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Interview

with

JOSEPH A. HERZENBERG

July 27, 1995

by Joseph Mosnier

Indexed by Joseph Mosnier

The Southern Oral History Program
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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SOHP Series: The North Carolina Politics Project

TAPE LOG

Interviewee: JOSEPH A. ("JOE") HERZENBERG

Interviewer: Joseph Mosnier

Interview Date: July 27, 1995

Location: Mosnier's home in Chapel Hill, NC

Tape No.: 7.27.95-JH.1 (cassette 1 of 3)
7.27.95-JH.2 (cassette 2 of 3)
7.27.95-JH.3 (cassette 3 of 3)
(approximate total length 220 minutes)

Topic: An oral history of Joe Herzenberg, from 1979-81 and 1987-93 a member of the Town Council of Chapel Hill, NC. Herzenberg was during these years often said to be the only openly gay elected public official south of the Mason Dixon Line.

Substantively, the interview is organized around two principle matters, the evolution of gay politics in North Carolina and Herzenberg's career in Chapel Hill town politics. The interview also includes, as part of a biographical sketch, discussion of Herzenberg's experiences as a history instructor at Tougaloo College in Mississippi from 1964-1969 and his involvement in the civil rights movement.

Comments: Only text in quotation marks is verbatim; all other text is paraphrased, including the interviewer's questions.

TAPE INDEX

Counter Index Topic

[Cassette 1 of 3, Side A -- Tape No. 7.27.95-JH.1]

001 [Opening announcement.]

008 Biographical sketch from his birth in 1941 in Franklin, NJ -- childhood, family, education, etc.

032 Experiences while at Yale University, including participation in civil rights issues through his activities with the New Haven CORE chapter.

- 080 Parents were very supportive of all of their sons, so there was no tension related to his participation with CORE or, for further example, in connection with his brother's anti-war efforts.
- 102 His decision in 1964 to move from Yale to Tougaloo College in Jackson, Mississippi.
- 135 Description of his years teaching at Tougaloo College (September 1964 through 1969) -- "in many ways the most interesting years of my life."
- 166 Attacks by Mississippi state officials on Tougaloo College due to its prominent role in encouraging civil rights protest.
- 196 His teaching experiences at Tougaloo.
- 208 Decision in 1969 to move to Chapel Hill and enter the Ph.D. program in history.
- 240 Experiences after arrival in Chapel Hill -- graduate school, etc.
- 254 [Was the Stonewall uprising of 1969 part of his landscape? No. He was busy with other things, and only read about it several months later.]
- 265 Involvement with local politics after arrival -- recognition that Chapel Hill was quite liberal in relation to the rest of the South.
- 290 Concern about the Vietnam War, involvement with the 1972 McGovern campaign and with local Democratic Party precinct politics in Chapel Hill.
- 323 His involvement with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, including attendance as an MFDP alternate delegate at the 1972 Democratic National Convention. Voting for a gay rights initiative at the convention.
- 371 Precinct politics in Chapel Hill, including sketch of the town's political history. His increasing involvement in local politics across the 1970s.
- 413 How he came rather accidentally to run in 1979 for the Town Council -- he lost but garnered more votes than any other unsuccessful candidate, and then was appointed to fill out a Council vacancy.
- 435 His unsuccessful races for a full four-year Council term in 1981 and, as an openly gay candidate, in 1985.
- 452 His assessment of the state Democratic Party's response to the 1972 election results -- the "moderately conservative" NC Democratic Party leadership had much preferred Humphrey to McGovern, and largely "blamed the McGovernites for the debacle." The NC Democratic Party leadership's reaction to the losses of 1972, including shifting the terms of local party officers to odd years so that an enthusiast for a given candidate would not overwhelm the local party structure. This had an "awful" impact on local grassroots party activism. In 1973, the Party

convened meetings to explore what had happened in 1972 -- "they frankly did not have very good solutions to anything, and they never have since" after the significant Democratic Party losses in 1984 and 1994.

- 534 Jim Hunt's efforts during his term as Lieutenant Governor (1973-77) to position himself as the heir to the Democratic Party's liberal tradition, not always successful.
- 566 Description of Gerry Cohen, a "moderately leftist" Chapel Hill town council member and candidate for mayor in the 1970s, after whose example Herzenberg patterned his own 1979 campaign for town council.
- 598 His two-year term as an appointee to the Town Council, 1979-81 -- his growing sense that the local political system was one in which he felt quite comfortable, particularly given such evidence as the local council's ready support for an early gay rights provision in a local anti-discrimination ordinance adopted in 1975.
- 689 [End of Side A.]

