AKL: What were your impressions of UNC and Chapel Hill, the town itself, when you arrived in 1973?

JH: I’d lived in Atlanta for 3 years, after I left New York, after I took my qualifying exams at Columbia. I was working for a civil rights organization and trying to write a dissertation. I loved living in New York, I loved living in Atlanta, but Chapel Hill was so easy to feel at home in and feel part of. My husband at the time was editing *Southern Exposure*, an alternative journal of culture and politics out of our house and we fell in right away with a community of like-minded folks.

UNC was a whole lot harder. Partly just because I had no inkling of what it meant to be a professor or part of an institution like this, or part of a department like this. And the history department, which we can get into later, was a very conflicted place, in ways that were very difficult for me to understand, and so I felt at sea, in that sense. I didn’t know where I was, what I was doing, or why these people were behaving the way they were.

You have to remember that I came here in 1973, with an unfinished dissertation, at a moment when women faculty were fighting for inclusion. The Faculty Council had just established a Committee on the Status of Women and University Women for Affirmative Action had just formed. In 1974, the National Organization of Women filed a class action suit against the University alleging salary inequities and, under pressure, the College of Arts and Sciences launched an affirmative action program to recruit and retain women and minority faculty. The dean of the College promised to add a faculty line to any department willing to fill that line with
a woman or minority member. Departments snapped up those new faculty lines and those hires created what people remember as the “class of 1974.” But—as I understood it—the dean found himself “out foxed” by departments that consciously or unconsciously subverted affirmative action goals. Some hired women and minority faculty whom they more or less expected to fail with the assumption that they could be denied tenure five years down the road and those new lines could be filled with white men. Others hired well qualified candidates but isolated and marginalized them in various ways and gave them little respect or support. As for NOW’s class action suit, the university fought it tooth and nail. But although it never admitted to discrimination, it did fork over back pay to at least a few women, one of which was me.

I was in an especially tenuous position—like lots of people who were hired in new programs like Women’s and African American Studies. I was supposedly on the tenure track, but my main job was to direct the SOHP, then formally part of the history department, and both the program and my salary were dependent on grant money, meaning that when that grant money ran out there was no line in the departmental or university budget for me. Plus, unbeknownst to me, I wasn’t being paid a regular faculty salary.

Two years after I got here, the senior faculty suddenly realized that this was all highly irregular. They called in the big guns in the oral history field, sent my dissertation our for review, and did a full scale evaluation—basically to decide whether to keep me and the SOHP or whether the whole thing had been a big mistake. You can imagine how vulnerable I felt. Thank the lord, the evaluators gave the barely launched SOHP a thumbs up and by some miracle I managed to finish my dissertation, which won Columbia’s Bancroft Dissertation Award. The department regularized my appointment and, at least for the moment, I kept my job. By 1979, when my book came out and I got tenure, many members of “the class of 1974” were gone.
Beyond all that, as I said, the history department itself was a very embattled place. You can read about what was going on in an article by William Palmer entitled “Piranhas, Whales, and Guppies: Transforming the History Department at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1965-1985,” in the Summer 2013 issue of The Historian. I see the story a bit differently, but you can get the idea. Imagine a department in which people actually thought of factions in those terms! Anyway, I was baffled by the whole thing. And a new cohort started coming along behind me, and I think they were baffled too, in what I think as a positive way. The lines that were dividing people at that time and the grievances that people had against each other, which went back to the distant past, just weren’t meaningful to us. We didn’t think those were things worth hating people for or having huge fights over. So we didn’t really side with any one of the factions. I think—this is my interpretation, which Palmer doesn’t emphasize—that was one of the reasons that the department changed: new people came in and just said, “that’s not our fight. We care about other things.”

AKL: Who else came in around the same time as you? How many women were in the department when you came in?

JH: One. Gill Cell, who became chair of the department not too long after I came, and then went on to be the dean of the College. She was the only woman with an actual foothold in the department.

For me, personally, what made a big difference in my life in the department, was when Leon Fink came. He and his wife Susan Levine made a huge difference in the department. And I don’t remember the sequence in which other people came in, but Lloyd Kramer, Don Reid, Harry Watson, Judith Bennett. I may be forgetting some people. But that cohort came in pretty close together, and I felt a real affinity with them. Also having Joan Scott come onto this faculty
was huge. It just made a world of difference when we hired Joan Scott. I just thought I’d died and gone to heaven, to go from practically no women to Joan Scott. That’s like going from no women to quite a few women.

