

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Jane Moffett, Class of 1958*

Interviewed by  
Anne Ames, Class of 2015

May 25, 2013

## **Abstract**

In this oral history, Jane Moffett recalls the extraordinary caliber of Smith's Art History Department which became the center of her life during her college years and beyond. She relates stories that shaped her worldview, including a conversation with Ruth Simmons that changed her life.

## **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:** Moffett, Jane. Interview by Anne Ames. Video recording, May 25, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Jane Moffett, interview by Anne Ames, transcript of video recording, May 25, 2013, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Moffett, Jane. Interview by Anne Ames. Transcript of video recording, May 25, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Jane Moffett, interview by Anne Ames, transcript of video recording, May 25, 2013, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 25, 2013, with:

JANE MOFFETT

by: Anne Ames

AMES: All right, well, my name is Annie Ames, and I'm conducting an interview with Janie Moffett, May 25th, 2013, for the Smith College Alumni Oral History Project. We'd like to thank you in advance for agreeing to participate with us.

MOFFETT: Well, you're welcome. Thank you for asking me.

AMES: Absolutely. So, first of all, why are you attending the reunion this year?

MOFFETT: Well, I've attended just about every reunion. I wouldn't not come to a reunion. Our 50th was the biggest, but I'm a very enthusiastic alum, so I like coming back. I am devoted to the art museum and art, and so it's always wonderful to see that, and good to see friends.

AMES: Excellent, excellent. So, how did you choose to attend Smith back in 1954?

MOFFETT: Well, my mother went to Smith. She was Class of '26. She was very active on campus, and also in Rochester, New York, which I told you I'm from, and she was class president, alumni fund chairman, and in Rochester she started the first house tour to raise money for scholarships, and, as far as I know, that – that went on until about last year, and it was very successful. She brought me to Smith, where I stood in the Admissions Office. I'll never forget that. And she wanted me – my mother was very forceful, she wanted me to say that I wanted to come to Smith. But, of course, in the eighth grade, what did I know? So, I was being contrary to her and I said, well, I really didn't know where I wanted to go, and that I really didn't like to read, and as it turns out I've – I have problems, which is why it's difficult to read. And I remember getting a lecture from the admissions officer about how when I got old books would be my friends.

AMES: Excellent, excellent.

MOFFETT: Then I had to write another letter, of course, the application, and say that I really did want to go to Smith.

AMES: Excellent, excellent. So, considering that your mother was such a force at Smith when she was here, clearly, based on all of her accomplishments that

you've just listed, what – when she talked about Smith with you what was that like?

MOFFETT: Well, she talked about singing in the Glee Club. She was asked to do that. She also talked about her major, which was Sociology, and she talked about going to men's colleges for weekends and taking part in the Dartmouth Carnival, and I guess they had some kind of contest at Dartmouth and Williams, and she made her own costumes, and I still have some of them. She went one time as a paint box with all the colors of paint and the paint brush, and everything. So, I guess she – President Neilson I think was here when she was here. So, she talked a lot about that.

AMES: Yeah, excellent.

MOFFETT: She just loved it. She thought it was the only place to go.

AMES: So, returning Smith as an alum for reunion, how do you find Smith changed?

MOFFETT: Let's see, how did it change? Well, you have an Engineering Department, and our 50th reunion gift was to give a room in the Engineering Department. Smith didn't have an Engineering Department when I was here, and it didn't really stress the sciences. I was an Art History major. So, I was good in Chemistry, but I – that wasn't one of the more popular majors: Chemistry, Physics, or Biology. The buildings have changes. The student union is definitely new, the one that Julia Childs gave. We used to be able to eat – everybody could eat in their own dormitories, and that's a big change. That's not possible anymore. Another thing, we had a watch, we had somebody on the desk all the time, as I understand it, who answered the phone, took messages, and so that doesn't exist anymore. What else? Oh, I remember this in particular, the light flashed, I mean, we had to be in at midnight every time we went out, and the light always flashed on and off when it was about to be midnight. So, we had to be back on time. Boys were not allowed upstairs. No men were up on the second floor. Men could come in on the first floor, but that was it. They couldn't go upstairs into the rooms, of course, that was a definite no-no. We had things like coffee or demitasse cups that were very formal and real silver spoons in the living room. I don't know if you do that anymore?

AMES: We don't.

MOFFETT: I haven't seen that. Julia – not Julia Child, Betty – not Betty Friedan, I'm thinking of these famous, Gloria – Gloria Steinem was in my dorm, in Laura Scales, and I don't have a memory of her except shuffling down the hallway in her bunny slippers. So, those are some of the changes that I've noticed.

AMES: Wonderful, and in following with that, what has stayed consistent?

