

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Anne Kingsley Thorpe, Class of 1943

Interviewed by
Carolyn Rees, Class of 2014

May 25, 2013

Abstract

In this oral history Anne Kingsley Thorpe looks back on her experience of being on campus during World War II, including rushing from classes to listen to reports of critical battles. She remembers Smith traditions which inspired her during her years on campus and the professors who shaped her college career.

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: Thorpe, Anne Kingsley. Interview by Carolyn Rees. Video recording, May 25, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Anne Kingsley Thorpe, interview by Carolyn Rees, transcript of video recording, May 25, 2013, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

Bibliography: Thorpe, Anne Kingsley. Interview by Carolyn Rees. Transcript of video recording, May 25, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Anne Kingsley Thorpe, interview by Carolyn Rees, transcript of video recording, May 25, 2013, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 25, 2013, with:

ANNE KINGSLEY THORPE

by: CAROLYN REES

REES: Okay. So this Carolyn Rees and I am conducting an interview with Anne Kingsley Thorpe, on May 25th, 2013, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. So thank you for being here and agreeing to participate. So why are you attending reunion this year? Why are you attending reunion this year?

THORPE: This year is my 70th reunion and, you know, people, when you say that, they say well there won't be very many of you there and there weren't that many compared to the number that came as freshman. But and there were lots more who didn't come and I learned today that some of them were put off by the idea that we were needing caregivers. But that never, you know, struck me as offensive, I thought what a nice thing of the college to do because Betsy's -- I wouldn't be coming without my daughter being able to drive me. And, of course, she does have a lifelong friend who lives here in North Hampton now, but we visited her and taken advantage of her hospitality and pleasure, I should say. And it was just nice to have her be at hand because I move like molasses in January. And this way I can be on time for appointments.

REES: That's great. So how did you choose to attend Smith?

THORPE: I'm sorry, what?

REES: How did you choose to attend Smith?

THORPE: How did I choose? In a sense I didn't choose because I had a cousin who went there, and older cousin. My mother had gone here, and her older sister had gone here. And I on the other hand thought I was going to go to Cornell and become a doctor. Now, why I got this idea I didn't know, I made this idea up about shortly after my 10th birthday because I had my appendix out and the doctor who did the job went to Cornell and was a doctor. Actually he was probably a bit of a hack and because he made an incision that made it impossible to ever be a belly dancer. So anyway, nobody tried to again say this, but the next fall or a couple of falls later after Helen graduated in '33 -- no, she was teaching at the school in New Jersey where I was attending and where my mother had taught on and off

since she had graduated, and she was going back for what's now parents weekend, but then was called something else. And it was sort of prospective students or just whatever and, of course, it was the first time I'd ever been on a college campus. But there were a couple of us who were coming together. My mother had a student a year ahead of us who was a very good student and she thought definitely should go to Smith, and so she talked her parents into bringing her up. And we came and I think we all visited classes. I remember visiting Ms. Dunn's (phonetic) English class, which was 17th century literature and it was -- you know, and then we had lunch on campus. Well, we were queens for a day and we just -- there was never any question after that/ Except that I -- a little later I came to grips with reality and realized I had to present all these credits, and had to have paths and I thought I was just okay, but I was squeaking through. So and anyway that's where I ended up.

REES: That's great. What were your first few days at Smith like, what were you feeling when you arrived?

THORPE: Well, you met a new roommate. I roomed freshman year with a girl from Pelham and it was Vernly Genery (phonetic) and she's a cousin of Helen Genery -- or Penny Genery and her older sister. And I think her own mother had died, but I think her mother went to Smith, and I know her stepmother had gone to Smith and they were -- but Vernly had come from a southern school in wherever the Citadel is, its either in Georgia or South Carolina, I don't -- anyway and I was -- and her father was editor of Collier's. Well, that doesn't mean much to you, but, you know, it's like the -- well, at the time it was as popular practically as the Saturday Evening Post and stuff. So I wasn't sure that we'd have much to say to each other. But actually we didn't have any of the same courses and, but I liked her a lot and came to admire her. Anyway, she went to the Perry Mansfield (phonetic) Camp and just this year, or last year read the book about nothing (indiscernible) ** 0:06:34.5 or what -- what is that?

DAUGHTER: Noting (indiscernible) ** 0:06:36.1

REES: Is that the name of it? And learned about how Perry Mansfield started, I mean where it came from and what its roots were. I found that sort of interesting.

REES: What did you do your first few days?

DAUGHTER: She wants to know about your first few days.

