

# Back to school

*How a Smith graduate with average grades and a love for history achieved a master's degree at age 76. By RUTH CHALMERS '44*

**A**NYONE WHO HAS been through Smith's Ada Comstock Scholars Program for older students will probably appreciate the satisfaction that I had from my experience in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Fordham University.

Because my two best friends in college had acquired master's degrees, I decided to do so after I retired. This was despite Freud, who, at age 49, said that after 50 the elasticity of the mind is, as a rule, lacking. And then there was this disheartening headline on page one of the March 16, 1998, *New York Times*: "Old people are no longer educable."

When I applied to Fordham, Smith had to retrieve my transcript from storage on West Street. Then I had to take the Graduate Record Exam at a nearby college. When I arrived on the appointed day, there were many students sitting on the floor of the hall. When they saw me, they stood up, assuming I was in charge. I quickly set things straight by asking if this was where the exam was. Although I did abysmally on the analytical and mathematical parts of the test, Fordham accepted me because I had 85 percent on the verbal section.

While at Fordham, I was required to pass an exam in a modern language. So, 53 years after my last French class, I passed the French test, with the help of a dictionary, which was permitted.

The nice people at Fordham did not know how to take me. A student asked, "Are you teaching here this afternoon?" In the library it was, "You're faculty, right?" The best was a nun from India who asked, "Are you a Sister?" (A friend of mine suggested that I should have replied, "No, I'm not in the habit.") Actually, once the students were used to me we got along well. One young man did an oral history with me on the Vietnam War for a class

of his. Then another student commented, "I wish my mother and father would go back to school. All they do is sit around and drink coffee."

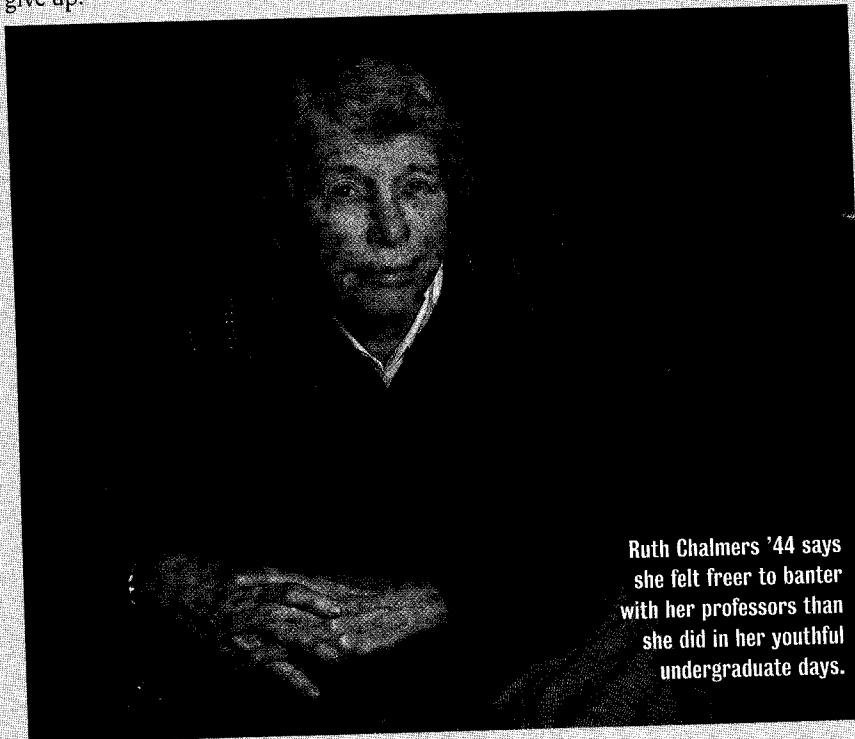
Each course involved as much as 20 hours a week of reading and also writing papers. In contrast to my classes at Smith, I now felt freer to speak out and sometimes banter with the professors.

I knew the required thesis would not be easy, but I was sailing along with a B-plus average until then. I enjoyed the research and writing on my topic, "John Calvin and Michael Servetus: The Use of 'Righteous' Power," which showed how Calvin used his theology to condemn a fellow theologian to the stake. It took four drafts and special help from two friends, one a scholar and the other an editor, to have the thesis accepted. I can understand why people get as far as the thesis (to say nothing of the dissertation) and then give up.

The rewards of my studies were many. I had to stretch my mind: grow and learn to analyze more deeply and thoroughly. In research, there was the thrill of finding an unsuspected "goldmine," such as an entire book of Calvin's letters. I had no intention of "using" my degree, but I enjoyed the pleasure of the achievement and of having a greater knowledge of history, especially of the Reformation.

There was an amusing side to my graduate career, as well. On Election Day, I was studying while serving as a poll watcher. A co-worker asked, "Where are you lecturing tomorrow?" Finally, someone said, "Let me know when you graduate. I want to come to your prom."

*Ruth Chalmers '44 was executive director of the Jane Addams Peace Association for 42 years. She received her master's degree from Fordham in May 1999.*



*Ruth Chalmers '44 says she felt freer to banter with her professors than she did in her youthful undergraduate days.*