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U.16 Long Civil Rights Movement: The Women's Movement in the South

Interview U-0497
Connie White
16 August 2010

Abstract – p. 2
Field Notes – p. 3
Transcript – p. 4

ABSTRACT – CONNIE WHITE

Connie White grew up on a farm in Loudon County, Tenn. in the 1950s. She became active in the environmental justice organization Save Our Cumberland Mountains in the 1970s and later served as President. Connie White discusses her family's history in East Tennessee; her childhood and growing up on a farm; education and racial integration; her family's political beliefs; being a working-class student at the University of Tennessee; protesters at the Billy Graham speech at Neyland Stadium; influential professors at the University of Tennessee; women's studies at the University of Tennessee; courses in religious studies; becoming a member of Save Our Cumberland Mountains in 1977; activism with Save Our Cumberland Mountains; attending workshops at the Highlander Research and Education Center; women's roles in Save Our Cumberland Mountains; anti-racism workshops; identity as a southern, working-class, white, feminist woman. This interview is part of the Southern Oral History Program's project to document the women's movement in the American South.

FIELD NOTES – CONNIE WHITE

(compiled August 16, 2010)

Interviewee: Connie White

Interviewer: Jessie Wilkerson

Interview Date: August 16, 2010

Location: Connie White's office at the Center for Literacy Studies, UT-Knoxville

THE INTERVIEWEE. In the 1970s Connie White joined the environmental justice organization Save Our Cumberland Mountains, eventually serving as president of the group. She is currently the Associate Director of the Center for Literacy Studies at the University of Tennessee.

THE INTERVIEWER. Jessie Wilkerson is a graduate student in the Department of History at UNC-Chapel Hill, currently conducting research for her dissertation which will explore social justice activism in southern Appalachia, with special attention to women's activism, from the late 1960s through the 1990s.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW. Connie had a two-hour window during her work day to meet with me for an interview. Before the interview we discussed the Southern Oral History Program's project on the women's movement, and she mentioned a couple of book chapters that might be of interest: a chapter about Save Our Cumberland Mountains in *Fighting Back in Appalachia* (edited by Steve Fisher) and a chapter in *Neither Separate nor Equal* (edited by Barbara Ellen Smith), which includes an interview with Connie. We paused once towards the end of the interview as the machine re-loaded.

CONTENT OF THE INTERVIEW. Connie White discussed her family's history in East Tennessee; her childhood and growing up on a farm; education and racial integration; her family's political beliefs; being a working-class student at the University of Tennessee; protesters at the Billy Graham speech at Neyland Stadium; influential professors at the University of Tennessee; women's studies at the University of Tennessee; courses in religious studies; becoming a member of Save Our Cumberland Mountains in 1977; activism with Save Our Cumberland Mountains; attending workshops at the Highlander Research and Education Center; women's roles in Save Our Cumberland Mountains; anti-racism workshops; identity as a southern, working-class, white, feminist woman.

Interviewee: Connie White

Interviewer: Jessie Wilkerson

Interview date: August 16, 2010

Location: Knoxville, Tennessee

Length: 1 disc, 1 hour 9 mins

JESSIE WILKERSON: This is Jessie Wilkerson, and I'm in Knoxville, Tennessee with Connie White, and it is August 16, 2010. So, Connie, I like to start off with asking people what their early childhood experiences are, where they come from, what your family was like.

CONNIE WHITE: Okay. Well, I didn't expect that question, but that's a good one. I come from a farming family. My people had land back five generations. It's where I still live, actually, where I was raised and still live, where my husband and I built our house on that same land, but you know farming doesn't pay the bills, so everybody also, both my mom and dad had other jobs. My dad worked for the TVA, and my mom worked in factories. Later on when I was grown, she got a job at Oak Ridge, which really changed the family's economic standing a lot, but when I was little, it was not like that. We didn't have a lot. So I lived out in the country and had a long bus ride to school, grew up in the Baptist church. My mom's people are actually from the mountains of western North Carolina, Avery County. My dad's people were originally from Greene County, Tennessee, but moved down to the edge of Roane and Loudon County, where our land is, which they always thought of as the land of milk and honey because the corn grew good

Connie White

there. That's what I heard. My mom and dad and their people didn't really, mostly did not have much education, but it was always important, and it was a priority for my mom and dad for us to have a good education. So I always knew that I would probably go to school, even past high school, even though it wasn't really all that typical at all for my family or most of the people that I grew up around to do that.

JW: How many siblings do you have?

CW: I have one brother and one sister. My brother's two years older and my sister came along ten years after me, so in a way she was sort of like mine to raise.

JW: What kind of factory did your mom work in?

CW: Shirt factories, mostly. Before the textile industry left this area, there was always some kind of a clothing factory, a hosiery mill. She worked in several different places while I was growing up, and there was periods of time that she didn't have a job, but mostly she worked in factories.

