

TRANSCRIPT: PENNY PATCH

Interviewee: Penny Patch
Interviewer: David Cline
Interview Date: April 17, 2010
Location: Raleigh, North Carolina
Length: One audio file, approximately 58 minutes

START OF INTERVIEW

[00:00 to 00:17 not transcribed]

David Cline: This is David Cline and it is April the 17th, 2010, and I'm in Raleigh, North Carolina at the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of SNCC with Ms. Penny Patch.

If you would introduce yourself, tell us where you were raised, name, and age?

Penny Patch: Okay. Am I looking in the right place?

DC: You can just look at me, actually.

PP: Oh, look at you.

DC: Yeah.

PP: Okay, great.

DC: And we can just have a conversation.

PP: Perfect.

DC: Ideally we'll forget about this.

PP: Yes.

DC: It might not actually happen, but we can just talk to each other.

PP: All right. I'm Penny Patch. I worked with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee from 1962 to 1965 in southwest Georgia and Mississippi.

DC: And tell us where and when you were born.

PP: I was born in New York City in December of 1943 and I lived there for two years, and then my father came back from--. He was in the United States State Department, so he came back from where he had been in Moscow for the previous two years and shortly after he came back we went to China. So in 1946 I left the country and essentially didn't return to the United States until 1956, so about thirteen years. So eleven years of my childhood were spent out of the country.

DC: Very interesting. Did you have siblings?

PP: I had four siblings. One was born in northern China; one was born in Massachusetts; two were born in Germany.

DC: I wonder if you see that experience of living out of the country as informing-

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PP: Absolutely.

DC: --[your take on]--.

PP: It was completely crucial to my experience and to the choices I made, and I think the biggest part of it that's really important for this story is the part that relates to the Holocaust, because I lived, well a couple years in China when I was very small, a year in Czechoslovakia when I was five, six years old, and then six years in Germany in the direct aftermath of World War II and the Holocaust. My parents, they were a little--. My dad worked for the State Department and then he worked for the government

interrogating people in displaced persons camps. First they were looking for Nazis; very quickly that switched over to looking for communists.

So I went to German schools, learned to speak German fluently, and being a child that had been moved around a whole lot I did everything I could to kind of embed myself in the culture that I was placed in, and Germany was certainly the place I was the longest and when I was the oldest. But what did happen is that I found out about the Holocaust from my parents and from their American friends, and they took me to a concentration camp outside of Munich called Dachau when I was nine years old, which was a completing shocking experience for me. I still don't really know--. My parents did not process this with me a whole lot and I still don't understand about that, but what I did was I went to my friends, my German friends, and I said to them, "Do you know what happened?" They would say they had no clue because a great huge silence had descended on Germany at that point so my generation was not being told, and believe it or not, being there was no internet or anything, you could actually get away with this for awhile. Then a few times, you know, visiting my friends' homes, I asked their parents. It was--. [Sighs] It was really hard. I was about ten years old and I would blurt out something like, "How could you let all the Jews be killed?" I'm trying to sort this out. Later on I also found out that there were all sorts of people in my house that my parents--. It's like things got very fluid at a certain point and people who had been Nazis were suddenly not.

DC: Right.

PP: The other thing that precedes this is that throughout my earlier childhood, in China particularly--and also just my godfather was Jewish--there were a lot of Jewish

people in my life. I knew survivors and I don't think anybody thought they were telling stories in my hearing but I was a kid and I heard stuff. So it was a childhood that had this, I'm living in the midst--and actually having these friends, and their parents were nice to me, and I loved them, but apparently parents had been responsible for killing lots of people, and children, because they were Jewish. So I didn't resolve that, haven't resolved it in my entire life but I've done some other work in that whole field.

DC: And you're also in this situation where you're a little kid looking for answers from adults--

PP: Yeah, and they're not coming.

DC: --and they're not providing them.

PP: They're not providing them. So essentially I shut down and I stopped asking questions, I didn't say anything about it, but when I was thirteen my parents transported me back. Time to get roots, you know, so I and my siblings were taken back to the United States. I went to high school in New York City, and it was a high school that was eighty-five percent Jewish so I certainly didn't talk a lot about my German part. Essentially there was a lot of silence that happened for me around all of that.

