



THE WAY WE WERE

by Judith Brown

Younger colleagues and present day students often have difficulty believing my recollections of mid twentieth century graduate student days, in the Cold War World. It was the world before the Soviet launch of Sputnik, an event that deeply influenced all education in America, sparking many profound changes.

Today, when many Universities have presidents who are women, deans who are women, tenured professors who are women and additional women on the tenure track, it is hard to picture a world in which no woman could receive a Ph.D. or an MA. from Harvard University. These graduate degrees for women could only be Radcliffe degrees.

In those days far, far fewer people attended graduate school and there were graduate schools, such as Princeton, which accepted no women. Those women who did attend graduate school were viewed as an anomaly, were not particularly encouraged in their endeavors and there were very few of us indeed. (For an example of the numbers: a friend who attended Harvard Law School was one of three women in a class of approximately one hundred-fifty.)

Once accepted into graduate school, one had to find housing within walking distance of the University. (In those days graduate students typically did not own cars.) Whereas Harvard had recently built an entire complex of graduate dormitories, complete with the commissioned sculpture titled

“The World Tree,” there were no dormitories for graduate women. Co-ed dormitories had not yet been invented. My mother and I (such team-work is no longer fashionable for this particular activity), wearing hats of course, wandered from Victorian rooming house to Victorian rooming house. The landladies were always cordial, asked us in, chatted with us and always told us that they did not rent to women students. There just were not enough women to make a rooming house for women students possible. (Also unlike male boarders, women had the disturbing need to make coffee in the morning and to wash things.) At last we found a rooming house, run by a French Canadian landlady, who not only took in women students but also rented to nurses, a married couple and an older male tenant who was in the process of founding a museum for streetcars.

Some of the academic facilities of Harvard University were not open to women students. The Lamont Library was a prime example. Also, if one had the good fortune to be invited for lunch at the Harvard Faculty Club, the main entrance was prohibited to women and they had to use the service entrance. But perhaps the greatest actual obstacle confronting women graduate students was the fact that many professors did not want women in their graduate student retinue. It was believed that male graduates created an academic progeny, whereas women graduates got married and had children. And of course sometimes, this was indeed true. (And sometimes this was true because the job offerings for women graduates were not particularly inviting.)

Thus although the choice of a mentor is crucial to the graduate school experience, this and the availability of female role models were at that time severely limited for the few women graduate students. As for available role models, there was only one woman with tenure (and there were no women on the tenure track) at Harvard University at that time. She was the Anthropologist Cora DuBois, and she held a Chair, endowed by its donors specifically to be held by a woman. As for mentors, the eminent Anthropologist Beatrice Whiting took

me under her wing. She was the wife of my official mentor, John W. M. Whiting, who mentored me also. Beatrice Whiting had a Doctorate in Anthropology from Yale University and was engaged in the historic research of the Six Cultures project. However so far as I know, at the time she had no Harvard appointment and she worked with no Harvard title and with no Harvard salary.

As for the prospects of the women with doctorates, they were distinctly inferior to those of their male fellow-graduates, regardless of the individual's graduate school scholarly record. Unlike their former male fellow students, women were often hired for non-tenure track, part-time positions, with lower salaries and possibly with no benefits. In addition, the woman "anchored" in the vicinity of the university, by the location of her husband's job was condemned to receive lower compensation, since she did not have the options to move elsewhere for a better opportunity. There was also a major financial disadvantage for women at the time: the United States Internal Revenue Service did not allow an employed mother to exercise the income tax deduction for the cost of childcare.

Thus in mid twentieth century America, although Anthropology was remarkable in having produced several eminent women such as Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict and Cora DuBois, the general picture for women anthropologists making their way in the academic world was as bleak as in other disciplines, a picture that was bleak indeed.