

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Claire Goldberg Moses, Class of 1963

Interviewed by
Carolyn Rees, Class of 2014

May 25, 2013

Abstract

In this oral history Claire Goldberg Moses reflects on the occasion of the 50th class reunion. She speaks of the important role the house culture played in her college experience and on the central role her Junior Year abroad in Paris played in her life. She recalls a progressive political environment at Smith, which included Civil Rights demonstrations in front of the Northampton Woolworth building.

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: Moses, Claire Goldberg. Interview by Carolyn Rees. Video recording, May 17, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Claire Goldberg Moses, interview by Carolyn Rees, transcript of video recording, May 17, 2013, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

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Transcript of interview conducted May 25, 2013, with:

CLAIRE GOLDBERG MOSES

by: CAROLYN REES

REES: So this is Carolyn Rees and I am conducting an interview with Claire Goldberg Moses on May 25, 2013 for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. So thank you for being here and agreeing to participate. So, what brings you back to reunion this year?

MOSES: I'm so excited to be here at 50 years, although I cannot believe that 50 years can have gone by. I love Smith. I loved the house I was in, Jordan House. And the members of our class of 1963 who lived together in Jordan House have been meeting in many reunions every five years since we turned 50. So this just felt like a natural next step to all of those reunions.

REES: Yeah, that's amazing. So how did you choose to attend Smith?

MOSES: I grew up in Connecticut in a community that was pretty focused on the elite schools of New England at that time, and that meant the Sister colleges and who knows why I chose Smith over one of the others, but I applied early admission the first year that early admission existed and never applied anywhere else.

REES: Okay, so tell me about your first few days at Smith and arriving, and how you were feeling and what you were experiencing?

MOSES: I don't think I remember my first days. My earliest memories -- first of all, I had no idea coming from really a middle, middle class home that some of the things I was later told made this is a sort of luxurious college were luxurious. I remember a friend, years later, who was not from Smith but visited the school, told me that she once walked into one of our houses and gasped because she saw oriental carpets on the floor. And I didn't know until she said that, that there was such a thing as oriental carpets. I thought that they were old, sort of, thread-bare, dark, carpets that weren't even wall-to-wall, so how could it possibly be luxurious?

REES: Right.

MOSES: Other early memories, I met my first Republican when I came to Smith. I'd lived so totally inside a world that was Democratic, with even a -- some old in my grandparent's generation, socialists. English 101, we had to read *The Varieties of*

Religious Experience. You've probably heard that. It was required all the way across the first entering class. And I couldn't understand it. And I'm not certain at all that I would understand it if I read it today. And on the other hand, I was terrified as most of the public school girls were, that I wouldn't be able to compete with the people who had the real preparatory fancy school background. And I got very high grades and continued to do so all the way through, so somehow or other, I'd been more prepared.

REES: Yeah. So, what was the process of deciding on your major?

MOSES: I think I was born to be a history major. I think I was a history major by the time I was in third grade. Yeah.

REES: And what were some of your most memorable and favorite classes or professors?

MOSES: Well, my advisor in honors was Gene Wilson. And somebody who did Ren. and Rest., that was the way we called the period, was Godot (phonetic), Miss Godot. In American history, Mr. Sheehan, a great American -- I only took one semester of one American history course because I was really interested in European history. And it was with him and he was really wonderful. Other classes outside of the history department that were memorable, the African course with Gwendolyn Carter. I can't remember the professor's name but I took Econ 21 which was the hardest course I'd ever took here and I struggled to comprehend. And the teacher I had was incredible for helping us understand economics. I took economics at the time that we were also trained in Keynesian economics. Oh, I had to choose a science lab course and chose what was the easiest one for people who didn't like sciences and took geology, and I loved it. And I told people that the reason I loved it is that it was a history course, just from an earlier period of time.

REES: Yeah, I'm a history major and I took geo sciences this semester.

MOSES: The same feeling. It's a history course.

REES: It is, it is.

MOSES: I really loved it.

