

# HELEN SMYTHE, NÉE KEITH

CONDUCTED BY  
ALICE STONE

August 22 and 30, October 2, 1978

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Pasadena, California



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## Preface to the Caltech Women's Club History Project Interviews

The interview with Helen Keith Smythe was done as part of a series of oral histories conducted by Alice Stone in 1978 to document the early history of the Caltech Women's Club and the social life of the campus. They capture the observations and perspectives of the times.

### Subject area

Caltech Women's Club

### Abstract

An interview in August and October 1978 with Helen Keith Smythe, wife of William R. Smythe, professor of physics 1937-1964.

### Administrative information

#### Access

The interview is unrestricted.

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**Preferred citation**

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**CALTECH WOMEN'S CLUB**  
**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS**

**INTERVIEW WITH HELEN SMYTHE, NÉE KEITH**  
**PRESIDENT OF THE CALTECH WOMEN'S CLUB 1928-1929**  
**[WIFE OF WILLIAM R. SMYTHE, PROFESSOR OF PHYSICS]**

**CONDUCTED BY ALICE STONE**

**AUGUST 22, 1978**

**AUGUST 30, 1978**

**OCTOBER 2, 1978**

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**WOMEN'S CLUB  
OF THE  
CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY  
HISTORY PROJECT**

**Interviews with Club Presidents serving from 1916 to 1931**

**1979**

**INTRODUCTION**

When Roxana Anson was president of the Caltech Women's Club in 1977-1978, she noticed that though the Club was founded in 1916, there were no records dating before 1931. She asked me to establish some form of historical record for that period.

We decided to limit ourselves to informal interviews of women who served as president from 1916 to 1931. Tapes or notes would be transcribed, and excerpts published in the monthly Club *Bulletin*. To ensure continuity of possession of at least one copy of the Project, the Caltech Archives agreed to become the primary repository, with a duplicate to remain in the Club files.

The Project assumed a pattern and identity stemming directly from the Women's Club, which was formed as a purely social organization and still sees itself as such. In this context, it seemed inappropriate to ask for personal details that were not volunteered and to pursue apparent inaccuracies.

Caveats should be noted. First, not all the living 1916-1931 presidents are included. Hazel Bates (Mrs. Stuart J. Bates, Chemistry), was unable to complete her interview because of illness, though it is hoped she will be able to at some later date. Second, we interviewed a gracious lady we mistakenly believed to have been the first Women's Club president, Mrs. Walter Adams. Unfortunately, the first Mrs. Adams died shortly after she served as president, and we were unaware of Mr. Adams' second marriage until after the interview appeared in the *Bulletin*. Third, the Project has been completed without the benefit of several pairs of eyes checking for errors. Therefore, there are probably many, and are all mine.

We hope the Project will be viewed as being both complementary and complimentary: complementary in that it concentrates on the Institute's social—as opposed to scientific life—through memories of faculty wives; and complimentary in that through the Project we spent some time with—and thus paid homage to—those women who established traditions of helpfulness and friendliness that make our lives more pleasant.

Alice Stone

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**Edited version for Women's Club *Bulletin*, January 1979**

**INTERVIEW WITH HELEN KEITH SMYTHE**

**President of Caltech Women's Club 1928-1929**

**[wife of William R. Smythe, Professor Emeritus of Physics]**

**Conducted by Alice Stone**

**Fall 1978, Pasadena**

STONE: Mrs. Smythe, where did you live when you first came to Pasadena?

MRS. SMYTHE: We all, when we first came here, lived in the bungalow courts near the campus. They backed onto the property of an architect, Albert Lombard, who had some tennis courts. Another woman and I climbed the back fence and used these, since the Lombards said we might.

One year, when I was living there, Greta Millikan took up the idea that being a good president's wife meant calling on people in the fall before the club year started. It became a sort of telephone watch, because people would call one another and say, "She was just here!"

Mrs. Millikan was well organized. She wasn't, of course, officially an officer of the Club, but when meetings were at her place, she did take charge. She would pick from the graduate students' wives or other people to do things.

STONE: Where were club meetings generally held?

MRS. SMYTHE: We met in Culbertson, and the meetings were held in the auditorium itself. The refreshments had to be served downstairs and there was a very narrow stairway. Whoever had charge of refreshments the first meeting of the year tried to grab off something easy, like French pastries, so we had trays and trays of French pastries ready.

One year, after the meetings had moved to the Athenaeum, Mrs. Einstein was here. She looked at the pastry tray that was passed to her and said, “Oh, I think I’d just like a sandwich.” So, I raced to the kitchen to see if I could manage to make some sandwiches. It was rather like a command, you know, coming from Mrs. Einstein.