JW: I just had a question, and then it left. Oh, what school did you go to and what was your early grade school education like?

CW: I went to Kingston Elementary School. I guess I think of it as fairly unremarkable. A big event I can remember is when schools were integrated in Roane County when I was in the fifth grade. Mostly my parents knew my teachers. There was some connection or another in the community or something. I don't know. I think of it as just being fairly typical. I did okay. I loved to read and that helped me a lot.

JW: What was that process of integration like?

CW: You know, I don't remember a whole lot about it, except just that when I was in fifth grade, black kids came to school, and it doesn't seem to me like there was

Connie White

very much uproar among the children, at least I don't remember it. I do remember my sixth grade teacher slipped and said the n-word once, and sort of got all upset and flustered with herself, you could tell. That's really the only sort of public incident that I remember at all about it. I remember the black kids being just pretty much keeping to themselves and they were most definitely a minority there and pretty isolated. We were pretty much separate, even though we were in school together.

JW: Was that your first time spending a significant amount of time around African Americans?

CW: Yes.

JW: Were your parents very political? Were they politically active in any way?

CW: No, not much. My mother was raised Republican, which she still is even to this day. My dad was a Democrat because his family converted to being Democrats, even though I think earlier than Roosevelt's time they were Republican, I believe, but with the New Deal and all, I think they pretty much then became Democrats. A lot of them reverted back to being Republicans, but my dad never did. He was always a Democrat. Not much activism. They pretty much voted when the polls were open, and they argued some about candidates, but it wasn't present in my life that much, political stuff wasn't. I don't remember a lot of discussion about issues or what the president had to say or our legislators. I don't really remember much about that or even very much about any political stuff when I was growing up, no.

JW: Can you talk about the process of going to college, how you decided to do that and how you ended up at [the University of Tennessee]?

Connie White

CW: Well, yeah, I mentioned that I pretty much always knew that I wanted to go to school, and I felt pretty focused on getting to college, even though a lot of the people I knew weren't doing that. And in fact, I even got out of high school early in order to get started on college because I did feel like by the time I was a senior that [high school] was kind of a waste and that I wanted to go on. And so I entered Roane State Community College early, before I finished high school, and I started going there and got two years worth by the time I was eighteen and transferred to UT when I was eighteen and a junior. I had a good experience at Roane State, academically and socially and in every way, really. At UT, it was--. Oh, my gosh, it was so much different. I was living on my own for the first time, and I worked at the dietary department of the hospital to put myself through school.

One thing that my dad did for me when I was growing up that really had a whole lot to do I think with feeling like that I would go to school was--he did this for all of his children--he bought or actually designated a cow for me and a cow for my brother. And when that cow, when our cow would have a calf, then that was our calf. And of course we were helping with the work and feeding and all, but still, we each knew our cow and the calves that they had. When we would sell the calves, then that would go into a bank account that was for school. And I remember that I had something like fifteen hundred dollars by the time I went to Roane State, which was a huge amount of money to me, I remember. And at that time, it seems like I had to pay like sixty dollars a quarter at Roane State. I had a work/study scholarship, so I didn't have a whole lot of expenses. Anyway, I got to be a junior at UT and still had most of that money, and so I worked my way through, and with that and my cow money, I made it all the way through.

Connie White

And let's see, I guess I got my B.A. when I was nineteen and maybe turned twenty the next day or something like that, but I stayed working at the hospital because I wanted to start a graduate program, which I did pretty quickly after that, because employment didn't look too promising. And plus I think I just didn't know what direction to go in, so it's always a good idea to go to school when you don't know what to do next.

[Laughter]

JW: And you were young when you got your bachelor's.

CW: Yeah, yeah, so that's how it happened for me.

JW: Were you pretty much working and going to class, or were you getting involved in campus organizations?

CW: No, I really, I just worked and then going to class. In fact, I remember thinking when I was a junior, then senior, an undergraduate at UT, that it felt more like my life was about going to the hospital and putting food on the plates. You know, that's what I did every day. And it felt more like my life was about that than being a student actually, but I managed to make okay grades and I got through it. And I'm not really sure, [but] I think a lot about how it's different for kids that don't work or whether the trade-offs, the things that you miss out on when you work, but also the things that you get when you get a good feeling when you know that you've done it yourself. And I do know that, that I did it myself. So that's a good feeling, but I did miss out on a lot. I didn't do any kind of extracurricular activities at all, but I did have a class or two actually that was really political in nature, in the sense of it politicized me more and made me look at events differently. I had several religious studies classes with Charlie Reynolds, who at that time was kind of at the center of a lot of controversy at UT. One thing that I

