TAPE TRANSCRIPT
Durham Civil Rights Heritage Project
CDS, Durham, NC

Interviewee: Jane T. Ryan
22 Kings Mount Court
Durham, NC 27713

Interviewer: Melanie Wilmer
Duke University Box 98251
Durham, NC 27708

Place: Durham Public Library
300 N. Roxboro Street
Durham, NC 27701

Equipment: SONY MZ-R700 Minidisk Recorder
SONY ECM-MS907 Microphone

Tape: SONY MD-80 Tape

Date: October 3, 2003

Description of Interviewee: Ms. Ryan is white and in her late 70s, grew up in the South. Was living in Willamette, IL during the 1960s with her husband and 7 children. Went south to MS and AL to assist with civil rights activities. She later moved to Durham in 1970 to attend NCCU in health education and has lived here for more than 35 years. In her interview she reflects on these experiences, the impact of the movement on the country and on Durham. She was not involved in any organizing in Durham.

Circumstances of the Interview:

Jane T. Ryan (JR): -- the woman that I described, but I did it. I was being very politically correct. I met a black lady, an old lady, and I called her "lady." Normally I don't call women "ladies," I call them "women." Because at the time, in the South, at least, and maybe in other places too, where you didn't call female blacks "lady." And so I really, you know, I thought, "Well, I'll show them. I'm going to call them 'lady.'" (Laughs) But anyway, excuse me.

Melanie Wilmer (MW): Are you the one in the picture?

JR: Yeah, I'm this person here. That was 1965. And these are two priests. This young man is from St. Kitts, a Catholic priest, and this woman was also from (?). We both belonged to the Democratic Women's Club. And that's not why I was there, because I'd been involved in – with Dr. King – for years. I mean, I went to meetings when they were black churches, and based in black churches in Columbus, Georgia. I mean, I started (?). I really started with my mother, who I -- My parents are both Southerners, and so am I, obviously. And I was brought up by very enlightened parents. And my mother was so enlightened that if I used anything, a derogatory term about any group of people, I got a lecture. And so I didn't do it. And that started me on the way, because she gave me – well, it was sort of a noblesse oblige idea that, you know, to whom much is given, much is expected. That was generally where she was coming from. But she was a good Christian too. She was a Catholic, as I am. And so I had that advantage of growing up in a home like that.

MW: Okay. Where are you from?

JR: I'm from Charleston, South Carolina. Originally. That's my home town. Still is, as far as I'm concerned.

David Cecelski (**DC**): I don't mean to interrupt, but I can tell that you two are going to be just fine without the professor lurking here.

JR: Yeah, we'd just as soon get rid of you, David.

DC: Exactly. And all I'll say is that I hope you'll say everything on your mind, and I hope that you'll ask anything on your mind.

JR: Yeah, please do. Just because I'm old and disabled doesn't mean you can't whack at something.

DC: And if you feel like you need assistance, if she gets rowdy or something –

JR: Yeah, I'll try to behave. I won't hit anybody with the cane.

DC: You can yell or something and I'll – (Small talk about mutual friends) I'll leave the two of you. Pleasure to meet you.

JR: Uh-huh. I'm sorry, darling. As I say, I get carried away.

MW: I would like to ask about (?) the picture. Do you have a specific story about this picture?

JR: Well, there's a narrative about it. What happened was, again, I had been very involved in Civil Rights for a long time in Georgia, and everywhere I lived. And I moved to Willamette, Illinois, and became involved with the Willamette Human Relations Committee. And we got up a bus of people, a busload, and went down to Selma and Montgomery. And at that time, I think I had seven kids – which I still have, but, I mean, I still had them then. And I remember my husband, I said, "This is something I have to do," and he said, "Alright. If you have to do it, go do it," which is really probably very good of him to do. But anyway, so I went down, and when we got there, I was on the bus with these two young men. I happen to be Catholic, and (of course there was?) a Catholic priest, and we happened to be walking together during the march. Now, being in the march was very interesting, because, first of all, I'm a Southerner, Jan. I was in the cradle of the Confederacy, Montgomery. And although I knew there were a lot of people that felt like I did, whites, but they never said much about it. They were intimidated. And I guess I never was intimidated by things, because of my mother, and my religion, and everything else. So you know, I knew, I understood that.

