

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Susan Gesing, Class of 1961*

Interviewed by  
Bethy Williams, Class of 2013

May 20, 2011

## **Abstract**

In this oral history, Susan Gesing describes what it was like arriving at Smith from the Midwest, what the dating scene and social atmosphere were like, her work as an American Studies major, her opinion on the Newton Arvin scandal, and what a Smith education has meant to her.

## **Restrictions**

None

## **Format**

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

## **Transcript**

Transcribed by Jessica Lin 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:** Gesing, Susan. Interview by Bethy Williams. Video recording, May 20, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Susan Gesing, interview by Bethy Williams, video recording, May 20, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Gesing, Susan. Interview by Bethy Williams. Transcript of video recording, May 20, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Susan Gesing, interview by Bethy Williams, transcript of video recording, May 20, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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

SUSAN GESING

by: BETHY WILLIAMS  
filmed by: KATE GEIS

WILLIAMS: Or you could come back to the archives and look at it, but yeah, that will make sense when you write it.

GESING: So does every -- nobody will -- you didn't do anybody who didn't at least let it be in the archives?

WILLIAMS: No, you have to choose at least the archives.

GESING: Otherwise why do it? (laughter)

WILLIAMS: Yeah, right? I mean, some people do that, though. And we don't have time for it right now (laughter), unfortunately, but--.

GESING: Yeah. Yeah.

WILLIAMS: Kate, whenever you're ready. OK. You don't need to like sound check or anything?

GEIS: I think actually while you were talking it (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)-

WILLIAMS: Oh, OK. (laughter) OK. My name is Bethy Williams. I'm here with Susan Gesing, and it's May 20th, 2011. Thank you for agreeing to be a part of this project.

GESING: You're welcome.

GEIS: Could you spell your name also just so we make sure we have that right?

GESING: G-E- one S-I-N-G.

WILLIAMS: Great, thank you. OK. So how did you choose Smith?

GESING: I had-- when I was 18, I had-- really had no idea where I wanted to go to college. Or maybe when I was 17 let's say. I-- my mother and her two

sisters had gone to Vassar. We were living in Cedar Rapids, Iowa and there were not many of my friends who were thinking of going east to go to school. Most people were choosing a big university in the Midwest, which sounded like fun to me. But my mother took me on a trip out west to see colleges in California, and I really liked Pomona College; a small liberal arts college out there. And she and her sisters had gone to Vassar, and she said maybe you (break in tape) to one Eastern college. And I thought a female college? That doesn't sound like something I'd be interested in because I had a lot of friends in high school who were boys. We called them boys then. (laughter) And (break in tape) miss that. But-- just for kicks, I applied to Smith because she said if you're going to apply to an Eastern college, apply to Smith. There were always a lot of really neat girls that I met when I was at Vassar who were at college weekends, and they were from Smith. This all sounds rather silly, but and then I applied to the University of Colorado cause it was fun. So when I got into Smith (laughter), I was kind of so amazed. Especially when I looked through the college catalogue, and all the wonderful academic offerings that I thought about it. And actually, my mother was a part of this decision too. (laughter) She said if you choose the University of Colorado, you'll probably have much more fun. But if you choose Smith, you'll be happy about it for the rest of your life. And it still kind of gets to me, cause it was so true.

WILLIAMS: Wow.

GESING: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: I'm also from the Midwest, and when I came here, it was sort of a culture shock. Did you experience any of that? Like how was it adjusting from the Midwest to New England?

GESING: It was-- it was-- it was very (laughter) traumatic. Where—now, where are you from?

WILLIAMS: I'm from Indiana, from (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)-.

GESING: OK. Well, Indiana, Iowa, they're kind of sisters. (laughter) Sister states.

WILLIAMS: Right. (laughter)

GESING: We all came on the train. Of course, the air flight was not very widespread at that time. So we-- there was a train called the New England states that brought all the Midwestern girls to Northampton-- to Springfield, and then to Northampton. And we met on the train-- the other Midwestern girls-- and we were all kind of, of the same ilk. But when I got here, I felt completely in shock cause there were a lot of women from-

- who had gone to prep school, and it was just sort of a different culture. And did you find that still today?

WILLIAMS: It's kind of the same way.

