Abstract
In this interview, Elinor Yahm discusses her difficult transition into the Smith community as a young Jewish woman from New York. She talks about her major in political science and how it influenced her post Smith work during the Women’s Movement. Yahm recalls the expectations placed on students and the affect it had on her academically as well as the pros and cons of attending a single sex institution.

**Restrictions**

None.

**Format**

Interview recorded using Canon Vixia HF.

**Videographer**

Video recorded by Kate Geis.

**Transcript**

Transcribed by Shomriel Sherman, Audio Transcription Center.

**Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms**

*Video Recording*


*Transcript*

Elinor Yahm, interviewed by INTERVIEWER NOT GIVEN

Social Work Archives Oral History Project
Sophia Smith Collection
Smith College
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted DATE NOT GIVEN, with:

ELINOR YAHM
Northampton, MA

by: INTERVIEWER NOT GIVEN

Q: All right. Ready when you are.

Q: OK.

Q: OK.

Q: So let’s start with your first reactions and thoughts about Smith when you arrived as a first-year.

YAHM: Well, I was terrified. I was totally in a daze, just really scared to death. Also, I — as a freshman, they lost my room application. So instead of putting me on the fourth floor with all the other freshmen, they put me on the second floor. And they were all doubles, and I was in a single. So here I am, the only freshman on the second floor. And everybody else has a roommate, and I don’t have a roommate. And I’m a painfully shy kid. So that was really depressing. So, I was just depressed, homesick, you know, just — it was just like — it was not good. The academics were fine, but the whole being away from home and living in the dorm was, like, dreadful.

And the other thing is, being a Jewish kid from Long Island, into — I was in Cushing. And the tone was set by the debutantes who were on the society page in the New York Times. Wearing their pearls outside their turtlenecks so they wouldn’t lose their luster. (laughter) So I’m just like, What am I doing here, you know? Just totally, What am I doing here? And there were very few Jews. There were quotas in the Seven Sisters. Smith had one of the higher ones, so there were very few Jews. But as somebody else who I was talking to the other day about this said, “Well, they wouldn’t — they wouldn’t have put you — once they had — you know, you were — you had to be in a single, because there wasn’t another Jewish kid to put you with. They had all — the Jewish kids were all teamed up with other Jewish kids.” So I was really just totally a fish out of water. I would’ve been much more comfortable in Smith today. So, anyway.

Q: Yeah. Did you become a little more comfortable as the years went on?
YAHM: How many years are we talking about?

Q: Oh, while you were at Smith. I mean, like —

YAHM: Well, let’s put it this way. By my second year, it was — it was OK, you know? I had some friends. All the freshmen, there was somebody who’s here now was across the hall from me. There were other sophomores across the hall from me. I had some friends. I did make one friend at a Smith College [tea?], who was another Jewish girl from Long Island. And we just bonded together, wondering what on earth we were doing there. Anyway.

Then I spent my junior year abroad. That was fabulous. Just absolutely fabulous. And then I came back and lived in the French house, and I did an honors thesis on integration in the New York City schools, so I was out of — out of Smith a lot of the time. So — so the last two years were just fine.

But I don’t feel — I don’t think I feel associated — I was in Cushing the first two years, and I’d been hanging out with people who were in Cushing — but I didn’t feel connected to Smith in the same kind of way that other people do. I’ve really seen that when I came back.

Q: Where did you go abroad, and what was that like?

YAHM: I went to — I went in Geneva. It was just great. I mean, there were no — there was no — there were no computers. There were no cell phones. And a telephone call cost $50 for three minutes. That was a long time ago. That was a lot of money. So nobody knew who you — where you — nobody knew what you were doing. So, I mean, my roommate and I hitchhiked all over Europe. We did all kinds of crazy things. I was a very shy kid, but this was just liberating. They went — the women went crazy. You had all these, like, proper Smith girls. They were practically dancing topless on tables. I mean, it was just — (laughter) you know. Nobody knew what you were doing! So, anyway.

Q: And then what was that — tell me about the integration project that you were doing your senior year.

YAHM: I wanted to do something on integration in the New York City schools. Because at that point in time, there was a lot of pressure to integrate. You know, it was the beginning of the civil rights movement, and there was pressure to integrate the city schools. So there was — and then — so that — people wanted — I’m — let’s see if I can remember this. They wanted community control of the schools. So the schools wanted to have the community be in control of it and therefore it would be integrated. But that being said, you know, the teachers didn’t necessarily agree on this idea about community control. So they went — I mean —
so there was — it was just a whole big deal. So, you know, there was a lot of tension between the teachers and the members of the community and — so I interviewed people on all sides. It was fascinating. I had a — I mean, it was really great. It was a wonderful experience. So — anyway.

