.S. history. Stetson seamlessly connects race, class, and national origin discrimination together into chapters on forced labor, marriage laws, voting, etc. Stetson understood racism as a national problem, not a distinctively Southern issue. As he told noted historian John Egerton years later, “Well, I’m sure you’re as much aware as I am that we’re not really talking South, we’re talking about the nation, and that segregation had permeated the nation. Even legalized and compulsory segregation was not confined to the South.”

Anticipating Leon Litwack's *North of Slavery* (1965), the *Jim Crow Guide* challenges the idea of America as a "melting pot" and states to the contrary that "the ingredients which have gone into the pot have been carefully screened for whiteness." He thus set the stage for generations of later scholarship on whiteness by Alexander Saxton, David Roediger, and Cheryl Harris. In her 1993 essay, "Whiteness as Property," Harris states: "In ways so embedded that it is rarely apparent, the set of assumptions, privileges, and benefits that accompany the status of being white have become a valuable asset that whites sought to protect and that those who passed sought to attain—by fraud if necessary. Whites have come to expect and rely on these benefits, and over time these expectations have been affirmed, legitimated, and protected by the law."

This is an analysis confirmed repeatedly four decades earlier in Stetson's *Jim Crow Guide*. I believe that that this book should be studied alongside Howard Thurman's *Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope*, W.E. B. DuBois' *Black Reconstruction*, and Oliver Cromwell Cox's *Caste, Class, and Race* as lodestones for the understanding of the creation and recreation of white supremacy into our own time.

Unveiling Modern-Day Slavery

In the midst of the Cold War, the U.S. State Department claimed that the "United States Constitution and laws contain effective safeguards against the existence of forced labor." In this conception, modern-day slavery was a problem in other countries and continents, but surely not in the United States. Stetson knew better. He spent hundreds of hours on the road with a recorder talking with agricultural workers who lived in slavery conditions throughout Florida and the Southeast. He talked with workers who lived under the constant threat of physical violence and murder if they dared to leave their employer's orchards. He also combed the U.S. government's own studies on migrant labor to find and document cases of peonage involving Mexican, Filipino, and Japanese migrant laborers in California and the Southwest.

When Stetson appeared before the United Nations Commission on Forced Labor in Geneva in 1952, he presented stacks of oral recordings, government reports, and state-based studies that demonstrated that brutal exploitation was a chronic experience in American agriculture.

“Peonage or debt slavery has by no means disappeared from our land,” Stetson testified. “There are more white people involved in this diabolical practice than there were slaveholders...the method is the only thing which has changed.”

He continued, “Forced laborers in the U.S.A. are not prisoners of war or persons convicted of some crime against the state, but rather are ‘guilty’ only of belonging to some vulnerable racial, economic, national, or occupational group...Moreover, their labor is not dedicated to the public welfare, but is exploited purely for private profit.” In many ways, this research was even more explosive than his better-known work in exposing the Ku Klux Klan.

Outcast

“Verily I say unto you. No prophet is accepted in his own country.”

—Luke 4:24

Stetson told John Egerton, “It’s true that I’ve always felt like an alien in the land of my birth, so to speak, but this was in cultural terms, as well as racial or political or any of those things.” As Edward W. Said noted, this sense of marginality has driven the best writing of the past century. It has animated the works of writers as diverse as James Baldwin, Luis Rodriguez, and Edwidge Danticat, and it is present in all of Stetson’s work. He recalled a particularly painful conversation early on at his family table where one of his sisters said, “I do believe you’d rather be with niggers than with us.” To which Stetson replied: “As a matter of fact, I would.”

Stetson brought this sense of marginality to the University of Florida in the 1930s. He took a writing class with famed novelist Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, but not much else about university life in conservative Gainesville interested him. In an interview with Diane Roberts, Stetson remembered being exasperated by the “‘politically illiterate’ university, blissfully unengaged with the struggles against

fascism in Europe and the forced labor that had replaced official slavery in the South... 'I guess I invented independent studies,' says Kennedy. 'I dropped out.'"