[Cassette 1 of 3, Side B -- Tape No. 7.27.95-JH.1]

- 005 [Opening announcement.]
- 006 He cites two student papers, one by a senior at Duke University and the second by a master's student at UNC-Greensboro, on the Carolina Gay Association, founded in 1974 and the earliest gay organization in Chapel Hill.
- 014 Description of Chapel Hill's reputation for having a relatively large gay community and a relatively tolerant, "live and let live" atmosphere.
- 059 His view that the town's relatively tolerant atmosphere resulted in the loose structure of gay organizations.
- 077 The Carolina Gay Association's role, despite its ups and downs over the years, as not only the most important gay organization in Chapel Hill, but in the state also. Only recently has there been much organizing by gays and lesbians in NC.
- 084 He notes that 1993 was the first time ever that gay issues were at issue in a local election (the Carrboro school board elections), and in this instance the two conservative candidates finished last and next to last. His efforts to create a local gay political organization, "OLGA," that was active in that election and subsequently.
- 109 Further reflections on the tolerant atmosphere of the Chapel Hill-Carrboro area.
- 113 Description of the CGA's history on campus, and mention of university administrators who offered support; the organization remains even today mainly a support group by and for gays and lesbians who have just come out.

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- 136 The NC Democratic Party's response to the 1976 elections.
- 148 How liberal influence seemed to spread outward from Chapel Hill all across Orange County -- liberals took control of the Chapel Hill board of aldermen in 1969, the Carrboro board of alderman ca. 1973, and the county commission also ca. 1973. Many of the more conservative local Democrats simply dropped out of local politics in these years. The Democratic Party thought Carter's win meant the Party was back on track, and the results of 1980 consequently came as quite a surprise.
- 182 His views in the 1970s about the evolving fortunes of blacks in the political arena in NC. Anecdote from the fall of 1964 in Jackson, Mississippi, when he was refused service at a restaurant with black colleagues, and how the Justice Department's remarkably rapid response led quickly to the restaurant's desegregation -- how such an episode encouraged a belief that the system could work to produce true social change.
- 282 Recollections concerning the 1976 Howard Lee-Jimmy Green race for NC Lieutenant Governor.
- 298 Jim Hunt's appreciation of the necessity of a bi-racial coalition underpinning the Democratic Party and his efforts to guarantee that blacks had a meaningful role in the Party. Anecdote concerning a rally at a black church in Durham during the 1984 Hunt-Helms race for U.S. Senate.
- 360 Experiences on the Chapel Hill Town Council during his 1979-81 two-year term, including participation in a reevaluation of the entire local government under mayor Joe Nassif. He viewed this period as marking the end of the phase of local government begun in 1969 by mayor Howard Lee, with an expanded focus on social welfare concerns.
- 406 The 1981 town council race; the decision to locate a public housing project was a major issue, as were local taxes and zoning. Concerns about growth were not yet pressing; these arose mid-1980s. Discussion of zoning ordinance and of the later political developments in the mid-1980s related to the growth issue. In passing, he notes that Chapel Hill has tended to elect black candidates beyond their proportion in the local population.
- 522 In context of discussion of how the growth issue has played out politically, Herzenberg describes his view that the issue broke essentially between old, "core" neighborhoods and precincts, on the one hand, and peripheral suburban neighborhoods and precincts, on the other.
- 578 His reactions to the 1984 election results -- Democrats tended, as before, to see the Republican successes at the top of the ticket as aberrations. Praises relative liberalism, on some issues, and friendliness of Robert Morgan.
- 655 Details of his "coming out" as an openly gay political figure in the early 1980s.

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690 [End of Side B.]

Counter Index Topic

[Cassette 2 of 3, Side A -- Tape No. 7.27.95-JH.2]

- 001 [Opening announcement.]
- 003 Continuing discussion of his coming out ca. early 1980s. Details of the response of local officials to his request that the Council condemn a gay-bashing incident in Durham.
- 018 Gay politics as a general rule has lacked a master strategic framework for success, and instead has been carried out on an ad hoc basis. Discussion of local activist Lightning Brown's efforts to impose a strategic approach for advancing gay politics in NC, in which Herzenberg joined after his own personal model for a political career failed to materialize as he had hoped in the early 1980s.
- 064 Anecdote of the successful effort by one white gay Durham man to win the support of his black neighbors at the local precinct meeting for a gay rights resolution. Further details of the strategic efforts to expand support for gay rights within the Orange County Democratic political organization.
- 096 Ca. 1983, he and Lightning Brown organized the Lesbian and Gay Democrats of North Carolina, and discussion of a series of conferences in the late 1970s-early 1980s convened to discuss the future of gay politics in NC and to build a statewide network. The effort to build support for gay rights resolutions within the state Democratic Party and simultaneously for the election of gay delegates to the 1984 Democratic Convention.
- 131 Detailed discussion of the anti-gay reaction to these efforts, in particular the hostile response of Bob Windsor, a local realtor and publisher of a small broadsheet in Chatham County, and Jesse Helms over the issue of Herzenberg's efforts to raise money from gays for Jim Hunt's 1984 U. S. Senate race against Helms. Response of the Hunt campaign organization to Helms' attacks of Herzenberg and Lightning Brown over the fundraising issue. The outrageousness of Windsor's attacks on Herzenberg and Brown. Within Chapel Hill in particular, many friends and others rallied to offer support. How Windsor cited the 1982 NC Fourth District Democratic convention, where a gay rights resolution was passed, as reason he started his broadsheet.
- 291 Details of Jesse Helms' attack by name on Herzenberg and Lightning Brown during Helms' televised debate with Jim Hunt in September 1984. His view of the impact of Helms' anti-gay attacks on the election outcome.

