

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Carol Sudhalter, Class of 1964

Interviewed by
Julia Greider, Class of 2016

May 17, 2014

Abstract

In this interview, Carol Sudhalter talks about feeling removed from many of her classmates when she was at Smith and discusses her frequent ventures off-campus into the surrounding area. She recalls the class and racial tensions that led her house mother to forbid her friendship with a black cook. Finally, she talks about her love for and career in music and how it led her back to Smith for reunion.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded using Canon Vixia HF.

Videographer

Video recorded by Julia Greider.

Transcript

Transcribed by Judith Jacobs, Audio Transcription Center.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Sudhalter, Carol. Interview by Julia Greider. Video recording, May 17, 2014. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Carol Sudhalter, interview by Julia Greider, transcript of video recording, May 17, 2014, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

Bibliography: Sudhalter, Carol. Interview by Julia Greider. Transcript of video recording, May 17, 2014. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Carol Sudhalter, interview by Julia Greider, 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:

CAROL SUDHALTER
Northampton, Massachusetts

by: JULIA GREIDER

GREIDER: All right. So this is Julia Greider and I'm conducting an interview with Carol Sudhalter, Class of 1964, on May 17th, 2014, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this.

SUDHALTER: You're so welcome.

GREIDER: So to start out, just tell me how you ended up coming to Smith.

SUDHALTER: OK. It's kind of an odd story. Well, I grew up in Boston, and my father was a really good saxophone player, and so he played in a lot of bands around New England. And he played at some time or another at Smith. And he looked around and said, "Oh my God, these women are so the top of the world and great class and everything, and if I ever have a daughter," and so forth, "this is where I'd like her to go." So that was it. And he started putting money away, and sure enough he ended up having a daughter after two sons, and when I got to be about sixteen he started telling me that this is what I should do. He'd really love it if I went here. And he wasn't a forceful person, but he made it clear that he would be so happy if I – so I should come and look at it. Anyway, so then I included it in the schools I applied for.

GREIDER: Cool. Did the fact that Smith was a women's college influence your decision to come here?

SUDHALTER: No.

GREIDER: OK. So what did you decide to study once you got here?

SUDHALTER: I was a rather passionate birdwatcher and insect collector and I always – you know, that's what I did as a child. I wanted to be an entomologist and a science writer. I wanted to follow in the footsteps of Rachel Carson, who was the pioneer writer on alternative forms of pest control, telling us about the dangers of DDT. That's what I wanted to do. So I studied biology, botany. I was one of the first four college students to

take entomology courses at University of Massachusetts. It's now Five College, I know, but then it was Four College.

GREIDER: So what was that like?

SUDHALTER: That was great. It was fabulous. It was really nice having two campuses, being able to get off campus and see men and get these great entomology courses, and the adventure of going over to Amherst, you know, to UMass was wonderful.

GREIDER: So tell me a story about an academic experience that you had here that had a big influence on you.

SUDHALTER: OK. Hm. That might have been something I'd want to think about beforehand. It would be OK to go to another question and come back?

GREIDER: Yeah, sure. Did you go abroad when you were here?

SUDHALTER: No.

GREIDER: OK. What kinds of extracurricular activities did you do? Like clubs or sports or anything like that?

SUDHALTER: I was kind of a loner so I was constantly out on my bicycle. Constantly. I really explored all the farm country and the stores and the towns and the woods and the rivers, and I'd just go jump in somewhere and have a swim and that kind of thing, so. I was in the Glee Club, though. I studied under Iva D. Hyatt, who was, you probably know, she was a great, great, legendary figure, wonderful choir director.

GREIDER: What house were you in when you were here?

SUDHALTER: I was first in Gardiner and then I moved to Ziskind.

GREIDER: So what was your experience with house community like?

SUDHALTER: Well, I – it was great. I had a conflict with the housemother in Gardiner. That's why I moved. It was a class question. She was complaining about my friendship with the cook.

GREIDER: Oh.

SUDHALTER: Yeah. She was British and she had her ideas. So I, rather than confront that or organize, which probably today I would, organize students and write a letter or something, but I, no, instead I moved. But then I loved the Ziskind House a lot. It was very modern, nice, and I liked the people.