GESING: Isn't that something? Yeah, we kind of clung together for about six weeks, and would always seek each other out. And then after that, it seemed fine.

WILLIAMS: How would you describe the typical Smithie during your time here, and did you fit into that image?

GESING: I don't know. I don't know if there was a typi[cal]-- I didn't completely fit in, probably. I really liked the friends in my house. I don't know if I ever, in four years, fit into whatever I thought that image of a Smith girl was. But (pause) I don't know. How did-- do you feel you fit into the typical image of Smithie today?

WILLIAMS: I don't know. (laughter)

GESING: It's a hard one to answer, even 50 years later, I guess. I think one thing we all had in common, and I think we were talking about it last night is we were very naïve. Sexually, (laughter) socially in many ways. Our-- the pill wasn't invented until 1960, so there was certainly very little-- if any-- thought of pre-marital sex. Is that OK to be talking about on this? (laughter)

WILLIAMS: Yes. That's really OK to be talking about this, yeah.

GESING: OK. Dates, you know, we had strict house rules. Even seniors had-- everybody had to be in by 10:30 on-- during the week. Is that not true any longer?

WILLIAMS: No. (laughter) No.

GESING: (laughter) And even on weekends, we had to be in by midnight. That was Saturday night. I think Friday was a little earlier. And we-- and freshmen and sophomores only could go on seven overnights. And of course, you had to check out and say exactly where you were, and all that. If you ever went out overnight. So social life was very different, and I think I've wandered from the original question. What was it? (laughter)

WILLIAMS: No, that's fine. It was very sheltered, would you say?

GESING: Oh, it was very sheltered, yeah. And we didn't really-- we weren't-- not worldly. Very many of us were not worldly. We were-- I felt like I'd

come to kind of a diverse environment because there were people from you know, prep school, and high school, and people from all over the country. But diversity, today, is a completely different thing. We had-- I don't think we had a single African American student. We had some Africans, but (pause) it was a very white, probably mostly middle to upper-class group of women.

WILLIAMS: Right. And it was interesting because you were at Smith at a time when the Civil Rights movement was really starting to get rolling. Did you hear about that kind of stuff being a Smith student?

GESING: We heard about it, but I-- you know, it wasn't-- we were just on the cusp. I think many of us got involved after graduation and Civil Rights. But I don't know if there were any freedom fighters. People who went down there to do the lunch-- sit ins at lunch counters. We didn't really have a lot of that activity. Again, we (break in tape) removed from world events, I think. (laughter) We're sheltered here.

WILLIAMS: Right. So you talked a lot about your house community earlier. What role did your house play in your life and how is that part of your Smith experience?

GESING: I think it was very important. We had-- I-- we were in Dewey House, which is not a house any longer. It's a-- but it's right on campus, which was a benefit. We only had 25 women, so it was a small pool of friends to choose from. But two of my best friends in life came from my house experience so.

WILLIAMS: And you're still in touch with them now?

GESING: Yes. And one is coming over here very shortly to have an interview. (laughter)

WILLIAMS: Oh. (laughter) That's nice.

GESING: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: Did you have any particular professors or mentors that inspired you here?

GESING: Arthur Mann, who taught American intellectual history was a wonderful teacher. Mr. Ruiz taught Latin American history and opened many doors to me. Well, I don't know if I'll say one professor, but Art 11 was the best course I've ever dreamed of having in my life. It opened the whole world of art to me, which I had not really been exposed to.

WILLIAMS: And you said you were part of the early American studies majors outside you told me.

GESING: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Can you talk a little bit about you know, what it was like when the program was starting and-.

GESING: Yeah, I think we were well, maybe the first or second class to have that offering as a major. And the whole idea of the interdisciplinary approach to a culture-- in this case, the United States-- was so useful. To be able to look at it through political history lens, through an intellectual history lens, art history, American literature. It just-- I was so interested in it, I can't imagine having missed that experience. And to this day, I'm still-- I'm a political junkie. I think that came from that exposure.

WILLIAMS: Do you think that interdisciplinary approach influenced what you do in your life now?

GESING: Probably just unconsciously, yes. Because I look at everything through several different lenses so. Do you feel you-- or starting to do that already?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, I think so. I feel the same thing. So while you were here, did you go abroad or-?

