Abstract

In this oral history Martha Gregory Tolles recalls her experience being at Smith at the beginning of World War II. She recounts being called into her house mother’s sitting room and listening to the news of the attack on Pearl Harbor, as well as work she did for the WAVES. She also tells of meeting her future husband on Mountain Day and recalls working on the college newspaper when Betty Friedan was editor.

Restrictions

NO ONLINE ACCESS

Format

Interview recorded on miniDV tapes using a Panasonic DVX-100A camera. One 30-minute tape.

Transcript

Transcribed by Janet Harris with Harris Reporting.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording


Transcript

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project  
Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted May 24, 2013, with:

MARTHA GREGORY TOLLES  
by: CAROLYN REES

REES: We're rolling and you can just look at me instead of looking right into the camera.

TOLLES: Oh, okay.

REES: We'll just have a conversation. So this is Carolyn Rees and I am conducting an interview with Martha Gregory Tolles on May 24, 2013 for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. So thank you for being here, Martha.

TOLLES: Yes.

REES: Why are you attending reunion this year?

TOLLES: Well, I thought it was a marvelous opportunity to come. And then I had the good luck to be able to persuade my son and daughter-in-law to come with me. And I really was very happy to – and I was free in my own life so to speak. The timing was good for me.

REES: Yeah, absolutely. Are a lot of your classmates back as well?

TOLLES: Quite a few. There are 16 attending in my class, which is pretty good.

REES: Yeah, that is. That is. So how did you choose to attend Smith?

TOLLES: Well, my mother and I had toured Wellesley and Smith. Those were the two we were looking at. And so I can't say that it was all my good judgment. It was my mother who had heard President Neilson give a talk. And she was so impressed with his talk. So then she persuaded me it should be Smith. So it was a great choice.

REES: Right. What were your expectations for your Smith experience?

TOLLES: Well, I just thought it would be very exciting. I was – it was a wonderful, wonderful feeling to come here. I didn't feel lonely or afraid or anything like that, but I was hoping I'd find a friend or two. But I always thought the classes were just wonderfully interesting.
REES: Yeah. So what were your first few days at Smith like? What was it like to arrive and to –

TOLLES: Well, now you're asking me to look way back. (Laughs).

REES: (Laughs).

TOLLES: And so that's a little difficult. I do think I went in there having a very large trunk with clothes in it. Nobody would travel that way now. And I was in Park Annex. And I was very surprised when I went upstairs to my room to find a rope coiled up in the room. And I found out that was to be used in case of fire.

REES: Right.

TOLLES: And then we – I believe there was some other rooms equipped that way also. And we have to go over to the gym and practice sliding down a rope so we'd know what to do. So that was all rather interesting.

REES: Yeah. Had you ever seen that before, where a rope was need – had you ever seen a fire escape rope before?

TOLLES: I have never – nope. I never really had much to do with sliding down ropes before then.

REES: (Laughs). And the test was mandatory, right?

TOLLES: Yes. Uh-huh.

REES: Right.

TOLLES: Yeah, there were a couple of mandatory tests when I was at Smith. One was to pass a reading test in a foreign language.

REES: Oh, okay.

TOLLES: And the other was to pay a swimming test. Luckily I was able to pass both of those.

REES: And so you arrived at Smith at the beginning of the war?

TOLLES: Yes, right.

REES: So –

TOLLES: And when I arrived, we all wore skirts and sweaters. Absolutely skirts and, you know, to look a little better we'd have a little string of pearls. And the kind of
long wavy hair. But by the time I left, this is why I thought it would be sort of interesting to talk to you today because it was such a change during those four years, you see. By the time I left, we were running around in blue jean and big baggy shirts that were supposed to have come from our – or we pretended came at least from our brothers or our fathers. So the whole dress code changed.

REES: Yeah. And so where were the button-down shirts actually from? If they weren't from your – because you said that you were pretending –

TOLLES: Well, I mean, sometimes you just buy them.

REES: Right.

TOLLES: Not just acquire them –

REES: Yeah.

TOLLES: – from your family.

REES: Yeah.

TOLLES: And of course the whole behavior code changed, too, in that – in the first part of my college career, I don't think any gal would have thought of going out at night to have a beer without a male with her.

REES: Right.

TOLLES: But after – especially the change was very marked after Pearl because it – I guess it was just seems as if the men just disappeared. And so then girls used to go out together at night.

