

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Judy Denison, Class of 1957

Interviewed by
Bethy Williams, Class of 2013

May 21, 2011

Abstract

In this oral history, Judy Denison describes her experiences living in Lawrence House as a scholarship student, her work as a physics major, her internship at the CERN, and her education after Smith. Denison also discusses her marriage and subsequent divorce, her children and grandchildren, and her job with the Bureau of the Census and recent work with the Belize Education Project.

Restrictions

None

Format

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

Transcript

Transcribed by Rachel Schein 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: Denison, Judy. Interview by Bethy Williams. Video recording, May 21, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Judy Denison, interview by Bethy Williams, video recording, May 21, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

Transcript

Bibliography: Denison, Judy. Interview by Bethy Williams. Transcript of video recording, May 21, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Judy Denison, interview by Bethy Williams, transcript of video recording, May 21, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted on May 21st, 2011, with:

JUDY DENISON

by: BETHY WILLIAMS
filmed by: KATE GEIS

DENISON: What's the purpose of this whole thing?

WILLIAMS: Um, all the interviews are going to go in the College Archives. So anyone like -- you mentioned that girl who wrote a thesis on Lawrence House. Like if someone else were to do something like that, they could look at these interviews or um, you know they might -- I don't know, just anyone who's curious and wants to know about the Colleges history. So—

GEIS: And women's history, and feminism , and any -- anything that you bring up will be searchable, so—

DENISON: Mm-hmm.

GEIS: (laughs)

WILLIAMS: Researchers or curious people.

GEIS: OK, we're ready when you are!

WILLIAMS: OK! Um, this is Bethy Williams, I'm here with Judy Denison and it's May 21st, 2011. Thank you for agreeing to be a part of this project.

DENISON: You're welcome. My pleasure.

WILLIAMS: Um, so how did you initially choose Smith?

DENISON: Uh, my mother was class of 1931 and my grandmother was the class of 1908 and I decided Smith was the place I would most regret not going to. Actually, it was the only place I applied, and the day before acceptances came out, it suddenly occurred to me I might not get in. (laughter)

WILLIAMS: And um, given the options, why did you want a women's college?

DENISON: Well, my mother had always said that women were afraid to speak up in a co-ed school, and that you get a better education there.

WILLIAMS: So you thought at women's college you would have the courage to speak up and--

DENISON: Well I've always had courage, but still.

WILLIAMS: Yeah (laughs). It would give you more courage! Um--

DENISON: I'm not sure in retrospect it was the best choice for me.

WILLIAMS: Really? Why not?

DENISON: Because I went into physics, and um, I did not get a good feeling of my own abilities, and when I went to graduate school I fell flat on my face because I thought I was better than I was. I also was not used to competition with men. I had been so nicely treated at Smith, so supported, and I got to graduate school and it was one-upsmanship, and what -- haven't you done your problems yet? Aren't you getting worried? And it was the worst year of my life, graduate school. Um, total feeling of having let everyone down. And in retrospect, I often thought I should've gone to Swarthmore, a spiritual school which was co-ed. However, I went to Smith, and I've kept very good friends. But my personality being what it was, I think it would've been strong enough no matter where I had gone to school. And I also had the feeling at Smith that men were looked at only as sex objects, and not as real people. And I could've used more practice in getting to know men as real people.

WILLIAMS: Right. And what was it like taking physics classes here at Smith?

DENISON: Well, I felt that I was special. I had known way back when that I wanted to study physics. When I was nine or ten I read the biography of Madame Curie, and that was what I wanted to be. I wanted to be Madame Curie, I wanted to work with my husband, all that idealism. And it was hard for me to get over that. So I actually -- in high school, I asked them here at Smith what I should take if I wanted to major in physics and they suggested taking math, so I came in with a lot of math and didn't start physics until I was in school here. And then I used up all the physics classes they had here and all the math classes, because I skipped some math classes because my teachers at Northfield School for Girls had given me some tutoring during the summer, so I got to go directly into second year calculus when I entered. And so I was used to skipping classes, so I thought I could do that when I went to graduate school, and I went right into hard classes at Radcliffe, which means Harvard, and when you're a graduate student at Radcliffe Harvard, you are one of two girls in 125 boys, and they have last names like [Fairme?], which just goes to show how hard it was. And so I was not prepared both in class work, and psychologically I was not at all

prepared. They just did me in with one-upsmanship, I didn't have the strength to stand up to that.

