

Unspoken Love;
Romantic Friendships at Sweet Briar College
Origination – 1950s

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HIST 105: "Doing Sweet Briar History"
Dr. Katherine Chavigny
12/18/15

In an article published in May of 1897, The Roanoke Times described the intimate relationship shared between two college women as a “smash” or “crush.” The article depicted these “smashes” as completely typical and mentioned nothing deviant about the relationships, even characterizing them as, “one girl, generally an underclassman, and usually a freshman, that becomes much attached to another girl, ordinarily an upper-class girl. The young girl is ‘crushed’ and the other, sends her flowers and tries in various ways to give expression to her admiration.”¹ Historian Lillian Faderman defines this era as the “last breath of innocence” for female-female relationships.² Yet, “romantic friendships” between young women continued to be openly displayed at all women’s colleges, like Barnard College in New York City, across the United States well into the 20th Century.³ In her essay, “Preserving the Pedestal,” Amy McCandless discusses the morality and expected social behaviors of Southern women who attended college. She states, “the strict regulation of heterosexual contacts by Southern Women’s colleges reflected concern for virtuous behavior.”⁴ Does McCandless’ pedestal accurately describe the social environment at Sweet Briar College or did “romantic friendships” between young Sweet Briar women continue into the 20th Century? How did the Sweet Briar College administration approach these romantic friendships? Through the examination of photographic evidence found in the Sweet Briar College archives, including personal scrapbooks, an interview with a Sweet Briar alumna, who graduated in the class of 1952, and the Sweet Briar College campus directory, the answers to these questions will become clearer. The evidence found in the Sweet Briar archives is congruent with an argument that both confirms and challenges

¹ The Roanoke Times, 1897. Slang Of College Girls, The "Crush"

² Faderman, Lillian, *Surpassing The Love Of Men*, 297-313

³ Wilk, R. M., *What's A Crush?*, 20-22.

⁴ McCandless, Amy, *Preserving The Pedestal*, 45-67.

McCandless' pedestal, conceptually and chronologically. This argument validates the pedestal that McCandless describes while also acknowledging that the private lives of Sweet Briar women were far more complex than the pedestal, on which they publicly resided. Evidence will show that Sweet Briar College publicly denounced any behavior that strayed from social expectations while privately offering these young women a safe place to explore their own sexualities. Sweet Briar College in essence, was privately progressive in an extremely conservative time and place, particularly with issues of sexuality.

Established in 1901, Sweet Briar College emerged at the beginning of the era that Faderman describes as the "last breath of innocence" for female intimacies. However, at all women's colleges as Wilks discusses, this era did not immediately cease the intimacies shared between the women at all women's colleges, and Sweet Briar College was no exception. Historian Helen Horowitz has argued that this trend continued as a result of the social hierarchy and power structure deeply embedded in the social life at all women's colleges through traditions that weren't present at coeducational institutions. She states that traditions such as the pairing of Freshman with Juniors and Sophomore with Seniors "linked an erotic element to a power relationship" and harvested romantic friendships between these college women.⁵ Sweet Briar College has publicly described this "Big Sister/Little Sister" tradition as one that helps a younger college women adjust to college life. According to the college's website, "Just after arriving on campus, each first-year has the chance to meet with a junior that has been assigned to her as a Big sister. Big sisters are supposed to help their little sisters acclimate to college life and answer any questions the

⁵ Horowitz, Helen Lefkowitz. *Alma Mater*, 166.

first year may have about Sweet Briar.”⁶ These time-honored traditions certainly establish a social hierarchy at all women’s colleges, but does that hierarchy exclusively promote romantic friendships? Lesbian psychologist Carla Golden argues a slightly different point in her contribution to the book “Lesbian Psychologies.” Her essay, “Diversity and Variability” argues “the environment at women’s colleges are structurally and psychologically conducive to lesbianism”⁷ Golden argues that college is a time for personal, social and sexual exploration in the lives of all women, even those who attend coeducational institutions. However, she states that many of the women at the all women’s college where she taught were able to engage in “the process of sexual self-definition” because they were provided the freedom to do so. Both Horowitz and Golden acknowledge that the structure of an all women’s college is conducive budding romantic friendships, yet Horowitz fails to acknowledge the freedom of choice provided at all women’s college. Women in the 20th Century didn’t have the right to vote yet, much less have the freedom to explore themselves. The individual freedom provided to the women attending all women’s colleges created an atmosphere that welcomed self-advocacy and self-exploration. Therefore, Golden’s freedom of choice is a far more powerful catalyst for sexual exploration, than social hierarchy mentioned by Horowitz.

