In February 2004, more than 30 life-long community activists gathered at Smith College for “Sharing Strategies: 30 Years of Grassroots Women in Community Development,” the 2004 Kathleen Ridder Conference. Organized by professor of government and women’s studies Martha Ackelsberg, the conference reunited members of the National Congress of Neighborhood Women (NCNW) and some of its affiliates, in celebration of the organization’s 30th anniversary.

Founded by a group of working-class women in 1974 in Brooklyn, New York, as the voice of a “new women’s movement,” the NCNW set out to address the needs of poor, working-class, and “neighborhood” women. Within just two years, the NCNW had established the first battered women’s shelter in New York City, begun a neighborhood-based college program, and received a $2.6 million dollar federal grant to place unemployed poor women in jobs at feminist non-profit organizations.

Since then, the NCNW has built partnerships with groups of grassroots women activists locally, nationally, and internationally. Members from several of those partner organizations came to the conference to remember, discuss, and analyze their collaboration with the NCNW. Public housing resident advocates arrived from New York, New Jersey, and St. Louis; rural activists traveled from the Appalachian region of Tennessee and Virginia; and global organizers gathered from GROOTS International (Grassroots Women Operating Together in Sisterhood). The diversity of participants testified to the NCNW’s impressive ability to bridge differences of race, class, religion, geographic location, and nationality in bringing women together to mobilize for social change.

In addition to chronicling their successes and sharing lessons from their community development work, the grassroots activists took part in a lively exchange about campus-community partnerships with Professor Myrna Brietbart of Hampshire College and Alan Bloomgarden, community-college relations coordinator at Smith. East Harlem public housing leader Ethel Velez noted that, “students need to see the community as a classroom, to recognize that they can develop skills there that you don’t get in school.” Holly Hansen of Mt. Holyoke College agreed, stating that, “From the perspective of the colleges, the issue is: How do we find the learning techniques to draw the academy into really profound social transformation?”

Other highlights of the conference included a presentation by Marina Grasse of the East-West Women’s Network in Berlin, Germany, on how to develop a community-based oral history project; and a talent show, which featured song, dance, and lots of laughter. Camden, New Jersey, activist Cathy O’Bryant noted, “It’s been a long time since I’ve connected with women in the movement. This weekend has taken me back to the joy and the fun and the fellowship of it all.”

One of the most moving sessions of the conference came when participants gathered at the Sophia Smith Collection, where the NCNW’s organizational records are housed. Welcomed by director Sherrill Redmon, historian Kathleen Nutter, and assistant curator Margaret Jessup, the NCNW members had a chance to look through documents detailing their long record of activism. As they descended into the stacks and realized just how much space, literally, they have to sharpen the distinction between the sexes in the intellectual and artistic fields, which would, indeed, be against the traditions of the college, but further to diminish the distinction by gathering an imposing evidence of work of women comparable in every way to that of men.”

Continued on page 2
NCNW, continued

been accorded in this repository of history, several women were overwhelmed with pride. Camden, New Jersey, activist Rosemary Jackson summed up her association with the NCNW: “It was the experience of my life.”

The conference also provided an opportunity to add to the NCNW collection. A group of Smith undergraduates, Professor Ackelsberg, and I conducted oral history interviews with many of the participants. In addition to video recordings and extensive written documentation of the proceedings, these will constitute an invaluable resource for future research into the NCNW and grassroots women’s organizing.

—Tamar Carroll

Tamar Carroll is a Ph.D. Candidate in the history department at the University of Michigan. She is completing her dissertation on Women’s Activism, Identity Politics and Social Change in New York City from 1955–1995, which includes two chapters on the National Congress of Neighborhood Women. She spent five weeks at the SSC this past summer as a Grierson Scholar-in-Residence.

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Visit our Web site or contact us by mail for more information about the Sophia Smith Collection and to learn how to help support our mission.

Please recycle this newsletter by passing it on to a friend or donating it to a school or library where it might be read with interest.

