



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Jonathan
Daniels, 1965 June 14

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/services/questions
www.aaa.si.edu/

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Jonathan Daniels on July 14, 1965. The interview took place in Raleigh, North Carolina and was conducted by Richard Keith Doud for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's New Deal and the Arts project.

The original transcript was edited. In 2022 the Archives created a more verbatim transcript. Additional information from the original transcript that seemed relevant was added in brackets and given an -Ed. attribution. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

RICHARD DOUD: This is an interview with Mr. Jonathan Daniels in the editorial office of *the Raleigh News and Observer* in Raleigh, North Carolina, July 14, 1965. The interviewer is Richard K. Doud.

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

JONATHAN DANIELS: [My interest in the FSA photographs -Ed.] of course, grew from the fact, and in I guess it was 1937, I went out to do a book, which became *A Southerner Discovers the South*. And I was interested, of course, in the picture of the—as I could see it and write it, of the South.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JONATHAN DANIELS: And a great part of the Farm Security Administration interest was in southern matters too. I, on that trip, went to a number of projects of Farm Security, and that somehow, and I don't recall how, brought me into the friendship of Stryker and some of his associates. Then just before World War II, I was looking around and I was doing a good deal of freelance writing, and I had planned to do—Roy had gotten me interested in doing the text for a collection of Farm Security photographs. Not a definitive one, but a selected group of photographs, which would have been in the nature of the book which was later done by Caldwell and Bourke-White. And the war came on, and I went to Washington with the Office of Civilian Defense first, and of course, all projects of that sort went into the soot [ph] while the war went on, and then when the war was over, my interests had shifted, and so nothing ever came of that project. But I became, in Washington, a close friend of Roy's, and sometimes he came to me for help and advice, sometimes I was able to give it to him and sometimes it probably wasn't worth anything.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure. Now, one of the things I wanted to ask you was, just what was your official capacity at the time when Stryker became concerned about the future of this file? I know they were in quite a dither when OWI [Office of War Information] took over the project, and they were concerned about the photographs being lost or dispersed, and—

JONATHAN DANIELS: I can't—I can't place that, because I went to Washington to take Mrs. Roosevelt's place as head of what was called the Civilian Mobilization Division of OCD [Office of Civilian Defense], as assistant director there. However, OCD, in the absence of air raids, was rather disintegrating, and I went there in January '42, I believe. And around about September I went on an assignment for the White House doing some investigations and chores for the President. Then I became assist—I mean, then I became administrative assistant to the president, and was administrative assistant to the president until early '45, when I became Press Secretary.

Well, as a newspaper man at the White House, and having known Roy and being interested in his collection, I was naturally interested in seeing that it was preserved. Also at that time, I knew pretty well both Elmer Davis and Mike Coles [ph] at OWI. Now, I don't remember any specific conferences with them about this collection. Also, one of my closest friends was David Mernes at the Library of Congress.

And another friend was Archie MacLeish. Now, in that jungle of relationships, I don't know

specifically where, if I am entitled to that—if I am entitled to Roy's feeling that I was effective in protecting the collection.

[00:05:20]

RICHARD DOUD: He feels quite strongly that you were.

JONATHAN DANIELS: Well, I know I wanted to, but I can't recall any specific things. As a matter of fact, a great many things that are accomplished, or were accomplished in Washington in those days were not accomplished by specific acts or exchange of memos. I might merely have talked to some of these men at luncheon, or even at a cocktail party.

RICHARD DOUD: Personal reaction [inaudible].

JONATHAN DANIELS: Yes, whatever I did was not by nature of a memo, reaction, conference, or a formal basis. But I cheated Roy because, as the war came on, Roosevelt spoke of Doctor New Deal is dead, now Doctor Win-the-War is here. There was a great deal of congressional criticism of so-called New Deal agencies at a time when many thought that all energies should go into agencies directly related to the war effort. So, Roy's place in the Department of Agriculture was becoming, to say the least, precarious. [Richard Doud laughs.] And I believe that I worked out, or helped work out—or suggested Roy's transfer—and I don't even know the details of that—to OWI. Now I remember that point at which I kidded him about moving from farm security to the OWI.

RICHARD DOUD: I'll send you a copy of the [inaudible]—

JONATHAN DANIELS: I want a copy of that [laughs].