WILLIAMS: Right. And you mentioned to me before this interview that you had taken a physics class at Amherst as well.

DENISON: It was quantum mechanics.

WILLIAMS: Oh, sorry, excuse me.

DENISON: And that was my senior year, and I believe I was the first Smith girl to take classes at Amherst. And then second semester I took a math class, I don't remember what it was. And I didn't do that spectacularly at Amherst. There were three in the quantum mechanics class. Two [courians?] and me. One got an A, one got a B, and I got a C.

WILLIAMS: How -- was that experience different than Smith, going over to Amherst?

DENISON: Well, it did a lot for my social life. I got more -- of course I got to know guys, and so then I could introduce them to girls, so that made me more popular with girls, too.

WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm. What were your experiences with relationships and dating and that when you were here?

DENISON: Well, I had -- I got a boyfriend when I was in my freshman year because I met him at a Quaker work camp and he was getting a Masters degree in physics, but he lived pretty far away and it just sort of -- over the summer -- just sort of fell apart from distance. Um, and, it -- it wasn't -- it wasn't what you'd call an intense and extensive relationship. Like finally after four months we got around to having a kiss. That was it (laughter).

WILLIAMS: And, um, how did you feel about issues of race and class and all of that in your time here? Did you think they were divisive or it was no big deal, or--?

DENISON: Well, it wasn't really a consideration. We had a couple of black girls in the dorm and no big deal. And um, when I was taking that class at Amherst, I had a big crush on the good looking Korean guy. That sort of interfered with my being able to think about the quantum mechanics. (laughter)

WILLIAMS: Right, can you talk--

DENISON: Um, class -- class, OK. Well we were in Lawrence House, scholarship dorm, and as I was telling you, somebody -- a senior at Smith a few

years ago -- did an honors thesis on what she called the "Plebes" and something else. She had a hypothesis that the scholarship house girls were second class citizens and discriminated against, and it was terrible and so on. So she sent out questionnaires to all of us, and we all wrote back and said No! We didn't feel like second class citizens! We felt superior to everybody. And we did. We were really close. We had all that in common. We were the noble poor! We were smart and we were poor and that proved we were better than everybody! (laughs) I don't know if any -- everybody else felt that way, but that's how I certainly felt.

WILLIAMS: Right. And do you have any, like, stories, or any particular anecdotes about that?

DENISON: About the Lawrence House situation?

WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm, right.

DENISON: Well, we were a little bit of non-conformist rabble-rousers, one of my classmates -- and we were class of '57, she sort of majored in Russian on purpose because it was the McCarthy era, so that was sort of a rebellion thing. And then after she graduated, she would write into the *Alumnae Quarterly* that she'd spent the summer being a chorus girl, you know (laughs).

WILLIAMS: Were you all working when you were in college?

DENISON: Well we all had summer jobs, of course. And we all had jobs at college. Um what -- the jobs that I had, I did a lot of babysitting for professors, and I also had a job in the physics lab. Believe it or not, in those days you'd get some electronics equipment that you didn't much need anymore, and so we -- my job was to un-[sodder?] it and sort out the resistors into the spin and the capacitors into that bin, and you know, read the bars on the resistors so you knew what bin to put it in, so we could reuse them. So that was my physics job. And then, of course, we all did some, you know, waiting on tables. Well, we did that in Lawrence House anyway, but at graduation time we'd get those extra jobs working for graduation events. And I do remember that we were getting 65 cents an hour, 50 cents an hour for babysitting. But when I was younger, it was only 25 cents an hour for babysitting, so that was OK.

