

Bill Carson Interview Log

Location: Orchard at Altapass

Date: 5-24-03

Interview by: Philip (Ted) Coyle

Logged by: Jamie Patterson

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Interview with Bill Carson

Location: The Apple Orchard at Altapass

Date: May 24, 2003

Interview by: Philip (Ted) Coyle

Transcription by: Jamie Patterson, a student at WCU

Checked by: Philip E. Coyle

Several people, including Laura Rotegard and Houck Medford, mentioned Bill and Judy Carson to me. They have converted an abandoned orchard on the Blue Ridge Parkway into a thriving tourist stop-over and community cultural center. In many ways, there project is ideal for the Blue Ridge Parkway, and also unique. But it's also a money-loser and manages to continue only because of the extreme dedication and love brought to the task by these two amazing people. One wonders what will become of it after they are gone.

After completing this interview, I stayed in contact with Bill and Judy, attending a Blue Ridge Memories Day, sponsored by Houck Medford's Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation. We began to discuss the possibility of writing a pamphlet about McKinney Gap that might be sold at the Minerals Museum. Bill and Judy agreed to come out to WCU, where they gave a storytelling performance on February 4th, 2004 and we discussed the brochure, which should appear sometime in 2004.

The tape was started on the deck next to the store that is used for performances, and then we moved inside as cars started to arrive. The sound quality is very good, with a little bit of wind noise and cars crunching on gravel at points.

Philip Coyle: My name is Philip Coyle, also known as Ted Coyle, and it's May 22?

Bill Carson: 24th.

PC: 24th. Yes. Memorial Day weekend, Saturday of 2003. I'm sitting here with Bill Carson at the Orchard at Altapass [he pronounces it with "a" as in "all"]. Bill, could you spell your name for me?

BC: Sure. C-A-R-S-O-N. And, Ted it's locally pronounced Altapass ["beginning with a short "a" as in "apple").

PC: Altapass, excuse me.

BC: That's alright. I had to learn that, too.

PC: Uh, let's see. Oh, you understand that this tape will be archived in the Blue Ridge Parkway and it will be accessible to the public and for Parkway interpretation in the future? I'll have you sign off on that, too.

BC: Sure, absolutely.

(014) Let's see. Well, first off I was telling you that I would begin by asking you about your background. Where are you from and when were you born, first off?

BC: Well, let me start with that. I was born in December 5, 1938 in Muncie, Indiana. My grandparents, my folks, had come from east Tennessee, and we knew our grandparents lived there, but in the course of this interview we'll probably get to the point of describing how this project we started on revealed other roots to us that we didn't even know about when we came here to do this. So I was raised in Muncie, Indiana. I went to Purdue University, and was an engineer at Purdue.

I graduated in 1960, the same time President Kennedy was promising to get us to the moon in the decades of the 70's, I mean the 60's. So, I wanted to do that. I went to work for IBM and worked in Huntsville, Alabama on the moon shot for the decade of the 60's. I was responsible for the software that was used to launch the vehicle at the Cape, at Cape Kennedy, and also all the software onboard the rocket that went into orbit around the earth and then on the way to the moon until the lunar module and command module separated from Saturn, and then my part of the mission was over. So, basically the countdown launch and the first two days of the mission were software that I was responsible for in that time.

I worked on other projects like the global positioning system. That was one of my projects. And then I retired after thirty-two years with IBM to Little Switzerland, ten years now. This is, well Ted gave you the date, in 2003. In 1993, we retired to Little Switzerland never planning to work again. I planned to be a weaver at a loom and was weaving.

(035) And then my sister was a successful realtor in Cary, North Carolina, and happened to visit us on a Wednesday. I can't tell you even what month it was. I almost can't tell you what year it was. It was nine years ago, I guess. She came to visit us on a Wednesday. That's when the Spruce Pine newspaper comes out. In that newspaper, which she was never there in the middle of the week before, but she came that Wednesday, and she never read the Spruce Pine newspaper, but she read it that Wednesday, she saw this apple orchard for sale. This orchard runs for two miles along the Blue Ridge Parkway, from McKinney Gap to Swafford Gap. It's 276 acres. She saw it advertised, and we were afraid instantly that if we didn't step in and buy it, it would be bought and developed and gone. So, my sister, Kit Trubey, T-R-U-B-E-Y, bought the land as a preservation project. It cost about what a medium-priced house in the big city would cost.

