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“Educate a Girl??
You Might as Well Attempt
to Educate a Cat!”:
Documenting Women’s Education
at a Single-Sex Collegiate Institution

Nanci A. Young

ABSTRACT. This article examines how materials collected by the Smith College Archives document the official life of the College, as well as the lives of undergraduates as they participate in student organizations, athletics, musical groups, and engage in other social relationships. It explores how the material has been collected, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the primary source material. It also examines how collections have been used to interpret what it was like to educate a woman in a single-sex institution at the end of the nineteenth century, and what it was truly like for the women who came to Smith to be educated. In addition, the article discusses a collaborative digitization project between the Five Colleges in the Pioneer Valley (Amherst, Hampshire, Mt. Holyoke, Smith, and the University of Massachusetts), funded by the Andrew Mellon Foundation between 1996 and 1999, that made selected records on women’s education available to the research community on the World Wide Web. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2002 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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In 1874, one year after becoming president of Smith College, Laureus Clark Seelye traveled to North Adams, Massachusetts, to deliver a paper before the American Institute of Instruction titled, "The Need of A Collegiate Education for Woman." Comprised of educators from Massachusetts, Connecticut and New York, Seelye spoke to an audience that was still adjusting to the concept that women be educated on par with their male counterparts. Boldly, Seelye stated that a woman had an obligation to, ". . . be perfect as her Father in Heaven is perfect" and took to task those who continued to believe that women should not be educated as exclaimed in this quote from years earlier: "Educate a Girl?? You might as well attempt to educate a cat!!"¹

This was not the first, nor the last time Seelye spoke to educators and the general public about the need for woman's education. He spent much of his initial years in office lecturing and writing about the "educated woman." He did so in order to gain support for the College from Northampton businessmen, politicians, and residents. Despite Northampton's endorsement, Seelye worked tirelessly against others who held the provincial attitude that the title of this paper implies. This quotation brought to the fore the basic element of the debate: should women enter into the scholarly, contemplative, lofty life of male dominated education?

We already know the answer to that question. Since 1836 there have been 74 all-female institutions of higher learning established in the United States and Canada.² Not all remained solvent; some folded outright over financial difficulties, others were absorbed, willingly or not, into their male counterparts, still others went co-educational. Yet, a goodly number remain viable and strong single-sex institutions. It is about student-initiated resources at one of those institutions, Smith College, and the historical records preserved in the College Archives, that I wish to explore.

The quote, "educate a girl? You might as well educate a cat" is one that has stuck with me since I first read Seelye's paper as part of my introduction to Smith College history a number of years ago. It's one that I've always wanted to use in a presentation. It is not only a pithy statement, but thanks to popular culture, a visual statement as well. Like the cats in a recent advertisement for the information technology company

EDS that depicts cowboys rustling thousands of cats across the western plains, documentation of student life on campus, an integral part of any education, is found in a wide assortment of places within the Archives. Grasp one idea from the collection of letters, journals and diaries in our care and you'll be able to verify or expand on it with the evidence found in the scrapbooks and photograph albums in our stacks. Read about the importance of physical culture at Smith in the early *Annual Circulars*, or early course catalogs, and you can learn more about the faculty responsible for carrying out those routines in our faculty papers. You can even read about the specific purchases of gymnastic apparatus in the *Reports of the President*, see students using the dumbbells in photographs of the gymnasium, and hold the wooden dumbbells in your hand. You can begin to analyze how students developed a group conceit by looking at the class notes about photography from a physics course in 1886, and then see the composite photograph taken of that physics class by their professor. By printing the negative of each individual student into a single image the professor created a composite photograph of the class. The students were so taken with this image that they named it "Composita," and wrote an original class play in the form of a Greek tragedy, about Composita's birth and life at Smith. Composita lived on with her fellow alumnae in the published class letters, and her image appeared again and again in photograph albums for the Class of 1886. The sources, similar to the cats in the EDS commercial, are out there just waiting to be herded.