And as we walked along, apparently they had called out the Alabama National Guard to protect us. Well, nothing happened, at least then; there were things that happened, but not on the march. But going down, they taught us how to protect ourselves, you know, with putting your hand over your head, and putting your head down, and all that. So we did that. But I sat right next to a man who's written a lot of books – his wife, that is – and Scott – he wrote a book about – oh, I can't – see what happens when you get old – you can't remember names. But his wife was very nice. But anyway, we got down there, and they put is in, you know, we got lined up. And I happened to be with these two young men and this woman. But you know, one of those men, of course, is black, and he was from St. Kitts. Very nice fellow. They both were very nice young men. And as we walked along the streets of Montgomery, people generally ignored us, except for what I think of as the poorer whites. And they were sort of overwhelmed, awed, by us. They didn't understand it, because they knew that the only people they could really look down on were the blacks. And as you know, they'd been played off against them. And so they

were there, and some of them were yelling at us. But all of the sudden, suddenly winked at me, a little white person. And I thought, "Oh, there's somebody being friendly." It was a child. Because she's too young to have any prejudice. And then as we passed this building – it must have been a governmental building or something – there were all these men, white men, standing up there, and it was like we were in a parade and they were observing us. And because Dr. King was obviously there, thank God – I'd heard him speak so many times, and been in numerous marches with him, and read his books. In fact, he gave me one of his books. It was autographed, and I gave it to one of my daughters, so I don't have it anymore. But that's fine. I don't need it anymore. But anyway, of course he spoke, and it was inspiring, as he always was.

And it was actually a remarkable feeling, because it almost felt like a culmination. Because I had been in this Willamette Human Relations Committee, and we had -- I lived in Willamette. Well, there wasn't a black person that lived in Willamette. So of course they got the bright idea to import some blacks, basically, from the (University of ?) Chicago area. And so they came up, and we'd have these afternoon talks, probably Sunday afternoon. Well, what would happen is that the whites there were Northerners, and they don't know how to relate to blacks, and they sat there and talk about "*the movement*." Well, I sat there and talked to people about, "How your kids? You have any kids? Did you go to school? What's going on with you? What do you like to do?" I mean, you know, I was talking to them like a human being.

MW: Like a normal person would talk to a –

JR: Yeah. Well, that made sense to me. I'm not going to just say, "Well, what do you think of the movement?" I mean, come on. You know. And so I was used to that. But I also felt very committed to this, for many reasons. Again, it was basically for my sense of fair play. It wasn't right, as justice is concerned. I had a great religious belief too. As I say, I'm Catholic, and I was brought up to believe that all of us are the same, equal. We're God's children, everybody, and we're all brothers and sisters – which makes you my sister, kiddo. But I'm old enough to be your great-grandmother. But you know, so it wasn't strange for me to be there at all. It felt good.

Now, people did get hurt. There was a woman that was down there like I, she was a housewife like I was, from Michigan, I think. And she happened to be somewhere during all this going on, before or after the march, and she was riding with a young black man. Well,

apparently some people saw it and didn't like it. So they shot her, and she died. Yeah. So, you know, things did happen.

But the National Guard did a good job in keeping order. And I think that the people had been taught just ignore us, which is very clever. And they did, basically. So that was my story of the march, basically.

MW: It's an interesting story. How did you feel when you went back home, after you had done that –

JR: I felt wonderful, because I knew – the people I knew up there felt like I did, so I wasn't alone, and my family felt like I did, my children were reared that way. So I didn't feel isolated at all. That was good. Now, there've been times in my life when I've lived places and felt very isolated, for obvious reasons. But you know, any time you take a stand that's not popular-- I mean, Jesus did that. You get isolated. (?) You don't do it just because of that. You do it because you think it's right. So that's why.

MW: Okay. Did –

JR: One of the things I found interesting, and if you read the narrative that I wrote – was the language, in 1965, that I used, was very different, as I told you, than I would now. And I do remember a black woman – whom I called "lady," because I told you that, earlier, why – and she came up to me to thank me for being there. And I said, "Ma'am," I said, "I'm going back. You're going to be here. Okay? And I know that, and I hope things work out." Because I did, and I just felt awful, because, you know, you felt like, "Well, I'm coming in here and being this rescue, and then leaving the people there to pick up the mess"" – which is basically what happened. However, Dr. King started a movement, and it did cause waves, as you know. He was a mover and a shaker. God love him.