Q: What do you think the attitudes were at Smith towards integration and civil rights? Was there activism, or —

YAHM: There wasn’t much activism in general. Smith was not an activist place. I was, like, one of the few people who was semi-active. Like, I went to some of the first peace marches and stuff like that. So there was a bus that went down from Amherst, and maybe there were two or three Smithies on the bus. I remember that. You know. There weren’t many people. I think that really — that has changed. That’s really changed. But there was no activism.

And if there were any gay people, they were hiding. I mean, I know there were gay people. But they were totally hiding. They felt completely liberated 20 years later, when, you know —

Q: That’s really interesting. And — so you talked a little bit about feeling out of place in Cushing, being Jewish. Did you get involved with Hillel or —

YAHM: No. I wasn’t — I wasn’t religiously Jewish. I was just ethnically a Jewish kid from Long Island, thrown into — I mean, I — I was — been talking to people about it. I’m now living in Vermont, in a kind of retirement community, that has about 30 Smithies in it.

Q: Cool.

YAHM: Yeah. It’s really pretty amazing. And then, you know — whatever. But I’m aware that I would not feel comfortable in that WASP-y world if I hadn't gone to Smith, or some place like it. It really sort of — it was a cultural shift, in a way. It was just interesting.

Q: Yeah. Was there anything that you remember really liking doing for fun while you were at Smith?

YAHM: I liked biking a lot. I really liked biking a lot. And those of us who were honor students, there was a connector, like, between — where the library is and went in to some of the dorms or whatever. And there was a coffee machine there. And so all of us goofed off and hung out there. So we had a — we had a great time, wasting time there. And — I don't know. I had a lot — when I — I mean, we hung out. We fooled around. We — you know. I don’t remember anything. Northampton was a dead town. I mean, there was — there was nothing happening in Northampton. There was Wiggins Tavern. There was no movie theater.
I mean, there was Friendly’s. There was nothing happening here. We’re dealing with a depressed [mil?] town. I mean, nothing. Just absolutely nothing.

Q: Did you ever go to the other colleges around?

YAHM: I mean, I remember biking to Mount Holyoke and stuff like that. Male colleges would come up and try to pick up girls. And then you would go away for weekends in the male colleges, and what you were basically doing was trying not to get raped. You know. I mean, it was just — the whole thing was, like, you get sent away for the weekend, and there was the sexual tension that — I mean, it was just like really — it wasn’t in any way natural, let’s put it that way. I would’ve been — I would’ve been better off in a co-ed school. I had — my guy — the — my friends when I went to high school were mostly guys. So then, I mean — now, I do think that Smith really enabled me to connect with other women, and it certainly fed into the women’s movement.

Q: Were you involved in the women’s movement?

YAHM: Very much so. I ran — I was very involved in that. I mean, listen. I had a — I had a six-month-old baby. This saved my life. Just absolutely saved my life. I mean, I got involved with a consciousness-raising group. And then I ran a psychotherapy referral service for women, a feminist psychotherapy referral service, women wanting to choose therapists. And I got a bunch of people, and we ran up a whole — we had a questionnaire, and we interviewed people, and it was — it was a pretty big deal. And that kind of inspired me to go for psychoanalytic training. Because when I interviewed somebody who was psychoan— psychoanalytically trained — it was like, wow. Their values aren’t interfering with what they’re doing at all. It was pretty amazing. So that was just — I came out of myself during that whole — I mean, I think the junior year abroad, and then that (unclear) were really instrumental in terms of my development. But that was very important. It was really—

Q: So that — the consciousness-raising and the therapist groups — that was at Smith?

YAHM: No, that was out of Smith.

Q: Oh, OK.


Q: Let’s see. What were your academic interests?
Hmm. Well, let’s put it this way. I was a political science major. But that’s — I mean, I was a government major. But that’s because the teachers were great, you know? I took a class on Tolstoy and Dostoevsky that I just loved, absolutely loved that. Because I love Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. So that was just awesome. So I remember that class. And then when I was an honors student, there were seminars that I really liked. It wasn’t the teacher as much as just I liked that seminar structure. I liked writing an honors thesis. I liked having independent research and really doing things in more intense kind of ways, and having the larger courses. But I don’t remember — it’s interesting. I don’t remember specific classes as much as just really they taught me how to think. And I went to a very good high school, so I was pretty well-prepared. So that I didn’t — I mean, I was panicked that I wouldn’t be able to do the work. But I didn’t have any trouble, at all.

