

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Celeste Hemingson, Class of 1963

Interviewed by
Carolyn Rees, Class of 2014

May 24, 2013

Abstract

In this oral history, Celeste Hemingson recalls the backdrop of political activism that marked her time at Smith, including student sit-ins to integrate the lunch counter at the Northampton Woolworths. She observes how her Smith experience gave her a love of learning and the self-confidence to pursue her passions, including becoming a priest.

Restrictions

None

Format

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

Transcript

Transcribed by Janet Harris with Harris Reporting.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Hemingson, Celeste. Interview by Carolyn Rees. Video recording, May 24, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Celeste Hemingson, interview by Carolyn Rees, transcript of video recording, May 24, 2013, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

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Transcript of interview conducted May 24, 2013, with:

CELESTE HEMINGSON

by: CAROLYN REES

REES: So this is Rees Rees and I am conducting an interview with Celeste Hemingson on May 24th, 2013 for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project.

So thank you for being here and agreeing to participate. We'll start off by asking, why are you attending reunion this year?

HEMINGSON: I came out of curiosity. None of the people that I was particularly close with or with whom I've kept up are here at this reunion, and I really don't know anybody. But I thought I'd kick myself if I didn't come, and I'm hoping to be kind of an outlier at this reunion and see if I can learn about the arch of 50 years and the meaning of time, and so I'm sort of curious.

REES: Yeah. Have you been back for a reunion?

HEMINGSON: I came back to my 25th.

REES: Okay. That was exciting. So how did you choose to attend Smith?

HEMINGSON: I desperately wanted to get away from my family, and I also had to prove that I could go to a good college, academically, a good – and that meant either the West Coast or the East Coast to be as far as possible from the Midwest where I grew up. I was afraid I couldn't get into Stanford, and so my high school counselor recommended Smith.

REES: So what drew you to Smith once you started –

HEMINGSON: Well, I came and visited here, and I also visited at Wellesley, and I found Wellesley very intimidating. It was so austere in its appearance, and the woman who interviewed me had a very severe hairdo and seemed very severe, and I was totally intimidated. And here everybody rode around on bicycles, and they were English bikes, and it seemed more informal and I figured I would be happier here.

REES: Okay. So can you talk a bit about your first few days at Smith, what you were feeling or expecting.

HEMINGSON: Well, I don't know, are you going to ask me about the second few days and the third few days?

REES: Absolutely.

HEMINGSON: I mean I – because my freshman year was just dreadful, I had a really difficult time, and it continued into my sophomore year. I came from the Midwest. I went to a public high school. I felt totally out of place here. And my background, I learned – I had very good skills that I got in my public high school, but I never got the sophistication that the students that had gone to private schools had, and so I immediately felt that I was not as bright as they and that I just couldn't even understand the water they swam in. I mean it was like we were in two different worlds, and it was really hard for me.

REES: So what made it get better?

HEMINGSON: Well, I met my future husband at the end of my sophomore year and things got really good then and were wonderful after that. And at the end of my freshman year -- I was in Sessions House, and I chose Sessions House because it was a very small house and I thought that would be more familial, but the fact is that it lacked the critical mass of young women that I might become friends with. And so I met a couple of people that I felt comfortable with who became friends that year, and they were in Northrup House and so I transferred to Northrup House and that's where I stayed all four years, and that made things immensely easier.

REES: Right, right. Did Northrup have a house mother during that time period?

HEMINGSON: Yes.

REESE: What was she like?

HEMINGSON: Well, she was wonderful. And when I got – I got married the day before graduation at Helen Hills Hills Chapel, and my parents were in the Midwest and we wanted a very small wedding, and so I was pretty much on my own to make this wedding happen. And – what was her last name? Can't think of her last name. But she performed as mother to be. We went out and I picked out my china and she helped me order the flowers. And I didn't realize what a gift that was that she was doing all of those things for me, but it wouldn't have happened otherwise.

REESE: Right. So you mentioned that you met your future husband while at Smith.

HEMINGSON: Yes.

REESE: What was the dating culture like at Smith during that time period?

HEMINGSON: It was certainly possible to meet a lot of guys if you wanted to. After I met Pete -- and he was in the Merchant Marine so he was away, and we hadn't committed ourselves to each other. And all of a sudden I was meeting all kinds of wonderful guys actually from Amherst mainly. So it wasn't difficult to meet men.

REESE: Right. And how did you meet Pete?

