

Oral History #6
February 25, 1991
Faith Holsaert

PK: I guess I'd just like to start with some background information. Where was it that you grew up?

FH: I grew up in New York City.

PK: Where did you go to school?

FH: I went to Music and Art High School, which is a public high school. Actually its the school that Dotty Zellner went to, but she was four years ahead of me, and Barnard College.

PK: How did you initially become involved with the Movement?

FH: I wasn't a Red Diaper baby, but I was in sort of political circles. I grew up in Greenwich Village. I don't know that I can answer that with clarity. But I first met people connected with SNCC through, oddly, a summer camp run by the National Conference of Christians and Jews in New York.

PK: That is interesting.

FH: Yes it's very odd.

PK: So, what was it that made you want to work for SNCC specifically. What was it that made it unique and different as opposed to say CORE or SCLC?

FH: I went South between my freshman and sophomore years. Really, in '62, SCLC, in terms of actual people in New York, didn't have much presence. Of course we all knew who Dr. King was, but there wasn't much presence in New York. CORE, oddly, I thought of much more as a Northern organization at the time than

a Southern one. In '62 I don't even know what CORE would have been doing. By '64 of course, I know they were in Mississippi and Louisiana. I knew that they were one of the organizations that was involved in the series of Freedom Rides prior to the Freedom Rides in 1960. I knew they had a historical involvement and I had lots of friends who were in CORE, but as I say, people I knew were New York based and the Southerners I met were SNCC people.

PK: How long did you work for SNCC?

FH: I worked in the Southwest Georgia Project from October of '62 to early August of '63. Then I worked in the New York SNCC office while I was in college, through late '65.

PK: Could you describe your experience with the Southwest Georgia Voter Registration Project? And the role of the Church there and the basic goals of the movement?

FH: Briefly? The Southwest Georgia Project had both a direct action and a voter registration component. I would have to sit down and figure it all out, but the first four or five months certainly that I was there, I was in Albany working on both direct action and voter registration and also doing sort of office work for SNCC, bookkeeping and all that kind of stuff. All of our work was really based in churches, you know with the canvassing crews of high school kids, and all of that, all met at churches. The SNCC office was very small, physically, so we met there some, but really very little. When we moved out into the county -- Well, you probably know this, but SNCC in Southwest Georgia had projects in Terrell and Lee County and in the course of that year, we also opened one in Sumter County. Those movements didn't necessarily take place in churches as much, but certainly the local leadership often included church leaders. But I think what I remember about sort of the backbone of the

none of us washed many dishes and I think that's true to my experience. But also, I really remember Charlie Sherrod, who was certainly a sexist in many ways, insisting for instance that I learn to be a public speaker and in his words, "preach." Because that was part of a leader's role, and just because I was a woman didn't mean that I didn't need to assume that role, and being very firm about his belief that in ways like that we had to be equals. I was very impressed with that at that age, I was eighteen or nineteen. He and I had quite a few quarrels about my driving. I was a New York City kid and I didn't drive. He insisted that I learn, which was O.K with me. But if I was going to get a learner's permit, I had to get a white one, and I refused to do that. But again that was part of his belief that we were all as he would say, "soldiers in the army," and we all needed to be able to pull our weight. Which again, looking back on it, is pretty impressive.

PK: Do you think that might have had something to do with the violence of Georgia and what was going on at the time? Just the kind of violence that you all had to face on a day-to-day basis.

FH: Yes. I think that he wanted everyone to be a competent adult. And yes, I think he would have liked to have had another driver, although we never had enough cars.

PK: There seems to be a lot of struggle over cars in SNCC.

FH: I think everybody was always aware of both his or her race and gender. There was a phenomenon of the good white staff who when they were male tried to "outblack," be blacker than, and badder than their co-workers. In some ways for white women it was a little more complicated because some of the church, Southern Baptist values, about not smoking, not drinking, and all of that, seemed to be applied to both Black and white women in SNCC much more stringently than it was to our brothers. If you

movement and the leadership was that a lot of the unsung heroes, who really did a lot of the day to day work, really were women.

PK: The community women you mean?

FH: Yes.

PK: I was reading some of your field reports and it seems like there were some pretty amazing women there.

FH: Yes, and high school and even junior high school women did an awful lot, well of course, song leading, but also canvassing. There was an extensive network of young adolescents, most of whom were women, and the strongest personalities of which were women.

PK: That's interesting. Could you talk a little about basic gender relations on that project? Particularly relationships between both Black women and white women, and between women and men.

FH: I took, again this is early in SNCC's history, but I took the injunction that we shouldn't be sexually involved with our co-workers in the field pretty seriously and I think that freed me from some of what other people have written or complained about. Ask me your question again, it is such a big question, it is a little hard to think about.

PK: I was just wondering about gender relations and kind of relationships and interactions between women and men, and between Black women and white women on your project.

