

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Susan Marcoux, Class of 1982*

Interviewed by  
Vivian Andreani, Class of 2013

May 25, 2012

## **Abstract**

In this oral history, Susan Marcoux describes living in Albright House for two years, going abroad in Germany, living in Hover House for her senior year, the lesbian scene at Smith, her work with Lesbian Alliance, and building an intellectual Smith community in San Francisco after graduating.

## **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:** Marcoux, Susan. Interview by Vivian Andreani. Video recording, May 25, 2012. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Susan Marcoux, interview by Vivian Andreani, transcript of video recording, May 25, 2012, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Marcoux, Susan. Interview by Vivian Andreani. Transcript of video recording, May 25, 2012. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Susan Marcoux, interview by Vivian Andreani, transcript of video recording, May 25, 2012, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 25, 2012, with:

SUSAN MARCOUX

by: VIVIAN ANDREANI  
filmed by: REBECCA RIDEOUT

ANDREANI: So this is Vivian Andreani, and I'm conducting an interview with Susan Marcoux on May 25, 2012, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you for agreeing to be here.

MARCOUX: You're welcome.

ANDREANI: So how did you choose Smith?

MARCOUX: Well, my mother -- well, actually my uncle went to the School for Social Work and he was a big proponent, and I didn't want to go to a woman's college at that point. I didn't identify as queer or anything, but I was like -- it seemed old-fashioned, and then when I started studying art history, I did AP art history in high school and the woman who taught the art history class who was awesome went to Smith, and she was very encouraging and wanted me to, you know, come here because they have such an amazing program and great library and everything. So I decided to apply and I got in, but I really wanted to go to Bard because I had gotten into Bard and -- you know, because I was a creative person and I wanted to go to Bard -- but my dad was like, no, you're going to Smith College, and it was the first time he'd ever really put his foot down in any of this, and I was like Smith College? Oh shit, I don't want to go to Smith College. But I went. It was like he said I had to go and I did. But it was -- I never, ever regretted it from the moment I got here. It was really the choice for me, actually, so --

ANDREANI: So how would you describe a typical Smithie of the time you were here?

MARCOUX: I came from the Midwest and my experience in high school was sort of informed by the late '70s, so music was really important to me. Guitar-driven rock and roll was really important to me and all other alternative forms of music and along with that was recreational drug use, et cetera. So when I got here I was surprised at this edifice of preppiness with -- you know, it was 1978, which seems like a million years ago, but it was actually the late '70s, so it was still -- it was moving into that whole Reagan era.

ANDREANI: Yeah.

MARCOUX: So it was really like literally wide-rail cords with whale belts and crew neck sweaters and turtle necks. It was really amazing, so it was very preppy. It felt very preppy, although underneath the surface of it, not everyone was like that by any means. And the house I was in, I was in Albright House was actually -- there were a lot of Midwesterners or people from the South or people from California, so there was a really different -- it wasn't just this bastion of East Coast preppiness, but there was a -- you know, it definitely had that predominating feeling, but you know under the surface it wasn't all that.

ANDREANI: So you fit into Smith College?

MARCOUX: Not really. I was pretty quiet and I think my experience with culture and music and also what I had experienced in high school with, you know, kids being involved in all kinds of stuff that wasn't part of the program. I mean I was seen as like this sort of alternative kid in high school, but I was really smart so -- you know, it was interesting because I remember my freshman year I went to some party at Amherst, and I ran into some guy from my high school and he was really shocked that I had gotten into Smith because he knew nothing about me. On the surface he thought that I was just this kind of druggy kid. Actually I wasn't. I dressed the part but I wasn't, but it was kind of that thing.

So when I got here I felt a little bit like out of place, but it was very welcoming in my house and it's interesting because a lot of those women are here and we were really different when we were kids, but we all really bonded and most of it was really around what are you studying, what are you thinking about, what are you reading? And the surface accoutrements of like what are you listening to -- I mean like I listened to The Clash, I listened to Pere Ubu and I brought all that stuff with me and so all these other girls were listening to The Clash.

So girls that you wouldn't think -- so there was this great combination of elements in there, even though on the surface it looked like conservative, but there was definitely -- I kind of didn't feel like I fit into a lot of it sometimes.

ANDREANI: Did you feel like you had to change, or were you able to keep yourself while here?

MARCOUX: I kept myself, and developed it probably.

ANDREANI: So you already touched on the Smith atmosphere, but can you describe a little bit more -- what was the atmosphere on campus when you were here?

