

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Susan O'Malley, Class of 1964

Interviewed by
Grace Ramsay, Class of 2016

May 17, 2014

Abstract

In this interview, Susan O'Malley begins with a small note of being placed in the maid's quarters in King House. During this segment, O'Malley refers to a Kingsman (groundskeeper) who mentions that there were a number of suicides at Smith committed in the quad. O'Malley then discusses her dating life, the rigid curfew, and Father's Weekend as issues that were shaped by the restrictive culture of Smith. O'Malley also mentions her amusing stint playing the carillon. She speaks of visiting sex lecturers at Smith, her post-grad experiences in the South, the Smith posture pictures as an invasive practice, and the overall homophobic culture of Smith in the 1960s.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded using Canon Vixia HF.

Videographer

Video recorded by Grace Ramsay.

Transcript

Transcribed by Steve Thaw, Audio Transcription Center.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: O'Malley, Susan. Interview by Grace Ramsay. Video recording, May 17, 2014. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Susan O'Malley, interview by Grace Ramsay, transcript of video recording, May 17, 2014, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

Bibliography: O'Malley, Susan. Interview by Grace Ramsay. Transcript of video recording, May 17, 2014. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Susan O'Malley, interview by Grace Ramsay, transcript of video recording, May 17, 2014, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 17, 2014, with:

SUSAN O'MALLEY
Northampton, Massachusetts

by: GRACE RAMSAY

O'MALLEY: –honor, so, and then there's a lot of funny stories about that, so–

RAMSAY: Great, I'm — yeah.

O'MALLEY: I actually had students who played the carillon every night.

RAMSAY: Really?

O'MALLEY: (laughter) Yes!

RAMSAY: OK, so, this is Grace Ramsay, and I'm conducting an interview with Susan O'Malley, Class of 1964, on May 17th, 2014 for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. And thank you so much for coming on your reunion weekend.

O'MALLEY: Thank you for doing it.

RAMSAY: Yeah, of course. So, how did you end up at Smith?

O'MALLEY: My sister had gone to Smith; my other sister had gone to Mount Holyoke. I actually had a relative who taught chemistry here. In those days, we didn't think much about where to apply to college. So, I thought, OK, I'll go to Smith. I went to Belmont High School, they said, Where do you want to go to school? I said, "Radcliffe or Smith." They said, Tell me Monday. So, I said Smith, and then I didn't get in early admissions. I still applied to no other place, got into Smith, never thought about it.

RAMSAY: Wow. (laughter)

O'MALLEY: Thought about applying to Stanford, but then I thought, oh, that's too far away. So, we didn't think about it, it's not like today.

RAMSAY: Right, yeah. So, what house did you live in? What was your house community like?

O'MALLEY: Cutter House, and a lot of us are here today.

RAMSAY: Yeah?

O'MALLEY: Yeah, quite a community, it was very nice.

RAMSAY: It was nice? So, what—

O'MALLEY: When I was first accepted — because they accepted too many people in my class, or not enough people rejected Smith, so I was put in the broom closet in Martha Wilson House. Yes — oh, excuse me, the maid's broom closet. Yeah. And Smith didn't quite know what to do with all of us. So, I came up the summer before to look at my room, and I was pretty much horrified. And the kingsmen — do you still have kingsmen?

RAMSAY: No.

O'MALLEY: OK. Kingsmen who were, like, took care of the grounds, and safety, and everything, the kingsmen, one of them took me around, and there had been a number of suicides. So, he actually — I was seventeen years old, he actually said, "Oh, a Smith student hanged themselves from this pipe!" And in my room were all of these pipes, and it was a tiny room. We went and looked at them yesterday or the day before, a bunch of us who were in the maid's quarters went over and looked at the rooms, we couldn't believe them. I wasn't sure if — I can't remember if I had a window or not. I mean, that's how bad it was.

RAMSAY: Wow.

O'MALLEY: I was told, and I didn't realize, I was moved into Cutter shortly after that because someone got pregnant. But I didn't know that, I didn't know why she was suddenly no longer around. She had been wearing a big black cape to cover her pregnancy, apparently. I don't know. So, I got a room in Cutter.