Connie White

remember happening was when I was probably about a freshman or sophomore in high school--you know I was raised Baptist and we went to church a lot--some of the people in my church, which was a little country church, really got uppity and decided that we would go sing in the Billy Graham choir when Billy Graham came to UT over at Neyland Stadium. So we did that and there were protesters--you might remember having read about this. There were anti-war protesters, and it was a really political event. And I don't remember having a whole lot of my own thoughts about it, although I do remember not necessarily accepting what I was hearing all around me, which was how awful it was that these people were protesting. Dr. Reynolds was involved in organizing some of those protests, and so just a few short years later, I found myself not singing in the Billy Graham choir anymore, but being on that same campus, that same place, having classes with that teacher who organized those protests and thinking, "Wow, I'm in a really different place than I was just a few short years ago." His classes really helped politicize me a lot. Then just a little later, after that, I had Dr. Sharon Lord for a couple of classes, and she was all about the women's movement. So not outside of class so much, but inside of class things were happening.

And I know I was open to all that because of my dad. He was a person who--. He read a lot, even though he wasn't educated. He's a very smart man and he didn't just accept what people told him, and I remember him being sort of anti-authoritarian and kind of not wanting to just do something because--. For instance, I remember he kind of was always saying things about the police having too many powers and questioning military stuff, even though he was a veteran himself, and sort of things like that. And I know that that gave me an openness to looking at things differently, as well as awareness

Connie White

of what money does for you and [I was] a little bit of being politicized about--. You know, my family didn't have money. I didn't have money, but what you might do to equalize power, like join a union, for instance, or some things like that. So even though there wasn't much activity outside of school, I guess I did have some experiences that sort of brought me to that point.

JW: Was your dad in a union?

CW: Yes, he was a member of the IBEW [International Brotherhood of Electric Workers]. And it was important to him, although I don't think he participated that much in activities. It was important to him. He understood what it meant, and he understood why it was important. I really, it was so important to me to put that in his obituary when he died, that he was a union member. I had to call them to get the number and everything, the local number and stuff, but, yeah.

JW: In those classes you were mentioning, like in, it's Sharon Holland, is her name?

CW: Lord, it was Sharon Lord.

JW: Sharon Lord.

CW: I don't know if she has the same name now, though, but anyway, she went to different places. I haven't kept up with her exactly.

JW: What was she teaching?

CW: A women's studies class. What was the name of it? I don't know.

JW: So they had, so there was a women's studies class in the '70s.

CW: Yeah, I think it was one of the first ones here, I'm pretty sure, and that would've been in probably [19]74, yeah, '74, maybe, '75, something like that.

Connie White

JW: Can you describe any memories you have from that class?

CW: I actually don't remember very many of the activities. I remember that we were reading *Our Bodies, Ourselves* and I think that was the first edition, and a lot of other books by people that remain famous in the women's movement. I can't remember the titles, but the reading was really exciting to me. The discussion was exciting to me. Sharon Lord was a very polarizing presence. I'm not sure what I'd think about her if I met her today as a human being, but I do know that her politics were exciting to me and made me really think about things in a different way, so that even when I married in 1976 I kept my own name. And I know that was a direct result of having heard about that, that you could do that, in that class, and that was a big deal for all my family who didn't think it was a very good idea, keeping my own name. It was exciting times. I think I only got to have her for one class because she moved away pretty quickly, but it was a good experience for me.

JW: And then in your religious studies class, what was it about that professor or his style that was really influencing you?

CW: Actually, he reminded me of, when in my little country church, every once in a while when we would be between preachers, there would be professors from Carson-Newman [College] coming down because we were actually were a member of the Southern Baptist Association, the church that supports Carson-Newman. And even though we were like I said little, country, we had hollering preachers, you know, and people speaking in tongues occasionally and all that sort of thing, but we were still a member of the association and so they'd send these preachers. Most people in church did not like that, when we had them, but I really loved it. My dad loved it, too. I remember us

Connie White

having lots of good conversations about stuff, because they would talk about it in a different way. They'd talk about historical context of things and cultural things, although I'm sure we weren't calling it that, but that's what it was really, and the messages behind the words in the Bible, and just really interesting things, good things, things that people who know stuff would know. But that's what it reminded me of when I went to Charlie Reynolds' class. It was like here's somebody who had just a totally different outlook and connected up current events to religious messages, spiritual messages, and just had a very progressive outlook, which I wasn't used to hearing. It was just fascinating to me. I loved it. I took several of his classes. I took some other religious studies, too, but they weren't as inspiring to me.

JW: Being in the Bible Belt, and I'm sure a lot of students at UT--. I mean I had similar classes at Carson-Newman, and for myself I can remember students not always being open to those professors, and I wonder if you remember there being conflict in those classes or around those professors.

CW: You know, it seems like that there surely would have been, but I don't really remember it. And I don't know if they were just so well known that people who didn't agree didn't take them. I don't really know. I don't actually remember conflict in the classes. Maybe it was there, but I don't recall it.