In 1937, the unemployed writer got a job working with the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration. It was here that Stetson became a friend and collaborator of novelist and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston.

Together, Kennedy and Hurston gathered, preserved, and promoted unbelievably rich veins of labor lore, folk songs, African proverbs and tall tales in Florida. Hurston and Kennedy were brilliant folklorists because they were more interested in listening to people than in studying them. All the while, they understood the grim realities behind the labor conditions that their informants toiled under. Kennedy told Diane Roberts, "Zora and I were at a turpentine camp near Cross City where we met this octogenarian who'd been born 'on the turp'mntine.' I asked why he didn't just leave, and he said 'the onliest way out is to die out and you have to die 'cause if you tries to leave they'll kill you.'"

Stetson's political campaigns in Florida for the U.S. Senate and for governor are the stuff of legend. Needless to say, he did not win. However, these campaigns exposed the base level of corruption in Florida politics. To put it rather mildly, political pluralism is not a well-established tradition in the Sunshine State. Lost ballot boxes, gerrymandering and intimidation at the polls are.

When Stetson ran for Senate in 1950, his campaign platform slogans included: "Right Supremacy, Not White Supremacy," "Total Equality," and other very un-Florida sentiments. What kind of Florida would we be living in today if Stetson Kennedy had been elected senator or governor? Woody Guthrie's campaign song for Stetson gives us a clue:

I ain't the world's best writer nor the world's best speller

But when I believe in something I'm the loudest yeller

If we fix it so's you can't make money on war

We'll all forget what we're killing folks for

We'll find us a peace job equal and free

Dump Smathers-Dupont in a salty sea

Well, this makes Stetson Kennedy the man for me.

—Woody Guthrie, “Stetson Kennedy”

An Enduring Influence

When the incredibly vibrant social movements of the 1960s did not bring the Revolution, Stetson was neither surprised nor anguished; he simply kept unleashing journalistic barrages against the corrupt system of economics and governance in the United States. Stetson’s meticulous study of American institutions inoculated him against burnout.

Years of research taught him that the idea of American exceptionalism—the notion of the U.S. as a uniquely democratic state with some minor problems that could be fixed by wise leaders or well-meaning college students—was nonsense. The nation was born with severe defects which included the dispossession of Native Americans, racial slavery, white nationalism and an increasingly suffocating corporate control. Stetson Kennedy believed in the promise of democracy and equality (these were one and the same for him) but he also knew that these ideals had never been achieved in the United States—even among and between white people.

His essays for *Southern Changes* in the 1980s were especially effective in revealing the more subtle forms of racism that flourished during the Reagan era. “Except for the black ghetto, Jim Crow has been dumped upon the ash heap of history,” Stetson wrote in 1989. “And yet, I submit, where once we had segregated racism, we now have desegregated racism.” This was classic Stetson. While others celebrated “progress,” Stetson pointed out the enduring flaws of the republic.

Stetson did not expect accolades for pointing out what was wrong in American life. This is another key to his longevity, and in his refusal to quit or to become cynical. He practiced the radical tradition of Ida B. Wells, Ruben Salazar, and Upton Sinclair, a tradition that believes that it is naïve to expect thanks for exposing the deepest flaws of the nation. Instead, the writer or community organizer finds satisfaction in the heat of the moment. In the words of Chicano intellectual Carlos Muñoz, Jr., “Life is struggle and struggle is life, but be mindful that Victory is in the Struggle.”

Works such as *Jim Crow Guide*, *Palmetto Country*, and *The Klan Unmasked* gave light, and generations of civil rights activists and Southern community organizers followed. When I joined the board of the Institute for Southern Studies in the 1990s, I came across the following statement by former director Bob Hall:

“At the birth of our magazine in 1973...Southern Exposure emerged as the obvious choice [for a name]...to carry on the tradition of Stetson Kennedy’s original Southern Exposure...a tradition that links analysis to action, that tells the truth and makes clear the imperative for change. We chose the right person to follow. He is a freedom fighter, patriot and rebel, investigator and truth-teller, a foot soldier and leader in the larger movement for a human planet.”