DC: How did you feel coming--? I mean this is really the first I guess major time that you're living in the US.

PP: Yeah. We had made like quick forays back.

DC: So did you feel like an American,--

PP: No. [Laughs]

DC: --or something else? What did that mean to you?

PP: No, I totally did not feel like an American. I didn't. I made some kind of peace with it. I went to a school that worked pretty well for me. It was a private school in New York City named Dalton and it was a good--it worked out, except for the silence part about the fact that I could speak fluent German and had lived in Germany for six years [Laughs] and even loved some people who were German. That's all by way of--. Both the fact that I never felt quite American, or it's taken me decades, so I was an outsider, and I think that may not be so unremarkable amongst white people who decided to do what I did, and this Holocaust history and this connection to people in both the victim and perpetrator sides made it absolutely--. When the Movement presented itself right smack in front of my nose I was at Swarthmore College in--it really came to me in 1961, the first semester I was in college--I didn't remember having a thought about, am I going to do this, am I not going to do this. It was like being a bystander was absolutely not an option, so no questioning. My wonderful Swarthmore friends and colleagues from the Swarthmore Political Action Committee, I mean there were debates about whether civil disobedience was a good thing or not or appropriate or not, and I just absolutely had--there was no debate for me about anything.

DC: So there was a political action committee.

PP: Absolutely, at Swarthmore College in 1961 when I showed up on campus. I do not know how it got there but it wasn't very long before that was one of my extracurricular activities, and it was a political--. I mean, students were starting to move at that point and they were being inspired by the sit-ins. There was one student named Mimi Feingold who had been on Freedom Rides the previous summer, 1961, and she

came back to Swarthmore to school and spoke. I remember this big assembly that she spoke at. She's just this little person. So I listened to Mimi.

There were any number of people--. There already was a project going with the NAACP Youth League in Chester, which is a town right next to Swarthmore. These were young people who actually I believe were cafeteria workers at Swarthmore. But the Swarthmore students had managed to make a connection with the cafeteria people, and they combined on a project, and that project was to desegregate a roller skating rink in Chester that had black nights and white nights. They didn't have them legally but that's how it worked. So it seemed pretty quickly I was part of a test case, and two young black people went up and tried to buy tickets on what was known to be a white night, they were turned away, told things were too full up, and then I and another young white Swarthmore student--I know her first name was Dorothy but I have been trying to retrieve her last name for a long time--we then walked up afterwards and tried to buy tickets and were immediately sold tickets and let in. That became the basis for a court case, which I think was eventually settled in favor of the people of color [Laughs] of Chester, Pennsylvania. So that was my first sort of activist--.

DC: Was that your first close interaction with African Americans as well, or was that earlier?

PP: It might. You know I had moved through lots of cultures but I had very little, really little, contact with African Americans. There were a couple of black students at Dalton. One of them is Peggy Dammond, who's here, who actually we both ended up going to southwest Georgia in June of 1962, but she was in a class ahead of me so I didn't know her well. I didn't know--. My parents were liberal Democrats. I remember

even when we were overseas discussing the *Brown v. Board of Education* case, but I had no intimate connection to African American people at all, and only knew the [basic history], Civil War, slavery, and I'm not even sure what I knew in comparison to the average American because I had gone to foreign schools a certain amount of the time.

DC: You already said a great deal, I think, about what drew you to the Movement and your initial response upon learning about it, but were there other things that drew you in? What was your response to it, being a couple of young Swarthmore students getting involved in what could potentially have been a scary situation?

PP: Even in the limited Swarthmore Political Action Committee and NAACP Youth Group, even in that context there was kind of a camaraderie about it, and I just think that I was--. I know I was looking for community, absolutely a hundred percent sure of that, so the politics, the political action, all of that began to provide me a community. My family was very political but sort of liberally Democratic political. I'm not a red diaper baby, nothing that extreme at all, so [Sighs], yeah.

DC: Okay. So this was fall, 1961 that you started school?

