

JACKSONVILLE STATE UNIVERSITY

700 PELHAM ROAD N.

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DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

TELEPHONE: (205) 782-5632

Gift and Release Agreement:

We Louise Kilgore (Louise) and Banyon Allison
(Interviewee) (Interviewer)

Do hereby grant permission to Jacksonville State University to copy the tape of the interview conducted at 113 West Oak St Oxford AL 36203 on the date(s) of 9-20-95 for the oral history collection being compiled at Jacksonville State University.

This collection will be maintained by Jacksonville State University for research into the history of Northeast Alabama and the South. We further grant researchers permission to quote from the interview on this tape.

Louise Kilgore
(Interviewee's signature)

Date 9-20-95

113 West Oak Street
(Address)

Oxford, AL
205-825-2386
(Telephone)

Banyon Allison
(Interviewer's signature)

Date 9-20-95

P.O. Box 8927 J.S.U.
(Address)

Jacksonville, AL 36265
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INTERVIEWEE BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Name: Louise Kilgore MTF

Address: 113 West Oak St Oxford, Al 36203

Phone number(s): 833-2386

Approximate age or date of birth: 57

Mother's Name: Leona Harrison

Father's Name: Laurence Harrison

Places lived and when: Penna, New York State, Vermont
Ala.

Education: College - BS Education

Religion: Episcopal

Business, political and social memberships (past and present) _____

Present occupation: Cashier

Former occupations: Teacher - Professional Girl Scout

Special Skills: _____

Major Accomplishments: Published writer

National Events in which interviewee has participated: National
Girl Scout Camp planning Committee

Local Events in which interviewee has participated: Local Scout

National born U.S. citizen? Yes No

Naturalized Citizen: Yes/No Date: _____

Country from which he/she emigrated: _____

Documents, photographs, and artifacts which are in the possession of the interviewee: _____

Individuals recommended by the interviewee who might be candidates for an oral history interview: _____

Additional information: _____

Louise Kilgore
Oral Interview, 9-20-95
113 West Oak Street
Oxford, AL

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The Life and Times of Mrs. Louise Kilgore

Banyon Allison

History of American Women, HY 436-G

Dr. Suzanne Marshall

12-4-95

Jacksonville State University

The Life and Times of Mrs. Louise Kilgore

Mrs. Louise Kilgore was born on February 17, 1938 in the small town of Westfield, Pennsylvania to the late Laurence and Leonna Harrison. Her only sibling, her sister, Marietta Thompson currently resides in Anniston. She is the widow of the late Mr. Joe Kilgore, and the mother of one daughter, Christina Diane Kilgore.¹

Mrs. Kilgore's father (Laurence Harrison) originally migrated from England. He was six or seven years old when he and an older brother traveled to Canada with their parents. His father died forcing his mother to get a job at a local shoe factory. The brothers struggled, mostly on their own, to survive. Eventually, both brothers ran away. Mr. Harrison's brother never returned. Mr. Harrison roamed all over Calgary, Ontario and the midwestern United States, the latter being illegal since he was not a citizen of the United States. Laurence lived off the Salvation Army and by following rodeos. Eventually, he found his mom in the small, Pennsylvanian town of Westfield. She taught school. He snuck over to see her, and ironically met, Leonna Harrison, who taught as well. After a period of courtship, they married.²

To say the least, the marriage between Laurence and Leonna suffered continuously. He seldom held a job for longer than a few months, and would not share his meager earnings with his

¹Kilgore interview, 20 September, 1995.

²Kilgore interview, 20 September 1995.

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family. However, later in the relationship he landed a job as a janitor at the school where Leonna taught, but he lied to others by telling them that he occupied the position of principal. He enjoyed frequenting bars, and often drank too much. On the contrary, Leonna was the settling influence of the family. She had her "feet on the ground." She held a teaching job for thirty seven years until she retired. While teaching did not pay much, it provided enough money for the family to get by. She ran the house, managed the finances, and ^{saw} seen to it that her children ate well, dressed nicely, and received an education.³

Upon reflection, Mrs. Kilgore believes that her father's disorderly early life would be a viable explanation to why he behaved as he did. However, this did not disguise the resentment that radiated from her voice and in her choice of words. She did not like the fact that he "stayed gone for months at a time, and then he would come back and expect to be treated with love, dignity, and respect by his children." She felt like he did not warrant this treatment. Concerning the issue of divorce, Mrs. Kilgore explained that divorce was "simply not an acceptable option." At this time, society frowned upon divorced couples because it went against the social norm of the day. Mrs. Harrison stayed married for the betterment of the children and to avoid being the subject of gossip in the town. ⁴

³Kilgore interview, 20 September 1995. The cause of death of Laurence Harrison was not discussed in the interview.

