

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Judith Silverman Ames, Class of 1961

Interviewed by
Sarah Dunn, Class of 2011

May 20, 2011

Abstract

In this oral history, Judith Silverman Ames discusses why she chose to attend Smith, her experiences living in Clark House, her participation playing on various sports teams and with musical groups. Ames also describes the campus atmosphere, the lack of diversity, the benefits of same-sex education, her post-Smith experiences living abroad in Mexico and Japan, and her various career choices.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded on miniDV tapes using a Panasonic DVX-100A camera. One 60-minute tape.

Transcript

Transcribed by Lauren Hinkle at the Audio Transcription Center in Boston, Massachusetts. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Olivia Mandica-Hart.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Ames, Judith Silverman. Interview by Sarah Dunn. Video recording, May 20, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Judith Silverman Ames, interview by Sarah Dunn, video recording, May 20, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

Transcript

Bibliography: Ames, Judith Silverman. Interview by Sarah Dunn. Transcript of video recording, May 20, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Judith Silverman Ames, interview by Sarah Dunn, transcript of video recording, May 20, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted on May 20, 2011, with:

JUDITH SILVERMAN AMES

by: SARAH DUNN
filmed by: KATE GEIS

DUNN: This is Sarah Dunn, and I am conducting an interview with Judith Silverman Ames, class of 1961, on May 20, 2011, for Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you for agreeing to be a part of the project.

AMES: Oh, it's my pleasure.

DUNN: Do you need her to spell her name?

GEIS: That would be great.

DUNN: Do you mind spelling your full name for us?

AMES: My full name. Judith is J-U-D-I-T-H, Silverman, S-I-L-V-E-R-M-A-N, Ames, A-M-E-S.

DUNN: Thank you. All right, so we're going to talk about how you came to Smith. So how did you—

AMES: I won't do the joke, "by car." (laughter)

DUNN: How did you choose Smith when you were deciding on colleges?

AMES: You know, I mentioned to you preliminarily that when I was applying for college, it was in 1956. And I was a good student in high school, I had good grades, and Harvard, Princeton, Yale did not accept women, so I thought, Well, I never thought about going to an all-girls' school, but I said, "I want to go to a really good school," and the Seven Sisters—Wellesley, Smith—and so I don't know why, this was the only campus we went on a trip. My parents—we went to Cornell—and my brother and I. And we came here, and there was something about it. We would just walk down the aisles, you know, the lanes, and people had a smile on their face, and they said hello. And they weren't literally ambassadors, but they were, you know, and there was a feeling for it. And so I applied to a few colleges. I only applied to this of the Seven Sisters, and I applied to Cornell and a few others. And so when I got

accepted to Smith, there was no—I just said, “That’s it, I know.” I wasn’t even thinking of anyplace else.

And I have to say, when I was thinking the other day about one of my favorite moments, back then, perhaps still, they had three, four days for just the freshmen, and then the whole school would arrive later. And we did the rule book and learned the alma mater and things like that. So the day that all people were here, they had a big assembly in John M. Greene, and the freshmen went upstairs. And at some point we all stood and sang the alma mater. I get the chills now. And I had chills. I said, “Look where I am.” I couldn’t believe. And I was singing my lungs out, and all these girls, and I was one of them. And to this day, it’s one of the most thrilling moments for me, to be at Smith College as a freshman and sing that song. It was just great. I was thrilled to be here.

DUNN: So why did you—you said you went to visit Smith, and you didn’t go to visit any of the other Seven Sisters?

AMES: Yeah, I just—you know, my dad, I guess, (laughs) just picked out, you know, it was a convenient route, or New England. Well, I lived in New York City. I could have easily gone to see Barnard or... But I didn’t want to be in the city, per se. And yeah, none of the others was captivating me.

DUNN: How would you describe the campus atmosphere at Smith during your time here?

AMES: Marvelous. First of all, I thought it was beautiful, physically. I loved the greenery. I just stopped to take some pictures of the rhododendron bushes, so... Everything’s so lush yet understated in a way, you know? And there were irises and roses, and the greenhouse was wonderful, and of course the Paradise Pond. I loved walking around.

And this is a little off the subject, but when I was in high school, my mother spoke to the head of the gymnasium department, the health education department, and she said, “You know, Judy loves sports, and there’s no softball team for girls, there’s no basketball team for girls, there’s...” And he said, “We can’t let the future mothers of America risk...” like that. And so after my parents left, and my brother, and when they dropped me off, I took a walk, and campus was beautiful, and I ended up in a soccer field. And I went—I can remember it—my arms out. I said, “This is for me.” It’s a hockey field. “This is for me.”

