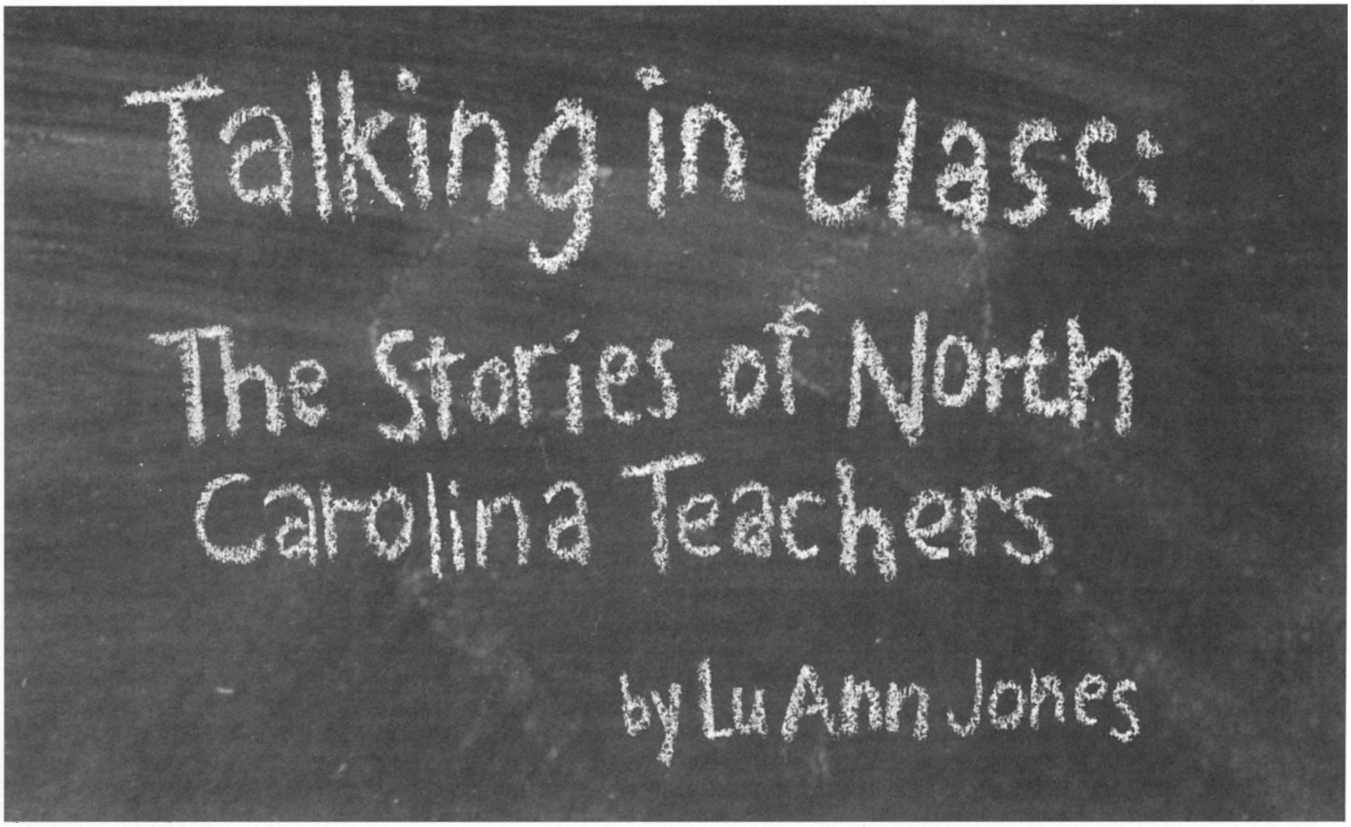

A central challenge of teaching an oral history methods course is choosing a research focus for students' first interviews. To my mind, the topic should be broad enough to accommodate the varied interests of students but specific enough to provide common ground. When I taught an oral history seminar at East Carolina University in 1997, the work and lives of teachers met those goals.

Concentrating on teaching had several practical and intellectual merits. The topic tied students to the original mission of ECU, founded in 1907 as a teacher training school. Because the novice interviewers were not too long removed from public school classrooms themselves, they could call upon their own experiences when asking questions. Finding former teachers to interview would be easy. Most students were still in touch with teachers from home, and if necessary, the ECU alumni association agreed to help students find narrators. Because teachers are used to dealing with learners, I thought they would be patient with students who might be nervous during their first interviews. By focusing on teachers we also had the advantage of building upon new social histories of education that use oral history to include the voices and perspectives of teachers. Finally, the project allowed students to make ECU's motto – "To serve" – a reality, and it allowed me to demonstrate to them that research complements rather than competes with faculty missions of teaching and service.