GREIDER: So do you want to talk a little bit about what it was like to have a housemother and what that relationship was like?

SUDHALTER: Sure. I had never had any experience like that in my life. It was just, you actually had to wait for the housemother to pick up her fork before you could pick yours up and start to eat. And you couldn't leave the table until she got up, so without really staring at her you had to kind of just know. So that wasn't a very nice experience for me. I felt very restricted and I eventually started skipping meals and eating on my own in various places. I didn't really like that restriction. You had to wear a skirt to dinner. It was hard to get used to all those rules, for me.

GREIDER: Yeah, it seemed, we did some research for this project and it seemed like there were a lot of rules and regulations that you had to follow like that.

SUDHALTER: There were. And if you came in five minutes after curfew, which I did once because I was in the middle of a very deep conversation and didn't think I should interrupt this person, you had to go up in front of a jury of your peers and you know, then you'd get this additional curfew or some other punishment.

GREIDER: So what were your experiences with traditions at Smith? Did you have a favorite tradition or anything like that?

SUDHALTER: No. No. There were traditional, for instance, foods that I was very unfamiliar with like flaming plum pudding on holidays and things like that. So that was interesting to me. I don't think I participated much in traditional kinds of marches and activities.

GREIDER: OK. How would you describe a typical Smithie when you were here?

SUDHALTER: To me everybody seemed sort of perfect and beautiful and great skin and great clothing and I mean, it's probably a misinterpretation on my part but that was kind of like, glancing around that's what I thought. So there was a little bit of a feeling that people were — again, this is probably a misconception, but feeling like the conversation at dinner was a little superficial, a little phony. The people were kind of being trained to be the all-around, you know, woman who says the right things and does like the finishing school sort of thing. Maybe there was a little bit of snobbery. I don't see any of this now when I see my classmates, none of it. But I do remember thinking that, so whether it's right or wrong, I don't know.

GREIDER: So how do you feel like you fit into all of that?

SUDHALTER: I didn't.

GREIDER: OK.

SUDHALTER: I didn't. I felt very outside. Until my last year. And I think that probably that was a mistake on my part. I think that now, being 71, I think I kind of know, after all of our life experiences, therapy, all the things that teach us, I think I know how to get past my own attitudes. First of all, to spot them. Like, look at your big, fat attitude today and let's do something about it. And then to reach out. And I think at eighteen or seventeen or twenty, I think you just don't know.

GREIDER: So what changed your last year here that made it better?

SUDHALTER: I had a huge life change in 1963. I was in a depression and I started therapy. I think it was the summer of '63. And I began to find my inner core, and six months after that I decided to play an instrument, I started playing the flute. I borrowed a flute from someone. And I learned, I started learning how to really accept myself and probably therefore start to look at what other people had to offer. My classmates.

GREIDER: So did you get involved with like other musical groups or anything when you started playing the flute?

SUDHALTER: Oh yeah, but not musical groups at school, no.

GREIDER: OK.

SUDHALTER: I think I took a few lessons from someone in a younger class but, but I think I started to go into the Northampton Inn and try to play with groups, you know I was interested in jazz. But the Glee Club was the main thing I did at college.

GREIDER: What was your social life like? What kinds of things would you do for fun?

SUDHALTER: I would do things regarding the town. For instance, are you familiar with White Eagle Hall? Is it still there?

GREIDER: It sounds kind of familiar but I'm not sure what it is. (laughs)

SUDHALTER: It's a kind of Polish center. They would have polka, a night where there was a band and people would come and dance polkas and obereks. And I would go downtown and sort of mingle with these Polish farmers (laughs) and they would pick me up and whirl me around. And I would watch the band, you know, quite fascinated with all these clarinets and trumpets playing so fast. So that was, adventures like that, I mean I would meet people from town and go out with them. I had some friends that ran a second-hand bookstore who became lifelong – a couple who

became lifelong friends. And I would go to their house and hang out. And then I'd do a lot of birdwatching, so that was my main activity.

GREIDER: So did you get a sense from that of what the town people thought of Smith?