PP: That was fall of 1961 when I started school, and then second semester some time, January, February, a couple of things started to happen. One, there were black students at historically black colleges and universities around this area, Morgan State, Temple, these students were organizing sit-ins all up and down the Eastern Shore of Maryland. And at some point they invited white students from the mostly white colleges around to join them, so we did, and there were lots. A busload would leave Swarthmore, and they would come from Haverford and Bryn Mawr, and we would all somehow end up probably in Baltimore, say, in some church, sleeping on the floor of the church. We

would come, whether it was Friday night, Saturday morning, I don't know, but it was kind of a weekend activity, and sometimes we would be arrested and then we would get bailed out and we'd go back to college and try and go back to class. [Laughs]

DC: Right. I'm wondering how the Swarthmore administration felt about this?

PP: Well, I will say they did way better than say the Spellman administration or probably also many of the other white colleges. I mean they are a Quaker school. They have some history. They were essentially supportive but at the same time I know they-- so there was no question about kicking us out of school or something for getting arrested. In fact they would come back and make it possible for us to talk to the student body, but we were supposed to be doing school work.

DC: Right. [Laughs]

PP: One thing I learned about Swarthmore is that I had to work very hard in that school just to get Bs, so I think--. I mean the first semester I did okay. By the end of the second semester, boy, I was really fading. I didn't fail anything and I think I got credit for everything but I was not--. I could barely hang in there.

DC: You had a lot else going on.

PP: I did. I absolutely did, yeah. The first time was St. Patrick's Day, March 17. We had a march--I have no idea how many people there were on this march but it wasn't huge, like thousands of people or anything--walking from Baltimore to Washington to raise awareness about the arrest and imprisonment in Louisiana of Chuck McDew, Bob Zellner, and Dion Diamond, and I got arrested for trespassing, I and one other person.

DC: Was this your first arrest?

PP: That was my first arrest, yes, so that's why I remember it,--

DC: [Laughs]

PP: --St. Patrick's Day, 1962, yeah. It was during that spring that I met SNCC people because they were coming up from the South, or there were SNCC people, like Reggie Robinson, who were in and around Philadelphia and Baltimore. And they were recruiting, and they were essentially trying to recruit black students out of college and into working for SNCC, and they were not particularly looking for white people, certainly not white women. But I did give them my name and they took my name and then, lo and behold, it probably was in May that I got a phone call saying we're going to try an interracial field project in southwest Georgia. I mean there was no application process; there was nothing. I guess somebody--I mean I met people a few times. They said, "Do you want to be part of it?" and I said, "Yes." I mean I didn't ask my parents or do anything like that.

DC: Right. Had you ever been south, into the deep South, before?

PP: I really don't think so. No, I don't. What did I know about the South? I'd read *Gone With the Wind* when I was about eleven.

DC: So were there others from the North? Were you part of a group that went down together?

PP: I was part of a group. Now people came from various places. I, Peggy Dammond, who had been at Dalton with me, and she's black, and Kathleen Conwell, another young black woman, the three of us flew down to Atlanta on a plane together. I remember all our parents took us to the airport and meeting them for the first time at the airport and getting on this plane and just going. There were other people who joined the project--bunches of them--I mean Prathia Hall, Ralph Allen, Bill Hansen, who was

already a SNCC person that came from somewhere and landed up there. Who else? Well, there were many SNCC people whom you know of at this point [who] at least circulated through southwest Georgia and were part of the beginning of that project. By that time Sherrod and Charlie Jones and Cordell Reagon had been there for over a year, so.

DC: And they were sort of the engine down there.

PP: Yes, they were the SNCC engine down there, and Sherrod, he was always the guiding force. He argued in a SNCC staff meeting, I think, for this project, this interracial project. And when I initially heard about this all I heard about was that it was really about black and white working together in equality, breaking down stereotypes, moving black people forward, also moving white people forward in some way or another. But actually later I got clear that there was a lot of pragmatism about this decision that had to do with checking out what would happen if you brought in white people and if things happened to white people and this got into the media. It was all an effort to get publicity and to get possible federal intervention, which was not coming when only black people were hurt. It just did not happen in the same way. Now Albany did--. Dr. King was there that summer and he certainly was generating a pile of media coverage and publicity, but I don't know whether Sherrod--. I don't know quite how much Sherrod understood about how much King would come in and then fly out, but anyway this is how Charles was trying to deal with a situation that he felt was going to go on for a long time.

DC: Did you have a sense of that at the time, of what--?

PP: That role,--

DC: That role of whites in the Movement?