And I felt like I was in a world of possibilities, not just the athletics, because I lived in Clark House. Next door was St. John’s Episcopal Church and then the museum. And in those days, you could just walk out my front door, cut through the museum, and go to class, and I did that often. I said, “Look, I’m in—you know, here’s an eighteenth-century masterpiece and, you know, Thomas Akins and this and that. And so it’s so rich. And then the people: they were just lovely. I didn’t

have any kind of harsh experience. And you can, you know. No, it was just marvelous.

I had a few professors that weren't so good, but... (laughs) It wasn't because they weren't intelligent, they just had a little hard time communicating. But no, I loved every minute of it; it was marvelous.

DUNN: It sounds like you had a really good house community, too, with Clark.

AMES: Very good, yes. Very strong. There were only 25 of us in the class, all four classes, and so we really got to know each other. And many of the people I wouldn't choose to be friends with, but they became members of my family because I spent so much time with them. And I don't know if it's true of everyone, but my friends tended to be more in the house than in class. I did make other friends, but the closest ones, you know, the ones who saw me with my toothbrush and... You know, they become like sisters in a way. Yeah.

DUNN: What clubs and organizations were you a part of? You mentioned athletics. So did you get involved in any sports, or...?

AMES: You know, we didn't have sports with other colleges; we had just among the classes. So I was on the volleyball team for four years. That was great. And I tried all different—I played lacrosse, I played squash, I played soccer like that, sports that—although I say to people now I shouldn't have done all these team sports, I should have done tennis or golf, because you can play your whole life. You can't play lacrosse when you're 50, find a lacrosse team.

I was in the Huff 'n' Puffs. I don't know if they still have it. It was the band, not the orchestra. I was in a dance troupe. And that's another thing. When I was performing with the dance group, the whole house would turn out and cheer for me. It was great. I'd look over, and there they were, "Yay, Judy," you know, like that. And I just thought, Where do you get that? What other things did I do?

Oh, I have a story I'm going to tell. Can I tell a story?

DUNN: Yes, love it.

AMES: And this sounds immodest, but I know a lot about art, especially painting, European, Western painting. And I never took a course, but I would go and sit in Art 101 it was called. It was in Sage. It was this huge lecture, and anyone could just walk in at night. I went three, four years. And so I didn't go my first year, but when I was a sophomore, I went the very first class. And the professor was a Ms. Kennedy, Ruth W. Kennedy, because there was a Ruth L. Kennedy who was a Spanish teacher, whom I later got to know very well at the University of Arizona. That's a long story. So Ruth W. Kennedy was starting the lecture for Art 101, and she took one painting, Botticelli's *Venus*. She spent the whole hour on one painting. And the purpose was to show

these students why you study art or what you can get out of it. So she talked about the decorative elements in it, the vegetation, the form, the repetition of line. It was fascinating. She just, like, sucked out all you could get. And so I stayed the whole year. She was just the head of that. They would have different people throughout the year. It was a year course. And so the following year I said, "Well, I don't know if I want to go again to the same course, but that first class, I've got to go to." And I walked out. There was a completely different person. (laughs) And he did it different. He just gave the chronology of art. And I'm sitting there stuck, you know. And I said, "Where's Ruth Kennedy? (laughs) I want to hear my lecture." But I always remember that, saying, Oh, that was a teacher. She was marvelous.

DUNN: Wonderful. That's a great story. You've talked a little bit about the acceptance on Smith, but I would like to talk a little more about that. Like, how did you find Smith as a place for people who may be considered outsiders? And in addition, what were the conflicts around, like, religion, class, race, sexuality? Did you notice any?

AMES: Oh. You know, all of those elements which I know are prominent now were not, to my mind anyway. I didn't notice things like that. And it was much more innocent time, you know. You know, the girls of the '50s, you know, the little Peter Pan collars, and the word "sex"? I mean, what was that, even? You know, you're 17, what do you know? I mean, times are so different. And with respect to diversity, that too was much narrower. It was a white—I mean, there were Eastern European, Western European elements to one's background, but everyone really was born here. Not everyone. You know what I'm saying, in general. And so those kinds of topics were not noticed. And in fact, and maybe it was 1960, there was the first kind of political, the sit-ins at I think it was Woolworth's here, where you would sit and bring maybe an African-American person to cause a problem. But there wasn't any, because they could eat here, you know what I'm saying? I mean, so there was very little kind of controversy. It was, Go to school, take your classes, sing. A lot of singing, you know, a lot of performances, a lot of outdoor things. Float Night—do they still have Float Night?

DUNN: They do still have Float Night.

