

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Lisbeth (Libby) Stone, Class of 1953

Interviewed by
Ellice Amanna, AC, Class of 1024J

May 25, 2013

Abstract

In this oral history, Lysbeth (Libby) Stone, who has only missed one reunion since graduating Smith in 1953, tells numerous stories from her Smith years, recalling that Sylvia Plath was in her Chaucer class and how evident it was that she was a unique talent.

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: Stone, Lysbeth. Interview by Ellice Amanna. Video recording, May 25, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Lysbeth Stone, interview by Ellice Amanna, transcript of video recording, May 25, 2013, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

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Transcript of interview conducted May 25, 2013, with:

LIBBY K. (LYSBETH) STONE

by: ELLICE AMANNA

STONE: I am 81. I was two years old when she graduated from Smith College.

AMANNA: Yeah, I met her last night at dinner.

STONE: Did you?

AMANNA: Yeah, she was at dinner last night, she's a hundred.

STONE: I just think that's fantastic that she came back.

AMANNA: Yeah, her daughter is with her she --

STONE: Oh.

AMANNA: Yeah, was the celebrity.

STONE: Did her daughter go to Smith?

AMANNA: I don't know, I am not aware of --

STONE: I don't know the answer to that. Last year at the opera -- the Smith College Night at the Opera, President Christ came, and then I was talking to a young man. He was there, he had brought his grandmother she -- you know, they -- you get so dedicated to being with, you know, Smithies and whatever.

AMANNA: You don't want to miss it.

STONE: And I thought that was so nice of his grand -- the grandson to bring grandma.

AMANNA: So are we rolling?

Video: Yeah.

AMANNA: Oh, we're rolling.

STONE: Oh, I didn't know that.

AMANNA: Oh, okay. That's okay. I didn't know it either.

STONE: You asked a question.

AMANNA: So this is Ellice Amanna and I am conducting an interview with Lysbeth, or Libby K. Stone, Class of 1953, it's May 25th, 2013, and this is the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you for being here to talk with us.

STONE: You're very welcome.

AMANNA: So just reflecting, you're here for reunion.

STONE: Right.

AMANNA: Do you come back for all of --

STONE: I've only missed one, that's because I had a new baby, I couldn't really leave at that point. But I've only missed one of my every five year reunions, and we came -- I still lived in the east, and we came the year after we graduated also.

AMANNA: Okay. So can you say why that's important to you?

STONE: Well, Smith is --

AMANNA: Clearly it is you keep coming back.

STONE: -- important to me. I am sort of -- I hope you're going to edit this. I'm sort of like Doonesbury because when Doonesbury first started it said my name is Michael Doonesbury, I come from Tulsa, Oklahoma, and I'm going to Yale University, and I thought I've done that.

AMANNA: You could hear yourself.

STONE: I'm from Tulsa, Oklahoma and my name -- and I'm going to Smith College. So I -- and I've been a reader ever since of that comic strip.

AMANNA: Okay. So you feel connected to the college.

STONE: Of course, he had on overalls and kind of a piece of straw hanging out of his mouth in that one. And I don't know how Gary Trudeau does it, but he's just so consistently funny and right on, it's fun to read.

AMANNA: So do you remember when you first decided to come to Smith, how you chose Smith?

STONE: I chose Smith. Well, my dad went to Harvard, and he thought Wellesley would be nice, but and I saw Wellesley, thought it was beautiful. And but the people I knew that I respected and admired went to Smith, and I thought I want to be like that, that would be really neat, and I'm not sure I turned out that way. But I do --

AMANNA: Do you remember when you first came here, first coming onto campus what your impressions were?

STONE: As I say, I felt like Michael Doonesbury who left Oklahoma and went east to college. I felt like everybody went to prep school and was smarter than I, but I thought I can do anything. My parents had told me I could do anything I wanted to do if I worked at it hard enough, and so I decided I would do that and I --

AMANNA: And was there a period of adjustment when you first got here?

STONE: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, and Sylvia Plath was in my Chaucer class.

AMANNA: Yeah, oh, wow.

STONE: Wow, and --

AMANNA: Well, do you have a memory of her, specifically?

STONE: Oh, yeah. And Mr. Patch would read with no names attached, he would read various assignments that people wrote and he always read hers. I'm not sure he ever read any of mine, but I mean aloud so that -- it's a very small class, and we knew whose it was when he would read it that it was her because they were so good. And but I have to say that she always carried a nice thick dictionary around with her. It didn't just flow out of that brilliant mind, she worked at those wonderful poems, and stories and things.

AMANNA: But you had a sense even then that she was --

STONE: Something special, right, and so did the professors.

AMANNA: Were you an English major?

STONE: Yes.

AMANNA: Oh, okay. Okay.

