

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Elizabeth Campen, Class of 1958*

Interviewed by  
Anne Ames, Class of 2015

May 24, 2013

## **Abstract**

In this oral history, Elizabeth Campen reflects on the house culture at Smith which, in the 1950s, included house mothers. She recalls fondly traditions which no longer exist on campus, including Wednesday chapel. Campen talks about the importance of the legacy of a Smith education, the confidence that Smithies can do anything.

## **Restrictions**

None

## **Format**

Interview recorded on miniDV tapes using a Panasonic DVX-100A camera. One 30-minute tape.

## **Transcript**

Transcribed by Janet Harris with Harris Reporting.

## **Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms**

### *Video Recording*

**Bibliography:** Campen, Elizabeth. Interview by Anne Ames. Video recording, May 24, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Elizabeth Campen, interview by Anne Ames, transcript of video recording, May 24, 2013, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Campen, Elizabeth. Interview by Anne Ames. Transcript of video recording, May 24, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Elizabeth Campen, interview by Anne Ames, transcript of video recording, May 24, 2013, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project  
Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted May 24, 2013, with:

ELIZABETH CAMPEN

by: ANNE AMES

AMES: So my name is Annie Ames and I'm conducting an interview with Betsy Compton (sic).

CAMPEN: Campen.

AMES: Oh, Campton (sic), sorry.

CAMPEN: No. C-A-M-P-E-N.

AMES: Campen.

CAMPEN: Like goin' campin'.

AMES: Goin' campin'. All right. Excuse me. Conducting an interview with Betsy Campen on May 24th, 2013, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you in advance for participating. I really appreciate it.

So why are you attending reunion this year?

CAMPEN: I haven't been to one for a while, and I'm going to reconnect with a group of friends and then go on and visit family around New England.

AMES: How did you choose to attend Smith as an undergrad?

CAMPEN: Well, I went to a private girls' school in Boston called Windsor School, and I think we had about 48 or 50 girls in our graduating class, and half of us went to Smith. It was sort of the trendy thing to do. We didn't even realize, hardly, that there were colleges outside of Massachusetts or out of New England. I considered the University of Colorado with a friend of mine, but practically everybody was going to Smith and it just sort of was the next step. We were pretty uninformed about choices back in those days.

AMES: Did your experience going to an all-women's high school, did it influence going to an all-women's college, or was it more the pull to a college in New England?

CAMPEN: Really, back then, unless you went to a state university, practically everything was single gender. There were a few – Middlebury was co-ed, and I certainly would have – I probably would have chosen Middlebury because I love to ski and because I thought it would be fun to go college with boys. I mean I loved girls but, you know, it's nice to have both, except I really don't think my grades were good enough. Middlebury was really hard to get into.

AMES: What were your expectations for your Smith experience?

CAMPEN: We were so naïve in those days. I wanted to get a good education, and a friend of mine had told me that he was going to major in geology. I had no idea what geology even meant, but I discovered it meant the study of rocks, and I loved mountain climbing, I loved skiing, I loved everything to do with the mountains, and I thought geology would be great and Smith had a major in geology, and I came and took geology 101 and I majored in geology. So I'd say that was definitely one of the things, but once again, I was just part of a flock of sheep who went to college. When I look back on it I can't believe how kind of naïve we were, but that's the way we were brought up, and thank goodness things soon after.

AMES: Absolutely. Returning to Smith for reunion, how do you find Smith changed, if at all?

CAMPEN: Oh, it's huge. And I have been back to a few others. About two reunions ago I went to the Geology Department, and I can't wait to get there, and I couldn't believe how wonderful – when I was here we were down in the basement of Seelye Hall and the windows were about 12 feet off the floor and dirty and we had about four rooms, and I mean I didn't know any better so it was fine with me, but I just loved seeing the new geology building. I love the new art building. And there's a lot that I haven't seen that I intend to see this weekend, but it's changed enormously and I think it's changed very nicely. It's beautiful.

AMES: Are there any things that you've observed to have remained consistent since your time here?

CAMPEN: Well, yes. I think it's just a wonderful feeling. I mean it's funny, I come back and I almost feel as though I've never left even though I can't find this particular building because I think it used to be a dormitory, but it's still very much the same, thank goodness.

