

Charlene Register: My comments are going to be a little bit different from what other people have done here because I actually was going to talk about newspapers but quite a few people have talked about it so I'm not going to do that. Part of my presentation was going to focus on using primary documents. Two resources that I've used rather extensively include collecting death certificates of dead entertainers as well as exploiting FBI files.

I brought some death certificates that I'd like to share with you all. Let me just say that this project really started with collecting the death certificate for Oscar Micheaux. He died in Charlotte, North Carolina in March of 1951. What disturbed me was that in newspapers they incorrectly reported his death date. So I was like, oh, I'm from North Carolina. All I've got to do is get his death certificate and we can resolve that so it won't continue to get reported incorrectly from paper to paper. So that's what I did.

Then it dawned on me that there were other entertainers that I should do the same for. So I sort of launched this several year effort of trying to collect death certificates of entertainers. It's been fairly complicated because death certificates are considered a kind of public record and in some states it is readily available. It is a public document. In other states it is not. Some states have laws where if the person died before 1950 they are available but if they died after 1950 they are not available. If you died under unusual circumstances such as a murder and the case has not been resolved we could not get your death certificate. So I could not get the death certificate for people like Malcolm X or Martin Luther King and even Tupac Shakur because those cases literally to some extent they might be sort of resolved but they're not available. Let me just put it like that.

So anyway, in my class, of course, I did some of this and I had my students do some of this. So basically what I did is I assigned everybody who took my black cinema course, historical survey course, a dead entertainer. I gave them the dead person at the beginning of class. I created a list and you had the whole semester to get your death certificate. On the last day of class you had to submit your death certificate. Now I did this many years ago when death certificates were cheap. Some were \$5; some were \$10 and \$12. Of course the costs have gone up. So I've had to stop. I can't afford to do it anymore. So anyway, it would be interesting if I could get the funding to do so.

What I discovered is that if you collect these death certificates there are some very vital information about people that's not widely available. Certainly date of birth, correct name, Stepin Fetchit, his name, that is not the name on his death certificate. The correct date of death, parents' names. With Stepin Fetchit what I found was very interesting is that his parents were from England and nobody I don't think up until that point actually knew that. So I just found that very interesting. So that's what led me on this search to get the death certificates.

Now it gets more complicated with respect to cause of death and then what you actually died of. So in other words, I could have a debilitating illness, say I have diabetes, but I died because I fell down these steps over here. So there is some parts about the death

certificates that I would really need a physician to explain what really happened to them and what was the cause of death.

But anyway, I also want to be very clear that I used the documents for historical information and not to exploit people's lives or their deaths. This is not an attempt to insult family members. So when I've used them I usually cover up the medical information or the cause of death because I treat my entertainers, and they're not mine. I'm like Terri [Francis]; I'm becoming protective here. I try to treat them as though they were my family members. So if somebody got the death certificate for my relatives I would want them to show the same level of respect. So I want to say that when I show these I'm not trying to exploit anybody. I'm just really searching for accurate information.

So anyway, you could go ahead and I'll just share a couple of these with you. I'm talking about these because everybody else talked about newspapers, which I would love to talk about but I didn't want to do that. I'll talk a little bit about the FBI files if I have time at the end.

This is the death certificate for Eddie 'Rochester' Anderson. You can kind of go through them kind of quickly so we won't take so long. You can see all of the information that's available. You can see a lot of these here they would list occupation. They will say actor/entertainer. So some people have very similar names and that's how I know that that's the person I'm looking for. You can go to the next one, I hope. Here we go.

That's Matthew 'Stymie' Beard from Our Gang Comedies. Again, you can see actor so that's how I was able to identify that this is the right one. Also, I noticed that it said the Angeles Funeral Home and apparently that was a prominent black funeral home because Evelyn Preer, who was in an Oscar Micheaux film, she was also funeralized at that funeral home.