REES: And it wasn't surprising any more for –

TOLLES: No, it was accepted.

REES: Right. Were you on campus when Pear Harbor happened?

TOLLES: Yes, I was on campus.

REES: What was that like?

TOLLES: And I remember being called into my – we had – in our house, we had – what'd she call it? Headmistress?

REES: The house mother.
TOLLES: A house mother. That was it. And being called into her little sitting room and we heard these terrible announcements on the radio about Pearl Harbor –

REES: Wow.


REES: Yeah.

TOLLES: Very, very frightening.

REES: And what was it like after? In the next few days?

TOLLES: You know, I – unfortunately, I don't remember. We were looking through the college newspapers earlier today. And there was a write up in there about some large meeting at the college the day after. But I just don't remember that.

REES: But at the time it was very frightening to hear that.

TOLLES: Very. We knew it was terrible.

REES: Right.

TOLLES: Really terrible news.

REES: Right. Were there – were men on campus often before the war – or before the war really caught up with –

TOLLES: Before – yes. Yes, it seemed to be a number of men who showed up from the weekends.

REES: Right.

TOLLES: Primarily for dates and dances and things. And more girls, I think, went to men's colleges for dates but just a lot fewer of them. Although there was nearby, that Westover Army base or something. And so occasionally there were some men in uniform. And I had met my future husband, I'm sorry to say, with a Mountain Day.

REES: Uh-oh. (Laughs).

TOLLES: I didn't realize at the time, I don't think we thought it was such a naughty thing not to go climb the mountains. I was reading this – in the archives, later all this discussion about, oh, girls shouldn't do that; they should climb the mountains and so on. And but my roommate and I and another girl, I don't think we felt we were doing anything terribly, you know, wicked. It seemed like a very exciting thing to
Martha Gregory Tolles, interviewed by Carolyn Rees

We didn't have cars, but one of the other girls talked to one of the young art professors into driving us there. We told him we wanted to go to the art museum. But we never did get to the museum. (Laughs).

REES: (Laughs). And where did – did you go to Amherst?

TOLLES: No, we went to Williams.

REES: Oh, okay.

TOLLES: My roommate knew my husband's roommate.

REES: Oh, okay.

TOLLES: We went over there. All the way over there.

REES: And then you and your husband started dating after that?

TOLLES: Yes, absolutely. I guess there are life, marriages, that happens from Mountain Day. (Laughs).

REES: (Laughs). And when did you and your husband get married? Was it after graduation?

TOLLES: Yes, after. About a year after because he was in the Navy.

REES: Oh, okay.

TOLLES: And at first he was in the pilot program. And the pilots were not allowed to get married until they were commissioned.

REES: Wow.

TOLLES: We don't know what the theory was on that. Whether it was – I mean maybe it was just to save money so they didn't have to support the wives. Or we used to think, well, maybe they want the pilots to do more – to be more daring during their training. I don't know what the thinking was.

REES: Right.

TOLLES: But it was at sea. He graduated and he speeded up the colleges, the men's colleges, you know.

REES: Yeah.

TOLLES: So he had gone through the summer. So he graduated in, I think, March instead
of June, went right into the Navy. And then it was a year from June after that, that we got married. So –

REES: Okay. What was it like having your husband in the service during such a scary time?

TOLLES: Well, the feeling was so immense that we wanted to help. And we had this terrible enemy. And so you were very proud to have your husband in the service. It was a great sadness and disgrace if a man couldn't serve. And I had a younger brother who was ineligible for service. And it was just like having a terrible illness. (Laughs). It was really hard. And he even dropped out of college. He felt it was wrong to keep going to college.

REES: Wow.

TOLLES: And worked in a war plant until after the war ended. Tremendous patriotism.

REES: Right.

TOLLES: But our little – I was thinking about it today. My roommate and I had moved into Capen House for our second year. And our third year we were entitled to a beautiful big room upstairs, it was lovely. And we were due to have that again the next year. And lo and behold the WAVES came and took over the house. And so Capen House was a really nice house. It had its own tennis court.

REES: Wow.

TOLLES: And so then we had to move to Morris House into a quite small room was my recollection, with a bunk bed.

REES: Wow.

TOLLES: So that was our – when I say contribution to the war effort.

REES: (Laughs).

TOLLES: Definitely.

