


IN MEMORIAM

# The Inimitable Geraldine Jonçich Clifford, 1931–2024

Kim Tolley<sup>1</sup>  and John Thelin<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Notre Dame de Namur University and <sup>2</sup>University of Kentucky

**Corresponding authors:** [ktolley@ndnu.edu](mailto:ktolley@ndnu.edu); [jthelin@uky.edu](mailto:jthelin@uky.edu)

She had a twinkle in her eye, a keen intelligence, and a wicked sense of humor. A petite woman, she loomed large among her colleagues, often asking sharp, challenging questions of scholars at conferences. To graduate students, she was an important mentor, one who would generously answer any question from a young historian writing from across the country.<sup>1</sup>

Geraldine Jonçich grew up San Pedro, the section of Los Angeles that was at the heart of commercial fishing on the Pacific coast. Her parents had emigrated to California from the Dalmatian Coast of Croatia. Her father, who was captain and owner of a fishing vessel, was active in civic affairs and the local school board, as the Jonçich family emphasized the importance of education and community engagement. Her older brother, Marion, graduated with high honors from Caltech, and Geraldine graduated Phi Beta Kappa from UCLA.

Like many women of her generation, Geraldine Jonçich began her career as a school teacher, landing a job in a third-grade classroom in San Lorenzo, California. But like any twenty-two-year-old, she had bigger dreams. As she later explained, she grew bored with teaching spelling and was anxious to expand her “bundle of possibilities” in the field of education.<sup>2</sup>

Her desire to do *more* led her to graduate school at Teachers College, Columbia University. There, she wrote a doctoral thesis on Edward L. Thorndike, with the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Lawrence Cremin serving as her dissertation adviser. She received her doctorate in the history of education in 1961, and her thesis eventually became an award-winning book.<sup>3</sup> Beyond her own dissertation and studies, at Columbia she met and collaborated with fellow doctoral students Patricia Albjerg

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<sup>1</sup>Geraldine Jonçich Clifford passed away on September 12, 2024. “Geraldine Jonçich Clifford, 1931–2024,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, Sept. 18, 2024, <https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/sfgate/name/geraldine-clifford-obituary?id=56334155>.

<sup>2</sup>Geraldine Jonçich Clifford, “Serendipity, or So It Would Seem,” in *Leaders in the Historical Study of American Education*, ed. Wayne J. Urban (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2011), 21.

<sup>3</sup>She received the Commonwealth Club Book Award in 1968 for *The Sane Positivist: A Biography of Edward L. Thorndike* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1968). Commonwealth Club World Affairs,



**Figure 1.** Photo of Geraldine Jonçich Clifford, taken when she lived in San Francisco Towers. Published courtesy of Robin Suarez.

Graham and Diane Ravitch. The trio kept in close touch over the years, as through their scholarship and leadership roles, they shaped politics and public policies in national debates over the character of education and academic institutions into the twenty-first century.

In 1962, she was one of the few women to that point hired on the tenure track in UC Berkeley's School of Education. Eventually, she would become just the second woman to receive tenure there. The sixties was an exciting time, a decade of anti-war protest, sexual liberation, rock and roll, and—most importantly for Geraldine—the feminist movement. Having experienced firsthand the culture shock of moving from the female-dominated profession of elementary school teaching to the male-dominated world of academia, she eventually shifted her research agenda to include her deepening interest in women's experiences.

In talks and published papers, she called for a reconsideration of the schoolteacher in the history of American education. During the 1970s and 1980s, she pointed out that most historians had been silent about women in higher education and called for more research on gender and women's experience.<sup>4</sup> The title of her edited book, *Lone Voyagers*, could have applied to her own experience at Berkeley. The book's biographical essays explored the early entry of seven women into the male-dominated domain of academics near the turn of the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup>

"The California Book Awards," <https://www.commonwealthclub.org/events/special-events/california-book-awards/past-winners>.

