

Interviewee: Zetzel, Geraldine

Interview Date: July 6, 2011

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Geraldine Kohlenberg Zetzel
University of Houston Oral History Project

Interviewed by: Debbie Harwell
Date: July 6, 2011
Transcribed by: Michelle Kokes
Location: Cambridge, MA

DH: Okay I am Debbie Harwell and I'm here with Geraldine Kohlenberg Zetzel in her home in Cambridge and it is July 6, 2011, and we're going to talk about Wednesdays in Mississippi. So we'll start with these questions if that's okay.

GKZ: Yeah.

DH: First of all I'd like to know what motivated you to become a participant in Wednesdays in Mississippi.

GKZ: The simplest answer is that my close friend Alyce Ryerson was invited to do this by Polly Cowan. They knew each other principally from living in Martha's Vineyard in the summer and Alyce's oldest daughter Susan was one of the COFO workers at the time. So Alyce was very motivated to go, and she asked me if I'd go with her. And I didn't think too hard, I just said "yes" without exactly knowing what we were going to do. But I have to say that it, in one way, appealed to me as an adventure, which is a little bit undignified considering the purpose. But also I had been certainly following what was happening with the civil rights movement and concerned about it, and my husband, Arthur Kohlenberg had participated in the March on Washington so we were moderately active, and so I felt drawn to do this, initially quite naively I would say.

DH: Did you have misgivings then? Was your husband supportive?

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GKZ: He was supportive but worried, and my children I figure were about 10 and 11 years old so they were pretty young. I kind of put it to him that he had his turn at activism, at standing up for what we believed, and here was my opportunity. So he didn't say no but I think he was concerned.

DH: Were your children concerned or were they too young to really understand?

GKZ: I've asked my daughter, and she said she remembers it. She remembers being worried without quite knowing what it was all about and knowing that I was going far away and having the sense that there was some danger involved. I haven't asked my son.

DH: But they were supportive in that you went?

GKZ: That's right.

DH: Okay, when you and I talked on the phone a while back (about three years ago) we talked about this idea of going as proper ladies . . .

GKZ: Yes.

DH: I wanted to know how important you think that was to the project's success and how you felt about that personally?

GKZ: I think it was really important that we were representing the middle-class kind of non-hippie, non-revolutionary type of person that, we were showing ourselves as people who could be respected, who were respected in their communities. Alyce, who was even less proper than I, had joked about it a lot initially because we didn't feel very proper. We were both somewhat rebellious in our own ways and had grown up feeling not at all part of the mainstream but for very different reasons. So in that sense we took it on as a persona. We're going to do this, we're going to do this act because this is what's needed. (phone interrupts).

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DH: Okay so we were talking about you and Alyce feeling rebellious and . . .

GKZ: Yeah we didn't object, we understood what that was about and we cooperated with it, but it wasn't true to the selves we were at the time anyway.

DH: Just out of curiosity how did she this was not in my original set of questions, but how did she feel about her daughter going down?

GKZ: She was very proud and very scared. And of course our group went just after the disappearance after the three workers. So everybody was in a state of fear. But she and her husband totally supported Susan's choice.

DH: That would have been difficult. I'm not sure I could have done that. I know my parents could have definitely not done that, definitely would have not done it. Okay, did you think that women had an advantage under the circumstances to fight for change?

GZK: I guess so. I mean I think the whole project was done in a (I'm trying to find the word) in a subtle and non-confrontational mode which is probably more natural to women, especially women of my generation, and I think that style was probably an advantage for the project.

DH: Did you all feel threatened at all?

GZK: Yes.

DH: While you were there?

GZK: Yes.

DH: Definitely?

GZK: Definitely. We felt as if we were in a hostile country. As you may know from the transcript, we were followed. When we got to Canton we were followed by men in a truck with no license plate and guns. It was pretty obvious that we were not welcome.