GESING: No. I've always regretted that I didn't take a junior year abroad. It was interesting. Several of us were talking last night that when we went into our first Spanish class here at Smith, we had all had high school Spanish for a number of years. But we went into where they were speaking Castilian Spanish, the teacher started talking in Spanish, and we all looked at each other like we must be in the wrong class. (laughter) So that was interesting to learn a whole different way of speaking Spanish.

WILLIAMS: (inaudible). How were issues of religion, and class, and race, and sexuality? How were all of those issues playing out at Smith? Did you think they were divisive? Like-?

GESING: I think they were invisible.

WILLIAMS: Right.

GESING: Frankly, I--. Maybe it's the way I grew up. I never really thought about I am-- I wasn't Catholic. I was Episcopalian, but very low key Episcopalian. I never thought about they're Catholic. Gee, I'm not

supposed to hang out with them, they're Jewish. I'm not supposed to hang out with them. To me, (pause) that just-

WILLIAMS: No one talked about it, almost.

GESING: No one talked about it. And maybe it was there, but I didn't-- I wasn't -- didn't even notice it. So that would show some of my naiveté as well. Race didn't really play a part at all because there were no black faces in our population. The only time it did. I remember when I was dating my future husband at Amherst, his fraternity left the national chapter over recruiting a black member of the fraternity; Delta Epsilon. So I was really proud of that.

WILLIAMS: Wow. And you met your-- your husband goes to Amherst?

GESING: He went to Amherst, yes.

WILLIAMS: And you met?

GESING: We met at Smith-- a mixer that I was social chairman of our house that year, and I planned a mixer with the fraternity that he was in, and we met there. (laughter)

WILLIAMS: Wow. And you've been together for how long now?

GESING: It'll be 50 years in November. (laughter)

WILLIAMS: Wow. Congratulations.

GESING: I did that choice very nicely. I did well. (laughter)

WILLIAMS: Yeah. (laughter) And were you part of any clubs or organizations? You mentioned you were social chair of the house.

GESING: Yeah. I think at Smith is where I developed my interest in leadership. Because I think at a female school, certainly then, you had many opportunities for leadership roles. I was on rec council, which I don't-- do they still have that?

WILLIAMS: Mhmm.

GESING: I was the chairman of our junior prom, I believe. I was certainly on the committee. Maybe that was what I was. (laughter) And I was chairman of the our father's day. Do you still do that? The sophomore father's day?

WILLIAMS: I don't think so.

- GESING: That was a fun event. So I got to test my leadership abilities, and since Smith I find that I dive very quickly into taking a leadership role.
- WILLIAMS: And do you feel like a lot of Smith people when they graduate say they just feel real-- like very confident.
- GESING: Confident would be the key word. The other thing I did want to say actually is I don't know if it's just the way I was brought up by very supportive parents, but I've never, ever felt lesser than any male. And I think today, that's very true for probably all of you. But I don't think that was true for most girls who came of age in 1961.
- WILLIAMS: And do you think that's typical of Smith women?
- GESING: I'm beginning to think it is, and maybe that's most (inaudible) of what the typical Smith woman is. (laughter) Very bright, and a leader, and confident.
- WILLIAMS: Right. So I'd like to ask I guess one like kind of time specific question. But do you remember the controversy of Smith firing Professors Newton Arvin, Edward Spofford, and Joel Dorius on charges of homosexuality? It's OK if you don't remember.
- GESING: No, I certainly do because Newton Arvin was an American-- in the American studies curriculum.
- WILLIAMS: Oh, wow.
- GESING: He was an eminent Hawthorne scholar.
- WILLIAMS: Did you have him as a professor?
- GESING: I did have him, and he was not a good instructor, but I know he was brilliant. And (pause) should I say this to the world that is listening? I think probably, if anything, we kind of made fun of him. There were rumors on campus. And I'm ashamed of that today. I read *The Scarlet Professor*. Did you read that book?
- WILLIAMS: I haven't read it.
- GESING: It's an excellent story of his life, and I have great empathy now, and I feel ashamed that I ever (pause) made fun of it.
- WILLIAMS: But during the time, he was kind of like a joke on campus?