MARCOUX: Okay, well, I think there -- I think it was kind of about the divisions of the time. And at that point in time there was -- the rise of the conservative right was imminent. It was happening, and there were very conservative people here; and then on the other side of it, there were people who were from a more progressive political background, so those things were reflected in culture at Smith. So there would be like, you know, the Quad houses were bastions of Republican conservatism, at least on the front -- on the face of it, and then other houses like co-ops. There were co-ops here that were lots of -- there were two of them, Tenney House and Hover House, and they were kind of the alternative houses, and so they were representing of the other side of that.

And in between there was just a lot going on in the houses that sometimes resulted in, you know, difficulty, but mainly it was reflective of what was going on in the United States at that point. I'd say it was a more conservative time. Most definitely and as a traditional environment it definitely had that element, but once you dug into -- once you actually had an intellectual life here, and you really had substantive conversations with people, those surface things could sometimes be deceiving.

ANDREANI: So how did Smith College deal with diversity, sexual diversity, racial diversity?

MARCOUX: Well, I mean racial diversity, there wasn't much of it at all. I mean I -- there were no African-Americans in my house at all and I think -- there was one from India and a woman from China and I think there were 80 of us in the house.

ANDREANI: Wow.

MARCOUX: Sexual diversity, I remember the first time I really saw a -- you know, butch dyke, I was probably -- it was like my freshman year and there was this dyke called Javon -- Javon Craig and she was just -- she was tall. She was probably like 5'9" and she had really short hair and her girlfriend was in the house, and a bunch of other women knew her and really liked her, and she walked up and I was like, oh, my god. Who is that? Like, what's going on with her? You know? It was like -- it really kind of freaked me out, but at the same time it was -- you know, obviously she had -- she had lots of friends in the house and it was a really diverse group of women and there wasn't this feeling that she was an outsider at all, so on that front I felt like the living situation I was in was very accommodating of a lot. We didn't have -- I don't think we ever really had any major problems that way. At least I don't remember them. On the wider campus there were definitely conversations about racial diversity and the lack of it and I think that's changed in the last 30 years a lot.

ANDREANI: So what was your living experience here? You started in Albright and then you went to Hover House. How was that?

MARCOUX: I started in Albright House for two years, and I came out between the summer of my freshman and sophomore year, and I stayed on Hover -- I mean stayed in Albright House for my sophomore year, and then I was a student of German and so I went to Hamburg for my junior year, and so I was away and then when I came back I moved Hover, because my sophomore year I knew a lot of people at Hover house and I was over there a lot, and a friend of mine in Albright House was seeing a woman at Hover, and so I would go to their parties and so I knew a lot of people over there. So when I came back, especially after being gone for awhile in a completely different environment, in an urban environment, I really wanted to be in Hover, so I moved there.

ANDREANI: So you went to Germany?

MARCOUX: Yeah.

ANDREANI: How was that experience?

MARCOUX: It was really -- it was very interesting. It was challenging. At that point in time, the Iranian hostage crisis was in full swing, and so as American students going into Germany where there is a culture of students coming from all over the world and living in urban, you know, built -- you know, urban environment where you are in dorms together with all the other international students, it politicized me and it was also incredibly challenging, because in terms of meeting other people from other parts of the world, from Africa, from the Middle East, so called, from Asia, that you were really challenged to address the politics of your country and in that particular moment, Ronald Reagan was voted into office while I was there. We were actually just talking about it last night and -- another friend was in Paris at the time, and we were talking about that when he got elected into office there was just this feeling of -- there had been this feeling of impending doom for like the year previous to that, and then he was elected and it was just a very devastating feeling.

So we had -- there was some incidents in Germany that were really difficult around people being intensely hostile and very challenging, and so it really -- the faculty person who was heading it up was awesome, Gertrude Guttmann. She was here for many years, she grew up in East Germany and she had very progressive politics and was very, very smart about how to kind of balance being supportive, and then also kind of like you're here to get to know the world, so get to know the world.