Having said that, I just want to also add that somebody mentioned earlier about a reservoir of documents in the black community in addition to churches. I've discovered that funeral homes also have a reservoir of black history in the black community. In Durham, North Carolina there was a black theater owner whose name was Watkins, F. K. Watkins. He was funeralized at a funeral home called the Fisher Funeral Home, which has been in existence for probably one hundred years. So I went to the Fisher Funeral Home and they told me they have F. K. Watkins' papers but the man is not ready to release them to the public. So I do know that he has those papers. He was very clear with me that he had that information. So that's the kind of, another avenue.

I think somebody was doing a documentary on Oscar Micheaux and I told them to go to the Charlotte, since he died in Charlotte there was a black funeral home in Charlotte that funeralized him and sent his body to Great Bend, Kansas. So I recommended that they go to that funeral home because they might have other information.

So anyway, just kind of nice to know information. You can keep going because I've got quite a few. I'll just mention a couple of these as we move along, if you can. It seems like it moved easier when we were practicing on it earlier. I don't know what the situation is.

Okay, this is James Baskett, Jimmy Baskett from "Song of the South." I don't know why they're, okay. This is Louise Beavers. Most of you know her from "Imitation of Life." Laura Bowman, she was in an Oscar Micheaux film and, again, but it's interesting with Laura Bowman. This one says white and it says housewife but I think this is the Laura Bowman from the Oscar Micheaux film but I would have to verify it. So some of these you have to double check.

One of the things we determined about and Jane Gaines some of her research that alludes to this. Noble Johnson of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company he passed as white and so his death certificate has white but we know that is Noble Johnson and that he is an African American. Keep going because I do have quite a few of these and I don't want to take up too much time. But there are a couple of points that I wanted to make about some of these and I wanted to show some from other states.

I just happened to get James Brown, the Godfather of Soul. So I was like let me throw that in there. I had no idea that we would get it. So, anyway, that's James Brown. This is Frederica Bell, who is really Fredi Washington who was in "Imitation of Life," the '34 version. She died in Connecticut. So I just wanted to show different states what their certificates looked like.

Now this should be Betsy Coleman; it is. So this is Betsy Coleman's death certificate and this, of course, is Nat King Cole and a lot of my students don't remember him but I certainly say Natalie Cole so they know who that is. So anyway, I'd just like to share that information but go ahead. I've got a couple more here.

Cab Calloway and of course Dorothy Dandridge and of course we all know about her alleged suicide. I guess it was in fact a suicide but anyway her death certificate had to be amended because they did an autopsy to find out what she really died of. So her death certificate is amended. So you can go to the next one. I think the next one should be the second page of her. See, accident undetermined. So anyway.

Then, of course, anybody who is related to cinema I tried to get. So these people are not necessarily always entertainers but that's Alex Haley's death certificate. I thought it was just important for me to have that.

Hattie McDaniel and this is Zora Neale Hurston and I just happened to get that. I'm not sure how I got it because I didn't actually get all of these. Some people got them and gave them to me. So that's Zora Neale Hurston. So we can tell if she really lied about her age, I guess.

And then with Hattie, oh, you've jumped to [Oscar] Micheaux. Okay, this is, you can go ahead. Go back. You can go to the next one. This is Oscar Micheaux and so after I got his death certificate then I was like, oh, I found somewhere his marriage certificate

because there was always this question about how many times he married, how many wives he had. So we were able to get his marriage certificate. So you can keep going.

Butterfly McQueen, this is John 'Bubbles' Sublett. It's interesting that he was with the Buck and Bubbles team. On his death certificate they do have his stage name in there. You can go on.

That's Stepin Fetchit and you will see it has Lincoln Perry. This is Madame Sul-Te-Wan who appeared in "Birth of a Nation." Her son was also, that's okay just leave it at that. But her son, Madame Sul-Te-Wan's son was also an actor who appeared in a few films. So he was the one who claimed her body.

Etta McDaniel Spaulding is really the sister to Hattie McDaniel and they also had a brother named Sam McDaniel. They appeared in several films as extras in Hollywood.