⁴Kilgore interview, 20 September 1995.

Mrs. Kilgore lived briefly in Westfield, and then she moved to the mill town of Antrim, Pennsylvania. Her early childhood took place here. She spoke fondly of this time in her life, especially when it came to entertainment. While many of the youth enjoyed bowling, softball, or volleyball, Mrs. Kilgore preferred to "curl up with a book and read." Mrs. Kilgore enjoyed this activity longer than normal, since she learned to read at an early age. Mrs. Kilgore attended school one year early. The reason being that every time her mother would leave her with a sitter while she went off to work, Mrs. Kilgore would run away to the school and just stare in the window. Eventually, Mrs. Harrison became tired of these actions and just enrolled her in classes anyway. Mrs. Kilgore also enjoyed writing poetry about various things, specifically nature and Christmas. She wrote her first poem at the age of nine. Mrs. Kilgore's enjoyment of reading and writing are still a very important aspect of her life today.⁵

The school environment was much different when Mrs. Kilgore attended. The students respected their teachers and did not misbehave as a whole. Most students valued education. Mrs. Kilgore attended the one room elementary school where her mother taught. Later, she eventually moved into a more traditional high school with multiple rooms. Her mother taught in a classroom

⁵For recreational activities, see Martha Dean Tidmore Henderson, Interview by Kellie L. Morgan, November 1994, Jacksonville State University Oral History Collection, Jacksonville State University, Jacksonville, Alabama. For reading and poems, see Kilgore interview, 20 September 1995.

heated by a coal stove in the center of the room, but it often did not provide enough heat to warm the entire area. To combat this problem, Mrs. Kilgore dressed warmly. At this time most of the students walked to school, because a bus did not run in the rural areas where many people lived. Also, the school focussed the entire time on learning the three R's (reading, writing, and arithmetic). Students performed multiple lessons at different grade levels in the same room. Mrs. Kilgore took joy at being able to listen to other lessons and being able to perform them as well.⁶

Mrs. Kilgore's family then moved to Wellsboro, Pennsylvania during her high school years. As previously mentioned, writing came quite naturally for Mrs. Kilgore, but it was not until high school that her talent was discovered and untapped by her 9th grade English teacher. He lived in a larger town and would bring her books to read, since the local library was inadequate. A friendship developed, and he recommended that Mrs. Kilgore enter a statewide essay contest with the subject being "Good Citizenship." Mrs. Kilgore entered and won. The prize was a tuition scholarship to Penn State University. However, Mrs. Kilgore was not able to attend Penn State, because the campus was far from home, and she could not afford to pay for food, housing, and books. Instead, she decided to attend Mansfield State

⁶For respect, see Linda Chandler, Interview by Meg Bakke, 9 March 1994, Jacksonville State University Oral History Collection, Jacksonville State University, Jacksonville, Alabama. For school conditions, see Kilgore interview, 20 September 1994.

Teachers College in Mansfield, Pennsylvania, because it was close to home, and she could save money by living there.⁷

At the time Mrs. Kilgore decided to go to college, most women did not attend for various reasons. First, many colleges did not recruit women nor were they encouraged by their families to further their education. Next, money presented an obstacle to not only women, but men as well. Many people simply did not command the financial means necessary to obtain an education. Finally, the last reason arose out of job opportunity. Many jobs were simply not open to women. That is many occupations were not accepted by society as a position a woman should or could handle. This created problems for women entering reputable institutions, graduate schools, and obtaining jobs in traditional male dominated careers. This caused many women to opt for a life in the local factory or as their husband's wife and homemaker.⁸

However, this was not the case for Mrs. Kilgore. While she did experience financial difficulties, it was really not an option for her not to go to school. Her sister had attended college, and her mother "expected" her to attend as well. As might be understood, Mrs. Kilgore chose to become a teacher mainly "because her mother and sister were already in the profession." Teaching comprised the only profession that she had

⁷Kilgore interview, 20 September 1994.