So it was a very formative experience in a lot of ways. And hard because it was on my own. I really tried to break out and -- and Gertrude was trying to give me places to go to meet women and so I would kind of go out to clubs. I saw a lot of music so I would go to all the clubs to see all the bands that were coming over from the U.K., and so I was like in the music scene a lot. I did that pretty much on my own. I was kind of a loner. And you know, went out to different bars and -- because that's kind

of the way the culture was. I would be in -- the queer thing would be in bars, but then there was this whole like really strong feminist deal that was happening at the university, which is kind of intimidating because it meant you had to have this really, really good grasp of German and also all the education that goes along with having, you know, big conversations at that level -- on a polemical level which I certainly didn't feel like I had at all. So it was very interesting, but it was hard. I was -- I felt like I was -- I liked -- I really liked the women who were there with me, but I felt like I was on my own road, and -- yeah.

But again it was people in the group really accepted me. I didn't dress like anyone else. I -- my hair was shaved. I had -- it was dyed. I wore a lot of black clothes. You know, I really -- I listened to the hard core music. I would go out and listen to different bands and people would come with me, but there was this real kind of coherence in the Smith group and people were really fond of each other. So I felt like even though there was this heavy preppy blonde girl our junior year abroad presence too that we -- we cohered. And a lot of it was around what are you studying, what are you reading, what are you thinking about. This whole life of the mind that really was so important at least to me and to other people to varying degrees, but it -- that was the thing that kind of -- and that time and time again with Smith College, that's the legacy for me is this life of the mind. It begins when you're a young person at a very formative stage where you can actually really have conversations that are about that. They're not about, you know, conversations that women are supposed to have or are allowed to have. They break those boundaries, so anyways, I'm going on and on.

ANDREANI: How was it leaving Smith then having that experience?

MARCOUX: Well, I -- basically I didn't know what I was going to do. I didn't really want to move to Boston, because I never really liked Boston and New York seemed intimidating, and I didn't want to move back to the Midwest, so I kind of got a restaurant job in Northampton and it was ridiculous. It was really expensive and I didn't really want to be stuck in Northampton, and I had these two friends who were girlfriends and they had been in France and they came back and they were driving to California. So I got in their car and went to San Francisco in like 1982.

ANDREANI: And how was that -- as a Smithie, how was that? Have you found that intellectual community anywhere else?

MARCOUX: We kind of took it with us, because when we got to San Francisco, I knew a bunch of Californians here. I never met a Californian before they were exotic, and -- very exotic. So -- when I got to San Francisco there were a bunch of -- there were a bunch of them there, so we -- we hung out. It was interesting, like a lot of the Smith dykes ended up there doing various things and then they all kind of filtered off and went various places, but

there was a group of us who knew each other and we spent time together in San Francisco, so we continued that and when I moved in with Kerry and Mary Beth and we moved across the country, we did it consciously.

ANDREANI: So what was the lesbian community here at Smith like?

MARCOUX: I think it was so -- it was different. I mean there was the really out dyke thing which I was a part of and which Hover was a part of, but Hover House was also this -- it was like a queer community. It wasn't just lesbians. It was like straight girls who were just -- didn't -- who were hippie girls. It was really highly intellectual people who just didn't want to deal with the rest of the party scene or whatever was going on at Smith. There -- it was idiosyncratic. There were jockey -- there was like one jockey dyke -- lesbian girl who was really closeted. So it was like this kind of combination of elements there. And the community at large I think was like that. I mean it was -- there were people who were really closeted. You know, like the athletic crowd where you knew that that was going on, but they really cut you socially. Like they didn't want anything to do with you and you know, there were more intellectual ones, there were -- I'm not quite sure. Maybe you could ask me a more specific question about that.

ANDREANI: Well, did Hover House already have a reputation as a lesbian house when you got here?

MARCOUX: Yeah, mm-hmm. It had been -- I don't remember the history of it exactly, but it had been made into a co-op at some point, maybe in the '70s. I can't remember. Tenney House was the hippie house and that's where kind of the hippie girls were, and it was progressive and all this stuff, but it was -- it was kind of hippie and Hover was not that. Hover was more push the limits, push the edge and like -- I think it was -- there was -- different parties would have different themes, like there was the politically incorrect party. It was really incorrect, and it was really hilarious and you -- there were usually -- it was very sexual. It wasn't like nice little conversations and then you go up into your room and do it. It was like a sexual environment. It was supposed to be and it was overt.

So the classes ahead of me, a couple years ahead of me who were in that house, every -- there was this thing that they did also like after dinner they would have wrestling matches, so after dinner you would pick a number and then you would get a partner and then you would have wrestling in the downstairs lobby. And everybody would watch, and so there was always this kind of pushing of who are you, what are you thinking about. It was sexual, but it was also intellectual so there was this very -- it was really charged. It was fun -- it was really fun, and it was scary. A lot of people thought it was really scary. And Tenney was a great place too. It just had a very different vibe. It was much more low key. And Hover was much more -- you know, kind of pushing certain



limits. I think it had been like that for a little while and I don't know how it -- where it went after that really. Does that answer your question?

