

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Jane Thurber, Class of 1964

Interviewed by
Grace Ramsay, Class of 2016

May 17, 2014

Abstract

Jane Thurber begins her interview with the story of coming to Smith as a result of the music program and her sister's attendance before her. She talks about feeling younger than her other friends in Wilder House. She moves on to discuss her music major and her career in teaching music, and closes by speaking to the importance of listening to other people's opinions and being grateful for the opportunities that Smith affords.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded using Sony EX1R camera, XDCam format.

Videographer

Video recorded by Kate Geis.

Transcript

Transcribed by Steve Thaw, Audio Transcription Center.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

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

Transcript

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

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Transcript of interview conducted May 17, 2014, with:

JANE THURBER
Northampton, Massachusetts

by: GRACE RAMSAY

RAMSAY: OK. This is Grace Ramsay, and I'm conducting an interview with Jane—

THURBER: Jane Thurber.

RAMSAY: Class of 1964 on May 17th, 2014 for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. And thank you so much for coming.

THURBER: You're very welcome, thank you!

RAMSAY: On Ivy Day. (laughter) So, I'm wondering how you chose to come to Smith.

THURBER: Ah, good basic question. Number one, I was aware of Smith as an important and wonderful women's college, because my older sister was here. She actually was in the Class of 1961, though she did not finish at Smith. She was in — she went through her middle of her junior year, but suffered what, at that time, was called a nervous breakdown. Nonetheless, I, as a junior or senior in high school did not — it was not that my sister Judy was discouraging me from coming here, nor was I thinking, oh, Judy's having trouble, therefore don't go. That seemed not to be a — it was more Judy exposed me to Smith. I was very interested in music, my mom was a composer, musician, piano teacher. Teacher of general music appreciation at my girls' private school, high school. And I had — well, I had done a lot of music through the Eastman Preparatory Department in Rochester, and knew that Smith's program was particularly strong. I knew about Iva Dee Hiatt. So, anyway, it was largely the influence of my sister, or the baseline of knowing about it through my sister. Knowing I wanted New England, knowing I liked a small town, but the fact that the music department was pretty big. I think that—

RAMSAY: So, what was your house community like when you lived here?

THURBER: It was very congenial. I think there were about 25 of us in our class in Wilder House. And about eight of us lived in singles in — on the third floor, I think it was. And we were kind of a community of our own. We

tended to be less — how do I say? We were less social than others who were up, like, I didn't know if there's a fourth — do you know—

RAMSAY: I think there are four floors.

THURBER: OK, anyway, there was a group of others in our class who were more sociable with guys and with each other than we were on the third floor. But, whatever, we were — we, I think, had strong bonding with each other. I felt myself to be somewhat young compared to all of them. I was a year ahead of myself from way back. So, I can remember, if we're talking about the house community, this in particular, I can remember that the other girls on my floor, they were menstruating, and I wasn't. If that seems — I mean, I didn't start menstruating until quite a bit later. And I can remember that on a monthly basis, they would be moaning and groaning. And I would be thinking, you know, I'm different, and poor them, but you know, what is there about me kind of thing. But that was sort of small, but it was in my brain as well.

Wilder, as you know, is far distant from the campus, and since I was going to the music building for much of my life of activity, that was a long trek. But there were others from Wilder who were also, so we were, you know, comrades with each other, coming on campus on our bikes, or walking, or whatever. What else do I remember about Wilder? I remember the smoker, I wasn't a smoker myself, but I remember that that was the escape place for a lot of people, especially to study. We had a very idiosyncratic, colorful, British — Mrs. King was her name, housemother. And I remember the meals were very formal, maybe — they're not now, right? They're not? OK. And I remember that we had Yorkshire pudding because she wanted her — you know, that was part of her background of eating from England. We also had a grand piano in the living room, and it was fun, I played some, but there was also another gal in our class who was not a music major, but she was a phenomenal pianist, and she'd play a lot.

