

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Susan Warner Thoresen, Class of 1966*

Interviewed by  
Grace Martin, Class of 2013

May 21, 2011

## **Abstract**

In this oral history, Sue Thoresen describes why she chose to attend Smith, the overall campus atmosphere, her experiences singing in the choir and glee club, the social changes that occurred at Smith during her time there, campus reactions to the Vietnam War, and her life after Smith.

## **Restrictions**

None

## **Format**

Interview recorded on miniDV tapes using a Panasonic DVX-100A camera. One 60-minute tape.

## **Transcript**

Transcribed by the Audio Transcription Center in Boston, Massachusetts. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Olivia Mandica-Hart.

## **Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms**

### *Video Recording*

**Bibliography:** Thoresen, Susan. Interview by Grace Martin. Video recording, May 21, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Susan Thoresen, interview by Grace Martin, video recording, May 21, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Thoresen, Susan. Interview by Grace Martin. Transcript of video recording, May 21, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Susan Thoresen, interview by Grace Martin, transcript of video recording, May 21, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted on May 21, 2011, with:

SUSAN WARNER THORESEN

by: GRACE MARTIN  
filmed by: KATE GEIS

THORESEN: I'm used to this side. I'm not used to that side. My mother—was the class of '41, and she's not here today. She's alive, but she's not here.

GEIS: You can talk about both of your experiences, I guess.

THORESEN: Yeah, we'll see. If it comes up.

GEIS: All right.

THORESEN: Like this, or like this?

GEIS: However you're comfortable.

THORESEN: I'm actually—running into something. OK. I'm good.

GEIS: OK. If you just want to—

THORESEN: Oh, I didn't even look at my hair.

GEIS: I'm ready when you are. Go ahead.

MARTIN: This is Sue Thoreson, class of 1966, interviewed by Grace Martin. So how did you choose Smith?

THORESEN: Well Grace, I grew up in Iowa, and I had a mother who was in the class of '41, who was from upstate New York. And she was a class fund agent, so we used to stuff envelopes. And when I got to be a senior in high school, I applied to a large women's college—that was Smith—a small women's college, a large co-ed, and a small co-ed. And my mom tried to convince me actually to go to an easier school. She didn't want to put the burden on that she was sending me off to Smith. But I chose to come to Smith, and I was delighted that I did it. My mom has—there were three people from Davenport, Iowa in my class. My mom interviewed people for Smith for, I think, 25 years. So there's definitely a family history.

MARTIN: So the family history was a big part of it? Was—you mentioned that you had applied to other schools, other than women's colleges—

THORESEN: I applied to Duke and to Rollins College in Florida.

MARTIN: So why did you ultimately choose a women's college over those?

THORESEN: I wanted the challenge, and I'd actually gone to a small girls school in Iowa, which—I was a day student, which was not a desirable thing. You were really discriminated against locally. People thought you were a snob because you went there. I went there because I had asthma as a kid, and I was in the hospital roughly four times a year. So my brother and sister went to the local high schools. But I really thought that the opportunities for education were tremendous in sports, and I wanted—and my mother and father both felt very strongly about going to a different part of the country. So that was a very important feature, and my mom has now established a scholarship at Smith for, with the first priority, people from Iowa, and then the Mid-West.

MARTIN: What was the campus atmosphere like when you were there?

THORESEN: Well it was really the beginning of a tremendous time for change, and I think—I was in Laura Scale's house, and we had three seniors in our house that were all student officers—head of the college and the student council. They were very, very progressive, and several had marched in Selma. They were—coming from Iowa was a really big change for me. One of the things they did freshman year in the fall—one of them did was fix me up with someone who went to Amherst who was black. He was from New York. I had never dated anyone who was black. And it was that atmosphere, so it was a real atmosphere of change, I think particularly in our house.

MARTIN: Can you elaborate more on the change in your house?