MOFFETT: Well, I think the thing that we all admire, certainly, is the intellectual stimulation, the ability to choose a major or a double major, if you want to. Because it's an all women's college I feel that it's very important, it allows women to speak up in class. In my town where I lived for thirty-one years, in Hinsdale, there were five Smithies who started their own businesses and that's outstanding. You can sort of recognize a Smithie. We were driving to reunion yesterday and we saw this woman, and we thought, "Do you think she went to Smith," and the person I was with said, "Well, why don't we just see." And, so I said, "Well, are you going to reunion by any chance?" And, she said, "Yes." I said, "Well, are you going to Smith's reunion," and she said, "Yes." So, this was along the Mass Pike you could recognize a Smithie. Leadership, I think that's outstanding. I mean, we've had so many leaders. Barbara Bush, of course, is one that comes to mind, Nancy Reagan, Tricia Nixon. But, of course, my favorite, and everybody's, is Julia Child.

AMES: Yeah, yeah. Moving on a little bit to talk about academics very briefly, what was the process of deciding on your major?

MOFFETT: Oh, boy, we got into that today a little bit, when I was looking at a Baskin print. My – my best subject really was Chemistry, but I didn't like it that much. I got in probably because I got a 745 on the SAT's, but I am – I knew all the time that I loved art. My father had a problem with that. He said, "What are you going to do to make a living? How are you going to support yourself?" And our – I wanted to major in Studio Art, and I started out doing that for the first two years, and then I had Leonard Baskin, and we were standing in front of Leonard Baskin's wood block print today of his wife, and I have a lot of Baskin stories, and he told me at the end of my sophomore year that I wasn't any good. He also told that to Liz Mumford, who is one of the most successful artists on the Cape. And so I switched my major from Studio Art to Art History, and that was – I didn't like the idea of thinking that I wasn't any good, but it was a – it was a challenge and it was the best thing, and my career has been like a series of building blocks all my life. We had an excellent Art History department with the most famous professors, and I went out and all my life I've had something to do with art. I actually taught or lectured it for fifty years, which is a long time.

AMES: Absolutely, through dedication of your – dedication –

MOFFETT: I loved it.

AMES: Yeah, yeah. So, did you go abroad when you were at Smith?

MOFFETT: No, not for my junior year.

AMES: Okay?

MOFFETT: I didn't do that.

AMES: Okay.

MOFFETT: I've traveled extensively ever since.

AMES: Okay, excellent. I'd like to talk about that in a bit.

MOFFETT: Yeah, I lived in the Middle East. I lived in Saudi Arabia, actually.

AMES: Actually, why don't you tell me about that now. How did that come about –

MOFFETT: Well, that was – that was actually, it did involve Smith because I didn't want to go, and Ruth Simmons was the president of Smith at the time. When I was – I think it was '98 when I was trying to decide whether or not to go because I didn't want to go. I know a lot about Islam. I have relatives who are half American and half Iraqi. I've been teaching about Islam for forty years. And I knew the challenges that I would face to go there, and I really didn't want to go, because the first offer was Paris, second offer was Japan and China, and then my husband came home one day and said, "How would you like to go to Riyadh?" So, that was a challenge. But I happened to be in front of Alumni House when Ruth Simmons was standing there. She had a pile of papers. They blew all over the sidewalk, and I helped her pick them up one by one, and this gave me the opportunity to talk to her, and I told her about my dilemma. I – you know, "I'm afraid to go to Saudi Arabia." She said to me, "My dear, with a Smith education you can go anywhere and do anything." And that tipped the scales. That was it. I went. It was one of the best two years of my life. I met the challenges. I had three part time jobs. I pushed the limits. I took chances, but that was really special.

AMES: Yeah, absolutely. How old were you when that happened?

MOFFETT: How old was I? Oh, just ten years ago, so I would have been sixty-seven. Yeah, I was there during the Cole incident, and during the time when Clinton invaded Baghdad. Yeah, right before 9/11, which is actually probably one reason why I ended up giving so many lectures about Saudi Arabia, and at my 45th reunion, which would have been ten years ago, I – our theme for our reunion was "www.womenworldwide", and I was on a panel and I dressed in my abaya, and my chodor, and I gave a fifteen minute presentation about Saudi Arabia and my life there.

AMES: Okay, so based on your extensive international history in the past, you know, ten, twenty years, were you involved in student activism of any kind during your time at Smith?

MOFFETT: Student activism. Well, one of the things I was doing out here in the archives

was I was looking at that scrapbook about the Smith band. Now, you might not consider that very controversial, but in reading the letters, we were never recognized by the music department, which we were very offended by.

AMES: What did you play?

MOFFETT: I played clarinet, and – and I was the president of the Smith band, which was the only woman's band in the United States, and we were invited to go to Yale. But as far as a political protester, no, I have never stood in the street with a banner. I've changed my political views from Republican to Democrat, and, you know, I was – I was a product of the '50's. I don't know if you can possibly even understand that. You did what your parents wanted you to do. You didn't make waves. You went through college and you got married. That was what you did. That isn't what I did, but –

AMES: Did you face any challenges while you were at Smith?

