

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Jona Burgess Hammer, Class of 1965*

Interviewed by  
Hana Sarfan, Class of 2016

May 15, 2015

## **Abstract**

In this interview, Jona Burgess Hammer describes moving from Iceland to the United States and the cultural differences she encountered as a student at Smith, particularly her surprise at discovering Smith was a single sex institution. She details social life on campus in the early 1960s, specifically mixers and dances in which men from neighboring colleges were brought to Smith, and how she met her husband at the first mixer she begrudgingly attended. She her English major, coursework and notable professors and the overall conservative climate of the Smith campus in the early 1960s.

## **Restrictions**

None

## **Format**

Interview recorded using Canon Vixia HF.

## **Videographer**

Video recorded by Kate Geis.

## **Transcript**

Transcribed by Tyler Burchfield, Audio Transcription Center.

## **Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms**

### *Video Recording*

**Bibliography:** Hammer, Jona Burgess. Interview by Hana Sarfan. Video recording, May 15, 2015. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Jona Burgess Hammer, interview by Hana Sarfan, transcript of video recording, May 15, 2015, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Hammer, Jona Burgess. Interview by Hana Sarfan. Transcript of video recording, May 15, 2015. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Jona Burgess Hammer, interview by Hana Sarfan, 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 14, 2015 with:

JONA BURGESS HAMMER  
Northampton, MA

by: HANA SARFAN

HAMMER: (inaudible)

SARFAN: So let's start with how you ended up at Smith?

HAMMER: Well, I'm from Iceland and I always thought I wanted to go someplace to learn English. That's what I wanted to study after my [gymnasium?]. And the choice was between England the US. And Smith offered me a wonderful scholarship and — which they gave me for three years. I came as a sophomore and stayed through graduation and I had a full scholarship all these years, and that was wonderful. I could never have done this without that scholarship. So I'm very happy now to make a contribution every year to Smith because I owe them big.

SARFAN: (laughs) That's wonderful. What did you first think of Smith in your first couple months [as a sophomore]?

HAMMER: Well, it was sort of a little bit of a surprise. You see, I hadn't written to Smith. Smith wrote to me. And I hadn't realized that it was an all girls school. And in Iceland, there are no such schools, except home economics. There are home economics schools for girls. And this was a little bit startling, at first, to — I only — I knew before I came here, but only a very short time before I came here. My husband and my Smith roommate concocted a story about — this is pure fabrication — they told anybody who would listen how I had been here for a month and I had finally come, rumbling and bewildered, and said to my roommate, "Well, when the boys get here?" And this is not true, but they've [dined out?] on this for 50-some years. So anyway, I did know, but it was very strange because I came from a gymnasium, where girls were a small minority. And this was, you know, very different from that, but, you know, took a bit of time to adjust, but —

SARFAN: Yeah. How did you enjoy studying with only women?

HAMMER: It was a different — it was a very different — I was used to — being on my generation and having gone to the kind of school I went to — I was used to women holding back. And you didn't want to have all the answers. You didn't want to put yourself forward or seem too bright because that was not — you know, you sort of had to defer to the man. And here, I was amazed. Like, I came here and these girls are all speaking out, they're questioning the professors, and [I'm saying?], Well, I don't know that that could be right because, da, da, da. (sighs) I didn't know — yeah. This was very strange. It was a very strange experience. And they talked about — you know, of course, not all the time, but we were — we had the formal dinners. And they were in the houses with — complete with (inaudible) and everything. And people actually talked a bit about subjects at these dinners about something they were working on or something they had read or seen that interested them. And this was new to me, too, and I was all ears. I didn't say a word ever, but I listened. I absorbed a lot of this [lore?] and I had a wonderful, wonderful roommate who was a big help and explained to me how things work, and she's still my best friend, so —

SARFAN: Wow, that's wonderful.

HAMMER: Yeah.

SARFAN: What house did you live in?

HAMMER: Baldwin.

SARFAN: What was that like? Did you like it?

HAMMER: Well, I didn't know any other, so it was all different, of course. I had lived in dormitory at my gymnasium in Iceland and that was a co-ed dormitory. Well, there was a separation between the men's building and the women's building. But still, it was very different and much, much more [Spartan?] than Baldwin House. I think we had one bathtub for, I don't know, 25 girls, you know, or something like that. But we only took baths once a week anyway, so it wasn't that bad.

SARFAN: Did you like — were — did you have friends in your house or were your friends more in [other places?]?

HAMMER: My roommate was my best friend and we [kept?] together a lot of the time. She was an incoming freshman and I came in as a sophomore, but I was also a brand new person. And, of course, during what would have been my freshman year, a lot of people had sort of — they found friends and it wasn't easy to come as a sophomore. So I was — I saw a lot of — I met a lot of her friends, but then, gradually, I started meeting people in my

own class. And, yeah, I had — by the time I graduated, I had several people that I didn't mind seeing again.