So, we got the land, and then we made the faithful decision to try to keep raising apples on it. See, it was an old orchard. The orchard was started in 1908 by the Clinchfield Railroad when it finished building the tunnels of the part of the Clinchfield Loop that got the train up the face of the Blue Ridge here right in front of us and tunneled through the Blue Ridge to start down toward Tennessee down the North Toe River and the Nolichucky Gorge and on to Erwin. And so they started this orchard and it has been a very productive orchard for a lot of years, but in the last thirty years it had been going downhill and neglected. And, when we bought it, it had been neglected for about ten years.

The local community members had given up on ever seeing the orchard again, and they had resigned themselves to seeing this place developed. So, when it was purchased, why they began to drop in to see what we were like, and when they found out we were intending to preserve it, they watched us for awhile. And, then they decided that we were telling the truth and started bringing us things: their stories, their music, their history, the things they liked and the things they're good at, their skills and their crafts, and their friendship.

And, so that opened our eyes to an awful lot of things beyond the physical beauty of this place, and over the course of the years now, we have become not only a preservation of the physical beauty of the place, but also a repository for their stories and their photos and their memories and their skills. And we are a meeting place where local folks can come and feel at home with the travelers and the folks like me who have retired here and drive up land prices with our purchases of the tops of these mountains. So, we hope this will continue as a respite, a different little spot from the normal tourist kind of a place and the normal plastic kind of a place that grows in some of the tourist cities along the parkway and in the mountains.

That's a little bit of a thumbnail sketch. I didn't mention my wife very much. She's a graphic artist and she has been key to the presentation that we make of ourselves and of the history and heritage and culture of this place. She's our webmaster and a very important part of our team.

(076) PC: Well, um, we're going to have to get to your vision of preserving history and culture in just one second, but I do have to follow up on one thing, which is that you said you were intending to become a weaver, and that seems a far cry from designing software for IBM for thirty-two years, if I have it right. So, would you talk about that briefly?

BC: Oh, absolutely. It turns out, Ted, that weaving and digital computing have a lot in common. A case can be made that the very first punch card system was actually on the Jacquard Loom in the late 1700's and player piano came along. The weaving, where each thread is either over or under its warp is a very digital sort of a thing. And, so it turns out, although I didn't take it up for this reason, but that it has a very precise and engineering-like craft. And the invention is in how you place those bits as opposed to maybe something like painting. But it is a very sort of a digital thing, and so I guess that's why it appealed to me. And I did a lot of that for awhile, but I discovered very quickly that weavers, like most craft people, are way underpaid. And, if your intention is to, and it wasn't mine, to make any money at it, but if it was to take up a hobby or a craft that could pay for itself, it's not weaving. And, since then, I found it's not apple growing either.

PC: Yeah, I was going to say not like orchard men, the well-paid orchard men in the world.

(095) BC: Yeah [laughs], that's right. I know why the guy wanted to sell it. Matter of fact, the guy that sold us this orchard tried to give it away as a charity to the Crossnore School, but they refused it, because it had a string attached. The string was that the orchard had to be operated as an orchard. Crossnore, as you probably know, is an

orphanage or home for troubled children. And, it's a good thing they didn't take it, because, with that string attached, it would have been a terrible financial burden for them. It does not pay for itself.

(102) PC: Well, I understand now that this is actually run as a nonprofit corporation.

BC: Yes. Ted, what we found out after seven years of operation was that growing apples and the little shop that we have could not offset the things that we thought were important to keep to give away free to everybody. For example, today's a Saturday where we are talking, and in another hour, hour and a half, we'll start our music program. This year, we have forty-five different music groups that come on Saturdays and Sundays from late May on through October. And, as part of our vision for this place, it's very important that the local folks feel at home here, and one way we do that is to make sure the music, their music, is available to them and everybody for free. So, we spend a lot of money on paying the musicians but giving the music away. And, likewise today, we have a special program, an eighteenth century metalworker and blacksmith is coming. He also is a music maker. He makes his own dulcimers, and he'll be playing his dulcimers and then showing off the craft that he has about how he makes the dulcimers and what his blacksmithing is. And all that is free to everybody that comes.