Don't remember that we, as Wilderites, did a lot as a group on campus to single ourselves out, but whatever. We've been quite close, actually, since our years here, and I would say our Class of '64, those from Wilder are as big a number as any here at the reunion.

RAMSAY: Did you have any other communities that you were a part of here?

THURBER: Well, certainly, the music majors were, and still are, in fact, if you're interested in the still are part of it, one of our class, Ruth Ann Solie, continued to teach here in musicology, and she retired in 2010. And so we, her music major consort came back for her ending — she had a, sort of, symposium weekend where some of her former students were speaking. So, we came back to hear some pretty amazing talks by her students, plus support her. And we — there are about six of us who still got together once or twice a year for lunch, because we're in New England. So, but anyway, that's a music major, you know? (laughter)

- RAMSAY: Yeah.
- THURBER: We were not a big major department to begin with, but we continued to have—
- RAMSAY: I'm a music minor, too.
- THURBER: Oh, you are? So you know what I'm talking about?
- RAMSAY: Yeah, yeah. (laughter) I know what you're talking about for sure, yeah. Do you have a favorite Smith tradition in general?
- THURBER: Hmm, by which you would mean an event as opposed to — well, yes. First I was thinking Rally Day, Rally Day was fun. But Christmas Vespers, I think, was and is, and I still come back, I didn't come this past year, but it's been interesting to see the changes, too.
- RAMSAY: Yeah.
- THURBER: Because it's — actually, in my day, the town of Northampton did not swarm in, and now they obviously do. And now, what else did I recognize as different? Well, it was just — it seemed less — it was still beautiful, but it seemed less magical, if that's possible to say.
- RAMSAY: Yeah. So, what did you like to do on the weekends, and what did social life look like for you?
- THURBER: OK. I was not — I rarely dated. I probably studied a lot, practiced a lot still. Did we walk into town much? I don't remember doing that. Hiked, biked, I can remember getting together with a friend of mine, a classmate from Rochester, who went to Mount Holyoke, and we did Mountain Day together, and got together, also, on other occasions. But I was not one to be socializing with males at that point. I then realized the world was very different when I went to New Haven the year after. (laughter) But here, no.
- RAMSAY: Yeah? So, I read that there's kind of a big controversy in your years here because Governor George Wallace came to speak?
- THURBER: This is where you're going to find little in my brain. (laughter) If he did, I don't remember it. And would you believe, I did not remember that Dean Rusk was our graduation speaker, and that will blow my husband's mind because his best friend was Dean Rusk's son, and when he's telling me about his — well, nor do I — I'm sure I must have come to Martin Luther King's speech in the chapel. I actually was president of a religious association in my junior year, and therefore — but it would have been my sophomore year. Is that when Martin Luther King came?

RAMSAY: Nineteen sixty-two, maybe three — yeah.

THURBER: OK. All right, so George Wallace was your question, and no, I don't remember.

RAMSAY: That's fine. Do you remember any other sort of controversies on campus?

THURBER: Well, truthfully, I was extraordinarily aware of the Vietnam War, and the Black Panther protests, and all that was going on in the controversies in the late '60s, living in New Haven and being very much influenced by William Sloane Coffin. But I was, here, much less politically aware. And I — now that I think about it, I regret it, because I would've had a better feel for what was going on at a later point. I was aware of the fact that when Kennedy died, because that was November of my freshman year, or sophomore year. But that was controversy — well, I'm not answering your question very well.

RAMSAY: That's fine.

GEIS [videographer]: I'm curious if maybe just in that vein—

THURBER: Say it again.

GEIS: If you talk about things that kind of loomed large that were going on outside in the culture?

THURBER: Yeah.

GEIS: How did that affect you?

THURBER: Not so much. I would say things outside in the culture, I was probably reading and aware of as much that I was getting, perhaps, from somewhat in class discussions, but mind you, I was taking music as a major, I took French, ancient history, geology, which I hated, I find it ironic that all of the outcroppings now are, you know, around here, the dinosaur footprints, etc. that I know have more — anyway. I did not — and history, economics, did I take? Beyond ancient history — yes, I took European history, and German.