ANDREANI: Yes, yes. So was there any kind of drama over so many lesbians being in one house or what was the house community like?

MARCOUX: We had a work wheel and you picked a partner and you had to do dinner for a week for everybody. As long as we were -- as long as we were organized, we usually had a -- you know, we had a -- I can't remember the name of the person. There was like one person who was in charge. Like my friend Kerry was in charge of the house and she ordered all the food from food services, and then we would work at the co-op and get the rest of it, so we had some things from Smith and something from the food co-op and as long as we stuck by the rules and did the things we were supposed to do, we didn't have any problems with the administration at all. I mean we were there and that's who we were. So as far as I know, we didn't have any problems. Kerry could probably speak to that more because she was involved with, you know, the administration, with the organization of the house.

So we would -- you know, do different meals and so if you picked dinner for a week, you did dinner -- like Caroline and I were partners and you know, I think it was probably mac and cheese and hot dogs every night because we were just not into cooking. So we did that and then other people who were like extremely vegetarian would be like, or vegan, the vegan of the moment of that time would have really like hard core vegetarian meals for the week and then we cleaned the house and we sort of had this whole organizing element which was, you know, more or less worked.

ANDREANI: So how did you deal with homophobia on Smith campus both in, you know, individual level and a group level with Lesbian Alliance?

MARCOUX: Well, on an individual level, to be frank with you, I didn't experience it that much and it may have been because I was in self-selected groups of people and I just wasn't experiencing that. But other -- other friends of mine had experienced it in classes and who -- people who were members of student government had experienced it so -- I became a member of the Lesbian Alliance, and then with my -- a couple of my friends I would -- we would do workshops as I described to you earlier, so there would be a problem in a house -- as head resident would have some problem. There would be somebody who was a lesbian down the hall and somebody else was having a problem with it and there would be conflict and they would call in the Lesbian Alliance, the lesbian avengers. And we would come in and they would -- I did a bunch of them. And there would be like three of us. And we would come in and they usually would be in the living room and everybody would be sitting around in their nightgowns in the living room, because it would usually be in the evening after study, and we

would ask everybody to write a question and put it in a hat and usually it was like women sitting around and then I would -- you know, sometimes boyfriends would be hanging around in the doorways like checking this whole thing out, and the questions would go in the hat and then we'd pull hats out of the question -- out of the -- pull questions out of the hat. (laughter) And -- and so then you would answer the question.

So it would be things like, you know, I'm trying to think of some questions that they asked. It would be like -- so, you know, kind of like don't you think sex is for reproduction? You know, don't you think it's wrong to have sex if it's not about that? Why do you hate men? And you know, why are you so ugly? And you know, why aren't you normal? You know, there were provocative things in there. And then there would be questions about, you know, do you think you've chosen this? Do you think you were born this way? Can you change? Why don't you change? Why are you causing trouble here? Things like that. There was a lot of anxiety in these situations usually.

And so we had a series of answers to some of these things that I think were actually really useful. You know, kind of like, well, when was the last time you had sex to have babies? And you know, and then I think -- at the time it was -- I mean I was really -- I felt like I had chosen to be a lesbian for reasons that were political, and it was also about how I felt, but my response was, you know, along those lines of this is a politics for me. So that was another way of answering it, and then some people were like, I was born this way, this is how I am, so there was somewhat of a plurality in it, but I think even having lesbians in the room sitting there answering questions seemed to kind of dissipate some of the tension. And it was really simple mostly.

ANDREANI: Did you see any kinds of changes in Smith's attitude towards lesbians while you were here or --

MARCOUX: Yeah, I mean I feel like -- it's a little hard to put my finger exactly on that. I feel like there was more of a presence with the Lesbian Alliance and the Lesbian Alliance events and you know, different series and different things that the Alliance did. There were parties. There were fun parties. People would go to them. And so I think it did -- it probably did a little bit and certainly having a presence in student government meant that there was a voice and that was really critical. Getting a budget, having a voice, being able to be part of the community that was making decisions or part of that decision-making process and getting -- you know, having a possibility of having a presence on campus was really -- did actually increase visibility and I think it did change things. I don't know what happened after that. I think things have changed a lot since then. That was a long time ago now.