THORESEN: Well we just had role models for us that were seniors, and we were freshmen. And, back in the '60s, in the early '60s, that was sort of the beginning of time for change. There were still these ridiculous rules, like you couldn't have men in the room and, by the time we graduated, I think you could have men in the room with three feet on the floor. And the door, I think, had to be open. There was a guy, I think sophomore year—freshman year—who went to Dartmouth, who ran up—we were on the fourth floor at Laura Scales—who ran up to the fourth floor and almost got expelled from Dartmouth, just appearing. So, you had—we all waited on tables, which I think is a really good thing to do. We learned to raise right and lower left, something we've never forgotten, and when I'm in a restaurant I think about it. So we all had to do that as freshmen, no matter how much money you had. You did it. And then we all were—had the duty where you were on—had to check people in

and out. So I think those kinds—and we had meals, and we had a dinner that was a sit-down dinner in our houses back then. And those of us who graduated in that era really felt that it made a much more cohesive house, and you made friends in multiple classes, because you did these activities together. So—and then also you could go down for breakfast, which I did, in your pajamas, and then you could go back up and go to bed, which is why I gained about 15 pounds freshman year. And I went home at Christmas, and my brother said, “Do you want skim milk or regular?” And he looked at me and he said, “I guess it’s skim.” And I’d never had it before then.

MARTIN: So you mentioned the house community was very close. Did you feel like there were opportunities to make friends outside of the house and socialize in different ways?

THORESEN: Yes. I sang in the freshmen choir, and sophomore choir and glee club for four years. So when it actually came to my fifth reunion, the first time I came back, a lot of people I knew there were from having sung in the choir and glee club. And—so that was one pretty major activity, and I think we did some house teams and sports teams. I did some of that. And then you made friends by the experiences from some of your classes, where you either struggled and you commiserated—and I just ran into one of those at my reunion right now, that we commiserated on over Botany. And I wish I had been a lot more attentive and really interested in botany initially. But I came to Smith as a W, and as a W—you signed up for classes, and that put me at the end of the latter. And I wanted to take this interdepartmental science class, because I never had Chemistry or Physics, and I was the outstanding Math student in this little school. But the kind of Math I had was not the level that it was at Smith. So I signed up for the class and it was full, and they put me in Botany. And the first day in Botany, his lecture was on corn, and he skimmed through everybody’s pictures and saw that I was from Iowa—I grew up in the city in Iowa—and immediately started asking me questions about the corn plant. And other than knowing it was a corn plant, I really didn’t know. And this would just show you something about grades. I think it’s probably good to share, which is—I had like a D in the first semester in Botany. I was not, shall we say, very motivated on it. And I hired myself a tutor for someone who was a junior, who ended up majoring in Botany, whose family owned an apple orchard in Massachusetts. And so, by the end of the year I had an A in Botany. And he gave me a combined score that was a B-/C+, which on my transcript translated into a C. I was really disappointed. And, probably ten years later, I was President of the New Hampshire Smith Club, and we had—this Botany instructor came up and gave a lecture in New Hampshire. And I told him that story, and he said to me, “You know, that was the first year I was here, and if it was now, I never would’ve done that. I would’ve given you the B.” I always think about Botany and that. And then, Botany’s one of those classes you use a

lot—you're interested in plants, you garden and stuff like that. I wish I'd paid a little more attention. Since I hadn't wanted to be in the class, I didn't have the right attitude to start. I had the right attitude at the end.

MARTIN: Can you talk some more about what it was like to be at Smith when all of the traditions and some of the regulations were changing?

THORESEN: Well I think they particularly changed as we were leaving. They were working on some of those issues, where—just the issues of being able to have men visit you. We had really strict hours in terms of being in: you had to lock the door, and you had to check in and out. And we had—you think about it now. To make a long-distance call, you had phone booths on the first floor. Never mind cell phones. The changes are just enormous from that perspective. I think the academic standards were really high. I mean, of course I'm the one who's sitting here and telling you what happened with that class. But I think they were high. There certainly was no grade inflation. But there was also a tremendous difference, I felt, coming from a small school from the Mid-West, to kids who came out of these big—particularly prep schools in New England, that they were incredibly prepared. And those of us who didn't come out of that background, it probably took us the whole first year to kind of catch up. So the Arts Survey course, which I took my senior year—there were people who had that in high school. For them it was like a review. So there was, I think, a lot of difference in the first part of coming to Smith coming from a small school in the Mid-West. But I think there were a lot of unifying factors, and I think the house system was particularly really good. I had friends from the two classes [above me] that I played bridge with. None of my friends played bridge. And my best friend from that era ended up living six doors away from me in New Hampshire when I moved there. And both of us married non-bridge players, and neither one of us plays bridge anymore. So I think some of the social change—things happened where there were—some of it was here, but this is during the Vietnam War, building up. So one of my—one of the things at that time was the draft, which was a factor that affected men and, obviously, people we dated. One of my friends got married between junior and senior year, and was about four or five months' pregnant by the time we graduated, because they were not drafting people who were married with children. So there was this whole outside awareness of not just some of the civil rights thing, but this whole war build-up. And it affected a lot of people. I met my husband in graduate school, but about six weeks after we were married, he was drafted. So people in my age group who had the military experience—it was really quite a different change of life.

