

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Ruth Cooper, Class of 1957*

Interviewed by  
Kirby Vasquez, Class of 2014

May 26, 2012

## **Abstract**

In this oral history, Ruth Cooper describes going to Smith in the mid-1950s and the social regulations that entailed, working hard academically, traditions like Ivy Day and after dinner coffee, and how Smith had changed when her daughter attended in the 1980s.

## **Restrictions**

None.

## **Format**

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

## **Transcript**

Transcribed by Janet Harris with Harris Reporting. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Kayla Ginsburg.

## **Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms**

### *Video Recording*

**Bibliography:** Cooper, Ruth. Interview by Kirby Vasquez. Video recording, May 26, 2012. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Ruth Cooper, interview by Kirby Vasquez, transcript of video recording, May 26, 2012, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Cooper, Ruth. Interview by Kirby Vasquez. Transcript of video recording, May 26, 2012. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Ruth Cooper, interview by Kirby Vasquez, transcript of video recording, May 26, 2012, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 26, 2012, with:

RUTH COOPER

by: KIRBY VASQUEZ

VASQUEZ: So my name is Kirby Vasquez. It is May 26, 2012 and I am here with Ruth for the Alumnae History Project. So would you please start off with introducing yourself and your class year?

COOPER: Okay, my name is Ruth Seiden (phonetic) Cooper. I came to Smith in the Fall of 1953 and graduated in the spring of 1957. And much has changed, but much is the -- Tennyson said that, "Much has changed, much abides." It's -- it's (inaudible)

VASQUEZ: And why did you decide to come to Smith College?

COOPER: It's very interesting. I knew nothing about the top level, the Seven Sisters. I came from a large, urban high school, and my religion was a minority, and my college advisor said that I had a chance of getting into one of the good colleges and that of all the Seven Sisters, the one that was likely to prove most welcoming to somebody who was not white, Protestant, wealthy, the one that would be most welcoming was Smith, and I think she was right. I look around me at the campus now, I think it's still true.

VASQUEZ: And do you remember what your feelings were as you were stepping onto the campus your first day here?

COOPER: Yeah, I had never seen the campus. It was not like nowadays where kids go and visit all over. I had never seen any campus except visiting one cousin once for one day. I had no idea what colleges were like and my parents pulled up to my dorm, which is no longer a dorm. It was 17 Henshaw, which is -- if you look at it, it's a private house. It's -- and dropped me off there. And my father took one look around and said, "Well, she's found something just like Girl Scout Camp," which in a sense is true. There's a certain kind of bonding, I think, a certain kind of atmosphere.

My biggest immediate impression I think was a little bit of worry and fear about what this new environment was going to be like, because I had never seen anything like it.

VASQUEZ: And did you live at 17 Henshaw all four years?

COOPER: No, 17 Henshaw was -- there was 17 Henshaw, then there was another one on Henshaw, then there was 91 Elm and 79 Elm, and all four houses were one -- all four -- they were small buildings and all four were one. We all ate at 91 Elm, it was all one. But if you look at Elm Street now, there is no 79 and 91 Elm, because that's Cutter Ziskind. So after two years -- I lived the first year in 17 Henshaw, the second year in 79 Elm, which was slightly larger, but still part of the same house. They said, can't stay here, we're going to tear it down. So they moved all of us into Lamont House, which was new at that time, and Lamont House had two groups of people. It had those of us who moved from Henshaw, and then I think the college wanted to set a certain tone from the beginning, I'm not really sure, but they invited a great many movers and shakers on campus, you know, big wheels -- I don't know what you want to call them, of people who were sort of involved with the running of things. They invited them to move into this new dorm, so there were these two groups of people, and I stayed there for my last two years.

VASQUEZ: And how was the house community there? Were you part of it?

COOPER: I'm sorry?

VASQUEZ: The house community?