And so, had we not been giving the stuff away, we might have been able to break even in the orchard, but we said that in the future, when people with their retirement, like from realty, my sister, or IBM, mine, when those retirements are not available to the people that would be running the orchard, it's important that it be self-sustaining, because we want to continue this thrust that we have started here. So, we applied for and got 501-C3 status and it makes us a public charity for the portions of the things that are the preservation of the history, the heritage, and the culture of the place. When we sell fudge and stuff like that, it's still part of the old corporation that's for a profit, but the nonprofit part is all the history that we are working to keep.

(130) PC: This is just remarkable, and, uh, so what is it about your past or your life that would have led you take on such a project?

BC: Hmm. Well, that's a very interesting question. And I guess I've got to think for a second about that.

PC: Here, I'll pause the tape.

BC: Well, Ted, we didn't set out to do this. We've been sort of following our nose as we'd gone along. And, as we have each year been doing this project, we've become more and more convinced of its importance. And, really, it's fun. If it weren't something that we enjoyed doing, we would not be doing it. It is a money loser for us, now a contribution to a charity perhaps, but a money loser nonetheless. And we've found ourselves in a position to be able to afford to do it. And it just seems like nobody is recognizing the importance of trying to preserve a little slice of Blue Ridge. Yeah, there are people that will go into detail in a particular area, maybe the Mineral Museum is a good example, to try to preserve the history of the minerals of the area, but that doesn't

say much about the people or the lessons that can be learned from those really smart, tough people that lived here in the past. And, it just seems crucial to us that if that's lost, then how we face the future is going to be harder than if we knew something about what those people went through and what lessons can be learned from them. So, it's fun, it's enjoyable, but we also think it's important and we're sort of on a mission. And, maybe you'll understand a little more, too, when we talk about how we stumbled into our roots here, roots that we didn't know anything about when we started this project. And, that has really cemented, in our minds anyway, the importance of this work.

(158) PC: Well, let's talk about that personal connection with your heritage in this area.

BC: Okay. When, we bought the orchard, we discovered shortly after we bought it that the gravel road that's sitting right next to us here is close to, if not exactly along, but close to, the Yellow Mountain Trail or Bright's Trace that was used to settle the interior of Tennessee back in the 1700's. It was also a line on a British map, and, in 1762, the British decided where we're sitting is as far west as civilization should ever go. They paid the Indians, if they caught you over the mountains, they paid the Indians to take white scalps. So, that meant the people that lived over there were kind of tough people, and they had to gather around forts for self-defense.

And so, when the revolutionary war came along and the British tried their southern strategy, which was to conquer Charleston and march Cornwallis up through the south behind Washington in the north and end the revolutionary war, they pretty well followed that plan. They conquered Charleston in May of 1780 and wiped out Washington's army in the south by the end of the summer. About the only thing that stood between them and doing that were little pockets of patriot resistance in the swamps in South Carolina and over the mountain here in North Carolina, what's now Tennessee and North Carolina.

So the British commander on the frontier made a terrible blunder. He challenged those men to give up or he was going to march his army over the mountains and deal with them. And so, they came over the mountains the other way to go deal with Ferguson before he could come over to them. And, this is a long story, but I'm making it, going to make it very brief.

In the end of the battle, the British commander Ferguson was shot by a man, a sixty-two year old man named Robert Young, shot with a rifle called Sweet Lips, which he named after his wife. And, it always intrigued me that this sixty-two year old man would call his rifle Sweet Lips, and his rifle and his wife apparently were the most important things in his life. He probably couldn't live without either one of them. But he shot Ferguson and ended the war, and Thomas Jefferson said that--not the war but the battle, ended the Battle of Kings Mountain--and he said that battle was the turning point in the American Revolutionary War. So, I was intrigued with the story and tell it over and over again to everybody that I can.

After several years of telling the story here at the orchard, I told it to an aunt of mine, who happened to be visiting us, and she told me that I must know about my kinfolk in the battle then, and I didn't, and so she told me. And it turns out, Robert Young was my and my sister's great-great-great-great-great, that's five greats, grandfather, and Sweet Lips, our fifth great grandmother. And it was startling to find our roots here at this orchard and to be telling stories about my own fifth great grandfather by name without realizing that

that's who that was. And it made me realize that we were here not only then to preserve the physical beauty of the place, but also to try to preserve the memory of the folks that came before and who made this country what it is and even made this place, the orchard, this spot here on the Blue Ridge, what it is. So, that sort of cemented our belief that what we were on to was something that needed to be done and was really worthwhile.

