

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Laura Jacobs, Class of 1965

Interviewed by
Hana Sarfan, Class of 2016

May 15, 2015

Abstract

In this interview, Laura Jacobs discusses her move from New York City to Northampton. She discusses the social and academic difficulties she faced during the transition and recalls the relationships she formed with her roommate and fellow students who helped her during that adjustment period. She discusses her house community, the roles that house mothers played within that community, as well as her experience as a Jewish woman at Smith and one of two women majoring in physics.

Restrictions

None.

Format

Interview recorded using Canon Vixia HF.

Videographer

Video recorded by Kate Geis.

Transcript

Transcribed by Janice King, Audio Transcription Center.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Jacobs, Laura. Interview by Hana Sarfan. Video recording, May 15, 2015. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Laura Jacobs, interview by Hana Sarfan, transcript of video recording, May 15, 2015, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

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Transcript of interview conducted May 15, 2015 with:

LAURA JACOBS
Northampton, MA

by: HANA SARFAN

SARFAN: What were your first kind of like reactions or feelings about Smith?

JACOBS: Oh, I can tell you that very clearly. I came to Smith as a high school senior to see it. My brother was dating a woman who lived in Washburn House and so I stayed in Washburn House with the person who became my sister-in-law eventually and who is no longer my sister-in-law, but that's another story. And I felt like I had been dropped on an alien planet.

I went to a huge New York City high school and we had to wear skirts and stuff to school. That was required. If we had gym we had to change into these heinous gym suits. And if there were a fire drill during gym, you'd rather burn than go out and be seen in these gym suits they were so awful.

Here I was dropped at Smith and sitting in the living room of Washburn house. This older woman walked in and everybody jumped up. It was the house mother. Maybe I was not well-raised, but I wasn't used to standing up when other people came into the room. I would say hello, but I wasn't – So I figured if they're jumping up there must be a reason so I did, too. So I had to learn that.

Then I went to classes and these girls kept walking in their gym suits and I thought, Don't they know they're not dressed? The professor came in and said, "Good morning," and they pulled out their knitting. I thought, This is the rudest thing I've ever seen in my life! How could they be sitting here knitting while the professor's professing? I just couldn't believe it. There were others that he would walk in – it happened to be a class that was taught by a man – he would walk in and he would say, "Good morning," and they would write it down. I thought, You know, I believe in taking notes, but this is a little excessive. So either they were taking a huge number of notes or they were knitting.

I really thought I was dropped on an alien planet (laughs). It was so different from my life's experience and I think – my brother was very pro-Smith in those days – and I think had he not urged me so emphatically, I probably would not have come here because I felt strange. But I was glad I had even that few day exposure before I actually came as a student because

I knew it to stand up for the house mother and I knew to expect weird things in class, so it wasn't as alien to me when I came as a freshman. I think had I experienced it for the first time as a freshman, I might have wanted to have turned around and gone home because I felt so out of place. But fortunately I had experienced it before. But that was my first impression.

The other thing was when I did come as a freshman, you might say I had an overprotective mother. I didn't realize it at the time. But she really wasn't. She really allowed me a lot of latitude growing up, but the one thing she was concerned about was the quality of the college beds. So she bought me – and my father bought me – a bed board to put under my mattress to make the mattress firmer. We pull up to Parsons house and in front of me are cars loaded with skis. Somebody carried in golf clubs. One girl had a horse trailer with her horse in it. I thought, I'm coming with a bed board? I will look really look weird compared to this group. So it was – that was also an eye-opening experience just pulling up to the front door of Parsons. So you asked for my first impressions and those were what they were.

SARFAN: And how did that evolve over the first couple of years?