MW: Why did you see this particular –

JR: That was the only one I had. Somebody had taken that picture, and gave me a copy. And so I saved it, and I had copies made for my seven kids and some of my very close friends. All of my friends are much younger than I am, and I figured maybe they'd like it for their archives, or to scare the cats or dogs or something. But anyway, that's why I saved it. It was important to me. And you know, I still have the original at home, which is a lot bigger than that, obviously.

MW: Why did you feel the need to come today to share your story?

JR: Well, I saw it in the paper, and I figured, this is a piece of history. And I mean, I'm almost seventy-eight. I'll be seventy-eight on the 20th of this month. And I'm not going to be around here forever. And somehow I don't think I'm going to be able to do this when I get to Heaven or Hell, or wherever I'm going, have an interview. So I just thought maybe we need to get it down somewhere, because it is history. It's part of history.

MW: Do you feel like after the civil rights movement, things have changed a lot for the better? How do you –

JR: Well, I think they're better and worse. I think certainly there have been strides. I mean, compared to what they were when I was growing up. And in fact, I remember, when I was a child, seeing a policeman beat up a little boy, a little black boy, with his billy club. And of course I was furious. I was only about seven. I went running up there to make the policeman stop. So I always had that sense of, you know, what was right and what was wrong. And that was wrong to me. So, you know, it just was a culmination for me.

But what's happened since then is, I think, thank God, certainly the Voting Rights Act has made a big difference. And blacks are doing just what the Irish did when they came to this country as immigrants: they vote in a bloc. And that's how you get power. Well, ultimately people are going to figure, "Well, I'm not voting in a bloc. I want to vote the way I want to vote," just as the Irish have. But it takes time for that to happen. So I think things have changed for the better that way. Unfortunately, I think that – I know when I was involved in the civil rights movement, we were literally asked, us whites, to get out and let – clean up our own act, and leave us alone.

MW: Really?

JR: Yeah. And that was hurtful, but I understand it. Okay? I understood it. And I went to a black university. I'm a graduate of North Carolina Central University. And I got an undergraduate degree in Health Ed. there. And then I went back and got two graduate degrees. So I'm what's known as a third-degree eagle. (Laughs) So you know, and I've always worked with blacks. There's some of them been my boss, some of them I've been their boss, and some of them have just been my colleagues. You know, so it's never been a problem for me. And I thank God that I had that kind of --

I mean, when I went to Central – this was 1970 when I first went to -- I was the only white student on campus except the nurses that came in this covey from Watts. And one of my

professors asked me one day, he said, "Are you from Watts?" I said, "Mr. Nixon, you're just saying that because I'm white. I'm not. I'm a health education major, and I *chose* to come here." But anyway. And so it was a good experience. In fact, I was forty-five and I took physical ed., because I didn't want to be different from anybody, and I didn't want to take advantage of my age. So, of course I got kicked around playing hockey and everything. But I told my classmates, "Look, I don't mind this black-and-white, but I don't want any black-and-white-and-blue. Okay? I don't want to be (?) blue."

But we got along fine. Now, I did meet a young woman from Illinois, who was an exchange student, and she was in one of my psychology classes. I think I may have been a sophomore. And, you know, I saw her later, the next year, and I said – that ended that year – and I said, "How did your semester go?" And she said, "Not good at all." I said, "What?" She said, "Well, I'm young, I'm a blonde, I got blue eyes, and the coeds didn't like me being here, and I felt very uncomfortable. And I was from Illinois, and I didn't have any experience." And she said, "How about you?" And I said, "You know, I grew up in the South. There was really no problem" I loved Central. I loved some of my professors; some of them I didn't, which you do anywhere. But the head of my department, Dr. Howard Fitts, is just a prince, a wonderful man. I mean, I always called him Dr. Fitts until I graduated, and now I call him Howard. But he's the – he's still one of my best friends. So I've had some good experiences. I've been very fortunate.

MW: Why did you decide to go there?