(205) PC: Well, you have as your mission, as you've said, to preserve as much as it can be preserved, or document at least the history and culture of at least this small part of the Blue Ridge mountains, which strikes me as amazingly similar to the mission of the Blue Ridge Parkway itself, or at least the cultural side of its mission. So, maybe we could move on to talk about your vision of that.

BC: Well, I think that's a very important mission and I think it's very hard for the parkway to make much headway on it. There's several reasons for that. First of all, money and the fact that they have many more urgent, I wouldn't say more important, but more urgent priorities for their money, like just paving the road and keeping it open and worrying about the physical nature of their project. That consumes a lot of them, a lot of their money and a lot of their people.

Second thing, kind of an example, the bureaucracies, and I know this from my years with working with the government for IBM and working with IBM and working now with the parkway, the bureaucracies move with glacial speed. And a lot of what needs to be preserved is going to be gone by the time they get around to trying to catch it and preserve it. Just a very small point, the Mineral Museum has been redesigned, and I admire their forethought for setting aside the money to do it. All the physical work was done a year ago, and all the work on the displays on the inside is at least a year and a year and a half late on a one-year project. So, you know, it's priorities and it's funding and it's focus. And the parkway, well intentioned, is not well suited to capture the cultural things that I think need to be done.

(238) And, then the next part of it is it is a huge job, an almost unimaginably huge job. And, the reason I believe that is because we're just scratching one little part of the Blue Ridge. Yeah, it made be one of the most historically active parts of the Blue Ridge, but we're only able with our interest in it here and our volunteer staff of my sister, my wife, and me and our paid staff of the rest of the folks, we're only able to do little bits of it and to do it in a not quite right not quite scientific way to collect all this yet. And yet, we see a lot of it slipping away from us because people are dying, and, as they die, then their photos, their memories, their possessions get separated to individuals in the family or lost. And we are observing that every year. Some very special people who have been friends to us and have told us a lot about the orchard and its history and its heritage are gone. And they're almost irreplaceable.

(254) An example, just one example, there are three graveyards on this orchard. One of them is Charlie McKinney's, who was the first settler and had lots of kids and lots of wives and is sort of the patriarch of the area. We know where his graveyard is, and it has a marker in it that his family has put in commemoration of Charlie McKinney. But, it's unmarked. It's not a graveyard that's on any map in either county.

There are two other graveyards that I doubt if three people living could take you to on this orchard. And, I found one of them and I found a few tombstones there. They are

railroad graveyards. The railroad was built by immigrants from Eastern Europe, southern Europe, Africa. When they died, sometimes they were buried where they were killed in the blasts or in the tunnels or on the fills along the track. But sometimes they weren't and they were buried in graveyards. And, one of them I found. The other one I couldn't find. A man who is now dead named Ray Bird McKinney took me in to show me where his granddaddy's homestead was, and it's just a puddle of rocks. The chimney and the foundation are all that's left of it. And he pointed to a hill across from that puddle of rocks and he said that's where this graveyard is. And I said how can you tell? There are no gravestones there. He said, well there used to be, but a previous owner of the orchard came up here with a wagon and picked all those stones up and took them and sold them as flagstones. Of course, the gravestones were just flat fieldstones that had been rounded at the top and square at the bottom, and they didn't have any writing on them, but they are gone. And so, the graveyard is gone. And, so then I have taken folks into that other graveyard, the one that I knew about, not Charlie McKinney's, but the other railroad graveyard. And, three years ago, when I went in there, I found all those tombstones were gone. The only things that were left were in the roots of trees and were too hard for anybody to dig out.

Now, those graveyards don't exist on any parkway map. They don't exist on any map in any county. They exist in the memory of people, and they're only, I say, three or four people alive who could take you to one or two of those three graveyards. And, to me it is a terribly important thing, because the railroad was built by those immigrants. And, when they were through, the locals, at the point of a gun, put them on the train cars and shipped them out to Spartanburg, the southern terminus of the line, because they didn't want them here anymore. And, so all that remains of that part of our heritage, and it's a vitally important part, that railroad plays such a role in transforming these mountains, the only thing that really remains is the railroad itself as a monument to those people and a few stories of their camps along the railroad.