JW: You mentioned the protestors at Neyland Stadium, and that just made me wonder if you had, what your knowledge of the Vietnam War was, if you remember protests or if you were engaging in anything like that.

CW: No, I wasn't really engaging in any protests. And I don't--. My biggest connection with the war was when I was at Roane State in like '72. There were lots of

Connie White

returning veterans. I wouldn't be able to characterize them, their politics, as one thing. I mean I think there were people who-- I think they thought different things about the war, but I do remember being very interested in talking with them and hearing what they said and wearing a bracelet that had a person's name on it that was missing in action, and, you know, little gestures like that, but I never participated in a protest. Now I would read about them and I was interested in them, and I think I probably even then thought, "Well, that's kind of an exciting thing to do," but I didn't do it myself.

JW: So, you went on to graduate school?

CW: Mm hmm.

JW: And what was your degree in?

CW: The undergraduate [degree] was in psychology, and I thought I wanted to be a college counselor, so it was actually in student personnel. The first master's was in student personnel, but I didn't work in that area. Actually, my first job was for what's the department of human services, social worker job, basically, and I did that just a short time, just a year. And then I moved to Morgan County to work at a place called Plateau Home School, which was sort of an alternative school that was being run by the Morgan Scott Project, which was kind of a-- It was a church-supported project, but it was sort of the progressive-- I'm not exactly sure. It was not-- I think it was UCC supported, but some progressive denomination, but anyway, that's when I became a SOCM [Save Our Cumberland Mountains] member. Actually, [it] was in 1977 when I moved to Morgan County and saw strip mining and was around it for the first time. I guess I knew of it sort of because just being in Roane County, just the neighbor to the south, but that was the first time I really lived with [strip-mining] was in Morgan County.

Connie White

JW: Can you describe the first time--? Do you remember the first time that you saw strip mining or learned about it?

CW: Yeah, well, when I was in Morgan County of course it was all around, and we actually first lived in Deer Lodge, which there wasn't daily--. I mean I didn't see it daily in Deer Lodge, just going back and forth from work to home, but the second year we were in Morgan County, we moved to Petros. I most definitely lived with it all the time in Petros because it was all around. And the creek behind our house was filled up with silt and they had to dredge it sometimes, and there was all sorts of--. You could see slides everywhere and there was all sorts of effects of it, and mountains just brutalized. It was all over the place there. And I went to my first SOCM meeting in 1977. And I remember being just so impressed by the people that I met who were were speaking out and the staff people from SOCM were, they were just, I just liked everybody. I was drawn to them. I agreed with what they were saying, and I wanted to be part of it.

JW: So how did you start to get involved? First of all, can I ask what your husband was doing at that time?

CW: Uh huh, sure. He worked at the prison in Petros. He was a counselor at the prison. He eventually got laid off from that job and he's been mostly in the area--. He went from working with adult incarcerated to youth, and at first, he was still in corrections in youth, and later on and still does work with foster kids, social services in the department of children's services. So that's sort of been his career all these years, but he was working at Brushy [Mountain State Penitentiary] at the time, and he was very much involved in the union there because that was a very active union. You might know some of that history. And he is a SOCM member, too.

Connie White

JW: So that's something that you two did together when you moved?

CW: Yeah, we both were present at SOCM, although some years apart, but, yeah, we've had some similar experiences in the organization.

JW: So, what role did you take in that organization as you started to get involved?

CW: Well, let's see, everything, but not all at once. You probably already know this since you've talked to some SOCM people, but the SOCM organization is very unique, particularly at the time--. Maybe more citizens' groups are like this now, but at the time I think it was very unique in that it pretty much always paid a lot of attention to leadership development, so it wasn't just about the issue. It was always about helping people become, develop a capacity to speak for themselves, to do the research, to think for themselves, to do all of the steps it takes to become more empowered yourself to decide about, have a say in your own destiny. So it was always about that in SOCM, but I didn't really see that right at first, but there were just all these little steps that led up to it. I think it's probably a lot of the same steps that a lot of people go through when they have a transforming experience. You start out small, so you bring something to the potluck that you have after the meeting and you might take somebody to the meeting. You might take some notes while you're at the meeting. You might eventually make a phone call about some issue or about seeing if somebody else is interested in working on the same issues. I don't remember what eventually I started being, having an elected office in the organization, but it took a long time before I did that, and eventually I worked up to speaking at hearings.

