

UNCG in the 1960s Oral History Collection

INTERVIEWEE: Gayle Hicks Fripp

INTERVIEWER: Benita Newman

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BN: Can you briefly tell me a little bit about your childhood experiences?

GF: Yes, do you want me to state my name; do you need me to do any of that; is that automatic?

BN: Yes, you can if want to, you can state your name.

GF: [laughter] What do you need on the tape? You do not need any of that?

BN: No, I do not need any of that.

GF: Okay, my childhood experiences, that's what you would like now?

BN: Yes.

GF: I grew up the third of three girls to parents who were older. My mother was forty when I was born, and my father was forty-four, so I grew up in a very secure household, and that was both an advantage and a disadvantage. I grew up almost as an older child because my sisters were five and seven years older than I was, so they had grown up as pair, and then I had come along that much younger, so they went to school and, you know, I stayed at home, and the other thing I guess that was significant was my mother, being older, she was very occupied with her clubs and her church, and we did have help in our home, in that we had someone that came in to cook, and I did have my own nurse maid, who was only probably thirteen or fourteen, but she came and took care of me every day, and her name was Dolly, and she was black, and I very early came to love black people as much as I loved white people because my nurse was black, and our cook was black and so I really, as a child, had black people that I loved very much, which made a difference, although I grew up in segregated circumstances. And I quickly learned that many people thought blacks were not as good as whites.

I grew up in a small town of eleven-thousand people and, as I said, was in a segregated school and social setting. It was a mill town, and so there was a real division between people who worked in the mill and those who did not, and we really didn't mix up until high school when, all of a sudden, it was the boys who were from the mill towns, who were the stars of all the athletic teams, and so that was when we began to look at those boys as the heroes, and there was a lot of social mixing then because of the dating. Let's see, what else I can tell you. My childhood, as I said, was very secure; we walked everywhere we went. Most families only had one car, and the father had that car as part of his work, so

we walked everywhere; I only had to walk half a block to school. It was in sight of my home, the school I went to the first six years.

And then, when I went to junior high until, you know, I could car pool with friends, my father took me to school; he'd pick me up at lunch, and brought me home from junior high for lunch, and took me back. What else can I tell you? We did—we walked everywhere until we could drive as teenagers. I did all the typical things, you know, Girl Scouts, church choir, very active in the Methodist church, loved my Methodist youth group, went to Methodist camps, Methodist youth fellowship conferences; very early, because of those Methodist conferences, came home with ideas that the Methodist black and white youth group should mix, and was told that should not be a good idea, and this was in the late '50s, so very quickly was discouraged that we didn't do that—trying to think—Oh early, also, was involved with some of the international students coming into the high school and working on international youth days, where we contacted international students at Duke [University] and [the University of North Carolina at] Chapel Hill, and had them come in, and I was very interested in that, so I think I was always interested in diversity.

And I guess, again maybe having met some of those students at Methodist conferences, so I think the church had a great influence on my life, with early interest in diversity—very interested in music growing up, although I cannot sing a note, not one note, but I took flute and piano from third through twelfth grade and, then, started taking organ about seventh grade, so I played the organ in a—in a—one of the mission churches, in a mill village, in an Episcopal church, and my senior year in high school that—that had an impact because there was a very important mill strike in Henderson, and that little church was split right down the middle between those who worked in the mill and those who were management in the mill, and the National Guard was called in and that—a curfew was called by the mill and the—actually the governor, and so our high school graduation was very much impacted by a curfew and this mill strike, so there was tension then where there never had been between students who were mill workers' family and management families and, then, owner families, so that had a great impact for us our senior year in high school. But everything else was just normal and lovely.

I was one of the few people in my class that belonged to the Henderson Country Club, not because we were rich, we weren't; my father was a lawyer, but we were not rich. He saw it as a one place we—the three of us could go swim safely. And so he did not play golf—they did not play tennis, but we had a swimming pool. And, so there were probably five of us who had started school together, girls and boys that swam out there a lot in the summer but, then, that separated us from us from most of our friends, so that was one other little sort of tension in the summertime, that we were separated with friends because we went there. You know, so there were few little tensions, but most of my growing up was just wonderful.

BN: Okay. That's good. My next question is can you really tell me your experience at the Woman's College [of the University of North Carolina, now The University of North Carolina at Greensboro] while pursuing your B.A. in history?