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Oral Historian

Sophia Smith Collection
Women’s History Manuscripts at Smith College

Elizabeth Dewane Norris (1914–2003), long-time YWCA Librarian and SSC benefactor. YWCA Records.
Greetings from the Director

The Sophia Smith Collection hosted visits from some remarkable women in 2004. In February came a group of leaders of far-flung National Congress of Neighborhood Women (NCNW) affiliate organizations described in our cover article. It was exciting to learn more about their innovative work to improve the lives and prospects of women in their neighborhoods and to witness firsthand their commitment to preserving the record of their work—the struggles no less than the triumphs. We see examples every day of the ways our sources help strengthen the historical record, but it was a special treat to see such tangible evidence of the importance that preserving their archives can have for the grassroots communities that produce them.

In September we co-hosted with the National Women's History Project and Smith's Project on Women and Social Change an exciting national conference entitled Women Change America. The occasion was the NWHP's Inaugural Networking Conference to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Women's History Institute, from which came Women's History Month. About 120 teachers, independent scholars, performers, and others gathered for stimulating stories and updates on curricular reform, public sites honoring women, and related topics. The program was organized by the indomitable Molly Murphy MacGregor, a pioneer in the movement to spread teaching and learning about women's history beyond academia into homes, schools and the broader community. For more about the event and a sampling of participant response to their time at Smith, go to http://www.nwhp.org/network/2004/comments.html.

The year also brought the loss of two collection donors and dear friends of the SSC. The artist, feminist, and activist known as Kady (born Kathleen van Duers) was one of the Pioneer Valley's most beloved allies of the marginalized. Earlier in her life she taught sidewalk art and toy making to hundreds of poor children from the New York storefront where she lived on a shoestring. In the 1970s, styling herself “Axe-maker to the Queen,” she used her skills as a silversmith to popularize the labrys as a visual symbol among lesbian feminists. In retirement in nearby Greenfield, Kady continued to live simply, becoming an accomplished painter and challenging the status quo through her writing. We miss the way Kady lived her values and brightened the day with her impish smile.

We were sorry to learn, too, of the death of Elizabeth Norris (Smith '36), long-time librarian/archivist for the YWCA-USA in New York. Elizabeth recognized the unusual historical value of her organization’s archives and worked tirelessly with SSC founder Margaret Grierson and her successors to see that they were preserved and made accessible to scholars. Her stewardship continues beyond her lifetime. We will apply Elizabeth’s generous bequest to making the YWCA's voluminous archives more accessible.

— Sherrill Redmon


Sculptor Nancy Cox-McCormack Cushman working on a bust of Benito Mussolini, 1923. Photo by Popry-Pastorel. From the newly processed Cushman Papers.
The SSC’s processing staff continued to be remarkably productive this year. From old favorites in need of refurbishing, to new and chaotic acquisitions, a good number of valuable collections are now more accessible to researchers.

- The African-American Institute’s Women’s Africa Committee, founded in 1958, was an effort to help the wives of diplomats from the newly independent African nations adjust to everyday life in New York. By targeting the needs of women community leaders, the Committee distinguished itself from its parent organization, which provided opportunities in higher education for (mostly male) Africans. This small collection illuminates American efforts toward cultural exchange with the emerging independent African nations in a period between battles for independence in Africa and the widespread adoption of pan-African identity among black Americans.

- Jane White’s (Smith ’44) acting career began in the 1940s when she captured the lead role in the 1945 Broadway adaptation of Lillian Smith’s controversial novel, Strange Fruit. Since, she has had prominent roles on and off-Broadway, on television (including a memorable turn as a villain on the soap opera Search for Tomorrow), and in self-designed cabarets showcasing her range of dramatic, comedic, and vocal talents. Scripts, programs, and photographs document White’s theatrical career, and this material, along with eloquent self-reflections in interviews and autobiographical performances, provides a boon to researchers interested in twentieth-century theatre. Her father, Walter White, was the NAACP national secretary, and her papers give perspective on a family that contributed significantly to the Harlem Renaissance and the civil rights movement.

