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National Museum of American History Kenneth E. Behring Center

Guide to the Shirley Polykoff Oral History Interview

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Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives Center, National Museum of American History
Title:	Shirley Polykoff Oral History Interview
Date:	1990.
Identifier:	NMAH.AC.0474
Creator:	Polykoff, Shirley (Interviewee) Ellsworth, Scott, Dr. (Interviewer)
Extent:	1 Cassette tape 0.3 Cubic feet (1 document box)
Language:	English .
Summary:	Oral history describing her career in advertising, especially the creation of the Clairol advertisement "Does She or Doesn't She?" in the 1950s.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

Collection donated by Shirley Polykoff, 1994.

Provenance

Interview conducted by oral historian Scott Ellsworth for the Center for Advertising History, Archives Center.

Processing Information

Collection processed by NMAH Staff, undated

Preferred Citation

Shirley Polykoff Oral History Interview, Archives Center, 1990, National Museum of American History.

Restrictions

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Biographical / Historical

Shirley Polykoff was born in Brooklyn in 1908 of Russian Jewish parents. Polykoff joined the well-known New York advertising agency Foote, Cone & Belding as a copywriter in 1955. Before her association with Foote, Cone & Belding, Ms. Polykoff had worked in a variety of creative positions for both advertising agencies

and corporate advertising departments, as she describes in this interview. Her work on Foote Cone and Belding's Clairol account produced a string of memorable advertising campaigns, including authorship of the campaign slogans "Does she or doesn't she?" and "Is it true blondes have more fun?" When these campaigns were credited with a phenomenal increase in Clairol sales, Polykoff was promoted to a vice presidency at the agency. She founded her own agency, Shirley Polykoff Advertising in 1974, and became the first woman elected to the Advertising Hall of Fame, in 1983.

Ms. Polykoff was married to lawyer George P. Halperin, who died in 1960. At the time of this interview, she was living in New York City, having retired from advertising in 1983. She died in 1998.

Scope and Contents

Shirley Polykoff covers both her early days in New York as a careerwoman and her distinguished years at Foote, Cone & Belding, where she was responsible for the Clairol account. She discusses the creative process that goes into successful copywriting, the difficulty of being both a woman and Jewish in the advertising world, and the role her personal experiences played in shaping her professional life. The collection consists of one taped 60-minute interview and an abstract of the interview.

Arrangement

1 series.

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

- Advertising campaigns
- Women in advertising
- Women in the advertising industry

Types of Materials:

- Audiocassettes
- Audiotapes

Preferred Titles:

- Clairol (Cosmetics)*

Container Listing

Box 1, Cassette
OTC 474.01

Shirley Polykoff oral history interview, original field recording, 1990-11-11
Notes: Tape 1, Side 1

BEGINNINGS OF THE CLAIROL CAMPAIGN

2:20, Discusses Clairol's hire of Foote, Cone & Belding. In 1954, when the agency got the account the cosmetic company did \$8 10 million. Last year, their sales topped \$1 billion.

3:00, Hair coloring was not common practice at that time. Some chemical formulas had dangerous side effects.

3:40, Before Foote, Cone, S.P. had worked only with small agencies. Jews often encountered anti Semitism in the ad business in those days. When someone suggested she try Foote, Cone, she jumped at the chance, mistakenly thinking it was Foote, Cohen & Belding Agency had no one at the time who did soft goods, so S.P. was given unusual amount of freedom to write the way she wanted. When the Clairol account came along, she was the logical choice for it.

THE ART OF COPYWRITING

5:30, S.P. admits that her daily wisecracks often were turned into lines for a campaign.

6:10, Is against research. "It's only to find out what the product does."

8:20, Ideas are personal. S.P.'s mother was blonde, and so was she. "I started out a blonde and had to do something to keep blonde." You have to have a feeling for the product; you can't fake that.

10:50, Hairdressers were authorities in those days. There was an expression: "Only her hairdresser knows for sure." That became the famed line, although S.P. originally wrote for the ad, "Only her mother knows for sure." Clairol wanted to promote their products over the counter and wanted the hairdressers to endorse them.

11:50, Discusses the difference between a red head (at that time, considered the classic "other woman") and blonde. But red hair coloring was impossible to get right. Besides, "blonde was more refreshing than red."

CAREER vs PERSONAL LIFE

13:10, Her dual identity as a career woman and the wife of a prominent lawyer. She went under two names her own for professional purposes, her married name (Halperin) for social occasions.

CREATING THE CLAIROL LOOK

14:40, Origin of another famous line: in those days if a woman came in with hair that seemed dyed, "I think I used to say, 'Does she or doesn't she?'" Began as a Joke, then became an ad line.