But I took very little that was politically controversial. I find this very sad to admit, and strange to say, because I am married to someone who is — I mean, he's an historian, but as contemporary politics said, he's — I mean, we are intensely involved in, and I'm forever debating with him, and he's debating with me, and so on and so forth. But at this time, you're talking about — no. And my parents, I came from a Republican family, my mom was somewhat more open and liberal than my dad, but that was only by comparison, they were pretty conservative.

So, it wasn't really looking for controversy, it wasn't in the style of my family, particularly, or at all. And yeah, the 1964 — I mean, the *Brown vs. Board of Education*, was that '65? It hadn't yet affected me. It very definitely affected me, because when I was teaching, I ended up in inner city New Haven for —and for forty years in Bloomfield with largely African-American population. But here, all quiet. (laughter)

RAMSAY: What was one of your favorite memories from Smith?

THURBER: Here?

RAMSAY: Yeah.

THURBER: Well, walking past Paradise Pond every day was lovely. I was actually on — crew was my sport, so that became on the pond. I actually loved Sage Hall and the practice rooms, too. I mean, I got a lot of pleasure out of just being in a practice room by myself and practicing. (laughter) I now come to the gym, to Scott Gym, and when I look over through the windows from Scott to the — I think about those days. The chapel, I loved Helen Hills as a place of refuge, too. And I loved Neilson Library, I would hole up with books, just for the joy of reading. But I was a pretty dutiful diligent student, too. So, I wasn't looking for ways to escape, or you know, to escape whatever the campus — I was doing the work that was assigned to me, I thought. (laughter)

RAMSAY: Yeah. So, what did you feel was expected of you one you graduated?

THURBER: Expected of me versus what I wanted to do?

RAMSAY: Yeah. If there was a difference.

THURBER: There wasn't, really. I wanted to be productive as a musician, and I also wanted it to involve sharing and teaching. I knew I was not the caliber of a performing musician that I was going to be concertizing, that was clear from the get-go. And I really loved choral work. I probably should've said, when you say special memories, Iva Dee Hiatt was, certainly, a significant influence. In retrospect, I think she was more of an icon than actually somebody whom I really learned specific things about choral conducting from. But whatever, she did — her joy in choral conducting certainly got to me, and I was an assistant conductor with the freshman choir. Continued to do some conducting in Glee Club, too.

So, I knew I wanted to do — or I wanted to do choral conducting, and figured I could in a high school setting. So, that's why I went into what were at that time, new programs. Master of Arts and Teaching were just — those programs were just getting started in the '60s, in fact, I think I was in the first music MAT [Master of Arts in Teaching] at Yale, I don't think they'd had any of them. And I applied

to Harvard and Yale, and I got into both, and I decided, I don't even really know why, the money from both — was forthcoming from both. It would have been very different, not just the life of Cambridge versus the life in New Haven, but the way it was structured, and I come to realize was quite different at Harvard. At Yale — do you want more about this, or no? You don't?

RAMSAY: Yeah, please.

THURBER: OK. Well, so, I knew that I was going to get the education courses I needed in a painless way, and as it turned out, a very interesting way. Philosophy of education was taught by a philosophy professor, you know, and psych by psychology. So, you got people right in from the department. And the music school courses I took were really very interesting, although they really didn't relate much to teaching. I did have practice teaching, but the person who was supervising was the instrumental person from Greenwich High School, so not much relationship to choral. And he pegged me — this is much too easy to say, much too simplistic, but I say it nonetheless. He pegged me as young, capable, and looked for an elementary teaching job. And I wanted to be in New Haven, because I had already established a relationship. (laughter) It wasn't with my husband, that came later, but and so I took a job in North Haven at an elementary school K-6 school. And then changed to go to New Haven after three years, everybody thought you're crazy. But at that point, I thought I'm not, I'm loving teaching — do you still want this?

RAMSAY: Yeah, this is good.