WILLIAMS: Right. And was it part of -- what was it like being part of a community of women who are in a similar situation to you, at least financially?

DENISON: Oh yeah, well, we made good friends. But I always felt like an outsider. It wasn't till later I discovered I really wasn't an outsider. But I was so tight with money that I would not spend five cents to go and get a cup of

coffee on Green Street. And they would go out for a cup of coffee and I wouldn't spend five cents to do that.

WILLIAMS: Other girls in your house would?

DENISON: Yeah, they would. I mean, they weren't as tight as I was (laughs).

WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm.

DENISON: And also, all I did was study. I didn't play bridge. I just studied pretty much all the time.

WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm. And what was it like with those two African-Americans living in Lawrence House?

DENISON: Oh, I don't remember anything about them. One of them became a good well known poet, I think. [Junie Jordan?] was her name. I don't remember the name of the other one. But it was no biggie, no deal.

WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm. They were just part of the group, like everyone else?

DENISON: Oh yeah, yeah.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. And um -- and so you think overall, Smith was a pretty accepting place for, you know, quote unquote "outsiders"? Like Jews, or racial minorities, or people from working class backgrounds.

DENISON: Oh yeah, oh yeah. And they were good even to students who weren't that good. You know, there was one girl in the class after us who really wasn't doing very well scholastically, and they didn't just kick her out on her ear. They kept working with her, trying to help her to improve.

WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm.

DENISON: Um, I understand that there was some sort of thing with the scholar -- Miss [Mensal?] was head of scholarships, and I understand that there were little funds in case a scholarship girl got really desperate for something. Or there was some place you could get prom dresses really cheap if you needed that. So they worked with us.

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

DENISON: But I didn't really feel part of the group. I took all the pictures in our group, and I -- and later, people said to me if it hadn't been for you, we wouldn't have had any photographs of our college years. And I would

DENISON: put them up on the board, and people would pay me. It was 35 cents for a print. And if I was -- if you were getting 65 cents an hour, that was a

lot of money for a print. And they would order a print, and I'd get the prints, and they'd pay me, and they'd have some prints!

WILLIAMS: Right. So as a photographer, you're kind of this outside observer.

DENISON: (Phone Rings) I'm gonna leave it.

GEIS: Can you just pause it for a second.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. All righty. Great, OK. So we were talking about, as a photographer, you were sort of an outside observer. Is that what you felt like?

DENISON: Well, it wasn't because I was a photographer, but that was the way that I could be a little connected, even though I wasn't connected, was by taking pictures of people.

WILLIAMS: Right. And I want to talk a little bit about your um, life after Smith. And uh, sort of where you went with physics. What happened with all of that.

DENISON: Mm-hmm. Did you want me to tell you about the incidents that happened while I was a student, about Woods Hole and so on?

GEIS: Sure!

WILLIAMS: Sure.

DENISON: OK. I worked one summer at Woods Hole, 1956, with other students. And we all worked together for the first month, and for the second month, all the boys got to go out on the research ship out to sea for a month, but the girls didn't because they didn't have separate restrooms, so this one girl who was a graduate student at Harv-- at Radcliffe -- and she needed to get samples for her PhD thesis, marine samples. And they said, well you can't come, but give us your jars and we'll get your samples for you. So she stowed away, and hid on the research ship. And after three days she came out and said I'm gonna collect my samples. And they turned that ship around three days to take her back to shore, because they didn't have separate restrooms.

WILLIAMS: Oh my goodness. So what was it like being a woman in the sciences, with that sort of stuff still happening?

