

The Radcliffe College Alumnae Oral History Project

The purpose of this project is to use oral histories to record the undergraduate experiences of Radcliffe College alumnae from the classes of the 1940s through 1979. These oral histories are being contributed to the Radcliffe College History Archive at the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America at Harvard University.

Radcliffe undergraduate life during this period has minimal oral history documentation at the Schlesinger Library. We were told by library staff that the Radcliffe College History Archive has little or no documentation of undergraduate life “for the “second half of the 20th century.” The project organizers feel a sense of urgency to give interested alumnae from these years, especially the older alumnae, a chance to tell their stories.

The period from the 1940s through the 1970s spans the transition from the time when Radcliffe had a separate administration, admissions and dormitories to the point when classes and college life at Harvard-Radcliffe became more equally coeducational – in other words, the era when Radcliffe College was more separate than equal.

Many alumnae, including those who fully support coeducation, think the history of Radcliffe College itself has disappeared from public conversation and from memory at Harvard and at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. We believe a careful documentation of the lived experience of alumnae from these decades is an essential contribution to the history of Radcliffe College, as well as to the broader history of women in higher education.

2. The Project

The project was begun by a committee of the Radcliffe Club of San Francisco in the fall of 2019. Oral history interviews with an interview guide developed by the committee began in January 2020. Then came the pandemic and the necessity to figure out how to interview and record online. As of late March 2021, we have completed almost 55 interviews: Nine from the 1940s, 31 from the 1950s, and 15 from the 1960s. Several more interviews are in progress and we plan to send all the recordings and professional transcriptions to the Schlesinger Library by the end of the summer.

The interviews are conducted by volunteer alumnae, and the recordings and transcripts are prepared according to the Schlesinger’s archival standards. The Schlesinger Library has welcomed the oral histories and has given guidance on how to submit materials that meet their standards. The Schlesinger also awarded the project one of its four honorary Oral History Grants for 2020.

Phase One of our interviews have focused on alumnae from the classes of the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s. All these women received a Radcliffe College diploma that was written in Latin. The second phase of our project will reach alumnae from 1963 through 1979. The Class of 1979 is the last class to be admitted by a separate Radcliffe Admissions committee.

The interviews cover three general topics:

- 1) Radcliffe College life.
- 2) Academic experience.
- 3) The alumna's retrospective view of her experience at Radcliffe College.

3. Funding of the Project

The interviewers are alumnae volunteers. Funding from donations and grants has been used to pay for consultation on oral history practices; training of interviewers; equipment for recordings that meet the requirements of the Schlesinger Library; and professional transcriptions of the interviews.

The Radcliffe Club of San Francisco provided an initial grant of seed money for the project in 2019. The Schlesinger Library did arrange some funding in 2020-21. Other donations have come from individual donors, including Radcliffe alumnae and other supporters of the project.

Additional donations are welcome and would be used to pay for more interview transcriptions and the training of additional volunteer interviewers. The average cost of preparing a transcription, providing a transcription booklet to the alumna interviewed, and some operating expenses is about \$300 per interview.

Tax-deductible contributions can be made through the Radcliffe Club of San Francisco, which is a 501c3 organization. Donors can use the Dues and Contributions button on the RCSF website at <http://www.radcliffeclubsf.org/>, or can mail a check to the Radcliffe Club of San Francisco, c/o Kathy Henschel, Treasurer, 108 Poppy Court, Walnut Creek, CA 94596. Please write *Oral History Project* in the check memo.

The Radcliffe Club of San Francisco is an official club within the Harvard Alumni Association and is the only remaining independent Radcliffe Club in the world.

4. Contact Information

The Project Director, Alice Abarbanel '66, welcomes any inquiries to learn more about this project. You can reach her at radcliffecollegevoices@gmail.com.