Students responded enthusiastically to the assignment. They did background research, found narrators, drew up preliminary questions, conducted the interviews, indexed the tape recordings, had narrators sign legal release forms giving researchers permission to use the interviews, and prepared the tapes for deposit in ECU's Manuscript Collection. In addition to growing intellectually, students also grew emotionally as they discovered the frustrations and rewards of oral history. Accustomed to conducting research in written records, now they were dealing with living historical sources. Ruth Jolly Wilson, for example, patiently repeated questions as she interviewed a ninety-seven-year-old woman who was hard of hearing. The discussion was exhausting and the stories were fragmented, but Wilson was glad that she had talked to Annie Jones Rue nonetheless. The former Hyde County teacher was preparing to enter a nursing home and welcomed the opportunity for self-reflection at this moment in her life. The interviews challenged students to position themselves at the crossroads where their heads and hearts meet – the place where much good history is written.

The collective memories of the ten teachers interviewed covered a remarkable time span and topical

range of education history in North Carolina. The oldest teacher interviewed was born in 1900, the year that Governor Charles B. Aycock entered office on a pledge to increase and improve North Carolina's public schools, and she began her career in a rural, two-teacher school. Most narrators participated in school consolidation and racial desegregation in the 1960s. The youngest teachers interviewed are still at work in classrooms that reflect the growing cultural diversity of North Carolina. Their stories illustrate how teaching was one of the few middle-class professions open to women during this century; while women's decisions to teach often seemed "natural," their work options were socially and culturally defined.

Talking to teachers allowed students to discover how individual lives intersected with broad social and political changes, to learn history on a human scale. They wanted to know how the relationships between schools and communities changed. How did teachers experience and remember school desegregation? On a more personal level, students asked how their narrators chose teaching as an occupation. Who had been their inspirations and role models? What was their college training like? How had they found jobs? What were their teaching philosophies?

Teachers answered those questions with thoughtful, poignant, and witty stories. All of the narrators contributed valuable insights about teaching, but some interviews held together as stories and lent themselves to editing better than others did. As I edited interview transcripts, I honored narrators' speaking styles and kept my intrusions to a minimum. I did not burden the text with ellipses when I left out material that interfered with the narrative flow. Occasionally, I used bracketed phrases to clarify meanings or to let narrators echo the question to which they were responding. In some cases, I maintained questions as well as answers to remind readers that oral history is created in a dialogue, as part of a relationship. I asked each narrator to read and approve the story that I had crafted from the interviews. These stories remind us that we have much to learn from teachers long after they have left the classroom. Just listen.

Inez Cannon Jones: "An Inspirational Figure in History"

In my early school years *in western North Carolina's Caldwell County I never really gave much thought to the black children who attended my school and were in my classes. The African-American population in my region is small, and many of the black students who did go to my school were, like me, children of employees. I always knew "little" Eddie or Rogie would probably be in my class, and because I had to wait for my mother to finish her teaching duties, I knew I could rely on these children to be my after-school playmates.*

Only now do I have a clearer picture of what it took for these children to be my classmates and for their parents to be my teachers. When choosing a subject for this oral history project, I wanted a person from my hometown. I thought I would know and understand more about his or her perspective. It was not until I chose my narrator that I realized I knew virtually nothing about her perspective. Yes, I grew up in Lenoir, I knew where the old William Lenoir High School was and where the old African-American high school used to be, but I knew nothing about what went on between those walls. My narrator, Inez Cannon Jones, an African-American woman in her early seventies, had experienced a great change in our society and in education – racial integration.

As a history student I had studied segregation and integration. I had memorized dates and facts concerning the Jim Crow laws, the cases that Thurgood Marshall argued while head of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's Legal Defense Fund, and the Brown v. Board of Education *Supreme Court decision. I had written many papers dealing with civil rights, had taken tests and quizzes on these historical events. What I discovered after I interviewed Mrs. Jones was that I could never fully understand the pains and triumphs of these events without listening to a person who had experienced them.*

I conducted two interviews with Mrs. Jones. I was interested in her life history and in the topic of education. Biography and education are intertwined in her life. Her mother taught school for forty-five years. After attending a private high school for African-American girls sponsored by the Methodist Church, Mrs. Jones majored in home economics at Bennett College in Greensboro between 1943 and 1947. A nationally respected liberal arts college for African-American women, Bennett was known as "the black Vassar of the South." In 1947, Mrs. Jones began a teaching career that spanned the end of segregation.

During most of her life, Mrs. Jones was a student as well as a teacher. She first did graduate work in home economics at Howard University in Washington, DC, and took graduate courses at various colleges each summer. Finally, in the mid-1970s she consolidated her graduate education and completed a master's degree in home economics at the University of Minnesota.

In 1977 Caldwell County high schools merged, and Mrs. Jones began serving as an assistant principal at the new