Connie White

And it was particularly--I guess in the '80s--a pretty compelling experience because there were things like people getting threats and intimidations and even some violence at hearings and a kind of sense that you really need to support each other and stick with each other because there was these things happening. [For instance], Annetta Watson and J.W. Bradley got beat up at that hearing that time, and just things like that happening to make it intense. That's just what I remember about those early years. Some other kinds of galvanizing experiences-- I do remember the first time that I saw something negative about myself in the paper because of something that I'd said at a hearing, somebody disagreeing in a letter to the editor or something, and that was--. That felt terrible. That felt so bad. I remember thinking, "Oh my gosh. My family's going to see this." And in fact, I did get asked and somebody said, "I didn't think that was our Connie White that they were talking about." And yeah, it was me.

There were things like that happening, but there were also lots and lots of good things because there was lots of--. I mean looking back on it now I see there was lots of times that people validated me, others in the organization, for being willing to speak out or for just--. You just got lots of validation as well. Like Maureen O'Connell, I would say she probably is so much responsible for hundreds, I'm sure hundreds, if not thousands of women today in this area who were touched by the kind of validation that she gives people when they do something that's really hard and scary, and then you grow and learn from it. I remember some of the other early experiences with SOCM was learning how to lobby. Wow, that was a big deal. That was a really big deal, and having those experiences of going into legislator's offices and saying your thoughts and identifying yourself and sort of putting yourself out there, sometimes, a lot of times, be in positions that weren't

Connie White

very popular. Sometimes we won, but gosh we lost a lot, you know. Speaking in front of the county commission, again, not always popular positions, but learning how to be more effective at all that, learning about your own talents and what you have to give and your contributions that you can make. And that was just so powerful, just so powerful.

And eventually, I guess maybe we were growing and growing in an understanding as an organization and there were opportunities to connect up to other people who, a lot of times it was around the same kinds of issues. SOCM had relationships with even people in the West that were doing strip mining issues, and there would be meetings--not very often because, of course, no organizations had any money, so it was hard to get together--but occasionally there would be a meeting. There were opportunities to go to Highlander Center, which I'm sure I never would've gotten to Highlander Center if it haven't been for SOCM, and because I was a member of SOCM I was sent to--. When SOCM was a member of the Southern Empowerment Project, I went to their board, and there were several rural coalitions that met in Washington. I mean I rode on an airplane, you know, it was pretty amazing and had all these experiences that I just, I'm quite sure I never would've had. I know I wouldn't have this job now, for instance. I would never have had the confidence, I don't think. It totally changed my life.

It was an incredibly transformative experience. It was like, years of this experience, so it was an opportunity to grow and grow and grow and find all the commonalities, and even though I like to think that I hope I would've had some of these same thoughts on my own, I knew I was stretched and challenged. For instance, we had anti-racism workshops because as an organization we came to realize that we would be more powerful if we forged partnerships and looked for ways to come together instead of

Connie White

being separate. And we always had good relationships with JONAH, which was a similar organization out in west Tennessee, so we did lots of work together and they gave us lots of challenges and we figured out ways that we could do things more effectively together than apart. There were things that I learned from the Overcoming Racism workshops that I would never have learned. In my professional life I've never had experiences that compelling. So it was just incredible.

It really was incredible and being at Highlander so much, and everything that I would do for SOCM would give me ten more opportunities in other--. Like I ended up on the Highlander board, and just what an amazing journey, really just amazing. It's because of a citizens' group that wasn't just about the issues, that was about people becoming more powerful and learning what you could do together. Another thing that SOCM always did that I think was at the base of its effectiveness was to really, really think hard about the place of staff and the place of members. And you'll see in a lot of organizations they're very much staff run and staff makes the decisions and staff does a lot of the work. It wasn't really like that with SOCM. Or anyway, we always tried for it not to be, and it was very member run and there was controversies inside the organization, but it kept being very member run. I just think all of that really contributed to what a powerful experience it was for the people who were part of it. I forget what our question was now. What are we talking about? [Laughter]

JW: No, that was great. [Laughter] So, as you were getting more involved and becoming a leader in SOCM, how was your family reacting to that or people you had known before you were engaged in that sort of activism?

Connie White

CW: Well, my immediate family, like my mom and dad and my brother and sister and their families, they were fine with it. I mean they got used to seeing me on the news and they were--. My dad would say things like, "Where are you going to preach next?" Because that's what they would talk about when I would give talks and stuff like that. They all called it preaching, and so we would all laugh about it, and actually they were SOCM members, at least for a while, even though they probably wouldn't have agreed with every position, but it was okay. It was okay. I mean people in my family pretty much did accept it. Like I said, not everybody agreed with every position, but it was okay.

JW: What years were you president of SOCM?

CW: Let's see. Sometime in the [19]80s, I think like maybe '88, something like that. Oh, it says I was president 1987, right there. I guess I was president for two years, probably '87 and '88, I guess.

JW: What were the major issues you were dealing with in those years?