RIDEOUT: Okay, there's about two minutes left. I don't know if you want to ask her something about her after Smith life.

ANDREANI: Yeah, I was about to say --

MARCOUX: Sure.

ANDREANI: -- did Smith politicize you?

MARCOUX: Yeah, definitely.

ANDREANI: How did it shape, you know, your career choices?

MARCOUX: Well, when I graduated in 1982 the Battle of the '80s, it was -- you know, Reagan. Reagan, Reagan and yeah, I didn't do the thing where I was getting an interview at IBM, and I didn't do it on purpose. And most of the people that I knew were not going into corporate America because they had very serious questions about that. So I was very aware of the fact that I had gotten this education that put me in an elite position in the northeast to get a track job and I said no. But it was -- and it was conscious. So yes, it definitely did.

ANDREANI: Okay, well, thank you very much for being here with me.

MARCOUX: Thank you. Thanks, guys.

ANDREANI: I thought we had a little bit more time because they said 24 minutes, so --

RIDEOUT: Oh, it's fair how that works because the clock over there says 11:30 and this one is past 11:30.

ANDREANI: Okay.

RIDEOUT: So I think maybe we started a few minutes past. If you want to ask one more question --

ANDREANI: Well, is there anything pressing that you maybe would like to have on camera?

MARCOUX: I'm sorry. I'm trying to think.

RIDEOUT: Or we can talk about more about what you did after Smith.

ANDREANI: Yeah.

MARCOUX: Oh, yeah. I mean that was cool.

ANDREANI: Yeah, let's talk a little bit more about that.

RIDEOUT: I just don't see anyone else lined up, so --

ANDREANI: Yeah, I mean --

RIDEOUT: Do they usually come out and stand there?

ANDREANI: Yeah, they usually --

RIDEOUT: Okay.

ANDREANI: At least poke their heads out if they're --

RIDEOUT: That's fine.

ANDREANI: -- needing somebody to walk in, so we can do --

MARCOUX: Am I answering your questions okay?

ANDREANI: Yeah, you're doing great.

MARCOUX: All right.

ANDREANI: Is there any way that I -- before we start filming -- is there any way that I can phrase that a little bit better?

MARCOUX: No, you're doing great.

ANDREANI: Okay.

MARCOUX: You're doing fine.

ANDREANI: Okay, so --

RIDEOUT: Okay, we're rolling.

ANDREANI Okay, so can you talk a little bit more about your after Smith career?

MARCOUX: Well, moving to San Francisco and having this group of women who were all -- we had a really tight thing going on around our intellectual interests, so you know, we lived in a house that was -- you know, cooperative but not hippie and we -- you know, put stuff up on the walls from the paper and we would talk about what was going on in the world and we did a lot of reading and we were at the library a lot, but it was really -- you know, this kind of important post-Smith experience because, you know, we were -- it was like San Francisco at the very beginning of the AIDS crisis, and we -- we all got dropped into the deep end of that, and it was this kind of amazing time to be there where then -- then -- you know, what had happened at Smith where we were was the sense of being out and being a sexual person and being out and being political about it and being just who you were, and then going into an urban area where there was this whole other thing going on and then also this big LGBT world.

It was really interesting to have these relationships with you that kind of grounded it and stuff that you were really interested in as pursuits

as work, as creative work. So we were focused a lot on creative work and art and photography and writing and -- and that was really important to me because that built on -- I built on that and went to film school and stayed in California for film school, but it was very much a part of how I understood my practice with camera and it came out of those group conversations and just having basically companionship in intellectual life was great. It was really, really important. And we all kind of went our own ways, you know, to study philosophy or study law or you know, go to film school, but we all -- but we're all still in contact too. So --

ANDREANI           So what are you doing presently?

MARCOUX:           I work at In the Life Media. I had a career in television for many years. Probably 15 -- it's almost 20 years I guess, 17 years and then I made the move recently to run a non-profit called In the Life Media, which creates media and a public television show on LGBT life and issues. So it's been on public TV for 20 years. I've only been there for about three years, so I made the move from -- to really want to work on media that actually challenges people's ideas about the community and presents real images of that -- us. So that's what I'm doing.

ANDREANI           All right, thank you very much.

MARCOUX:           Thank you.

ANDREANI           Thank you so much. Yeah.

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Janet Harris, June 2012.*