JACOBS: Smith became home. I was extremely fortunate. I had an amazing roommate. She was just phenomenal. I had another little disadvantage in that – to quote a conversation I had with her. She said something like, "I drove to the library," and I said to her – she came from a suburb of Chicago – I said to her, "You drive?" She said to me, "You don't?" I said, "No, you have to be 18 to drive in New York." She said, "How old are you?" and I said, "Sixteen." She said, "Uh-oh." And she said, "Hmmm," and I'm sure she – it caused her some pause, but we just hit it off.

She was amazing. She really kind of saved my life at Smith. I did very poorly on first final exam and never experienced anything quite like it before. And it was a French final and language is not my strong suit. I came back and I was very upset. In those days we actually wrote letters, I mean with a pen and paper. And we didn't call home a lot and we certainly didn't email home. She wrote to her mother and her mother later quoted me the letter. It said, "Dear Mom and Dad. Laura just came back from her first final. She's very upset. I don't know whether to console her or burp her." (laughter) I mean, but we were able to joke about the fact that I was an infant by comparison to everybody else.

There was one other person in my class who was younger than I. She's the one I went to elementary school with. I saw her recently and I said, "We're the youngest ones in the class." She said, "Yeah, there's one other girl who's two months older than we are." So, that was another little problem, whatever. But it worked itself out and I was very, very fortunate about that.

I really became – I went home for Thanksgiving and as – it was New York – and as the train was pulling into Grand Central Station I was looking at the window, the scenery around, I thought, I spent the first 16 years of my life here? This place is awful. So, I became – the first few nights I was at Smith I could hardly sleep because it was so quiet. I wasn't used to that. I was used to city noise. So that was an adjustment for me. But boy, I adjusted really fast to all of that stuff. I loved it here. It was tough. I worked very hard. I found out I wasn't as smart as a lot of the other girls, but I think my education here was unbelievable. It was absolutely phenomenal.

SARFAN: So you mentioned your roommate. Did you have other people that you were close with?

JACOBS: Oh, yeah. I made other friends, certainly. You know, through classes. I was very involved in Hillel, so I made a lot of friends through that. You know, various other things I did. I was on the student – something called the student library committee, which after a few months voted to disband itself (laughs). But, you know, I was involved in other stuff. So I was amazed when I came back from my – the first reunion I came back for was my 15th and I thought, I hardly know anybody and I was amazed at how many people I actually did know. So, I guess I made friends in different places and wasn't even conscious of it.

SARFAN: How was being in Hillel? What was that like?

JACOBS: Oh, it was interesting. For those of us who were involved it was very, very nice. Many of the other women – girls we called ourselves in those days – who could have been involved, just weren't interested and they were kind of disdainful of those of us who were.

SARFAN: The other Jewish women?

JACOBS: Yeah. But I enjoyed it a lot. So it gave me – I was president of Hillel so that gave me a leg up on sophomore push and junior rushes and all that sort of stuff. I really liked it and I became close with the rabbi and his wife and as a matter of fact, unfortunately he died shortly after we graduated from Smith, but his widow came when I was a newlywed. His widow came to my house for dinner. That's how close we became. So, it was nice. Yeah, so that was good.

SARFAN: What was it like being Jewish on campus? Was it like challenging at all?

JACOBS: Not for me. I have a very close friend in the class for who it was because she came from an orthodox home. She had to jump through hoops to get

permission to cook her kosher meat and stuff in one of the bathrooms or I forget where. So for her it was very challenging.

In those days – not now – but in those days, I ate anything that didn't eat me first. So, the food was not an issue for me at all. The challenge was dealing with other people who thought I was a looney for being interested – in being involved in Hillel, but that, you know, I just slept that off. And as for the rest, I didn't – I mean, I just felt like everybody else. So it didn't – it was not an issue for me because I could – well, I could eat whatever. My background and upbringing was such that food was not an issue. But for this one friend of mine it was a huge problem. Really big problem. Her grandmother used to ship her stuff and the school was little difficult about giving her a place to store it and a place to cook it and stuff. So it was a challenge for her. So I'm aware of the challenge, but I didn't participate in it.