THURBER: OK. I'm loving teaching music, I'm loving this age level, but I'm not teaching them anything, I'm just having fun with them and you know, that's what you can do with it. And I really thought I needed to learn something more about strategies, and I thought the answer was to go into New Haven, and New Haven was rife with controversy at that point, as it still is. Particularly, I mean, Black Panthers were big at that point, there was all kinds of ferment in the schools. I changed, and was happy I changed, much to the consternation of people around me, but what was valuable was that the reactions of the kids were much quicker. And after a year and a half in New Haven, I took the lead of the gal who — Carol Heath was her name, she was the wife of Fenno Heath, the Yale Glee Club director. She was, like, big wig in New Haven, trying to get better music in the schools, and she was getting people to go into the Kodaly Musical Training Institute in Wellesley, which led to going to Hungary, I did that. My husband and I were married right before we did that. We went to Hungary together. Basically, I wanted, at Smith, to teach music, choral, and that's the path that it took.

And, you know, it meant graduate work of some sort. The most significant work that I've done since Smith that really informed my teaching was with the Kodaly Musical Training Institute and program. Because after that — that was in 1972, so it would have been, like, after five years of teaching. A year in Hungary, some years — six months in Wellesley prior to that. And then a pilot program in South Hadley. From there, I went to Bloomfield and was there for forty years. That was, by and large, really related to this system of teaching music that I learned from the Kodaly program. Kodaly is K-O-D-A — you know what it is, but I'm not sure whether your — yeah.

RAMSAY: So, do you have any advice for graduating Smithies?

THURBER: Do I have advice? Be open to differences. I'm not happy with the Christine Lagarde story, I find that very sad. I recognize that it's happening a lot all over the country, that students are protesting for people that they don't agree with. But this whole culture is so rife with people to, you know, protest — I have nothing against protest in and of itself, but it's just become endemic, and people take it as the easiest route, it seems to me. And we need more thoughtful consideration. I mean, the scenario right now with the Ukraine and Russia is another good example. We're so quickly attuned to whatever we're told by the easy media that we don't think about what Putin might be like in another context, or how Russians might be — I mean, that's just one — you know, it's in my brain because we're going there.

But for students who are going into a world knowing they're smart, and they are, and knowing they are — they don't have the world by the tail because of the way the economy is, but still, they've got lots going for them. I would say stop and listen, pay attention to what other people are thinking. But I would say that not just to students, I would say that to the people in the age group of the somewhat older young adults as well. (laughter) Because I think there is a tendency to give short shrift. And maybe I say that, the older I get, I think that our — my classmates, we're 70, 71, 72, and we recognize that we are also fading from the main stage of the world, and can be treated as peripheral even by our own children. So, part of — probably what I'm saying for students, I'm saying to a lot of younger people, you know, they're (laughter) — listen to others.

RAMSAY: Thank you very much. Do you have anything else you want to say before we wrap up?

THURBER: Yes, this is one more thing for, sort of, thinking about (young?). I think one of the most sustaining things for anyone, and a female especially, can be to be daily cognizant of things to be grateful for, and it's awfully easy to take a whole lot for granted, and hopefully, the class coming out of here, and you guys who are going to be here for a few more will take every day of some way to say that there — you know, you really have

an extraordinary environment, and extraordinary people around you. And I will say this also in relation to two people I know now who are on the faculty at Smith, who I know from my singing in the Edwards Church Choir. One of them is Floyd Cheung, who is in the English department as a poet, or poetry is not — and the other, good Lord, what's Judy's last name? She's a biology teacher. Anyway, they're wonderful. They are so — and I think to myself, God, you guys are so lucky to have people like that (laughter) teaching. So, it does — to me, it does relate to thinking, yeah, you really are blessed. Looks to me from looking at you and (inaudible) whatever, that you know that.

RAMSAY: (laughter) Oh!

GEIS: I'm going to grab your microphone.

THURBER: What is that?

GEIS: I'm going to grab your mic.

THURBER: Yes.

RAMSAY: OK, thank you so much.

THURBER: You're very welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Steve Thaw, June 2014