PP: --that I was going to play? No. I don't think I really understood. I was eighteen. I mean I was really--. I wouldn't say I was clueless. I mean I had all this information about genocide so I knew really bad things happened, but I wasn't thinking strategically or tactically. I just had a ton to learn about everything when I came. I was really young and I was the only white woman at that point.

DC: Right. Can you tell me about when you first arrived and what that immediate community was, how many were there of you, where did you stay, just the practical--.

PP: We were a group of something like eight or nine, and initially Goldie and Bo Jackson in Albany put us all up in their house, and it was a small house. Then we got spread around. Sometimes there was a Freedom House that some people lived in. After a time I lived with a family named Sanders, and Mr. and Mrs. Sanders had one, two-- five--. I can get all of them: Margaret, Mary, Joyce, Sharon, Bobby. If I've forgotten somebody I hope not.

DC: [Laughs] That's fine.

PP: Yeah, and I lived with them for a good chunk of my time in Albany, and then also at a later time in Albany I spent some months living with Mr. Monroe Gaines and his family.

DC: So what was that like, living with these families and getting to know these people intimately?

PP: That was one of the better parts. I was so welcomed and people took me in, and I was only going to cause more trouble. For people who were already on the line to take a white girl into their homes was a big deal, but people did it, and I think--. Some of

my closest relationships in that community which exist to this day come from particularly those two families, of which the elders are now passed away but the young people in the families, who often--. The teenage girls were very active in the Movement and I was only a couple of years older.

DC: So you've maintained that connect and connection.

PP: Yeah. I didn't for awhile but in the last twenty-five years or so, yeah.

DC: So do you remember what kind of work you were put to do immediately?

PP: [Laughs] You know, we were in Albany and there was a big to-do going on, with Dr. King and all, and there were demonstrations and people being arrested, so I think it was something like making flyers and learning to work the mimeograph machine and then handing out the flyers. [Laughs] That's one of the first things that I remember actually doing. It probably was not too long before I was doing door-to-door canvassing on the black side of town, and often I would--. I certainly didn't go alone. I would usually be paired with a black woman, either one of my coworkers in the SNCC project or a local community person, and we'd go knocking on doors down these dirt roads in Albany, recruiting people to come to mass meetings or giving them information about this and that, starting to talk to them about registering to vote. It's very hard to keep track of exactly what was going on when. I came in June, and by sometime in July Sherrod had decided we were going to move ourselves out into the rural counties and leave the big Albany movement to do its thing. Then I initially lived with Mama Dolly Raines in Lee County.

DC: This is a legendary figure, but could you tell me a little bit about her, for the historic record?

PP: Yes, well this is a remarkable woman, Mrs. Dolly Raines. I'm sure she--. I mean she was older. Can I tell you if she was sixty or eighty at that point? I really don't know. She took in civil rights workers, she was a midwife, she had delivered babies all over the rural areas, and I was told she was delivering white babies as well as black babies.

DC: Is this Baker County?

PP: No, this is Lee County.

DC: Lee County, okay.

PP: I also know that at certain points when the threats got really bad she would sit on a chair by the window with a shotgun on her lap, so she was pretty tough, but she was also very connected to both the black and the white community. I mean midwives in the community are--. So that's what I can tell you about her. She fed us, she took care of us, but there was a point, and time sort of gets very weird here because I don't know the exact timing, but it probably wasn't more than a few weeks or a month before she asked the SNCC project to have me not stay at her house because she was getting all these telephone threats. They were just intolerable for her. She kept other black civil rights workers there, and I don't know if any of the white men were staying there. I think it was just girls. I mean she did survive, nobody [hurt her], she was not bombed out and her house wasn't destroyed at certain points like Carolyn Daniels, but she's gone now.

DC: So you had to find another place to stay.

PP: I did. Well, at that point they moved me back into Albany, and one of the things I've learned, but it's as much from reading old reports as it is from my own memory, is that there's some records of staff meetings in which we talked about how--

there was conversation about how I was struggling with, well, I thought we should be doing direct action and we shouldn't be out of Albany, and that I was actually expressing that I didn't want to be out in the rural counties. It's embarrassing to think about, you know, that I was sort of putting forth all this stuff and that anybody was taking valuable time to talk about it. But I do have this quite wonderful report to the SNCC office that Kathleen Conwell wrote--and we wrote long reports, [Laughs] very detailed--in which she described such a staff meeting and in which she identified that she thought my problem really had nothing to do with whether I thought that voter registration was less important than direct action, but really was all about that I didn't know where I fit in. It was not clear what to do with a young white woman who wasn't working like in the Atlanta office but was out in a field project. This was absolutely an experiment.

