Alumna Profile
Sylvia Gates, Class of 1946
Part I (September 2010 Newsletter)
By Claire Wilson

I had been wanting to sit down and talk with Sylvia Gates, class of 1946, for a long time; our brief interactions at Book Clubs, Strawberry Socials and the like had just whetted my tremendous appetite for her wonderful stories about Smith. So when I finally got the chance for some one-on-one time, heading over to her beautiful Southwest Portland home after work one day in August, I could hardly wait. She greeted me at the door, and offered me a plate of delicious homemade brownies and my choice of tea, water or beer, before we got down to business: Smith College. “It got me three jobs, a husband and a house,” Sylvia said, laughing, at the end of our interview. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

Sylvia Breed Gates’ relationship with Smith began in 1906—a time when “one half of one percent of women in the United States went to college”—when her mother, Celia Kimball, applied to live in Miss Maltby’s “invitational” house. Luckily for Celia, for Sylvia, and for us, she was accepted—though only after an interview over tea in Boston with Miss Maltby herself. She graduated in 1910, President Seelye’s last year. The seats in John M. Greene, just finished, were freshly shellacked just prior to Baccalaureate and all the graduates had to sit on newspapers if they didn’t want their dresses to stick to the gleaming chairs.

Sylvia was born in 1925, grew up in Swampscott, Mass., and became conscious of Smith when she was seven or eight, due to her mother’s active involvement in the Lynn Smith Club. Her neighborhood was crawling with Smithies—one street even had five in a row. “Smith College meant fun ladies!” she recalls. She was particularly struck by a meeting in her own living room, which that evening was graced by the presence of Mary Ellen Chase, famous regional Maine author, talented speaker on the lecture circuit and professor of English at Smith College.

Sylvia went on to the Ethel Walker School in Simsbury, Conn., where she “had a great boarding school experience.” She couldn’t speak highly enough of the academics; it wasn’t a “finishing school” like other institutions (Miss Porter’s, for instance, which was “all debutantes and horses.) No, the girls at Walker’s, “trained for the college boards like seals,” and were well-rewarded: eleven of Sylvia’s classmates applied to Smith and ten got in (the eleventh got in the following year, and graduated with the class of 1947.)

The class of 1946 grew very close during their four years at Smith. They were “locked up together” during the war, and all of them got to know each other extremely well. Sylvia’s anecdotes were peppered with wartime details that made it clear that her Smith was very different from the campus I knew during the first decade of the new millennium. For instance, the College allowed Capen, Northrop, Gillette and the Alumnae House to be used by the WAVES. Sylvia used to sit on the front porch of her own Talbot House (which had absorbed all of Capen’s sophomores, forcing some Talbotites to sleep in bunks) and watch the Capen WAVES march into town, where they took all their meals at the Hotel Northampton.

The College also made the decision to dispense with all house maids during the war. The cooks were allowed to stay, but the sudden absence of help meant that all students, whether on scholarship or not, had the same choice of jobs. There was still a pecking order though, with seniors given the first choice and freshman the last. During her freshman and sophomore years, Sylvia waited tables at lunch in Talbot. During her junior year, she vacuumed. Finally, during her senior year, she chose to clean the bathrooms, which she acknowledged might seem like a strange choice. But, she said, since nobody wanted to do it, she only had to do it twice a week! And she avoided fighting over the most popular job, that of “phone duty” in Talbot’s foyer: “I did not want to do that,” she recalls. The idea was that one could simply sit at the phone table and do homework, “but it rang too much to study!”

And speaking of studying, that mostly went on at the library. Sylvia remembers everyone working until late in the evening, and then going to a lovely student-led service in the small chapel inside
the library from 9:30-10. She also remembers groups of friends heading to Green Street after a hard day’s work in the “Libe” to hang out in one of its many coffee houses (the Tylerite in me loved hearing about those!) She and her gang spent most of their time at The PX, which they considered far superior to the other coffee-serving establishments along that edge of campus.

At the end of her freshman year, Sylvia was let out of school early, along with a group of other Smithies who were to be part of a pioneering effort to augment the nation’s dwindling force of farm workers. At this point, every healthy 18-year-old male was in the service, and the only farm laborers were overage, unfit, or conscientious objectors. So Sylvia and the other Smithies in her group went to live at the delightful Ashland, Mass. house of Frances Valentine, class of 1902. Every morning, they grabbed their boxed lunches (two sandwiches, two sour balls and a thermos of milk) and went off to the farms. During her first summer, Sylvia went daily to a truck farm in Natick where she worked with radishes, tomatoes and squash. The general opinion was that this group of college girls wouldn’t last a week, but Sylvia and her friends were pleased to prove these naysayers wrong. In fact, the group lasted two more summers after the first! They worked six days a week, from early in the morning until sometimes as late as nine at night. Initially, they earned 32¢ an hour, but eventually their wages were raised to 35¢ an hour. Sylvia remembers taking home $12.00 per week, and $200 for the whole summer (a paltry sum compared to a classmate who worked for Revlon. It was a miserable job—putting the tops on tubes of lipstick—but she earned $800!)