Now, my kids went to Swarthmore. And Swarthmore the first semester everything’s pass/fail. Because they figure with the co— you know, with the co-ed dorms, and the alcohol that gets snuck in, you know, and being away from home, like, the first semester is really difficult. And that was actually really excellent. Because instead of being panicked, they just did their work and paid attention, and they did fine. So then they were really able to relax. So —

Q: Did you ever feel like there was a particular set of expectations for you as a Smith student?

YAHM: Yeah. I — there was chapel every Wednesday morning. And I don’t remember — to me, the message of chapel was, “Thou shalt not waste your Smith education.” I mean, there was a real clear expectation that you were going to use your education. A lot of people probably could have done the Junior League, or did volunteer work. But my class was almost — I think almost everybody in the class really became some kind of professional. If they didn’t go for their PhD at graduate school, they had kids first, they went. So that almost everybody in the reunion has had a career, you know, has had a real career. That was — there was absolutely that expectation. I had that expectation anyway, because my mother worked, and she was so much more interesting when she went back to work. She was! (laughs) So anyway. I expected to go to work. But there was clearly that expectation. And there was an expectation that you would use your education. They treated you like a very bright, you know — you really got the sense that you were a bright, capable woman who really could go into leadership positions. They did a very good job of that. They really did. And they did a very good job of teaching us how to think and approach things critically. Excellent, excellent job.

Q: Were there other ways that you think going to a women’s college was a really unique experience?
YAHM: Well, it was, in the sense that it wasn’t natural, you know? (laughs) That this is a society with men and women. I didn’t feel that there was any really natural way to get to know men. That being said, I really did get close to other women. But I think I would’ve in a co-ed school anyway. I mean, my kids certainly did. I did not feel that in terms of my education that I was — I needed to be in an all-women’s institution in order to be able to express myself. I wasn’t raised like — I didn’t go to a school like that. That’s not who I was. I may have been very shy, but in academic settings I had a pretty big mouth. So I really didn’t need that. That wasn’t an issue for me. Nor did I feel for my girls was it an issue. And neither one of them would go to an all-women’s school. They wouldn’t have.

Q: I’m curious, also since you did some activist work, about, like, any insights you have about the political climate on campus. Like, if you felt like it was pretty conservative, or —

YAHM: It’s certainly much more activist now. But then, it’s much more diverse now. It was just — what a pleasure. I mean, it just — it’s a joy. It really is. I don't know if it was politically conservative. I mean, if I’d asked people if their parents were — if they were Republicans or Democrats, you know — well, everybody was into Kennedy. Kennedy got shot when we were — when we were in college. I was in Europe when he got shot. So that was a whole other thing. It was just — it — well, I missed the whole (part?) of American — but we certainly were excited about Kennedy. But he was young, and he was good-looking, and he was charismatic. I mean, like, you know. So — so I really don’t know. I think that there was — I didn’t get a sense of it. I didn’t get a sense that people were conservative or people were — they just weren’t all that interested. I think they were mostly interested in their academics. And maybe getting married, and — they weren’t running around talking about clothes, or anything like that — thank God. I mean, that would’ve chased me out of here. That didn’t — that didn’t — I guess — I guess that was a shift. Because my friends in high school were mostly guys. And that’s because I just didn’t want to talk about coys — clothes and boyfriends, you know. It just — I wanted something more interesting to talk about. That was not true here. I mean, you really talked about ideas and — but I think in a lot of co-ed schools that would’ve happened also. But certainly I did — it did change my bias against — my — prejudice against female friends. This — that was really helpful, I think.

Q: But you did feel like there were expectations around marriage, and meeting men?

YAHM: You were expected to get married and have kids. That’s what — that was the expectation. Now, there were — I mean, I’m sure there were people who decided not to get married, you know. I have two friends now, my age, who made clear decisions that they never wanted kids.
They were willing to get married, but there was no way they were having kids. Both of them. Just very clear, they didn’t want kids.

Q:

Can you talk a little bit about how Smith has influenced, like, the career path that you took, or your family life or anything (unclear)?