RAMSAY: So, what did you do in Cutter with your friends? Were you close?

O'MALLEY: I was very close. We had room mothers at that time, I mean, you had house mothers, excuse me, house mothers. You don't have those anymore, and they had a little, you know, room, and they were supposed to take care of us, you see? The first one was a Christian Scientist, and quite a strict one, because I remember when I fell off my bicycle, and blood was pouring off, I said I could walk to the infirmary, and she said, "That's a good idea." The second one was an alcoholic. Quite charming, and she was a friend of F. Scott Fitzgerald, if you can believe it, in her youth.

RAMSAY: Wow.

O'MALLEY: Yeah. And when she — she's mentioned in the biography of F. Scott Fitzgerald. So, one (laughter) night when I came back from a date, and they brought me in, and apparently, he looked like F. Scott Fitzgerald. So, her name was Mrs. Nicks, came out totally drunk, looked at him and said, "Scotty!" and started lurching towards my date. I thought, oh this is weird, I'd better get out of here. Pushed him away and whatever, but what a weird — what a weird time, things have changed so much.

RAMSAY: Did you have any other communities that you were close with? Any other friends, groups?

O'MALLEY: I was a musician, so I played — a cellist.

RAMSAY: I'm a cellist, too!

O'MALLEY: Oh yes! So, I was in the string college quartet, I played in that, I took — one of the reasons I did come to Smith was because of the music department, and that I could — I studied cello and chamber music for credit. And it was an extraordinary music department. I was an English major, but I hung out a lot in the music department. I practiced two hours a day to keep sane. (laughter) I went back to Sage and was looking all around at the practice rooms yesterday, it was interesting.

RAMSAY: Yeah. What were your experiences with — you said you had brought a date, so what was the dating culture like?

O'MALLEY: It wasn't bad, it was, I think, extremely unnatural in some ways, because you could have boyfriends in all different campuses, you know? You sort of just — it wasn't, like, a day-to-day occurrence, like, say my children at Bowdoin College, or whatever, in which people went to classes together, or whatever. But at Smith, I mean, I'd have, like, boyfriends on different campuses. But it was odd, because you didn't take classes together. Not that I — I still believe in women's education. So, I hung out at Amherst a lot. And see, we had to be back by ten o'clock at night, so this was tricky. Because particularly, if you had a house meeting, then it was 10:00, other nights, maybe it was 10:30. And then I can't remember the weekends, but it wasn't that late. And I remember one time hitchhiking back from Amherst. (laughter) And I got — I was late, so I was, you know — the upperclassmen or whatever, the whole — you know, I was put on — I had to come home at 10:00, like, every night, or something, I don't know, for a long time.

I remember — and then we were watching the movie *Vertigo*, and it's pretty scary, and it was past the time they — or it was coming close to the time I was told I had to be back. And so, I told my date,

We have to leave. And it was the terrifying part of *Vertigo* we couldn't see the end, because I had to be back, because I was told I had to be back on time. Strange.

RAMSAY: So, the rules are really strict, it sounds like.

O'MALLEY: And then, do you still have Father's Weekend?

RAMSAY: Mm-mm.

O'MALLEY: Oh, and then your father came, and you hung out with your father all weekend. My father was a very good dancer, but it was very strange going to dance with my father.

RAMSAY: Yeah.

O'MALLEY: Bizarre.

RAMSAY: It does sound bizarre. (laughter)

O'MALLEY: Something wrong! (laughter)

RAMSAY: So, would you like to tell some of the stories you had mentioned when we walked in?

O'MALLEY: Sure. Well, the first one, when I came in to look — because I hadn't been back here, it used to be an alumnae gym, and it was — it didn't look like this. But everybody was supposed to be able to propel outside of their dorm window on a rope in case there was a fire. And, you know, a lot of these wooden buildings, you know, they were a little scary. But we were taught how to do that, propelling out of windows here, as I remember. They had these rope harnesses, and we had to propel out of — and show that we could get out of a window of alumnae gym without, you know, falling or whatever. So, that's one thing.