DC: Were you the only white woman out in a field project at that time?

PP: Yeah.

DC: Okay.

PP: This was Sherrod's big experiment. There were also young white men.

DC: Was Jane Stembridge still around at that point?

PP: She was absolutely still around,--

DC: In the Atlanta office.

PP: --but she mostly worked in the--yeah. She was there at the very beginning in the Atlanta office. Joan Browning came through Albany and was there briefly on the train Freedom Ride and other white women had kind of passed through but, yeah, I was it.

DC: [Laughs] You were a big experiment.

PP: I was a big experiment. I was the youngest one in the whole group.

DC: Did you go home for Christmas breaks or things like that, or once you were there were you there? How did that work?

PP: I don't think I went home--. I did at times go home. I didn't go back to school in September. I stayed until probably Christmas. I went home for Christmas and then I attempted to go back to Swarthmore for a couple of months and spent my entire time there recruiting people to go work for SNCC, or raising money, or just being as connected as I possibly could to what was going on in the Movement and totally by March or something I had just bagged it, and I went back to Albany. I stayed in Albany then I would say, March, April, May, June, July, August, into--we're now in 1963, right, so all through the summer and into November of 1963. Then I went north again and I worked in the New York SNCC office for a little while, and I know that's where I was when Kennedy was assassinated, which is really the only way I can identify that in late November of 1963 I was in New York City working for SNCC there. Then in January I was asked to go to the Jackson office in Mississippi and to help with organizing and dealing with all the paperwork and the applications that had to do with the summer project, so that was one of the main things that I was doing the whole winter and spring in the Jackson office, dealing with applications.

DC: For--?

PP: For the Mississippi Summer Project.

DC: Summer project, right.

PP: Then I was in the Jackson office through the month of June, through when [James] Chaney, [Michael] Schwerner, and [Andrew] Goodman were murdered, and then

July and August I worked in Greenwood. I think in Greenwood there was a Greenwood SNCC office and a Greenwood COFO office and one was above the other and I think I was working with the Greenwood COFO office, but do I actually know? I don't.

[Laughs]

DC: [Laughs] Right.

PP: Then after that I was sent to work in the aftermath of the summer project. I did go to Atlantic City so I was there in August of '64 and then in September I went to Panola County, Mississippi, northern Mississippi, another rural county, and spent a year there working in that county. There was a local movement there actually, Panola County Voters League, formed by some independent black farmers in 1959. And they were already trying to do stuff and then SNCC sent a project in, in the summer of '64, and I was part of the continuing of that project. I mean a lot of the summer project people left but I came--.

DC: You stayed for a year?

PP: Yeah.

DC: Who were some of the other people involved in that?

PP: In Panola County?

DC: Yeah.

PP: Let's see. Well, there was Chris Williams. He was a summer volunteer at the summer project. I actually later married him and we have a child, although we subsequently divorced. Pam Jones, Kathy [Amatniek], Buzz [Graham], Jeff Cowan, Claire O'Connor, Elaine--a lot of white women. I'm naming them partly because these are the people I've stayed connected to, some of them.

DC: Did you develop--?

PP: But the Panola County movement had these remarkable families who were very, very active in the movement. The most obvious one was Mr. Robert Miles and his wife, Ramona Miles, and they had a farm and they had founded the Voters League and they had civil rights workers staying at their house all the time. Then there was the Williams family, C.J. Williams and his family. Some of the people that I actually still have the most connection to was a family, their name was Nelson, Roland and Rosie Nelson, and they had five children, lived on the Hayes Plantation in Panola County and sharecropped and were just the leaders of the movement on that plantation. I ended up--. Again many white women in the Movement did spend a fair amount of time in offices because it was sort of the place where they would be the least inflammatory, but it kept working out that I was more out in the field, I mean certainly being inflammatory but--.

DC: [Laughs] Why do you think that was, by dint of personality or just how it happened?