- The Jane Lakes Harman (Smith ’66) Papers are scheduled to open to research early in 2005. Representing California’s 36th District, Congresswoman Harman was the first Smith College graduate to serve in Congress. (She has since been joined by Wisconsin Representative Tammy Baldwin, Smith ’84.) Currently she is the Ranking Minority Member on the House Intelligence Committee. Throughout her legislative career she has been a proponent of women’s rights, protection of the environment, job security, and national defense. Harman’s papers document her first three terms in office (103rd–105th Congresses) and provide glimpses of her life as a Smith student, her previous government work with Senator John Tunney and in the Carter administration, and her career as a lawyer.

- Labor organizer and Communist Party official Anne Burlak Timpson (1911–2002) was arrested numerous times for organizing workers in the mills of Rhode Island and Massachusetts during the 1920s and 1930s. At the age of 21 she was elected the National Secretary of the National Textile Workers’ Union, the first American woman to hold such a high post in a labor union. Known as “The Red Flame,” she was indicted under the Smith and McCarran Acts in the 1950s and 1960s. Through scrapbooks, oral histories, organization and subject files, and correspondence, the papers document her political and social activism, involvement with the Communist Party of the United States, U.S.-Soviet relations, the peace and justice movements, as well as her close ties with her family.

- The Records of the Margaret Sanger Research Bureau date from 1873 to 1973 and represent a rich source of information on the early birth control movement in the U.S. and abroad. Of particular interest are 19th and 20th century pamphlets on birth control, religious views, sex education, contraceptive methods (dating from 1877), and early commercial catalogs.

- The papers of Patricia Beck (1924–1978), a writer, poet, and artist, provide a rare view of a woman’s struggle with depression, diabetes, and personal tragedy. The collection includes 40 years of Beck’s diaries, her oeuvre of largely unpublished poetry, short stories, and novels, and correspondence with friends and family that provide further insight into her life.

— Amy Hague
Gems from the Stacks

The Ames family papers, spanning six generations and nearly two hundred years, have recently been completely processed and are now open for research. Among the most fascinating of the individuals represented in this outstanding collection is Blanche Ames Ames (1878–1969, Smith 1899), a dauntless suffrage activist and one of the most determined players in the early years of the birth control movement. While serving as the first President of the Birth Control League of Massachusetts, which she also co-founded, Ames was instrumental in formulating The Doctors Bill to Clarify the Law. Its purpose was to elucidate language in laws regulating doctors’ ability to provide birth control counseling to married women with health problems, and it was the cornerstone on which the case for universal access to birth control was built and eventually won. Massachusetts did not legalize contraception for married women until 1966, the last state in the nation to do so, and Ames set the standard for perseverance in the decades-long effort. She wrote the following letter in 1930 with regard to the Bill.

— Burd Schlessinger

My dear Mrs. Apthorp,

I am sorry not to accept your invitation to join the “Hundred Dollar Club.”

All my energies are going into the work for the Doctors Bill to Clarify the Law.

There are so many men and women and organizations working for Peace! In the meantime these women die by the hundreds in Massachusetts for want of proper medical care. 2,717 Massachusetts men died in battle or of wounds received in battle in the [first] World War. From 1917 to 1929 over 7,000 women died of childbirth in Mass. The women’s need is vital and present.

This is a critical time for the Doctors Bill because there is no organization to work for it except the Birth Control League [of Massachusetts].

So forgive my apparent singleness of purpose.

Yours sincerely,

[Blanche Ames Ames]

In addition to being politically active and pursuing her work as an artist, Blanche Ames was also a devoted mother to her four children. The following letter, written in 1927 to her daughter, Pauline Ames Plimpton, (Smith 1922) shortly after the birth of Plimpton’s first child, the writer and editor George Ames Plimpton, exemplifies the dynamic interest she took in their lives.