JR: Well, what happened was, I got a divorce. I was living in Charleston, South Carolina. I was mother of seven kids. And my ex-husband, as it turned out – I've been married twice – he finagled it so that I couldn't have my children – okay? -- for whatever reason, but that happened. But what I did was – I knew – I was working on one of these – it was – I didn't know whether it was (OEU?) – and they had these health facilities, and one of them was in what's really a ghetto in Charleston, a black, black neighborhood, very poor. On Nassau Street. And I worked there. And Dr. Fitts, who was my boss – I mean, Dr. Anderson, Leroy Anderson. He was a black man. He taught at South Carolina State. And he was very kind and good to me, and he knew I wasn't a racist. So I got along fine with him and all my work-mates. Most of them were black. And one of them, when we got these grants from the (OEU?) and the Labor Department – because I didn't have any money – and we could go back to college, or graduate school – because I hadn't even been to college. But we had to either be a nurse or a health educator. Well, at that time I

didn't know you could be a psychiatric nurse and all this stuff, and I could envision myself doing bedpans and (?). So I said, "I'll be a health educator. I don't know what in the world it is, but that's what I'll do."

And one of my work-mates, a young black woman, said to me, "Why don't you go to North Carolina College?" That's where she had gone. Because there was no undergraduate program at that time in South Carolina, and that's where I would have chosen to go, because I was near my kids there. So I came up and talked to Dr. Fitts, and I loved him, and he was very kind to me. And I thought, "Well, this is it. I'm going here." And what I did was every weekend I drove to Charleston and saw my kids. So it was tough. But I *loved* going there. And I was a first-honor graduate, because – I got to tickle my classmates, they said, "How come you get all these As, Jane?" And I said, "Because this is my last chance, okay? I'm not young like you guys, and I don't have to go to parties and all that stuff. So that's why. I'm just studying a lot more." But it was wonderful.

MW: Did you feel like you were accepted when you first got there? Was it hard to adjust (?)?

JR: No, no. Uh-uh. No. I think probably because of my own experiences in the past, including this one, and also because I – I grew up in the South! And I grew up with very wonderful parents, a very good home. And that kind of behavior was not accepted. Now, it took folks a while to get used to me. And I understood that. I have sense and all that. I remember one young man, he was so cute – when was it, when Nixon got elected, he came up to me, and he said, "I guess you're happy." And I said, "No, I'm not happy!" He said, "But you're white. Don't you like –" I said, "*No*, I'm not for Nixon. I didn't vote for Nixon." But that was understandable. He had stereotyped me, like so many whites stereotype blacks, and some blacks do that to whites. And it's easy to do that. You know that. I mean, you just do it, you know?

MW: (?)

JR: Yeah. Exactly. So that's why I went to Central.

MW: Okay. You obviously enjoyed the experience of going there.

JR: It was wonderful. I mean, I loved my classmates, I generally loved my professors. A few of them I didn't care a thing about, but most of them I did. And they were black and white. I mean, I had different-race teachers and professors. And I had many good classes, and I just thoroughly enjoyed it. I learned a lot, mostly because I was so dedicated, and like a sponge. I wanted to learn. And now, at last, I could put things into context, because I read all my life. My

mother graduated from college, my whole family did. But I got married when I was sixteen, it was World War II, so-- Yeah. And we moved all over the country. I had seven kids. So I never got a chance to go. And this was like – wow! It was wonderful.

MW: Okay. Do you feel like you lost any friends, or gained any friends, from going there, or from being active in the civil rights movement?

JR: Well – you know, I can't – well, I think people in Columbus, Georgia, the people among my friends – and frankly, they were whites mostly; I mean, I had a few black friends, but most of them were white – and they didn't understand it. I mean, they really didn't. But they were relatively tolerant of me, because they knew that I had always been someone who heard a different drummer. And I always listened to the drummer. Because I had many arguments with them about blacks and whites. I remember some jackass man once said to me, "Well, you know, God made blackbirds and bluebirds, and they're not supposed to mix." And I said, "What's that got to do with human beings?" I mean, you know. So I'd always argued for that. So I don't think they were the least bit surprised that I'd go.

MW: (?)

JR: No, mm-mn.

MW: Do you think that's because you surrounded yourself with friends who were more open to it in the first place?

JR: Well, I think I would have been open to anybody, because I think that's the way I was reared. Had strong moral courage.

MW: It has a lot to do with –

JR: It's a lot to do with my mother, frankly. I think more my mother – daddy sort of went along with whatever mother said about stuff, and mother was the strong one that way. She was remarkable.

MW: So did your political (advocacy?), most of the ideas, come from your parents (?)?

JR: Well, oftentimes they do. Like all my kids, I mean, none of them are racist. I mean, my God, there's no way they could be. I mean, it just wouldn't work for them, because of the way they were reared. And their father was not a racist either, actually. He wasn't an activist, like I've always been, but he was not a racist.