SARFAN: So you talked a little bit earlier about how you were a physics major.

JACOBS: Yeah, weird.

SARFAN: And there were only two physics majors at that time. What was that like?

JACOBS: It was amazing. I always talk about my senior year at Smith. Well, first of all, most people I know who go to college say, I've got to register early because I really want to get into this course and I'm so afraid if I don't register early. There was not a class at Smith for which I registered that I didn't get into. The whole concept of getting into a class was alien to me because if there were too many students, they just added another section. I mean, you know, they accommodated the students.

Talk about accommodating students. When I was a senior I had three physics courses. I don't remember which specific ones I took except for one of them. And one of them had a very huge population. There were three. Another one, there were the two of us and the third one was me. I went to – I was speaking to the head of the physics department or something, and he said, "What do you want to do with this major?" And I said, "Well, I think I'd like to teach it," and he said, "OK. We'll work that out." At the time PSSC was a – in response to Sputnik they came out with all these new math and science courses, and PSSC was one of them. And Professor Michael Rice was assigned to prepare me to teach physics. He exposed me to all the PSSC materials and he was my mentor. They got me a student teaching gig up in – where was that student teaching gig? I can't remember. Greenfield, I think. Up in Greenfield. I mean, it was amazing. They put together a course for me. I can't think of a college in this world that would do that other than Smith.

So, I always say that my Smith education was phenomenal. I mean, I never – I know my professors had to publish because that's the way of the world, but I never got the feeling that was their first job. I always felt that

their first job was to educate me and then on the side they had to publish. So, again, I know that's a unique experience for many, many college students.

SARFAN: Definitely.

JACOBS: Yeah and if somebody asks me – and people have – what was your favorite course at Smith? They expect me to say modern physics or something. My favorite course at Smith – and I loved a lot of them – was a course – we had requirements in those days and one of the things we had to do was take Latin or Greek or classical literature in translation. Well, being not the world's best student of languages, I felt that taking a year of Latin or Greek was waste of my time and I'd be lucky to get through it.

So I went and took classical literature in translation. The teacher came in. Her name was Elizabeth Moffet. She was not a particularly attractive woman and then when she began to speak she spoke like an adolescent boy. Good morning ladies. It's very nice to have you in this class. I mean, her voice went up and down. I thought I'm not going to make it through this class. Between the way she looks, which was a little intimidating, and the way she speaks, this is going to be awful. Within ten minutes I forgot all of that. It was the most fascinating, wonderful course. A course I wouldn't have taken on a bet if I had a choice.

So I have a great deal of respect for the schools that still have requirements, and there are a few. I have three children. They went to three different universities and the one I was happiest about writing the checks for was Columbia because my son had requirements at Columbia and I respect that being an old fuddy-duddy.

SARFAN: What was something that you liked to do for fun when you were a student?

JACOBS: Who had fun? No, I was exposed to crew. I had been in rowboats. Not being terribly athletic, I thought how hard can rowing be? So I signed up for crew. They said, "Strap your feet into these things." And I said to myself, if I was smart enough to be admitted to Smith, I'm not going to be so stupid as to strap myself into a boat. I mean, it could capsize. I could be dead in few minutes. Then I figured out what the purpose was of strapping yourself. I loved it. I really enjoyed it. I wasn't good, but I was good enough to row on my house crew, which I did. So that was fun.

I was very involved in Hillel and that was fun. And I met this guy at the beginning of freshman year and we started dating in the middle of freshman year and that kept me going for the rest of my college career and for 50 years since.

SARFAN: And you're with that person now?

JACOBS: Yeah, we're celebrating our 50th anniversary.

SARFAN: Wow. That's great.

JACOBS: Yeah.

SARFAN: Where did they go?

JACOBS: Amherst. Yeah. So that was – my social life was kind of taken care of from the middle of freshman year on. So that was good, too.