AMES: I mean, it was just so much—we enjoyed it, we worked hard, but we also had a wonderful light kind of time, too. Father's Day—do you still do Father's Day?

DUNN: We have Parents' Weekend, but—

AMES: Oh, parents. Yeah.

DUNN: –I've seen a lot about Father's Day in the yearbooks.

AMES: Well, because what was nice about it—I loved my mother to pieces—but it was like he was your date, you see? So Mom, what's she's going to do? So we went and danced together. We would play sports together. He was really my date. And it was sophomore and junior years. That was one of my favorite memories, too; I just loved that. Yeah.

DUNN: So what were your experiences with relationships here and dating? What was that like on campus?

AMES: It was a little strange. But, I mean, plenty of people had dates all the time, Amherst guys. There were no girls at Amherst, you know. So they would—seven miles away—they would come. I hated mixers. We had a lot of these 'mixers.' Oh, gosh, you know, Yale and—

DUNN: Why didn't you like them?

AMES: It's not my style. You know, "And how are you, and what's your sign?" Now, you never said that, but, you know, it was that kind of feel to it. And, you know, I wasn't tense about it. I graduated, you know, just turned 21, and I had plenty of time. I did get married, it was fine, like that. I was enjoying the people I was with. And, you know, occasionally it—so it was harder to meet people. And I did do things occasionally where I would invite someone up. We had a lot of these Christmas weekends and different kinds of weekends where guys would come. I had a friend from Middlebury, he came down, and things of that sort. And that was enough for me.

And in a way, it was good. I didn't want to be distracted, because I found in high school, you know, the girls were kind of cute when they—they didn't want to say this because Johnny would think I'm too smart. And there was none of that. We were just sitting in a class, and we were ourselves, and we weren't acting out for some boy that we liked sitting next to us. And there was sort of a relief. I liked that. You'd think about that before I came. In fact, you know, I was hesitant a little bit because all girls, but I wasn't that worried about it. But that aspect, I didn't think about. I said, "Oh my gosh, this is so different," because I can remember how my friend, I said, "Why are you acting so foolishly?" you know, in high school. I'm pointing there; that means way back. (laughter) "Why are you acting so foolishly?" "Oh, well, I didn't want him to—" like that. They knew why they were doing it. And I said, "Oh, you shouldn't do that. That's too sad." But yeah, so that was a nice aspect about just being here and talking in class because you had something to say. Yeah.

DUNN: That's wonderful. (pause) Sorry. What did you expect as a Smith graduate in terms of marriage, work, family? I mean, did you feel any

pressures around (Ames laughs) what happened when you left?
Basically, how did you feel?

AMES: Yeah, not really. And, you know, I got married when I was 27, and I think that was a good age to get married. I had a chance to—well, I traveled with him, too—but I had a chance to see the world and to work and to do things that I might have been more limited to in another person because you have to agree about where to go (laughs) and how to, you know. And so no, I didn't feel tense at all about it. And I wouldn't have wanted to get married right away anyway. Some of my friends actually did, because that was very common, to graduate and the next week, get married. But I wasn't ready to give up my independence and searching for things.

But I knew I would get married. You asked about expectations. I knew I would get married. And I did not have children. I don't recall having an image—I mean, I like children a lot, and I'm good with them, but I always say, "Well, maybe it's because they're someone else's." (laughs) Because I think I would be a very hovering mother, which is not good. Because I have a younger brother, and we lived sort of—it was within New York City, but it was like a suburban kind of place, and when he was about 18, he went into the city to see some friends, and I went to bed—it was about 11:30—and he wasn't home. Oh, my goodness. My parents were fast asleep, but not I. I would listen—you can hear better; the subway was elevated. And I'd hear it and wait for the ten-minute walk. No. Oh my gosh. Hear the subway, (makes noise), no, like that, until two o'clock in the morning, and then he finally came home. I never said anything, but this is not good. He was 18 years old or whatever, and he should be able to do that. But I am a worrier kind of thing, so I think just transferring that experience I don't know that I would have been such a great mother. I'm a good aunt. (laughter)

DUNN: Who have you become since Smith?

AMES: What have you become?

DUNN: What have you become? What have you been doing?

AMES: Oh my gosh. Whew! Well, you know, I'm 71 years old. You want the whole story?

DUNN: Well, (inaudible).