Then over here is Burt Williams. I think somebody mentioned the song that he popularized earlier today but anyway that's his death certificate.

Lorenzo Tucker was in an Oscar Micheaux film. This is Ethel Waters' death certificate. You can keep going because I've got just a few more. Ethel Waters is the last one? Okay.

So anyway, I just wanted to convey the importance of using primary documents, the kind of information that you can find in terms of getting accurate dates or at least as accurate as you're going to be able to get.

Then the other reservoir of primary documents that I have exhausted is I've tried to get FBI files. I've discovered that now somebody is publishing some of these files. I've actually ordered some FBI documents for certain entertainers from Amazon, which seems bizarre but I ordered it anyway. I tried to get some for some entertainers and they will give you some documents but they will not give you all documents. Also, when you get the documents there are considerable deletions, meaning things that they don't want you to know about that are, I guess, they are protecting themselves somehow. So I get them anyway because you never know what information you might find in terms of exhausting FBI files.

So anyway, it's a laborious process but it is interesting. Then I'll just say for my own little since we're talking about digitizing stuff, actually I was going to bring my notebook of death certificates. So I probably have five times as many as I've shown here today. I was like if I take that notebook my luggage is going to be heavy so it's going to cost me more money. So I was like let me digitize a few of them. They don't need to see all of them. And so it actually worked because at least you get some sense about what they looked like and so forth and so on.

So anyway, and then the other little story I'll just end with is I got Hattie McDaniel's death certificate and I was at an Oscar Micheaux conference in South Dakota. In Gregory, South Dakota they usually have an annual Oscar Micheaux festival every year. So I was out there and at some point they were thinking about doing an HBO movie on

Oscar Micheaux. I was out there and Pearl Bowser was out there and James McDaniel, who is an actor who played Lt. Fancy on the original NYPD Blue, he was out there. So I met him and I said, oh, you know your name is McDaniel just like Hattie McDaniel. He said that is a distant relative but he didn't want people to know because he didn't want people to think that that's how he got his career in Hollywood. So anyway, I told him I had these death certificates because I like to take them places. So anyway, he asked me for a copy of her death certificate and I sent it to him. But he can get it from the department of vital statistics in the state where you become deceased just like anybody else. But anyway, I just thought that was kind of an interesting story.

The other thing I'll just say is that you do have to know when you're searching for these certificates you do have to know a little bit about the entertainer because I could be a resident from North Carolina but my death could occur while I'm traveling to New York. So it's the state where you become deceased that actually issues the document. So anyway, that's something that you kind of have to know.

Also, I'll just add Jack Johnson died in North Carolina in a car accident. So because I can get most people in North Carolina I do have his death certificate. So there are many other entertainers that I have but I have found it very useful, very resourceful. I guess I should also add the reason I came up with some of this is when you're in a school that's far removed from archives or museums that's a public funded institution where resources are scarce, funding is being cut, the arts are being devalued, you've got to come up with creative strategies to survive. So I've just thought about different ways of trying to get my research even though I'm located in this sort of remote area. I continue to do that and it seems like I thought I worked hard but I'm going to have to work a little bit harder. So when you don't have money, money is going to always be an issue but I say don't let that be a deterrent to keep you from getting access to the kinds of things that you do.

I'll just also add that I think archives and resources are a little friendlier now than when I first started. They are willing to send stuff by mail. When I first started you had to go somewhere. You had to have money to stay there. I've been the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts twice, which was about \$2,000 each time, and stayed five days. That's all I could stay. I worked every day that they were open the whole time I was there. But I don't have another \$2,000 to go back but now I've established a rapport with the archivist there who will help me, who will send stuff to me. So that's just the final thing cultivating a relationship and I tell people to exhaust any resource that you can. I've even contacted some presidential libraries because these entertainers have had contact with important political leaders. So exhaust whatever resource you have to get whatever you need.

So those are my concluding remarks.