The affections between Sweet Briar College women during the early 20th Century were open and uninhibited. Students often posed for pictures in rather intimate ways, arms around one another, lovingly gazing into one another’s eyes.⁸ Several scrapbooks from this era found in the Sweet Briar archives, including one belonging to Eugenie Morenns

⁶ Sbc.edu, *Traditions | Sweet Briar College*

⁷ Golden, Carla. *Lesbian Psychologies, Diversity and Variability*, 23 - 34

⁸ See Appendix for Photos, Sweet Briar Archives, *Personal Scrapbook of Emmy*

contains pictures of these women kissing and caressing one another openly in various places around campus, including in front of academic buildings and dormitories.⁹ This type of affection is not documented in any of the archived photographic evidence after 1923; in fact the body language between Sweet Briar women found in the archived photographic evidence begins to shift drastically around the early 1920s. This is congruent with the Wilks' findings at Barnard College from 1900-1920 and according to Horowitz resulted when "sophisticated Americans learned in the early twentieth century that women have an active sexual nature, not latent ones." As a result, intimacies shared between two women were no longer publicly displayed. McCandless attributes this shift to the emergence of the pedestal, which set a standard of social behavior for southern women. The photographic evidence found in the Sweet Briar archives confirms that students maintained the public pedestal McCandless describes and were not openly affectionate with one another, or for that matter, any males that visited campus.

Historian Helen Horowitz, in her book "Alma Mater," goes on to describe the post-World War I culture in the United States as one that began suspecting women's colleges as an environment that "inhibited healthy relations between the sexes."¹⁰ This public scrutiny and opposition is one that was fueled by distinct gender roles and assumed heterosexuality. This forced many young college women who were participating in a romantic friendship to live out their love lives more privately than their heterosexual counterparts. This public shaming of same sex intimacies adds another dynamic to McCandless' pedestal, thus creating the complexity of the public vs. private pedestal at

⁹ See Appendix for Photos, Sweet Briar Archives, *Personal Scrapbook of Eugenie Morenns*

¹⁰ Horowitz, Helen Lefkowitz. *Alma Mater*, 282.

Sweet Briar College. According to the photographic evidence gathered in the Sweet Briar Archives, women's behavior and body language is not the only thing that shifted during this time. It appears that what is defined as "public" and "private" at Sweet Briar College also shifted as a result of this post-World War I public scrutiny. From the time of Sweet Briar's origination in 1901 until 1920, the word "public" referred to anything outside of the Sweet Briar Campus and anything on campus would be defined as "private." This definition shifted however in the post-World War I culture that began scrutinizing all women's colleges. After this shift, what was "public" referred to anything outside of one's personal residence and only things within one's personal residence was "private." Thus, the private vs. public pedestal was established at Sweet Briar College. This shift and the emergence of the public vs. private pedestal explain the lack of photographic evidence that represent female intimacies past the 1920s at Sweet Briar College. The post-World War I culture on campus would be one that is suspicious of the affection women previously shared more openly. Therefore, affections of that kind were only privately displayed behind closed doors. The lack of photograph evidence, however, does not confirm that romantic friendships did not continue at Sweet Briar.