CW: Well, there was always strip mining issues, but in the '80s there came to be lots and lots of waste issues, nuclear waste, medical waste. There was like waste facilities trying to come in to all of the communities around, in the rural area here because it was just thought I guess that there wouldn't be opposition and so there were lots and lots of those issues. That was also the time when we were really trying to do a lot of anti-racism work within our organization. We sort of grew to be committed to that within the organization and during about that time, and that was also about that time or maybe even a little before that when we started articulating a lot of things about leadership development and how important that was. That's what we were about just as much as the

Connie White

issues. And we started also a little before that time, but doing lots of it during that time, is connecting up with Highlander, the Southern Empowerment Project, Rural Coalition. There's probably a dozen organizations that we really tried to connect with, and so we were lobbying on issues. At every session we would be doing lobbying. We would be participating in hearings about strip mine permits always, and then lots and lots of hearings about waste facilities coming in and doing lots of stuff about that, so all those things.

JW: What was it like to get involved more politically, not just becoming more politically aware, but you were actually going and lobbying and seeing how things work in a way that I think the average person just doesn't ever experience. Can you describe what was most surprising about that?

CW: Most surprising, well it was really an experience to see the political process in action. It was surprising to understand that the legislators often don't really know what they're voting for and hadn't read the bill because it really is, in a practical matter, it's pretty much not possible even to read all the bills that you're going to vote on, and you have to depend on people you trust to advise you on it. That was really surprising for me to know that, to see how that happened. It was really surprising to me to see how thoughts on a bill can change, and it's sort of like you get critical mass and you'll see people change their positions, and you see how it is when you can get a lot of phone calls coming into offices and stuff, into legislative offices. All of that, of course, I knew nothing about. I knew nothing about how to craft a ninety-second argument on an issue. So I learned that and how to make points quickly and not be so angry or so emotional that

Connie White

I wouldn't be heard. All that was new and I don't know I would've ever known all that if I haven't have had that experience.

I mean I guess seeing myself as a person who had something to say was transformative. I think women particularly around here a lot of times, and anyway in those days--. It's a battle to overcome what you have to overcome to speak out, to think of yourself as a person who has something to say, to think of yourself as someone that's in charge of your own destiny instead of just reacting. It was wonderful to have a supportive place to come to that feeling about myself, and it's a battle of course that goes on even until today. But that was a good spot for me to learn a lot of things about what I could do and what I was capable of and what I could contribute. All of that was really surprising to me.

JW: When you would go to Nashville and when you would lobby, I'm just thinking there probably weren't a whole lot of--. There still aren't a lot of women in the state legislature. I assume there were women doing administrative work and stuff like that. Was that ever something that became apparent to you? Did it become an issue for the men who were the politicians? Did you ever become aware of yourself as a woman in a situation where you're doing something that they're not seeing a whole lot? You know, it's a woman speaking out.

CW: You know, I don't really recall that too much, and I think probably why I don't is because SOCM always had lots of women members and I always felt a whole lot like, there were always women leaders, and there would always be other women going to lobby just like I was. And I don't really recall that. Maybe I was thinking it, but I don't really remember it. I do remember obviously there were not very many

Connie White

women legislators, although there were some. Anna Belle Clement O'Brien was there, who was not always on our side at all, but yeah, SOCM always--. Even though there were things that happened, like one of our very first, very charismatic leaders, citizen leaders in SOCM was a male who probably had some fairly traditional ideas, although I never really came across that. So I don't know that I'd want to say that for sure, but right after he stopped being president, there were, you know, women leaders already had emerged.

And though there were times within the organization--. I remember some of the men in the organization recruiting my husband to come to hearings because they were looking for big, mean men to be at hearings because there were all these goons basically that the coal company would hire or maybe they didn't hire. I don't know, but anyway, they would be present, and their purpose would be to be intimidating, and then when there was violence at some of the hearings, so all of those things I guess sort of would make you think that people might think it wasn't a good thing for a woman to be a SOCM leader. But there were always women leaders, and I think probably because we had so many strong staff women who were, they wouldn't have had any of that. That was just always from the first--. There were people like Betty Anderson from the very first. There's always role models in the organization about strong women, so I don't really remember anybody in the organization or I don't really remember that feeling of anybody out of the organization very much--. I mean it didn't seem abnormal somehow. I know it seems like it would've, looking back on it, but I don't really recall it seeming weird to be there.

Connie White

JW: Can you say a little more about the anti-racism work, what that actually is? And what does it mean to dismantle racism consciously like that?

CW: Well, back in the, I think that work started in the late [19]80s and went on and goes on. When we had the Dismantling Racism trainings, I'm trying to think of--. We spent some weekend trainings where there were two days that we would come together and study basically, although it was a very oral thing, but there were papers involved and there was--. I even remember there was a picture of a cage and it was talking about how racism enslaves us all, and they were talking about--. That's the first time I ever heard the term "internalized oppression," and I could of course apply that to myself as a woman, too. I could understand it in that way. I remember there were some really incredibly good speakers from the organization that was providing the training, and I remember we even--. I can't recall the names, but they, even apart from coming to that training, they would work with the organization.

