

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Kye Cochran, Class of 1966*

Interviewed by  
Millie Cook, Class of 2018

May 14, 2016

## **Abstract**

In this interview, Kye Cochran reflects on her life after Smith. Having been at Smith for a year, Cochran decided to leave, going on to travel the world with a marine biologist. Cochran talks about her travels as well as starting the Alternative Energy Resources Organization, and the conception of her co-op, Local Energy and Food, in White River, Montana.

## **Restriction**

None.

## **Format**

Interview recorded using Sony EX1R camera, XDCam format.

## **Videographer**

Video recorded by Kate Geis.

## **Transcript**

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center.

## **Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms**

### *Video Recording*

**Bibliography:** Cochran, Kye. Interview by Millie Cook. Video recording, May 14, 2016. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Kye Cochran, interview by Millie Cook, transcript of video recording, May 14, 2016, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Cochran, Kye. Interview by Millie Cook. Transcript of video recording, May 14 2016. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Kye Cochran, interview by Millie Cook, transcript of video recording, May 14, 2016, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

Alumnae Oral History Project  
Sophia Smith Collection  
Smith College  
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted May 14, 2016, with:

KYE COCHRAN  
Northampton, Massachusetts

by: MILLIE COOK

COOK: I'm ready when you are. Great. So I am Millie Cook, and I'm conducting an interview with Kye Cochran on May 14, 2016 for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. So thank you for agreeing to be part of the project.

COCHRAN: You're welcome.

COOK: So how's the reunion been so far? How has Rally Day been?

COCHRAN: It's been interesting. It's been really fascinating and tiring too, I should say, because there's just so much to take in. I haven't been here for 52 years.

COOK: Yeah.

COCHRAN: But it's been really nice, really good. Yeah.

COOK: Very good. So where did you grow up? And what brought you to Smith?

COCHRAN: I grew up in Cape Cod. And I went to Smith in 1962, and by 19— end of 1963, I had realized that I am not an academic type person. And so I decided that I would leave and go — because I have always, my whole life, I've really preferred to do things, and whatever I was doing, I like to then learn a lot about that.

COOK: Yeah.

COCHRAN: You know, but not do a lot of learning on things that I didn't know if I was going to use in my life.

COOK: Mm-hmm?

COCHRAN: So the first thing that I did was, I joined a marine biologist working out of the Smithsonian. And I went on three summer trips with him; he was

in the beginning of a 30-year study on a kind of algae. And I became a cook and scuba diver on his boats, and — for two years. The first year, we went from Maine to the Gulf of St. Lawrence, all around the Gulf of St. Lawrence, all around Newfoundland and up the coast of Labrador, in a 45-foot boat. And we were a five-person crew. And the second year, we went from Washington, DC, which was where he was based, and we got a much larger boat, 110-foot boat, out of moth balls from the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard, fixed it up as a research vessel and took it down the coast to the tip of Florida, where we got caught in a hurricane. And a story that I like to tell about that, which just shows the difference in communication between now and then is — and this was around 1966. We were on this boat, and we were about to go across to the island of Nassau. And we had heard that there was a hurricane coming up the coast, Hurricane Betsy. And we thought we knew that — we somehow heard from the radio, or something, that it had turned off, and we didn't need to be worried about it.

So we started off for Nassau. And just a little ways out, a mile or two out, it started to get pretty rough. And a seaplane came out and started circling around us. And we saw that they were dropping something into the water. And so we thought, maybe we're supposed to pick up this thing from the water. So we got a net out. We picked this thing up from the water — and this was the communication back then — it was a block of wood that had been hollowed out, a message in paper was stuck in it, and a cork. We took the cork out and read the message, and they said, Hurry back to Florida because the hurricane is turning again and is coming straight for us.

COOK: Wow!

COCHRAN: And so we did that. And we rode out the hurricane, moored to a big wharf in West Palm Beach, Florida. So then the third year I — he was collecting samples of this alga, which is called coralline, in Iceland. So instead of taking a boat over to Iceland, we actually flew over to Iceland and got a couple of Land Rovers that were flown over from England, I think. And one of them had a trailer as large as you can get of a Boston Whaler type boat; I don't know if you know what that kind of boat is, but it's a kind of boat that's very stable. And you can sit, if you're in scuba gear, you can sit on the edge of it, and the boat doesn't tip up. So it's really good for scuba divers.

And we could also, because that was a large Boston Whaler, we could pull a little dredge, and we were doing a little bit of dredging for — because this kind of algae grew on rocks. And we could pick up rocks that had algae on them and take them for him to study.

COOK: OK.