⁸For reasons to teach, see Mavis G. Harris, Interview by Bryan D. Jamison, 28 February 1994, Jacksonville State University Oral History Collection, Jacksonville State University, Jacksonville, Alabama.

ever been around, since her father did not work much. Also, Mrs. Kilgore mentioned that she lacked information about job opportunities. She believes if she did it over again, she might of pursued a field in journalism. This would have provided a way that she could "use her writing ability and make a living at the same time."⁹

Upon entering college, Mrs. Kilgore decided to major in home economics education. This major was extremely popular for women during this era, because homemaking skills were part of women's traditional roles. Not only did she take classes in sewing and cooking, but she also studied chemistry, physics, and nutrition. However, many of the men and adolescents traditionally looked down on these teachers. They believed these were skills that should be taught at home to the women, by the mothers, so they could cater to the needs of their husbands and families. Sexist attitudes prevailed during this era.¹⁰

Once during the summer, Mrs. Kilgore took a job as a dietitian at the Philadelphia General Hospital. She substituted for the regular dieticians who were taking their vacation time during the summer months. Many home economic majors worked in the summers like this. Two of the job requirements for dieticians were that the person major in home economics or some related field, and that the student perform some type of internship.

⁹Kilgore interview, 20 September 1995.

¹⁰For home economics attitudes, see Chandler interview, 9 March 1994.

This internship usually occurred during the summers of undergraduate school, or one could opt for a one year internship after the person had received his or her degree. Both avenues led towards college credit and were paid positions. The only difference was that the graduate was paid somewhat more than the nongraduate.¹¹

At the hospital, Mrs. Kilgore fulfilled the duties of a Therapeutic Dietician. This type of dietician overlooks the diets of the patients who need certain types of foods because of their particular illnesses. In a hospital, many times most of the patients eat restricted diets, and this made Mrs. Kilgore's job meticulous and time consuming. She was in charge of getting the particular diets from the doctors, preparing the food, and seeing that it got distributed properly, on time, and to the correct patients. She did not enjoy this job. She worked long hours for minimal pay. A starting dietician's salary ranged between \$265.00 to \$335.00 dollars per month in 1955. Another reason she did not enjoy this experience was because she had never been far from home for an extended period of time. Philadelphia was a very big, and dangerous city. She did not go out at night unless accompanied by others. The threat of being mugged always presented itself. Mrs. Kilgore even mentioned an incident when a girl in the apartment above her was raped and killed by a intruder who had climbed up the fire escape that went

¹¹For dietician requirements, see "Dietetics as a Profession," by the American Dietetic Association (Chicago: American Dietetic Association, 1951).

right past her own window. These incidents helped make the job of hospital dietician an undesirable one.¹²

After the baby boom of the 1940's, the population of America increased tremendously. Eventually, these babies entered high schools in the late 1950's and early 1960's, thus causing swelling enrollment. At the same time pay raises for teachers failed to keep pace with industrial pay scales of the day. Besides teaching being a traditional role for females, pay was one of the reasons why many men decided to forgo a career in education. This opened the door for careers in teaching for many women who opted to do so. Mrs. Kilgore was one of those women.¹³

Upon graduating college, Mrs. Kilgore obtained her first teaching job in Levittown, Pennsylvania. It was not a positive experience. She taught there for six years. The experience was filled with gangs, violence, threats of violence, and unruly students. Levittown was a city on the outskirts of Philadelphia. The mere vastness of Philadelphia, coupled with the diversity of the students contributed to a disruptive atmosphere.¹⁴

One incident that Mrs. Kilgore described involved a fight

¹²For therapeutic dietician and salary, see "Occupational Briefs on America's Major Job Fields: The Young Person Interested in a Career as a Dietician will Find Many Specialties within the Field," by the Science Research Associates (Chicago: Science Research Associates, 1955). For mugging incident, see Kilgore interview, 20 September 1995.

¹³James C Stone and Clark N. Robinson, The Graduate Internship Program in Teacher Education: The First Six Years (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965), 1.