And I remember this one gentleman speaking at several events and he had this speech where he repeated the phrase, "I've got your back," and you sort of began to understand through all of these interactions that we were having and the training that we were having what it means to have each other's back and to have that level of trust. At the same time, we were having this relationship with JONAH and a lot of primarily African American organizations and Southern Empowerment Project that we were relating to as well, and it was--. I mean I guess I can never learn it all or do it perfectly, but you would get a glimpse of what it would mean if you haven't grown up with this racism. It was just an incredible experience and much, much, much, much more compelling than any academic experience I've ever had on that issue. It doesn't even

Connie White

come close. I don't know why really, but it hasn't ever even come close, and I've done that sort of thing a little bit in my professional life, I mean participated in it in my professional life. It doesn't come close to the experiences that I had within SOCM and at Highlander Center and Southern Empowerment Project. I just feel like I understand on a level, I'm positive I'm not totally there yet, but I understand on a level I'd never get to if I hadn't had those experiences.

JW: Can you say a little more about how you think it has shaped you to grow up in the South as a woman from a family who was on a farm and more working class?

CW: Well, I think I see everything through those eyes. I mean I think we all sort of shape our own reality in a lot of ways, and I do see everything through those eyes, and I can--. I think my compassion comes from having those experiences. Also, my mother has a mental illness, and I think that because of that and because of growing up working class, because of being a member of a citizens' group in that transformative way that it happened for me, I think it shapes everything that I do every single day. I'm more compassionate. I look for the good in people, at least on my good days I do. I think I see people's struggles. I think I see behind their actions sometimes, and I'm more able to do that. I'm more able to reach out. I'm more able to be tolerant. My politics are definitely, the way I vote is definitely, definitely impacted by it. So, yeah, I mean my personal life, everything. I'm very grateful for having a good job and a good education, but I'm always a farm girl from Roane County, and that's always a part of me, and I don't want it to go away. I notice every once in a while that I don't sound so Southern, I think, or so country, really so country as I used to. And I feel a little sad about that sometimes, but it impacts everything.

Connie White

JW: So you were mentioning earlier when we were talking about Barbara Ellen Smith's book that there's a chapter that's an interview with you where you talk about class and gender, I guess being a woman.

CW: Yeah.

JW: Do you want to say a little--? You don't have to talk about that interview or that article.

CW: Good, because I don't remember a whole lot of it, sorry. [Laughter] I'm sure it's good though. We should look it up.

JW: How do you think that class has shaped your understanding of what women's issues are?

CW: Well, I don't know that I could be real articulate about it, but I mean the first thing that comes in mind is that money is power, being male is power, and those are kind of, have their own power, it seems like, that exists totally apart from anything else. So if you don't have money and you're a woman, I mean that's--. There are some things that that suggests that are in common, like that you aren't going to have any inborn advantages. You're going to have to make your own way in the world, and money, and I guess in some ways being a male. I mean it's sort of, I guess even now, you get the benefit of the doubt that you don't when you're a woman. In the same way money can connect you and make things happen and give you opportunities. You have to make your own when you don't have money. So I guess that sort of gives you an understanding, and the same reason that I think maybe women have, if they're very thoughtful and reflective will understand racism just because they've been raised women and they sort of know what that means maybe, at least a lot of women, if they think about it, they would

Connie White

understand that from their own experience at least a little bit. And I'm not saying those experiences are equal. I don't know that, but I think you would get a head start on understanding the experience of racism as a white person if you're a woman.

JW: You've talked some about being a leader in SOCM and you becoming politically involved had a big impact on you in sort of your, I guess, public life. What has it meant to you personally in the way you've engaged your own family and had your own life? I guess what I'm asking is on a really personal level, how has it affected you?

CW: Being in SOCM?

JW: Being in SOCM and being a leader and having those, like the experience of the anti-racism workshop, being able to have access to those things?

CW: In my own personal life, like with my family? Well that's a good question. You know I have the urge to say you would think that I would've figured out things a lot sooner because of those experiences. [Laughter] But it seems like I've had to get to be fifty-five to figure out a lot of things that--. Let's see. Let me try to make some sense here. It seems like that my journey has, it's taken a lot, it's taken a whole, whole lot to move me from being a person who is fairly passive and wants more than anything for people to just get along and don't fight and don't make me confront anything about you. And that's the kind of person that I naturally would be, and I have to fight that every day still, every day. And with my family, my husband, you know I really, I seem to have been born or at least there is just an incredibly powerful force within me that just wants to not make trouble and just help everybody and take care of everybody's needs, and I don't know where that came from exactly. Well I sort of do, a little bit, but I have to fight that. And I don't really want to be like that. I do want to be compassionate. I do want to be

Connie White

kind, but I want to be able to pay attention to my own needs, and it's taken years for me to get there, despite all those experiences.