COCHRAN: And so we went all around the island, Iceland, that year, in these Land Rovers. And in the — and actually, he brought his family with him, so

his two younger kids, his wife and his two kids, who were six and four, came with us too. And so, let's see, we were camping. And what we would do is, we would camp for a couple of weeks in one place.

COOK: Mm-hmm?

COCHRAN: And all of our camping gear was in the boat on the trailer, and we towed that behind us. And so we went around Iceland that year. And then we were — there was a little bit of time left in September, so we went across to Norway and up to the tip of Norway, Hammerfest, and started down the coastline of Norway a little bit, picking up samples then. So that was the first job that I had. And I've had a number of other jobs that I'm not really sure exactly the lineup of them, because it's just been so long. But I taught in a private school that was run by my parents on the Cape. I taught German and baking. The German I had learned at Smith, the baking I learned from my mother. And I had spent a number of summers going to Montana to the ranch of the aunt of cousins of mine. And one of the years, the aunt who was on the board of directors of a tiny little schoolhouse in the middle of nowhere in Montana, in Kirby, Montana, called us up.

There were a bunch of us young women who were living in Cambridge at the time, and including a sister of mine and a cousin of mine. And she, this aunt, wanted my cousin, who was about my age, and me to go to Montana and teach in a two-room schoolhouse there, in Kirby, Montana. And so we said, sure, we'll try, even though — she had gone to Smith too, Ellen Emerson, and she had graduated in South American studies. I had gone to Smith and only gone for two years. And yet, there was at the time an emergency certificate that you could get in Montana, where whoever was the most qualified got to be the teacher. (laughs) And so she became the teacher of grades one through four, and I became the teacher of five through eight. And we did that for a year. And I think we did a pretty good job, even though we had never taken any teaching courses. We both came from rather large families, and knew kids pretty well. And I don't know — we had a lot of fun. And the kids really learned quite a bit, I think. So and because I was in Montana, and often I was staying at this ranch, I became involved later with — and this was in the early '70s, with a group of ranchers and some farmers who were very upset about the beginning of coal strip mining in Montana in that area. And one of them was this aunt of my cousin's. And so I became, you know, quite well versed in what was going on, and interested. And it seems that they were looking for staff, although they didn't have any money to pay staff. And so I became one of their free staff people at this organization. This was in Billings, Montana, they're called the Northern Plains Resource Council. And they still are doing fine there in Montana. But I was one of their first staff people.

COOK: Wow.

COCHRAN: And none of us knew anything about organizing, or anything like that. We just wanted to do something about the coal development. And so — but there were also many people from the East, and from the Southwestern part of the country, where strip mining had happened, and it had been very devastating, like in Appalachia, and the four corners area. And so there were many people who were looking at Montana, and what was happening in Montana, and thinking, what is going to happen with these ranchers and farmers that are trying to do this, and all? And some people got interested in helping us to do a good job. And so some professional organizers came out, and during one weekend, they worked really hard to make it so that we knew something about organizing and how to deal with things. And one of the main things that they told us was that you need to — each of you, there were probably about seven or eight of us, all young people. And they said each of you needs to focus on one part of this whole strip mining thing, and instead of everybody trying to do everything, which is what we had been doing. And so I decided that the thing that I really was the most interested in was, if you can't have the coal, what can you have?

COOK: Mm-hmm?

COCHRAN: And I had become interested in what we called “alternative energy,” then, largely because – well, at that time, people knew virtually nothing about any other kind of energy, except for fossil fuels.

COOK: Mm-hmm?

COCHRAN: We didn't even think about it. But I had visited a brother of mine, who's quite eccentric, and always interested in new things. And he had been going to Washington University in St. Louis. I had visited him there, and he had a magazine which, at that time, was very new, called *Mother Earth News*. And I saw a copy of it. And on the front of it, it had a picture of a tractor. And the title said, “Run Your Tractor on Chicken Shit.” And I thought, What? You know, This is really weird! And so I started reading, and what they were talking about was taking chicken shit and processing it into methane gas, which is digest — methane digester type thing, something I had never heard of. And I was kind of interested in that.

And after I started getting interested in this Northern Plains Resource Council, I also realized that there was solar energy, and there was wind energy, and both of which were very good possibilities in Montana. And so I said, “I want to look into these things and see if we can have an answer,” because they were always — all of the people, you know the coal companies and all were saying, Well, you know, you're going to freeze in the dark, and stuff, if you don't get the coal. And we wanted to say, hey, we've got — there's something else you can do. And so one of the first things that I did, along with some strong advocates of this, some good friends of mine, was to organize a

conference, a citizens conference, and bring in people who were pretty good at knowing how to build a small wind generator, and what big wind generators were like, and all of these different things. And this was in 1974. And I think because we were probably the first organization to actually hold a citizens' informational conference on this topic, people were very interested in coming and talking. And it was a very, very inspiring and fun conference. And because of the conference, it was just so much energy — people energy — generated, that we started a new organization, that was called the Alternative Energy Resources Organization. And that's also still going strong in Montana, and is now into many things that I have also since become interested in, such as sustainability and alternative agriculture we called it back then, but there are different — organic agriculture, and all of that sort of thing, but as well as renewable energy.