The letters, journals and diaries of undergraduate women found in the Smith College Archives date from 1875 to the present. These materials provide us with a glimpse into student life that one could never glean from the official records of the President's Office, or the Dean of Student records, or the files of the Warden. The letters home to family and friends offer a refreshing and candid look at what it was like to be a young woman at an all women's college. The first women's basketball game was played at Smith in 1893, the same year that Senda Berenson, instructor in gymnastics, saw a game played in Springfield and immediately returned to Smith to devise a woman's rule game. Grace Whiting, a member of the Class of 1897, describes one of the early games to her parents:

We are getting very much excited over basketball as there is a match to come off soon between '96 and '97. There are indefinite numbers of teams at present so we only play one or two. Our team, I proudly say, has won the last two games. We are going to prac-

tice on the 22nd and “wipe the floor” on Friday. Really, it’s the most exciting thing you ever saw. The teams that aren’t playing get up in the running track and hang their feet over, applauding violently most of the time.³

Gertrude Barry, Class of 1908, wrote home to describe a ‘bacon bat’; outings in which small groups of students went to a rural, off-campus spot and picnicked on coffee, sweets and bacon roasted over an open fire (see Figure 1). Gertrude explained to her father:

Last night about 5:00 a bunch of us went out to Easthampton at the foot of Mt. Tom for a bacon bat and oh! what a good time we had! We built a fire on some rocks right by the little mountain brook and then got busy toasting the bacon of which I had 7 slices with four rolls. Then plus one cruller and several marshmallows and I was comfortably filled.⁴

FIGURE 1. Bacon Bat in 1897 (Courtesy of Smith College Archives)



In 1910 Hart Lester-Harris writes in her diary of the annual and still celebrated Mountain Day (see Figures 2, 3, and 4), a sunny day when classes are cancelled and students are encouraged to head for the hills to enjoy the greater outdoors:

Today was Mt. Day. Gert, Anabel, Sybil and I took a surrey and one horse, Pegasus . . . and drove to Whately Glen. There we ate. It was also Amherst's Mountain Day with the result that about 6 men watched us eat and talked and tried to pick up our acquaintance. They stayed near us most of the day and made it quite unpleasant so we came home. If we had known any of them we might have had a good time . . . but as it was, they were the freshest specimens I ever saw!⁵

While the letters to family and friends are in general full of gossip and bright and cheery news, the diaries and journals are more introspective and include darker and more sobering moments. Some carry special meanings that are locked inside forever, like the diary of Mary Askew Mather, Class of 1883, written in her own coded handwriting, that only she could read. Mather was a popular student, president of her class, a talented writer, gifted athlete, and the "crush" of many an underclass

FIGURE 2. "Playing Cards During Mt. Day Excursion." Hart Lester-Harris '13, Photographer (Courtesy of Smith College Archives)



woman. After graduation Mather continued to write poetry, and was a strong community advocate for the Women's Christian Temperance Union, and the Free Public Library in Wilmington, Delaware. We are very curious about her own thoughts—although we may never break the code to find out what she really thought of Smith.

The scrapbooks and photograph albums in the Archives provide a form of the visual culture of the College, available for researchers to explore. The scrapbook collection dates from 1881 to 1996 and when seen as a group, they can provide a sense of progression about the activities Smith women were engaged in over the years. Scrapbooks from 1879 to around 1910 contain newspaper clippings about the College, scraps from athletic events, personal drawings, greeting and calling cards, as well as Smith memorabilia such as dance cards, printed sheets of class songs and yells, and pressed botanicals from the Botanical Garden. In scrapbooks from the turn of the century, we begin to see evidence of students participating in activities beyond campus. Programs show that they attended

FIGURE 3. "Cards and Cosmopolitan on Mt. Day." Hart Lester-Harris, '13, Photographer (Courtesy of Smith College Archives)



musical and theatrical events in Northampton as well as Boston, New York and Albany. Newspaper clippings from regional newspapers begin to appear, as well as articles from the popular press, and mementos from social engagements not sponsored by the College. Photographs depicting favorite faculty members, housemates, and interior shots of dormitory rooms become an integral part of the scrapbooks. One scrapbook made by Fronia Ernestine Fisher, a member of the Class of 1913, includes a decaying Yale pendant (she married a Yale man), a pair of desecrated ballet slippers, as well as photographs of her dancing in a senior dramatic play wearing those slippers. The photograph albums, which date from 1879, provide another personal view into the life of the student. Many of the images are candid photographs of friends, events and cherished moments taken by students. These expressive shots of what Seelye called, “. . . the contagious enthusiasm of college students . . .” are unequaled by the more formal portraits found in the yearbooks.⁶

FIGURE 4. “Travelling to Mountain Day Activities in Style.” Hart Lester-Harris, '13, Photographer (Courtesy of Smith College Archives)