(303) So, I don't think the Blue Ridge Parkway, well meaning and under-funded, is going to be very successful in capturing the real stories along this parkway. And, gosh, I'm talking about a two-mile stretch here. If I multiply that by the full 469 mile length of the parkway, that's a very very hard job.

(311) PC: A couple of times you've mentioned that, if we lose this history, we're not going to be able to learn lessons from that history. So far, and I know that this is an ongoing project for you, what are some lessons that you think that we might learn from the history of this area?

BC: Well, one is the very very high cost to us as a society of the throw away economy that we have. To me, one of the best examples of that are the railroads hereabouts. The railroads were built first for freight, and then they put the passenger service on, and they built a large infrastructure along the tracks, a marvelous passenger station in Altapass, a couple of resort hotels and golf courses. A lot of energy went into building up the community of Altapass. Then, in the 40's, the railroad discovered that passenger service wasn't paying very well. So, as quickly as it started the passenger service, it abandoned it.

Well, we welcome that free enterprise decision, but what happened was, if you look at the communities around here, before the railroad came, the county seat was Bakersville. It still is. The railroad bypassed Bakersville. It's the same size now as it was a hundred years ago when the railroad came through. The biggest city in the county is Spruce Pine. It was nonexistent when the railroad came through. It was a little place called Kim Thickets. Thickets are the rhododendron thickets. There were two houses there. Kim Thickets became a mining railhead when the railroad came through, and the city of Spruce Pine was built and, I wouldn't say flourishes, because it suffers as all small towns do in these mountains from the changing nature of the economy, and I could speak volumes about that in a little bit, industrial jobs leaving again and all that, another part of our lesson. I'm just talking about the railroad right at the moment.

The little community of Altapass was nonexistent when the railroad started, and it became a resort community. On the railroad, "alta" means high and "pass" means pass. It's the highest point on the railroad. So, they brought in tourists. And they would take the trails around here and spend a week or two in the mountain air with the mountain water. It was a thriving community. Well, the automobile came and came through another gap in the mountain, and the railroad canceled the passenger service because I guess competition with the automobile. And the whole community of Altapass disappeared almost as rapidly as it had built up. And, as I look at it, it was built at fair cost, both in people and in dollars. And then it disappeared, and it was lost, not only the people and the things that happened there. There had been a little library built; there was a little infirmary that was built that disappeared. And all of those things that people put their energy into went away.

And it's hard to see us learn over and over again how temporarily we think ahead and how temporarily we build. And I know that this is a tough subject for our freedom loving mountain folks, especially because they are first among us who tell us that, "The land is mine and I can do what I want with it and no one can tell me what to do with my own land." But they are also the victims of that. Now the other industries are leaving, as the textiles and the furniture leave the mountains. And that withdraws an awful lot of the sustenance of the economics of the mountains. And we're headed for a bipolar economy here where folks like me, who can afford the mountaintops, come in and buy the land and drive the price up. Industry leaves, and so a very low income service sort of mentality is all that people have to earn their living. And the good people, I mean not good, the best educated, most ambitious of the local folks, leave, and the bipolar nature of the community gets worse and worse. The railroad is an example; the mining is an example; the industry that's here is an example. And we are too blind to see that we repeat those things over and over again. And in the last hundred years, we can point to several examples like that.

This orchard at Altapass isn't going to fix that problem, but I would like for it, through the stories of the people, to be able to continue to call attention to what things were like, how they changed, and maybe even, as we grow, a little bit about why they changed. So, that's sort of what I think that lies behind my comments about lessons.

PC: Well, that's the end of Side 1, Tape 1 of the May 24, 2003 interview with Bill Carson at Altapass.

End of side one, tape one/Beginning of side two, tape one

(435) PC: This is the beginning of Side 2:Tape 1 of the May 24, 2003 interview with Bill Carson. And, you talked about one ancestor here on the orchard. How about talking about Olin Hefner?

BC: Good. Olin was not an ancestor of mine-

PC: I meant just in general sense.