SARFAN: Yeah. Were you — did you feel pretty at home at Smith by the end?

HAMMER: By the end, I did. Yes. It was an adjustment and, you know, some confusing things. And, you know, Americans are very outgoing, and the girls were very friendly, and they smiled a lot. And that would not have been — in Iceland, people really take stock of you before they — they don't just come out and say, Oh, hello, my name is so-and-so, and tell, Who are you, where are you from, that sort of thing. It's much more difficult to meet people in Iceland than here. All the girls were all very friendly and helpful, and they smiled so much. And I thought, hmm, well, this is something interesting. I better learn this.

SARFAN: Yeah. Different. What were your academic interests?

HAMMER: Well, I immediately wanted English, and I wanted — coming from where I was coming from, I thought you could sign up for as many courses — I'd been taking 10 or 11 courses at the same time in gymnasium, but it's a completely different system. So here, I sat for a whole day in the — we sat in the [gym?], as I recall, signing up for courses, and there were advisors, and I signed up for 11 courses. And then I got to the table, where there was an advisor, and she said, "Which ones have you-?" "Oh, all of them, of course." But I took as many English courses as I was allowed to have. I had to — I had distribution requirements that I had to take, as well. And I did some theater courses, also, because, you know, they were so interesting that this was all available. I could choose, you know, hey, I can do this if I want to. That was another marvelous thing because I was used to a set curriculum where you did — you know, you went through a curriculum as it stood. You didn't pick and choose.

SARFAN: Yeah. Did you have any professors that you really connected with or were inspired by?

HAMMER: Oh, yes. There was Ms. [Williams?]. She was my — she taught me old English. And she was absolutely wonderful. I took (inaudible) from her in my senior year, and old English both my soph— my junior and senior years. And she was just marvelous. I'm — she went on teaching a few years after I graduated, but she was already in her last — you know, her last stretch of teaching, but I always remember her. She was my favorite one. And, you know, there were other teachers, too. There was a very young PhD — I realize now that she must — this must have been her first job and she taught me freshman English, which I was taking, because that was something I had to — they thought would be good for me to do. And she was very encouraging. And a scary thing for me was I didn't have a

clue what was expected, and nobody — there was nobody to tell me what was expected, so, go home, write a paper about this or, oh, what does that mean? I had only written creative essays and I didn't know anything about research or just what you were supposed to do. So my first papers, I got all D's, and or D-minus on one. And this was very upsetting, of course, and this -- Ms. [Willatis?] was very encouraging. And she managed to see some merit in some of the things I did. So I think, OK, well, all cannot be lost. (laughter) So, you know — yeah, so she was — like, I remember her very fondly. I don't know how long she stayed at Smith. She was still there when I graduated, but I don't know after that.

SARFAN: So you were telling me about meeting your husband and going to these mixers and stuff.

HAMMER: Yes. That was another thing. I didn't know anything about the American dating system. That's not how we do these things in Iceland. But I was dragged to a mixer by a friend. It was a Smith mixer at [Wiggins?] Tavern. And invitations had gone out to all the men's schools, and there were going to be lots and lots of boys. And I was very contemptuous. I was very snooty in those days. And I said to my friend, "I will not go to that. That's a meat market. I'm not going to [spend there?] and, you know, be bid on," or whatever. And (inaudible), "Please, please come. Let's just go — just 10 minutes and we can go home." And so I — all right. I went with her. I saw, as we entered, the big ball room at Wiggins Tavern — I saw a man who looked, you know, fairly distinguished, I thought, and nice, but I wasn't paying any attention to anything. And I — there were women standing three deep, all around the dance floor. And I said, "I will have no part of this. I'm not standing here to be, you know, weighed and measured," you know. So I went through the wall of women and — behind them and sat down at the table and had my back to the whole scene. And after a while, very short while, there came a tap on my shoulder, and this guy asked me to dance. And it was that guy that I had noticed when I came in. And so we danced, and last November, we celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our meeting, and it had been — it was his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. I had been 21 for six months. It was 21<sup>st</sup> birthday and we — he brought me over to his table after we danced for a while, and then he was going to buy me a drink, and the waitress refused to serve me because I didn't have an ID and she did not want to serve me because she didn't believe that I was 21. She served him without his — ever being asked for the ID, but she wouldn't — so this became quite a little scene there at the table, and I was, of course, you know, very indignant, and then we argued the whole evening, and then we started going out together, and arguing some more, and arguing some more, and we got married in 1967, so we're still arguing. So — but that is the — going to a Smith mixer and meeting your future husband. That's the — you know, that was the myth and—

SARFAN: Yeah. It's kind of the story that you always hear.

HAMMER: That's right.