Dr. Sally Miller Gearhart, a Sweet Briar Alumna from the class of 1952, published a story about her own experience with romantic friendship in the collection of gay and lesbian short stories "The New Our Right to Love." In her story, Dr. Gearhart describes falling in love with one of her fellow Sweet Briar sisters "Lakey." The two women began an intimate relationship during their sophomore year at Sweet Briar College, even becoming

roommates to conceal their romance.¹¹ These women carried on an intimate and sexual relationship behind closed doors, yet around campus their interactions remained completely platonic. The story of Dr. Gearhart and “Lakey” is one that is not unusual for romantic friendships that existed from 1920’s to the 1950’s. Additionally, students were not the only source of romantic friendships at Sweet Briar. Several notable faculty and staff members were also involved in same sex relationships. Faculty members such as Harriet Rogers and Dr. Lucy Crawford resided together in the home now commonly known as “Red Top.” The two women moved into the home together when it was first built in 1928, and lived there for nearly 40 years according to the Sweet Briar College directories.¹² The home was later named “Red Top,” name given in honor of the two women and their red hair.¹³ According to Dr. Sally Gearhart, who was a student at Sweet Briar College during Dr. Crawford and Ms. Roger’s cohabitation in Red Top, “Everybody knew that these were two of the strongest and most intelligent women on campus. Everybody knew they were lovers.” Gearhart also states that the Sweet Briar administration “managed a delicate balance between allowing us, Sweet Briar women, to be who we were and at the same time making us aware of the fact that the general public, the world, was not yet ready to accept us as intelligent and loyal citizens of the country.”¹⁴

Dr. Sally Miller Gearhart who graduated from Sweet Briar College in May of 1952, went on to become an influential social activist in the gay and lesbian community. She fought along side historical figures like Harvey Milk and succeeded in halting California’s

¹¹ Vida, Ginny, Karol D Lightner, and Tanya Viger. *The New Our Right To Love*, 36-40

¹² Sweet Briar College Archives, *Sweet Briar College Directories*, 1928 – 1953

¹³ Rainville, Lynn, and Lisa Johnston, *Sweet Briar College*, 72

¹⁴ Gearhart, Sally Miller, *Memoirs of Sweet Briar College Interview by Tristin Burke*, 1

legislation known as Proposition 6, the Briggs Initiative, which called for the automatic termination of homosexual teachers in public schools. In a more recent interview, Dr. Gearhart credited her experience at Sweet Briar College for fueling her social activism in the gay and lesbian community.¹⁵ The social atmosphere in Sweet Briar, VA was one that “completely demonized” anything that deviated from public heterosexuality. Although romantic friendships continued on campus, they were rarely discussed and never displayed in public. Dr. Gearhart also stated that if the relationship was ever discussed on campus it was “looked upon as just a stage that a young woman might through and that ‘stage’ happened to last 60 or 70 years in the case of some older women.”¹⁶ According to Gearhart, Sweet Briar did a wonderful job balancing the public and private pedestal.

In conclusion, although Faderman stated that the early 20th Century was the end of innocent female intimate relationships, all women’s colleges have proven to be the exception. The continuation of romantic friendships at all women’s colleges is greatly attributed to the freedom of choice, as described by psychologist Carla Golden. This is in contrast to Helen Horowitz’s account of a linked erotic element to all women’s college traditions. With evidence such as the photos found in the Sweet Briar Archives and the personal testimony of Dr. Sally Miller Gearhart, the dynamic of the public vs. private pedestal must be considered when applying McCandless’ pedestal theory to the social like at Sweet Briar College. Faculty and students alike continued in romantic friendships well beyond Wilks’ findings at Barnard College, though they were not publicly discussed. This is greatly attributed to Sweet Briar’s ability to distinguish what is deemed “private” and what

¹⁵ Gearhart, Sally Miller, *Memoirs of Sweet Briar College Interview by Tristin Burke*, 1

¹⁶ Gearhart, Sally Miller, *Memoirs of Sweet Briar College Interview by Tristin Burke*, 2

is “public.” Sweet Briar College, though never publicly addressing the issue, provided a safe environment for women to continue exploring their sexuality. Therefore, this evidence supports an extension to McCandless’ original pedestal timeline of 1920 -1940. There is no evidence that the administration ever rebuked this type of behavior, but rather warned their students of the dangers they could face beyond the gates of Sweet Briar. The evidence shows just a few degrees of separation between the relationships and romantic friendships formed at the turn of the century and those that still persist today, mainly the increased acceptance of same sex relationships in the United States and the ability to speak freely about such relationships. However, the love shared between early Sweet Briar women, despite being forced to conceal their affections, is no more or less significant than those who now proudly display their affections publicly. Love is still love, even if it’s unspoken.