BC: Right, just for the record. He was, among other ancestors, a Hefner and a McKinney. Hefner Gap is the next gap past McKinney gap. Olin Hefner was a special friend of ours. We didn't know him until we came here. And he was one of the first people that came down to greet us when we bought this place. We were sitting in the store there trying to figure what to do with what he had. And he told us lots of stories about himself. He grew up in this house here. He, everyday of his life, heard the train go by down below, sometimes, well of course now it's thirty times a day. Part of the time then, it was passenger train. That was before the passenger service quit. And he said he viewed that train as his ticket out of here. And at 18, in 1942, he volunteered for World War II. He went off to serve in World War II.

He served in Africa and then in Italy and then he was in the army until the end. He told the story about Büchenwald and how he was one of the first soldiers and was sent up to arrest the camp commander. When he got up there, the commander was having dinner, fine dinner, wine and very fine food and a big table with a lot of his friends around him. Olin was an enlisted man, and he said, "You're under arrest. You've got to come with me." And the guy said, "I'm not going to surrender until I surrender to an officer." So they went ahead drinking. So Olin got furious and pulled out his pistol and held it to the guy's head. His buddy --there were only two of them-- his buddy said, "Olin, he's not worth your life to pull that trigger." Olin didn't. He tells that story in great presence, great attention, great poignancy.

He came back, went into North Carolina State University, went into the seminary, and became a minister. He was a Baptist minister all his life. He said thirty years after he left, he came back home and he realized what he had left and what he missed about living here.

So, he had become then a great supporter of things mountain and especially of us and our attempt to preserve this place. And, he would bring his friends, he would bring his stories, he would bring us his own presence, being master of ceremonies, at some of our activities here. And, whenever we were down or whenever we needed to meet someone or were just in need of a friendly face, Olin would seem to show up. He'd sense it, and he'd showed up, and he'd come and support us. And, he was much loved by the entire community.

And so, when he died, we decided that we wanted to do something special in his memory. And, it turns out his wife and his friends and his church, all that, have rallied around this as Olin's place much more so even than his pulpit or his church. So, he's a special presence here. He's with us all the time.

PC: He passed away in 2002. Is that correct?

BC: Yes.

(472) PC: Well, as I mentioned to you, I first heard about you and your work up here from Laura Rotegard, and I was hoping you might describe the project that you worked on with her.

BC: Yeah, I met Laura shortly after we moved here. I was nominated to the Little Switzerland Community Association, that's the volunteer government for Little Switzerland. It just shows you how much in need they were of people to take someone who was brand new. And I became the president almost right away of the Community Association. And we had some issues. It seems that the one particular thing that was the straw that sort of made the community come to realize we didn't understand the parkway very well and they didn't understand us very well was a house that was built up there. It was built on property that was in the parkway easement. And the feeling had always been that the parkway easement was sacrosanct and nobody could ever build there. So this marvelous piece of property had been passed by the people that were thinking about building and moving there for a lot of years. And, this one fellow decided to buy it. And, in all innocence, I believe to this day and will always believe, he did not have the fix, and in all innocence, when he bought the land, one of the conditions of buying was that he receive permission from the parkway to build a house there. And so, he applied, and the parkway granted an easement variance and he built his house there.

And then, to show you the way bureaucracies work, he was more than willing to paint this house any thing the parkway said, and somebody or rather read a rule and said, "Well it's supposed to be like original farmhouses were and we think they were white." So, that made it an eyesore. It stands out. If it had been any kind of earth tone, it probably would've not caused quite the furor it did. So, we decided we had to start a dialogue with the parkway to find out what was sacrosanct and what wasn't.

And the parkway, through Laura --Laura was brand new there and this may have been one of her first projects-- and so she came to us and we held community meetings where we tried to decide the things that were of vital importance to the community, that were the heartland of things that we really wanted to preserve, and what role the parkway would play in some of that preservation.

So, it was a very interesting project for several reasons. First the community began to think as a community instead of just a bunch of people who were there on vacation. . . [Speaks to another person. Inaudible]

PC: Well, we relocated inside the house, because things are starting to pick up here at the Orchard. But, you were talking about the project that you and Laura worked on in Little Switzerland.

BC: Right. So, what we did is we went through a pretty rigorous program of brainstorming and then trying to write down the things that were important to us, and then trying to figure ways that we could preserve those or we could work with the parkway to make sure that things that were important to the community were recognized by the parkway. Laura brought rigor to the process. I was familiar with some of the