Materials from student organizations provide another facet of student life outside the classroom. The records of Smith's first literary society, the Alpha Society, contain issues of the magazine, *The Alpha Paper*, first published in 1879, invitation cards to new members, minutes of the meetings, and copies of papers presented by members at the meetings. *The Alpha Paper* itself provides clues to how students saw themselves, and what issues they thought important. The organization improved both the writing habits of its members, many of whom went on to careers in writing, and honed their public speaking skills through debates that were held at the meetings. Examples of debate topics include, "Is Woman Intellectually Equal to Man?" (1879) and "Is the Self-Consciousness of the American Girl the Result of Conceit or Self-Distrust" (1880). In the 1890s *The Alpha Paper* expanded its content and began to publish literary pieces and poetry. When the Phi Kappa Psi Society formed several years later, a rivalry sprang up between the two groups that is documented in articles from both their magazines. In the early 1930s, when the two societies merged they developed a yearly arts festival on campus. Like the two literary and debate societies, the Student Drama Association began with a small number of theatrical groups in Smith's residential houses. In 1908 these groups were replaced by class groups with such names as Cap 'n' Bells, Sock 'n' Buskin, and The Players. By examining the plays that were produced in specific time periods, a researcher can begin to understand the mood of the campus. Not surprisingly, the first plays performed were Greek tragedies (like *Electra*), the plays of Shakespeare, and classic plays from around the world. Plays by contemporary authors such as Ibsen were performed, and comedies and experimental theatre began to appear on stage. The political and social contents of the plays may surprise researchers. In the 1930s, Smith students responded to changing world politics, as seen by their choice of two plays. In 1935, the students staged a production of "The World We Live In" by Czech playwrights Josef and Karol Capek. In the play a philosophically minded vagrant—a *la Rip Van Winkle*—falls asleep in the forest and is visited by groups of insects representing the good and evil of human kind. This very political play was succeeded in the following year with an adaptation of the German play, "Maedchen im Uniform," a production which examines the relationship of authoritarianism and sexual repression on the lives of young girls in a Prussian boarding school. Photographs, programs, and scripts from these plays, as well as the articles from the student newspapers reporting on the productions, round out the available picture of drama at Smith.

Sport and athletic events are also well documented in the College Archives through photographs, rulebooks, club minutes, and published sources. As we've already seen, sports are referred to in letters, journals, and diaries, as in Gertrude Barry's letter describing a basketball game. A researcher can find depictions of sports in the Grounds and Buildings photograph collection. Often the photographer inadvertently captured a tennis or baseball game being played in front of a dormitory, while taking an exterior shot of the building. Comments found in a visitor's book from the Outing Club's cabin in a nearby hill town reveal not only the activities held there, ". . . we had 'much fun'—whispering into the night, read Kipling's 'Tomb of His Ancestors' by firelight," but also the sheer expressive joy of being out in the woods, with no school to worry about, such as found in this poem,

Feather of cabin smoke against the sky.
 Sound of a lonely church peel far away.
 Peace that is mine on the hilltop where I lie.
 Peace of the autumn—strength of the rising day.⁷

While these student-created materials generally do provide a more personal look at a student's life, a researcher can also turn to the official publications of the College. *Annual Circulars*, the *Reports of the President*, copies of the student newspaper, the alumnae magazine, and course catalogs can all spell out what a student might refer to colloquially. Various administrative records offer the story of policy-making at the College, and the departmental records and faculty papers provide access to information about the curriculum and teaching at Smith. Information about student organizations, the demerit system, and Smith customs and traditions can be found in the *Freshman Handbook*, along with tips regarding the expected social behavior of students from a section called, "Hints for Freshman." A few of these include:

- Don't cut classes—or chapel—or friends.
- Don't bring a trousseau to college. Have your clothes few, simple & becoming.
- Don't get a 'crush.' It's the surest way to lose friends.
- Don't play with one girl exclusively. There are 2000 in the College.⁸

So how did this material come to Smith? The College Archives has its roots in a newspaper and memorabilia collection begun by Nina E. Browne, Class of 1892, when she was an undergraduate. Browne contin-

ued to collect alumnae material through the 1930s. In 1940, Margaret Storrs Grierson, class of '22, was appointed archivist and in her 25-year tenure the Archives expanded greatly. The Archives collected not only published information about the college, and alumnae material, but faculty papers, and records of offices. Through Grierson's efforts, the Archives has grown into a deep and rich resource for individuals interested in all sort of history. Alumnae material also comes through the generosity of family and anonymous donors. Every day packages cross my desk containing postcards of campus buildings, and publications such as year-books, commencement programs, and newsletters. I find Smith College pins, cigarette cases, pendants and even rub-off tattoos in my box. The generosity is sometimes overwhelming! We come by materials in other ways. Dealers offer to sell items. I've fielded offers of a complete set of Smith College commemorative Wedgwood plates (we already have a set); seen a 1910 photograph album up for auction at Swann Galleries for \$450 (we didn't bid, as we already have a large number of albums from that class), and recently had a dealer approach us with 100 to 200 museum quality cyanotype prints of Smith by an alumna from the class of 1912. The asking price for the prints: \$20,000! I certainly don't have an acquisitions budget that will allow that type of purchase so I declined the offer. Part of my duties now include watching the sales on Alibris and eBay, and to fielding inquires from family members who, in the wake of shows like 'Antiques Roadshow' and 'QVC Collectables,' now want to sell rather than donate items to us!