And if I hadn't had those experiences, I'll tell you there's not a chance that I would be where I am now if I hadn't had those experiences because even yet I find myself like becoming startled at my position and saying, "Oh my gosh. How did I get here? I don't deserve this. I don't deserve--. How can I think that I can ask for a raise? How can I think that I can be firm in my opinions? How can I think that I can complain about something because that is so not what I want to do?" So a lot of times I'll just wake up and realize I am that person who can say her needs most of the time. I am that person who has a responsible job. I am that person who has got to the point of having a decent salary through my own efforts and my own insistence that, you know, pay me, and it still--. It surprises me. It surprises me that I am that person, and there are a lot of days that I don't live up to what I want myself to be as far as saying my needs. There are a lot of times when things are just easier if I just don't make a fuss, don't say anything, and I would like to do that, but mostly, mostly I'm not that person anymore. Mostly I will say what I need.

You know, it's always been much easier for me to speak out against injustice to somebody else than injustice in my own personal life, but I pretty much got to the point where I can these days. It's been a long, long journey. I wish I could say, "Yeah, I got there quick, and boy when I became a leader in SOCM or when I started going to Highlander or when I went to lobby and when I did those things, it just fixed me, every other part of my life," but I can't really say that, but I'm--.

[Tape cuts out at 1:02:08, comes back in at 1:03:01]

Connie White

JW: This machine uploads again, so if you don't catch it, it's just funny. A lot of times people will be telling a really important story and then it does it. So we just luckily paused right as it was happening. I guess one more question I have is if you saw the work that you were doing in SOCM as part of other social movements?

CW: Oh, yeah, I see lots of relationships there and lots of--. I mean I think you can't really work on an issue when at the base of most social issues is the thing about power and people having access to power and people using their power and developing themselves. And of course you immediately see all sorts of connections and issues that seemed pretty peripheral to your life, you can all of a sudden have a position on because you see how it is connected. So, yeah, I see lots and lots of connections. Yeah, I do. I mean I don't know if there's something you have in particular that you're interested in, or--.

JW: Well, our big question for the Southern Oral History Program is the women's movements and how--. I mean I think with the anti-racism work that SOCM did you can see how civil rights is, that movement, and the involvement of Highlander gets back to the civil rights movement. I guess the one for us that we're thinking about is the women's movement and then also gay and lesbian rights, if that was ever, if those issues around gender or sexuality were coming up in SOCM.

CW: I don't recall issues of sexuality coming up, but I do know that we created an atmosphere that if people wanted to say disparaging things, they wouldn't. I think we at least did that. I never heard any hate remarks in SOCM, and you know, SOCM's an organization of people that, like me, that grew up hearing all sorts of hateful things. So that's an accomplishment in itself, but I don't think we ever took that on in my memory.

Connie White

Gender, well, you know, I don't remember. It's like I just don't remember people ever saying, 'Women can't be president of SOCM,' because there were all those women who were president of SOCM or there was no leadership that women didn't take. So within the organization, I can't recall. Women spoke out. I don't remember us ever saying, "There's this we want to work for, the Equal Rights Amendment." I don't remember. That sort of thing never came up, I don't think, but I'm pretty sure that the experience of most people would be that as you work to increase your own power, your own capacity to speak for yourself, that you see the parallel, you see what you hold in common with other people who have been denied their rights or denied their power.

JW: So it sounds like a more organic process that was taking place.

CW: Yeah, yeah.

JW: My last question is do you consider yourself a feminist?

CW: Yes, I do. I've always known that since that first college class I was telling you about. And yeah, I do consider myself a feminist and I call myself that.

JW: And what does that mean for you? How do you define being a feminist?

CW: How do I define it? I guess I would define it as not letting my gender limit me or not letting my gender prescribe any boundaries about what I can do or am capable to do. I guess that's how I would think of it. I would think that I would not think in terms of, "Women do this and men do that," and that I would give that same freedom and power to men to do what they wanted as I would to women to do, you know, non-traditional or unexpected things, that we wouldn't have those things that are barriers to us, and that's how I would think about it. Yeah, I do consider myself a feminist.

JW: Okay. Well, is there anything else you can think of that you want to add?

Connie White

CW: That's interesting, very interesting experience. Yes, I do consider myself a Southern ,farm girl, union member, Democrat feminist. Yep.

JW: Great, well thank you for doing this interview.

CW: You're welcome.

JW: It's been great.

CW: Thank you. Thank you for asking.

END OF INTERVIEW

Madeleine Baran, March 8, 2011

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