PP: Clearly I have some push behind me but I'm not sort of a real obviously forceful, insistent--. I do not know.

DC: [Laughs]

PP: I can't answer that. Sometimes it's just circumstances and luck. In Albany Sherrod was bent on trying everything out. In Mississippi I did spend many months in Jackson and then in Greenwood in offices and then, boom, there was Panola County and it wasn't an office situation. One thing that happened in Panola, I was there long enough so the community really knew me. I teamed--. Chris and I, and we were both white, we were together in a relationship, we worked together, we worked together really well; this

sort of saved the community from thinking about, well, were we involved in interracial relationships, and I'm talking about the black community. So I actually think it was the best arrangement in the world because we were so well known and reasonably well trusted--Mickey and Rita Schwerner were another sort of similar situation--that we had access to everybody, so we would sneak onto the Hayes Plantation at night without the lights on and hide the car behind the Nelsons' and then people would come and meet in the Nelsons' and do organizing. I mean we did that sort of thing, but, I don't know.

DC: I'm struck by the similarity--. I'm curious what other similarities or differences you saw between southwest Georgia and this rural area in Mississippi. Of course I'm immediately struck by these strong farm families in both places.

PP: Oh, yes, and absolutely very similar in that regard, absolutely.

DC: But were they dealing with different issues in Panola?

PP: Well,--

DC: How would you compare them to--?

PP: --voter registration in both and voting in both. In Mississippi there was the challenge to the--there was the formation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party over the summer and we continued to organize around the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and there was a congressional election that came along that Mrs. [Fannie Lou] Hamer ran in, which was, I believe, after the Atlantic City challenge, so it was like a step further along by the time I was in Mississippi. One of the projects we worked on was an election that went on around the Agricultural--wait a minute--the ASCS Committee, which was an agriculture committee in all the counties in Mississippi.

And they controlled the cotton allotments, the representatives did, and of course they'd always been all white and we ran black candidates.

DC: Right.

PP: So it was 1962 in southwest Georgia and 1964/65 in Mississippi. By that time in southwest Georgia I think there was more work going on around cooperatives and things like that too, and in Mississippi one of the things we were working with was a Panola County farmer's cooperative, okra cooperative, which got off the ground and ran for some number of years. Yeah, so it was the same and different but further along, and still terrifying. But by 1965 the law enforcement at least pretty much had orders not to kill us, which was not true in 1962 in southwest Georgia, so again that was a shift.

DC: But even from '64 to '65 there must have been a shift.

PP: Oh, yeah.

DC: I imagine it was terrifying hearing the news of the murders in '64.

PP: That was absolutely terrifying and heartbreaking and it was--. Other people that we knew had already been murdered, people that we were connected to, but I have to say although Mickey and Chaney were officially CORE, I think, because that district was the one CORE district in the state, they were us, you know. Yeah, absolutely we were all--we knew each other and that was--. Yeah. It was terrifying.

DC: But that kind of fear had dissipated somewhat by '65?

PP: Well it didn't dissipate in my heart.

DC: Right.

PP: That's the thing. I got scarer and scarer as we went along. It didn't matter that it was probably actually marginally getting a little safer. In this new *Hands*

on the Freedom Plow book, my little piece in the book is about being in a polling place during the ASCS elections in a rural area with a young black colleague and poll watching, and people harassing us and just being surrounded by hate but nobody doing anything actually to us, and I was terrified. I mean I was so afraid. I was way more afraid than I had been two years ago. Now I just think it's accumulated stress and fear. That stuff, you know, I took that away with me.

DC: I was going to ask you about that. Does that begin to take its toll?

PP: Absolutely. I know I had some version of post traumatic stress disorder. Some of my comrades had way worse cases. But, yeah, it took years to deal with, you know, not having the hairs on the back of your neck go up when you see a policeman, or a car comes up behind you, but I was in a state when I left of I didn't like to drive over bridges or go in tunnels.

DC: Really? Yeah.

PP: And that, you know, I had used to go over bridges and in tunnels. [Laughs]

DC: Right. But it took some time.

PP: Oh, yeah. It took years. Where are we at?

DC: I just want to give you the heads up. We're at a quarter of 4:00.