YAHM:

Well, I don’t think it influenced — it didn’t — I don’t think it influenced my career path. When I — I think my family did in some ways more. Well, let’s put it this way. All right, like, so I was a political science major and I, you know, wanted to save the world. And this was the War on Poverty, so it was just like — so I was going to — I was thinking of going to law school, and my father said — who was a lawyer — said, “Women lawyers are too aggressive. Don’t do it.”

So then I became — I decided to go to social work school and get a degree in community organization, because then they’d pay me to start the revolution. So I went to the University of Chicago, and they had a split-major, Casework and Community Organization. So I got out of school and I got a community organization job that was boring. And then I get another one that was pretty interesting. And then the War on Poverty wasn’t being funded anymore. Nixon became president. And so all of a sudden those jobs dried up. So I got a job in a residential treatment center with emotionally disturbed boys, and I loved it. I just absolutely loved it.

And then my husband at that point in time was going to go back for psychoanalytic training. He also had a social work degree. So I was home. I had a kid. You know. And I went back to work. I only was home for six — for six months, and I was just like, Forget it. I went back part-time after six months. But he went for psychoanalytic training. And he had gone into the program a pretty angry guy, and he came out like a really nice, mellow guy. And I was like, Wow. That’s pretty amazing. So I decided to do that, you know. I guess Becky was maybe two years old, two and a half, when I did it. And that was amazing. Just absolutely amazing. So — then I ended up doing psycho — psychoanalytic work. In private practice. I had no clue that I was going to do that. That was my mother did. There was no way in hell — she was one of the first social workers in private practice. No way in hell was I gonna be like my mother. But I loved the work.

So — I don't think Smith had that much to do with it. Certainly the fact that I would go on, pass the MSW, and be psychoanalytically trained was part of — like, you were always doing what — you do whatever you can for your own growth and development. That was — but that was also the times. I mean, this was the '60s, and the world was open, you know? We thought we could — we really thought we were going to change the world. We absolutely thought the world was really going to change and become a better place. Just amazing. And everything’s going backwards. But, I mean, we just absolutely thought the world was going to be different. We really did. So there was — and I don't know how many — see, I — this all happened when we were out
of Smith already. So I think a lot of people really got radicalized. But I didn’t know them when they were, let’s put it that way.

Q: That’s really interesting. So you mentioned diversity — more diversity on campus — and how great that is. Do you think that there’s other big ways you’ve noticed that Smith has changed?

YAHM: Well, I mean — listen, academically it’s much freer. There’s not a core curriculum in the same kind of way. There just — there’s engineering. That’s totally different. That — many, many — when I looked at the graduation, you know — and the honors, and all that stuff — many, many more people taking sciences. Many, many more taking sciences. There’s certainly more of an emphasis on being able to go out and earn a living. That was not considered relevant, you know. The expectation was that you were going to get married. But also, if you weren’t going to get married, there were plenty of jobs. There were plenty of jobs. So there wasn’t the same anxiety about survival. That’s really — you’re real — it’s really in a different time. And Smith is really trying to adjust to the times. That being said, I was telling my daughter, who’s 36, about how they had an engineering degree and they were really working on getting people to be able to invest and be financially viable. And she flipped out. That being said, she’s really pissed off that she graduated from Swarthmore, and they didn’t prepare them to go out in the world and earn a living. So I think you can’t win. But anyway. There is a real emphasis on preparing you to go out there and cope, you know. And I think that there’s a feeling that you’re going to need to be able to do that. So — but that was very different. You just — whatever. You’re going to go to graduate school, you’re going to go to — I mean, there certainly was an expectation that you would do something.

I mean, the other thing is, we had “gracious living.” Have you heard at all about this?

Q: Mm-mm.

YAHM: Well, you had to wear — for Thursday dinner and Sunday lunch — you had to wear stockings and heels and skirts. And — and then we all had linen napkins that were in our napkin cubbies, and they changed them twice a week. So you had — you had your napkin cubby, and you had linen napkins in your cubby. And then after you had the formal, you know — the stocking and heel dinner — you line up, and your house mother would serve you demitasse out of a samovar. (laughs) It’s just like — for real. Like a sterling samovar. And you’d be lining up, and then, you know, she’d be filling these little demitasse cups.