SARFAN: So did you ever attend mixers?

JACOBS: Yes. I was telling somebody this story that my husband and I actually were fixed up by a mutual friend that I had met at summer camp and that he had gone to high school with. And we met in the fall of my freshman year. I thought he was – I liked him. I thought he was very nice, but he wasn't particularly interested in me. But he would come to Smith to go to services on Friday night because they didn't have them at Amherst. There was a Hillel mixer coming up on a Saturday night and we saw each other at the services Friday night and he said to me, "Are you going to the mixer tomorrow?" and I said yes, and he said, "OK, I'll see you there." And he started walking down the hall. I think he had another date or something. So we're walking down the hall and I could see him slowing down. As a physics major I would say he decelerated, changed to a mid-180 degree turn and came back. And he kind of felt a little bad about – he thought he wasn't very polite. So he said to me, "Would you like for me to pick you up at your dorm and walk you to the mixer?" And I said OK. And I came back and said to my roommate, "How am I going to ditch this guy? I mean, why is he walking me if he's not interested in me and how do I ditch him and meet somebody I like or who would like me?" And he asked me to dance and somehow he decided he changed his mind and from then on we dated. That was one mixer I attended. I guess there were others as well. I don't remember them as vividly.

SARFAN: So, in the early '60s there was a lot going on at Smith and the world in terms of like social change and politics-

JACOBS: Not so mu- either that or I lived under a rock which is possibly more the case. Not so much as I think later in the '60s. To be quite honest with you, I was unaware of drugs on campus, which is not to say they weren't on campus. I was just saying I was unaware of them.

The huge thing that happened while I was here in Lily Hall was the assassination of President Kennedy. I mean, that was huge. I mean, it threw the world into turmoil. It certainly threw my world into turmoil. So, things like that.

But of course the Civil Rights Movement was – Governor Wallace came to speak and I went to hear him. People said, How can you hear – I said, “It’s important to hear other people’s opinions. I don’t agree with him by a long shot, but it’s important to hear their opinions.” And it turned out – I must have been up very late the night before studying for something or other. I fell asleep and he said, “You probably had the best reaction to him of anybody there.” So, I was aware of these things but I don’t remember them – of course Kennedy’s assassination rocked everybody – but I don’t remember much of it affecting either this campus or my perception of things on this campus. As I said, I might have lived under a rock. I don’t know.

SARFAN: Yeah, that definitely makes sense. So, Smith, I think, has a lot of great, important traditions. I don’t know if you resonate with any of those. And then we also are changing and evolving a lot. So I’m curious if you have any thoughts about either of those aspects, like some of the traditions that are really important to you or the changes.

JACOBS: One of the traditions – I might not even be aware of some of the ones you’re referring to – but one of the traditions I always found very moving because I was a part of sophomore push and I was a junior rusher and of course I was graduated and have come back to reunions – that parade tomorrow – I remember saying to some of my classmates, I said, “Boy, when we were graduating when the ladies who were 50 years out who were in the class of 1915, my gosh, two World Wars ago. When those ladies walked in the parade I thought, Ahh, they’re still walking. It’s amazing! Considering how ancient they are. And here I am still walking.

But I loved that. I loved all of that stuff. The roses and the white dresses and the whole thing. I really loved that stuff. So those were traditions that I held dear at the time and still do. I’m trying to think of one other tradition.

There actually was – I found out but I didn’t know it until I was part of sophomore push – there actually was a precedent for this. One of the buildings around here – and I forget which one it was – had – Lyman maybe. No, not Lyman. The biology building in the Burton, I think it was, had steps that were occupied by – I think they were occupied by seniors on one of the last days they were on campus, and then sophomores came and pushed them off so that the juniors could come and take them over. So that I think was the origin of sophomore push. That’s my understanding of what it was, but I hadn’t heard of it until I was part of it. So I wasn’t quite sure exactly what that was. I thought we had to push ladies in wheelchairs like people my age. That’s where I thought the name came from. So that was an interesting tradition. One I knew very little about. But I’m not sure what other traditions you’re referring to because I can’t think – yeah.