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DH: True. I was talking with Pricilla [Hunt] about that a little bit earlier about how some things happened after a team had been to a freedom school or with the guy for the Hattiesburg, the first team that went to Hattiesburg being arrested. I'm not sure that those things had anything to do with the fact that a WIMS team had been there, as much as it was just, it was a Freedom School or it was a church and that just happened to be when they were attacked, but you would have never known. Is it going to be while I'm there or not?

GKZ: Right. I don't think, I certainly didn't feel that I was about to be attacked or that somebody was going to throw a bomb but I felt a great deal of tension and also it felt like a very foreign place to us, I think, just realizing that we were potential targets, that we were not welcome, that we were not all that protected. I mean there was the briefing included that we had the attention of the Department of Justice but you know this was before cell phones, this isn't exactly easy to get help if you wanted it.

DH: That's exactly right. How did you feel that your presence was received by the local women that you met? This is almost two questions because it would be the local women in Canton versus or/and the local women that you met that Tuesday evening at I think it was Mrs. Rawl's home?

GKZ: Well, let me start with that one, that meeting of the so called League of Women Voters, which is again a bit of a pretense. I think Alyce belonged to the League of Women Voters (I didn't) so it was as if we were from the same national body as they were, and they were not either because most of the League of Women Voters, women in Jackson had quit the organization because of the pressure on their husbands largely.

"Get your wife out of that commie organization." So the group was a little bit . . . they

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were there because they wanted to meet us. We were there because we wanted to meet them. Initially, as you know from the transcripts, it was very unfriendly and they couldn't—certainly the biggest difficulty there was focused somewhat on Alyce because when it came to light that she had a child working as one of those terrible agitators and then when it was revealed that it wasn't a boy, but a girl, which was an appalling idea that a girl was doing this and she was living in a black family just, it blew them away but it also opened the doors to a very good conversation in the sense of people were expressing themselves. Did anybody change their minds? I don't know. I mean I can talk about how I was changed by that because I really saw the sincerity with which they felt their feelings and held their opinions. You know these were not ordinary bigoted, stupid, uninformed people, and they had so many ideas about what was going on that were false or . . . and of course until Mrs. Schutt, I think it is, made her breakthrough speech, I think they thought everybody, all the local people, were in agreement with them, and they just couldn't understand what we thought we were doing and what our kids thought they were doing, making trouble. I don't think they thought we were making trouble, but they thought the whole Freedom Summer was a disaster for them.

DH: Well they had been told that also.

GKZ: Yeah.

DH: The newspapers.

GKZ: Yeah. But I was impressed really by how brave they were to come at all and meet with us. They didn't have to.

DH: Right and what about the people that you met in Canton?

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GKZ: I don't have a clear memory of individuals unfortunately in that part of it. I know from reading my own notes that we met a number of people, and I don't honestly recall them individually, but certainly these were people who were very much in the middle of the battle and impressively brave and tough, willing to . . . go through what they had to go through.

DH: I would agree 100%, everybody that was working very difficult. Okay, going back to that meeting at Mrs. Rawl's home, in your report you said something about if you had met them after you had been to the project in Canton instead of beforehand that you would have found it difficult to be as reserved.

GKZ: Yeah I mean I think after that day in Canton, we were so moved, agitated, passionate that it would have been very hard not to kind of lay it on them and say, "Look, this is what's really happening, and we've witnessed it, and you are living in a delusion." I don't know, I mean maybe we would have been able to do so. I think if we met them a day or two later, but because the whole experience was so compressed and by the time . . . I just have a visual memory of getting back from Canton and being exhausted but also tremendously hyper, sort of an altered state, partly fatigue and partly the intensity of the experience. I don't think it would have gone very well (I agree with myself) to meet them then.

DH: Did you find it that when you did meet with them, did you find it hard to be reserved when they were saying things, "Blacks are happy. They don't want to vote" or whatever, "There's no abuse taking place" whatever comments were being made, did you find it hard then not to step up and say something? Or maybe you did, but you did it in a very kind way?