AMES: That's fantastic. So switching gears a little bit, talking about academics. We talked a little about the process of how you found your major, but if you could go a little more in-depth, tell me a little bit more about how you chose geology.

CAMPEN: Well, basically what I just told you. I mean I really honestly didn't have anything else I wanted to major in. I loved English. Back then – I don't know how many

others in my class you've interviewed but an awful lot of people, women especially, went to a women's college and they went for four years. They either majored in English or history or art. Then they went to Boston and they went to the Hancock School of Typing, they learned to type, they went into a law office or a medical practice of some sort and married a lawyer or a doctor. And that was just what people did. And I, having grown up in Boston, meeting lots of – dancing with lots of potential doctors and lawyers, knew that that was not what would work for me. I mean I'd done the Junior League and the Vincent Club, and I knew that I'd be a terrible flop at spending the rest of my life trying to conform to what I'd have to do as a lawyer's wife in Boston. So I was definitely looking for reasons to escape, and geology was definitely one of them.

But it didn't have a very happy ending in the beginning. Do you want to hear about my – so I took geology 101 and then we did all electives. I took mineralogy I think in my sophomore year, and I always knew that I wanted to major in geology, and then I majored in geology. We had three professors. My favorite one, unfortunately, Dr. Shok (phonetic) went and took a sabbatical year or junior year, maybe both years, and went up to Barrow, Alaska, so I was kind of left floundering, but I went through four years of college. And once again, I was incredibly naïve. I went to my advisor, Mr. Collins, in May of my senior year and said, "Where do I go to get a job in geology?" And he said, "Women don't work in geology." And I was so naïve and stupid, I just believed him. It never occurred to me to go get on a plane and go out West and figure out how, or even to go to graduate school. I can't really understand – I wasn't the best student in the world, but I was certainly an adequate student – and I never have been able to understand, but back in those days not too many of my classmates, most of whom were brilliant, went to graduate school, and the ones who did you're interviewing here this morning I'm sure, but it would have been wonderful if I had, but nobody guided me in that direction.

And so I graduated and then I did lots of other things. I went to Europe, I went to nursing school, and I married a rancher, so I didn't become a geologist until 1977 when I got a divorce after 17 years of being married to a rancher, and I just luckily happened to be during an oil boom in Montana and I – anybody I think who'd taken a beginning geology class could have gotten a job, but I found job immediately as what they call a geo tech and that was 35 years ago, and I've been a practicing geologist ever since, and it is thanks to my education at Smith because even though I was not guided into continuing my education then, when I went to get a job I had a lot of catching up to do, but I knew exactly how to do it, and it was because of the wonderful learning experience I had here and the ability to know how to find out what I needed to know.

AMES: Having had to kind of put your geology degree on hold and then having by chance become a geo tech, what was that like to kind of be reinstated into the academic mindset again?

CAMPEN: It was wonderful. I'll tell you, I was – I've used this word about six times – I was incredibly naïve. I pictured myself marrying a rancher, living on a ranch, having a wonderful family, sort of riding horses around, and I didn't realize I was going to end up being the ranch cook and 60 miles from town having babies and all the things that went with it. But the worst thing about it was not having any intellectual stimulus, and I never really honestly understood how important that was to me. And once again, with my private high school and Smith, you know, I was ripe and ready to learn, and all ranchers talked about was the weather. And when I finally became a geologist I just started reading and reading and studying and taking classes, and it was wonderful, it was just absolutely wonderful to become intellectually stimulated again.

AMES: Because ranching is a fairly male-centered field and geology is, or was back then, did you feel isolated as a woman in either of those –

CAMPEN: You know, it's a funny thing, and I think again I attributed it to Smith and the feeling here and to Windsor, which was my high school. I never was intimidated, and my friends who went to co-ed colleges I think were, but that was the wonderful thing about a female education is that I knew there were stumbling blocks, and I knew as a rancher there were things I couldn't do, but I think you both know that you can do anything you want to do, and I never was daunted by the fact I was a woman and didn't – I mean ranching, I'd brand along with everyone else, I'd cook a meal for 40 people and go out and vaccinate calves, and nobody ever told me not to and it never occurred to me that I shouldn't. Every now and then I would end up branding where I was expected to be in the kitchen frosting cakes instead of vaccinated calves, but, you know, you flow with it.