STONE: Were there other club activities besides meetings, small group meetings, trips and things?

MRS. SMYTHE: We had a book club that was not part of the Women’s Club. Membership was limited to eighteen. It didn’t meet on campus, and you could belong only if you had some relative who was officially on campus. I remember we had our June meeting one year at the Millikans; and believe it or not, it was supposed to be a garden meeting and it was so cold we had to go in and sit by the fireplace.

We also had what I think of as “Death Valley Days.” Maybe three or four cars would agree to go on an informally organized trip. We ate together as a group and put our supplies together and worked out something right there over the fire.

Once we decided it would be quite an adventure to go down in an inactive mine that was across the border. The first fifty feet or so we had to crawl, then it would start to dip, we’d shinny down, and then we’d have to crawl some more. There were the most beautiful white stones—milk white. I have this one piece as big as a child’s head. We carried these out by stuffing them in our blouses or shirts and crawling along. You can see we weren’t too puny, depending on a soft, easy experience.

STONE: Did you go on other trips?

MRS. SMYTHE: Yes, but not quite like that. I think I was the first woman who ever slept in the “Monastery” at Mt. Wilson. Dr. Michelson was repeating his experiment on the velocity of light, and his man who ran all the equipment asked if Ralph would come up there and spend a month. It was quite an adventure for a young married couple at the time. When it came to a certain point, there was a convention that had reserved most of the cabins so there was a question of where to go. I was finally put in the Monastery. There was a woman housekeeper, and I had a room to myself.

Before we came to Caltech, we went to the Philippines. Ralph was getting his PhD in [University of] Chicago. While he was there, he lived in the Gamma Alpha House. There was some member who had just come back from the Philippines, having resigned. We finally seized on the wonderful idea of taking his place. We went over halfway around the world and got the money to go the rest of the way. We were married in March 1921, arrived in the Philippines in May of that year, and stayed until 1923.

When we left for the Philippines, we were put on an Army transport at the last moment. All Ralph's expenses were paid by the Department of Education in the Philippines. Instead of \$375 on the Princess ship, we paid \$1.75 for food. It was a funny feeling going out of San Francisco Bay and seeing the only person you knew only at mealtimes and on deck.

We stopped in Guam—not many people had, then. They were unloading lighters of cabbage. We wondered how the cabbage would stand up to the tropical climate, and who would supply the corned beef!



**ALICE STONE'S CORRESPONDENCE  
WITH  
HELEN KEITH SMYTHE**

**August 24, 1978**

Dear Helen,

Just a note to say thank you for taking the time to talk to me on Tuesday afternoon—

I can't tell you how much I enjoyed hearing your memories of Caltech before it became as big as it is now. I would like to have known the campus—and for that matter—California and Pasadena at that time.

As I told you, this is all part of the Women's Club History Project, which is a series of interviews with women who served as president of the Club between 1916 and 1931, when records begin. I took notes during our telephone conversation, and, as you said that I might, I will include your memories of the Women's Club and your trips in the material that will go both to the Caltech Archives and the Women's Club files.

Since our conversation was by telephone and the record of it is my notes, I don't think it will be necessary for you to go through the rather bothersome procedure of signing a formal release for the Archives, who will, officially, hold the rights to the Project. We are also planning to include excerpts from the interviews in the *Bulletin* this coming year. I will of course stay as close as I can to your actual words. (You might also like to know that according to the guidelines of the Project we carefully observe all "off the record" requests.)

Again, thank you so much, and I may indeed take you up on your kind offer of calling again if I have any questions.

With affection,  
Alice Stone

**September 18, 1978**

Dear Helen,

When we spoke on August 30, you said that it was all right if the results of our telephone conversations as part of the Caltech Women's Club History Project were written up for the Women's Club *Bulletin* and the material passed on to the Caltech Archives. As I was working with my notes, it occurred to me that you might like to have copies of both my

shorthand notes and the finished, edited version which will appear in the *Bulletin* after the first of the year.

Bear in mind that the “Transcript of Shorthand Notes” is really much like a grocery list one jots down to jog the memory. I took those notes, rearranged them, added questions that I remembered asking, and came up with the “Edited” and condensed version that will appear in the *Bulletin*.

If you find any errors you feel are important enough to correct, let me know and I’ll fix them.

I hope you enjoy reading through these as much as I have enjoyed working with them since it gave me a chance to re-live our conversations. I envy you your trips and travels—I would like to have gone then.

With affection,  
Alice Stone

**October 6, 1978**

Dear Helen,

I have just this past minute captured enough time to go over my notes of our conversation this past Monday and want to say thank you so much for calling to give me the corrections and your additional insights. Everything you told me made what we have talked about more real.