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GKZ: I don't remember finding it hard. I think they had a lot to say, and I think we all instinctively felt that the best way to be in dialogue with them was to listen and not to interrupt or jump up and say, "You're all wrong" that wouldn't have . . . it wasn't that we had a kind of agreed on policy, I think it was just instinctive. And things did begin to turn and change in the course of the evening just in terms of our speaking up . . . Yeah, I don't remember having trouble listening to all of that. I remember feeling, "Boy this is a different point of view."

DH: Well sometimes that's the only way we can understand other people or what they are thinking. Well it sounded like from what you said and even what other people said that it turned out to be very productive in terms of getting people to talk.

GKZ: I think so yeah.

DH: Not necessarily change their opinion but to at least begin to consider a change in them.

GKZ: Yeah, and I think there it was, it was really important (going back to an earlier question) that we were intelligent, respectable, thoughtful women who were not crazy. Like those kids!

DH: Like those . . . like those trouble makers.

GKZ: Right.

DH: Okay, well, talking about this overall experience, you had mentioned that in Jackson it seemed like, not so much like in Canton, that you got this sense of crossing back and forth over an invisible wall or barrier of some sort as you moved between the different communities. Can you elaborate on that a little bit? Do you remember that sensation?

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GKZ: I remember the sensation. I don't know if I could say much about how it was in Jackson except for the incident that I put in my notes early on that when we got to the hotel the bellhop, the guy who brought us, signaled very clearly that he knew who we were, and that he was there to protect us if necessary. And he was African American, so we had a sense that we were part of the underground, which was in that instance reassuring and in other ways creepy of course—like we were spies, like we had infiltrated into another country. The “otherness” of Mississippi was just stunning just everything about it. And I feel that I had no idea of the South. I had very little experience and it was only in my early life that I ever went south, and I really didn't understand very much about the whole southern way of life, or the southern values, or points of view. I think in Canton it flipped in the sense that being on the black side of the wall felt safe. We felt safe when we were with black people, and the white people, by and large, were the hostiles. So that was a very interesting change over, which side of the wall we were then. Especially when we went out, as I remember to eat lunch as a mixed group, which was pretty scary but we were in a place that they had picked so it was really alright. But they were our safety, the workers and the people who were being active in the community; those were the people we were safe with. Whereas the white guy in the store where we stopped to ask direction or his friends in the pick-up truck were the scary ones.

DH: True. Susie made the same comment in Jackson they would be in the black community that they felt safe.

GKZ: Yeah.

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DH: It was in the white community often (or more often) where they would feel threatened and having to be careful about who knew who they were. Tell me about your experience with Sister Catherine John?

GKZ: Well you've got to help me there I was intrigued by that question. Is there something in the record or something you know that contributes to the question because I have a lot of sort of emotional memories of her but I don't . . .

DH: You and I had talked on the phone before which I did not record that conversation but I did make notes throughout and you talked about the two of you coming back and it was kind of like you said a little while ago you were still sort of hyper and you know it had been an intense day and that you sat and had like a pajama party and visited.

GKZ: Well okay that I do remember. I was very taken by her. I liked her a lot and was intrigued by her. I thought you know here's a nun who is joining this group and doing this pretty individual kind of thing. My memory of our pajama party talk was just that we became quite close and told each other a lot about our lives and particularly as concerns things spiritual. I don't remember the content, I just remember that the sense of closeness, and I think we kept in touch for a while maybe on and off for a year, but we didn't ever see each other after that debriefing and I've often wondered how her life was. She seemed like a very . . . a very individual kind of person, a person who thought for herself, and I didn't know how that matched up with being a nun, being religious. And of course she was the most disturbed of any of us by what we saw at the Catholic school where they had all these facilities and all this and complete blocking out of what was going on in the community. People there just weren't participating at all, and that disturbed her, of course, more than anybody else. Why were they sitting on their hands?

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DH: Right, right. Well she's probably of all the team members the one that seems to be the most difficult to trace.