MARTIN: So what was the attitude around campus around the build-up of the Vietnam War?

THORESEN: Well I think, initially, we were isolated. We weren't thinking about it as much until—then you started talking to friends, people you were dating. One of my classmates, her brother was killed. But we were still in an isolated campus, so I don't—we had some unusual speakers. We had politicians like Teddy Kennedy. I think the first time he ran, he had this airplane accident up here in Northampton, and he spoke at John M. Greene Hall in front of it, and I remember going to hear him. George Wallace, who was a segregationist Governor from Alabama, he was at Smith. So we had—Arthur Schlesinger was speaker, I believe, at our graduation. So we had some pretty prominent people who came in and they were not just people that would represent—they would represent, clearly, different views. I mean, George Wallace was quite a different view. So if you—I majored in Government, so if you were more interested in the political kinds of things, you went to some of those events, and you could've been here and not gone to any of them, other than graduation—that kind of thing. So I don't know if that's different. I don't know how involved people are now, in terms of Afghanistan and Iraq. I think the major difference now and then, in terms of people being, say, 20, was the draft. That was huge. And what that did was it brought a lot of equalization and a lot of—men had a lottery, and they drew a number, and it brought all sorts of people into the military that might never have been in there. And during Afghanistan and Iraq, many of those people never were in there. And it equalized it out all that. And having lived in Georgia for two-and-a-half years as a result of that, which was quite a different experience from someone coming from Smith College and Iowa, where I was discriminated against—I ended up resigning a job on sex discrimination, where I was ultimately offered a promotion with a \$200 raise when it was budgeted \$2800 more. And it was quite a different experience at that time. Things that—sex discrimination was not illegal.

MARTIN: What were your expectations when you graduated from Smith, in terms of what you would do?

THORESEN: Well, I think Smith—and I still think this way—I think it really empowers women. And I think you come out of here feeling you can do anything, and that's an incredible statement. When you sit there and you think of where you came from—in high school, I certainly didn't feel like I'd do anything then. I felt I could hold my own. I went to a graduate school where there were 110 people in my program—there were ten women. I didn't find that any problem at all. So I think you feel quite a bit of confidence. You feel like you're smart. You feel like you can listen. And I think you'd be pretty well-rounded. You recognize that there are people who are brighter than you are, and there are people with expertise in areas that you are clueless about. But I think you feel—when you get out of Smith, I think you feel like you've had a really good education and that you can do a lot. You can make a difference.

MARTIN: Were there certain expectations about marriage and family, right after you graduated?

THORESEN: No. I went to graduate school. I did meet my husband in graduate school. When I was at Smith, I was pinned to somebody else, and I didn't ever feel that that was going to be the person I married. And I didn't think I was ready for it then. But I think I chose graduate school, partly because I didn't have to write a thesis in the program, to be honest about it. And, also, it was 11 months in to get a Master's degree. So I got one in Public Administration. And I got that because my—I had a Smith professor who had been an advisor and, between junior and senior year at Smith, they had a program called the Ford Foundation—Ford Scholar Program, probably the only honorary scholarly type thing I did at Smith. And there were 12 of us selected, and we went to Washington, D.C. And we could—some people worked on the hill. They worked in different areas, and I worked in Public Housing. I grew up in Iowa. There was no Public Housing. It was viewed as communistic at the time. And so I selected something I knew nothing about. I thought I'd go in the Foreign Service before that. And I did a study—this is 1965—on services received by low and moderate income women in Baltimore. And it was right when the head start was starting, so I went up and interviewed people and I found that a number of people had no books in their house. And so, when we were trying to get them to start reading and stuff to their children, a number of the adults couldn't read and had nothing. And it was a really big eye-opener, and I came back and wrote a senior paper about it. And that professor—Smith professor—his mentor was at Syracuse, and that's why I went to the Maxwell School—Graduate School.

MARTIN: Were there any professors or mentors at Smith that had a really big impact on you, or were inspiring?

