

PARTIAL TRANSCRIPT: Interview with Nancy Agnew and Karen Dold  
Founding members of the Common Woman Chorus  
Conducted March 13, 2007

Transcript begins at 00:00 of the recorded interview.

Code: NA = Interviewee Nancy Agnew; KD = Interviewee Karen Dold;  
JW= Interviewer Jenny Womack

**JW:** This is a recording with Nancy Agnew and Karen Dold at their home in Chapel Hill, North Carolina and the interviewer is Jenny Womack. We're discussing today the founding of the Common Woman Chorus and Nancy and Karen's involvement in that. So (addressing interviewees) I would ask you all, just if you would, to talk about what you remember about those early days of the Chorus – how it came to be? Who was involved in it?

**NA:** My veriest – very earliest recollections were – that I had been living here for about six months and I really missed a Chorus that I was in, in Kansas City. And so as the new school year approached, I said "I'm gonna put" – there was something in the old days called the Newsletter – "I'm going to put something in the Newsletter – surely we can find a group of people who would like to sing". And so I got a little two line written thing and put it in the Newsletter, and somebody else who had been in the chorus in Minneapolis – I think that one's called Calliope – also put something in that very same issue. We didn't know each other.

**JW:** Two separate ads?

**NA and KD:** Two separate ads. In the same issue.

**NA:** And so I called her and said "I'm interested in starting this chorus" and she said "I'm interested in starting this chorus" and so we talked a little bit about our respective choruses that we had come from. And so we said, okay, well let's have a formative

meeting. And we did it at the YWCA that used to be in Durham where TALF used to meet, on the porch and twelve people came. And her name was Barbara Anderson. And besides Karen and myself and Barbara and LeeAnn and Miriam, who already mentioned, I remember Pat McKenzie, and Judy Winston and Libby Gell and the woman whose husband was killed in the Greensboro Communist Worker's Party thing – I can't remember her whole name now. And several other people but I can't remember their names. And Barbara had brought some music from her chorus and I had brought some music from my chorus – that is to say, the Kansas City chorus and the Calliope chorus – and we just started with three pieces of music and a gig that was coming up in early November I think it was, or the end of October, at the War Resistor's League – Laura Dry was another name.

**JW:** How was that - that was already a gig for whatever chorus you formed, or?

**NA:** Somebody knew somebody who wanted to do some sort of a program and there was a War Resistor's League program happening and somebody said "I will call and get us –" It was sort of, to sort of to jump-start things. But I don't remember who was the contact for that -

**KD:** Libby?

**NA:** Might have been Libby.

**KD:** Libby was one of the more politically active of our first members. I do remember that.

**NA:** Yes, very politically active. Libby and the woman whose husband was killed at the Greensboro thing – I feel terrible for not remembering her name – she was little and blonde.

**KD:** It was twenty-four years ago - this is okay. (all laughing).

**NA:** But anyway, right away, there were some people who were there who were lesbians, there were some people who were straight but *very* politically active, as in Communist Worker's Party people, and then there were people there because they mostly wanted to sing and be with people who sang.

**KD:** That would have been me.

**JW:** That would have been Karen. You mentioned two things that I wanted to ask more about. One was the Newsletter - if you can sort of say what the Newsletter was -

**NA:** (laughing) Okay, that was in operation when we moved here. And it was basically a - a series of articles that came out monthly that was put together by, I believe, the Triangle Area Feminists originally-

**KD:** As far as I know-

**NA:** They never did come up with a name for it besides "The Newsletter". And it involved - at it's best it had articles and little short classified ads and then also flyers - your group could put a bunch of flyers in, and so you would bring the 200 or 250 flyers *and* help at the stuffing party that happened on Sunday afternoon at 4 if you wanted your thing to go in. So you had to pay ten bucks and provide a stuffer for that. And it was in operation for years -

**KD:** Years. Over twenty years I think.

**NA:** You know, at various points it was really professionally done - I mean, it was really nicely done - and at other times it was stuff that was sort of photocopied off of a typewriter.