HEMINGSON: He was running a folk music festival at Yale. He was an undergraduate there. And it was called the Indian Neck Folk Music Festival and it was important in the annals of folk music. It brought Judy Collins to the East Coast for the first time and Bob Dylan was there as Bobby Zimmerman before he became Bob Dylan -- yes -- and Peter was running it. And my roommate, Judy Thomas, and I went down to work at the Folk Festival, and that's how I met Pete.

REESE: So what was the political climate on campus like during that time period?

HEMINGSON: Well, I crashed the maiden meeting, the inaugural meeting of the Smith College Young Republicans Club. I never considered myself politically committed, but my sympathies were to the left, but kind of in a standoffish kind of make-fun-of-it sort of way. And so some of us went and -- when we heard that the Smith College Young Republicans Club was having this startup meeting, we went and pretended that we were republicans. And I remember at one point one of the women there who was a real bona fide republican, she thought, well, what will we do, what will this club do, and she said, well, we can bring prominent republican speakers to the campus and let them speak. And I jumped in and I said, yes, that's a wonderful idea, then we can find out what we're against. (Laughter) And I marched Woolworth's. We all went down and did a sit-in at the lunch counter in Woolworth's, which was the extent of my civil rights activity. So I didn't do much but the ideas were definitely there, and once again, I was kind of an outlier.

REES: Right, right. So what was the process of deciding on your major and area of study?

HEMINGSON: I think we just -- you just -- career was not an issue. It wasn't something that we thought about. And history, I was interested in history and I had enjoyed it, and so I chose that.

REES: Did you have any favorite classes or professors?

HEMINGSON: My favorite professor was Stin Stinson (phonetic) who was a professor -- my freshman year he was a professor of philosophy, and I really enjoyed his course. And then he switched over to the Religion Department and became a professor of religion, and I took subsequent courses with him in the Religion Department. And he and Tom Mendenhall were the only two professors that ever

really took an interest in me, and I will always remember them for that. In looking back, I realize that the reason that they took an interest in me was that I sought them out because I was terrified, and so I went because I thought for sure I couldn't possibly do this course. And they explained the course to me, and after that they were my friends.

And Stin took an interest in Peter who was a frequent visitor to the campus, and was just a real inspiration to me. And you couldn't – you could do a lot worse than having the president of the college being one of the professors that knew you personally.

REES: That's true, that's true. Did you study abroad?

HEMINGSON: No, I did not. I wish I had, but you had to have a B average, and I had a B average, but I figured the reason you had to have a B average was that the work would be so very difficult and that I couldn't possibly do it. Years later, years later I learned that nobody does anything in their junior year abroad and the reason they wanted the B average was so that you wouldn't lose so much during that year. I had no idea that the whole idea was to go over there and soak up the culture and have a wonderful time. See, I was out of it. I was just never really – never really got it.

REES: Yeah. Did a lot of your friends go abroad?

HEMINGSON: Yes. Yeah. But even then I didn't realize that it was all about having a good time.

REES: Yeah. It's still that way. Were you involved with any extracurriculars?

HEMINGSON: No, not really. I was too busy trying to keep up with the reading.

REES: Right, right. So what were some of the challenges of being a Smith student?

HEMINGSON: Having said all of these things about how intimidated I felt, it's hard for me to name a challenge, because I never thought of it in terms of challenge. So I wasn't – I'm not aware of challenges. The work was hard, it was always interesting, and you just did it.

REES: Yeah, absolutely. So how did your house community affect your overall college experience, moving from Sessions to Northrup?

HEMINGSON: Well, certainly I was much happier at Northrup House and certainly made a lot of friends there and got to know people in other classes whom I have continued to keep up with, but they're not here for this reunion. And I enjoyed the informality of it. I understand you don't eat in your houses anymore here.

REES: Well, not every house has a dining hall anymore.

HEMINGSON: Yeah. That was nice. And we would hang on in the living room and play the piano and talk about things, and it was great.

REES: So you mentioned eating in your houses. What are some of your other favorite Smith traditions?

HEMINGSON: Traditions of the house. I can't really – I can't remember anything like that. I wasn't aware of any particular traditions. At Sessions House there is a hidden staircase, and when you – if I had stayed there until I became a senior they would have taken me to the staircase, but I left too soon.

REES: Right, right. So how would you describe a typical Smithy during your time?

HEMINGSON: A typical Smithy.

REES: Yes.

HEMINGSON: Well, enthusiastic, self-confident. I would put self-confident ahead of enthusiastic. And talented. I did not consider myself a typical Smithy. But they did, they seemed to have wonderful talent, in the arts, academically. They seemed to have these really creative ideas and the initiative to do them, and it just amazed me.

REES: Yeah. Do you feel a connection to that identity of a Smithy now?