REES: Yeah, that's great. So, what house did you live in?

MOSES: I lived in Jordan House which I assumed was the best house on campus. And I'm certain it is one of the reasons that the Smith experience was so good for me. We had an unusual group of incoming first-year students and who lasted through the four years. And one of the things that was special about Smith for me was that I was allowed to work hard, achieve a lot and be encouraged to do so in spite of being a woman, and that was pretty unusual when, you know, I came through

high school in the '50s. And our particular group in Jordan House was filled with people like us. And I just felt comfortable around them without any sense of being thought of as too studious or something like that.

REES: Yeah. And did you have a house mother?

MOSES: Yes.

REES: And what was she like?

MOSES: I can tell you stories about her. This is for an oral history project. It'll be interesting. Her name will come to me in a moment. But she was -- we were talking about her just yesterday. She was anti-Semitic.

REES: Okay.

MOSES: Expressed herself as such. I don't mean that I sensed it in the way she looked at me, I mean, she made outrageous anti-Semitic comments. And a group of us went to see our class dean, Charlotte Finch (phonetic) to complain. Her name, by the way, was Mrs. Butterfield.

REES: Okay.

MOSES: Living in our house was a faculty advisor, Mrs. Kafka (phonetic). Her husband was the inventor, the creator or the originator of gestalt therapy. They came here in the '30s as exiles from, you know, Nazi Europe. Miss Finch called in Mrs. Kafka to ask her about it. And Mrs. Kafka told her, "Well, yes, that's true, but you know, they're going to have to live with this in life. That's the way it is. And I just think it's good for them."

REES: Wow.

MOSES: Wow.

REES: Wow. That's amazing.

MOSES: Wow. That's an amazing story.

REES: Yeah.

MOSES: I went in junior year abroad to Paris, which was unusual for history majors. And I went earlier than my class because my French wasn't good enough, unlike the French majors and the art history majors. It was, for years and years and years, I said it was the most important year of my life. Miss Ott was our director. And it was the first group she had and she'll be entertaining all of us at her home tomorrow. I just, you know, the whole world opened up to me. It was long

enough ago that none of us had ever been outside the country. It's not like the kind of travel that is typical today.

REES: And what was it like once you came back from abroad, how did the experience influence the rest of your time at Smith?

MOSES: Well, I'm not certain that it was different than it was for the other seniors. There's a certain way in which we suddenly felt too old for college and were waiting to get out. I think that's typical of seniors, and not just because I was returning from Paris to Northampton. I'd made a decision already that I'm going to go to New York afterwards. And then I had this year to get through. It was fine.

REES: Yeah. So you mentioned that you met your first Republicans when you arrived at Smith. What was the political climate like on campus during your four years here?

MOSES: Well, you know, it was not -- it was not conservative. It was fairly, fairly liberal. I think that JFK ran for the presidency, although I wasn't old enough to vote for him, but that was on campus. And he had a lot of popularity. So when I said I met my first Republicans, I was meaning people whose parents were Republican. It was not extremely radical, but it had a progressive feel to it and, you know, civil rights, the demonstrations in front of the Woolworth Building when the sit-ins started in the South. That was all going on during our four-year period. And there was a tremendous amount of sympathy for the civil rights movement. The Peace Corps volunteers were those who graduated when we were juniors and several people went in. So, there was a sensibility that was liberal and progressive. So it wasn't the students per se that I was speaking about. And I'd have to say that I'm one of the editors of the reunion book and so I know everybody's essay inside-out, and where the commas are, etc. And that is clearly true of our class. And the progression that followed.

REES: Right.