And then when I went into geology which was very interesting and petroleum geology, I was obviously such a newcomer, but people were wonderful. I mean I really am a pioneer in Billings because just by chance I was one of the first women, because 10 years later there were lots of them, but back then I really was a pioneer. And I was so excited about actually becoming a geologist, and I wanted to be out on drilling rigs and I wanted to be involved in all of it, and so I just did it, and all those men who were my age and maybe five and 10 years older, because that's when the boom had been before that, couldn't have been more helpful. And I have mentioned this several times, I mentioned it in a women's luncheon one day, and one of them said, you know why, because you weren't a threat, and I was not a threat. I mean a 40-year-old coming into a field where there were men who had been there for 20 years, I wasn't a threat, and so they were helpful, and I was so incredibly grateful. We all like to help each other. And I have never had any problems as far as that goes. Now, that's not to say that some of my younger friends trying to get in down in places like Texas haven't had big problems, but I just never did because I guess my expectations were just to do the best I could. I was coming in so late and I really had such a shallow background compared to the people who had gone to Texas A&M or something, so I was very lucky. But once again, I give Smith an awful lot of credit for that.

AMES: Okay. All right. Well, switching gears a little bit after that fantastic story, what was your house community like during your time at Smith?

CAMPEN: It was wonderful. I was so lucky. I lived in Gillette. And I'm not sure, I'm trying to remember how many of us there were, but maybe 60 or 80 or something like that. It was the perfect-size house. It was just a wonderful setup. I don't think it was – you know, the housing was so erratic then. Some of my friends who ended up in tiny little houses weren't quite as happy and then the Quad was so far from things, but they've certainly formed a very long-lasting group. But Gillette was absolutely perfect. It was great.

AMES: And because you graduated in the '50s you still had housemothers.

CAMPEN: Oh, yeah. Mrs. Morrell (phonetic).

AMES: What was your relationship like with your housemother?

CAMPEN: Mine was very good, and I think she had a good one with everyone. But Mrs. Morrell was a widow and she had a beau who was a geologist and so she was really interested in me, and so we became good friends and she spent a lot of time asking me questions about geology so that she could say the right things to him. She was probably about my age then. But she was terrific.

AMES: Okay. And did you have curfews at the house?

CAMPEN: Oh, yeah. We had curfews, and we stuck to curfews. You had to, or I forgot what we got, black marks or demerits or something. But yes, and they were horrible. I mean my freshman year – I know this is all in the archives – but we had six overnights a semester, we only had 12 nights a year that we could be away, and I love geology and I love Smith but I also was pretty – I like boys, liked going – and everywhere you went with boys was so far away. I mean you had to get in a train and go to Princeton or go to Yale, and you couldn't go to Dartmouth. And I mean to get someplace for a weekend and then get back in 24 hours or 48 hours was tough. I'm glad they changed that. They had to change that. That was ridiculous. And as far as getting in early, I don't think that hurts anybody. I mean what was it, 10:30 during the week and 12 on weekends. Keeps people out of trouble.

AMES: Absolutely. I'm assuming it kept you out of trouble then. That's how.

CAMPEN: Yeah.

AMES: How did your house community affect your overall Smith experience?

CAMPEN: Oh, I think it was definitely good. I had – I roomed with one of my very good friends, Ann Pouning-Mayer (phonetic), and we roomed together for four years,

and one year we were in a suite with two other girls so there were four of us, and I'd say everybody in our house was very close and we're still in touch and still bonded. It was great. I was just the right number of classmates in the same year. It was really good having four years altogether – you know, because we made friends with the older ones and the younger ones as they came along. so I'd say that was very positive.

AMES: Excellent, excellent. What were your favorite Smith traditions?

CAMPEN: Traditions? Huh. Paradise Pond. I was in the – what do they call it – Rally Day, May Day or something – in a canoe with my friend and (indiscernible) and we paddled around to Big Rock Candy Mountain, and everybody sat in the hillside. That was wonderful. And then they had some kind of a senior play where we did the can-can, and that was tons of fun. We always went to that every year. And then, you know, the Chapel on Wednesdays I think. That was a good tradition. And then I thought the formal meals. I mean to come down and have to wear a skirt to dinner and sit down and have a nice dinner and talk to people was very civilized. I realize that couldn't on. It was totally unrealistic, but it was nice.