SUDHALTER: Yes.

GREIDER: What kinds of things did they say?

SUDHALTER: Well, there was a little rift there, you know. I think it's probably different today. I mean I think there was this feeling that we're the town and those are the kind of, the ones that think they're the rulers or something.

GREIDER: Did you have any experiences with relationships or dating while you were here?

SUDHALTER: Oh, I had one friend from Amherst who was an unusual guy that I think we made friends, and he had a lot of, you know, stability problems, emotional problems, but he was a gifted poet and so forth. I didn't — nothing that I can remember as a serious relationship, maybe there was a fellow in New York I saw for a while who went on the Freedom Rides and — but nobody from within the Ivy League or anything.

GREIDER: So do you remember any particular controversies on campus when you were here or big political issues that people were talking about?

SUDHALTER: I think that some people may have gone down South to be active in the Freedom Rides and SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee]. I'm not sure. And I don't remember any — I think you're more referring to something that would be happening on the campus.

GREIDER: Well, both things. Because I think the larger politics kind of might come out in campus life sometimes, but—

SUDHALTER: A few of us went to the dean to find out why there weren't more black students, and we were kind of annoyed about it. There were some foreign black students, but not American, African Americans. And the dean said something foolish like, "Well, we just don't have the applications," or "We just don't have the grades." It didn't seem feasible to us. So that was like, I don't know how much of a buzz that was, but we did try. So that's one thing.

GREIDER: How did the campus react to JFK's assassination?

SUDHALTER: Everybody was wearing black and very, very upset. I remember that very distinctly.

GREIDER: Do you remember where you were when you heard?

SUDHALTER: No.

GREIDER: We saw that in our research we saw that George Wallace came to speak here.

SUDHALTER: Oh, God, I don't remember that.

GREIDER: OK. (laughs)

SUDHALTER: Sorry.

GREIDER: That's OK.

SUDHALTER: Wow.

GREIDER: So tell me about some challenges that you experienced while you were here.

SUDHALTER: Well, yeah, I don't know if this is what you're looking for but my, you know my father, being so bent on this image he had, was determined that I should somehow fit in. So my curly hair wasn't good enough. I should have straight hair. My clothes weren't right. I should have another outfit. So I felt this pressure, which I knew was impossible. I was never going to be — you know, I'm who I am. I knew that from the start. So that was a conflict I think I had.

And then I had this issue with the house mother because she called me in and said that she had heard that I had made friends with the cook, the black cook, and, you know, that I couldn't do this. This wasn't allowed. I couldn't go to her room. And I insisted that yes, I would go to her room. She had nice records. She used to play me her jazz records and we had a good friendship. No, she said, then I couldn't cross her kitchen to go to get there, so, and then I had to go out the front door all the way around the dorm and in the back door, which was for the cooks. And it wasn't so easy in the snow. (laughs) And she insulted me and said, "What's wrong with you? Can't you make friends with your own peers?" So I couldn't see why a cook wasn't my own peer. I mean that, I had never heard anything like that. So that was a major conflict and unfortunately it tainted my attitude until my last year. So that I felt on the defensive. And as I say, now I would not, I wouldn't react the same way, I wouldn't keep something inside like that and just be mad, that's crazy but that's — those are the things we learn from life. If people learn it earlier, just that much more lucky, but I think we just grow in life and we learn how to deal with things in a more healthy way. Not all of us, but I've been lucky that way.

GREIDER: Do you remember other instances of racial or class tensions that you experienced?

SUDHALTER: No, I don't.

GREIDER: All right. Do you have any favorite memories from your time here?

SUDHALTER: Yeah. Well, the whole setting, the town and the campus was also so beautiful and I loved the botany department and my teacher, the botany teacher. I think his name may have been Haskell, Mr. Haskell. I loved going out on my bike and just exploring this area. It's just a beautiful, beautiful part of Massachusetts and I thoroughly, thoroughly enjoyed that. So those are the things I remember, and then I loved the Glee Club, of course, with Iva D. Hyatt.

