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Making Barnard History

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**Oral History: Interview with Carol Berkin Class of 1964**

My interview with Carol Berkin (BC ’64) was very informative about her experience at Barnard in the early 1960s. While Carol’s experience certainly wouldn’t be the same as another alumnae, I think her interview shows an accurate account of her time at Barnard. Carol’s story began with her interest in going to college in New York. Carol grew up in Mobile, Alabama but her father grew up in New York City and her mother grew up in Connecticut. While visiting a cousin in the Northeast she became introduced in a boy she met who attended NYU—she came back to Alabama and announced to her parents that she wanted to apply there. They were upset because they wanted her to attend Sophie Newcomb College, the women’s college of Tulane University in New Orleans. Carol ended up applying to both NYU and Barnard because of her brother’s suggestion—through his fraternity connection he had heard of a girl who went to Barnard, and her parents liked the idea because it was a women’s college. Carol was very frank in talking about her family background at this time, and described them as being very poor—her father was unemployed when she was applying to college. When she was accepted to Barnard, the college wrote her father to ask how much financial aid they needed; Carol says he responded “how much can you give?” and then Barnard covered the full cost. Additionally, Barnard waived many of their academic requirements for Carol because her public Alabama high school didn’t offer many high level classes—the highest level of math she had taken was Geometry.

This was a bit problematic for Carol because upon her arrival at Barnard, she said she realized that because she was from Alabama and poor, Barnard had assumed that she was a black student. She described how she was instructed by Barnard to go to the PR office (or the equivalent of that), where she found a student from the United Arab Republic waiting so Barnard could take pictures of them together.

One of the most interesting things I learned from my interview with Carol was her description of other students’ perceptions of her. I think this shows how Barnard didn’t have a geographically diverse population at the time (or at least, not very many students from the South)—she said Barnard students in her class assumed she was rich and racist because she was from the South, and some even asked her if her family owned slaves. Carol told me an anecdote about how some of her Barnard classmates would try to get her and a black student together in the same room together to see how Carol would react (they were presuming she was racist). She said finally the two of them sat down together and told everyone something along the lines of, “look, we’re sitting together! It’s not a problem!”

I was also interested in how the relationship between Columbia was at the time (early 1960s) and if there were any fears about Columbia going co-educational. Carol said there was no discussion of this during her time at Barnard and that students quite enjoyed the separation—she said that while Barnard women often dated Columbia men, it was nice to be able to wear pajamas and no makeup for Barnard-only classes and to not have to worry about a Columbia man seeing you in that state.

Additionally, I wanted to know what the expectations of Barnard women were in terms of careers. This was contrasted with Carol’s experience in Alabama, where it was common for young women to drop out of college to get married. Carol said that everyone in her group of friends went to graduate school, and that all of her classmates she keeps in touch with still had a career with a family and even continued to work after retiring with writing projects or consulting. I also found it really interesting that Carol said that rather than dominating class reunions with pictures of their children, her classmates mostly discussed their careers. Carol provided another great anecdote regarding this, which occurred at a regular tea event held with President McIntosh. At the tea, students were able to ask the President questions; Carol recalls that a student asked the President if it was possible for her to be both a doctor and a mother. President McIntosh’s response was “I don’t understand the question,” presumably because to her there was no question, women could be both doctors and mothers.

Regarding any controversies or important discussions during her time at Barnard, Carol said that the big debate was regarding dorms. Students who commuted weren’t as much a part of the Barnard community (Carol felt that they missed out on the college experience of discussing readings late at night in the dorms). Carol said that because of this Barnard decided to expand the dorms, and her senior year was the first year that Barnard had 616, where Carol lived.

While Carol’s experience at Barnard is certainly unique, I believe that her overall experience with students being unfamiliar with the South, the issue of the dorms, the relationship with Columbia, and the thought that most graduates would go on to have long careers would have been similar to other Barnard students in the early 1960s.