AMES: No, I didn't have a career, like a doctor or a lawyer, that kind of thing. And in the book that we contributed to, I said, "I had a series of very interesting jobs, and the only thing they had in common was low pay." My parents went to Mexico, and my father said, "That's your gift when you graduate." And I went to Mexico for a summer, because I already

had a job with the state of New York waiting for me, so I didn't feel pressure. And I fell in love with it. I lived with a family in Mexico City, which just had two million people in 1961 and now has 20 or something million. It was lovely, and the family was lovely, and they loved me, and I loved them, like that. And so I went to this job, and I couldn't stop thinking about Mexico. What the job was, by the way, it was—you know Social Security has disability payments, and I was one of the disability determiners. That was my job. And I told them I was leaving, and they said, "We had big plans for you." And I said, "I'm sorry, I'm going back to Mexico."

And I went to Mexico. Eventually I got a Master's degree, not there, but at the University of Arizona. So I taught Spanish for a while at several universities and my old high school, in fact, for a short period of time. But, I don't know, it wasn't really for me. And then I worked in an administrative position at a local City University of New York. And then I got a Ph.D. in educational psychology. But a friend was in Japan and invited me to come and visit. Oh, my goodness, there we go again. You know, I just fell in love with it, even though Japan is a little quirky. And I came back. I said, "I worked so hard on that dissertation, but I want to be connected with Japan." And I worked at the Japan Society, which is an educational organization in New York, founded in 1907, closed down during World War II. And I was—well, I had two jobs. I was a research librarian, and then I was the head of the educational programs for teachers. I loved it there, I really did. It's right near the U.N.

And then, oh, then I moved out of New York City and moved to be near my brother and his children up in New Paltz, New York, which is an hour and a half north of New York City. And so it's a very odd story, but I—I won't go into it—but there is a website, the Motley Fool, fool.com, and it deals with investing. I was never interested in investing, but I thought, You know, you can do it online. I read an article about someone. I said, "I'm going to buy a stock." I had never done so. And I went to this Motley Fool website, and I'm a good proofreader, and every time the newsletter would come, there would be something wrong and I'd write but I'd say, "Sorry, but in MS Word this is all crooked," and "Oh, thank you." And then (makes talking noises). So after the third time, this woman said, "May I call you?" And she said, "Would you come work for us?" From afar, at home. So I worked for them, and eventually they made me a supervisor of 15 people, like the customer service. I loved it. I hired people over the phone because I would have them submit sample letters and things like that. And every once in a while I would go down to Alexandria where the headquarters for the Motley Fool was. And to my great honor, the other day, one of the co-owners said, "Would you think about coming back?" I said, "Oh, my goodness." But, you know, I'm too old for that.

But anyway, so you can see there's nothing holding it all together, but they were all interesting things of pursuits and different fields, sort

of. Some people say, “Well, they were all kind of researchy kind of things or more administrative kinds of things.” So. But it’s fine.

AMES: Well, sometimes I say, “Hm, why didn’t I become a doctor or a...?” But, you know, but too much blood. (laughter)

DUNN: Can I ask one more?

GEIS: Yeah.

DUNN: What difference has a Smith education meant to you, and would you make the same choice if you had it again?

AMES: I would make the same choice. I have never been sorry about it. And I think what I got out of it, more than learning about Shakespeare or this or that was it gave me a self-confidence about being a woman, about being an intelligent woman, about working my way through the world, that I don’t know that I would have gotten elsewhere. And, you know, this just popped into my mind. I used to live across the river from Poughkeepsie, where Vassar is, and I always remember when they went coed, there were like 50 guys and the rest were young women, and almost instantly, the president of the school was a boy, the head of the newspaper. It was like women deferring to them. And I said, “You see? I couldn’t have been the editor of the paper.” Here, you can be, you know what I’m saying? And it’s that kind of security in yourself. I mean, we all have our insecure moments, but it really helped me in that sense.

And the other thing was people, learning to live with all kinds of people and really coming to care about them, even though their personalities might not have appealed to me elsewhere. You see the good in people, and the bad, but, you know, it was a wonderful experience. And I mentioned to you that my dad had said, “Why don’t you think about going to Paris junior year abroad?” And I said, “Dad, I can go to Paris when I’m 25. I’ll never, ever have a junior year at Smith College.” And he said OK; he agreed. And I made the right choice there too. Yeah, I’m very pleased, and I’m glad to be back after 50 years of graduation. I’ve come to other reunions, too, but this one’s the best.

DUNN: Yes. (laughter) Thank you so much.

AMES: Thank you, Sarah. Thanks.

DUNN: Do you have any additional? Are you good? Wonderful.

AMES: Now, you didn’t test my level or anything. You just knew, or...?

GEIS: I could see.

AMES: You could see! (laughs) [My?] techie. OK, so I'll unclip.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Lauren Hinkle, July 26, 2011.