During her second and third summers, Sylvia worked at a farm on Cape Cod, delving into the world of broccoli, squash and transplanting. At the end of the broccoli field was a cement wall, behind which was Camp Edwards. On Thursday, June 6, 1944—D-Day—Sylvia and her friends were doing the job known as “rocks and roots” (clearing a field) when they heard an announcement from the loudspeaker beyond the wall: the invasion of Normandy had begun.

But Sylvia’s Smith experience wasn’t all about grueling farm work. She remembers the “happy times” of the Sophomore Carnival, and the fun she had chairing Sophia’s Circus—a fundraiser for Northampton city projects, which helped town-and-gown relations—during her junior year. She came up with the idea of auctioning off the faculty during the latter event, and was richly rewarded when Miss Chase and Miss Duckett came to wait on table at Talbot. During her senior year, Sylvia was the chairman of Rally Day. “It was the biggest thing I ever ran in my life!” she laughs. There were over a thousand people involved, with the three combined upper classes, and finding rehearsal space was a “huge challenge.” Writing the script was hilarious, and the music was all original, mostly composed around the piano in Talbot house.

And then, of course, there was the dominating factor of any Smithie’s life—studying. Sylvia majored in art. She remembers adoring her Art Applied to Graphic Journalism course, and a growing passion for cartooning. She was heavily involved in drawing for SCAN (the Smith College Associated News), and also did war posters, lettering and book covers. She even got permission to draw rather than write her senior project, and came up with the idea of doing a piece on Smith’s varied architecture. Called ‘The House we Live In,’ and dedicated to her mother—“because this was her house too”—it is a beautiful study of the architectural details that make our “house” so special. It has been accepted by the College Archives.

To be continued in the Next Edition of the Smith College Club of Oregon Newsletter.
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Part II (February 2011 Newsletter)
By Claire Wilson

Over New Years, I went back to Northampton for the first time since graduation. I’d been homesick for Smith since May 18, 2009, and could hardly wait to be back on campus. I met up with my three best friends in Boston, and we drove west through a bright, chilly, snow-covered winter wonderland, the sight of which aroused an almost painful nostalgia. My heart started pounding as we took Exit 18 off of I-91 and made our way to Main Street, and I had to blink back tears when the Grecourt Gates came into view. It was a wonderful, bittersweet, whirlwind trip that brought back hundreds of memories, but I left feeling strangely saddened. Everything seemed the same but…different. I didn’t see anyone I knew. Campus was closed for the holidays, and reminded me of a ghost town. The windows of Tyler seemed blank, blind, empty. Did I really live here for four years? I wondered. Is Smith still mine?

These feelings made me especially eager to revisit my notes from my interview with Sylvia Breed Gates last summer. Remembering my afternoon at her house—her fantastic photo album, the fresh brownies, her vivid stories about Smith—convinced me that, yes, Smith still belongs to me; it still belongs to all of us. Being part of the Oregon Smith Club has made me realize that I’m part of a community that is much larger, more diverse, supportive, exciting, empowering, and long-lasting than I ever realized as a student. I look forward to returning to Smith again and again throughout the coming years, and I know my experiences there will continue to shape me. I only hope that they’ll shape me into half the person that Sylvia is.

When we left her, Sylvia Breed Gates had just finished a successful four years at Smith College. It was 1946. Her senior year was lots of fun, but plenty of hard work too. She chaired Rally Day, spent time with friends, and created a beautiful senior project—a gorgeous pictorial study of Smith’s architecture, which has recently been accepted to the College Archives. She was also trying to win Vogue Magazine’s Prix de Paris, which required her to write a critique of the magazine once a month all fall and winter. It was grueling, and by the time the final essay rolled around in March, Sylvia was almost ready to throw in the towel. But she decided she’d gone too far to turn back; she wrote it all in one night at a favorite carrel at the Library and sent it off the next day, just grateful that it was done with, and spent her only peacetime spring term wondering, with all her classmates, about Life After Smith.

In late May a telegram arrived at Talbot House from Conde Nast: she had made the Final Ten in the Prix, and was invited to come to New York for a gala weekend of interviews, introductions, a tour of the offices, and parties. But that was the weekend before her final exams; she wired Vogue that she couldn’t come. A week later another telegram arrived: she had won the new Art Section of the Prix. She had been the only one of 10 finalists who had not come to New York, and she merrily told her classmates that she won because they hadn’t seen her.