And another quick story, freshman year, Robert Frost used to live around, and he had access to Amherst, and also, I believe, to Smith. But he could roam around and do whatever he wanted, particularly in Amherst. And so, one night, he was here at Smith. And it was so exciting because, you know, if you knew his poems. And the first thing he said, "You're all here to see me before I die," because he was pretty old. But then he said something in his talk, because I was a professor for many years, teaching for many years. He said, "Beware teachers, professors, when teaching becomes having to guess what it is in the teacher's mind." You know how often a teacher will say, Well, and he has, or she has the right answer, and waiting for the student to give the right answer, what's in the professor's head. And I always carry that with me, because it's so easy to lapse into that when

you're teaching, and it's not good teaching. But I think what would be interesting, if I talked about being the college carillon.

RAMSAY: Yeah.

O'MALLEY: There was a will that left money for a student to play the carillon every night at around six o'clock, and then when chapel came out — let out on Sunday. Now, I didn't know anything about playing a carillon, but I knew it paid you money, not a whole lot, but it paid you money. But as a musician, and the bells were terrifically out of tune. Now, Cutter is right near the bell tower, where the carillon is. It's not those bells in Mendenhall, but the — you know? So, you could hear the bells all the time, and they were so out of tune. So, I figure, well, it wouldn't be bad to play them, because then they wouldn't bother you so much being out of tune, and you get paid. So, I went up — I could play piano, but I didn't know how to play the carillon, but I figured I could figure it out.

So, if you haven't been up there, it's wonderful. You go up high, and then you have this big key that unlocks this grate, and you go into this little medieval room. And I went in there yesterday, but now they have a new keyboard. And you hit it like this, and the bells ring. Now, they go all over Northampton. So, I'd be playing, sometimes the music would fall down, but you'd just sort of — nobody ever listened, nobody. I did a couple of things. One was, you could jump on the pendulum at the clock and stop time. And sometimes, I didn't feel like I had much power when I was here, because I came from a public school, didn't have a very good education, pretty insecure, and very young. So, jumping on the clock and changing the time, that was pretty exciting. Nobody ever noticed, though. But when I was there yesterday, and they now have a digital clock, no one can do that anymore. (laughter)

The other thing, that I used to play a lot of Beatles songs, nobody ever noticed. Once, when chapel broke, I played the Israeli national anthem, thinking that might get a rise out of somebody. No, none. And I played it quite a lot, and I did, like, variations of it. It was kind of a pretty tune. The only time anyone ever listened was this string quartet, the Kaiser string quartet by Haydn, and the theme of it is actually "*Deutschland über alles*," which — it's a beautiful quartet, but when you think it's the German, you know — whoo. So, I played that one time, and the violinist, his name was Banat, but he was Hungarian, and he got very angry, and he said, "What is Gushee doing playing that?" And it came back to me, that was the only time anyone ever listened to my carillon.

And it was a great place to bring dates, because you had your own little medieval tower. And you could walk up among the bells. One of the bells said, *ishishon chuvskala*, which I translate, "I sing almost A," and it was so out of tune. Now, I've been told that all of the bells have been replaced now, because they were so out of tune.

RAMSAY: Wow. (laughter)

O'MALLEY: So, I don't know if anyone has talked about the sex lectures. I don't remember enough about them, but we were just trying — we were just at a program, and someone was asking about — they were Harvard professors that came to talk to us about sex. Yeah. I think it was sophomore year; it would be great if you could find someone who could talk about that. You know, it was at a time when there was no birth control pills, abortion was illegal. And even birth control of any — even all birth control, even the kinds that they were, like, condoms, or whatever, is all illegal. So, to have someone come and talk to us about sex was like, whoa.

But we were trying to put it together. All I remember was that — all girls, you know, and here is these two male Harvard professors talking to us about sex right there, that's — and he said, I remember, "Well, if you have an orgasm, you'll know what it is," he said, very knowingly. "It's sort of like a warm bath." I was very young, very Catholic, and I was like, Oh, OK. Anyway, they told us a lot of things, in which, I think if our parents had been there, some of them — I shouldn't repeat this, I think, because I didn't hear it, but there was something about being sexually active, and you should be by a certain age, or whatever. I mean, things that, whoa.