COOPER: Well, I still have one friend, close friend from those days. She was one year ahead of me, but I made a close friend there. Yeah, we functioned as a house. We had after dinner coffee in the living room, and yeah, it was a community, and there was none of this eating here, there or the other place. We all ate together, we saw each other in the morning in our pajamas. Yeah, it was a community. And I think that the house system was a major attraction. I know it's had to change. I understand that. But to whatever extent it could be kept, it was good. It was very good. We had a house mother, which you don't have any more, and somebody from the faculty lived in many of the houses, and ours was the warden, which we don't have any more either. Kind of like a dean or something, but she was called the warden.

VASQUEZ: And how was your relationship with the house mother?

COOPER: I didn't have very much to do with her. I never had any problems that I had to go to her with. I never did anything that she might have frowned on. I was a mousy little quiet person. She -- the way the food worked in those days was they gave each house mother a certain set amount of food, and she could do whatever she wanted with it, so the relationship with the house mother was did you like the kind of food she served, and then she would be in the living room after dinner with coffee and I don't remember any particular relationship with her.

VASQUEZ: And what were your thoughts on the house rules, the curfew and everything?

COOPER: In -- I don't think -- we're talking 1953 to 1957, it seemed very sensible to me. I understand that, you know, by the time my daughter came here things had changed completely, but for that era it seemed very sensible. We had a curfew, well, so what else is new? You know, that was reasonable. If a male came into the -- you know, came up -- even if your father came to help carry your luggage, you know, "Man on the floor!" But that was all very reasonable for that era, unlike my daughter's era when somebody on her floor had a live-in boyfriend, but that's a separate issue. None of that existed in the '50s.

What was a little bit regressive, I think, even for then is that one of my classmates got married and then her husband went off for his six month required military service, which was part of the '50s, and they didn't want married girls -- because we were girls, we were not women, they didn't want married girls in the dorms because -- ah, they might tell us something that we didn't know. So that was a little regressive. Even then that was a little old fashioned, but the rest of it, it never occurred to me that there was anything wrong -- you know, that's how life was.

VASQUEZ: And do you have any favorite Smith traditions or remember any?

COOPER: Any Smith --

VASQUEZ: Traditions?

COOPER: Well, obviously Ivy Day -- even this morning, I found myself sort of tearing up as everybody -- it comes to me now. Everybody lines up and it -- it -- that sticks. It would be better if it were graduation weekend, which I'm hoping they can at least get some classes back. My daughter was appalled last year to find out that at the 25th reunion, her's was the oldest class. I mean that -- 25th, you'll see, is not old. So clearly Ivy Day --

I kind of liked the after dinner coffee. I'm not sure why -- it was not something I was accustomed to at home. It just seemed nice. Once in awhile somebody would invite a faculty member to have dinner and set up a table with a faculty member, you know, and her friends and whoever. And that was nice too. Beyond that, I have a hard time thinking of what you would call a tradition --

VASQUEZ: Was Mountain Day a big deal?

COOPER: Oh, I forgot Mountain Day. Yeah, Mountain Day is a -- but that was -- you know, I mean even from third grade, you know a day off from school is -- yeah, I hadn't even thought about that. But that was just -- you know, oh, wow, we have a day off from school. Another day to get that paper done or whatever.

VASQUEZ: And do you remember facing any hardships while at Smith College?

COOPER: I don't know how you interpret the word hardship. I had a scholarship which is different from the way financial -- I think it's different from the way that -- and I had to keep my grades at a certain level in order to keep the scholarship and that was hard. That was difficult. I'm not a genius and it was hard. I lost it one year because my grades slipped a little bit and will be forever grateful that Mary Menzel (phonetic) who was the woman in charge of things then called me in and said we'll give you a job to -- and instead of telling me how many hours I had to work to get that, she looked at my program and said, "Let's see how much time I think you will have with these courses," which is remarkably positive. And she looked at it, and she said, "Well, I think with that schedule you can work so many hours," and I worked in the library.