<sup>4</sup>For two examples, see Geraldine Jonçich Clifford's Division F Vice-Presidential Address, delivered at the American Educational Research Association, April 2, 1975: "Saints, Sinners, and People: A Position Paper on the Historiography of American Education," *History of Education Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (Fall 1975), 257–72; and Clifford, "Shaking Dangerous Questions from the Crease: Gender and American Higher Education," *Gender Issues* 3, no. 2 (June 1983), 3–62.

<sup>5</sup>Geraldine Jonçich Clifford, *Lone Voyagers: Academic Women in Coeducational Institutions, 1870-1937* (New York: Feminist Press, 1989).

Throughout her distinguished career, she took center stage along with a cohort of scholars in a new era, one that ushered in “The New Historian of American Education.”<sup>6</sup> Starting in the early 1960s and gaining momentum over several decades, the “new historians” added critical analysis to the serious, systematic study of school systems and colleges and universities as part of American social and political history.

Geraldine Jonçich Clifford and fellow historians drew from such disciplines as sociology, gender studies, anthropology, political science, literary analysis, and psychology to reconstruct and interpret educational institutions and their numerous constituencies. While the traditional American credo emphasized formal education as a source of optimism and opportunity, the new scholarship included attention to exclusion and those who were left out and left behind. Historians of education between 1960 and today came of age posing significant questions and presenting complex data and findings. Integral to this trend was the emergence of the History of Education Society and its journal, *History of Education Quarterly*, as a lively forum of inquiry and discussion.

In addition to being centrally involved in the national trends in her field, Geraldine played an important role within her campus community at UC Berkeley. A catalyst, she brought about numerous campus symposia, brown bag lunches, and seminars in which outstanding researchers from a variety of fields, along with highly regarded college and university leaders, accepted her invitation to join in the local discussions. Not only did she seem to know everyone at UC Berkeley, Stanford, and other colleges, but she also brought them together to present their work—feats of persuasion that countered the alleged compartmentalization associated with what student and faculty protesters of the 1960s criticized as the “impersonality of the modern multiversity.”<sup>7</sup>

She was a natural leader. In UC Berkeley’s School of Education, she took on the roles of department chair and associate dean. Nationally, she served as president of the History of Education Society and vice president of the American Educational Research Association’s Division F. And as a leading scholar in her field, she received significant honors and awards. She was a Macmillan Fellow (1958-59), a Guggenheim Fellow (1965-66), a Rockefeller fellow (1977-78), and recipient of the Willystine Goodsell Award for Contributions to Women in Education (1992). In 2013, the American Educational Research Association honored her with the Distinguished Contributions to Gender Equity in Education Research Award.

Her leadership skills led her to serve for several years as acting dean of the School of Education during the eighties, and her experience in that role led her to think deeply about the status of education in academia. While schools of law, business, and medicine were well respected in the US, the same could not be said of schools of education. She collaborated with James W. Guthrie to explore the origins and development of this phenomenon. Their resulting book, *Ed School: A Brief for Professional Education*, broke new ground in suggesting strategies to bridge “the deep chasm that

<sup>6</sup>Wilson Smith, “The New Historian of American Education: Some Notes for a Portrait,” *Harvard Educational Review* 31 (Spring 1961), 136–43.

<sup>7</sup>The quote is from John R. Thelin, “Joe Biden as Joe College,” *Inside Higher Ed*, Oct. 27, 2020, <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/10/28/historian-describes-how-joe-biden-was-regular-not-radical-student-1960s-opinion>.

separates the academic community from the professional educators in many of our universities.”<sup>8</sup>

Throughout her long career, her scholarship always circled back to the subject of women teachers. Her book *“Equally in View”: The University of California, Its Women, and the Schools* challenged the long-standing theory that male colleges and universities only began admitting women students in the nineteenth century when falling enrollments threatened their survival. Instead, she argued that the growing numbers of female undergraduates were driven in large part by the demand for knowledgeable teachers in high schools.<sup>9</sup>