Many of the student materials I've mentioned are unavailable on the Web, but there is a large body of material available to researchers in electronic format. A 1996 Andrew Mellon Foundation grant, awarded to Smith and the other four colleges in the Pioneer Valley (Amherst, Hampshire, Mt. Holyoke and UMASS/Amherst) allowed us to digitize materials relating to the history of women's education.⁹ On this site you will find digital images of the early founding documents relating to the creation of Smith College, including Sophia Smith's will; the journals of John M. Greene, her pastor and confidant; images of the College seal; contemporary newspaper clippings and writings about Smith; selected records from L. Clark Seelye's papers; and copies of the *Annual Circular* through 1910. Our challenge is to continue to add digitized material to this site on a regular basis, which frankly, has not happened. What the site has done is to increase the visibility of the College Archives, and the number of requests for the use of images in publications, videotapes, wedding invitations, and program announcements. We frequently refer researchers to the web site when they have queries about curriculum de-

velopment, want a list of faculty who taught in specific departments, want to know how the College marketed itself at the turn of the century, or how much tuition and board cost in 1908. When I teach undergraduates about primary source materials I encourage them to use the “real” materials in the Archives during the day, but at night when we’re closed, I tell them to look at the digitized images, where they are available to them 24/7. We have a strong link with the undergraduate curriculum at Smith. A number of departments and programs use the Archives extensively in their teaching—and they aren’t always the traditional departments that you might think would naturally gravitate towards using the materials in the Archives. I’ll offer 3 examples. The Women’s Studies department annually has students work on papers about a particular early undergraduate. The students are responsible for finding out as much information as they can about the women, usually through their letters, journals and diaries as well as what the College was like at the time. They then write a biography about this woman, and about their experiences as a biographer. An archeology class comes in to use the papers of Harriet Boyd Hawes, an alumna, and professor of Greek from 1900 to 1906, and the first woman to excavate on the island of Crete. By looking at her papers the students learn about Hawes’ education and how she transformed herself into a woman with the confidence to set off for Crete by herself to manage a complex excavation, with the full support of the male-dominated American Archeological Society and the University of Pennsylvania. Students in an anthropology class designed an exhibit on Native American artifacts in the collection of the Art Museum. By conducting biographical research in the College Archives on the donors, who were former Smith students, the students in the anthropology class made the connection that a particular faculty member in the Zoology department appeared influential with these women. Using this man’s faculty papers, the students were not only able to trace his influence with these women back to their classes, but to also learn about the nature and changes in the teaching and research practices in zoology/anthropology at the turn of the century.

Clearly, arriving at a full understanding of the experiences of young women at a college like Smith, can feel very much like the process of herding cats. Resources of an official nature provide a small portion of the story. The more personal student generated materials must play a major role in any analysis of the education of women, for it is this material that speaks to part of the education process not found in course listings, or annual reports, or handbooks. Alumnae donors and archivists have an equal stake in collecting and making these materials available

to researchers so that a more complete picture of the education of women can be obtained. Just as L. Clark Seelye was successful in leading women towards a first-class education, so too has the Smith College Archives been successful in preserving and making available the materials to reconstruct this history.

NOTES

1. L. Clark Seelye, "The Need of A Collegiate Education for Woman," a paper delivered before the American Institute of Instruction, North Adams, July 28, 1874. Published by Vote of the Convention.
2. "History of Women's Colleges" listing at: <http://www.womenscolleges.org/> Women's College Coalition, Washington, DC.
3. Correspondence, Grace Whiting to "Fred" [?], 18 February 1894, Alumnae Biographical Files, Class of 1897 records, Box 1537.
4. Correspondence, Gertrude Barry to "Father & Bob," 20 May 1908, Alumnae Biographical Files, Class of 1910, Box 1762.
5. Diary entry, Harris Lester-Hart, 6 October 1910, Alumnae Biographical Files, Class of 1913, Box 1826.
6. Seelye, pp. 9-10.
7. Unattributed poem, Registration Book, Outing Club records, Box 1363.
8. *The Students' Handbook*, Smith College, Class of 1926. (Northampton: Smith College Association for Christian Work), 1922.
9. The Web site is located at: <http://clio.fivecolleges.edu>, and can be accessed through the Web sites for the participating Archives and Special Collections departments.

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