MW: Did you ever try to convince people who maybe agreed but didn't get involved? Did you ever try to convince them to get involved?

JR: No, I never did that. I never tried to make activists of people, but I certainly tried to convince them. Because I had a great sense of people's boundaries.

MW: (?)

JR: Yeah. But I would certainly tell them what I thought, and hope maybe some of that would make them think, at least.

MW: Is there any one person who stands out in your mind as someone you met during the civil rights movement that you'd like to talk about?

JR: Well, of course Dr. King, obviously. That was my hero. He was my hero. And there were others, too. I mean, I like Malcolm X. I heard Malcolm X one time debate in Chicago with Louis Lomax, and he had just come back from Mecca, and realized that, my God, there were white people there too. And he had changed his ideas about that. And I thought he was remarkable, because he was able to evolve. And that's sometime hard to do. You know. But he was able to. So I had a lot of heroes. And I certainly liked – Lewis that was in the civil rights movement, that's now a congressman from Georgia. John, is it? Black man. He was one of King's right-hand men. And so, yeah, I had a lot of heroes.

And then when we had a hospital strike in Charleston, and virtually all the workers who were striking were black, because they were underpaid and everything. And you know, housekeepers and that type thing. And I was working, at that time, for the federal government. Believe it or not, I was working in a birth control clinic, as a counselor – which took a lot out of me. I mean, I already had seven kids, and now I became an anti-fertility goddess. But anyway. But I had crossed the picket line – you know, I was a federal employee, I wasn't a -- And (digging under?) while I explained it to them. I said, "Look, I'm sorry. I mean, if I could be, I'd be right out here with you all."

And another thing I did that was fun – this woman in the clinic, we'd go out to the clinic, and most of the clients – well, all of them were poor, but many of them were back. And they'd call them by their first name. Well, I went out there, and I says, "Mrs. Jones, Mrs. Brown, Mrs. –" And I thought, "This is my way of fighting that foolishness." So, I mean, I hate that sort of thing. I mean, you don't call a person – at least in those days – you didn't call a person by their first name until you got to know them. And that was fine. In fact, I think some of that's good now, but it doesn't happen now. And like somebody asked you – like I did, asked you to call me

Jane – it's fine. But just to assume, "Well, she's Jane." No. Not unless somebody says, "I'm Jane and I'd like you to call me that." But that was fun. I was subversive.

MW: So you enjoyed being –

JR: Yes.

MW: -- different.

JR: Yeah, I did. I enjoyed doing what I thought was right. Because that's basically what it was. Doing what I'd been taught to do. Listened to my mama. (Laughs)

MW: Is there any other way that you were involved in the civil rights movement that you'd like to talk about? Anything else that stands out in your mind?

JR: Well, you know – no, frankly I think I've covered it generally. Oh, one other thing that happened that was really kind of amusing – it shows you how hypocritical people can be. I worked – I mean, I lived, in Willamette, Illinois, which is a lily-white suburb. And one of the things that happened, a woman at the Human Relations Committee got the bright idea that they'd try to integrate it, by going to talk to realtors. They used to send me, because I had a Southern accent and I sound like magnolia -- And so I'd go, because they thought it would disarm these realtors. Well, of course, it did. And what I'd do was talk to them about not only the fact of injustice, but that economically it was stupid, because that would appeal to them. So I did that. You know. So I did a lot of little thing like that, but I did have seven kids I had to take care of. And I'm sure there are other things, but I can't off-hand think of any of them.

MW: (?) Do you think that Durham, specifically, has changed a lot?

JR: Well, I have not – I've been in Durham for thirty-three years. I guess that's a long time. I came up to go to school in '70, and they never got rid of me. And I do find that the race situation in Durham is sad, because it's so polarized. And although I certainly understand reasons of this, I wish it weren't that way. I really do. Because my idea is to try to work together, and I think it's just difficult because of the way things are. And I find things sad.

MW: So you think the situation here is not that good?

JR: No, I don't think it is. And you can understand reasons why, but that doesn't mean you think it's in good shape. Yeah.

MW: Is there anything else you'd like to say?

JR: No, just to thank you for this opportunity to meet you.

MW: Thank you for coming –

JR: And I'm so glad that you're studying and doing this. Are you planning to be an oral historian – or what? No. But it's good. It's good to learn how to interview. Because I know how to interview too, I was a counselor. And it's a real art. (End of recording)