GKZ: Really?

DH: Where she went or what happened after WIMS but she must have had a tremendous impact on people personally because also in something Alyce wrote, and I can't remember exactly which document I saw it in or whatever, but she made the comment that . . . something to the effect that it changed how she looked at institutional religion (or at least Catholics) . . .

GKZ: Yeah.

DH: . . . to have met her, that she had no idea that there were people like her in the Catholic church.

GKZ: Yeah, interesting.

DH: So you obviously, both you and Alyce, obviously shared some sense about who Sister Catherine John was and what she was trying to do. There was a group of nuns that were supposed to actually participate and go on these trips and the Bishop in Mississippi stopped that. So I don't know what . . . I do know she was with a different order.

GKZ: Where was she from do you know?

DH: You know . . .

GKZ: I thought the Midwest but I'm not sure.

DH: I think she was . . . I was going to say California or maybe she went to California after she left the Boston area. I think she was just here going to school, or here temporarily, and then she went back to her original group. In fact it was just recently I

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found out which order she was with and it was a very small group I suspect today it's even smaller still.

GKZ: And they don't know or have records?

DH: You know I didn't . . . I haven't tried to track her down through them. I know when Susie was looking for people for that reunion she couldn't find her so I haven't pursued that a whole lot.

GKZ: Well I think it's true. I don't know about the other people, Alyce and I both were kind of not religious, but definitely what now we would call spiritual people. One of the interesting things is to me is that though I'm Jewish, I did not particularly identify as Jewish. I didn't go with a Jewish group. I wasn't a member of any Jewish group. I wasn't a member of any congregation and Alyce was more or less Quaker, and I had been more or less Quaker because I went to a Quaker college and I was very involved in doing my undergraduate years with Quaker practice. So I think we had a sort of natural affinity.

DH: Interesting. Okay this next question, in your report at the time, you theorized that "the student activists in Mississippi had made the movement their religion is sort of primitive communistic Christianity, with The Cause as their god, non-violence as their dogma, and that as black equals white distinctions of dress, race, or even sex, are of no importance." Do you think that proved to be the case, and at one point or did that start to fade where we had that intensity of the movement?

GKZ: Gee I really don't know. I can't say. I think that's an interesting idea I had, but as to whether it was valid or became less so I don't know. Certainly one felt at the time that this was their cause and in a sense their whole lives that they were dedicated. I do

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think that after the civil rights movement things in the movement got much less clear and much less there was more divisiveness and less coherence as often happens with movements. But I can't really generalize about it.

DH: Well I will tell you that there are historians that make that same theoretical statement today.

GKZ: Okay.

DH: Looking back at the civil rights movement that it was like a religion for the people that were deeply involved.

GKZ: And when you see the documentaries that have been coming out, you certainly feel that. I mean I hadn't seen the documentary, or I hadn't really understood the history of the bus riders as well as I did after I saw the recent documentary and what they were about and what happened to them. You know there are these different aspects but even though you lived through the times, you don't necessarily "get it" unless you are right in the middle of it.

DH: Right. That was a very well made piece.

GKZ: It was.

DH: I really enjoyed watching it.

GKZ: One of the things it brought out in terms of your question was that as I remember some of the movement "elders" (so to speak) got pretty nervous about these bus riders, they were causing more trouble and not really contributing to "the cause" so you have this kind of differences that inevitably immerge I think.

DH: That's true. Do you believe that WIMS was able to open lines of communication in Mississippi?

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GKZ: I believe so but basically not out of my personal knowledge because I don't know.

But when I read some of the later things people wrote, and I hope it's true, but I don't know. I didn't stay very connected to WIMS. I mean I did this, and I don't remember getting newsletters or being involved any further. So it was kind of a "one of" experience, and I wasn't one of the people who kept in touch with WIMS.

DH: Do you have any thoughts on what was its most significant accomplishment?