RAMSAY: Yeah.

O'MALLEY: Anyway. OK, I mean, I can tell more stories, but time must be getting close.

RAMSAY: No, we have time for plenty more questions.

O'MALLEY: Oh, OK.

RAMSAY: Yeah, so I was wondering, it sounds like you were around for a lot of controversial things.

O'MALLEY: Yeah, you know, I was a real political activist.

RAMSAY: Yeah, so were there any political controversies at Smith when you were there?

O'MALLEY: Not much, it was quite a quiet time. I do remember, one of my friends was in SNCC, and I probably had a SNCC button, or whatever. But I was so determined to graduate and not take any time off. I did go south at the end of '64. But I did not want to interrupt my education to become that involved, so I was involved in graduate school in New Orleans. But a lot of people took time off, not so much at Smith, I guess.

RAMSAY: So, you went south to do voter registration?

O'MALLEY: No, I went south to — at first, to go to Tulane and get a Ph.D.

RAMSAY: OK.

O'MALLEY: And then, because I had grown up in Boston, which is very segregated, but one is very — can be raised very liberal. But when you were in the South, there was constant things you were bumping into. The first time — it was a group of us who drove from Smith, who drove to New Orleans. And I was with Kathy Vogel, whose father taught at Tulane, and she was raised for part of her life in New Orleans. And we were in Jackson, Mississippi. I was twenty or twenty-one, and I was very vain, so I didn't have my glasses on, couldn't see anything. So, I just needed to go to the bathroom, so I walked into this bathroom, not seeing that it was for blacks only. And I got pulled out of that bathroom pretty fast, saying, You want to start a riot? If you do, OK, but you ought to know what you're doing.

But in the South, there were always — from laundromats that, you know, said white only to — and I would say things like, “Well, how about if I only do white wash?” Ah. Or, “How about can my dog come in, because he's very black.” But it was constant. It got so that if we went black and white people together into a restaurant, they would serve the black people but not the white people, and they thought they wouldn't have trouble with the law. (laughter) But then we would immediately get the FBI, or whatever. We would do housing things, in which an African American would try to rent a place, and be told no, and then I would go try to rent the place, and of course, be told I could, and then we'd bring the FBI, or whatever, on them. We did all kinds of stuff. And it was exciting.

RAMSAY: Yeah.

O'MALLEY: I must say. And important. I taught — and my husband — my first teaching was at Xavier University, which is an all-black university. And a lot of the students, it was a summer course, I think a lot of the students had never had a white teacher, or really knew anyone white. And I had never taught all-black students. I mean, it was just such a wonderful education. And would have a black student living with us, usually one of the Xavier students. And one time, he forgot his key. He was from the North, and he was going to go in through the window, and then he realized, if I do that, anyone sees me going through the window, you know, I could easily get shot.

RAMSAY: Right.

O'MALLEY: So—

RAMSAY: Wow.

O'MALLEY: Anyway, it was quite a time. This — my husband was about to be drafted into the Vietnam War. So, at that time, if you were pregnant, you could keep your husband out. So, I was — we were in the draft board, and he was 1A, and that meant you were going to, you know? So, I said, "What if I'm pregnant?" And they said, "Oh, are you? Are you? Are you?" And I said, "No, but give me ten minutes." And so, we had a child. Oh, about ten months afterwards. So, when the child was born, they wanted to know what color the child was. Well, she's blonder than I am, so it seemed a little silly, but I wouldn't tell them. And in New Orleans, at that time, you had to go back to 32 ancestors to determine if the child was black or white. So, they had to go back to Ireland, they had to go back to Maine. But we finally got the birth certificate, so he didn't have to go to war. But in New Orleans, they would say, What is your color? And I never knew — up here, we would put C for Caucasian, but if you put C down there, it's Colored, you see? So, finally I got — I said, "Well, why don't you just put down P for pink." (laughter) Which would put them in a terrible rage. But anyway.

RAMSAY: Well, it sounds like you had — you know, you were very involved with activism, yet you did a lot with social change after Smith.