REES: So how else did Smithies contribute to the war effort?

TOLLES: Had a way –

REES: How else did somebody contribute?

TOLLES: Well, I was invited to join the WAVES.
REES: Okay.

TOLLES: That WAVES program, I don't know why they made it so sort of hush-hush. It was kind of secretive like. But if you – for some reasons it seems the right sort of person or something, you would be invited to join. And I don't know why I was invited to join. My roommate was a more brilliant student. She was a Phi Beta and very smart girl. But one time she had done something. What was it she did? I think she stayed out. You know we had to be in at 9:00 on weeknights.

REES: Right.

TOLLES: I think she stayed out beyond the time.

REES: Wow.

TOLLES: I believe that was it. It was – I don't know why. But any way they did invite me to join and I joined it. And we would have to go and meet somewhere and have this sort of class. And the work seemed to involve unscrambling letters and forming words. I think they were going to be – they worked later in doing decoding, is what I understand they did. I didn't enjoy unscrambling letters at all. I didn't like it. But it sounded so impressive to be invited to join the Navy. And I was due to become an officer. And then – and, of course, they told you, you were going to make this huge sum of money. And so it was all – seemed like such a big deal. But after a while I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to get married to my husband. I didn't think two naval officers would be able to it. So later on I dropped out of it.

REES: Right.

TOLLES: So after the war, after I graduated, I got a job at a newspaper instead. And I figured well, I was helping the war after that way. I had a wonderful time at Smith. And one of the things I most enjoyed was being on the newspaper.

REES: Right. You were talking about that earlier.

TOLLES: Yes.

REES: I mean Betty Friedan was the editor.

TOLLES: Betty Friedan, we were looking that up in the files.

REES: Right.

TOLLES: And just –

REES: So you worked with her?
TOLLES: Well, she was the editor, I worked under her.

REES: (Laughs). What was that like?

TOLLES: Well, I didn't really know her personally.

REES: Right.

TOLLES: But she had a reputation even then of being very brilliant, very dynamic, very – the feeling was she was an important person. Now maybe just being the editor would make you to a certain degree. But she really had a very dazzling reputation already of being somebody quite special. So somehow it wasn't that surprising to me later on that she wrote this groundbreaking book.

REES: Right.

TOLLES: But it was wonderful fun to be on the paper. And I got to become an assistant managing editor. And the managing editor was Priscilla Buckley of the Buckley family. You know, she was the sister of Bill Buckley, who had the program on television for such a long time.

REES: Wow.

TOLLES: Yes.

REES: That's quite the star-studded newspaper cast.

TOLLES: Yeah. It's big-name people.

REES: (Laughs).

TOLLES: Uh-huh.

REES: And were you involved in anything else besides the newspaper?

TOLLES: I was on – there was a radio board. I was on that also.

REES: Oh, okay.

TOLLES: Priscilla and I were both on that. I remember we gave a few broadcasts. I'm not just sure what they were all about. I know in one of them, I, somehow, I was interviewing taxi drivers and train conductors about Smith girls traveling, I guess.

REES: Okay. Sounds interesting.

TOLLES: That's about all I remember of the radio board. But that was it. The newspaper, I
don't think I was on it until, I think, I believe I was on it in my sophomore year. But it did take a lot of time and I gave it a lot of time because I like it so much.

REES: Mm-hmm. And you went on to work for a newspaper afterwards.

TOLLES: Yes. And I have always felt though I might not have even gotten that newspaper job if I hadn't been on the Smith paper.

REES: Okay.

TOLLES: Because I went right straight onto a straight reporting, you know, it wasn't any file per first stuff. It was get right in there and write the paper.

REES: Wow.

TOLLES: So and it was a wonderfully interesting time. Very fascinating. And, of course, the reason I got it was because the men were drafted. Women didn't get those jobs prior to the war at all.

REES: Right.

TOLLES: Though another girl named Bennington, Ethel (phonetic) Bennington. She had been there a year or two ahead of me on the paper. But – so she and I ran a branch office all by ourselves. I was told about six men ran it before the war, I guess.

REES: Wow.

TOLLES: Yeah.

REES: Are there any other ways that you noticed your life being impacted by the lack of men, like opportunities –

TOLLES: Out of –

REES: – that you received that you might otherwise not have gotten it?

TOLLES: You mean because the men were –

REES: Right.