- 341 Discussion of one study that subsequently argued that Helms' goal was to make Hunt seem weak and maybe effeminate, and thus not 'man enough' to be in the Senate. Herzenberg's speculations about Helms' anti-gay views, which he thinks are politically opportunistic rather than sincere. Discussion of 'right wing' gays and their relationship to the GOP.
- 394 He jokingly views Helms' remarks in the debate as a "third class 'outing'." How it came to be realized and accepted locally that Herzenberg was gay, through the Windsor and Helms episodes and more generally his work on behalf of gay rights resolutions and related efforts in local Democratic politics.
- 413 Discussion of his selection and experiences as an openly gay Mondale delegate at the 1984 Democratic National Convention. Generally, other delegates from NC were quite congenial.
- 493 How state Democratic Party officials at the 1984 state convention responded to requests for a better pro-gay plank in the party platform. He saw "no first hand evidence" that state Democratic Party officials believed, as Lyndon Johnson once said, that by doing the right thing and responding to black and gay concerns that the Democratic Party would thus be destroyed.
- 583 The Chapel Hill Town Council races in 1985 and thereafter included very few incidents where his sexual preference was an issue.
- 620 Discussion of his 1987 town council campaign, which Mike Nelson directed very skillfully after first convincing Herzenberg to run. How they planned to turn any anti-gay attacks to their advantage in the race, believing that local voters would rally to support him if he was attacked for this reason.
- 657 The key issues on which Herzenberg campaigned for town council in 1987. Above all, the growth issue predominated.
- 679 [End of Side A of Cassette 2.]

[Cassette 2 of 3, Side B -- Tape No. 7.27.95-JH.2]

- 005 [Opening announcement.]
- 006 The key issues on which Herzenberg campaigned for town council in 1987 (continued from Side A).
- 016 Discussion of the relative clout of the various components on the local political scene, and discussion of the fact that political views in Chapel Hill tend to cluster fairly tightly around a relatively progressive center. The role of the University in local politics; by and large the University tries to keep a low profile.
- 075 Life in the community as a public figure.

- 097 His ties to other elected gay officials around the country, particularly through a national organization of gay elected officials and its annual conferences, including one held in Chapel Hill in 1992.
- 131 How term limits have ended the careers of many pioneering gay elected officials, particularly in California.
- 136 Reflections on the reasons for the rise of the Republican Party in the last ten or so years. He thinks race has been exploited as the most volatile issue; he has also seen a backlash against women. Speculations on what the future holds for gay politics, and discussion of gay Republicans and their still relatively low profile in North Carolina. He tends to think that, as more and more gay Republicans speak out, the GOP will tend increasingly to downplay its anti-gay stance.
- 204 Recollections of the Equal Rights Amendment fight in NC.
- 216 Discussion of the role of the religious right in NC politics.
- 227 Discussion of certain key landmarks in the evolution of gay politics in NC, including the very active gay and lesbian community in Durham and its efforts to get a pro-gay proclamation from the city government and its successful organization of NC's first statewide Gay Pride March in June 1986. The success of subsequent annual marches, six of which have been held in the Triangle area.
- 312 The considerable positive impact on the gay community in Durham of the effort to organize in support of the proclamation, against the recall effort initiated to remove Durham mayor Wib Gulley over his support of the gay cause, and to carry off the first Gay Pride March in 1986. Comment on the fact that organizing becomes easier when there are well-organized and vocal anti-gay factions or personalities on the scene.
- 354 Discussion of the quite unstructured nature of gay politics, both in NC and on the national level. Discussion of the creation and history of NC gay political organizations including the Lesbian and Gay Democrats of North Carolina, the Triangle Gay and Lesbian Alliance, the North Carolina Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality, and the North Carolina Pride Political Action Committee for Gay and Lesbian Equality. Evaluation of the reasons for the relative lack of success of these organizations insofar as formal structure is concerned.
- 436 His involvement with the North Carolina Pride Political Action Committee for Gay and Lesbian Equality (the "Pride PAC"); the organization's leadership turmoil; and extended discussion of the organization's efforts through the 1992 and 1994 election cycles to function as a typical political action committee within NC. He notes that no one anticipated the magnitude of the Republican landslide in 1994.
- 525 Evaluation of how well gay organizations are holding up in the new climate following the November 1994 Republican victories.