O'MALLEY: Yeah, the women's movement.

RAMSAY: Yeah, so—

O'MALLEY: I do stuff at the UN, now, too, and I'm having a great time.

RAMSAY: Yeah, so, where do you sort of trace that radicalism? Do you think you gained any of those ideas at Smith, or other places?

O'MALLEY: Well, I don't think necessarily from Smith. Smith was — I just heard figures that there were more women faculty in the '30s and '40s, I think, than when we were here in the '60s. That was a time of low faculty — you know, and now, you have over half women faculty, as you should. At Smith, there were women faculty who could not get any higher than Smith, this was sort of the — and a lot of them were very bitter. They were good faculty members, but if they — it was like they could choose to be a faculty member, but then they didn't have a husband, or children, or — and there was something — I felt like I didn't want that, I wanted it all, and I wasn't sure how you could do this. There was a history professor named [Klemperer?], and she was the first woman — and her husband also taught. And it was so nice to see a married couple that was a woman professor teaching, because there weren't women professors teaching or were married.

Yeah, so it was odd. You probably had everyone talk about posture pictures, right? I hope.

RAMSAY: Just one, yeah.

O'MALLEY: Just one? Oh, OK.

RAMSAY: You can, yeah, share that with us, that'd be great.

O'MALLEY: I still find it so amazing that they would take pictures of us. If you had your period, you'd keep on your underpants, so a lot of people said they had their period, so at least you'd keep on your underpants. But what was so amazing is having your picture taken, and then discussing it with someone, with your gym teacher, and then you get graded on it, and your hyperextended knees got — I got a B-plus. But I, you know, seventeen, the first one, looking at it, and thinking, I've never seen myself — you know, it was appalling.

Now, I think afterwards — and now, the world has changed a lot about lesbianism, thank goodness. But I do think the woman who went over it was lesbian — which is fine. But it was, at the time, the whole thing was, like, it was bizarre. And then you had them several times, and you had to pass them.

I also, about lesbianism, Smith was very, very anti, and it is my understanding that a woman that I greatly admired who was a year ahead of me, she disappeared, and later, I asked a friend who was with me when I was getting my masters what happened, she was from Smith. And she said, "They discovered her affair with — or her relationship with another woman." She was kicked out. And just before we came, you know, there was a whole in, like, '63, '62, that was when the homosexual — the gay faculty, men, were all kicked out. It was Newton Arvin, and there was a whole group of men who were really, really fine, but they were forced out because they were gay. But they were really prominent. And you would think, why would — families would like gay men if they're worried about faculty. (laughter)

RAMSAY: That's true, yeah. So, I guess I'm going to wrap up by asking two questions. What do you think of — what's the first thing that comes to your mind when you think of your time here?

O'MALLEY: A really fine education.

RAMSAY: Yeah?

O'MALLEY: And to me, it felt like a summer camp in some ways, because everything was done for you, it was so lovely, so pretty. But you could learn all of these things, and read these books. It was so exciting, the education, and that's the way it should be. So, it's good.

RAMSAY: Do you have any advice for the graduating Smithies?

O'MALLEY: It's such a different world. Next weekend, I go to — my oldest granddaughter is graduating from Bowdoin College. And when I told her there was such pressure on us to get married, and both my sisters got married at twenty-two. She said, "Susu, that's the funniest thing I've ever heard! If any of my friends wanted to get married, we'd think they're sick!" She said, "I'm almost — you were twenty-two, you know, I'm twenty-one, this is crazy!" And take your time. You know? Have courage, take your time to figure out what it is you want to do, and go for it. It's such a different world, but it's harder in some ways. And it's much more exciting in other ways in trying to figure out what it is you want to do, and then figuring out how to do it. I mean, we didn't — we couldn't even figure out what to do, you either became a teacher or an academic, some people became doctors, some became lawyers, but the kind of range of things that you can do now is so exciting, right? Right? And think about the UN, too! (laughter) It is so exciting there, I find.

RAMSAY: Yeah.

O'MALLEY: Yeah.

RAMSAY: Well, thank you so much for taking the time to do this, I appreciate it.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Steve Thaw, June 2014.