Bibliography

1. "Sweet Briar Archives". Personal Scrapbook of "Emmy" (1908-1909) Rare Books Room.

This scrapbook provided a perspective into the social life of Sweet Briar women in the early 1900s. They are openly affectionate in many pictures, holding and kissing one another often.

2. "Sweet Briar Archives". Personal Scrapbook of "Eugenie Morenns" (1917 - 1923) Rare Books Room.

This scrapbook provided a perspective into the social life of Sweet Briar women beginning in 1917. They are openly affectionate in many pictures, holding and kissing one another often.

3. "Sweet Briar College Photo Archives". Box #13 – 19 (1930 – 1949); Box # 21 & 22 (1950 – 1953).

These are a collection of pictures taken by Sweet Briar College for publications; they depict the social life of students, including tap clubs and other organizations.

4. Faderman, Lillian. 1981. *Surpassing The Love Of Men*. New York: Morrow.

This book is an excellent resource when looking at romantic friendship from a historical perspective.

5. Gearhart, Sally Miller. 2015. *Memoirs of Sweet Briar College (1948 - 1952)* Tristin M. Burke via Mana Youngbear Interview by . In person. California.

This was an interview (via email) that I was able to obtain with Dr. Gearhart. She provided her own perception of life at SBC back in the 1950s while also confirming information that had previously been speculated.

6. Golden, Carla. 1987. *Lesbian Psychologies: Explorations And Challenges*. Boston, MA: Boston Lesbian Psychologies Collective.

This piece gave some insight into the psychology behind same sex relationships at all women's colleges.

7. Horowitz, Helen Lefkowitz. 1993. *Alma Mater*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

This book provided so much information about all women's colleges, very well written and well researched.

8. McCandless, Amy. 1987. "'Preserving The Pedestal' Restrictions On Social Life At Southern Colleges For Women' 1920 - 1940'". *History Of Higher Education Annual* 7: 45-67.

This essay makes great points and has several wonderful examples to back up her argument; however overgeneralization she applies to all Southern Women's Colleges is something that contradicts my research.

9. Rainville, Lynn, and Lisa Johnston. 2015. *Sweet Briar College*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing.

This is the newest publication about Sweet Briar College, written by faculty from Sweet Briar. It provided dates pertaining to "Red Top"

10. Sbc.edu,. 2015. "Traditions | Sweet Briar College". <http://sbc.edu/student-involvement/traditions>.

This is the current description of the traditions at Sweet Briar College and was pertinent to my research

11. The Roanoke Times,. 1897. "Slang Of College Girls, The "Crush," "Dead Squelch" And Other Terms Expressive Of Student Life".

This piece was first published by the New York Sun, but no author was available. It was republished at least 3 times in 1897 around the country. It portrays the social view of the innocence of female-female relationships.

12. Vida, Ginny, Karol D Lightner, and Tanya Viger. 1996. *The New Our Right To Love*. New York: A Touchstone Book published by Simon & Schuster.

This Dr. Sally Miller Gearhart's piece that was the inspiration for this research, but also provided some insight to the LGBT subculture at SBC in the 1950s.

13. Wilk, R. M. 2004. "'What's A Crush?' A Study Of Crushes And Romantic Friendships At Barnard College, 1900-1920". *OAH Magazine Of History* 18 (4): 20-22. doi:10.1093/maghis/18.4.20.

This is a very interesting article that condenses a lot of what Horowitz and Faderman say while also offering some examples from the Barnard archives. I predominantly used this essay for the resources cited.

14. "Sweet Briar College Directories (1928 - 1953)". Sweet Briar College Archives.

These directories were used to document how long Dr. Lucy Crawford and Ms. Harriet Rogers resided together in "Red Top."

Appendix :



Unknown Sweet Briar Women, dated 1908.



Unknown Sweet Briar Women, dated 1908.



Unknown Sweet Briar Women, dated 1908.



Unknown Sweet Briar Women, dated 1917



Unknown Sweet Briar Women, dated 1917



Unknown Sweet Briar Women, dated 1945



Unknown Sweet Briar Women, dated 1953



Unknown Sweet Briar Women, dated 1955