So financially, yeah, that was -- financially it was hard. My family is not -- was not wealthy, and the work was much more difficult than I had experienced in high school. I was talking to somebody yesterday. We had exactly the same experience of going to high school, and we're talking about freshman English which is required. And she and I both had gotten A's in English in high school and came here and wrote our first paper and got a C. And that was -- you know, that really hit hard. But other than that, no particular.

VASQUEZ: And did you go abroad at all?

COOPER: I'm sorry?

VASQUEZ: Did you go abroad?

COOPER: No, I did not. Again, in the first place for an English major I wasn't sure, you know, and in the second place it would have cost money. So --

VASQUEZ: And did you develop good relationships with professors and mentors here?

COOPER: Not like you have nowadays.

VASQUEZ: Mm-hmm.

COOPER: And I know this because of my daughter. I certainly got along fine with my teachers, had my favorites. You know, I could go on for about six hours about my favorites. One of my teachers had a very small class. There were only, I think, only four of us in it. We used to meet once a week in her living room, which was very nice, but I think it was a different kind of relationship.

VASQUEZ: Did you feel that Smith College during your time was an accepting place for minority groups whether --

COOPER: Well, I told you when I started, absolutely. It was why I came here. It was definitely the opinion of the person who was advising me that -- you know, I don't know how much stereotypes, how accurate -- I had no idea. But Vassar had the reputation of being snooty, Radcliffe had the reputation that you had to be a super brain beyond human ability. I have no idea whether it was true. But yes, I definitely had the feeling that it was accepting and I certainly was able to meet people of similar background. That does not mean everybody at the school was accepting. Most of the people I ran into were accepting, but I have a vivid memory of coming down the stairs one day and overhearing a conversation in the living room in which they were discussing whom to vote for in some campus election, and one girl said she would not vote for so-and-so because she was of my background and that was somebody she would not vote for. So you know, the school was very accepting. Most of the people here were fine, but there were pockets of (inaudible) --

VASQUEZ: And when you say "of your background," what do you mean?

COOPER: My religion. I'm Jewish.

VASQUEZ: Okay, I just wanted to clarify. And what were your experiences -- did you date while you were here?

COOPER: Not much. Not -- did I date at school? Not really here. I went to one fraternity party at Amherst, but I don't have terribly much interest in alcohol and I was not about to go necking in the back corners of the hallway. And so I went once to a fraternity party there. I had a couple of blind dates that people set up, you know, a friend of a friend kind of thing. No, I did not. I ended up marrying somebody I had known from home. When I was here I didn't know that. I mean it was not like we were hot and heavy, it was not. But no, I didn't really date much while I was here, no.

VASQUEZ: And so you graduated in the post-War era. What were the expectations of you in terms of marriage and work and family?

COOPER: Different. Not for me personally. My mother worked all -- my mother was a teacher and worked all the years I was growing up, so that in my family there was clearly an expectation that you do what, you know, you have a job or a profession or whatever. Not -- some of my classmates got married like the day after graduation. I mean this was not the norm exactly, but that's what -- that was still what they were looking forward to. I did not get married until a year later. I went to graduate school for a year and then got married the following year, but that was late. But the era was totally different. Again, my daughter's experience was totally different. In my family the question -- I dropped out of graduate school to get -- when I got married, because I was the sole support for a few years

there. And in whatever the world may have said, in my family the expectation was when are you going back to school? When are you going to get another degree? I was teaching. When are you going to move up within that? I never did, but my daughter did and I saw what it meant to my parents. My daughter teaches at Harvard and my mother, you know, it was kind of like I didn't quite make it, but she did. So that you'll find in my generation mostly the expectation was get married, stay home, take -- that was not my families expectation.

VASQUEZ: So how did you feel that having a Smith education affects your life?

COOPER: They always ask that.

VASQUEZ: Yep.

COOPER: It was invaluable, for several reasons. In the first place, as I said, I came from a large urban high -- I was introduced to a way of life that I hadn't ever seen before and I liked it, and I found I was able to keep my own background and my own life at the same time as being introduced to -- it was not an either or. It was not like if you become this, you can't be that. It wasn't by any means. And so it introduced me to a world I had had no clue about. It was also the first place I had ever been -- I don't know what it's like now. You'll have to think about this yourself. But I came here and everything was done right. You went to sign up for classes, it worked out fine.