We also had gracious living. Every dorm had its own kitchen. And every meal we had linen napkins and you might think, how lovely. Well,

except that they were only changed twice a week. So at the end of every – yeah, it was gross – at the end of every meal – oh, and there was another tradition that was really cute. At the end of every meal we'd fold and roll our napkins and we had little cubbies for them, and then we'd pull them out at the next meal. So by Wednesday when they were washed and by Saturday they were pretty dirty and yucky.

But another tradition that existed at that time, and I don't know if it does now, we got our caps and gowns at rally day and you were not allowed – you had to be dressed for breakfast. Unless you were a senior, you could wear your cap and gown over your pajamas to breakfast. Well, not your cap but you could wear your gown over your pajamas to breakfast. I looked at us marching in for graduation and I said, "How distinguished looking are we with eggs here and oatmeal there and so forth." And that was a fun tradition at that time as was rally day weekend and the rally day shows and stuff like that. Those were all great traditions and do they still exist?

SARFAN: We do have rally day, yeah.

JACOBS: But not the cap and gown thing?

SARFAN: Well, I think people get their cap and gown. I think they wear it to rally day and they also – we've the tradition now of wearing hats to rally day. I don't know if you had that, but everyone wears like a fun hat.

JACOBS: No, I don't think we did. That does not sound familiar. But you can show up at breakfast in anything you want to wear?

SARFAN: I think so.

JACOBS: Yeah, well in our day you had to be dressed for breakfast. Yeah. And you had to be dressed for Sunday dinner. You had to get dressed as though you were going to church and that's how you had to show up for Sunday – dinner was at lunch time on Sundays. And I showed up the first week and lunch was the same every week. It was a pork chop, mashed potatoes and cauliflower as if having everything white on a plate was going to make us pure or whatever. I don't know what the purpose of that was (laughter). But after two weeks of that, I said this is not worth getting dressed for. I'm going to go to Green Street and have a sandwich. That was the last, I think, that I ever went to Sunday lunch.

SARFAN: OK, we're pretty much out of time but just a final quick question. Do you think that Smith prepared you well and how do you see Smith's influence in your life now?

JACOBS: Well, as I said, they – oh, and you asked me about change. I just want to say one thing. I noticed on campus the huge diversity of the population. We had – my class simply had one woman of color. I mean one. Literally. But somebody told there was a second that I don't know. Women of color, women of different cultures, and so forth. Huge change for the better in my opinion. That's wonderful. That I can see just opening my eyes. So that was good.

How did Smith – well, I told you there was a professor who prepared me to teach physics. I mean, that's what my life's work was. But a byproduct of that thing I just said about the linen napkins was whenever I go to a restaurant, or eat in my own home if I happen to be using linen or go to a friend's house, I always fold my napkin before I get up from the table. It's just ingrained. It's habit. So it prepared me to fold napkins.

I guess, you know, it did not prepare as we heard a talk by an economics professor last night who was talking about teaching the women of Smith now practical economics. We didn't learn practical anything as I recall. I was fortunate in that I was prepared for my eventual career. But I think it also prepared me to want to learn. It prepared me to be more knowledgeable about things. I had a colleague in school in which I taught who had also gone to Smith. She was about five years ahead of me. And there were a group of Catholic teachers in the school talking about the Immaculate Conception and we said, You're wrong. That's the virgin birth. The doctrine of Immaculate Conception is blah, blah, blah. So we were educating them. I had to take art history. It was also one of the best courses I ever took. So I could appreciate a lot of that stuff now I think because of the distribution requirements, I had to be educated and that's stands you in good stead throughout your life.

SARFAN: OK great. Thank you so much.

JACOBS: Well, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Janice King, June 2015.