AKL: Many of those people that you mentioned are still here. And so you’ve shared the vast majority of your faculty career with them. So can you talk about what it’s been like to develop as a scholar, as part of this intellectual community over all these years?

JH: I think we were able to create a departmental culture that was very respectful, where people were friends with each other and respectful toward each other. We had differences of opinion over things. One of the things that’s really hard about being in a department for a long time is that you are going to have differences of opinion, including with your friends and with people that you’re usually in agreement with. Over time, those can drive wedges between people, even though they’re maybe not even acknowledged. Not big wedges, but wedges. It’s going to happen. There’s no way to avoid it. But we didn’t have big factions that were fighting with each other.

Another positive dimension of staying here is that my community has been not just UNC, but also Duke and other institutions, UNC-G, NC State, NC Central. Those people have been among my closest friends and that’s been a real gift and blessing, and not very many places have that. So that is one of the things, the Oral History Program being another, that I think has helped me keep from being too immersed in the History Department. I think that can be a problem, at least it would be a problem for me. Because, sort of like what I was saying about this earlier conflicted generation, people get where their department, and the fights in it and what’s going to happen in it and who you’re going to hire, become their lives. You know, huge stakes. I feel
like I’ve had a big stake in the department and cared about it, but not that much [laughs], not too much. Or at least I’ve tried to be in, but not of the world.

Still, I have to say that it’s hard to come into a department when you’re very young and very vulnerable and baffled, and grow up in that department, because it’s hard for people to start seeing you differently. And it’s hard for you to start seeing yourself differently. That’s why people love to go away to college, after high school. I think that’s one of many reasons that relatively few ambitious people in academia now stay in one place for their careers, or even stay very long in one place.

JESSIE WILKERSON: Can you talk about Anne Firor Scott and your relationship with her, and her influence?

JH: I knew Anne when I was a graduate student. I came here to do research for my dissertation, and in great trepidation—she remembers this very well, she actually has letters from me that she’s given me that I wrote to her when I was a graduate student—I called her up, you know, like, “I’m Jacquelyn Hall and I’m a Columbia graduate student, and I’m writing a dissertation and I just wonder—.” I don’t know what I was asking: if she could help me, or I could meet her, or something. And not knowing, obviously, then that I was going to come here a few years later as a professor.

So when I did come here—Sara Evans and I, and Rebecca Scott (Anne’s daughter), all have very similar stories to tell about Anne. One of our emblematic ones was that she really wanted us to all cut our hair. She would always say, “cut that long hair off! Your hair’s hanging down in your face!” She was trying to shape us up, get us to look and act more professional—in my case, to be more forceful, and to talk more loudly. So she was a great presence but very no-nonsense. She didn’t appear to have any of the human weaknesses that the rest of us have. But
she has become a dear friend over the years. I was thrilled to have a hand in her getting an honorary degree from UNC this year.

A: Can you talk a little about when you first started teaching your oral history classes and your women’s history classes, how students responded to those? And then if you’ve seen changes in students’ responses to those courses over the years.

JH: The women’s history course, the undergraduate women’s history course, was just so exciting. The university didn’t admit women on the same standing as men until 1972, after pressure from students and parents and the federal government. And the first women’s history course happened that same year. It was taught by Peter Filene and three graduate students. The four of them got permission to teach this course together, as a kind of overload for Peter. People were knocking down the doors to get into it. I first taught it in 1975 or 1976. Of course, it doesn’t have the same personal/political charge now that it had then. But I think that the amazing thing about women’s history is, it still is new, over and over again. Because it’s new—and often transformative—to the people who are coming new to it.

I also think the oral history course has as much or more impact on people now than it did in the 1970s. In fact, more and more people are interested in oral history. It’s just continued on an upward track in terms of being kind of revelatory to students.

AKL: What changes have you seen in the history department and in UNC more broadly?