DENISON: Well, there was a mixture of feelings. On the one hand, it was an identity thing. I was the physics girl, I'm cool. And there was one other physics major, and I was very, you know, sort of competitive and resentful of her because I wanted to be the only physics girl. And -- but

DENISON: on the other hand, if there was a mixer, you know, you'd be dancing

with some guy that you never saw before, and it would be, you know, well what do you do? What are you studying, blah blah blah. And I would -- then I would finally say "Well I'm studying physics!" And he says "Physics! I flunked a physics course once! Well, bye, see you later!"

WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm. So it was almost like it was OK at Smith when it was just women, but then when you had men you were--

DENISON: Yeah, it was OK with people who were not dates, but it didn't work with guys. Except for that one guy that was my boyfriend for a while who was getting a Masters in physics himself. And as I was telling you, in those days we felt that of course the guy had to be smarter than us, and your parents were after you to marry somebody who was going to be smart, and successful, and rich. And they never mentioned marrying somebody who was kind and supportive! Totally wasn't in the picture! Never entered anybody's head. Not your parents' head, not your own head, that was for sure. And I had the feeling that physics people were the smartest, so therefore I never dated anybody who wasn't a physicist. It kind of narrowed the field. And they had to be a smart physicist um, and, I did not make good choices about getting married. But at any rate, when I was in graduate -- I did get into graduate school at Radcliffe -- which means Harvard, because you had classes together. But the admission policies were different. So I wasn't as good as the Harvard students that were admitted, but still they had to admit two girls in Physics, so there were two of us and 120-some Harvard guys first year. And I was taking classes that were too hard for me as -- I already told you that, I think.

WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm.

GEIS: Did you -- did you get [yelled at?] at some point? Did you always feel that you were behind, or did you ever feel that you were able to --

DENISON: I was not able to catch up out there. There was one class, and there were 80 guys in the class and two girls. It was one of these long, narrow classes where you can't -- can't see from the back, and there aren't enough seats, and we'd get there early and we'd sit right in the front row in the middle. And there'd be guys standing up in back in the class, but there'd be an empty seat on either side of us, because they didn't want to sit next to a girl because they might get distracted. I mean, people don't treat blacks that badly! So, we decided, final exam - - we weren't doing that well -- we decided OK, they're afraid they're going to be distracted? All right, we'll distract them. So we wore tight red sweaters, high heels, and perfume to the final exam. Made us feel better. (laughter) I don't think it affected their grades. So after that year, I did do some -- while they were all busy studying, I had heard that there was a laboratory in Geneva, Switzerland. CERN, you've probably

heard of it. That's where, you know, they had the large Hadron Collider. OK, so I heard it existed. So I wrote them and asked them if they had any summer jobs. And they wrote back and said "Well, we've got this guest student under the Ford foundation for four months. You interested in that?" And I said "You bet!". And I get over there -- oh, oh! So then I got that job, and all the Harvard guys were saying how did *you* get that job? I said I wrote and applied. I got over there and discovered I was the only person in the entire United States who had thought of writing and applying.

WILLIAMS: Wow!

DENISON: Well I didn't know they had a job! I just wrote and asked. So that was good. When I came back, I went out to the University of Colorado. Totally different atmosphere, very supportive. Same ratio, two girls and 100 boys, but they were supportive, and I did get my Masters degree there.

WILLIAMS: So what -- what motivated you to want to take this? It sounds like a difficult course to take, to be the only woman in all these physics and science programs. What motivated you?

DENISON: Well I was good at math and science. I just was really good at it. And when I took the -- like Graduate Record Exams to go to graduate school, I was, let's see -- I was 99 percentile in English, 98 percentile in Math, but I was three degrees off scale for women in math.

GEIS: What does that mean?

DENISON: Well, you know 98 percentile means that 98 percent of the people got worse grades than you in that class. But it -- and that was overall. But if you separated it into men and women, you know, you could have different -- so I was three categories off scale for women in math. And I had had a lot of help -- I went to Northfield School for Girls, and they helped me a lot. Gave me private, you know, tutoring during the summer as I told you in math. And I just always was good in math! I skipped seventh grade. I went to Smith College day school, which was not good. Um, but they did skip me -- they skipped seventh grade, and I did two years of math, you know, on my own. And --

GEIS: So it always just made sense to you?