You asked me before about academics and there was one thing that popped into my mind, that when you wanted to study something, you know, it was quite possible and easy to do so. So when I got involved with studying Spanish, which I studied for four years, there was the language labs, and I could go every day and dictate and read and talk into a machine and listen back and improve my pronunciation, and there were all the facilities that we needed to study anything well, so that was quite amazing and I see in retrospect all the more how amazing it is.

GREIDER: What do you feel was expected of you once you graduated?

SUDHALTER: From the world or your family or—?

GREIDER: Anything, both, or yeah.

SUDHALTER: Well, I think it was a tacit, not-so-tacit expectation that I would get married. You know, I think that there was, part of coming here might have been the option of meeting someone who was well heeled and having a comfortable life. Maybe that was just my father. And I probably internalized it and knew that he had that in his mind. My mother, I'm not so sure how she felt, and the rest of the world, maybe expressed it or not, I don't know — I mean I live in New York now and nobody cares if you're married, single, or anything else. I mean, in New York you can just walk down the street with no clothes and no one would look. (laughter) So there's a tremendous freedom and, but I guess getting married, I don't know about having children, whether that was expected of me or not. I don't think I received any messages from anywhere about that and I never did. I never married and I never had children, and there's no particular reason. It just didn't happen. Maybe I chose inappropriate people or — and then realized it or something, I don't know. So that was one thing. And then I guess there was the expectation that you would use your education to get some kind of

status in your job, in the job world. So again, that's something I didn't really do.

I mean, I took my first job as a science writer in the government agriculture department and I didn't really like the way they – it was very bureaucratic and I wasn't really writing what I wanted to write, and then I did get other offers later from science magazines, but by that time I was so involved with music that I thought I shouldn't have a full-time job anymore. I should work part time and have – and nothing too demanding and be able to study music and practice a lot and catch up. So I sort of did that and then at a certain point, I think 1972, I started teaching flute after I had studied for those years. And when I was 32 I started playing saxophone, so I tried to make those the priority.

GREIDER: So how has music been a part of your life since then?

SUDHALTER: Well, I've been a musician since then all the time, I've been teaching and I travel, I play concerts. I played, I have my own big band, jazz big band, and I have a quartet, and I play in other people's groups, and I record, I do all the things that a freelance musician does. For a while I had my own business, Mix & Match Music, which provided bands for weddings and parties and did classical as well as jazz, as well as Latin, but that was more the '80s and '90s, and with the economic downturn there's not as much business for people with groups like mine. It's more the everything bands that really can play all the styles that – and do a show and do a little dancing and kind of the whole show – that really get the weddings. So, which is OK because I had enough years with it, but I loved it. And I travel, I go to Italy at least usually about two months a year and play there, and England, and I've been in some festivals and I have a very nice life and I teach kids, you know, five-year-old kids piano and teenage kids flute and you know like that, I just, a really, really interesting variety of things that I do.

GREIDER: Mm-hmm. That's great. So do you feel like your Smith education has influenced the rest of your life very much? Or not?

SUDHALTER: I would say yes.

GREIDER: How?

SUDHALTER: Well, I mean it's sort of a point of — like — it's kind of like an access, in a way. In some ways negative, in some ways positive, but it's, it's like you integrated into yourself not just the education but being a part of this institution and becoming aware of what it is, and then in a way, if you're looking at other colleges, you're always comparing and saying, Well, what did I have and what do they have and you know what, and seeing it through those eyes of your own experience and then, and then looking at women, especially coming to reunions and seeing what did my classmates and I each accomplish and how did this come from, how

did Smith enable us to do this? And looking then at other women and saying, What do they accomplish and how does that compare? It's always that kind of a comparison point or is it a central, a focal point.

GREIDER: Do you think you can describe what it is that Smith gave you and other women in your class?

SUDHALTER: Well, certainly a belief in the depth and power of women as a being. That's a very big thing.

GREIDER: OK. So how did you decide to come to the reunion this year, and have you been back before?

SUDHALTER: OK, yeah. I played at my forty-fifth. Well, they asked me about coming because each — some classmates volunteer to contact other classmates, and so someone contacted me and I said yeah, I would come. At that time I wasn't making too much money and I said I would come but I can't really afford it and I would love to play. If I could play I'd have a role there that I would really enjoy. And they worked it out for me, so I did, I came and played and everybody was so enthusiastic, I mean it was just wonderful that my music was reaching them so directly.