So I was in Montana for a number of years, 13 years, I think. And I ran that organization, and then I was on the board of it. Then I got married and had twins, and was still living in Montana. I started by living in Billings, but then I started — then we lived for a year, or possibly two years, in a little town called Roundup, north of Billings. But about that time, my mother, who lived back on the Cape, who had inherited a farm in Vermont, let all of her five kids know that if someone wasn't going to come and live on the farm, then she was going to have to sell it, because she couldn't just keep paying taxes on a place that she wasn't at. And so we decided, my husband somewhat reluctantly because he was in Montana, he was from Billings, that we would move back to Vermont. And we did, in 1985. And I had a third child, and then I became — after he was about a year old, I became interested in doing something outside the house. This — we lived on a farm, we actually got five heifers, red angus heifers, from a friend whose relatives developed the breed of red angus heifers in Wyoming, but she lived in Vermont. And we wanted to have some cows. So she got us five heifers, and we had a herd of beef cattle for about 14 years.

COOK: Wow. So were you, like, homesteading there? Was it self-sustaining?

COCHRAN: Well, it's — I had a big garden, but we weren't really thinking a lot about homesteading. We were just sort of learning how to do gardening and farming. And I had actually had a garden, practically, since I was 21. But a lot of the things that I did, I didn't have a chance to have much of a garden, because I was working those other jobs.

COOK: Mm-hmm.

COCHRAN: So I became interested in doing something outside. And as soon as we had gotten to Vermont, we had joined a little food co-op that was in town, in White River Junction. And so I thought — and one of the things you could do there is, you could work and earn a discount at the co-op. And so I thought, well, I'll try to be one of these super-worker

type people, that they called them, where you work for two hours each week, and you got a 20% discount. And so I went and worked. This was a tiny co-op at the time. I went and worked as a super-worker, and then the next week, the person who was the manager asked me if I would be on the staff. And so I became a staff member there, one of two staff members at that time. And we did every job at that little co-op. But in a few years, we got a really good manager, and started to thrive in that co-op, and to sell more and more stuff. And pretty soon, we were too big for that space that we were in.

COOK: Mm-hmm?

COCHRAN: And so we found another place in White River that had more than twice the space that we had had. And in 1993, we moved there. I was the produce manager there for 15 years. And then we went through a kind of a bad patch, where we got some general managers who were — who didn't really know exactly what they should do with a co-op the size of ours, and all. And it did not — it started to not thrive. And it wasn't that much fun. And at one point, I felt, well, I think what I want to do is start a little organization called Local Energy and Food, and, you know, do another sort of a little nonprofit thing, as opposed to continuing to work at the co-op. So I — that was in 2002, I retired from the co-op. And I worked at this little organization for a couple of years. And then — and meanwhile, the co-op was really having a very hard time.

COOK: Yeah.

COCHRAN: And in 2004, in the summer of 2004, I got this phone call. I had never wanted to be the general manager of the co-op, because I saw us go through a lot of general managers, and none of them had fun. It was not a fun job for them. And I thought, I'm not going to, you know, I'm not going to do that. But the board of directors was just about to fire the latest general manager. And so they wanted me to try at being — there were people who were convinced that I would be good at it. I was not completely convinced. They wanted me to give a try at being the interim general manager. And so, what could I say? Might as well try it and just see. And so I did, and I had the right combination of skills and attitude, I guess, and all, for what we needed at the time.

COOK: Mm-hmm?

COCHRAN: And I was the general manager for eight years. And we began to really thrive. But at the end of the eight years, for one thing, I had gotten older, (laughs) I was beyond 65 now. And I was thinking really, you know, this co-op can continue to thrive, but not under me. I don't have the right skills to really keep it going the way it should be going.

COOK: Mm-hmm?



COCHRAN: And I had brought — one of the things that you do when you're working at a co-op is, you have all of these policies, and one of the policies is that you are supposed to be bringing somebody along that can take over for you.

COOK: Mm-hmm.