15:30, After a time, a child was added to ads' picture of woman with same hair color as his "mother."

16:40, S.P. urged that women that looked like fashion models be dropped in favor of women who looked like the girl next door "only better." A wedding ring would be obvious in the photo.

17:40, Foote, Cone's first reaction to "Does she. . ." was that it was too suggestive. So S.P. took it around to all the secretaries in the office, none of whom was bold enough to admit the double entendre.

19:40, One ad in Ugsper's Razaar featured tight closeups of woman's face, no hair showing, with copy along the lines of, If he likes blondes be one; o,r, If redheads turn him on, be one.

21:20, American women want to be blonde because they always attract attention. You don't have to be as pretty when you're a blonde. In all the fairy tales, the princess is a blonde; all the greeting cards feature blondes. "It was free P.R."

22:50, The next ad line: "Is it true blondes have more fun?" It was a question people didn't have to answer. At first ad didn't have much of an impact but then was tested in California and took off.

23:30, Next ad line was introduced with huge ad in the New York Times: "If I have only one life to live, let me live it as a blonde." Other variations of that were run throughout the same Sunday issue and response was phenomenal.

24:40, When the Clairol account left Foote, Cone, S.P.'s lines for Clairol's Nice In' Easy went with it.

EARLY DAYS

25:20, Began in the business writing advertising for I.J. Fox on Fifth Avenue in New York, then Boston Shoes. S.P. learned to give each shoe a distinct personality. Everything she did helped her on subsequent jobs.

INSPIRATIONS

26:50, Next Clairol ad line was "The closer he gets,, the better you look." TV ads featured couple running toward each other in a field a visual that was copied and spoofed many times.

27:40, When S.P. learned that her brother in law didn't like his wife showing any gray, she had her inspiration to write for Loving Care, Clairol's first shampoo in product. "Makes your husband feel younger just to look at you" was a way of bringing the whole family into the picture.

28:50, S.P. would got to the theater, look down the row and could tell which women had colored their hair and with which product.

30:40, Inspiration for getting into the business: as a girl she saw ads that touted being thin and S.P. was curious about their power over immigrants like her parents for whom plumpness was a sign of prosperity.

Tape 1, Side 2

STARTING.OUT

:10, Her first job was as secretary for Harper's Bazaar. One day, while most of staff were on vacation, she was pressed into service to write an ad for Good Housekeeping magazine. Unfortunately, she misspelled five authors' names and was fired. A few years ago, she was honored as Adwoman of the Year with a lunch hosted by Harper's, Bazaar and was asked how she got into the business: she told the story.

4:30, Did some creative writing on the side at first but her success in advertising precluded any more of that. One of the stories she sold to a magazine was about a career wife and mother whose child when injured runs to his nanny instead of his mom. Magazine asked her to change the ending in which the mom goes off to work after the incident.

WRITING TECHNIQUES & INFLUENCES

8:30, "My original style is like high school oratory." Has to write out something first before she can boil it down to its essence. Important to invest several ideas into one word.

11:40, Mother a great influence on her. Even though she was an immigrant, she had a love for the language, a way with words. Father was quiet but bright and opinionated, as was her husband.

WOMAN IN A MAN'S WORLD

16:50, As to whether there were restrictions on how high she could rise within the business, she often imposed limits on herself. In the beginning of her career, she did not want to make more money than her husband. When he died (in 1960), the agency quadrupled her salary.

17:50, As to whether there was widespread anti-Semitism in the industry, S.P. asserts that conditions eased greatly "after Hitler." Her status at Foote, Cone was always high: "I was their favorite child."

19:30, Attributes her success to being a middle child, always striving to prove herself. She also stayed loyal to her employers: "Every place I worked I worked at least ten years, and at Foote Cone, 18 years.

LOOKING BACK

20:30, Retired in 1983. Talks of difficulty of aging, of children who are too devoted, "treat me like a piece of porcelain."

23:30, Has collected art, still goes to galleries every Saturday with a painter friend. Her experience in advertising, in understanding design, has helped her appreciate art and collect the best of each artist's oeuvre.

26:10, Talks of her memoir, written in 1973.

27:20, A joy to be in the Advertising Hall of Fame, "the only lady." Reminisces about her early days in advertising, when

she'd go into a restaurant with all male group. That's how her husband spotted her. Later they met at a party at the George Gershwins and he told her how intrigued he'd been with her. They were married a few months later.

END OF INTERVIEW

Box 1, Reel OTM
474.01

Shirley Polykoff oral history interview, master tape, 1990-11-11

Box 1, Cassette
RTC 474.01

Shirley Polykoff oral history interview, 1990-11-11

Box 1

Abstract of interview