DENISON: Just math came -- it's still -- I stayed being good at math. I didn't get to work in physics because I married a physics guy, as I told you, and then I -- we went up to Wyoming and it was the nepotism rule, and I couldn't work there. So when -- I never had a real job all the time, because there were no jobs in Laramie, Wyoming -- population 25,000 -- except university jobs. So I started an art supply store instead (laughs).

WILLIAMS: Did you have children in your marriage?

DENISON: Yeah, I had four children in less than four years. I had twins, and then 15 months later another. And I have eight grandchildren, and they've all been married 25 years or so, and they all have at least one child. It's a miracle.

WILLIAMS: Wow. And what was it like, you know, sort of pursuing your own dreams, while trying to raise children?

DENISON: I didn't succeed in doing that. It was very frustrating and I felt quite bitter. My education down the drain, and my husband was not at all supportive. Um, like once he said "I don't understand why home and children aren't enough for you!" and I said "What did you expect when you married a woman with a Masters degree in physics?" And he said "I didn't think you'd take it that seriously." And another time, later, I -- I said "This shirt is so hard to iron." He says "If you really loved me, you'd enjoy ironing my shirts." And I said, quick as a wink, "If you really loved me, you'd buy shirts that don't need ironing!"

WILLIAMS: (laughs) Right.

DENISON: But that was later in the relationship. He used to tell me I had an obnoxious personality, and I believed him because that whole thing about there's something wrong with me, I'm not docile and quiet and satisfied. And so if he told me I had an obnoxious personality, yeah, I know, that's something that's wrong with me! And how am I gonna fix it? But I never -- but it took me until -- until I was in my mid-60s, before I finally got rid of that concept that there was something wrong with me. Because I had this -- I mean, I had difficulties in my personal life. I'm being -- my father was a violent alcoholic, so I had a thing about men, you know? And I got this thing after I'd broken up with the second relationship, what is wrong with me that men can't love me? What's wrong with me? And I was in this downward spiral, there's something wrong with me, what *is* it? What can I do?

And there would be times I'd be at a party and I'd let somebody for an hour tell me what was wrong with me because I kept thinking maybe I could fix it. And I went to coun -- to a -- there's something called Landmark Education, which is an international program for well -- for personal transformation. It's not self-improvement. It gives you a different place to stand to view the world. And they want you to identify a possibility of being. And I couldn't identify it. I knew it had something to do with love, but I couldn't identify it. And finally, the last day of the second workshop -- and they're intensive workshops, 9 a.m. to midnight, three days in a row -- very effective. I had lots of counseling but this was way more effective than any counseling that I ever had. It came to me: the possibility of being loved by men and

being able to recognize it. And that just was like a thunderbolt that showed me that my father had loved me, my brother had loved me, my husband had loved me, my partner had loved me. It was just human frailty, and there was nothing wrong with me. And that lasted. It enabled me to restore relationships with my brother, and so on. And ever since then I have been free of this, that there is something wrong with me. But that's how long it took! From childhood to my mid-60s, before I finally believed that there really wasn't anything wrong with me.

WILLIAMS: And you're happy now?

DENISON: I am. And I have a sweetheart who is not smarter than me, and he's kind, and he's supportive, and it's just nice.

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

DENISON: We don't live together, we're just sweethearts.

WILLIAMS: Hmm. That's great!

DENISON: We were friends for nine and a half years before we became sweethearts.

WILLIAMS: Wow. And--

GEIS: I was curious about your work, and um where science has played in your life.