PP: Well so I think I do--. You could ask me a million questions and I could--
[Laughs]

DC: [Laughs]

PP: --reflect, but I do want to say that I left in 1965, at the end of August in 1965. Chris and I left together actually because by that time there was pressure coming from SNCC people for white people to leave. It was another whole year or more before Bob

Zellner got voted out officially as the last remaining one standing. [Laughs] Well, Dottie too. But by that time there was this, you know. I only rarely got real hostility. I'd been there a long time so most SNCC staff people, the old ones, were not hostile but they began to--they sort of receded, and when we would come together at a conference, whether it was Waveland [Mississippi], or in the spring of 1965 at Gammon Theological Seminary, wherever that was--Atlanta?

DC: Atlanta, that's where it is.

PP: Atlanta.

DC: Yeah.

PP: The distance, that was, you know. It was just like there would be parties and I wouldn't know about it.

DC: And it hadn't been that way before?

PP: Oh, God, no. No. It was totally not like that. In the early days, not that all the--everything was there. People's nationalist parts were there, people's integrationist parts were there, nonviolence was there, violence as a strategy, violence as--I mean nonviolence as a strategy or nonviolence as a way of life. Sometimes black people-- I know black people who carried nationalist, separatist parts of themselves and then had personally very close relationships with us, white people in SNCC, up to a point, and then at a certain point in time that was no longer an option, so I left. Probably we could have stayed in Panola County. The black community in Panola County was very supportive of us, but I couldn't do it. I couldn't do it without-- I mean I had-- That's the piece-- I'd come for the community and partly the fact that I had the community of SNCC is what sustained me. That's what sustained all of us, is our community, and as that began to fall

apart--and it fell apart around race but it also fell apart for all sorts of reasons and in a lot of different ways. It was terribly messy.

DC: Was it painful to you personally?

PP: It was excruciating. It was excruciating. So I left. We went to California. I had no idea what I was going to do. I worked in an ERAP [Economic Research and Action] project for awhile in Cleveland, working with poor white people, most of whom it turned out they came from Appalachia and they had Southern accents and I just--it was really scary to me. I worked a little bit in the anti-war movement and then eventually--. Chris had grown up in Vermont and his family had a farm there and I just followed him to Vermont. This was--I left in 1965. In 1969 I had my first child and I started to get my feet back under me at that point because I had to, and slowly over time found my professional life as a midwife, first as an independent homebirth midwife and then as a nurse midwife.

DC: Like Mama Dolly. [Laughs]

PP: Like Mama Dolly, exactly. My other relationship to women's health was in Panola County on the Hayes Plantation. At some point a couple of the women came to me and said, "Look, we want to know something about birth control." I'm twenty years old. I mean, 1965 and a twenty-year-old woman; I'm not so well informed about birth control. I'm only lucky I'm not pregnant myself, but I gathered information and I, and I believe it may have been Claire O'Connor, we ran these little birth control classes, and women from the plantation came. We were just doing it in the kitchen, I think, while the guys were organizing the okra cooperative, or whatever. [Laughs]

DC: Do you remember where you got your information?

PP: No, I do not know where I got my information. I only know that when I first talked to Mrs. Nelson again, who is now in her eighties and failing, but quite a number of years ago we had a conversation and one of the first things she said to me--I remembered this but I thought maybe I'm really making this up--she said, "You know, you remember those classes? They were really great. I never had another child." At that point she'd had six and she was done if she could possibly be done. [Laughs] I said, "Oh, okay."

So, yeah, those are my two experiences with midwifery and women's health and I became a nurse midwife. I also do a lot of anti-racism education in the state of Vermont. So, we're done.

DC: Okay. I need to swap the tape out, or--

PP: I think maybe--

DC: --can we just end?

PP: --we should be--.

DC: Okay.

PP: Can we be done?

DC: We can be done. Great. Well thank you very much.

PP: Is that enough for what you--?

DC: I would love to keep talking more, and maybe we can at some other time.

PP: You can call. We can do something by telephone if that's useful to you. I'd be happy.

DC: Great.

PP: If you think, you know.

DC: Okay.

PP: Okay?

DC: Good.

PP: All right. It's time to go.

DC: Let me unclip that for you.

PP: Oh, yes.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcriber: Deborah Mitchum

Date: May 26, 2010