I can't even put it into words, except I had this feeling that if things were supposed to go this way, they went this way. If they were supposed to go this way -- and I had never been in an atmosphere where it all worked -- it was all done the way it was supposed to be and so I'm -- that was perhaps one of the biggest lessons I got out of this was that you can face a situation and try to deal with it, and if you're careful and work at it, you just make sure it works out right.

Not that you can do things right 100 percent. Obviously, I mean you can't, but that one can attempt and often succeed in getting things done right, and that was -- you know, I'm putting the academics down a little because I take that for granted. There was a level of academic learning that you don't see everywhere. I went to graduate school after this and I was very disappointed, because it was -- it was too -- I mean I had gotten B's here, and in those days B's were respect -- you know, quite respectable, and I went to graduate school and it was straight A's all along the way. It was like going back to high school, so even though I put the academic after the rest, that's because I take it for granted, that sort of thing.

VASQUEZ: And how do you feel -- how did you feel about your daughter coming back here?



COOPER: Oh, I encouraged -- you know, I thought it was a wonderful place for me. It gave me -- a lot of it is intangible. That's not going to show up on your questionnaire, just atmosphere and feeling and behaviors and what's -- and expectations, because the expectations were high. I thought they were wonderful. My daughter got into her teenage rebellion stage. I don't know if you went through that, but I suspect most girls do at some point, but she did it when she was like 14, 15, going into 16 and so it was one of those deals where -- oh, it's cold outside. No, it's not. It's not cold.

VASQUEZ: (Laughs)

COOPER: Yeah, it was one of those -- very typical, very typical (inaudible) -- but my husband is a very smart man and he said to me, "Would you like Suzanne to go to Smith?" And I said, "Yeah, I think it would be really great." And he said, "Then stop talking about it." And I did, and she came and it's been absolutely wonderful. If -- did great things for her.

VASQUEZ: When was she here?

COOPER: She graduated in 1986. So to you that's old, but you know, it was 25 years ago and she came last year for her 25th, to the reunion.

VASQUEZ: And did you guys ever talk about the differences that you saw?

COOPER: Oh yeah, yeah. I mentioned one before that somebody on her floor in Gillette had a pretty much live-in boyfriend. I mean that type of thing. But the world had changed by 1986. I was pre- the 1960's, she was post the 1960's. So that was a big difference. She called some of her professors by their first name. I would never have dreamt of doing something like that.

Mostly I think what I was pleased to see was what we said at the beginning, what has remained. You know, okay you can come now with your lip piercings and you look totally different from, you know -- and your shorts are up to here, but we couldn't have our shorts more than -- so the look is totally different when you walk around the campus. But underneath it all a lot remains and that's what she and I have noticed, and you know, she has friends from here. That's mostly what we've talked about.

VASQUEZ: And so what keeps you coming back to reunion?

COOPER: Very hard to tell. It's not that I have a lot of friends in my class. I know people, but not -- you know, it's not that I have these close friends, although one did come this year that I haven't seen in 55 years. But I think it's what you mentioned before, the tradition, the feeling that I was part of something that's very important, that's very good and that still continues, and of course, the college encourages it because we give money. You

know, that's -- but as I -- I'm repeating what I said at the beginning, when everybody lined up this morning before the parade started, I got tears in my eyes. It's just -- there's something about being a part of all this that -- I didn't come back when I was younger . Oh, I had a job and family and, you know, there was a whole period in there, maybe 15 years or more when I really -- I came back at the very beginning and then there was this whole span when other things were going on in my life and I didn't come back here, and then I think as my daughter grew up I began thinking more about it and it's the -- it's the tradition and it's the being a part of something very wonderful. It really is.

VASQUEZ: Well, I think we're -- great reflections. Wonderful. Thank you very much.

COOPER: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Janet Harris, June 2012.*