HEMINGSON: No, no. But I'll be able to tell you all kinds of wonderful things about why I went to Smith if you don't ask me, about how good it was, I will. But no, I don't identify – in fact, that's one of the reasons that I've come back here, is to see whether I do, knowing what I know now. That would probably be a best explanation of why I came to this reunion. See how it looks from this perspective.

REES: Yeah. So let's explore that a bit more. How did Smith – what impact did Smith have on your life after Smith?

HEMINGSON: Well, the first time that I noticed that I was different from other women was -- right after I graduated I started working immediately. I took a job with the Social Security Administration. And we would train recruits for 12 weeks in a classroom seminar setting. And so there I was in this classroom for 12 weeks with men and women, and we were learning about the Social Security Act and learning the law and learning all of these things, and it was difficult learning. And all of the women in the class would just sort of giggle, and I found that I was the only woman in the class that would ask questions and that would answer questions, and I thought, wow, I'm different from them, and I think it has to do

with the fact that I went to Smith. So that was the first inkling.

REES: Right. So what did Smith succeed in teaching you about life after graduation and where did it fail?

HEMINGSON: I don't think Smith failed in any respect. It taught me to love the life of the mind, and that has been a huge source of joy for me. And the person that most contributed to that was Mary Ellen Chase (phonetic). She was a professor emeritus when I was an undergraduate and she would come frequently to Northrup House for dinner or she would come and talk, and I remember – I don't know how old she was at that time but she seemed ancient and she had blue hair, and she talked about the life of the mind and she showed a tremendous amount of wisdom and a tremendous love of learning. And I said to myself, I want to be her, and it worked.

REES: So how did you pursue that goal of enjoying the life of the mind?

HEMINGSON: It just happened.

REES: It just happened.

HEMINGSON: It just happened. I – it has sustained me. My husband died 16 years ago and I really didn't think that I would have any life at all, but I have a wonderful life. And it's because I can learn things and get a kick out of it, and things that you can learn are exciting, and that is just a source of great joy to me and it fills me. So that's it.

REES: Okay. So who have you become since Smith?

HEMINGSON: Who have I become?

REES: Who have you become since Smith?

HEMINGSON: At this point I have become a crone, and, you know, crones were good. I mean they – I tell people I'm a crone and they say, oh, no, don't say that, don't say that, but the fact is that a crone is a woman beyond sexual age I would say who has a sense of wisdom, and that's what I am. I retired from the Social Security Administration, oh, what would it be, 14 years ago now, and I went to seminary and I became an episcopal priest. So I have this wonderful second career and it very much supports my croneness, or maybe vice-versa, I'm not sure.

REES: Okay. What inspired you to pursue priesthood?

HEMINGSON: Well, I got interested in – like I said, learning is always fun – and several years before I had become interested in the bible. I was not a very religious person, but I was interested in the bible as a – well, Mary Ellen Chase was a

scholar of the bible. We could start there. But the bible is literature. And so I went to divinity schools to learn. That's the only place you could get courses on biblical literature and exegesis. And one thing led to another and after Peter died I found that I had an opportunity to do something totally different with my life but nothing appealed to me, and one day it just hit me that I could be a priest. And so I took my retirement from Social Security and changed my matriculation. In divinity school I had been working on a master in arts in bible, and I changed to master of divinity and started the process. And when that idea came to me I had a picture of myself doing those things that a minister and priest does, and it fit. I said, oh, my god, that's great, I could – that's me, and it is.

REES: So returning to Smith, how do you find that it has changed and what has remained the same?

HEMINGSON: Well, I don't know. There's a lot more buildings. I certainly understand that it's a lot more diverse. I think that when I was at Smith the faculty understood the value of women's education. I don't know that the students did. And now I have the impression that the students come knowing the value. So I would think that may be what I would find to be the biggest difference.

REES: Right. So for a final question, do you have any advice for current and future Smithies?

HEMINGSON: Yeah. Don't be intimidated, because as you go on you will discover that everybody feels intimidated and the people who seem the least intimidated are probably the most. And you just have to fake it until you can bake it.

REES: Great. Do you have anything else, any memories or stories that you would like to share before signing out?

HEMINGSON: Well, I would – at Northrup House on the fourth floor you can get out onto the roof which was at that time a tile roof, and my friends and I used to climb out and lie and sunbathe on that roof. And when I think back to how easy it would have been to slide off that roof, it's shocking that none of us was killed, and I would never do it again, but we did.

REES: Well, thank you for being here and sharing your story.

HEMINGSON: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Janet Harris, July 2013.