STONE: So I took Chaucer and medieval lit from Howard Rolland Patch who was a very famous professor at the time even. And one summer I wanted to go to California, I had a cousin there who said, "Come stay with me." So I -- mother -- I said, "How about if I take a course at UCLA." She said, okay, she didn't want me to go and just do nothing all summer. So I did that and I wanted to get into a graduate course and medieval literature, and oh, we don't allow auditors. You're not supposed to have knowledge; I mean you don't just learn for learning, you have to get credit for any. Well, it might give you an advantage next year if you take the course. Okay. I said, "Well, how about if I'm a student of Howard Rollin Patch at Smith College?" And he said, "Oh, well I -- we might be able to let you audit the course and say a few words from time to time." I said, "That would be very nice, thank you very much." And so I did, but that was definitely a Smith influence that got me into audit that course.

AMANNA: Right, that was early sign that Smith --

STONE: Very early, I was a junior -- I was junior -- between junior and senior year and definitely.

AMANNA: So that was the early 50s?

STONE: Yes.

AMANNA: Did you have a sense that you wanted a career, because a lot of women at that point were going to get married and that was it, but did you plan to do something with the English degree?

STONE: Not at that moment. Everybody in my class either wanted to go to Boston, Washington or New York. So I went to New York, and I went to work at Bloomingdales on the Executive Training Squad. It was very exciting to go to New York and to move to New York and share an apartment with several other Smithies. And it was hard work starting out in the Executive Training Squad, and you worked 9:00 to 9:00 everyday from Thanksgiving to Christmas, and I thought there's got to be a better life than this. But I learned a lot, if you don't learn anything except to be a smart shopper, you still learn a lot if you do one of those programs. And then my boss at Bloomingdales introduced me to my husband and we were married 58 years. So and he didn't do that. Well he became an executive and then we moved to Houston, Texas, in the olden days, you know, before NASA and it was exciting, it was interesting.

AMANNA: So the women that you moved to New York with, were they roommates, were they housemates?

STONE: We had two bedrooms and two bathrooms.

AMANNA: Where were you living at Smith?

STONE: In 88th and Lexington in New York.

AMANNA: No, I mean at Smith what was your house?

STONE: Oh, Laura Scales.

AMANNA: And were they --

AMANNA: And one was from Laura Scales and one was from -- the fourth one was not a Smithie, she was from -- what's the -- at that time it was a girls school, but now it's combined with one of the Boston, like Harvard or something. It was Harvard Radcliff or something like that.

AMANNA: Oh, yeah, Radcliff.

STONE: Okay. The fourth one was from that, one of the other girls knew her. But it was fun.

AMANNA: But do you have -- do you remember your house, was that a big part of your life the house culture? Do you remember your housemother?

STONE: I loved everything about Smith except -- I won't go into that. But I loved my English major, and I loved my professors, and I loved the reading, I loved the library. For a little girl from Tulsa, Oklahoma it was all pretty wonderful. But and as I say I had some role models that I hoped I would turn out like. Then after having -- meeting George, getting married, having three children and raising them, I volunteered for years. And then when my third child finished high school one of my friends said, "You can stop being a volunteer, why don't you get a library degree? And I thought well, maybe I will, and so I did. I went back to school after all those years and got a Masters Degree in Library Science and became an elementary school librarian because they were all gone off to college and I'd have something to do with the rest of my life. And I had never stopped reading, either to them or to anybody else that would listen. And but I did go back and get the degree and have a library of my own to run for some years thereafter. And my one disappointment is I haven't been able to get into the library here to see what's new. But Betsy Hays (phonetic) who's a co-chair of our class reunion this year is also a librarian, she went back to library school after some time. So somebody said, "Oh, and then you got paid for being a librarian." And I said, "Well, you could call it that, but not really."

- AMANNA: Yeah, that's not why you went into it.
- STONE: It's not like some graduate degrees where you immediately get this big higher salary for having it.
- AMANNA: Yeah. So thinking about Smith and your education here, you were an English major and, you know, clearly loved reading and it led --
- STONE: Absolutely.
- AMANNA: It led in some way to your career. How would you assess the education you got, do you feel that Smith prepared you for the world?
- STONE: Wonderful. Wonderful, and also the attitude that you can do anything you want if you work hard enough at it. If you go to this school and graduate you'll be able to do anything you want in life if you work at it.
- AMANNA: Yeah. Do you have a sense when you come back of how much the school has changed or how much it's stayed the same?
- STONE: It's changed a lot over the years. Because when I went here it was more liberal arts and literature of different countries and languages, and now, I think there's more of an emphasis on science and, but that's kept it up with the world. I mean I had a little Royal typewriter when I was at Smith, and I would sit it on top of the case that it traveled in and type up things. And you know, my children -- I still have it by the way, I mean it went to Smith too. I got it when I graduated from high school and it had a four year education here. And so I still have it in a closet, and my kids look at it, my grandkids look at, oh, wow, what is that. But it still works and occasion --
- AMANNA: So you felt well prepared?
- STONE: I felt well prepared, not scholastically well prepared. But after graduating from Smith I felt scholastically well prepared. I never had any trouble in library school. They wanted me to get a PhD and said they'd pay for it. Well, I said, "Well, why don't you give that scholarship to somebody who needs it, okay. It cost at that time -- are you -- and you're sitting down and you are too, okay, \$90 a course, \$90, not \$9,000. But I really said my husband could -- if I decide to get a PhD my husband can afford to pay that.
- AMANNA: Yeah. Yeah. So do you remember the political climate at that time? Were you involved at all in any kind of activism? There was a lot happening on campus. Or were you strictly in your studies?