Am so glad you enjoyed looking over everything—I certainly enjoyed working on it.

## TRANSCRIPT OF ALICE STONE'S SHORTHAND NOTES

### During phone interviews with Helen Keith Smythe

Conducted by Alice Stone

August 22, 1978

A book club was started. It didn't meet on campus, but you could belong only if you had some relative who was officially on campus. I remember we had our June meeting at the Millikans' residence; and believe it or not, it was supposed to be a garden meeting and it was so cold that we had to go in and sit by the fireplace. Mrs. Millikan liked to read things like *Winnie the Pooh*—very coy. Mrs. Millikan was well organized, and she would pick from the graduate students' wives or other people to do things in her home. She wasn't of course officially an officer of the club, but at her place she did take charge. I remember Helen Millikan—lively. I remember a meeting at the senior Millikans where Helen was outside playing hopscotch with some of the graduate students. She was a lively person.

I spoke of going to Death Valley—"Death Valley days" then. Those trips were informally organized. They were people from the Club, though they were not a club activity. Maybe three or four cars would agree to go. The [Lee] DuBridges, the [Arnold] Beckmans, and the [Richard] Suttons.

We all, when we first came here, lived in the bungalow courts there near the campus.

The Club met in Culbertson and the meetings were held in the auditorium itself. Culbertson didn't expand well. It held the Club unless we had a very unusual program. The refreshments had to be served downstairs and there was a very narrow stairway. Whoever had the first meeting of the year tried to grab off something easy, like French pastries, so we had trays and trays of French pastries ready. Mrs. Einstein was there, and she looked at the tray passed to her and said, "Oh, I think I'd just like a sandwich." So, I raced out to the kitchen to see if I could manage to make some sandwiches. It was rather

like a command, you know, coming from Mrs. Einstein. [Phone conversation, 10/2/78: the incident with Mrs. Einstein took place in the Athenaeum Hall of Associates. – A. Stone]

I've been thinking about our "Death Valley Days." Three or four of us would decide to go. Of course, our cars varied in performance. I think it was the Suttons who had a little Ford runabout in which they'd come across the country. Grace Sutton was a great friend of mine, so I can say this—She was a graduate of Sargeant School of Physical Education and said that most of the time coming across country she was either on her knees trying to save her back or else with her feet hanging out the window.

[Regarding the Death Valley trip.] The DuBridges went one year. The Beckmans, the Suttons. We ate together as a group. We put our supplies together and worked out something right there over the fire. We didn't have those camp stoves. Across the border was a mine. We decided it would be quite an adventure to go down in that. The first fifty feet or so we had to crawl, then it would start to dip. We'd shinny down, and then we'd have to crawl some more. There were the most beautiful white stones—milk white. I'm not a geologist, but it wasn't milk quartz, I'm sure of that. I have this one piece as big as a child's head. We carried these out by stuffing them in our blouses or shirts and crawling along. You can see we weren't too puny, depending on a soft, easy experience.

I couldn't help thinking of the people from that group. DuBridge became president, of course, and is still the "guardian spirit" of the organization. Beckman came back and presented the Beckman Auditorium.

These Death Valley trips were always in spring vacation. We tried to vary the route. Went in by Rosebud Canyon one year, another year from the south end.

[Regarding a mine they explored near Minden, Nevada, east southeast of Lake Tahoe. – A. Stone.] I don't believe it was working. There was a caretaker, I guess. Minden is

across the border, the other side of Death Valley. Most of the buildings were partially depleted, since lumber was at a great premium.

### **August 30, 1978**

Mrs. Millikan referred to as Greta. One year, before the club year opened, she decided to go around and call on people. It became a sort of telephone watch. People would call one another and say, “She was just here.” This especially happened in the bungalow court which was well filled with Caltech people. Mrs. Millikan took up the idea that being a good president’s wife meant calling on people in the fall.

Mrs. Laing was quite advanced and startling in her ideas. When she was elected president, there was some trepidation as to what kinds of programs she would have; but as I remember it, when she was elected, she became quite conservative. Maybe that’s one way to handle advanced people—elect them to office.

I think I was the first woman who ever slept in the “Monastery” at Mt. Wilson. Dr. [Albert A.] Michelson was running his experiment on the velocity of light. A beam of light was shot to the mountain to the east. This had to be done twice a day. Michelson’s man who ran all the equipment asked if Ralph would come up there and spend a month. Being a National Research Fellow, he could not expect any pay, so it was for expenses. Even so, it was quite an adventure for a young married couple at the time. When it came to a certain point, there was a convention that had reserved most of the cabins so there was a question of where to go. I was finally put in The Monastery. There was a woman housekeeper. I had a room to myself. I don’t remember what became of Mr. Smythe.