Dear Pauline,

I hasten to warn you and to fly to the protection of my grandson and to damn the doctors up hill and down dale. How dares he to advise you that three months nursing is enough!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Don’t ever have him again. Look at Lucy’s puny children and take warning! You don’t need a baby doctor anyway — G’Ames is a fine healthy fellow and doesn’t need medical advice.

You nurse him through August and September if you possibly can manage it. The Lord backed by millions of years of nursing female ancestors can provide much better food for your son than a fool, cock-sure fashionable New York doctor who is apparently making business for himself at G’Ames’ expense. And yours. For believe me —nursing him may be a nuisance but it isn’t half the trouble mixing formulas and sterilizing bottles and worrying with a sick baby is. !XXX!!!!!!!!!!!! You see how I feel….

Much love, Mother

Above: Blanche Ames on the porch of the governor’s house, North Easton, Mass., circa 1901. Ames Family Papers
Below: Blanche Ames (standing, right) with her daughter Pauline Ames Plimpton (seated, left), grandson George Ames Plimpton (standing with his mother) and various Plimptons, circa 1935. Ames Family Papers
My Students Love It!

Each year Pioneer Valley professors in a wide variety of disciplines bring their undergraduate and graduate students to the SSC to enrich their courses.

“Using the resources of the Sophia Smith Collection is always one of the highlights of my ‘Introduction to Women’s Studies’ class at Mount Holyoke,” says Martha Ackmann. “There is simply nothing like seeing (even touching) the authentic documents of women’s lives. In working on their research projects, students keenly understand that they have to search for the deepest meaning of these documents and these lives. That scholarly responsibility both thrills and terrifies them.”

Sherry Marker’s American studies course at Smith, “Scribbling Women,” uses archival sources in each of the Libraries’ Special Collections to deepen her students’ understanding of the contexts out of which women authors produced their works. “Working in the Sophia Smith Collection allows the astonishing opportunity in an undergraduate class to work with the papers of women who shaped public opinion through their writing. Elaine Goodale Eastman in her memoir Sister to the Sioux wrote to convince her largely white, middle-class audience that ‘Indians are People, Too.’ Fanny Fern, in her newspaper columns and novel Ruth Hall, used humor to try to make her readers question ‘polite’ society’s assumptions of what a woman could—and could not—do. . . . If [my students] only read these works in paperback, they would approach Eastman and Fern’s worlds. But, thanks to the SSC, we are able to study Eastman’s drafts of her work and see what she was reading, where she was living, what she was doing when she wrote. Consequently, we are able to inhabit the world each occupied, the worlds we try to understand as scribblers ourselves.”

Students in Kelly Anderson’s course “Women in American History,” which she teaches at Greenfield and Holyoke Community Colleges, visit the SSC in part as an exercise in demystifying archives. Because the class meets in the evening, it draws students from an unusually wide range of ages and backgrounds. Each year about half her students choose to work on a project using the SSC’s resources. “The purpose of the assignment is, of course, to get them to use primary sources, to feel they are intelligent enough to interpret these materials on their own. (The whole course is really one long workshop on empowerment, just disguised as women’s history)! . . . I love that they’ve had that kind of rich and sophisticated academic experience.”

Julio Alves, Director of Smith’s Jacobson Center for Writing, Teaching and Learning, created his English department colloquium “Women and Social Change” to give his students an opportunity to do original research while developing their writing skills. They spend the first half of the semester reading about 20th-century women’s history. In the second half, they come to the SSC to study a 20th-century activist’s papers and produce a biography and critical analysis of some portion of that woman’s activism. He describes his students’ involvement with “their” women as “immediate, intense, and emotional.” And the result is papers that, he says, seem to simply flow out of the students.

UMass history professor Marla Miller’s graduate students get their introduction to Public History with the help of guest speakers and field trips to Valley institutions. When they visit the SSC, they get a hands-on introduction to some of the issues archivists face in trying to balance the privacy needs of the people who donate papers with researchers’ desires for full and immediate access to the materials. Using an example of a recently received collection, SSC Director Sherrill Redmon asks the students to weigh the issues and develop strategies for satisfying our various constituents. “It’s very effective with students who haven’t thought much about the archivist’s job. Their main experience has been as researchers; archivists have mostly been the people who bring them boxes. The visit transforms their idea of what archivists do.”

