

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Francine Haber, Class of 1965*

Interviewed by  
Tanya Pearson, Class of 2015

May 15, 2015

## **Abstract**

In this interview, Francine Haber recounts her arrival at Smith in 1961 and its reputation as the “Ivy League” college for women. She describes her house community, strict rules and regulations, the roles of house mothers and social life on and off campus. She describes the atmosphere on campus at the start of Vietnam War, her participation in the civil rights student movement, and the contention surrounding George Wallace’s invitation to speak at Smith. Haber details her years in London immediately following graduation, and credits her Smith education with shaping her formative years in a way that benefited her personally and professionally.

## **Restrictions**

None

## **Format**

Interview recorded using Canon Vixia HF.

## **Videographer**

Video recorded by Kate Geis.

## **Transcript**

Transcribed by Richard Thomson, Audio Transcription Center.

## **Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms**

### *Video Recording*

**Bibliography:** Haber, Francine. Interview by Tanya Pearson. Video recording, May 15, 2015. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Francine Haber, interview by Tanya Pearson, transcript of video recording, May 15, 2015, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Haber, Francine. Interview by Tanya Pearson. Transcript of video recording, May 15, 2015. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Francine Haber, interview by Tanya Pearson, transcript of video recording, May 15, 2015, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project  
Sophia Smith Collection  
Smith College  
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted May 15th, 2015, with:

FRANCINE HABER  
Northampton, MA

by: TANYA PEARSON

GEIS: OK. All right — whenever you're ready.

PEARSON: Yeah?

GEIS: Yeah.

PEARSON: OK. All right. This is Tanya Pearson interviewing Francine Haber, Class of 1965, on May 15th, 2015, for the Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you for coming — really appreciate you being here.

HABER: Thank you.

PEARSON: I know it was a busy day.

HABER: Thank you.

PEARSON: So I just want to start at the very beginning, which is: how did you choose Smith College?

HABER: I lived in New York City at that time, and Smith had a wonderful reputation. I went to high school in Manhattan. And so, even though Barnard is a wonderful school, I wanted to have a different experience, with people from all over the country and — on the campus. And it just had a great reputation. Why wouldn't I choose Smith?

PEARSON: That's a good answer. (laughter)

HABER: Well, no, to be — you know, since this is historical — the male Ivy League did not accept women at the time. It was, I think, two years before they took women in. And I have to say — I would have applied there, if I had been allowed. We considered ourselves the women's Ivy League. Whether anyone else did or not — we did. So it was the best of the best, in my opinion.

- PEARSON: And how did you feel about Smith when you first arrived — if you could think back to, like, being a freshman arriving on campus, or the first —
- HABER: Right — I certainly can. Of course, very exciting, with all the different people from — I mean — I don't know if I had ever met anyone from Texas before. Isn't that pathetic — a New York City provincial person? So it was very exciting. From my point of view, it was more restrictive than I had had in New York and at my high school, which was very high academically, but they didn't bother with many rules. And of course, we — not that not letting men in was my prime concern, but it was kind of indicative. We had a curfew, and I don't know if you still do. So it was still part of that era, but it was wonderful. The courses were wonderful. I had a good academic preparation, so that was not difficult for me.
- PEARSON: I'm glad you brought up the strict rules —
- HABER: The social ambiance?
- PEARSON: — yeah. In the research here, you still had house mothers then —
- HABER: Yes.
- PEARSON: — it seems like there was a lot going on, socially. Guys from other schools —
- HABER: Imported.
- PEARSON: — coming — yeah.
- HABER: Yes, we'd import people, or we'd go to other campuses.
- PEARSON: Mm-hmm. And you participated in all those kind of social outings and the dating scene —
- HABER: Yeah, I wouldn't say I was a social butterfly, but you kind of can avoid it, because there were — occasionally, you're in the house on weekends, or something like that.
- PEARSON: Oh, so that was allowed?
- HABER: On the ground floor.
- PEARSON: Oh, OK.
- HABER: During certain hours — certain activities. But yes, we had a house mother, and I really, retrospectively, feel sorry for her, because she was

at a table — and she's a perfectly nice person — but there was kind of, I guess, a reticence, to sit with her at the meal tables. And she must have known it. It was nothing personal. She was lovely, but it's more relaxed — just hanging with your friends, as they say. And it was really amazing, having individual dining rooms and all those kitchens. You don't have that anymore, right? You have one dining area, or —

PEARSON: Each of the houses has a dining —

HABER: And you have three meals a day there?