GF: I can tell you that I came to the Woman's College expecting to stay two years and get out as soon as I could to go to Chapel Hill. I had no interest in staying here. I had planned as—I

really thought that God had called me to work in the Methodist church and I thought, if I did not do that, I would be a lawyer like my father, and I did not want to go to Duke. I was born a Tarheel, [chuckles] my father graduated from Carolina in '21; my mother had finished here. She had started as a four-year student and then, because her father died, she finished in the secretarial course in 1919 and, so the deal with my father was his three girls would go where their mother started and, then could go anywhere they wanted. So my first sister finished here in history in 1955; my second sister started here, and then went to Chapel Hill and finished in 1957; she almost stayed here because she majored in English, and Randall Jarrell was a mighty force in her life; he was a poet here, who taught at that time and, so I came prepared to graduate, I mean, to transfer to Chapel Hill, but I liked it here my first year. In fact, I had such a good history here—history professor here my freshman year I already started weakening, I think the first week or two of class, and then one or two of the female history professors, that I did not even have, remembered my sister and called me in and, just as a kindness, and talked to me, and were so nice that I thought these people are really nice to you as students.

And then, one day, I was walking to the library, really was in the evening, and it just shone like this beacon on the hill, and I think it was that night that I fell in love with this place. I always loved the library; I came here to study. I had a [study] carrel my junior and senior year; I did not even try to study in my dorm. And I think it was as much falling in love with some of the people who taught here and the library as much as anything else. So I was weakening my freshman year, and then I went to summer school at Chapel Hill, and I realized you dated there for breakfast, and you dated for lunch, and you dated for dinner, and I could not figure out when you studied. And by that time, I was a pretty serious student. I guess we got what were called—no—I guess we only got semester grades, but when I got them—I really came to college thinking you got C's; I did not know anybody got A's and B's, and I got good grades my first semester; I loved to study. I loved what I was taking—not everything, mind you, I did not warm up to biology, and I think there were one or two other things but I really—Oh French was my nemesis but you can imagine, with this southern accent—

BN: [laughs] Yes, ma'am.

GF: That I cannot do very well in spoken French, but I really thought "Oh, I think I like college," and so I decided that I would not transfer and, by the time I had courses under Dr. Bardolph and a number of other history professors that I really did like, and some English courses. I just knew that this is a place I wanted to be. Now, what was my question?
[laughter]

BN: What did you—can you briefly tell me about your experience at Woman's College, you know, while you were pursuing your B.A. in History?

GF: Okay, some of my experiences were—we had a very active History Club, and we would actually discuss things with professors, not necessarily courses we were taking, but probably a lecture that we had attended, and that was even when there would be a brief social after the History Club, and you might even dance with professors. I mean, I can remember that we actually danced. But also, we worked on committees to bring lecturers to

UNCG. I was very active with the Harriet Elliott Social Science Forum, and that was exciting; I remember the year that we had Christian Herter, who was a former Secretary of State, come, and how gracious he was as we talked with him in the afternoon.

But I remember going to a professor's house; she was female, but she would have us over for tea, and we would talk about important things. The professors treated us as adults, and that was so important. And they took interest in us as individuals, but it was not the size that it is today and professors could take a personal interest in you, and we had house counselors then, and it was all just smaller, and so you had opportunities to interact with these adults on campus, who knew you by name and treated you as adults, and it was all about growing up while you were on campus, and we dressed a different way, and we spoke a different way, and it was an incubator for growing up and becoming an adult, and it was all priming you for the adult world, not treating you like children. It was just a whole different way, you sort of went from eighteen and being a child at home to being a ward, you were a ward in effect of the chancellor and, in many ways, we were treated like children. One way I remember was during the [Greensboro] Sit-ins of 1960 but, in another way, you were being primed to grow up and be an adult when you left in nineteen, you know, for us '63, so that you knew how to move out in the adult world and talk, and have a job, and dress job appropriately, and you knew that as an adult, and I am not sure that when my daughter left UNCG she was prepared for that.

BN: I completely agree.

GF: But we felt we were, so that was it but there were, in other ways, we were very childlike and in the way they treated us. For example, when the Sit-ins began on February 1, 1960, and the chancellor called us in for that big meeting in Aycock Auditorium, and he told all of us—and we were naive, we were freshmen—and he said "Now girls, the best you could do to support those young men"—and I guess he called them young men, although he probably called them boys—"down at Woolworth is to stay on campus and continue your studying." Most of us believed him and said "Yes sir, we will stay right here on campus and continue our studying" [laughter] now, ten years later, they did not believe that, but we had grown up in the '50s and we were, you know, our parents had turned us over to him as our parent in absentia, and that is what we believed, and that is what most of us did. A few slipped off and did otherwise, but not most of us.

