



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. It is also intended to illuminate the unusual history of Radcliffe College. Radcliffe was founded in 1879 as a separate women's college, with instruction provided by Harvard professors, but by the end of the 1970s had come close to merging its undergraduate life with that of Harvard College.

The project also contributes to the broader history of higher education for women in the United States. These oral histories are preserved at the Radcliffe College Archives at Harvard University's Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America.

How the Project Began

The Oral History Project is a volunteer effort, initiated and carried out by volunteer alumnae. It was begun in 2019 by the Radcliffe Club of San Francisco, the only remaining independent Radcliffe Club (as opposed to a joint Harvard-Radcliffe Club) in the world. Following the group's annual meeting that spring, an informal committee of four members, who were intrigued by the life stories of some of the older alumnae, began discussing how the stories of these alumnae could be recorded and saved.

The project was originally envisioned as a small-scale, local effort that would focus on Radcliffe alumnae in the San Francisco Bay Area. By early 2020, however, it had grown to a national reach, encompassing the oral histories of alumnae around the country and even overseas.

One reason for the growth was the enthusiastic interest and support of alumnae who heard about the project. These alumnae were eager to preserve the history of the college. Many, including those who fully support coeducation, were concerned that the history of Radcliffe seemed to be disappearing from public conversation at Harvard and to some extent from institutional memory at the university.

A second factor, made necessary by the pandemic in 2020, was the use of online teleconferences or the telephone instead of in-person meetings to conduct the oral history interviews. This technology made it possible to interview alumnae from around the United States and overseas, as well as to use alumnae interviewers from different areas.

The Development of the Project

The original committee was made up of Alice Abarbanel, Class of '66, who later became the volunteer Project Director; Pat Bourne '61; Julie Cheever '66; and Randy Mildren '73. In meetings during the summer and fall of 2019, they developed a mission statement and a prototype of an interview guide.

Early on, the committee made a couple of decisions that shaped the project. One was that the interviews should focus on the undergraduate college experience of the alumnae, rather than

what they did later in life.

Another decision was to make the older alumnae the top priority. This resulted in dividing the project into two phases: Phase One covers alumnae from the classes of the 1940s through 1962. Phase Two includes the classes of 1963 through 1979. (The Class of 1979 was the last class to have been admitted by a separate Radcliffe Admissions Office.)

The interviews cover three general topics:

- The alumna’s experience of Radcliffe College life;
- The alumna’s undergraduate academic experience; and
- The alumna’s retrospective view of her college experience.

In a visit to the Schlesinger Library in October 2019, Alice Abarbanel was told by the librarians that while the Radcliffe College Archives contain numerous documents, there was very little living history of Radcliffe undergraduates in the second half of the 20th century. The librarians welcomed the idea of the oral histories and worked with her on specifying the archival standards for the recordings and transcriptions.

The next month, the Radcliffe Club awarded the project a crucial grant of seed money to start the project. Although the organizers and interviewers are volunteers, funding is needed to pay for professional transcriptions and other costs. In 2020, the project was awarded an Oral History Grant by the Schlesinger Library and received some additional funding. The project is currently funded in an ongoing process by donations from alumnae and other supporters.

In January 2022, the project completed about 100 interviews in Phase One, covering alumnae in the classes of the 1940s through 1962, and transferred the recordings and transcriptions to the Schlesinger Library to be archived. Eight volunteer interviewers joined Alice Abarbanel, the first interviewer, to gather these oral histories in 2020 and 2021. Phase Two will begin in 2022.

Historical Scope of the Project

The period covered by this Oral History Project, from the 1940s through the 1970s, spans the transition from the time that Radcliffe was a separate women’s college, but with joint classes with Harvard, to the point when college life was more fully coeducational and Radcliffe began to disappear as a distinct entity. In its earlier history, Radcliffe was founded in 1879 as a Harvard “Annex” for women and then chartered in 1894 as a degree-granting college. At first, Harvard professors gave separate classes for women at the Radcliffe Yard, but in 1943, at approximately the time of the start of these oral histories, the classes were made coeducational as a wartime measure.

Radcliffe women were subject, however, to a quota of a 4-to-1 ratio of men to women for nearly three more decades. Finally in the 1970s, the quota was at first loosened slightly and then abolished. The combining of dormitories, administration and admissions also began in the 1970s, although the formal merger of Radcliffe and Harvard was not completed until 1999.

These oral histories show the graduates’ varied memories and reactions to what Radcliffe was like during their time, and their sense of what was gained and what was lost in the transition from a women’s college to more complete coeducation. The interviews include discussions of the historical moment of the alumna’s undergraduate life, from World War II and the Korean and Vietnam wars to the social movements and cultural changes of the ’50s, ’60s, and ’70s.