STONE: I did a lot of stuff, a lot of class stuff, a lot of things for the class and --

AMANNA: Like what for instance, social kind --

STONE: Well, just volunteering kind of things, and later on I had been a class secretary and I've been Smith -- at Houston all the official jobs and all that, and --

AMANNA: So was that part of the culture that you think you got out of Smith that giving back?

STONE: Volunteering.

AMANNA: Yeah.

STONE: Well, my mother and my aunt always volunteered places and so I had good role models as well as Smith teaching you to participate and because it really did.

AMANNA: So you had --

STONE: Both -- I'm getting it from both sides and that's very good influence.

AMANNA: So what extracurricular things were you doing at Smith other than your classes, were you involved in clubs, organizations, anything like that?

STONE: Not much that I can remember of clubs. But I did volunteer in various organizations, things that had to do with literature. And I fell very, very fortunate to have had teachers like Professor Howard Rollin Patch, which - - who had at that time a very big reputation as being the best on Chaucer and he wrote -- I still have several of his books and occasionally look at them. And he would be very proud to know that within the past year a friend -- a father of one of my sons-in-law said Cindy's mother took Chaucer in the original and I have a passage that I would like to know what it says that somebody sent me do you think she could do it. Well, it just happens that my daughter had -- the oldest one had volunteered me at school when she was in high school, well just before high school. Her teacher said "We have a teacher here that knows old English, but we don't have any teacher here who knows Middle English." And my daughter waived her hand and said, "My mom knows." So I volunteered at her school and I didn't know the teacher was taping it, and she gave me a copy of the tape. So I have me doing Chaucer at school for my kids.

AMANNA: So there's definitely a Smith connection for that?

- STONE: A Smith connection to that because I never saw Chaucer in the original at Tulsa Central High School I can assure you. But and so that was nice I could do it, I translated it. Mr. Patch would have been proud of me after all those years that I could translate that. And I do have a Middle English dictionary that I bought in England. After college my mother gave me a trip to Europe with her inheritance, and a bunch of other kids, Smithies. There were ten of us including a (indiscernible) ** 0:16:52.3 student who were Smithie who kind of organized things.
- AMANNA: Was that when -- for graduation?
- STONE: And for graduation that was my graduation gift it was very --
- AMANNA: How long did you go?
- STONE: Seven weeks.
- AMANNA: Wow, where -- what was that --
- STONE: England, France --
- AMANNA: What's your memory of --
- STONE: -- Germany, Italy. I've been to several of them again, fortunately I've been. My husband traveled for work and I would go along sometimes once the kids were grown.
- AMANNA: So were these women that you were close to, your friends, people you might still know, people you traveled with?
- STONE: I have always been a friend of other Smithies. I helped organize a Smith club in Houston. I haven't quite made that yet in Santa Fe because I'm old now and I have too many other things -- responsibilities. But I would help anybody. And we now have a trustee who lives in Albuquerque for the first time, Debra Romero. Why can't I think of her whole name? But anyway, she's a lawyer in Albuquerque, nice lady I've met a couple of times. She came to the Smith Night at the Opera, and we've had several nice chats.
- AMANNA: All right. So you do have a lot of connections even at this --
- STONE: Even without a formal Smith club in Santa Fe I still keep my Smith connections.
- AMANNA: And what do you remember about that trip, any memories of --

STONE: You mean that trip to Europe. Oh, a lot of funny stories that I don't think I want recorded for posterity like one -- well, this ones not so bad. A customs customer in front of me was being really evil in Switzerland, and finally after about ten minutes when were standing there all of us with our stuff and waiting for him to be quiet and move on, and the customs official said in a very sweet non-sarcastic voice, "Do you know that your brain must be the size of a pea and you could still fit in the Gettysburg Address." And I've never forgotten that. And the man sort of to himself -- he didn't know whether he'd been insulted or complimented with the Gettysburg Address and all this. But that was a rewarding experience from that trip, and I don't remember funny stories and things, but I remember that.

AMANNA: Yeah. So when you come back to reunion and reminisce, do you have a group that you --

STONE: Oh, yes, we do.