RICHARD DOUD: Yes. We're indebted to you for that, and the least we can do is give you a copy of it. What was your—you were interested in these pictures, you said, when you were working on this book. What was there about them—how were these different from other photographs of the—

JONATHAN DANIELS: How do you say how are they different? I mean they were—they did—they seemed to me true. They seemed to me to have design. Now Stryker's a great editor, I don't know whether Stryker ever snapped a camera in his life.

RICHARD DOUD: Very successful.

JONATHAN DANIELS: But his—he told or taught his boys, or collected men who were able, not merely to take photographs, but to take pictures. And there can be a very great difference between them. Almost anybody can snap a camera, but to see the picture, and the picture always begins in the eye of the cameraman, and not in the lens of the camera. I thought many of those pictures were real works of art. Now, there's another character in here that you ought to see. And I don't know how close he was to Roy, or—I knew him well. And that's Pare Lorentz. Pare was very much interested, of course, in these pictures, and I knew him pretty well.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JONATHAN DANIELS: And about that time, he did *The River*.

RICHARD DOUD: Yeah, wonderful film.

JONATHAN DANIELS: Now, how close Pare was to Roy, I don't know.

RICHARD DOUD: Not too, really.

JONATHAN DANIELS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RICHARD DOUD: I think Pare was thinking more or less in terms of motion picture.

JONATHAN DANIELS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RICHARD DOUD: Documentary motion picture.

JONATHAN DANIELS: I did a job for—just before the war began, in the period of preparation,

rather frenzied preparation. Lorentz, who had some relationship in an editorial capacity with Otis Weise [ph] and *McCall's Magazine*. They got me to go around the country and do a piece called Boomtown USA.

[00:10:05]

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JONATHAN DANIELS: About all these munition places, and camps, that were being quickly built all over the country. And I've forgotten who did the photography for that. It may have been—and I'm rather inclined to believe, that we borrowed or got some of Stryker's photographs—

RICHARD DOUD: I think you did.

JONATHAN DANIELS: —for the illustration of that article.

RICHARD DOUD: I think you did, yeah.

JONATHAN DANIELS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RICHARD DOUD: Well, this business of Stryker was actually a pretty small part of all the excitement that was going on in the late '30s and early '40s, but do you have any recollection of what the official attitude toward this thing was? Did you ever hear any comments on that part of the president or any of the high government officials as to this business of government photography?

JONATHAN DANIELS: Well, I can't remember anything specific, except a feeling that it was important. Now I did know well both Beanie [Calvin Benham] Baldwin and Dr. Will Alexander [ph.]. Now, both of those men were enthusiastic about this.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

JONATHAN DANIELS: Old Doctor—Beanie was a very vivid young man himself. I understand he's kind of gone a little farther to the left these days.

RICHARD DOUD: He's kind of a vivid old man.

JONATHAN DANIELS: Yeah.

RICHARD DOUD: I saw him recently.

JONATHAN DANIELS: Yeah, and Dr. Will was a very wise man, older man.

RICHARD DOUD: Is he still living?

JONATHAN DANIELS: No, he died a few years ago. He retired to Chapel Hill and died here. He was probably, I think, the wisest man that I ever knew in the field of race relations, with a great sense of humor, as well as a sense of purpose, which are not always found in conjunction.

RICHARD DOUD: That's true. [They laugh.] Seldom are. [They laugh.] Do you know Robert Hudgens in Chapel Hill?

JONATHAN DANIELS: Yes, he's living over there now. Gets out a little privately printed paper of his own.

RICHARD DOUD: Wonderful little paper.

JONATHAN DANIELS: Yeah, uh-huh [affirmative].

RICHARD DOUD: *The Rooster Press*.

JONATHAN DANIELS: He was interested in this.

RICHARD DOUD: He spoke very highly of Alexander [ph.]

JONATHAN DANIELS: He was most interesting. Then [inaudible] in a more remote sense, Dr.

Odem [ph] was interested in this, who was the—thought of as the supposedly wise—he was wise, but he was a great collector of regional information.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JONATHAN DANIELS: There were a great many people interested in this thing. It was—in a way it was one of the real points in the creative excitement of the New Deal, something that I don't find in the USIS, for instance, today. It was—I don't know, these boys were just fascinated with what they were doing, and they had admiration and acceptance. And I think they went through—I know they went through a rather difficult time when the country suddenly turned its focus from—well, should we call it, reform, to war. And there was a danger that the resource of these cameramen and their editorship could be lost when it was needed in—well, I don't like the word war propaganda, but that's what it was—work. I never—I can't judge as to how effectively it was used.