BN: How was coed [coeducation] under your B.A. degree while pursuing—?

GF: Well, of course, we knew that the campus would go coed as soon as we left because we left in the spring of '63—spring, early summer, and it was to go coed in '64, and we thought it would be the end of the university—well—the end of the college as we knew it. WC [Woman's College] had a wonderful reputation as a residential Woman's College; we thought we were the equal of the Ivy League Sister schools. We really thought we had a fine academic reputation, and many of the professors kept assuring us that we had a fine reputation. Many—we just thought it was going to be the end of the world, and there was no way we could fight it. I don't think we would have known to fight it or certainly have even thought about fighting it. Like many of the schools have that we have seen in the last decade but—but—we thought it would change the—change our school forever, and it has

changed it forever. But some of the changes have certainly been very good and, having been a part of Founder's Day, in this last week, I have seen some of those positive changes.

BN: Okay, well, what was coed—when you came back to get your M.A. degree, what was coeducation like then, do you think?

GF: Well, of course, I came back that very next fall, and there were some men in my master's classes pursuing a degree in history and, well, I think the first thing, of course, was that these men challenged the professors. Now, although certainly our professors had invited us to participate in answering questions, and we certainly did, and that is what I always seen as the value of a female school is that females discussed and answered all the questions because they were the only ones in the class. These men answered in a challenging way and it was just a completely different atmosphere. And the other interesting thing I noticed was a couple of these, and they were young—they were very young men—they were my age—if they did not like a professor, of course, they would simply drop the course and go onto something else and, you know, most young women had been taught, you finish something when you begin it, and that was not in all the attitude of these young men, so I think a more challenging note in their voices, and to quickly drop something if they were not doing well, and to move on to something else. And, of course, they were looking at this much more, I think, quickly as a means to an end; they were looking to the end and women, I think, were looking at it more as a process; "I am getting an education." Men were looking at the job at the end of the education, and that was something I noticed, especially at the end of what was supposed to be a one year program. Men were much more goal oriented than I had ever seen, but I had never been in a one year program.

BN: So you strongly agreed with the coeducational transition?

GF: No, I did not.

BN: You did not agree with it?

GF: We just did not think we had any way to fight it and, so nobody protested.

BN: Do you agree with it today, or do you—

GF: I have seen many, many positive results and, as a state supported institution, there was no way to challenge; I would never have seen any use in challenging.

BN: Okay. What was dorm room life like?

GF: My freshmen year, I did not—my roommate backed out at the last minute and, so I did not come with anyone I knew to room with and, when I arrived, I was rooming with a young woman, who came with thirty-two stuffed animals, a boyfriend who was still in high school, and she cried every night, so dorm room life was not very positive for me my freshman year, but dorm life after that—that is when I learned to study at the library, and

even though we still had, you know, a very controlled dorm life—and I will tell you some of the things we had. We still had white glove inspection, and you didn't know when it was going to happen, but the inspection—the person in charge of the residence hall could come into your room at any time, and have inspection, and she wore white gloves.

BN: And that is how it got its name?

GF: Right, that is how it got its name, and she would come in and inspect your room for dust, and how your floor looked, and how everything looks.

BN: Going back to these women qualities of cleanliness, you know, a woman is supposed to clean.

GF: That is right, so we had inspection, especially in all the freshmen dorms, so rooms had to be kept very neatly, and they could be inspected—If a male came on the hall, there was a huge scream that went out that announced a man is on the hall [laughter], and everybody screamed to run into their rooms, and shut their doors and, so there was much ado about any male; that could be anybody, from somebody on the maintenance crew. I mean no boyfriend—this would be a father, for example, who was coming to do something—same scream would go up [laughter]. No boyfriend ever got on any hall, or any male who was the age of a coed I mean a student.

BN: He was not allowed to, was he?

GF: Oh no, oh no. There was only one telephone per floor, and you had to be called to the telephone, if you were ever lucky enough to have anybody get through the busy signals. [laughter] I mean, that was wild[?], hardly no communication. You could not keep food in your room, as I remember it, you could only keep food in the central refrigerator; restrooms were very limited. Now, one year—so that is kind of how I remember my freshmen year, when I lived on the Quad, and I lived in Gray [Residence Hall], which faced the tennis courts. Now, my sophomore year, I lived in Weil [Residence Hall], which was at the bottom of the Quad, and I had a nice roommate, someone I selected, I mean, we selected each other, and that was a nice year, and you had a lot more freedom your second, third, and fourth years and, you know, that was a very pleasant experience of living with somebody with a lot more freedom but still, of course, you know, your male callers just came to the parlor, and was announced, and you went down, and it was still—you had to be in at eleven and he left you at the door, and the lights all had to blink at eleven, so that is when you ran up from the cars to get into the door before it was locked at eleven.