And we had it at the Alumnae House and it was a very intimate little setting. They were just crowding into the room and sitting on the floor and cheering and everything and subsequently one woman, one of my classmates organized the Smith Club of Cleveland, so they had me out to a major jazz club there and they just filled the room, so the owner was completely willing to have me in. And so they asked me to come back under similar circumstances and now we have a quartet instead of a trio. And I was more aware of what it meant. I had not been to a reunion prior to the forty-fifth, so I didn't think anything interesting would really happen.

But it is very interesting and very heartwarming. It's very nice. And then you know it's great to hear, I'm sure you would love this, too, to hear the stories, the follow-up stories of what has happened to people, not just what they've accomplished but how their medical histories have been and the tragedies and you know all these things. It's fascinating I think.

GREIDER: When you think about your time at Smith, what's the first thing that comes to mind?

SUDHALTER: I see myself you know, just running and biking and just, just that, an image of a figure that just gets outside and just can't stop, just starts moving and exploring. My eyes were wide open. Somebody just said to me, from my class said, "You opened my eyes to Northampton when we were freshman," she said, "And I thank you. You know, you were so enthusiastic about the area." So I was happy to know that I had shared that.

GREIDER: Do you think there's any particular reason that you were more interested in like going off campus and stuff like that? Or seeing the area?

SUDHALTER: It seems to be something that I have in me and I'm not sure I can explain it. I was thinking about it last night because even though I'm perfectly happy to be in the dorm and I went to the activities, nevertheless when I went back into my room I had the same urge, I just had that urge to go and I left and I walked up and down Elm Street and I was so happy. So maybe it's something about the area that draws me or maybe it's, I mean I've done a similar thing when I went to Vermont to some classes in Vermont, so maybe it's just an innate wish to explore, but I'm not really sure because when I go to Italy, for instance, on tour, it seems like I can be in Rome for two weeks and I never get to the Vatican. (laughs) So maybe it has to do with the country and fresh air and stuff like that.

GREIDER: Do you have any advice for current or future Smithies?

SUDHALTER: Oh, that's a great question. Wow. Oh God. I do, I do. I mean — just I guess, OK, I mean maybe I could say it this way. Just to take advantage of the great privilege that we have in this country, better than other countries in a lot of cases, of getting in touch with our feelings, getting therapy, getting counseling, joining groups, reaching out. You know, we have it way over Italy in that. That's, I mean in this country you can get every kind of therapy imaginable for every problem. So I'm sure that at Smith there's so many people who are willing to communicate, so I would just say to them, don't isolate, you know, reach out and whatever it is, you know.

GREIDER: Well, just in wrapping this up I guess, are there any other big things from your time here that you feel we haven't touched on that you'd like to talk about?

SUDHALTER: Well, I mean there's huge, huge change. You know, away from these rules and it's a very healthy thing, away from the pressure of alumnae, you know, that you couldn't room with this person and you couldn't do that or, you know it's all gone, so I think it's definitely for the better.

GREIDER: Did you think those changes were happening while you were here or did you see them—?

SUDHALTER: No.

GREIDER: OK.

SUDHALTER: When I came back, you know I came back occasionally and I'd see, I'd see the changes. I mean everything had to be so hidden and so proper

and in presenting a face, you know and then you couldn't have men in the dorms. If somebody, if a man came to the second floor to do some repairs you'd have to shout out, "Man on floor!" (laughs) So yeah, I mean the improvements are tremendous. Tremendous.

And there's much less of this class structure, which was very intolerable. So many of my classmates, you know, they say the same thing. They say, "You know, it was a curse and a blessing. I feel proud to be a Smithie, but I feel embarrassed." You know, so I think we were left with that, and I don't think today you would have that. So it's all for the good. I think it's all totally improving and I'm glad that's —

GREIDER: That's great. All right. Well, thank you so much for doing this.

SUDHALTER: So welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Judith Jacobs, June 2014