Like most people, I discovered Stetson Kennedy relatively late in life, well outside of the college classroom. His works are still anathema in most Southern history seminars. Like all great prophets, he is a stranger in his own country. Most academic liberals are terrified of the fact that Stetson’s relentless pursuit of truth clashes with their shameful retreat into “nuance” as if oppression can be softened somehow by labeling it “complexity.” Stetson Kennedy is not someone we are going to find in a mainstream history book, but he’s someone we find when we are ready to strike against injustice and inequality.

“I didn’t even know Stetson’s name until I was in my mid-30s, and I consider that a travesty,” Jimmy Schmidt, a staff member of Gainesville’s activist Civic Media Center recalled the day of Stetson’s passing. “I’m Florida born and raised, and I feel like I should have known Stetson’s name and been taught about him as an example from when I was in elementary school.”

Schmidt worked indefatigably over the past several years to help catalog Stetson’s vast book collection, which Stetson donated to the Civic Media Center so that organizers and members of the community will be able to study and read about progressive traditions for generations to come. We cannot depend on our schools to teach our children how to dream and organize collaboratively for social change. Therefore, we’ll have to do this work ourselves.

Recently, I traveled to St. Augustine to conduct an oral history with Stetson in my capacity as director of the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program at the University of Florida. We talked that day about the ways that Stetson approached writing and research in the 1930s as well as his disagreements with Lillian Smith and Gunnar Myrdal's *American Dilemma* among other incredible topics. It was a great day for story telling. I could taste and feel Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* unfolding in Stetson's memory. The 94-year-old elder became a young man again when he recalled the mentoring role that Caldwell played in editing *Palmetto Country*.

I also learned that day that Stetson still mourned for his friends Harry T. Moore and his wife Harriette, who [reportedly] were assassinated by the Ku Klux Klan in Florida in 1951 because of their leadership of voter registration campaigns. Stetson took the assassination of the Moores as a personal blow and an affront to human dignity six decades later.

Stetson and Sandra Parks stayed in contact over the years with the Moores' daughter, Evangeline. Sandra offered to give Evangeline her ticket to the inauguration of President Barack Obama in 2009 but she was unable to make the trip to Washington, D.C. due to her rheumatism. "It has been more than half a century since my parents were assassinated, but it has taken the election of Obama to make me feel that they did not die in vain," Evangeline Moore observed.

In spite of the freezing weather, and against his doctor's advice, Stetson traveled to Washington for the inauguration. "I really did need to be there," he explained "I've been campaigning for President Obama since 1932."

Stetson never gave up, he never stopped running. This is one of my favorite Stetson zingers. In 2004, he told journalist Diane Roberts, "If the Bush brothers really think that women and minorities are getting preferential treatment, they should get themselves a sex change, paint themselves black, and check it out." One of Stetson's intellectual strengths is that he understood that racism, sexism and class oppression were not artifacts of the past. His perception of

human social relations remained sharp to the very end. He urged people to continue organizing unions and movements for democracy.

I am overwhelmed with grief at Stetson's passing. I will revere him as a mentor, a friend, and a role model for the rest of my life. I am heartened that there are so many people today who work in the spirit of solidarity that always animated Stetson's writing. Stetson Kennedy's pursuit of honesty, social equality, and freedom was unparalleled. He told the stories of America's forgotten people. It is our turn now to pick up his torch and to tell his stories for as long as we are able to breathe.

* * *

PAUL ORTIZ, a history professor at the University of Florida and director of the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, is a former board member of the nonprofit Institute for Southern Studies, which publishes *Facing South* and the print magazine *Southern Exposure*. This article originally appeared on the Institute's website shortly after Kennedy's death.