But there would be no Paris. Visas were not available yet for civilians, so she was to start in September as an assistant (read flunkie) to the Art Editor in the office of Alex Liberman, famous (and formidable!) Art Director of Vogue, Glamour, and House and Garden. It was a year of meeting, greeting, covering exhibition openings and small private press publishers (like Peter Pauper), and being 21-year-old fly on the wall among many notables, including Babe Paley, Frank Crowninshield, Blumenfeld, Joseph Cornell, Cecil Beaton, and Saul Steinberg, who made a drawing for her that you can see at the next meeting at her house.

As the year in New York wore on, she realized that her heart was still set on getting to Europe; she wanted to do reconstruction work. Her chance came thanks to joining a Smith group at the first work camp at Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, the town in unoccupied France where two Protestant pacifist pastors were credited with saving 5,000 Jewish children, and were eventually honored at the Holocaust Museum as two of the 12 Righteous Gentiles from France.
Later adventures included flying in to Berlin on the Airlift with the coal sacks and a group of Quakers. They sneaked into East Berlin, cleaned up an old barracks so it could house children being flown out to Frankfurt, and sang Dona Nobis Pacem to General Clay around his Headquarters desk. In the fall of 1948 she entered Newnham College, Cambridge, during the first year that women were accepted as part of the University. They were even presented to the Queen! Sylvia spent her time at Cambridge doing research on the Scrooby Separatists, a group of English religious protestors who eventually ended up on the Mayflower. “I was essentially studying my own ancestors!” she laughed.

Sylvia came back home in 1949, when she learned that her father was ill. She did a great deal of work on Smith’s 75th Anniversary campaign, where she had the privilege of meeting Mrs. Morrow and working with Laura Cabot Hodgkinson ’22, then President of the Alumnae Association. “In fact,” she said, “I did a lot of work that people in the Alumnae House are paid to do now!” Her father’s health eventually improved, and in the spring of 1951, thanks to introductions from two Smith friends already on the inside, Sylvia was hired to do intelligence work in Washington, DC. She lived in a house with her classmate Sue Steinem—and even played host to her roommate’s little sister, Gloria! (Yes, that Gloria Steinem.) She was grateful for her time at Smith, as her new job required her to use many of the skills she had picked up during her college years, including the ability to synthesize vast amounts of information.

She met Stuart Gates, her future husband, during a training program in Washington. In the fall of 1952 she took a leave of absence to volunteer on the Eisenhower campaign for Katherine Graham Howard ’22, the Republican National Committeewoman from Massachusetts who was one of the five advisors who ran Ike’s campaign. She ended up on the campaign train and eventually in the Oval Office when Mrs. Howard was sworn in to a new sub-cabinet post.

Back in the intelligence world in 1954, she was sent to Bangkok for six months with a ’50 classmate, a friend of Sis Hayes. They flew into Angkor Wat on Ambassador Wild Bill Donovan’s private plane, and bicycled through an encampment of Chinese irregulars when they strayed too far out of Chiangmai. On their way home they were detained in cell-like quarters at the airport in Jidda, because the Saudis thought Sis’ friend might be Jewish, and then stopped in Rome to see their old friend Tish Baldridge, who was by then Social Security to Ambassador Clare Booth Luce. Sylvia then flew to Tangier and wisely (and finally!) became engaged to Stuart. She flew back to finish up in Washington and plan her wedding to Stuart in the First Universalist Church of Lynn. She and Stuart sailed back to Tangier on the Andrea Doria (fortunately the year before it sank.)

Stuart’s next assignment was to be Algiers, but with a new wife and baby Celia in tow he decided that one revolution was enough. He wanted to return to his home state and enter Willamette Law School. Sylvia found Oregon on the map, and found herself in a rental house in the little farm community of Zena, population 100 (mostly sheep), outside Salem. One of her first visitors was Constance Morrow Morgan ’35, and when Sylvia saw her small guest get out of her car, she thought it was like seeing Mrs. Morrow again. Her life in the Oregon Smith Club had begun.

Several years later Thomas Mendenhall, the sixth President of Smith, came to Portland for a dinner at the Benson Hotel, chaired by Judy Forster ’36 and Sylvia’s classmate Anne Wheeler Winters. Anne’s mother told Sylvia and Stuart about a house in Southwest Portland that would be going on sale. The couple decided to visit, right around Sylvia’s birthday on April 2nd. It was just a small guesthouse, but it was trillium time and the whole acreage was a riot of flowers. Sylvia, struck by the beauty and expecting her third daughter, thought ‘I can see my children here.’ The pair was sold, and they moved in shortly thereafter.

“And that,” Sylvia laughed, “is how Smith got me three jobs, a husband, and a house.”

‘And this,’ I thought to myself, packing up my notebook, gratefully accepting a bag of brownies, and marveling at her incredible life (and at her generosity in sharing it with me), ‘is why I’m proud to be a Smithie.’