



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 the 1970s. The histories are also intended to contribute to the history of Radcliffe College itself.

Radcliffe was founded in 1879 as a separate women's college, with instruction provided by Harvard professors. By the end of the 1970s it had merged with Harvard College in practical effect, and Radcliffe College as a separate entity was lost from view, although the merger was not officially completed until 1999.

The oral histories are preserved at the Radcliffe College Archives at Harvard University's Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America. In addition to illuminating Radcliffe College history, they add to the broader history of higher education for women in the United States.

How the Project Began

The Oral History Project is a volunteer effort, initiated and carried out by volunteer alumnae serving as organizers and interviewers. The project was begun in 2019 by the Radcliffe Club of San Francisco, the only remaining separate Radcliffe Club in the world. Following the club's annual meeting that spring, an informal committee of four members, who were intrigued by the life stories of some of the older alumnae, met to discuss how the stories of these alumnae could be recorded and saved.

The project was originally envisioned as a small-scale effort that would focus on Radcliffe alumnae in the San Francisco Bay Area. In the next couple of years, however, it expanded exponentially to include alumnae from all over the country and class years up to the 1970s. Long-distance interviews were made possible by the use of Zoom and other technology.

The main reason for this growth was a groundswell of enthusiasm and support from alumnae who heard about the project. While most alumnae would agree that coeducation was an advance whose time had come, many were concerned that Radcliffe College was disappearing from institutional memory at Harvard. They wanted to preserve its history and were eager to tell their stories.

The Development of the Project

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. A second decision was to make the older alumnae the top priority. As a result, the project was divided into Phase One, the histories from the classes of the 1940s through 1962, and Phase Two, the classes of 1963 through the 1970s.

Phase One was completed in early 2022. It consists of 101 oral histories, including one history from an alumna of the class of 1941 and at least several from every class from 1944 through 1962. The transcripts, recordings and videos have been archived at the Schlesinger Library. They are now available online at radcliffearchives.org.

Phase Two, the classes of 1963 to the 1970s, is now under way. As of the spring of 2024, the volunteer interviewers have recorded about 130 oral histories from these classes and are planning on at least 60 more.

The interviews cover three general topics: the alumna's experience of Radcliffe College life; her undergraduate academic experience; and her retrospective view of her college experience.

In a visit to the Schlesinger Library in the fall of 2019, Alice Abarbanel '66, the volunteer Project Director, 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.

Also in 2019, the Radcliffe Club awarded the project a crucial grant of seed money to start its work. Although the organizers and interviewers are volunteers, the project has some expenses, primarily the cost of professional transcriptions suitable for archiving, plus some administrative costs. As of the spring of 2024, these costs amount to about \$500 per interview. They have been covered by donations from alumnae and other supporters, made through the Radcliffe Club of San Francisco.

Historical Scope of the Project

The period covered by this Oral History Project, from the 1940s to 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 it was merged with Harvard in practical effect.

When it was founded in 1879, Radcliffe was called the Harvard "Annex" for women and could give certificates but not diplomas for four years of study. In 1894, it was chartered as a college and could give diplomas. For more than six decades, Harvard professors gave separate classes for women at the Radcliffe Yard, but in 1943, classes were made coeducational as a wartime measure and remained that way. Thus, coeducational classes were part of the college experience of everyone we interviewed except for one alumna from the Class of 1941. But

Radcliffe had its own dormitories, administration, admissions office and activities such as a newspaper and radio station.

In the 1950s and 60s, there were couple of changes: most Harvard extracurricular activities were made coeducational in the late 1950s and most separate Radcliffe activities were phased out. Women started receiving Harvard diplomas in 1963. Despite the coeducational classes, however, Radcliffe women were subject to an admissions quota of a four-to-one ratio of men to women for nearly three more decades after 1943, and this disparity in numbers of men and women was also part of the college experience of the alumnae interviewed.

In the 1970s, the momentum toward a merger of Radcliffe and Harvard accelerated. The quota limit on women was at first loosened and then abolished in 1975, when the Radcliffe and Harvard admissions offices merged, although it took a few years to achieve parity in numbers of male and female students. Co-ed living in the dormitories began in 1970, and by the end of the 1970s, Harvard had taken over most Radcliffe undergraduate administration. Thus, the Oral History Project ends with alumnae of the 1970s, even though the merger was not official until 1999.

Besides preserving Radcliffe College history, the project is intended to show the varied experiences of individual alumnae, and their views as to what was gained and what was lost at each step as Radcliffe moved toward the merger. The histories also show how students were affected by events in the outside world, from World War II and the Korean and Vietnam wars to the social movements and cultural changes of the '50s, '60s, and '70s.