GKZ: I really, in the same way, I can't say . . . I can only talk about my own immediate experience and the aftermath but not really in a general sense.

DH: Do you know if anyone in your group continued to correspond with anyone they met there?

GKZ: I corresponded for a while with the organizer George Raymond and I sent things for the schools. I send some supplies but only for a few months. I don't know about the others.

DH: Did you feel like when you came home you had accomplished what you set out to do?

GKZ: Yes I do feel that. I think we were well prepared for what we were there to represent, and to be as witnesses, and to see for ourselves as well as perhaps open a few doors for the people we met with. I mean it's amazing to me to think how short the experience was because it felt like much longer—like a trip to the moon and back for instance.

DH: So maybe it was just the right length of time?

GKZ: Maybe so.

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DH: Do you feel that your going to Mississippi or your work on any other social causes has impacted or did impact your family and their activism?

GKZ: Yes I do. I think we talked about that before but it's pretty much the same answer. I think it definitely influenced my daughter because she became very much of an activist towards the end of the Vietnam War and at one point was doing pretty scary things and I remember saying, "Hey . . ." and she said defiantly, "Well you went to Mississippi in 1964, and Dad went on the March on Washington, so what did you expect me to do?" And she was right out there being involved in protests and sit-ins, and she lived with (I can't remember their name) the Catholic brothers who were quite famously activists at the time. And got arrested and did all kinds of pretty out there stuff. My son less so, though I think he has very strong social conscience, and has made himself available to a lot of community projects and done pro bono work (he is a lawyer), and he really cares about social issues. He didn't . . . he was younger so he didn't get involved as she did in the Vietnam War.

DH: Do they ever talk about that you went or do you all ever . . . do they tell you, "Mom I'm so proud of you for going."

GKZ: Yeah from time to time. I think they certainly . . . I don't know about at the time but I think they respected it and were, yeah, I think they were proud. I think they still are when it comes up.

DH: Well it would have been hard at the time I think while they were young but even still. Sometimes right in the middle of it you don't always realize the overall effectiveness or the repercussions or how important something is going to be until years later and then you can look back and . . .

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GKZ: Yeah.

DH: You mentioned a few minutes ago about witnessing or being a witness and how important do you think that was to changing how other people here or in the South or other places, how did that impact the way that they responded to the needs of African Americans?

GKZ: I'm not sure, can you rephrase the question a bit because I'm not sure.

DH: What I want to know is do you think that for people to come to the South and say, "Here's what I saw when I was there," and then you bring that message back home, or even you are bringing that message to the women that you met, which didn't happen with your team actually. But you know you bring that message back home. Do you think that that impacts how people react? Does it make them want to take part because they are hearing someone's first-hand account?

GKZ: Maybe. Certainly I gave maybe two or three talks when I came back, and they were received with a great deal of interest. I can't remember exactly where all the talks were except for one of them. And it had the effect, I think, of a reporter coming back from a war zone and saying, "This is what it is like. This is what I saw. This is what I experienced." And I was pretty much fired up, so I think that it transmitted itself.

Probably the most interesting of those talks was in a church in New Bedford. We summered down in Westport, Mass which is near New Bedford, and New Bedford is racially a very interesting town because it's a very large Portuguese population, and some fraction of that large Portuguese population is very African but they don't . . . they consider themselves totally different from African Americans. So I innocently kind of walked into that, and it was very interesting to see if you could engage the people who

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did not consider themselves part, but who were experiencing the same kinds of prejudice, maybe not so obvious. But you know it was a racist society they were living in, and they were black skinned so even though they didn't think of themselves as "the same" as the descendants of slaves, they got the same treatment. They kind of didn't . . . the discussion was (as I remember) very ambivalent about yet they were there. Do we identify with what's happening to the black folks? Are they our brothers or not? Well generally speaking it was sort of, "Well no, they are not our brothers, but on the other hand, we suffer too because it's a racist society." So that was very . . . I don't remember the specifics, but I remember a lot of how I learned of these so called, in fact they were called black Portuguese—they are . . . Cape Verdeans is the official name for them because they immigrated from the Cape Verde Islands where there was a lot of mixture. It's just off the coast of Africa, so they were Portuguese plus African. So that, yeah, I certainly think it's a self selected group that comes to a talk like that, other than your friends and neighbors. But I think they were impressed and interested, and it made it very real.