THORESEN: Yeah, it's terrible. Now I'm—we had very good Government professors, besides Mr. Weinstein, and Mr. Rothman—Stanley Rothman. And it's terrible having told this story about this guy who was really influential—I'm drawing a blank of his name. I don't remember his name. I think the—Iva Dee Hyatt from the choir and the glee club was very instrumental. And a lot of us—we have a lot of fond memories of that whole experience. And even though I talked about the Botany professor, that was really, really important. I think your advisor is important. But there are a lot of good classes. I think—we were talking about it today—that one of my favorite classes and professors was Ramon Ruiz, and he taught Latin-American History. And I've had no Spanish. I had three years of French in high school and in college. But he was such a fabulous lecturer that I took every class he offered. He was the type that could give—no apparent notes—and like a crescendo at the end of the time, and he got standing ovations all the



time. So I think ultimately—I think he went to a school in California, but he was really a fantastic lecturer. So he always stood out as probably the best lecturer of anyone I had.

MARTIN: Do you have any advice for current and future Smithies?

THORESEN: I would say try different things. This is a liberal arts college. When our class did a survey as the most influential course that people had—it was pretty unanimous that it was Art 1-1. It was something that my mother made me take senior year. “You are not a well-rounded person unless you take Art 1-1.” So I think having—making yourself exposed to other areas is really important. It may not do the best job for your grade point average, when you try something that’s completely different. But just trying something different, I think, is good. So that’s still there. I think communication and listening. And I would not be tied in to your Blackberry all the time.

MARTIN: I just have a follow-up question about your husband when he was drafted—what happened?

THORESEN: Well right after Syracuse, we went to Boston, and he was concerned he might get drafted. We applied for the Peace Corps. We were accepted into the Peace Corps on Friday. On Monday he got a notice from his draft board that he was eligible, and on Tuesday he got drafted. And he was getting a degree in City Planning, so he had tried to write a proposal for using city planners in the military, in terms of base planning and community planning. And nothing really happened on that, and then he got drafted and was sent to Fort Dix in New Jersey. And I was working in Boston, and—I got to tell you that story in a second—so one morning at like six in the morning, this military-type person called up and asked to speak to my husband. Well I didn’t want to say he wasn’t there, and I didn’t really want to say he was drafted. And they said they wanted to talk to him about this, and then I did say that he was at Fort Dix. And then I worried that it looked like he was trying to pull strings. And strangely enough, he ended up going from there to Fort Benning in Georgia and working in a mental health clinic. And he had never had Abnormal Psychology. He only had Sociology and Architecture. So it was sort of interesting. But that’s why we ended up there. But I will say that when I interviewed, after having the Master’s degree, one year out from Smith, in Boston that—I had two interviews that today people would be finding pretty shocking. The first was with a management consulting firm, in which they had never had a woman travel. They didn’t want me to travel; they just wanted me in the back room. And my husband—that was before he was drafted. They were like, “Well, your husband’s here. You need to be here for him.” Then, the second thing was—the other place, they actually hired me—in the interview, asked me if I was expecting anything in nine months. And I was just totally shocked and, when I told my husband later, he said, “Well I hope

you said, ‘a raise.’” And I’ve always repeated that story, because it’s a good response when someone takes you—something like that that you just don’t expect at all. So they did hire me, and they were a really good place to work.

MARTIN: You mentioned that Smith sort of made you feel like you could do anything? Would you—if you had the chance to go back to Smith again, would you do it all over like that?

THORESEN: I’ve been involved with Smith a number of times since then. I just went to Alumni College for a couple classes. I could’ve gone to like eight of them. I could’ve even—I went to two. The choices were many. I think one of the things that’s really been good about Smith in more recent years is the Ada Comstock Scholars: bringing people back who aren’t able to graduate and complete the education. There’s also more diversification now, which is great. My year, there were not very many people that had different color. They might’ve—maybe one or two were from Africa, and one or two were from India. But there were very few Native Americans. There were very few people who were black. There were very few people who were Hispanic. And there weren’t even that many people who were Asian. So there’s a lot more diversification now, and that’s good, I think. I don’t—now, there’d be other classes I’d take that I didn’t take then, especially as a mother and a grandmother. We used to kid about people who took “kiddie lit.” Now—“I should’ve taken that,” just—little things like that. And I think there were a few classes that you were kind of intimidated about taking and you didn’t take, and now you wish you had taken them. And I would appreciate Botany a little more now too.

MARTIN: That’s a good place to end. Thank you very much.

THORESEN: You’re welcome.

MARTIN: That’s great.

END OF INTERVIEW