

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Ellen Moorhouse, 1966

Interviewed by
Sunny Lawrence, Class of 2017

May 13, 2016

Abstract

In this interview, Ellen Moorhouse reflects on her transition to Smith as a Canadian international student. She remembers her community in Martha Wilson House and Dawes House. Moorhouse also talks about her idea of a “typical Smithie” and women’s role in the workplace in the 60s.

Restrictions

None.

Format

Interview recorded using Sony EX1R camera, XDCam format.

Videographer

Video recorded by Kate Geis.

Transcript

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Moorhouse, Ellen. Interview by Sunny Lawrence. Video recording, May 13, 2016. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Ellen Moorhouse, interview by Sunny Lawrence, transcript of video recording, May 13, 2016, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

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Alumnae Oral History Project
Sophia Smith Collection
Smith College
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted May 13, 2016, with:

ELLEN MOORHOUSE
Northampton, Massachusetts

by: SUNNY LAWRENCE

LAWRENCE: I am doing this interview for the Alumni Oral History Project at Smith College. And I'm here with — could you say your full name and your graduating class?

MOORHOUSE: Yeah. My name is Ellen Moorhouse and I graduated in 1966.

LAWRENCE: So I would love to start this interview just by hearing a little bit about what your life was like before you came to Smith. Where did you grow up?

MOORHOUSE: Well, I grew up in Toronto, which was not the cosmopolitan city it is today. And I grew up sort of in a suburb of Toronto called Islington. The year before I came to Smith I did spend a year in Switzerland, because there was a program in Switzerland where kids could go and take their grade 13 — we had five years of high school at the time. So I came from Neuchatel in Switzerland, basically, and then I came here. So I guess I'd seen quite a, you know, I'd seen a bit of the world. I traveled a lot with my family, because my father had been a geologist, and I'd been to some obscure and odd places.

LAWRENCE: You said your mom was also a Smithie, right?

MOORHOUSE: Yeah, she graduated in 1936, so she was here during the Depression. And, yeah, she actually grew up in Brooklyn, New York, so you'd say I was half American. But I was a Canadian citizen when I came here.

LAWRENCE: Can you talk a little bit about making the decision to come to Smith?

MOORHOUSE: I came to Smith, because in Canada, well, in Ontario you really had almost specialized by the time you got out of high school. So when I graduated from high school I would have to have chosen really between math and the arts. So I was really looking for a liberal arts situation, where I would still get a four-year BA and I could choose maybe after the first year or the second year. I had been leaning towards chemistry

and astronomy actually, but then I ended up studying English, and partly because of the strength of Smith's faculty.

LAWRENCE: So you said before we got here that your experience at Smith was very mixed.

MOORHOUSE: And it wasn't really Smith's fault, although, you know, Smith was an incredibly different place then. It was very much in locus parentis, I guess, where, you know, it was rigid in its rules. You had the house system with the housemother. You know, you were — it was very much, I think, like a private high school in some ways compared to the way things are now. So that was a little strange, I think. And the first year I was here I was at Martha Wilson House, where I made some very good friends. We were in a section of the house called Maid's Quarters. We had our own little rooms at the end of the hall. And after the first year I moved to the French house, and partly we were a group of I would say misfits when it came to Smith. And it was funny, I was taking a course in Middle Eastern history at the time and one of the girls who was taking the course as well, the fact that I always arrived late and I was always dressed the same in sort of, I don't know, black and gray — I haven't changed — she identified me as a candidate for Dawes House. And plus I spoke French, because I had been in Switzerland. So after that I went to Dawes and it was a group that chafed at some of the rules, I will say. But there were some people of great talent there. I wouldn't include me among them (laughs) but, you know, they were a very interesting group.

LAWRENCE: So it sounds like you felt like you wanted more freedom as a student there?

MOORHOUSE: You know, it's funny, I think it was just the nature — not necessarily more freedom, but less fraught with convention, the idea that you dress for dinner, that you, you know, the afternoon tea thing, all those things, which — let's say that I'd grown up in a much more casual way and so that kind of formality, I think, made me feel as if I weren't really a part of it in some ways.

LAWRENCE: Did you feel like there was an image of, like, the typical Smithie?

MOORHOUSE: Well, I remember when I was here — and I'm trying to remember the — it was an article that was in the *Harvard Crimson* or something like that about the three flavors of the women's colleges. And I think lime was Radcliffe, and I think it was chocolate was Smith, and maybe peach was Vassar or the other way around. But, you know, it was the era of the madras skirt, the cardigans, the circle pin, and all of those things, and I didn't feel as if I — and I came from a different country as well. I mean, Toronto was very straight-laced, but somehow there was maybe a feeling of — I don't know — almost like a class thing, perhaps.