DH: You know I think it was really difficult even for me . . . for people then to read the newspaper and see, "Here's what's going on." And even for me now, it's difficult for me to 100% understand what it would have been like to have been there and live at that time. I was twelve in 1964, and I had some . . . I had a knowledge that a civil rights movement was going on but it wasn't until years later that I really developed an understanding of what was going on and I think . . .

GKZ: Where did you live?

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DH: In Houston. So I think it's difficult for people to . . . who weren't there to really understand what people in the South were going through. Or African Americans in the South were going through, and I think it was difficult to understand where whites were coming from too.

GKZ: Then there's the South and then there's Mississippi which . . .

DH: Which is not the same.

GKZ: It's the extreme South.

DH: Right. In Houston or in Texas we would consider ourselves part of the South but we would not consider ourselves part of that kind of South.

GKZ: Yeah.

DH: Although my boss who grew up in Rural East Texas he would say that part is definitely "Deep South." So it would depend on where you are. But it definitely as a Houstonian you would not lump yourself in with the same category with Jackson, which isn't to say there wasn't discrimination.

GKZ: Right but discrimination is one thing and beating people up for trying to register or . . .

DH: Right.

GKZ: Some of the really awful attitudes are extreme.

DH: Okay I guess is there anything else you recall about WIMS that you would want me to know?

GKZ: I think one thing we haven't talked about today, though maybe we did on the phone, is how it changed my perception of what the South was going through. That and also that in the South, I sort of paradoxically felt there was a closeness and an intimacy

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between blacks and whites that we didn't have in the North. And partly that they lived close together, that they were not as we are here—not so much now but at the time, you didn't see a black face in Cambridge except maybe behind a counter. All the African American people lived in Roxbury, so we didn't have that kind of intimacy, that sort of day to day-ness or the sort of the sense of almost family and I realized that, that they had (in a sense) and advantage because they knew each other in a way that in the North we didn't. So that was.

DH: It is interesting that in the North that you would feel that way because you did have that separation. On the other hand, it seems like in the North there was more of a sense of equality that was absent in the South.

GKZ: Yeah a sense of at least respect and potential equality and not the kind of . . . I think there was plenty of discrimination in the North, but it was not overt or as damaging but I think it was there—probably still is to some extent. There was something else I don't remember. I don't know maybe it will come back.

DH: Doris said, Doris Wilson said you know it wasn't that there was no discrimination in the North, there was. The difference was in the South it was legal.

GKZ: Yeah, well that's right . . . certainly that. I've struggled all my life with the kind of what I feel as a kind of "ingrained racism" that I grew up with despite the fact that I grew up at least partly in Europe, but even there I saw it happen. That I think I see my grandchildren really pretty much not aware or not caring about race. Not seeing somebody's race as the defining characteristic of them. So it's a big change and it's great.

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DH: But look how many generations it takes. I mean my mother was born in 1912 and she was very definitely taught that blacks were inferior. They weren't as smart. They were not social equals, but I see in my children a very, like you were saying about your grandchildren, I see in my children a very different... It's easier for them. It never crosses their mind because that's how they were raised, my husband and I taught them that everyone was equal and you know who cares what color someone is.

GKZ: Well I must say that everybody in my family was completely passionately involved in the Obama run for president (including my grandson who took a term off from college and ran the Obama campaign in South Florida) at the age of 19 or something. He didn't run it but he was very, he had a whole precinct to himself.

DH: Where in South Florida?

GKZ: I don't know I can't remember. He told me all about it. It was an amazing education for him.

DH: I'll bet.

End of Interview.