MOSES: And like so many other people who mentioned in their essays, I, too, read *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, the year that we graduated. I, too, said, "Oh, my God, this is a survey that she did of Smith alums. This could be me that she's talking about." I also was influenced by it. I also was a radically feminist, Women's Liberation movement activist. I switched into women's history from straight French history. At that time, I ended up getting one of the first faculty positions in women's studies. I edited a journal for 35 years of my academic career called *Feminist Studies*. And all of that progression felt an absolutely natural continuum from having come to Smith in the first place. What I loved about being at a women's college, the kind of culture and atmosphere that was cultivated here. I then felt as if I was part of creating the same thing in women's studies classes in a large state university. I was at the University of Maryland. But women's studies always felt like a small enclave of Smith College there.

REES: Can you expand a bit more on that inspiration to switch from straight French history to women's history?

MOSES: Well, I was in graduate school and my advisor at the time that I had to choose a dissertation topic was encouraging me to look at a large database of the social class -- of the French officer corps of a particular moment. And I could look at social class issues, things like that. And meanwhile, I was spending more time as a feminist activist than I was in choosing my dissertation topic. And it was, you know, it just hit me, "Oh my gosh, I could write about the French feminist movement." Which I did. So I wrote a history of the 19th century French feminist movement. It was an amazing time to be in women's history. Of course, I then look back at my education at Smith and realized how sexist it had been. Oh, let me be specific, I mean the curriculum.

REES: Right.

MOSES: Not the way we, as women, were treated, but the curriculum. Because I was a French historian, I got all involved in reading everything that Rousseau had written. And I somehow or other, it never came into my consciousness that he was writing about men and not women. So, you know, I can look back on all of that and say, "How is that possible, to be so unconscious?" With -- excuse me, without ever having been treated in a sexist way. So as an intellectual kind of sexism. I tried to think if I got angry about it. I don't think so. I think I used it as little story vignettes that just fit into all the other stories I could tell about growing up in the '50s and the omissions in history, etc. So, no particular anger at Smith for that except the irony that I was at a women's college. I had more than half of my professors were women. We didn't have professors, women, who would model a family, mother career for us, so we were aware of doing -- we, meaning my generation.

REES: Right.

MOSES: Of doing -- of monitoring something for which we had no fore-mothers because these wonderful career women had no life outside of being professors at Smith. And so how we would manage all of those -- well, conflicts of a certain kind, were new to us. And but it was also an exciting feeling. We felt like pioneers. And we also felt we were going to change the world.

REES: And I think that you did.

MOSES: We did, but we wish -- well, at some point, I said, "Now, it's my daughter's turn." Yeah, or my students' turns, yeah.

REES: Right, the next generation.

MOSES: It's you. You, what are you doing?

REES: And so, did *The Feminine Mystique* come out while you were still at Smith or had you?

MOSES: It actually did, but I read it in the fall, after I had left Smith.

REES: And what was that experience like -- out of Smith, and reading that?

MOSES: I mean, I felt as if I were staring at my own future, 15 years -- what it would be like in 15 years. And it made -- it was very upsetting. But it was upsetting because it was -- and it wasn't me yet. I mean, I went to New York to go to graduate school, so it wasn't me. But it was, "Oh, here's what it's going to be like in 15 years." That's when the survey was done. The fifteenth -- her fifteenth reunion.

REES: Right, right.

MOSES: So, that's what it's going to be like?

REES: And you talked about being a radical feminist and becoming involved in those politics. Were you involved in any student activism while on campus?

MOSES: Well, yes and no. I mean, the student activism had nothing to do with women.

REES: Right.

MOSES: But you know, we picketed in front of Woolworth, we were -- that might have been all -- there were no particular politics. We certainly were not -- oh, yes, I got involved in one thing. I authored a letter to the editor which we labeled, "Jacque Times" (phonetic) protesting the firing of the three gay men. And we just couldn't believe it. I think none of the students could believe it. Here it is, a women's college, and it's gay men that they're worried about? I knew so many students who were sleeping with their professor. You know, why they didn't fire all the heterosexual men, you know, and be concerned. They're concerned about gay men?

REES: Right.

MOSES: But that went on between my -- it was the summer between freshman and sophomore year.

REES: Oh, okay.