When we left for the Philippines, we were on an Army transport at the last moment. All Ralph’s expenses were paid by the Department of Education in the Philippines. Instead of \$375 on the Princess ship, we paid \$1.75 a day for food. It was a funny feeling going out of San Francisco Bay and seeing the only person you knew only at mealtimes and on deck.

The “old guard” of the Women’s Club was running it when I came [in as Club president]. The first thing I did was to appoint women to the Board who were not of the old guard.

The bungalow courts backed onto the property of an architect, Albert Lombard. They had tennis courts. And another woman and I climbed the back fence and used these courts, since the Lombards said we might.

Ralph was getting his PhD in [University of] Chicago. While he was there, he lived in the Gamma Alpha house. There was some past member who had come back from the Philippines—resigned. There was a wonderful idea that we finally seized on—to take his place. We went over halfway around the world and got the money to go the rest of the way.

Arrived in the Philippines in May 1921. Married in March 1921. Stayed there until 1923. We stopped in Guam. Not many people had, then. They were unloading lighters of cabbage. We wondered who would supply the corned beef, and how the cabbage would stand up to the tropical climate. And then we steamed to some of the smaller islands of the Pacific to see if there were any shipwrecked people. It was a 30-day boat ride. Many of the people were going out to go in service, and some were returning. They had interesting tales to tell of the conditions there.

It was the first time Mr. Smythe had to give up his Army gun. He was in service during World War I. He was at Dartmouth. I met him on a house party at a sorority house.

The book club was not connected with the Women’s Club. No guests were allowed except for house guests, and membership was limited to eighteen.

We always had when, we could get her, [concert pianist] Lillian Steuber. She had a patroness in Pasadena who was backing her. She is so meaningful in Pasadena. She was

partial to our group in that sense and came when she could. I know we had her in the early days.

**October 2, 1978**

The incident with Mrs. Einstein took place in the Athenaeum. You think you are so smart with French pastry, and then you run up against someone of her ilk. I do not know how she fared. [Whether or not Mrs. Einstein ever got her sandwich. –Alice Stone] You see she managed things a great deal for Mr. Einstein. You see, the transport was provided [for] him. He did not have to pay or provide his own facilities for getting around. He felt that his regular chauffeurs should not have to work in the evenings.

One of the main points is that the club did not organize activities for the members, so the members on their own did things.

The Helen Millikan incident of the hopscotch game took place on Palmetto Drive.

The Einsteins were here after the Athenaeum was built.

I hope you understand that my not participating in the club does not mean that I have any offish feeling. I have just gone a different direction.

[Regarding the disposition of the interview notes] I am so pleased and happy with this that anything you do will be fine.

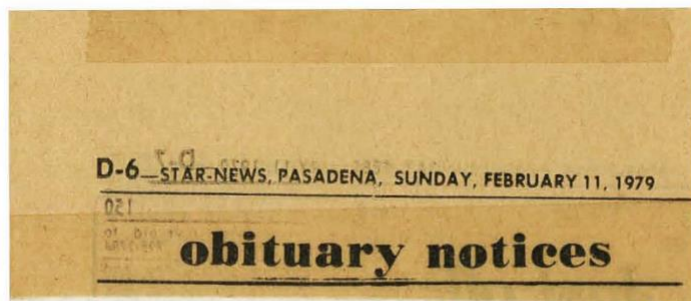
[A. A.] Michelson's "man" was the brother of the man who was the head of the physics shop for so many years—Pearson. The experiment always ran at 5:30 am and 5:30 p.m.

A relative of Michelson's is writing his biographical background and got in touch with Ralph because Ralph was one of the few men who can give any background on Michelson during that period. Ralph got his PhD under both Michelson and Millikan.

Ralph much prefers Michelson to Millikan because Michelson was the better scientist. Millikan was always out raising money.

Millikan was against our going to the Philippines because of Ralph's research. There was nothing he could do in the Philippines. I must pay tribute to Ralph's feeling that we must do something like that before we get tied down with property and a home. I could see Millikan's point of view, but it was also a great opportunity for us to do something like that at the time. Ralph had an official position.





SMYTHE--Helen Keith Smythe, passed away February 9, 1979. She was a resident of Sierra Madre for forty-five years, and active in the Christian Science Church. She is survived by her husband, W. R. Smythe of Sierra Madre; son and daughter-in-law, Mr. and Mrs. William Rodman Smythe, and four grandchildren, all of Boulder, Colo. There will be no Funeral Services.