THORPE: First few days. Well, I felt a little lost because the school I -- I was graduated with the -- in the largest class that had ever been, there were ten of us, and in the last few years there had been either one, or two or none,

no seniors. So we started out as seven when we were freshman, but we picked up a couple and became ten. But I'll tell you we drove up by the back of Chapin House, and Helen had gone to -- had lived in Chapin too. And as we came I heard them say its Ms. Ross, its Ms. Ross, Ms. Ross. It was the maids, you know, who recog -- and later I -- you know I kept thinking she was such a special person and yet there was nothing to her. But she was just so nice and so kind and so pleasant to everybody and all the maids I guess just appreciated that. Anyway, that was it. But it was drizzling in the fall, and at least it wasn't a hurricane as it had been in 1938, this was 1939, the fall of '39, and the war had already started in Europe. Actually as I listen to President Christ give her last words to the alumni association, sort of I guess was her last words, I thought boy, I hope they have somebody inspiring to go on because she just gets you so fired up. And actually this last drive, I thought why reach all over the world. After all there are still an awful lot of corners in the United States that could -- that have promising, but impoverished people that might benefit by, and be ready for a liberal arts education and it would help the country perhaps too. But she, you know, laid my fears at rest. She always captures me and I just said wherever it goes, you know its good. But anyway, I hope they have somebody -- I know they have somebody. But I hope she's fired up and because for you class especially, you know, to be the last class after a beloved president leaves, or an inspiring president, I don't know (indiscernible) ** 0:09:55.3 but she's certainly made a fine impression on the alumni I've talked to, and anyway. And I liked going to my classes, I went to them feeling a little bit intimidated, didn't have anybody from Chapin in any -- freshman from -- in any of my classes. We had little divisions that we had to fulfill, which I think you didn't have when you started out, I think. When I heard I was taking something about French movies, you know, I was going to have the (indiscernible) ** 0:10:42.6.

DAUGHTER: Oh, tell her about your French teacher.

THORPE: Oh, 0:10:51.7 was abroad and hadn't been able to get back. She was held up waiting for a boat -- a ship, excuse me, to get her back. And so we met and while we were sitting waiting for the --to see what turned up, we had heard rumors that our teacher was not going to be there. A little man came walking in, stood up to his all what, maybe five feet and said my name is Robart R-O-B-A-R-T, Robart and I said, oh, my God, that's (indiscernible) ** 0:11:40.7 the textbook that we had was -- whatever it was of the -- a French literature collection, you know, ** 0:11:53.1 And so anyway, it worked on -- I was about ready to crawl under the chair, I thought. But then in a few days she was -- she materialized. But it must have been a very difficult experience for her because that first year France, you know, just -- our final French exam in between we did all the usual things. But

France was falling as we were writing about it, I think June of 1940. Anyway.

REES: So who was president when you were in college?

THORPE: Who was president?

REES: Yes.

THORPE: Well, that --

REES: Or president of the college.

THORPE: This is why I said I hope they have somebody good because Neilson had just retired, much beloved President. And we had -- I can't remember the dean's name, but she was a very prominent scholar and I think then left the year she was taking over the leadership brief -- well, temporarily and they had not selected a president yet. And so then she left and went to Columbia to teach, or Harvard, I forget which. And then the next year we had Mrs. -- oh, dear, Morrow, Mrs. Morrow she's the -- you know who she -- okay. And sweet lady and very bright and well a very woman of the world, but not an academic, nothing -- not -- no inspiration there. And then they selected a president, had followed in the tradition that he was a white male, and Herbert something Davis, Herbert W. (sic) Davis or -- anyway very uninspired. He may have been a wonderful whatever it was, scholar, but he -- I don't think he made any impression. There was no -- there wasn't that spirit that I sense about the college every time I've been, or when I read the alumni quarterly she really inspires me. And I'm sure that there have been other people since but, I mean before him because when I brought my mother back for her 70th reunion and they did stay up in the infirmary. And Dean and I went up to see if she was getting along all right because we had dropped her off and with some qualms, you know. And we walked around downtown and came back, and they were having cocktails, and the cocktail -- I mean the sherry was served in pill cups. And Jill Ker Conway was there with them and talking and she was enjoying that. But she turned to dean and said it's not as good as your sherry either. But anyway.

REES: So what are your memories from being on campus during the war?

THORPE: What were the memories that --

REES: From being on campus during the war?