RICHARD DOUD: You mentioned war propaganda, would—could you also say that their work prior to the war could have been considered propaganda in peacetime, although certainly a very disturbed peacetime? Was it designed as propaganda?

JONATHAN DANIELS: Oh, I think there's no question that the whole activity was an effort to—well, we're talking today about a war on poverty. This was the same thing, and they were engaged as we also used the word corps today, C-O-R-P-S, not C-O-R-E. And they were a sort of peace corps of photographers. Or—

RICHARD DOUD: It's a good that—

JONATHAN DANIELS: See they were out there getting these pictures. Then of course, there were some people, even then, who thought that no good service was performed in photographing what they regarded as the seamy side of America.

[00:15:10]

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JONATHAN DANIELS: They're always there.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, as a newspaper man, do you feel that the newspapers utilized this material to the extent they might have? Do you feel that this photography was successful through the utilization of it?

JONATHAN DANIELS: I don't think that the newspapers at that point were as imaginatively concerned for what we now call the background story, as they are today. And these pictures, of course, were not what we call spot news pictures.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure.

JONATHAN DANIELS: And I doubt that they were as much used as they should have been. Now, as I believe *McCall Magazine* got interested in it, for the illustration of this particular piece, and it was one of a series of pieces.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What was there, do you think, about Roy, that made him do what he did? See he wasn't—

JONATHAN DANIELS: Well—

RICHARD DOUD: —really supposed to be doing all this.

JONATHAN DANIELS: Roy was, just to use a good old American term, full of piss and vinegar.

RICHARD DOUD: [Laughs.] He still is.

JONATHAN DANIELS: Yes. And he got excited, and he had a gift for communicating excitement. Perhaps that was his greatest contribution. I say he was a great picture editor, but I think the thing that made him a great picture editor was the ability to communicate his excitement about what they were doing, and what he wanted them to do, to his photographers. That would be my feeling of his—

RICHARD DOUD: It seems a little strange that you had, maybe not the only guy around, but one of the few guys around who could have done this, and he attracted the type of people, and they're very rare, who could catch this thing up and really interpret it through their cameras.

JONATHAN DANIELS: Well, one of the things that has got to be remembered about the— attracting these people, one of the things that made TVA [Tennessee Valley Authority] immediately exciting, was that at the time when there was unemployment, there very able unemployed engineers, there were very able unemployed photographers, and in a sense, we were talking a little while ago about the Arts Project of the WPA. Well in a sense, these other agencies provided employment for able people who hadn't been able to get it, and became in themselves sort of art projects of the New Deal.

RICHARD DOUD: True.

JONATHAN DANIELS: I don't know—I don't know what ever creates any kind of an artistic explosion. I'm sure that in architecture, it's always a new rich [ph] that creates the explosion —

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JONATHAN DANIELS: —because they have to throw out their chest whether they be in Newport palaces or Frank Lloyd Wright residences. And, but what creates an artistic explosion in other fields, I am not so sure.

RICHARD DOUD: It's almost an evolutionary process, I think you hit bottom and the only way to go is up.

JONATHAN DANIELS: Well, for instance the fact that Mississippi, our most backwards state, has also been, from the point of view of literature in the last decade, almost a leading American state.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JONATHAN DANIELS: The Irish Renaissance certainly didn't come in an opulent society. And on the other hand, of course, the classic Renaissance was the product of opulence. I don't know, I—

RICHARD DOUD: Pretty hard to pin it down when you—[Cross talk.]

JONATHAN DANIELS: We're getting off—we're getting away boat from Stryker, and into—

RICHARD DOUD: [Laughs.] A little philosophy. [Jonathan Daniels laughs.] Well, another thing that I'm interested in is what value this whole business has as a picture file today. What does it mean, how could it be used? How can it best be exploited?