TOLLES: – away?

REES: Yeah. Exactly.

TOLLES: Oh, I see. Well, there was that fantastic job as I say, when we – because before
the war women mainly had to just be the society editor. And now we were the ones to cover the city councils and the boards of education, everything. The crime, but there was hardly any where we were anyway. And that's because I guess the men were drafted. So it impacted me in the, you know, the best way. Husband –

REES: Who happened to be –

TOLLES: – was very worrisome, very scary. As I look back on it, I think even though we were the lucky ones in that my husband never had to really be in the – any battles. By the time he was trained enough, he was mainly held in the Pacific for the preparation for the invasion of Japan. But still there was this worry that he was going to have to do this terrible thing. So, it was just a very difficult time, difficult to live with. But it certainly did change the role of women.

REES: Absolutely.

TOLLES: They just – worldwide, I guess that happened. Women started doing all kinds of things they hadn't done before. So and you couldn't really undo all that later. They tried and they (laughs) – may – we all tried maybe in a way.

REES: Right.

TOLLES: And though also there were a couple of other really important things here at Smith when I was here. One was Janie White, I think her name was. I believe she was a year behind me. Have you heard of her?

REES: No, I haven't.

TOLLES: Well, there were three African American students here, which in itself was quite unusual.

REES: Right.

TOLLES: And then Janie was elected to one of the top three student government positions.

REES: Wow.

TOLLES: And this was considered – I mean in today's world I know this seems so tame but it was considered really astonishing.

REES: Yeah.

TOLLES: And as we understood it, the students – the college was acting very – as they would say today, cool about it. They weren't making a big hubbub about it. But the African American press were just, oh, filled with articles about her.
REES: Oh, really.

TOLLES: And her parents came to visit. And Walter White, who was head of NAACP and his wife.

REES: Wow.

TOLLES: And so – and I was in – she and I were in the same house in Morris House my last year. So I knew her, you see. And I met her parents too. And interesting, her father was very light-skinned. He could have passed as they say. It was quite something to see her and she was very popular.

REES: Oh, really?

TOLLES: Very, very well liked. And the other sort of big name at that time was – and my classmate, was Nancy Reagan.

REES: Yeah. Yeah. And did she transfer from Smith? Or she left Smith?

TOLLES: I thought she was –

REES: Or did she graduate?

TOLLES: – here all four years.

REES: Okay.

TOLLES: But I really –

REES: I might be wrong.

TOLLES: – didn't know anything about her until my senior year.

REES: Okay.

TOLLES: And I, of course, I lived down on campus and she lived in the Quad I'm told. And she was in drama. Smith was supposed to have had a rather strong drama program.

REES: Yeah.

TOLLES: And so – but she was in a class musical my senior year. And then was when I – and she made a big hit with the song she sang. And so that was when I just found out who she was. That was all. It was Nancy Davis, I think, then. And the song she sang was considered very, a little bit daring.
REES: Oh.

TOLLES: And it went like this.

REES: Do you remember what song it was? Oh.

TOLLES: She sang, I wanna make the soldier boys pause, you know. Oh, what did she mean? Then bandages and later meds. (Laughs).

REES: (Laughs).

TOLLES: Anyway.

REES: Yeah. That is daring. Wow. So what are some of your favorite memories from your time at Smith?

TOLLES: From my time at Smith?

REES: Yeah.

TOLLES: Well, you know, I loved – in the class work, I loved the – I love being an English major. And I love all the writing classes. I took all that there were. And there was a good class in Chaucer. There was a good class in I think, it was 18th century poetry. And I – my one regret is that I didn't get into the – there was a literary magazine. I wish I had tried out for that, but I guess I didn't. I thought newspapers was the way I would go.

REES: Right.

TOLLES: I had an aunt who was a journalist. I think that probably influenced me some. So instead, you know, later, I went on and I wrote children's books.

REES: Really?

TOLLES: So I found fiction much more fun. I tried to make it up.

REES: What children's books did you write?

TOLLES: Well, I had eight that were published by Scholastic and they were a series about Katie and Darcy. And they were very – they went over well. Good sales with those.

REES: Good.

TOLLES: And then I did a few other little small books and about 25 short stories.
REES: Wow.

TOLLES: But I was busy, I had six children. (Laughs).

REES: To have. (Laughs). That would make life busy.

TOLLES: Yeah.