During the last decades of the twentieth century, she embarked on a massive research project on women teachers. Envisioning a comprehensive, two-volume history of women in education, she aimed to resolve the “two sets of parallel tracks” that ran through the standard historiography. The first was the usual separation of sectarian schools from their public and secular private counterparts, and the second was the common divide between K-12 school history from higher education history. To this end, she visited 628 collections in state and local historical society archives across the country, traveling over a period of twenty-five years to repositories in thirty-two states and the District of Columbia.<sup>10</sup>

In 1994, she retired from UC Berkeley. Her beloved husband, Bill Clifford, had died the previous year, and with the loss of their stimulating fellowship and shared enthusiasm for travel, music, good food, and great wine, she eventually felt it was time to sell their little house in Berkeley and move to a continuing care community. She moved to San Francisco Towers in 2001, appreciating its closeness to live theater, the Symphony, and the Opera. When she made the move, she brought around a dozen boxes of research documents and notes with her, hoping to finish her two-volume work on women teachers.

But, as she would later confess to her editors, those boxes languished in a storage area for more than a decade as Geraldine threw herself into the life of the community. She joined a bridge group and started taking exercise classes. She became an outspoken Towers “activist,” organizing a monthly movie and dining group, creating the annual Cal Post-Big-Game Brunch, and leading the discussion of around 150 films for the Foreign Language Film Series.<sup>11</sup> It was so much fun that for years, she set aside all thought about those boxes of research.

Nevertheless, as she later explained to some of the former students who helped her prepare the final manuscript for publication, by 2010, at the age of eighty, she knew it was time to knuckle down and finish the work. “I’ve interviewed so many women across the country,” she said. “I can’t let their words just disappear.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Geraldine Jonçich Clifford and James W. Guthrie, *Ed School: A Brief for Professional Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 43.

<sup>9</sup>Sarah Henry Lederman, review of *“Equally in View”: The University of California, Its Women, and the Schools*, by Geraldine Jonçich Clifford, *History of Education Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (May 1995), 207-8.

<sup>10</sup>Geraldine Jonçich Clifford, *Those Good Gertrudes: A Social History of Women Teachers in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), xii–xiii.

<sup>11</sup>“Geraldine Jonçich Clifford, 1931-2024,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, Sept. 18, 2024.

<sup>12</sup>Quote from a conversation with Kim Tolley, 2010.

It wasn't easy. The final manuscript ran well over a thousand pages, and cash-strapped academic presses could no longer afford to publish two-volume sets. She found it excruciatingly difficult to cut anything. But after much whittling down in response to stern admonitions from her publisher, in 2014 her book appeared in print, titled *Those Good Gertrudes: A Social History of Women Teachers in America*. Reviewers described it as a "breathtakingly encyclopedic history of women teachers" that presents "a fresh argument that for women, teaching played a subversive role as an incubator of feminism."<sup>13</sup>

At last, she could rest. She had finally succeeded in bringing the history of women teachers to life.

**Kim Tolley** is Emerita Professor at Notre Dame de Namur University. She is the author of *Vaccination Wars: The Two-Hundred-Year-Fight for School Vaccinations* and *The Science Education of American Girls*.

**John R. Thelin** is Professor Emeritus at the University of Kentucky. He is the author of *A History of American Higher Education* and *Going to College in the Sixties*. Both received their doctorates from UC Berkeley, where Geraldine Jonçich Clifford was their dissertation advisor.

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<sup>13</sup>Respectively, the quotes are from Jackie M. Blount, review of *Those Good Gertrudes: A Social History of Women Teachers in America*, by Geraldine Jonçich Clifford, *Education Review* 23 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.14507/er.v23.1978>; and from Christine A. Ogren, review of *Those Good Gertrudes*, *History of Education Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (Nov. 2015), 500.