- 540 Discussion of NC's single ACT UP chapter, ACT UP Triangle, and the group's efforts, including the occupation of a Burroughs Wellcome office and its support for the continuance of anonymous AIDS testing in NC.
- 583 AIDS as a contemporary political issue, including Jesse Helms's efforts to exploit the issue.
- 627 Further reflections on the evolution of gay politics, both nationally and within NC. Gay politics and culture have been largely urban phenomenon in the postwar U.S., but NC has lacked a single large urban center which might have fostered the growth of a more cohesive and politically active gay community. To date, gay activists have succeeded in getting gay-positive legislation passed in Chapel Hill (beginning in 1975), in Raleigh (beginning in 1988), and in Carrboro (beginning in 1991). There have been efforts elsewhere, including in Durham, Greensboro, Asheville, and Charlotte.
- 689 [End of Side B of Cassette 2.]

Counter Index Topic

[Cassette 3 of 3, Side A -- Tape No. 7.27.95-JH.3]

- 001 [Opening announcement.]
- 004 Continuing discussion of gay communities in NC. Evaluation of Charlotte's gay community; mention that the Triad has proven a difficult spot for organizing gay politics. By and large gay politics has been organized between Chapel Hill and Charlotte.
- 040 The importance and singularity of the Triangle as the center for gay political organizing in NC.
- 048 The story of Asheville's experience when considering a gay rights ordinance, including a public hearing where 1,000 people showed up, among them 800 conservative Christians. Evaluation of the sorts of arguments advanced in opposition to calls for gay rights ordinances, and his lack of regard for the merits of particular "Biblical" arguments.
- 103 The story of the difficulty Herzenberg had obtaining permission to hold a gay and lesbian Passover seder at the Hillel in Chapel Hill ca. mid-1980s.
- 155 On the other hand, there was wide support for the recent domestic partners ordinance in Carrboro.
- 189 While no gay-positive legislation has ever been approved in the state legislature, Herzenberg decided in 1989 to make an effort to "find the minimal" pro-gay proposal that might, after incorporation as a preamble into the Chapel Hill town

charter, nonetheless be approved (as was required) by the state legislature. However, someone in the legislature objected to the inclusion of the phrase "sexual orientation," and the effort did not succeed.

- 218 What the Orange Gay and Lesbian Association might propose in the near future in the way of gay-positive local ordinances; in this regard he mentions that the furthest they ever went was ca. 1991 when the 300-odd attendees of the Orange County Democratic convention approved a gay marriage proposal with what seemed to be only two or three dissents. Both the Chapel Hill and Carrboro town councils have voted unanimously this year to continue asking the Orange County Commissioners, indefinitely, to request of the state legislature that it approve model legislation localizing anti-discrimination authority at the county level for Orange County, and the County Commission, by a vote of four to one, have agreed.
- 240 Further discussion of the move "to localize" civil rights legislation. Orange County asked the legislature for local anti-discrimination authority, including an anti-discrimination provision covering sexual orientation, but it was this particular provision that the legislature struck out before otherwise approving the request. Herzenberg's best guess, after the "setback" of the 1994 elections, is that it will take eight or ten years before such pro-gay provisions are approved.
- 274 Discussion of the nature of the political opposition confronting gays. Generally, both nationally and within NC, black political figures have been quite supportive of gay-positive efforts. "Whites have been the problem" -- the Orange County Republican Party certainly has not been supportive.
- 367 Reflections on his view that gays and lesbians, in a sense, as analogous to an "immigrant group," insofar as their relation to the remainder of the political landscape is concerned.
- 482 He mentions that Lightning Brown would probably recall the events of 1984, when Helms attacked Herzenberg and Brown during the debate and Bob Windsor also attacked them in his local paper, with considerably greater bitterness. Brief biographical sketch of Lightning Brown.
- 569 [Interviewer's mention that Herzenberg himself was a founder of the following organizations: Lesbian and Gay Democrats of North Carolina; Triangle Gay and Lesbian Alliance; North Carolina Pride PAC for Gay and Lesbian Equality; and the Orange Lesbian and Gay Association.]
- 583 [End of interview. Side B of Cassette 3 is blank.]