[00:20:02]

JONATHAN DANIELS: Well, in terms of the popular present phrase, the war on poverty, I would compare them with Brady's photographs of the Civil War in terms of other warfare, and in history. Now this is a picture of a period and a region. And of course, it is largely directed at the South, which for some reason has always had a peculiar appeal to the American imagination, or the American indignation.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [Jonathan Daniels laughs.] Some sort of an attraction [inaudible]—

JONATHAN DANIELS: Yes. It's either fascinating or repellent, one or the other.

RICHARD DOUD: So, what should we do with it?

JONATHAN DANIELS: I think you should preserve them, of course, catalog 'em, make scholars aware of their existence, and in some part of your collection, you should select some of the pictures and decorate your Archives with them so that ordinary people will be aware of these historic photographs.

RICHARD DOUD: I was wondering if they have any value other than pure historical

documents?

JONATHAN DANIELS: Some of them do. Some of them—some of them are portraits of people that are really works of art.

RICHARD DOUD: This could be carried forward, too—

JONATHAN DANIELS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RICHARD DOUD: —to somehow re-instill in photographers today, some sort of a standard.

JONATHAN DANIELS: There are some very fine works being done in photography today, I think.

RICHARD DOUD: It's true, I think we're so deluged, though, with mediocre material.

JONATHAN DANIELS: We are.

RICHARD DOUD: Sometimes we tend to ignore the whole business.

JONATHAN DANIELS: Well, that's true in every field, I would think.

RICHARD DOUD: Certainly, with writing.

JONATHAN DANIELS: Indeed.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, do you have anything you feel you should say about this?

JONATHAN DANIELS: Not a thing, except I'm very, very fond of Roy, I'm a good admirer of Roy's, and I think he has made a real contribution which you're doing fine work in preserving and extending the influence of.

RICHARD DOUD: Obviously, we're quite excited about what he did and feel it's worth our time and effort.

JONATHAN DANIELS: Well, I think without—without leaving Roy, I think there must be some other pictures of that period that deserve search and saving.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, I personally am concerned with some projects that were carried out under the WPA.

JONATHAN DANIELS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RICHARD DOUD: Recently I came across a reference to something that was done in Florida on the Seminole Indians that looked worth locating. I don't know where they are, who did them, or anything about it, but a lot of work was done, of course, on photographing for the WPA state guides. They used some FSA material—

JONATHAN DANIELS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RICHARD DOUD: —but they also had WPA photographers. Berenice Abbot did a fine thing on New York under the WPA, with photographs. And of course, at this time *Life* and *Look* were coming into their own and doing a lot of photography.

JONATHAN DANIELS: Yes, so *Life* has done a fine job in many ways in commercially following the influence of the WPA photographers, I think.

RICHARD DOUD: So, I think that it's sort of hard, and yet we must do it I feel, to set up a starting and stopping place on anything of this kind, since we can't be in archives of photography as well as an archives—

JONATHAN DANIELS: Well now. Harry Luce [ph] I bet you, can tell you more about the history of the picture in America more than most anybody. I worked on *Fortune* in '30—and then back again in '32, and he was—Bourke-White had come in to work for him. This was long before *Life*. He was a great editor. An editor with an eye.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JONATHAN DANIELS: What has he done about any collection of the pictures taken for *Life* and *Time* and *Fortune*?

[00:25:00]

RICHARD DOUD: Now this, I don't know. I'm not sure exactly how much Eastman House has done.

JONATHAN DANIELS: Eastland?

RICHARD DOUD: Eastman House. [Cross talk.]

JONATHAN DANIELS: Is that in Rochester?

RICHARD DOUD: Beaumont Newhall and his—I think, I get the impression they're more interested in the—sort of the arty aspects of photography.

JONATHAN DANIELS: I wouldn't know.

RICHARD DOUD: Unlike Stryker's project, which is more interesting to me.

JONATHAN DANIELS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RICHARD DOUD: [Laughs.] Of course. It's a fascinating topic. I'd certainly like to find out all I can about it. Well, I guess I won't take up—

JONATHAN DANIELS: Well, thank you, I'm glad to have the opportunity to speak up for Roy, who I'm devoted to although I never see.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, it's too bad, because I know he thinks highly of you.

JONATHAN DANIELS: Colorado's a long way from the Carolinas.

RICHARD DOUD: Beautiful place to go. Well, thank you very much.

[END OF TRACK AAA_daniel65_8489_m.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]