LAWRENCE: Like, did you feel—

MOORHOUSE: Like, upper-middleclass. That kind of, you know, you dressed in a certain way, and so on.

LAWRENCE: Did you feel alienated from that?

MOORHOUSE: I didn't feel I was a part of it. Apparently once I was walking across campus and I always wore this long, gray man's sweater, actually, and black pants, and I had a boiled wool jacket. And a friend of mine said to me, you know, "I heard someone" — they looked at me as I was walking across campus and they said, Does she always wear that? You know, and so it was, you know, partly I guess that.

LAWRENCE: I know it was also a time of, like, great conservatism for Smith, but also there was a lot of, like, hot button political issues going on, such as the civil rights activism on campus.

MOORHOUSE: Well, that was beginning, yeah, and there were people who were going down, you know, to the southern states. I certainly wasn't part of that. And I have to say I do believe that — and I often wonder whether my memory has played tricks on me on this, but — and I was in my way very conservative, even though I didn't sort of adhere to the, you know, the way to dress and that sort of thing. But I think Arthur Schlesinger, I believe, spoke at our commencement and I remember he emphasized how important it was to have educated women, you know, to bring up the next generation. And in the diplomatic service it was very important to have educated women who, you know, to — with their ambassador husbands. You know, so even, you know, at that time, even in the mid '60s — now maybe I'm not remembering it right, and I'm not sure if anybody else has referred to that.

LAWRENCE: From what I've researched it seems like that really was a part of the culture at Smith, the idea that, like, you were to find a husband. That was a big part of, like, why you went to college.

MOORHOUSE: Absolutely. Absolutely.

LAWRENCE: Was that part of your thoughts on your own education?

MOORHOUSE: Not really, although I would say as a product of that era I never had the sense that I would have a career, and I never think of what I did over the years as a career, it just kind of happened. And there was a time in my life where I thought, OK, I can judge myself as being emotionally healthy and mature if I'm a good mother, you know? So I was definitely — and it absolutely didn't bother me at my first job when the guy said to me, "Well, we'll pay you 4,200 a year, because you're a

woman. Now if you're a man, you would get 5,000." It simply didn't strike me as being odd. So, yeah, we definitely were on the cusp. And then, you know, the pill came, you know, everything.

LAWRENCE: Yeah, yeah. I was reading about there was all this controversy about — while you were there — about whether or not to allow men in the dorms.

GEIS: So (inaudible) with us for one second.

LAWRENCE: (pause in tape) OK. I was reading about the controversy about whether or not to allow men in the dorms. Was there, like, what were the ideas about sex and sexuality that were going around?

MOORHOUSE: Well, first of all, I don't remember there was actually a controversy about having men, there was just a very limited period of time that they could be in the rooms, and the doors had to be left open. The old thing, leave the door open and three feet on the floor, that was the saying. But certainly when I arrived at Smith in — so that was '62, Masters and Johnson was new and so, you know, everybody was preoccupied with what was in Masters and Johnson, and then, of course, we were heavily into the Freudian influence at that point as well, and so phallic symbols. And of course everybody was, you know, fascinated with the people who had lost their virginity, and everybody, you know, in some ways that was like a rite of passage. And there was — I don't if anybody's talked about Dr. [Freund?], who was down in the — Dr. Freund, everybody's friend, who was in Northampton who would provide diaphragms for the girls. So, you know, it was a — I mean, it was definitely a time — and I'm sure it's always been that way in college.

LAWRENCE: Did you have any relationships while you were here?

MOORHOUSE: I had a boyfriend when I was in Switzerland. There were actually a couple of boys who went to Harvard. So I did have that friendship, you know. It was my first romance that started in Switzerland, and I visited him at Harvard, and, you know, I was trying to remember a while ago what happened and I don't know. It just kind of petered out. And he was from the Philadelphia area and actually lived on a dairy farm, but his father was a lawyer and so on. But I don't know what happened, but it just kind of fizzled after sophomore year. And then, yeah, I did have a boyfriend — well, I wouldn't say a boyfriend. I had my first real sexual experience here. He was a writer who lived here and it was partly, you know, a friend. He was a friend of a woman at Dawes House who is now unfortunately dead and that makes me extremely sorry that I hadn't seen her in many years. She was a very interesting woman, who ended up working on *The New York Times*, but very hard on herself.

And, yeah, so, but most times I compulsively tried to study. You know, at Smith it was interesting. When I first came I took math, you know, I got an A in math, A in astronomy, I did well in chemistry. And I thought, This stuff is too easy. So I kept gravitating towards doing the most difficult things that would be the most hard for me. And one of those things was writing papers. And I always wanted to make the most original paper in the world, and I'm sure a lot of students feel that way that they really want to do something that stands out. And so the end result was that I could never write anything. And actually they were very kind to let me get out of Smith with a BA and several unwritten papers.