AMES: How would you describe a typical Smithie during your undergrad years?

CAMPEN: Oh, well, the group that I ran around with was sort of – I mean we were all – we all wore Bermuda shorts, we all wore Shetland sweaters, we all went out to Rahar's and drank bar, and we just traveled around in a great troupe. Now, we had other people in our class who were very interesting, and I know you're interviewing, or somebody is, some of them today, who were Jewish girls who came from New York who were smart and intellectual and challenged, and it was wonderful getting to know them. They were far more interesting than we were in our little Girl Scout ways. But I think there were more of us probably back then, and we all did exactly the same thing, and we didn't protest anything. I can remember in my senior year – must have been my junior year because Ellen Brisetrip (phonetic) who was a year ahead of me wore a little Adelaide Stevenson footprint or whatever the symbol was, and she was going to vote democratic, and we were all astonished because all of our parents were republicans, and I just intended to spend the rest of my life being a republican I guess. I didn't – we just didn't think about it. But we had Eisenhower. What was there not to like about Eisenhower, you know? It was before wars and starvation and poverty, and those really were good times, easy times.

AMES: Very much so. Especially easy to be in college during those times.

CAMPEN: Very easy. And Smith was – I mean \$2,000 for a year? \$2,000 barely will pay for this trip. But of course we've got inflation to deal with, but still, things were reasonable and you didn't have to have iPads and iPhones and, you know, there just weren't a lot of things that people needed to have.



AMES: How would you describe the campus atmosphere in your time at Smith?

CAMPEN: I think it was fine. I mean everybody – we all sort of knew each other, it was small enough. Everybody got along. I don't think anybody ever protested anything. And, you know, we all played field hockey, and it was sort of a faery world, something that you all will never know or experience, sad to say, but you've got something else.

AMES: Yeah. Something comparable I'm sure in many ways. Let's see. How did the campus change during your four years here?

CAMPEN: I don't think it changed at all. Oh, they put up that big wide dormitory over there near Davis. I think that was while I was here.

AMES: Oh, (indiscernible).

CAMPEN: Yeah. And that of course was shocking because it wasn't brick. I honestly don't think anything – one thing that changed though that was great was we were – suddenly somehow we were allowed to have cars for skiing, and so my spring of my junior year and during my senior year I got to have an old car here, and then we had more weekends. Actually, I don't think we – it was just freshman and sophomore year I think that we had overnights. And we'd all tumble into my big car on weekends and go up and go skiing, and we had sort of a farmhouse up in the White Mountains and so we'd all go up and go skiing. And that was a big change, being able to have a car.

AMES: That's a mark of independence certainly in that time period.

CAMPEN: Yes.

AMES: Did you face any challenges during your career at Smith?

CAMPEN: Well, I wasn't – yeah. I guess I was chall – when I look back, I should have studied harder and partied less. And back in those days, you have to realize, partying didn't really involve much, going down to Rahar's (phonetic) on a Thursday night instead of staying home and studying. But I guess my challenge was not conquering some of the things that I would have done much better, like organic chemistry. That was real challenge, and I finally dropped it. And I didn't have any assistance and my mind just didn't run – it ran like a geologist, not a chemist, and that was my own fault, but that was a challenge I guess, not being more serious about my studies. But in geology we didn't have – I mean I took every class that there was because we didn't have that many.

AMES: So we've talked a fair bit about your experiences after Smith, but in particular what did Smith succeed in teaching you about life after graduation? How did it prepare you?

CAMPEN: As I said, that you can do anything you want. You can get through anything. I mean I made a big mistake in marrying my first husband. He's a very nice man and I have three wonderful children and I had some wonderful times on ranches, but I knew almost immediately that I had made a mistake, that this ranching life was not what I should be doing. But I grew up in New England and I went to Smith and I knew I had to stick it out, and I stuck it out for 17 years. And then I wasn't very graceful in the way I got out of it, but I did manage, instead of just being stuck the way a lot of couples were in my parents' generation anyway, I did leave the marriage and have a career, and that – I mean I think the way I'm telling it, it makes it sound easy, but of course it wasn't. I mean I had to really, really work hard, but my kids were all independent by then, they were in college, or nearly in college, and I just wanted it to happen so it did but, you know, it's not easy starting a career in the middle of your life when you've basically never had one.