- GESING: He was a joke, yeah.
- WILLIAMS: But how did-- were you an alum when that happened, or were you still in school?
- GESING: It was about when I was there I think. It was when I was there, yeah.
- WILLIAMS: Do you remember what your reaction was like then?
- GESING: It wasn't one of empathy, but then you have to remember that society was fairly homophobic then.
- WILLIAMS: Right. Definitely. So now your reaction's different than it was.
- GESING: Very much so, yeah.
- WILLIAMS: Interesting. So let's talk a little bit about after Smith. What were you-- what did you expect as a Smith graduate in terms of marriage, and family, and work. Like what were you taught to think about all of those things?
- GESING: It was just subconsciously in my psyche that I would graduate from college, get married, and raise a family, and be a wonderful volunteer in my community. I really didn't have any strong career ambitions. I did, for a little while have an ambition. And I'll very quickly tell you I went to American Heritage Magazine in New York right after I graduated, and applied for a job because perfect background. American studies major, I loved to write. And you might have heard this story already 10 times, but when I had the interview they asked how fast I could type, and I would-- I'm a terrible typist. (laughter) Forty words a minute with mistakes was probably what I said. And they told me that if I really should go to Katie Gibbs and get a certificate in secretarial, and learn how to type, and then come back. So that was-- that kind of sent me back home to Cedar Rapids, Iowa. And I got a menial job back there until I got married.
- WILLIAMS: And then what did-- so you lived with your husband. What did your husband do?
- GESING: Well, (laughter) he had a degree very similar from mine, only from Amherst College. And he was recruited, and joined a corporate management training program. But I was asked to learn how to type so.
- WILLIAMS: Yeah. So did you feel like fulfilled with doing that job or--?
- GESING: Which job?
- WILLIAMS: I mean, I guess the whole situation.

- GESING: I think like, probably many of my classmates, I love my children, and it was great cause all women were at home with their children. So we had-- we made friendships, and I was in volunteer organizations. But after you do that for a while, if you have an active brain, it starts wanting more. And I did ultimately go back to graduate school and get a counseling degree. But that was after my kids were pretty much well into school-- into their school years.
- WILLIAMS: And then you were a therapist for a while?
- GESING: No, I-- actually, I was a career counselor. I had my own business. And I actually did my internship right here at the career development office at Smith. They were very supportive.
- WILLIAMS: Yeah, they're very supportive for us too. (laughter) That's great. So looking back, would you encourage your daughter or a younger woman to go to Smith? Would you do it again?
- GESING: It's hard. That's a hard one. I really think I probably would not. Just because there are so many other options, and because I really do enjoy interaction with other males in a work or learning situation. I'm very involved in our senior college in Maine. Take-- where they have a thousand seniors who are taking liberal arts courses for fun. And I like the interaction with the male friends I made in class. So I don't know if I would. But I think I would miss a lot if I didn't.
- WILLIAMS: Right. So would you have preferred that you had co-ed education when you were in college?
- GESING: You know, I really--
- WILLIAMS: It's hard to say.
- GESING: It's hard to say. I-- that -- my favorite part about Smith was the academic challenge and excitement. So (pause) I probably wish I would choose Smith again. (laughter)
- WILLIAMS: Right. Right. (pause) What do you think the typical Smithy is like now if you had to guess.
- GESING: Wow. I think-- I'd love to put the 1961 Smithy and today's Smithy side by side. Maybe they'd look exactly the same, I don't know. But I think much more worldly today. Certainly I'm not necessarily a Lily White, middle to upper class female. I would probably be-- who knows, from any

economic part of our culture or from around the world. You have a very diverse population now, which is exciting. It's great.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, it is. (pause) What would you say that what's the difference for Smith education has meant for you? How do you say it changed your life?

GESING: I, again, I go to the fact that it really fostered my leadership interest and skill, and it increased my confidence as a woman, and as a human being in our society.

WILLIAMS: And as sort of wrap up. Do you have any advice for future or current Smith students?

GESING: (laughter) Well, maybe this is-- as a former career counselor too, just listen to your heart, listen to your gut. And go with what you think you really enjoy and love to do. If your work can have your heart in it, it's going to be a lot more pleasant work life.

WILLIAMS: Right. Do you have anything you want to add?

GEIS: I think you got it.

WILLIAMS: So thank you very much for this interview.

GESING: You're welcome. Now maybe I should strike out that I'd let it be shared. (laughter)

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Jessica Lin, July 2011.*