Q: Wow! (laughs)
Elinor Yahm, interviewed by INTERVIEWER NOT GIVEN

YAHM: And it was pretty — pretty wild. And then I remember my first semester, I had a blind date with an African guy. And she called me in and lectured me about dating a black guy.

Q: Who did, your house mother?

YAHM: Yeah. My house mother.

Q: Wow.

YAHM: I’m telling you, it was very different. They—

??: What did she say?

YAHM: She said, like, “You shouldn’t be going out with somebody who’s —” I don’t remember exactly what she said. I remember the essence of it. I was pretty appalled. This is 1961, you know. I was just, like, I couldn’t be—I mean, I couldn’t believe she did that. Then, you know, also that there were no men in the rooms. And that curfew was, like, at 9:00 or whatever. And then there were two weekends a year that men could be in the rooms, but the door had to be open big enough for a book, and they had to have two feet on the floor. (laughs) Anyway. So that was—I don't know at what point they got rid of the fine dining stuff and the stockings and the heels and the samovar and the — you now have no house mothers. Believe me, nobody misses them. And you — you don’t even have a curfew, probably, either, do you?

Q: No.

YAHM: I didn’t think so. I didn’t think so, you know. Do people have cars?

Q: Some people.

YAHM: We all — we had bikes. But I assume you guys — we biked everywhere. That’s how we got around.

Q: Yeah. A lot of people have bikes too. Yeah. OK. Well, we’re almost done.

??: I have one question when you’re done.

Q: Yeah. You can go ahead.

??: I just want to follow up on your quick — on your — what you were talking about, about going off-campus and women having to not get raped, essentially. What was — what did you have to do to — for that to not happen?
YAHM: Well, you had to really be — you had to be prepared.

??: And you should look over at Hannah. Look over here.

Q: Oh yeah, that —

YAHM: You had to be prepared to really have to fight someone off and set a limit. Do you know what I’m saying? So I don’t remember — I mean, I — you didn’t have to take karate, you know what I mean? I mean, I don’t remember being physically attacked. But you knew that a guy was going to try. You just knew. That was the expectation. That was the culture. That a guy would really try. That’s what he would do. He’s probably terrified if you said yes, but that was beside the point. I mean, really. The Pill became — the Pill came out in 1961. That’s when I was a freshman. So that changed — that also changed the whole tone of things. That was a whole other — so that premarital sex became an option. You know. So that was something else that you really struggled with and you had to make a decision about. And — I mean, there wasn’t the same culture of one-night stands, you know. But — I was having a conversation with somebody today. And it was like, we were — like, I was — I didn’t stop being a virgin till I got out of Smith! You know, that was like — but it was an option. It hadn't really been an option before that. Before that it was, like, you walked around with the name of an illegal abortionist in your pocketbook in case you needed it. And I do remember — I remember somebody in graduate school having an illegal abortion. So, you know. So there was tremendous anxiety about not getting pregnant out of wedlock.

Q: Yeah. So while you were there, people did start making those decisions to have premarital sex?

YAHM: I think they did. I remember somebody — when I was a sophomore, we were having a conversation. Her boyfriend was at Harvard, and I think she and I were going out for a weekend or something. And she said, “Well, what do you think we do?” So I was like, OK. (laughter)

Q: All right. Well, I guess, just to wrap up, do you have any hopes for decisions that Smith makes in the future, or —

YAHM: Well, let’s put it this way. I certainly think they’re doing a very good job. But that being said, I think that we were really concerned that there’s — the emphasis on art, literature, music, is really receding, and there’s much more emphasis on science and economics and ways of earning a living. And I think that there are a number of us — the woman who asked the question yesterday in one of the — they had a panel of four women talking about what they got out of Smith, and they didn’t make one mention about anything they did that had to do with the arts or literature or anything. And the woman who raised the question,
somebody who was a professional musician, and who had taught at Smith for three years. She — she’s a choral director. And she was, like, really appalled. Just absolutely appalled that they weren’t really spending their money on things like that. And I think that’s a tremendous loss. I really do. (coughs) I mean, I just do. You know, it’s just really being exposed to all that. I took a music class when I — you know, Music 101. Which is not my field, but I learned about music. I took art classes. Whatever. It was just really — and I had great literature classes. So — because I loved them.

Q: Yeah. Great.

YAHM: So I guess that would be the only thing I would say, is I think that shouldn’t be lost.

Q: All right. Thank you so much.

YAHM: You’re welcome.

Q: That’s a great interview.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Shomriel Sherman, June 2015.