AMANNA: Yeah, what kinds of things do you -- do people remember, what --

STONE: Well, sometimes they actually talk about serious things like things they've read, and Betsy Hays who is one of the heads of our reunion this is also -- was also a school librarian in her working life and she and I talk about reading to kids. People say, oh, kids don't read anymore. Oh, yes, they do if they get to read what they want to read they read a lot. And my volunteer group that I help do, I did not start it or organize it, but I helped with it for years, has been giving three free paperback books a year to two schools worth of children from poor areas, and the kids -- I order all the books by the way for this. I do not spend all the -- raise all the money, though I do donate decently. But if you could watch the looks on peoples -- on kids faces, and these are elementary school and they came in and the books are all -- they've got them all spread out on tables and they get to go around and look and pick a book three times during the year. And up until this year we have been matched by Reading is Fundamental. And I hope you're going to edit this. But congress in it's infinite wisdom has stopped giving money to Reading is Fundamental, they'd rather complain that kids don't read, than give money go a wonderful organization like Reading is Fundamental. And they provided 80 percent of the fund, and then matched what we raised from that source. So in Santa Fe we will -- the 75 volunteers we have will keep it up. But there's so many towns and school systems that won't be able to do it and that's so sad. And I just wish they could see the children when they come in on one of those days and they're allowed to go around in the library to all these, you know, tables with books on top and watch the children and watch the looks on their faces. They're just thrilled that they can pick a book and, you know, after the first couple of times they'd come in and say how many can I have. Well, just

one today, but two other times during the year you'll get another one. Kids do love to read. They don't -- not necessarily love to read what they have to write a test on or a paper on, but just for the pleasure of it and its all things you read when you were growing up too, I mean there's wonderful classics and things. And as I say, we -- our 75 volunteers will probably be able to keep up our program in Santa Fe, but so many we know aren't. And, you know, Reading is Fundamental their riff will be -- just it will be gone. I mean they have some backlog money, but --

AMANNA: that must break your heart?

STONE: Oh, it does. It's just you open a whole new world to children when they like to read and it's relatively easy to do when they're young.

AMANNA: Well, we're coming to the end of our time. Is there any other memory of Smith that you'd like to talk about?

STONE: I loved Smith. I loved my four years here. I worked hard, because some people had a much better scholastic background than I did. But I just found out your teachers are willing to help you. And it was impressive to have people like Sylvia Plath in your class and --

AMANNA: Are there any other --

STONE: -- in Chaucer class. She's one year younger than we are -- was a year younger than we are.

AMANNA: Are there any other professors you remember --

STONE: Oh, I remember all of them.

AMANNA: -- other than Professor Patch that stand out to you?

STONE: If you promise you won't say?

AMANNA: I promise just between us.

STONE: We loved Alan Burr Overstreet he was Government Professor. I couldn't decide for a while whether I was going to major in English or in Government and I had as many hours of each just about because I came here thinking I'd be an English major. My earliest memories are my mother reading to me. And some poet whose name I've forgotten because I'm taking antibiotics at the moment said, "Richer than I you will never be I had a mother who read to me." And I really, really believe that's true. And just --

AMANNA: That's a lovely way to wrap up. Thank you so much for sitting with us.

STONE: I could go on and on with the funny stories I mean.

AMANNA: That's the nice thing about coming to reunion, it triggers a lot of those memories.

STONE: Yes, and I -- but I didn't tell you enough about the professors that we really liked. But as I say, the Government and English Professors that we just loved. And I had Marie Borroff for a writing course and it was her first year out of getting her -- after getting her PhD. And then she went on, you know, to be the first woman professor at Yale of English, and I felt very lucky to have had her. And she worked past retirement years and she was not much older than we were, as I say, she had just gotten her PhD. And she became, as I say, Yale's first female English professor and -
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AMANNA: So some formidable models for you?

STONE: Right. And then I don't remember her married name, but there was a girl in my class who went to prep school, and I'd be writing my paper of the week for Ms. Borroff's class and as a head, you know, and Nancy would -- I'm not going to tell you the rest of her name, she's come into class and she'd put her feet up on the seat in front of her and she'd be writing her paper of the week and she'd get an A. She went to prep school in Connecticut someplace or something like that, and I thought how does she do that, I labor over mine so hard. But by the end of the end of the year I was getting pretty good grades too because I was working a lot harder on it than she was. You can't really sit there -- this is before computers so this -- she's writing it in -- with a pen on lined paper and she turns it in and she gets a better grade than I do every time. But that gradually changed. You can imagine that would be slightly discouraging. She went to a fancy prep school and I went to Tulsa Central High School myself. I had a couple of good teachers there, and they were also reinforcing the fact that if you work hard you can do it. So I think that's a lesson that applies today as well as 50 years ago.

AMANNA: Absolutely.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Debbie Shea, July 2013.