THORPE: Well, the only way it affected me was that the room that I had passed onto the person who going to take it, I was taking her room and rooming with

her twin sister our senior year in one of the big fourth floor rooms in Chapin. And the year before, junior year I'd had the middle room, which is good size at least as big as this and a nice window seat looking over the hill of the daffodils in the spring. It was really a luscious place and you could look. And anyway, they had made that instead of being -- having a single that she hoped. They had brought a girl down from the quad and, but it happened that it was a friend of Jean's it was, you know, very much turned out well. But it wasn't what we had expected so, but it -- as far as and we were all interested in the WAVES in general, but after a while the novelty sort of wore off. Meanwhile about second semester -- or no, must have been right sometime in the first semester they notified a lot of people that if you took this course you could -- and finished it, completed and you could get a job right out of college in either by joining the service, if there was -- and maybe it was junior year that they told us this. And if you took this course - and must -- probably it was because there wasn't -- the WAVES had been actually formed yet. And then -- and you could go into the service or you could -- and go that way or you could go into a civil service job and right away. Well, I know the reason it was junior year is because I thought, oh, then I can spend that hundred dollars that I saved toward graduate school if -- and then go to Mexico this summer it'd pay my transportation. Because my brother and sister-in-law were in Mexico and they were establishing the very first American library. But it was not established by the State Department, it was established by the American Library Association. And Jim went down because he could speak Spanish and his wife was of Mexican parentage and they would be able to navigate well, and were both familiar with the city and so forth. Anyway, that's how I -- now, I forget what exactly you asked me, but I will try another question.

DAUGHTER: About how the war affected you.

THORPE: You don't have to tell me, I'm talking to Carolyn.

REES: What was campus like during the war?

THORPE: Oh, well, I wasn't there very long. Well, I guess I was.

REES: You were.

THORPE: On the rest of the camp I remember rushing back to listen when -- after the Russians had broken from Hitler, and when all of the battle of Stalingrad was going and it went -- it was long and so drawn out, you know, and rushing back to here, are they still holding, are they still holding. And but I didn't do a lot of newspaper reading when I was in college war or no war. The first place I looked for was Terry and the Pirates, and the Dragon Lady all sorts of world-shaking things like that. And so I don't -- I

remember not -- well, there was talk about bringing -- about the children who came over. And campus was -- or the -- generally the faculty seemed to be, you know, more involved than we were. And then general feeling, of course, was for the British, and then fear of the kind of bombing and listening to Edward R. Murrow, "This is London" and so forth. And but my mother was -- she had been very excited or upset about the Germans in World War I. And my father and mother were married in 1913, and had two little boys by 1917, when the United States entered the war so my father wasn't called or wasn't going to be called. He worked in the Brooklyn Navy Yard on a project, he was a civil engineer, but he wasn't called. And my two older brothers, Jim was in Mexico working, you know, and he was married and had two children and expecting a third. But he was -- had been in the reserve or something and gone up to Plattsburg and for summer training. So he finally, I think felt so anxious about wanting to be called that he was ready to drop everything, you know, get his family home and go, and made arrangements to do that when the war was virtually -- at least the German part of it was over. And my last nephew, I mean the youngest of their children; the expected child was born on V-J Day. The next year we were all down at the Jersey shore and Peter took his first steps about the day after his first birthday or the day before or something. So, you know, that's the way that -- But the campus as a whole I won't say I was the most aware person because I certainly wasn't. There may have been much more feeling, you know, I mean if you had a boyfriend, there were. And there were lots of boys. I remember a most attractive young man stopped, he had met a girl who was a junior in our house and he was from South Africa, his name was Ian and he brought accordion and he sat outside in front of -- and school went on a little longer or we had a warmer spring or something. But there were blossoms there and people would sit on the steps and watch him and sign along with him and he would -- it was just -- he was adopted by everybody, and he was in no rush to get over there to join, but he did. But that was where he was heading, but he stopped to see Cynthia (phonetic) on the way, you know, and he stayed, prolonged it another day or another two or three days, then finally left. And then there was a friend of our housemother's, or the son of a friend of our housemother's and she introduced him to the Neuberger (phonetic) twins who were very -- both very sweet and friendly girls from Cedar Rapids. Jean and I did go -- we spent my hundred dollars and Jean spent whatever. Her father said yes, she could go by bus as long as we rode the train while we were in Mexico. And then we lived with my brother and sister-in-law that summer and went to school. That was the summer of '42 and we were aware of getting lots of attention because there were soldiers as we went down, particularly in Texas, any stops you had in there. And then another big event that we noticed, for me, I mean this is the first time I had ever seen a colored and white signs on the -- and when we got to Missouri or it was just crazy. I thought, "What are they doing, putting these signs on the door."

REES: So what is your favorite memory from your time at Smith?

THORPE: My favorite memory?

REES: Yes.