¹⁴Kilgore interview, 20 Sept 1995.

between two youths in her homeroom class. They were fighting and one of the boys pulled out a switch blade knife. Without thinking, she immediately jumped in between the two young men. One of them jerked his elbow away and knocked her down. The boys, who usually caused no trouble, were "frightened by the fact that they had knocked the teacher down." They forgot about the fight and began to check on her. She was alright, but the boys ended up getting in severe trouble when the principal and other school authorities arrived.¹⁵

Another situation occurred when she stayed after school to prepare for her next day's class. An older student ^{whom} ~~that~~ she did not know walked into her class and began to stare at her threateningly. He did that for several minutes and eventually told her that they were all alone. Mrs. Kilgore responded, "that there was a phone in her room, and she would call the front office." He retorted, "What makes you think you can get to the phone?" Mrs. Kilgore became really frightened, but eventually the boy left. She now believes that the boy only tried to scare her. Needless to say, Mrs. Kilgore never stayed after school again.¹⁶

After her stint at Levittown, Mrs. Kilgore moved to Corning, New York. She ended up teaching there for several more years. It was during this time that Mrs. Kilgore contemplated getting out of the teaching profession. She became frustrated to the

¹⁵Kilgore interview, 20 Sept 1995.

¹⁶Kilgore interview, 20 Sept 1995.

point of slapping a disrespectful senior high student. This incident almost cost her job, but the case never went to court. Since she was single and had no other financial obligations besides herself, she decided to pursue the first other job opportunity that arose. That opportunity arose when her sister, Marietta, invited her to come to Alabama and visit.¹⁷

Mrs. Kilgore had never been to the South, much less Alabama. It was a whole new experience for her. She fell in love with the area immediately. The people were friendly and the weather was delightful. She commented, "The magnolias and azaleas were truly beautiful." Mrs. Kilgore decided she wanted to live here. She immediately began searching for a job outside of the teaching profession. She put in an application at the Alabama State Employment Office and then returned to New York for some unfinished business. The day that she arrived home, she received a phone call from her sister saying that the Department of Pensions and Security wanted her to interview for the job of social worker. She immediately turned the car around and began her return trip to Alabama. Little did she know that Alabama would be her permanent residency~~y~~ for the next thirty years.¹⁸

While at the employment office, Mrs. Kilgore ran into a "good" problem of sorts. She found out that not only did Pensions and Securities want to hire her, but also the Girl

¹⁷For slapping incident, see Kilgore interview, 20 Sept 1995. For single and leaving profession, see Stone, The First Six Years, 81.

¹⁸Kilgore interview, 20 Sept 1995.

Scouts of America. She hesitantly made a choice. Since several people had informed her that the job of social worker was bleak with few rewards, she decided on a career with the Girl Scouts. The job fit Mrs. Kilgore's desire to get away from the problems that she faced while teaching. Girl Scout officials informed her that the scouts involved "only the best and brightest people of the community." This excited her tremendously.¹⁹

The Girl Scouts, founded by Juliette Low in 1912, original purpose was to discover the happiness and joy of giving service to others through good deeds. Girl scouts, then and now, perform helpful services for the elderly, disabled, and poor alike. They do this while trying to build a sense of sisterhood through nature activities such as camping, hiking, plant and animal identification, and first aid skills. Mrs. Kilgore coordinated these types of activities. Also, she helped start new Girl Scout troops. She covered the Calhoun County area and the several surrounding counties. She often drove long hours to get to her assignments. Many times a hotel became her substitute home. Mrs. Kilgore did not work eight hours a day and return home, because she received a yearly salary. She worked until the job ended, no matter how many hours. This job often left Mrs. Kilgore fatigued and weary, but she enjoyed it very much. Mrs. Kilgore especially liked being her own boss and enjoyed not having someone looking over her shoulder constantly. She liked the traveling aspect of her job, because of the new people and

¹⁹Kilgore interview, 20 September 1995.

places she encountered along the way. She enjoyed the "quiet" time that she had when traveling alone in her car. It provided time when she could think and reflect on her daily activities. Mrs. Kilgore said, "She enjoyed this job tremendously, and that she would probably still be doing it if she had not gotten married and had a child."²⁰