FH: I was talking with somebody about this just the other day. Although, obviously there was some sexism, in terms of who washed the dishes and all those that people have complained about. First of all I think Martha Prescod or somebody said in Hartford

were going to conform to local norms and show that you weren't an insensitive white Northerner, and you were a woman, you didn't adopt the big, bad dude. You probably read the Danny Lyons speech from Hartford. I thought some of what he said was funny, but I also thought, "oh, God, I remember all those white boys trying to act bigger and badder," and how disgusting they were.

PK: I was looking through the SNCC papers and I don't know if you remember this or not. But this sort of caught my eye. It was a letter from Ruby Doris Smith, there wasn't a date on it, but it must have been from around October of '62. It was a letter from Ruby Doris Smith to Reginald Robinson, from Atlanta. She said, "Guess who else is here -- Faith Holsaert. She's leaving this evening going to Southwest Georgia. Boy, what you men do to this woman." Do you remember what that was in reference to?

Move accurately, we were involved before I went South and for several years after, and continue friends to this day.
FH: Well, Reggie and I were involved before I went South for several years. And I know Ruby had a real problem with white women being involved with Black men in the Movement. I knew Ruby, because we were a small enough group, but I wasn't close to her, and I didn't know very much of her complexities because I didn't spend much time in Atlanta.

PK: It must have been something in reference to that, it just caught my eye. O.K., did you go to Waveland?

FH: To where?

PK: To the Waveland Conference in November of '64.

FH: No.

PK: O.K., why did you finally leave SNCC in '65?

*eg. correspondence
or calendars* *cf. H*

FH: I would probably have to look at some old things. But what I remember, I got married in the spring of '66 and I also graduated from Barnard that spring and moved to New Mexico. If I remember, I had probably quit working in the SNCC office the previous autumn. And of course, all of the Black Power stuff was happening. I live in West Virginia, to a large degree because I took very seriously the injunction that white people connected with SNCC should...

PK: Work with whites?

FH: Should find out what's going on in mainstream white America, right. We had a responsibility to our brothers and sisters to do that. I also felt like we had a responsibility to let people work things out in SNCC. So it was a combination of where my leaving New York City, and I really still stayed in touch with some people. Although I had many mixed feelings about my own whiteness, I never saw it as the affront that I think some people did. I was amazed at Hartford at the number of whites who had just lost total contact. I mean SNCC is my cohort, they are really the people, if I think about who I am and how I was shaped, I go back to those friendships and I've maintained some of them.

PK: So what are you doing now? Are you still organizing with whites?

*during the
SNCC years* *cf. H* FH: I'm working with the Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Social Justice which is a descendent of the Southern Conference Educational Fund. I've done lots of things in the intervening years. But, SCEF is the group that funded Bob Zellner. I met Anne Braden while I was in Southwest Georgia and she and I stayed political friends all of these years. During the Rainbow campaign in '88, we just said we'd really like to work together. So we raised some money to do that.

PK: That's great! I guess my final question is, I guess it's obvious that you think that women were pretty significant participants in SNCC. But why do you think that was the case?

FH: I don't know. In the communities, it was almost like a lot of those high school women just had the energy. This is really hard to do over the phone in such a brief period of time.

PK: Right.

FH: I guess I would have to say that I can't say and I would really have to think about it.

PK: O.K., Martha Norman talked a lot about social networks that existed in the communities. Do you think that had something to do with it?

FH: Probably, and a lot of the women who were very active, especially at the high school level, were parts of large families, of girls, actually. In Albany, there was the Christian family which had four daughters, the Gaines family had three or four, and a few families like that. I don't know if that, and the Church, of course. There do seem to be special friendships that have persisted among say SNCC women. I know that Martha is in touch with lots and lots of people, including myself.

PK: That's great. Is there anything else that you would like to add about your experience in SNCC or women's participation in general?

FH: Yes. I have no idea what your hypothesis is or the scope of your work. But I think that one of the dynamics that has been kind of cloaked in saying this is the difference between white women and Black women, is really a difference between central office workers and field workers, especially in the early days.

The Harris family of four activist women, one of whom, Rutha Mae, became a SNCC Freedom Single ASH

If I sat down and talked with you over a period of time, my experience and my feelings stack up on what some people seem to be positing as the Black woman's experience in SNCC. But I think that is because I was in the field.

PK: That's interesting because Betty Garmen also, she worked a lot in the office, but she wasn't thinking the same way that Casey Hayden and Mary King were. So I wonder how you all come together, since she wasn't in the field that much. That's interesting.

FH: Maybe it was politics.

PK: That might be it.

FH: Because I certainly came to have a pretty radical analysis as a consequence of my work in SNCC. Which I think again, some academics have kind of downplayed that. I think Martha is extremely articulate on that. We weren't all a bunch of spoiled, undisciplined children. We were pretty thoughtful.

PK: Well, I'll certainly have to think about that. Thank-you very much for your time and I will send you a transcript as soon as I get it typed up.