REES: So what was your life like after Smith? When did you have your first child?

TOLLES: Oh, right as soon as –

REES: Right away.

TOLLES: – the war ended.

REES: Right. Wow. So you're –

TOLLES: That's why I came home and started law school.

REES: Oh, okay.

TOLLES: Yeah.

REES: Okay. Wow. And where did you live?

TOLLES: Well, we lived in Cambridge.

REES: Okay.

TOLLES: Because he was at Harvard. And I did one article at that time for the Herald Tribune for my aunt's page. She asked me to do it for her. But I foolishly – this is part of that thinking. You know, you get so – you're so swayed by whatever the thinking is at the time you live in. You don't realize it until later. But the thinking was, okay, now it's time to have the family and stay home. Be a homemaker.

REES: Right.

TOLLES: And so I gave up writing, didn't try to do anymore writing. Just concentrated on starting the family and trying to learn how to cook and things like that. So later, I realized, I should have kept on trying to do a little something. You know, writing another article now and then, just something.

REES: Right. So what did Smith teach you about life after college? How did it prepare you for life after college?
TOLLES: Well, I – oh, I see. Well, aside from the rather narrow way as I was saying, it really did help me, I think, be a newspaper reporter.

REES: Right.

TOLLES: But in general college gives you such a feeling of – I think a feeling of – I don't know what I mean exactly. Security?

REES: Right.

TOLLES: You've heard, you've learned all these things, you've heard about these important things. You've met all these other people. I mean people who don't go to college, they miss that whole experience of – maybe it's just an experience of maturation. Or certainly an opportunity to explore in many ways that you would have otherwise. So and then, of course, you know what it's like to deal with hard work – I mean mental work. And exams and deadlines and so that would prepare you a lot for many types of careers. And just many of the hardships in life, I think that are bound to come along.

REES: Yeah. Absolutely.

TOLLES: But it was – I liked coming to a woman's college. I had been in a coed high school.

REES: Okay.

TOLLES: And had a lot of fun in high school. You know, a lot of – we didn't date, but we had groups that met and we danced a lot. Stuff like that. But it was always, how do you look and that stuff. But also I know – I don't know if this is still true today. But it was this feeling of we're the important ones now. We get to do it all. We're not overshadowed by the guys. So that was really – it was fun.

REES: Yeah.

TOLLES: It was nice.

REES: Uh-huh. Absolutely. Well, we're almost out of time.

TOLLES: Uh-huh.

REES: And are there any other stories or memories that you would like to share?

TOLLES: Any other stories? It's always been wonderful for me to know that I went to Smith.

REES: Hmm.
TOLLES: I don't know exactly how I was lucky enough to get in. I do remember one thing that seemed to impress. I met with some little committee beforehand and I told them – I wasn't such an outstanding student, but I was a great reader. And so I told the committee when I read, that if I came across words I didn't know, I saved them and then I made my own little private dictionary out of these words. And when I told them that, I could just sort of see in their faces, oh, look that sounds pretty good. So I thought, oh, good, I said the right thing here.

REES: (Laughs). It worked.

TOLLES: It seemed to go over –

REES: Okay.

TOLLES: – quite well.

REES: Do you have any advice for current and future Smithies?

TOLLES: Just make the most of it. Absolutely. I spent a lot of time playing bridge here. I do love the game now. It's fun to pick it up again in my later years. But I wish I'd really spent more time with the academic work and a little less time with the bridge.

REES: (Laughs).

TOLLES: But they – I don't think they probably play bridge that way now.

REES: I don't think as often any more.

TOLLES: But maybe they're instead on their computers or iPhones or something.

REES: Right.

TOLLES: And so that's my main advice. Just make the most of it. And try, it's good if you can, to let yourself explore as many different subjects as possible. You may think, oh, I only want to do this or I only want to do that. But for instance, I wish I had done more with Shakespeare. And so if you give yourself every chance to do as much as you can, then you won't look back and say, oh, I should have done this or I should have done that. I think those are the most important things. And, of course, it's awfully nice to form friendships that you may have for a long time. And I was very lucky to find a wonderful husband. I don't think that should be the goal, but if it should happen, fine, you know.

REES: Right. Yeah. That's great. Well, thank you so much.

TOLLES: Oh, you're welcome.
REES: This was wonderful.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Janet Harris, June 2013.