The consensus among these professors is that Smith provides regional students with something unique and truly valuable. Martha Ackmann writes that “Some students have been literally transformed by the work—going on to graduate school in library science to become archivists or turning their sights on studying to be historians, biographers, and writers.

— Maida Goodwin

From the Stimmenheft (or part book) used by Franziska Lentz, who was a member of a women’s chorus directed by Johannes Brahms. In the newly processed papers of musicologist Sophie Hutchinson Drinker.
Virginia Gildersleeve International Fund

Jane Mead von Salis (Smith ’48)
Susan von Salis (Smith ’79)
Betsy Wade

Gifts from the following were received in honor of Jane Mead von Salis (Smith ’48):

Catherine Dixon Ammann (Smith ’43)
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Barbro Soderberg Dirke (Smith ’53)
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Holly Hoover Massee (Smith ’48)
Gesine Brueckmann Pohl (Smith ’69)
Penelope Stout-Hammar (Smith ’73)
E. Louise France Werbe (Smith ’46)

**The Studwell Fund**

Deep thanks to Jane Mead von Salis (Smith ’48) and her daughter Susan von Salis (Smith ’79), for creating the Studwell Fund, a new source of support for processing collections. The name honors Jane’s memorable grandmother, Sarah Frances Studwell Mead. Susan’s long tenure as an archivist at the Schlesinger Library taught her the high cost of transforming shoeboxes of tattered letters into a collection of sources scholars can use to rewrite history and she and her mother wanted to help the SSC with this vital aspect of our program. This issue’s list of funding donors (above) includes eighteen members of the Smith Club of Europe, who added to the Studwell Fund to honor Jane upon the occasion of her return to the U.S. last year.
Snapshots

We are delighted, and somewhat overwhelmed, to have been awarded a two-year grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission for the first phase of processing the YWCA-USA Records. Two full-time positions for the project have been filled by existing staff members Kara McClurken (Project Archivist) and Maida Goodwin (Assistant Project Archivist), who began in October. The project team’s considerable challenge is to do “preliminary processing” of this incredible collection of over 850 boxes, which will include consolidating and arranging the many accessions received over the past several years, creating a preliminary finding aid, and performing emergency preservation measures. The primary goal in this first phase is to make this invaluable historical resource accessible to the numerous researchers who already have been clamoring to delve into its riches. The records will be closed for the duration, though the portion on microfilm will remain available.

In August we began our third year of the Visions of Feminism Project. The Ford Foundation has renewed the funding for two more years, enabling the SSC to continue conducting oral histories and collecting papers of those women activists who have been under-represented in the historical record: women of color; lesbians; working-class and poor women; and grassroots activists. We’ve recorded more than twenty oral histories to date and some thirty individuals and organizations have committed their papers and records.

Staff News

We are pleased to have Karen Kukil join the SSC staff as a Reference Archivist. Karen has been the Associate Curator in the Mortimer Rare Book Room for the past 14 years. Due to some shifts in the Libraries’ staffing last summer, she is now dividing her time between the two departments. “Archivist Emerita” (as she prefers to be known) Amanda Izzo joined us over the summer to process some smaller, high priority collections before returning to her graduate work at Yale.

Sarah Keen left us in September to accept a position as Project Archivist of the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences at Cornell University. Sarah came two years ago to work on the Jane Harman Congressional Papers Project, which she completed single-handedly after the departure of the Project Archivist, Kathleen Banks Nutter last summer. We’ll miss Sarah and know she will go far in the archives profession.

Look for these recently published biographies by some of our researchers:

- **A Very Dangerous Woman: Martha Wright and Women’s Rights** by Sherry H. Penney and James D. Livingston (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004).

—Margaret Jessup