THORPE: Oh, man. So many. I don't know. I think sometimes it was Rally Day and seeing everybody in white with their ribbons and sitting together, or just before exams, having a chapel, and singing *Awake My Soul, Stretch Every Nerve and Press With Vigor On*, and it was just such a darling idea. You know. And there was something about that size and the part of being a part of it. And it was different from -- you asked me about the first few days and I really felt lost. But then, you know, as you meld into a force, and that's the best example of why I think was when you're all together and it -- whether -- of course its emotional, and its not reason at all. But it is a good force and it could be what politicians thrive on. So. But to me it was a good force. And I can't point to just one time, but then -- at Christmas was lovely too. And I remember one wonderful and one of the great songs that I loved was when they, then the choir sang, *Masters of the Soul*, at the Fold, or however it is, and it's a wonderful carol. And taking home my history 11 book and my sociology -- I was sure I was going to -- with mid-years were going to be after Christmas, you know, I mean exams. And oh. And then just today confessed my most foolish decision was rushing to the library to study for some exam, I can't tell you what it was now. And I went into the Browsing Room, and I was -- had all my notes with me, and then I looked up and I saw on the shelf were editions of Agatha Christie, and I thought, "Oh," and then saw, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and Ms. Duckett, I took this course in Latin and translation, I'd had four years of Latin in high school, and struggled with it, but it was nice to be able to read it in translation. And she had mentioned, this was an unusual mystery, so I just picked it up off the shelf and just thought, "Well, I'll just look at it." Well, the next thing I knew I was going and it was time for lunch and I dashed home for lunch, grabbed a bite and came back to the library, not to study, but to finish *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. And so you can tell then I was not the world's most devoted student. I was diligent. I really was. I had to push and shove, man, make myself do it, and I didn't -- I wasn't unwilling to study, but I just -- you know when you're in the presence of somebody who can cut and go to the movies and still ace an exam the next day, whatever it was, and that was not me.

REES: What did you study?

THORPE: What did I study? History.

REES: Oh, okay.

THORPE: But I took as many other different courses as I could, and sometimes didn't help -- like I had to -- a free scholarship, not a full one or anything, but had financial aid. And in those days even counting for inflation, tuition was -- it was a bargain, but it was a lot for somebody whose family was not very well heeled, and coming out of the depression certainly -- I took ancient history. I worked through -- I didn't take any history course at all on -- in my freshman year, everybody else that was new practically all the freshman were taking History 11, I didn't take that until Sophomore year. And then I wanted -- I went on with taking more U.S. History, but only -- I took Billington's Intellectual History and Mr. Schrumutso (phonetic) who was ancient history professor, they were stories about him in -- had been a priest and his wife also in Orders, and they had decided to forego those vows and leave the church. But anyway that -- we never talked with him about it, but we loved our teachers. We really and Professor Kohn, (phonetic) who taught one end of the week at Smith and another end in Cambridge. But to have open house every week and so you could to tea if you wanted to or could. And people really did -- that's all I took, sort of scattered, I wasn't a full course in there, didn't have any straight political U.S. history. And presumably one would have had that in high school, but i didn't, I had English history in high school and ancient history.

REES: Well, I think that we're almost out of time, but do you have any advice for current or future Smithies?

THORPE: Oh, I think you all are so smart. I really do. I think you have a wonderful -- I mean, the world is lucky to have you and you're lucky to have a place like Smith, or -- and I think, frankly, that there are plenty of other excellent, excellent schools, and where my granddaughter, Anna's cousin is. And Anna went and visited there before she -- because I think her mother knew somebody in the French Department at --

DAUGHTER: Advice.

THORPE: And it was -- Oh, I know. Just do what you're doing I think. I just think that the -- I think you're much more aware then I ever was and I am not saying that about other people because I know that there were many wonderfully wide awake people. But I was -- I think I'm a slow learner. No? Not a slow learner?

DAUGHTER: Uh-huh.

THORPE: Just maybe late bloomer. No, I'm still studying, I guess. I have lots of questions.

REES: That's good. You went to WAVE training at Mount Holyoke after graduation?

THORPE: Well, yeah and we started right -- I was called, I think there were about, there must been about 20 of us that were all sworn in at the same time, going into communication and into communications intelligence, the Navy. We had to swear our and we called into active duty, and another girl and I, and she was here this weekend. We were both at the same office and we had to swear all these things that we were never going to tell any secrets and didn't know any. You know. But we worked, we were in the same office, doing the same things, but we were on different watches, and we never crossed path except on a weekend we might, you know, but it was just crazy. But when I was first in I was so embarrassed to be, still wearing my civilian clothes, but when you had your hat, you had to salute and I was, I thought, "Oh good heavens," you know. (indiscernible)** 0:36:51 So I would see somebody coming, it was an officer I'd cross the street so I wouldn't have to salute them. And then we would eat at -- the second month we were in, in Northampton, a hotel. No. Motel Northampton. And the same food that was --

(Audio ends abruptly)

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Debbie Shea, July 2013.