MOSES: And then we authored that article. And I came back to Smith, I don't know, ten or fifteen years ago for a panel that was set up to sort of rethink that moment. Well, it had been rethought and I think Smith was embarrassed about it before 15 years ago, but it was an anniversary of some sort and they were doing something and

they dug up that article.

REES: Oh, so the discussion around that controversy was very much that students were upset that they were being fired?

MOSES: They were very upset by that.

REES: And how did students find out since it was during the summer?

MOSES: It was in the *New York Times*, it was everywhere. It was a big, you know, it was a big story. And one of the disappointing things about how and why the college acted as it did is this school had really held firm, unlike almost all colleges and universities across the country, in the 1950s through the McCarthy era. And what, it's doing what for whom?

REES: Right.

MOSES: Yeah, it actually didn't make sense to us. It was more than just a political protest. I do remember what made more sense was I remember anti-- you're not even going to know what this acronym is -- HUAC protests. That's the House Un-American Activities Committee. So that was the continuance of sort of 1950s and McCarthy era. And you know, I even went through the *Sophian* last summer because we were going to do the reunion book, and you could see in the *Sophian* from 1959 to '63, that kind of progressivism. There were not right-wing letters to the editor, you know, there. I don't know if the whole school was involved in thinking like I was thinking then, but there wasn't any active voices saying, you know, I'm in favor of segregation. You know, it was -- yeah.

REES: Right, yeah. So tell me about the challenges of being a Smith student?

MOSES: It's interesting. I don't remember challenges as much as I remember almost the indulgence. Obviously, one challenge was dating and -- and I wanted to date. I wanted to be popular. I wanted to be certain I would marry as soon as possible after college. I shared all of those values. But it was also relaxing in a certain way that I was with so many other people who also weren't enjoying the way we had to meet men at that time. I mean, I had blind dates for weekends. Can you imagine a blind date for a weekend to Princeton or Yale or Dartmouth? Blind date, you don't know until you get there. So it was a kind of a freaky existence. But there was some discomfort, but there was also a lot of almost relaxation in not dating all the time or caring about it, too. It is an indulgence. And of course, it was the wonderful indulgence of being respected for having an intellectual life. And everything available. I mean, walking through the stacks at the library, sitting -- and you know, this is like heaven. When I try to compare this kind of college existence to what my own students have at the University of Maryland today, it's night and day. We were like in a cocoon of intellectual academic life. And I thrived in it. So, in that respect, are those challenges? You could say I was

intellectually challenged, but I loved being so.

I took my daughter on her college trip when she was a junior in high school. And she'd gone to summer camp not far from here and had a counselor from Amherst. So from the age of nine or ten, she decided she wanted to go to Amherst College, and it was the first school we visited. And we walked into a classroom. Now, every school has a bad teacher and it was uncertain that this particular professor was not exemplary of what Amherst was like. But we walked into a classroom in which not a single female spoke up. And a couple of men of color, two of them, had their hands up all the time and the professor didn't call on them. And she had no comment after that tour. And the next day we came over here to Smith and she -- I mean, it was, again, I used the expression, night and day, at one point in time. All these women speaking up, speaking out, such a lively classroom. As it turned out, she did not come to Smith, to my dismay. But ever after, I told every mother of daughters that they had to take their daughters to visit Smith so that if they chose a co-ed school, they would at least know what they should be looking for in the classroom and what it could be, and make certain that that co-ed school had that quality at least. So, visit Smith.

REES: Right, absolutely. So, when you think back from your time at Smith, what are some of the first memories or experiences that come to mind?

MOSES: I can visualize every room in Jordan House and meeting rooms. I have memories of getting -- of renting a television set for the 1960 election. I remember that after the houses were closed at 10:00 on weeknights, that we would go around our floor and create a menu of ice cream sundaes and call Friendly's, who in turn called the taxi company, which brought up the ice cream. And then here we were, minus 78 cents and you know, doling it out. I remember being exhausted all the time. I never seemed to get enough sleep. Totally exhausted. I remember English 101 more than I remember any other class. I remember, I'm still close friends with a woman who was not in my house, who I sat next to, in English 101. And I took horseback riding as my sport. I'd never done any horseback riding before. And I would come from horseback riding in my smelly boots and sit next to my friend, Sandy. And I remember sitting in the library going through the stacks, looking for whatever I was going to find, but not necessarily knowing what I was looking for. I mean, I put myself in front of -- I don't know, the subject matter, and I just went looking for all of the books.