MOFFETT: Oh, yes, yes. The biggest challenge of all was my freshman year, I was right outside the gym here, I was riding my bike, and it was a very big mistake, but I had all my chemistry notes, all my history notes, I can't remember which course it was, whether it was Latin American or American, in my bicycle basket, and my notebook was stolen. And I almost flunked out. I thought, you know, this is it for me. I shouldn't have had all my notes in one book. So, I talked some friends into loaning me their notes, and over Christmas vacation that's what I did, I copied notes, and, yeah, I – I got back and I was on the Dean's List once in awhile. I wasn't as much of an academic as I was later when I went back to graduate school. That was one challenge. Another challenge was that for some reason or other some of us were allowed to have cars so we could go skiing. Now, I never understood that, but my car always used to break down in Hanover, New Hampshire, where I had all my friends. So, in fact, I almost graduated from Dartmouth, because I – I missed the last train back to Northampton on the night before my graduation, and I talked a senior who already had his car all loaded with his stuff, ready to leave the next day, he loaned me his car, but he didn't tell me that it was low on gas. There was one gas station between Hanover and Northampton that was open at 6:30 in the morning, and I made it, and I got here at a quarter of nine. I put my white dress on, and I marched in front of the Dean, Helen Russell, and she looked down at me and she said, "Jane, I never expected to see you graduate." That was another challenge.

Another challenge was, getting back to the band again, I just thought of, we had two musical instruments stolen. When we were hosting the MIT band and the Harvard band they each had the great big drum, you know, with the H on it that was stolen. I mean, somebody took it, I don't know. It wasn't gone for very long, but I had an encounter with Helen Russell, the Dean, again, because, you know, we had to get it back. And somebody stole the main trumpet, the

trumpet of the first trumpet player. My gosh, yeah, it sounds silly, don't they, but, you know, you get pretty scared when that happens.

AMES: Absolutely. Well, –

MOFFETT: Is that it?

AMES: As much as I would love to sit here and talk with you about your international career, I – we have about five minutes left?

MOFFETT: Okay, well, shoot.

AMES: And I actually have time to ask you a few –

MOFFETT: You tell me what – I'll try to – tell me if I'm talking too much.

AMES: No, you're – this is – this is wonderful, it's perfect. When you think back to your time at Smith, what comes to mind first?

MOFFETT: What comes to mind first? My classes, my professors. I was so privileged to have some of the great, great, famous people in Art History: Phyllis Laymon was my thesis advisor, and Oliver Larkin, he won the Pulitzer Prize for his book, "Art and Life in America". It was a joy to listen to him. Henry Russell Hitchcock, one of the most famous architectural historians, it was a joy; Clarence Kennedy, I mean, I could go on and on. It was so fabulous. We gave a party for all of them. That was fabulous. So, that's what I think of, I think of the academics, I think of – I also have to admit that I had a pretty good time at some of the men's colleges. Well, I was a skier, and not too many people knew how to ski when – in the 50's, not too many women knew how to ski.

AMES: What difference has your Smith education made?

MOFFETT: It's enabled me to do exactly what I wanted to do in life, which means teach and lecture about art, and art appreciation, and cultures from around the world, to get students interested in something. I didn't – I never cared whether it was photography, archeology, art, travel, just something, and I established my own business in the Chicago area, Culture Ala Carte, and I lectured for thirty-one years. I worked in three museums. That's when I mean it was like building blocks. I went back to graduate school years later. Thirty years after Smith I went to Northwestern, got my masters, wrote a thesis on Museum Labeling, which I've had a chance to use fairly recently in our new Marconi Museum in Chatham on the Cape. So, everything fits.

AMES: Absolutely, absolutely.

MOFFETT: That was probably why I wanted to do this interview.



AMES: Yeah. All right, and for my final question of the day and of my time here at the archives, do you have any advice for current and future Smithies?

MOFFETT: Do I have advice for – oh, my. About their career, their lives, their what?

AMES: About their time at Smith.

MOFFETT: About while they're here now or when they graduate?

AMES: Both.

MOFFETT: Ah, while they're here I – take advantage of the resources that, you know, I – I think I might tell them to go on the junior year abroad, if that's still – or even senior year abroad, some kind of international program, I think. I would certainly encourage them to become fluent in a foreign language, and I would suggest either Chinese or Arabic, that would be one thing. Think ahead to what they're going to do when they graduate. I know that's very painful, but it's important because suddenly when you get out and you leave this protected atmosphere, you know, you're in the big, wide world, and what are you going to do. I don't know if that helps?

AMES: It does. It does. Well, thank you so much for coming in and speaking with us. It sounds like you've had an extraordinary –

MOFFETT: Well, thank you for the privilege of talking to you.

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Janet Harris, July 2013.*