COCHRAN: And there was a woman that I had identified as being a person who could really take over for me. So the last either year or two years that I was there, we formed a three-person general manager team. This woman ran the store, I was the outreach and education, because that was what I was really interested in, was outreach and education. And then we had a wonderful finance manager, who had actually, when I had become as general manager, if it hadn't been for him, I couldn't have done it, because I was not interested in money matters. And what I really liked was, everything to do with taking care of the customers and being the best co-op we could be. But — and so this man, he was just our bookkeeper at the time. And I did identify him as being a person who could really help out. And I gave him more and more of these jobs. And so, so we were a three-person team for either one or two years. And then I really did retire.

COOK: Mm-hmm?

COCHRAN: Well, I really did sort of retire. (laughter) And they are now the official two managers of the store. But when I did retire, they sat me down, and they said, How would it be if you continue to come in one day a week and just look around and see what things are kind of falling through the cracks, and not working, or need to get done, or need some help. And ask the different managers, you know, if they need help with this or that, and just do things for eight hours? And so that's what I do. I still do it. And I go in, and nobody bosses me, I don't have to boss anyone, which is wonderful.

COOK: Mm-hmm. (laughs)

COCHRAN: And I just look for things that need to be done.

COOK: Mm-hmm?

COCHRAN: And actually, one of the things that is dear to my heart that I do every time now is, we have, for quite a long time, we've had a reusable container program which we call our "experienced container program," or "ex-cons." (laughs) And I took over that. Whenever I come in, people have brought in containers, they've brought in bags, they've brought in glass containers, plastic containers. And they all go to a basement to a whole setup that I have. And I check them all, make sure that they're

clean, make sure that they're dry and good, and there are certain places that I take them up and I put them in, with these signs that say, "Reuse is the best form of recycling," because it really, really is. (laughs)

COOK: So you were in Vermont during, like, the time of the Vermont Yankee controversy?

COCHRAN: Oh, yeah. You bet.

COOK: Do you want to talk a little bit about that? Were you involved in anything about that?

COCHRAN: Well, personally, many of us were very much against Vermont Yankee.

COOK: Mm-hmm?

COCHRAN: I've always been against nuclear power.

COOK: Yeah.

COCHRAN: I've always thought it was the most unbelievably crazy-dangerous thing that we've ever done in this country. And, you know, the fact that we haven't had a horrible accident is just pure luck, as far as I'm concerned.

COOK: Right.

COCHRAN: But I was not one of the activist people, there were a lot of people who, many of whom I knew, and elderly ladies like I am now who used go out and chain themselves, or, you know, sing songs, or whatever. And according to Entergy, who ended up owning it, they said it was not worth it. And that was why they were going to close it. But I think one of the reasons that it wasn't worth it was because people made such a big deal, and so much trouble for them.

COOK: Yeah.

COCHRAN: Yeah.

COOK: Very cool.

COCHRAN: And we were very pleased. (laughs)

COOK: I bet.

COCHRAN: Although of course they're doing, you know, now they don't have nearly enough money to do what they should be doing.

COOK: Yeah.

COCHRAN: And it's still pretty darned controversial.

COOK: Well, we're getting to the end of our time. Do you have any advice for the graduating Smithees of this year?

COCHRAN: There are things that are going on that they're going to have to deal with.

COOK: Mm-hmm.

COCHRAN: And they're very, very serious. Climate change is very, very serious. And whatever they can do to work with anybody who's trying to mitigate this would be wonderful.

COOK: Mm-hmm.

COCHRAN: There are ways that are very involved with agriculture.

COOK: Yeah.

COCHRAN: And organic farming and all, and I was a little bit disappointed when I got my picnic today to see that there was nothing that was organic there. And I know that there is a lot of organic and local agriculture going on around here, so I kind of wonder why Smith isn't a little bit involved in a little more of that.

COOK: It is involved.

COCHRAN: It is?

COOK: It's not heavily involved, but it's still involved in it.

COCHRAN: Uh-huh?

COOK: We do have spec— we have organic stuff at (unclear) all the time.

COCHRAN: Oh, good. Good.

COOK: And we do have specialty nights where it's all local food.

COCHRAN: Oh, great.

COOK: Yeah.

COCHRAN: Great. Yeah. I've only seen, you know, what I've seen in the last couple of days.

COOK: Yeah.

COCHRAN: So that makes me feel better.

COOK: Yeah. It's definitely on our minds.

COCHRAN: Because I think that's very, very important, too.

COOK: Yeah, and we have a very strong compost thing going on.

COCHRAN: Yes, I saw the compost thing.

COOK: Yeah.

COCHRAN: And I'm hoping that some of those utensils that they say can be composted really can. (laughs) We're very involved with composting back there, and I know people who do a lot of it, who have composted some of those utensils for years, and found that they still didn't compost. But they may have improved them by now too, so I don't know about that.

COOK: Well, thank you so much.

COCHRAN: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center, June, 2016.*