AMES: True. So going back to kind of the social life at Smith, what was the dating culture like as you experienced it?

CAMPEN: Oh, it was tons of fun. It really was. My freshman year these guys would just swarm down every single night. The streets would just be packed with guys from Williamson, Dartmouth and Amherst, and they'd drive for hours and hours, and then we'd all pile up and go down and drink beer at Rahar's, and I don't know how we did it. I mean I know we faked our licenses. Back then they were just a piece of paper. But they'd look the other direction, and every now and then they'd get busted and people would stop for a while and then we'd start again. But it was all so kind of – it was probably what most people go through in high school now, what they go through in junior high. And it was before birth control, so very few people I think ever had sex. I mean honestly. I don't know that we need to have this on – well, I guess. I mean I was a virgin for a very long time, and it wasn't necessarily by choice, it was because we had no way of birth control really and I was terrified of getting pregnant and having my whole life stop, and I think all my friends felt exactly the same way, so we just didn't have sex for the most part. Now, I know that isn't entirely true. One of my good friends in Gillett got pregnant during college, and we all didn't even realize it until she left. I mean it was such – I was just totally shocked and surprised because it never occurred to me that that would happen.

AMES: Did Smith foster an environment where discussions regarding sexuality could be had?

CAMPEN: No, I don't think we ever, any of us, talked about sexuality. And we certainly never talked about homosexuality. We never really talked about anything. I didn't anyway, and I was as close with my roommate as anybody. We never discussed what went on in the car outside in the dark. We just didn't. I'm not sure but – we didn't have that much to talk about really because we didn't have sex.

AMES: Fair enough, fair enough. All right. Well, we're kind of reaching a point where you have to wind down a little bit because we have back-to-back interviews going on all day, but I would love to ask you a few closing questions at this time.

CAMPEN: Sure.

AMES: First of all, I've been very interested in this ever since I read about it in I think the president's report in the archives. What was it like having JFK as your commencement speaker?

CAMPEN: Well, in hindsight of course it was wonderful. And he gave a very good speech which I have reread several times. Coming from the background I did, I can remember walking across the campus to go to commencement with my parents and my mother saying, "I simply cannot believe that they would have a womanizer and a democrat for your graduation speech." And honestly, I didn't know that much about him. Well, of course after that I knew everything about him and I realized how lucky I was, but we simply were not political in those days. Once again, there weren't any big issues. There was no reason to be political. You study history. Things just chugged along. It was just a few years before Vietnam and Korea.

AMES: Very different time period.

CAMPEN: Very.

AMES: On the cusp of a very different time period. What difference – I guess, you know, we already talked about that. I was going to ask you what difference your Smith education has made but we've already talked about that. What keeps you coming back to reunion?

CAMPEN: Oh, it's such fun. Living all the way in Montana, I don't see my Eastern friends and my college friends as much as most of them see each other, so this is one good way for me to see them, and then also to keep up with what's going on at Smith. It's just a very, you know, positive experience. And then having family back here and everything, it's wonderful to be able to combine a couple of nights here and then go on and do that.

AMES: So it's very convenient. All right. For my last question, do you have any advice for future and current Smithies?

CAMPEN: Yes. Just to thine own self be true. Smith has turned out to be such an interesting place, and I wish that I had more time to talk to both of you. I would love to know all the changes that have taken place as far as sexuality, as far as majors, as far as careers. I think it's so wonderful the way there is such freedom. That's what I was always looking for and I just didn't know how to find it back when I was at Smith. And I'm so happy that your generation has the openness to be able

to do it. So I'd just say use Smith for everything you can and go on and conquer the world. And I'm just glad it exists. I'm glad it's remained a female college. I don't know much about Vassar, but I don't think it's worked so well, I think it's better sticking – and there's plenty of males around if that's what you want. But I love this atmosphere of just being women together.

AMES: Absolutely. All right. Well, thank you so much for coming in to talk with us.

CAMPEN: Thank you. That was fun.

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Janet Harris, July 2013.*