**JW:** So you were - ?

**KD:** Every month also included a calendar which you didn't mention –

**NA:** That's true, I'm sorry –

**KD:** So you could scan all the - mostly lesbian events, I believe – concerts, meetings, I suspect AA meetings-

**NA:** Potlucks and potluck and potlucks.

**KD:** So every month we got in our mailbox, in a brown wrapper – so you paid more or less for the brown wrapper?

**NA:** You paid more for the brown wrapper.

**KD:** There were two subscription fees.

**NA:** It was like five bucks for the regular fee and ten bucks for the brown wrapper because that was mailed first class in an envelope as opposed to just stapled.

**JW:** OK, so this was in the early 1980s?

**NA:** Yes.

**JW:** And had the Newsletter been in existence before that time – when you talk about the twenty years?

**NA:** Yes, I think it started in the 1970s but I don't know when.

**KD:** I agree, but I don't know when.

**NA:** (To KD) Do you know who would know?

**KD:** No. We moved here in 1982 and the Chorus was founded in '83, and the Newsletter was well into its existence when we arrived in '82. I think in the late 1970s but I don't know the exact date, and I don't know who would know.

**NA:** Would Lucy know?

**KD:** Possibly.

**JW:** The other thing that you mentioned – and now I realize it the Newsletter was connected to it – was TALF – and that's?

**NA:** Triangle Area Lesbian Feminists.

**JW:** What group was that - how did that group connect to the Chorus?

**NA:** It didn't so much connect to the Chorus as several people in Chorus were active in TALF and, it was basically a group of people, and they would sponsor events. It was kind of a clearinghouse of information, You've got to remember that at *that* point – when we moved here – if we went to a concert to see, for example, we saw, who was that - the woman who did "Don't get me started"? The comic? Anyway, we went to a concert - I have a book upstairs! (laughing) And -

**KD:** Was it Alex Dobkin?

**NA:** No, no, no. No, no no, it was a comic. Anyway, everybody in the community was there, which was a whole 180 of us or something like that. And you went and you knew everybody's face. And that was kind of it for the whole Triangle as far as we knew. I mean, clearly it wasn't, but it was kind of it. And then people started moving in and so now we go to these kinds of events and I know one in four people or one in eight people or one in ten people. But when TALF was active it was just kind of a way to get with a bunch of other people that you knew were kind of like you in some ways. I say in some ways because of course there's the whole lipstick thing (laughing) – it all varies!

**JW:** There's a whole bunch of diversity in diversity.

**KD:** Diversity within diversity.

**NA:** So I would say TALF didn't necessarily actively have anything to do with Chorus, but I believe the first meeting happened on the steps of the Durham YWCA which was

also where TALF met and did events.

**KD:** We went to a number of dances there, and -

**NA:** Yeah. Now it's a daycare or something. I don't think it's connected at all - it was just basically a big house.

**JW:** OK. I have just recently heard from some other women doing some storytelling about a lesbian-feminist community that existed in Durham in the '80s in particular where a lot of people lived communally and had - and I didn't know if TALF was related to that in any way, but it doesn't seem like -

**NA:** I 'm not sure that it was -

**KD:** No, I don't think so. Now it may be that members of TALF were also members of that community - probably there was some overlap of people. I'm just speculating but again the community was very small at the time.

**NA:** There was a lot of crossover.

**KD:** It's probably - everything is relative. We came down from Boston and at the time I wasn't out in Boston, but you (addressing NA) were out for a couple of years. There was a huge community in Boston so coming here it felt really small. On the other hand if you came from a small town to here it felt really big, so it is all relative. There was a community here - you could find them and you didn't actually have to look too hard.

**JW:** And Durham seems to have been the center of that community - at least as far as what I've heard?

**KD:** Well, we lived in Durham, so -

**JW:** You don't have a sense?

**KD:** We first moved here, we moved into a part of Durham that was just outside of

Research Triangle Park so I had a short commute to work, and we moved there on purpose to enjoy the commute to work so that we could spend a year or so going to Durham, driving to Chapel Hill, driving to Raleigh and just getting to know the communities before we decided where we wanted to live. There was another community in Raleigh – we went over to Raleigh to the -

NA: A totally different bunch of people –

KD: - to the Enos – not to the Enos - to the Unitarian church in Raleigh, was the center of yet another lesbian community. How much overlap there was with Durham I don't really know.

NA: There was some.

KD: Yep. And I'm not sure we ever really found a community per se that was located in Chapel Hill. I think people -

NA: Most people from Chapel Hill and Carrboro went to Durham.