PEARSON: — I don't know if it's three meals a day. I live off campus.

HABER: Oh, right. Well, we couldn't live off campus, then. And I think you couldn't get married, because there was someone who was surreptitiously married to a guy in Boston, at some college there. And she had to keep it secret.

PEARSON: Oh — couldn't be married when you —

HABER: You couldn't be married, period. And you couldn't live off campus. That was — that was very shortly after I graduated, that you were allowed to — Julie Nixon got married, and she lived off campus. So I guess if she could do it, we all could do it.

PEARSON: Can I ask what — how would you describe the campus atmosphere during your time? Because that — you were here '61 to '65, so —

HABER: I was here in the transition — with Vietnam. The beginning — it was very calm. I remember — the only demonstration we had was sort of a mock demo, but then, by the end, there were teach-ins on Vietnam. And it — all the activities that are connected with the '60s were starting. I just was with someone in my house who was very active in SNCC, which was the Civil Rights student movement. And I asked her if she was in Selma, and she said she was there the week after. So it was starting. And in fact, we had — we did have a demonstration, which consisted of writing a letter to the mayor of Northampton. Don't ask me why — I guess because he was here — and I don't remember on what. I think Vietnam. And we just presented the letter, and there, maybe, were 50 students, and there must have been 50 FBI guys or — I mean, they didn't identify, but they look so — security. And I think, maybe, the administration panicked, because it was so, so docile. So there was a big transition during those years.

PEARSON: Uh, yeah, I read in the archives that we have here — around the Civil Rights movement, there were — some of the students wore the black armbands.

HABER: You know — I don't remember. It could be.

PEARSON: Oh, OK. Or do you remember when Wallace came to speak, and the [politics?] surrounding that?

HABER: I was there. I was in the audience.

PEARSON: OK.

HABER: Now, that was a big discussion about whether it was better not to attend and demonstrate outside, or just hold up signs outside, or come in. And I still thought it was better to, you know — go and let him speak. I still believe that he should have been let to speak, but as I was sitting in the audience, I changed my mind, and I thought it would have been better not to attend. I thought it would have been — because I didn't agree with him. Obviously, if you agreed with him, then you would have another point of view. But I definitely thought that the audience was being used to legitimize him, and I changed my mind, then and there, that — no doubt — I knew his point of view before I went in, and that it would be marvelous if nobody showed. But more — that was significant in my life, because it's the first time I heard a politician using — invoking God to support — you know, God was on his side, very obviously. And he used the word "God," like, a million times. And believe it or not — since it's so common now — that was a little bit shocking and totally rare, that kind of speech. And I said, "Oh, I see. You can use God for anything — even racism and segregation." Which, of course — there's an argument for every side that often has a religious basis — not at the core but — so that was a very important event in my life, actually. I'm glad you brought that up. I had forgotten about that. (laughs) This whole weekend has been things I haven't thought about in literally 50 years. So it's —

PEARSON: Well, thank you. I appreciate (inaudible).

HABER: — it's interesting what pops up.

PEARSON: Can you talk a little bit about your academic interests, your major, if you minored in anything?

HABER: Sure. Well, I grew up in a — my dad was a lawyer, and I wanted to be a lawyer when I came to Smith. And then, I discovered the art department. Now, the government department was wonderful, too, but the art department was really stellar. So was the government department, but it was just something new to me. Why, living in New York City, with all the museums, I had to have my revelation in — you know — looking at a Rembrandt in Europe — but that's the way it goes. So I majored in art history, although I shifted to kind of a minor within the major of architectural history, because I was always

interested in social issues. And — had an excellent program — that was a very big major, then. I didn't think about — I wasn't naïve, but I didn't really consider economic factors at the time — as to earning power. And if I had to do it again, I honestly don't know if I would say, "Francine, age whatever — go join Goldman Sachs." You know? (laughs) Or whether I just would have pursued what I loved and done the same thing all over again. I don't know. I don't know, but that's what I made my living at, afterward —

PEARSON: What — art and architecture?

HABER: — was art history and architectural history. Yes, I taught. First, I went to London to do a graduate degree and lived, in fact, with — roomed with a Smith person from my same class that I — who I didn't know very well at Smith, but is a good friend of mine, now, and, in fact, came in from London for the reunion. She has been to reunions more often than I have. This is my first reunion in 50 —

PEARSON: Is this the first time you've been back on campus since you graduated?

HABER: Yes, in 50 years, yes.