DENISON: OK, well I couldn't work at the University of Wyoming in science, so as I told you I started an art supply store because I had -- we had lived in Switzerland and I had taken folk painting classes. So I did that for 12 years, never made any money, but at least I had a life. So then when I got divorced I moved down to Denver, and by then I'd gotten a second Bachelors in Psychology because I was -- just curiosity, you know? I wanted to find out the secrets of the universe and physics, that didn't -- I didn't find them there, I thought I'd look in Psychology, and I didn't find them out there either. Anyway, so [with all that?] statistics, I got a job for the Bureau of the Census where I was a supervisor for four and a half years. And then I worked for the geological survey. And then in my mid-50s I became a computer programmer. And that really worked well for me, and I had a couple of jobs, and then I worked at one company for 12 and a half years and I really liked it. It was like puzzles. It was just fun, it was creative, I was good at it, good detail orientation. I could make it look good on the webpage, and I did well with that, and I was accurate and it really worked well for me. And then I retired when I turned 70, which I had been planning all along. And it just happened at the time I had decided now it's time to retire, they

announced lay-offs! So I got six and a half months severance pay. And also at that time I was having cancer treatment, and so it seemed like a good time to retire, which I did. And the cancer's all gone, so I'm fine. And now -- I knew I was too busy to work -- I do an awful lot of volunteer stuff. But mainly, it's not that I go work for some other organization. I start the organizations! So I've got -- I've started several organizations, but the ones I'm most active in now -- first of all I send out an email newsletter every Sunday to about 1,000 email addresses. It's environmental and cultural news of Golden, it takes me two, three hours to do. And that's my community service. And it's mainly like save the mesas from the developers, don't let the beltway go through Golden, that kind of thing. And it's got a lot of news and people say it's very fair, and it's better than the local newspaper. And then about 11 years ago, I st -- well the universe drops things in my lap. I had always enjoyed singing, and we didn't have any choral group in Golden, and one day I'm just walking down the street at a city fair and talking to somebody, and we talked Golden politics, you know "What do you do? What do you do?" He says "My wife's a choir director." I'm an organizer! So 11 years ago, I started the choir. And then last summer, the universe dropped in my lap that the rich guy in Golden called me up and asked who -- what organization I thought he ought to support. I said, well we had to drop the children's choir because of finances. So two weeks later I had a check for \$10,000 and I don't even have to write him any reports. And then, another thing, four years ago we were down in Belize on a medical mission -- not that I know anything about medicine, but I was handing out pills and taking blood pressure -- and there was a school next door to the hospital that had 350 kids and zero books. So we started the Belize education project, and we now have sent a total of 14,000 books and we are giving scholarships. Next year it's going to be nine high school kids, and we send every fall a team of like 14 teachers down to Belize to teach the teachers -- give workshops -- on how to teach literacy and how to do classroom management. Then we bring them up here in April to um, to observe schools in the Denver area. And so that -- that's happening. And the wife of the ambassador to Belize has taken notice of it, and has been very enthusiastic about it, and this is what she wants for her model for how to improve education in Belize. Why Belize? The universe dropped it in our laps.

WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm. Wow! It sounds like you've had a very accomplished and rich life.

DENISON: Yeah (laughter). And I have eight grandchildren rai -- oh, and the Belize project, the president of the thing is my daughter who's a teacher. And so I have eight grandchildren ranging in age from 11 to 21.

WILLIAMS: Wow!

DENISON: And they -- the two oldest ones are tending to want to be teachers.

WILLIAMS: And I guess we're running out of time (laughs), I hate to cut this short, but it's sort of a final question. What advice would you give to current and future Smith women?

DENISON: Well, of course we say have courage, but also, do your homework enough to find out if you are -- you know, if you're over-reaching too much. Because when you go from Smith to another atmosphere, it's not gonna be the same. So get your feet under you before you reach too far when you change your location. But other than that, if you have an idea, go with it. The universe drops these things in your lap, and you can say yes or no to what the universe gives you. Say yes.

GEIS: Thank you!

WILLIAMS: Thank you very much!

DENISON: OK.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Rachel Schein, July 2011.