

'We Went Far and Wide'

What was it like to study in Paris in the 1950s? Ask Suzanne Jagel O'Brien '59.

By Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

Every few days, from September through June of the academic year 1957–58, Suzanne Jagel O'Brien '59 wrote detailed letters to her parents in Queens, N.Y., describing her travels in Paris.

"I would catch them up on everything I had done—or almost everything I had done," says O'Brien from her office in Lattimore Hall, where she is now an associate dean of the College.

For years, her parents kept the letters, before eventually handing them back to their daughter. "The ink was fading," O'Brien says. So she typed them up.

And last fall, she handed the stack of letters and postcards, and a transcription of over 100 pages, to Rush Rhees Library's Department of Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation. Nancy Ehrich Martin '65, '94 (MA), the John M. and Barbara Keil University Archivist, calls the letters "extraordinary."

"We have nothing like this in the University archives," she says.

The collection offers a striking portrait of what has changed. There was no formal study abroad program. Very few students went abroad, and those


who did, like O'Brien and six other Rochester students that year, planned their years on their own. "In those days, we didn't just fly abroad," O'Brien says. "We got on ocean liners and sailed for days. So you really knew you were going someplace far away and different."

Sharing that voyage and almost every other adventure that year was Roberta (Bobbie) Kirsch Thomas '58.

"There wasn't a day that went by that we didn't realize we were having a fantastic experience," says Thomas. "We had such a sense that this was a miracle year."

The women enjoyed a remarkable degree of freedom, roaming not only Paris, but cities across Europe, including London, Vienna, Florence, Munich, and Brussels—to which they hitchhiked in November, on Armistice Day.

"After much talking and discussion with French and Americans alike, we decided to hitchhike to Brussels," O'Brien wrote home a week later. "Calm down—it's quite accepted in Europe. So many wonderful people helped us (and we saved money besides) that we think it was really a marvelous experience."

"We went far and wide," O'Brien recalls. "Everything there was to see, we saw. I don't know how we knew how to do all of that because we didn't have anyone telling us the way. We ran into people. We met people. They gave us the benefit of their lives and experience. And we just ate it all up." 

For photos of O'Brien's collection of letters and more about her year abroad, visit www.rochester.edu/pr/Review.



CRUISE CLASS: Constance Redman Spande '59 (inset, left to right), Sylvia Bienenstock Ettinger '59, Suzanne Jagel O'Brien '59, and Roberta Kirsch Thomas '58 set sail for Europe in 1957, a year abroad that O'Brien chronicled in a collection of letters she donated to the University's Archives.