JH: The one thing about the department that, if I were going to continue to be in the department, I might worry about. . . Ever since I’ve been here, there’s been an issue over the balance between U.S. history and other fields. When I first came there’s no question that the balance was way too far in the direction of U.S. history and southern history. Some of the fights were over that, but some of the people that were pushing to change that were U.S. historians. I
think that did change, and it changed in a good way, but we continued to have a really strong U.S. history department and to be known for that, and for southern history, as we should be given where we are, our archives, and our traditions. But now there seems to be a whole other push, to shrink the U.S. history field even further. There’s been a lot of attrition, a lot of U.S. faculty leaving, people not being replaced. I know that other people see it as, “Well, students need to know about everything. Americans are too provincial and they don’t understand the rest of the world.” And that’s all true, but to me, this is the flagship university, a public university, in a public system, in the South, teaching kids that have got to be the citizens of this region and this country, and vote and understand the country and run the country. A huge proportion of our students are from North Carolina, and they stay in North Carolina, and they run the state. Chapel Hill has always been the place where they learned how to do it in a certain way. Given what’s happening in Raleigh now, it worries me very much to think that we may develop a history department in which the faculty don’t have a sense of place and a sense of responsibility as citizens of a place—North Carolina, the South, the U.S.—and a special sense of responsibility for teaching students to be informed and engaged citizens of that place.

At the same time, and this is a huge change, there’s the shrinking of the graduate program. We had a big graduate program when I came here. They had a graduate culture which has always been, I think, our pride and joy and our selling point. But we’ve shrunk the graduate program more and more and more. That was absolutely necessary, but it affects everything. There are just fewer creative, smart, energetic young people around, fewer people to build a community. And since they are divided into many small fields, they have less and less in common with each other.
A: By really any measure you’ve had an extraordinarily successful academic career, but one of the things that people consistently sing your praises about is the way that you’re such a wonderful mentor to your students. Do you have any advice for other scholars, whether they’re young scholars or older scholars, about how to mentor students?

JH: This is a terrible question for students to ask me! They know me and my foibles too well. But I must admit that I’d rather people say that about me than anything else, so I don’t want to downplay that. Still, it’s a fraught relationship. It’s a very difficult relationship. What I would say in my behalf is that I see graduate students as young colleagues, as intellectuals, as creative minds that I am learning from and like to be in contact with. I think that graduate students don’t get as much credit as they should get from this history department, other history departments, for what that they bring to departments. They are building departments, and institutions within departments.

The other thing is that when what I do works, I think it’s because on the one hand I have really high standards, and I work really hard myself, and I don’t hold back on conveying those standards to students. I feel like everything can always be better, so I always think their work can be better, and I feel like it’s my job to convey that. But that can be really discouraging to people. You know, “Oh no, more red marks from Jacquelyn.” But to me, it’s how you just keep growing and getting better. When I was in graduate school, I seldom had a professor write anything on a manuscript or a paper of mine. They didn’t take the time. They would give us a grade, but they wouldn’t say anything. So I think I work really hard that way, and I model working really hard in the sense of just really making the work good, and realizing that it can go to another level.
On the other hand, I really, really care about students and their well-being. I am totally behind them, and I never would write a mealy-mouthed recommendation, or say something that would undermine them to the other faculty or anything like that. So I hope that they realize that even though I’m writing all these things on their papers, that I am totally in their corner.

JW: You know what else you do? You invite students into certain networks and spaces. I think that’s huge, because it makes you feel like, without knowing it, you’re becoming a historian and you’re becoming a part of that network of people, simply because you said, “why don’t you come along.”

JH: I do push people to get out there and be part of the profession. I’ve come to realize that that’s a deliberate thing, and I think it’s important. I’m really proud of these students, and I want people to know them. But also I think they’re a lot of fun. I do it just like I would introduce anybody to other people that I like.

AKL: Do you have any other last thoughts that you want to throw out there?

JH: In terms of how I see the department, I want to say how gratified I am that the department has continued to be as committed to women’s history as it is. I think it’s fabulous that we’ve hired this new young person and that there are plans to hire a senior person. Also the commitment of the department to the oral history program I think is really a kind of amazing and good thing. I think the history department has been amazing in its support and recognition of the oral history program. I hope that continues as the US field shrinks and as the graduate program shrinks, because the oral history program has been really important to the history graduate program, supplying support for graduate students and attracting graduate students, and creating a community of graduate students. And the graduate students in this department have been critical to the oral history program.