BN: Wow, that is interesting.

GF: And Sunday nights were gloom nights—I think—maybe you had until twelve on Saturday and Sunday nights were eleven. They were pretty gloomy. And food in the dining hall was awful on Sunday nights because there were not many people here. Oh—in the dining halls, that was a whole other experience—no choice in the dining halls.

BN: No choice?

GF: One meal prepared.

BN: Wow. [laughter]

GF: One meal prepared, and you ate it, and the only choices off campus, of course, the faculty shop—faculty hut? Is that even what they call it now? Is that where they have poetry readings and everything? You might not even know.

BN: I am not sure about that.

GF: That little brick building—there is a little brick building beside the Alumni House.

BN: Yes.

GF: Okay, that used to be the Soda Shop.

BN: The Soda Shop?

GF: Yes.

BN: Oh—really—okay—I have always—

GF: That was a wonderful building.

BN: I think that building is so cute.

GF: It was a Soda Shop, and you could go in there and get a wonderful soda. But look how tiny it is. That was our soda shop—that was all it was—I mean that's the only place we had, other than Tate Street or the Dining Hall.

BN: Cute little building.

GF: That was it. And I think there were—how many of us? Maybe ten thousand, so it was Dining Hall, or Tate Street, or that little soda shop. [laughter] So, that's got the flavor.

BN: Okay sorry, skipping around here. My next question is, though, what do you think students and faculty thought about coeducation? Did you witness other students against coeducation?

GF: Oh yes. I think most students were opposed; I do not know any students who were in favor—unless—I didn't personally know any students in favor of coeducation.

BN: How did they express those feelings?

GF: I think just in small groups. I don't—I do not remember any protests of any kind against coeducation.

BN: You don't remember anything about a panty raid that went on in the dormitories?

GF: No. Was there supposed to be a panty raid about—

BN: I read something in [Allen W.] Trelease's book [Making North Carolina Literate: The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, from Normal School to Metropolitan University] about it; he alluded to it one time.

GF: Okay, about coeducation?

BN: Yes. It was where the men and the women—the women kept picking on the men and they got frustrated.

GF: Oh, after they came?

BN: Yes, after they came, and they kept picking on the men—I guess the men just got fed up with it, and they stormed the dorms and took all their panties and—

GF: Well, of course, I didn't live on campus as a coed.

BN: I think it was in 1968.

GF: That is after I left, so I do not know.

BN: Okay.

GF: And the faculty—I think the faculty, when I was here as a female student, the faculty was not in favor—I think most people felt, and especially about the time of the transition that the first males who would apply would not necessarily be the best students, and they would take them in, to begin to build of the base of male students. In other words, they would take some males in, even if they were not as good as the females who were here, to get it started. But I don't think that proved to be the case; I think they were area males who needed to come here for financial reasons, even if they did not live on campus, who were just as good as the females who were being admitted. And then I think, of course, over the years it has been proven time over time that the athletes have actually brought up the grade point average.

BN: The athletes?

GF: Yes. Some of our athletes have had some of our highest grade point averages. I do know that to be a fact. So it has been a pleasant surprise that it did not water down—

BN: Most of them male athletes or women athletes?

GF: Male and female, yes. I heard some of that reported through the Spartan Club. So it has not necessarily watered down anything; it has not hurt that way.

BN: So you think the faculty—they did not really express, outwardly, their opposition to coeducation?

GF: I think some did.

BN: Did—can you remember any of that?

GF: No, I do not know by name.

BN: Okay.

GF: I just know there was general concern.

BN: Okay—what kinds of subjects did male students major in—I mean—was it very different choices compared to women, or was it about the same, or?

GF: I think it was the same because my first experience, see, was in the department of history, so I think it would have been about the same. And, of course, UNCG offered many subjects, so I would imagine they sort of slipped into all the general areas.

BN: Okay, so based on what you can remember, even though you were a history major—so you think that maybe there were as many men and women taking biology as there were physics—et cetera?

GF: I would think so, but I do not know that.

BN: Okay well, that is it. Thank you so much.

GF: Oh, well that was easy enough.

[End of Interview]