Mrs. Kilgore met her husband, Joe Kilgore, her first week in Alabama. She was moving in her house when they first met. He worked for the city of Anniston's water department, and connected the water up to her house. As a matter of fact, he was the first person, besides her sister's family, who she met in Alabama. During his brief first visit, she mentioned that she needed some odd jobs done around the house. Seeing this as a way to get to know Mrs. Kilgore better, he seized the opportunity and volunteered himself for the job. They began dating and several years later, they were married.²¹

Shortly after her marriage, Mrs. Kilgore resigned from her job with the Girl Scouts. All the traveling required was not conducive to married life. She then turned her attention to a second career in education. She began teaching at Friendship Elementary School near Oxford, Alabama in the early 1970's. This

²⁰For girl scout purpose, see Girl Scout Handbook (New York: Girl Scouts Incorporated: 1933), 20-21. For activities, see Anne Hyde Choate and Helen Ferris eds., Juliette Low and the Girl Scouts: The Story of the American Woman 1860-1927 (New York: Girl Scouts Incorporated: 1928), 83-84. For job description, see Kilgore interview, 20 September 1995.

²¹Kilgore interview, 20 September 1995.

experience was much better than her 2 previous experiences . She taught first grade. The school was small, and the people of the community friendly. The children showed adults respect, and they wanted to learn. Mrs. Kilgore believes that if she could have started out in a friendly environment such as this or possibly elementary school in itself, she might have "taught until retirement". However, a bit of "circumstance" came Mrs. Kilgore's way, and her career as a teacher in Alabama ended abruptly.²²

During her stint at Friendship Elementary School, Mrs. Kilgore became pregnant with her first and only child, Christina. This ~~incident~~ changed her life dramatically. She resigned from her job because of the pressures of parenting and would never return to the education field again. Mr. and Mrs. Kilgore were extremely surprised to learn of her pregnancy but both ^{were} pleased. When Mrs. Kilgore was a child, she ruptured an appendix that went undetected for several days. She became extremely ill from the toxins that circulated her body undetected. Since the damage was already done, the appendix was never removed. The young Mrs. Kilgore was not expected to live, but somehow she managed to survive. The doctors told her that unrepairable damage was done to her reproductive system, and that she would never be able to have children. However, they were wrong. Mrs. Kilgore did become pregnant and carry a beautiful baby girl to term.²³

²²Kilgore interview, 20 September 1995.

²³Kilgore interview, 20 September 1995.

Mrs. Kilgore was in her mid-30's, and her husband was in his mid-40's when the pregnancy occurred. Mrs. Kilgore had never wanted a child of her own. She had always been very independent and spontaneous, and never entertained the idea. When she learned of her situation, she responded by taking the attitude that this was just another change in her life, and "Why Not?" She believed that she was reaching an age where she believed a child would be good for her, especially when she got older. On the other hand, Mr. Kilgore was even more excited than Mrs. Kilgore when the topic of another child arose. He already had two older children from a previous marriage. He was ecstatic at the notion of having another infant, while "many men his age were already having grandchildren."²⁴

Since the birth of her child, Mrs. Kilgore developed a different set of priorities. She switched from being a totally independent career woman to a woman consumed by the rigors of raising a child correctly. The pressures of this task increased tremendously in the late 1980's with the death of her husband. To be sure, she handled the challenge well. She raised her daughter to be an assertive, independent woman, capable of meeting challenges and overcoming obstacles. With her daughter away at college, Mrs. Kilgore looks to the future to accept the challenges that lie ahead. If the past is any indication of the future, Mrs. Kilgore will be fine.

²⁴Kilgore interview, 20 September 1995.

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WORD LIST

Westfield, Pennsylvania

Leona and Laurence Harrison

Mansfield State Teachers College

Levittown, Pennsylvania

Titanic

Calgary

Antrim, Pennsylvania

Episcopal

Catholicism

Coal stove

Tavern

George Pat

Creek

Philadelphia

Wellsboro, Pennsylvania

Azaleas and Magnolias

Hoodlums

Switchblade knife

Hawaii

Hazle Roe

Margaret Copeland

Mr. English

Gypsy

Stargate Cards

Panama

Colorado