REES: Yeah, so what keeps you coming back to reunion?

MOSES: Reunions are wonderful. Reunions -- our 25th reunion, we have a video. It could make you cry. And this one, also. They're very different because at the 25th reunion, people were talking about their transitions from a particular lifestyle that would have matched people coming of age in the '50s, to new aspirations in the women's movement and talking about things like divorce and new mothers, etc., and incredible sense of what I thought of as success stories, but not success as any

man would tell that story. Nobody was talking, "I'm president of this bank," or something like that. It was more like, "And then I left him and I had two children and decided to go to law school or to nursing school," or whatever, "or start my own business." And incredibly wonderful, almost inspirational stories. Now, most of our class, it seems, the ones who talk out, are retired or just -- but actually just retired, and dealing with a second set of challenges. And the stories, once again, they're so real. They're not of what I would imagine to be male stories of high achievement and bragging, they share more of what people have felt or, you know, at certain moments. They're still success stories in a certain way, and as a matter of fact, there's a tremendous amount of success in the way that Americans understand success. But when the women get together and talk about their lives, they will share more of the real feelings, the anxieties, how they face challenges, but how they really face challenges with all the sense of anxiousness that still you get through.

So it's just an incredible experience. If you don't come back for your ongoing reunion, you just remember that you must come for your 25th, and then I know you'll come for your 50th. And now, of course, watching -- were you at the parade?

REES: No.

MOSES: To watch the Class of '38? And the Class of '43?

REES: Yes.

MOSES: And as I say, I'm going to have my grand-daughters wheel my wheelchair, and I will be here for it when I am 96.

REES: Yes. That's great. So who have you become since Smith?

MOSES: More than what I told you, I became -- I learned to be confident at Smith, but I lost part of it in the years right after Smith. In a way, I wasn't prepared for the kind of ordinary sexism that the real world has. As I look back now, it all feels so seamless in a way. Now, it couldn't have been. I know that I wasn't -- I wasn't expecting to have the kind of life and living through the kind of incredible transformation that women went through. And yet, every piece of it as I look back seemed to prepare me for the next stage. The women's movement, when I first got involved in the late '60s, early by other people's standards, but five, six, seven years out of Smith, it felt like everything I had known was false and everything was new and different. And yet, after about 10 years, that feeling disappears completely and I say, "Oh, that's what it was like in high school. That's what I was like in college. Oh, this is just the next step." So, at the moment of living, things felt incredibly different, challenging, taking a new route, not having a model, pioneering, and then you look back and it seems like I just flowed through it. I did -- maybe one of the things that made it easier for me is

that I know that I took and stood out in a lot of unpopular stances. But I was always part of the group that was with me. So I never really had a sense of being alone as a true solitary pioneer. As part of a movement, I was part of -- I had close friends, I had colleagues in academe. I was in women's studies. I wasn't in engineering. So all of that pressure and making change, I felt like I was surrounded by like-minded people. And I've always acted that way. And it means, of course, that I had a lot of support and didn't feel alone. Doesn't every woman believe like me? Aren't they all there?

REES: Yeah.

MOSES: So it's a funny kind of life. There's not, I guess you would say, there's not a lot of diversity in my life in a peculiar way since what we were fighting for was diversity, etc., but moving with like-minded people.

REES: Yeah, so as a last question, do you have any advice for current and future Smithies?

MOSES: Create a group of close friends that's not a lot. People that you could tell anything to. And people who share aspects of your personal life, not just your career.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Janet Harris, July 2013.