LAWRENCE: Did you feel like you had professors or even older students who were mentors for you, who you looked up to?

MOORHOUSE: There was one young woman, girl, in my first year, who was a terrific mentor in that the first time I wrote an English paper in English 1-1 it came back and I had, like, a B plus ideas and D style. So Barbara Abrahamson, her name was, she was just a crackerjack editor and so she basically showed me how to write. And, you know, again as a — I don't know what happened to Barbara. She was a year ahead of me and I believe she went to Katie Gibbs Secretarial School, which was the way many bright women went. You know, they became a secretary and then they, I guess, moved up through whatever business situation or — that they ended up in. So she was very much a mentor. And then some of the unusual people at Dawes House in some ways were mentors, because it was because of them that I became the editor of the *Grécourt Review*?. And not just because probably nobody really wanted to be editor (laughs) and so—

LAWRENCE: Can you talk a little bit about your work on the *Grécourt Review*?

MOORHOUSE: Well, we used to sit around and discuss. Oftentimes the material that went into it, they were, you know, people who were taking the poetry courses here, but it was quite a small group and everybody really knew everybody else. And then there were some people, you know, at Amherst or whatever, who submitted, and we got a lot of material that just came in out of the blue, you know, by mail, people looking for various academic reviews or poetry and places to try and get printed, published. But we, you know, we obviously tried to — at times we published something that Sylvia Plath had written, I guess, that had been in an earlier *Grécourt Review*. You know, so we tried — we put in a couple of things by professors. There were some excellent writers here, actually, and one was Nancy Dowd, who became a screenwriter in Hollywood — actually probably wrote the script for the best hockey movie ever made, called *Slap Shot*, with Paul Newman. So there was a lot of — and you could see a good friend of mine, her name was Docie Simmons, became Eudora Pendergrast, she just wrote some marvelous

poems, and she also is someone who has passed on and something that makes me very sad. But she left some beautiful poems and some of them inspired by what she saw here, and we published those. So but we sort of sat around and if something slightly salacious came in we giggled, because of course we were all preoccupied, and sometimes published it. So it was, you know, the little collection of outlaws in some ways.

LAWRENCE: It sounds like despite feeling like you didn't always belong here you did find your community.

MOORHOUSE: Yes, absolutely. Absolutely.

LAWRENCE: Can you talk a little bit about that, what those people were like?

MOORHOUSE: Yeah. OK, one was Judy Kroll, who — and, yeah, I'm not quite sure whatever happened to Judy, but she was an excellent student and excellent writer. There was Condon Rodgers, I refer to, who ended up working on *New York Times*. Diana Wolkstein, who became the storyteller of Central Park in New York. She died a couple of years ago, but she made a real name for herself as a collector of folktales and she was a storyteller. And she had the most magnificent long, blond hair that she braided. She was the one who was in the Middle Eastern history class who said, "Oh, you should come to Dawes House." So they were — and my friend Docie Simmons, who went junior year abroad. Oh. (sighs) So there was — and, you know, there were other friends and I think they also felt a little — like, I'm going to visit one this weekend actually who isn't coming to the reunion, you know, again, to suggest that in some ways they didn't really feel part, you know, in a way. But as I mentioned to you before, I felt a real attachment to the geography, and I love coming here, and I love walking around on campus, and especially I love this time of year.

LAWRENCE: Mm-hmm. So we're running out of time but I want to ask you one more question before we go, which is you mentioned that Smith has really just shaped the rest of the course of your life.

MOORHOUSE: Yeah, it was shaped by the fact that certain professors, like Mr. Haddad, who taught medieval English, and Mr. Peterson, who — they really encouraged me to go into English, and they really seemed to like what I — the papers I wrote and so on. And I needed a lot of that kind of encouragement, because really I didn't know what I wanted to do and I still don't know, (laughs) you know? I'm still waiting to find out when I grow up. And so in that way they influenced it. And then as I — and you can see that I wanted to please them. I wanted to do papers that would get me the positive feedback, I think. But then I stumbled, because the — I made it too difficult for me to write papers. Mr. Young, Richard Young, was another teacher who really influenced me.

And in the end I ended up going into journalism, which seems like kind of a counterproductive thing to do if you have trouble writing, but I kind of said to myself, “OK, I’m going to have to overcome this problem.” And so I tried to overcome the problem, but always there was the resistance. I am a better editor than I am a writer. But in the end I went into working with the printed word. So in that way it entirely shaped my life.

LAWRENCE: Unfortunately we have to stop there, but thank you so much for coming and (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) –

MOORHOUSE: (laughs) OK. I don’t know if it’s of any–

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center, June 2016.