PEARSON: Oh my gosh — what's that like? I mean, how are you feeling?

HABER: I'm feeling great. I am. It's wonderful to see the people again. Fortunately, all the people in my house are together at Lamont. And I'm realizing — everyone else looks vaguely familiar, and you're staring at your chest, because we all have these big labels. But that it's the people that I housed with that I'm most eager to see, and it's a lot of fun.

PEARSON: Well, you kind of —

HABER: I'll tell you something about that —

PEARSON: — OK.

HABER: — I'm struck by just how idyllic Smith is. Of course, I knew it was pretty and lovely when I was here, but it's really strikingly so, to come back. And now, I'm thinking — "Wow, it costs a fortune to maintain this place," which was not the kind of thoughts I had as an undergraduate. And it's — it's just a beautiful physical pl— you know — the physicality of it is lovely. And there's an elevator in Lamont, which we didn't have, but I don't know if it's been there forever. I think that elevator has been there a hundred years, but that's unus— we didn't have an elevator. (laughs)

PEARSON: Did you study abroad, or did you —

HABER: Yes. Mm-hmm.

PEARSON: — have any opportunit— oh, did you say that — did you go to London? Or was —

HABER: Yes. I went to London, to the Courtauld Institute of Art, after going on a Greek seminar sponsored by Smith — after graduation — a seminar to Greece that was, I think, heavily subsidized by the parents of a Smith graduate. And that was exceptional. I mean — serious, heavy studying. And I don't know if I should admit that we were drinking Ouzo or something on the beach, but — no, that's Provence —

PEARSON: It's OK, now.

HABER: — but you know. I think it's OK, now. It was just fabulous, and I didn't — I didn't go home. (laughs) Oh, my poor mother. (inaudible), OK, fine. So I went to the Courtauld Institute of Art, which is an institute within the University of London that was — that is a really good place to study. And that is where I roomed with [Santi?], and the whole London experience, the — The Beatles had their, you know — Apple was their — what they named their company, which lasted not very long. And first, we lived on Baker Street, and their shop was down the corner. And that's all I remember — are these women — young women, tall young women with long blond hair and long dresses, looking like pre-Raphaelites — that floated around there. It was also at the same time as mini-skirts and all that, and (inaudible).

Then, since I chose a French topic — which made a lot of sense, going to a London university, being American — yes, choose a French topic. So I lived in France for many years, and I actually — I tau— I began teaching at schools of art and architecture schools in London. And when I say London, London is a — really the center of a wheel, both culturally and transportation-wise. And some people made — never had one position and would commute to these different art schools, down by the coast and all — in Farnham and Portsmouth. And there had been a great tradition of arts schools — Arts and Crafts — through the Arts and Crafts movement in London. And many of them continued, but had been renamed “polytechnics” or “colleges” or — and so I taught there. And some in kind of art schools with that tradition, and some with the new “polytechnic” label, and they've all become universities — you know? I don't know if they changed any, but just the names change — for more prestige. And that's where I got started, teaching. And going to France and living there — sometimes, I lose track of which came first. Let's see — yes, the research in France came first, and then teaching in London, writing it up.

Again, Smith was quite influential, because — at the time that I was studying — they had two of the most prominent architectural historians



in the world here, Henry-Russell Hitchcock, who wrote several of the Penguin guides to architecture, and Peter Collins, who substituted for him when he was on sabbatical one year, and wrote the definitive book on Auguste Perret — Auguste Perret — who built, in the north of France, after the war. And that book turned into a — kind of a split book on the history of concrete. And I — we took seminars from Peter Collins, and that really clinched my decision. The teachers are so important. I say that, having taught — I hope I'm that important to somebody, somewhere. So I —

PEARSON: I'm sorry — we have been — we're doing these in half-hour increments, and our next alum is here. So you can hear —

HABER: Oh, gee — we didn't even get to my teaching or anything.

PEARSON: — she's right on the other side of that door.

HABER: OK, so should I wrap it up or just — you're going to cut me off?

PEARSON: Yeah, that would be great. Thank you.

GEIS: We'd love to hear more, but unfortunately, we have more [participants?].

HABER: Yeah — could I say, like, one sentence to finish it off and just — it'll be apropos. I promise. To Smith — as I'm talking, I realize what an important, formative institution it was in my life, both professionally and personally. And I hope people who watch this appreciate that.

PEARSON: Thank you very much.

HABER: Thank you. Oh, gee —

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Richard Thomson, June 2015*