SARFAN: Yeah. Hmm. What was it like going to those mixers? Were there a lot of expectations, or was it –

HAMMER: Well, I had — I did go to a few and they were pretty much all the same, except some were bigger and some were smaller. And mainly, the idea was to meet as many people as possible. In fact, at this very same mixer, I also met another guy who asked me down to Yale for the weekend, for another weekend. And that was all, you know, very proper and very usual. As I (inaudible) — that was another thing that came as a surprise to me. I didn't know how these situations were — how to deal with these situations, but this was the — the pattern was that if the man became interested in you, he would invite you down, at some point, to his school and see to it that you were put up somewhere appropriately, you know, in a women's dorm or something, something. And so that gave you a chance to get to know each other a little better. And this was — at that mixer, I did meet these two guys, and went down a few weeks later, and went down to visit the other one. But by that time, I already had become quite interested in this one I met first. So, all right. Well, it was — there was a lot of choice out there.

SARFAN: (laughs) Mm-hmm. That's good. What were the expectations at Smith for after graduation?

HAMMER: I think I came in on the tail end of the last generation that was thinking probably more in terms of who they would marry than what they would do. And in my gymnasium in Iceland, it was the same thing. I was — my generation was the tail end of that cohort, and the women who came after us were talking about professions that they wanted to enter. One of the women I was friendly with applied to medical school at the end of Smith and was turned down. And she was a very good student and I don't know exactly why she was turned down, but she maintained that it had to do with a reluctance to accept women into medical schools because it would be a waste of space. And that was still — that point of view was still in evidence. And I didn't have any profession in mind, myself, other than, I thought, Well, I want to teach English. And I thought I'd do the obvious thing: you know, go get the degree and then go back to Iceland and teach English at my gymnasium, and that would be my life. But instead, I found that I was — I wound up teaching English in the US and that's nice, too. I've had a very good career. Retired now, three years.

SARFAN: Do you think that Smith prepared you for that career? Is there anything that you would've wished had been different?

HAMMER: I wish I had been better at taking more advantage of all the things that were offered. I spent too much time thinking about men or, you know, totally frivolous things. And I wish now that I had, instead, spent some of that time on studying more subjects that were — (inaudible) offered to me, and made better use of it. That is my one regret about Smith. But I've always been very happy that I went here and the — it's been — you know, not only do I feel that I got a very good education, but it has also opened a lot of doors that I wouldn't otherwise have been aware of.

SARFAN: So — let's see. Did students have a role in making decisions about Smith while you were there?

HAMMER: I didn't have the feeling that there was a lot of student input. I can tell you, in 1960— probably it was in '64, as an example, a lot of students wanted the library to stay open until 11 p.m. instead of 10:30 and the very first and only political action at Smith that I remember in my time was that there was a sit-in at the library. I didn't dare participate because I also was always concerned about the fact that I was an international student, and anything I did would reflect back on — other women might be coming from my country and if I did anything that created a bad reputation, that could hurt their chances, so I felt a responsibility for that. So I was not in the s— involved in the sit-in. And as I — as it was reported, it was a very polite sit-in, and it didn't come to any blows, but I don't think the library times were changed as a result of that. And I don't really think that students had a lot of say. There was a student — there was a judicial board for dealing with cheaters and some, you know, academic infractions, stuff like that. But I really didn't have the feeling that there was a lot of student input otherwise.

SARFAN: So I think that Smith is a school that has a lot of traditions, and also changes a lot, and seems to be evolving a lot. Do you like how Smith is evolving? Do you have any thoughts about the changes or the traditions that we're keeping?

HAMMER: I think it — I was very impressed when the engineering school started up. I thought that was a very worthwhile project and I also like the Ada Comstock Program very much. That's a marvelous thing. I did all my degrees with decades — decades apart. I (laughs) finally got my PhD at the age of 58. So I — you can — I had long pauses. So I know what it's like, you know, when you're an older student and you come back to a classroom. And I think it's a very, very commendable thing that Smith has this program and — for older women. So these are things that I approve of very much, and I do hope that Smith does not go co-ed, but,



you know, things are going to have to take their course, whatever they are. But I really do hope that that doesn't happen.

SARFAN: Yeah. Definitely. Do you have any advice that you would want to give to current Smith students?

HAMMER: I wouldn't presume to give any advice to current Smith students (laughter) because I am sure that they're much more knowledgeable than I am, certainly much more so than I was at their age, and they know a lot of things that I don't know. So I can't imagine giving any advice to them, other than, you know, I can say, take advantage. Use your opportunities. But that's the most specific I can be. I can't say more than that, and that is good advice. And unfortunately — and people gave me that advice, too, but unfortunately, I was very young and not very smart, and I didn't take it, and neither will they, so —

SARFAN: OK. Great. Thank you so much.

HAMMER: You're very welcome.

SARFAN: Those were great answers.

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Tyler Burchfield, June 15, 2015.*