KD: - were driving to Durham. But I'm not sure they were driving from Raleigh to Durham. At least not in our experience.

NA: Some did.

JW: So the Chorus seems like it was a combination of both people who had been in women's choruses and people who were politically active and saw music as a way to express that activism. Is that a fair statement?

KD: Yes, I would say it is.

JW: And do you – and maybe it's a little early for this question, but I guess over the evolution of the Chorus, do you see that continuing? Or do you see one group maybe having more of a presence than the other one as the Chorus evolved?



**NA:** It seems like the Chorus has evolved constantly. There were times when there would be like one token straight woman, it seemed, and she would very good-naturedly just ignore all the jokes about lesbianism or whatever. And there would be times when at least half the group would be straight women and I think some of the stuff would be more political as opposed to quote "reflecting women's lives" unquote.

**KD:** Which is in and of itself political –

**NA:** Which is, but for some people that's not political enough, if it's not anti-war or whatever, so I think it's kind of shifted constantly anyway. I know there was a time when it seemed like there were an awful lot of straight women – as much as two-thirds, which was a lot for that group.

**KD:** (to NA) I find your answer intriguing. I would never have answered that question in that way.

**NA:** Well, okay you answer it.

**KD:** I am, I am going to answer it in my own way, but I'm curious – (to JW) Do you mind if I ask Nancy a question?

**JW:** No, feel free.

**KD:** Let me back up and I'll answer your question first. My sense of the Chorus when it was first started was that it was very political. Not just for reflecting women's lives but wanting to get involved in making statements about peace and justice and racism –

**NA:** Yes.

**KD:** - and what not. Which was not really the reason I was there. So I was really struck by that being our focus because that wasn't why I was there. And over time I would say that that focus has ebbed and flowed (to NA) which you said but you were speaking



about a different kind of political emphasis. I perceive the Chorus right now as *much* less political than it was in it's earliest days. We both sang with the Chorus for the first seven years and then I was gone for – I'd have to do the math - thirteen to fifteen years and now I've been back for the last couple – and I think it's much less political now than it was very early on. I happen to- I like that shift. But I don't know if everyone would agree with me because what we do *is* political - it's just, the personalities behind the creation of it aren't as – I don't want to say they aren't as passionate, they're passionate about different things. Back in the early days there was a lot of: "we have to do this or else" and "please see it my way" or, or – yeah, business meetings were pretty awful.

**NA:** Awful!

**KD:** [to NA] My question for you is: The Chorus was co-founded by two separate people, through synchronicity as we've already mentioned. Were you interested in creating an organization that was as political as it was at the very beginning?

**NA:** Not necessarily as kind of mainstream political. You know, going to War Resistor's League rallies and Communist Worker's Party rallies and this kind of thing was not necessarily what I was looking for. I was looking more for singing music that reflected women's experience and women's lives – not necessarily lesbian women, but women. So, and that partly cause that's what I had been in, in Kansas City and enjoyed it very much and so I was just kind of finding a place to sing.

**KD:** Right, and the personality of the Chorus was an outgrowth of all the people who showed up at that first meeting. I think Barbara, the other co-founder, was much more, much more-

**NA:** Cause and issue oriented -

**KD:** -cause and issue oriented than you were, but as were a lot of people in the group. And as many feminist organizations were at the time and may still be - I don't know because I don't belong to any right now. Decisions were made by, hopefully consensus- it wasn't always, but that was the idea

**JW:** Painful consensus.

**NA:** Painful consensus.

**KD:** The painful consensus. So the group went where the majority of the group wanted to go and some of us just went along for the ride because I wanted to sing and I wanted to be with a group of women.

**JW:** This just brings up so many questions, because I think about - what I've always been curious about with the Chorus - is how music is the vehicle for political activism in a sense even if it is a bit underground sometimes, but it also sounds like the political activism could have served to maybe discourage some people who wanted to express themselves through music from doing so because they weren't necessarily a part of the political - bigger political sphere. I don't know if that makes sense.

**KD:** It does make sense. I don't know if that has ever happened. I could picture that it might have happened, but I don't, I know I don't recall details from that period well enough to be able to say if somebody showed up for three weeks and disappeared because they said - I don't know. But, the business meetings were such that it may have happened.

**END OF TRANSCRIPT:** 16:18 on audiotape