

ROBERT DYER '34

July 10, 1996

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Mame Warren,
Interviewer

Warren: This is Mame Warren. I'm in Lexington, Virginia, with Robert Dyer, and today is the 10th of July 1996.

Now, you are class of 1934.

Dyer: Yes, ma'am.

Warren: That must have been a really different time to come to Washington and Lee. We're talking the middle of the Depression.

Dyer: It was different, but not that much different. The Depression caused a great many of my friends to drop out before they got their degrees because their families were having trouble economically. But we still had the Honor System. I think we had a better football team. But it was still very similar. Probably 35, 40 percent of the students had grandfathers in the Confederate Army. That may not be true anymore. But the same kind of student has applied here, and I don't see any great difference.

Warren: I'm real interested in that. Did people sit around talking about their grandfathers having been in the Civil War?

Dyer: No, but they had names that made everybody know that they'd been involved in the South. The professors gave a little sign when they called on somebody with a name that had been important in the Confederacy or earlier. They'd almost give a slight bow to that person to acknowledge that they recognized their history of their family. Actually, this happened when I was at Harvard, too, only there it wasn't history of the family. It was family names that founded companies, like Dole Pineapple or Briggs Body or General Motors. The presidents gave them a little nod, showing that they had that same recognition. I don't think they do that anymore.

Warren: That's really interesting. How did you pick Washington and Lee?

Dyer: Because I'd grown up with the influence that the South should have won the Civil War. The Dyers had originally come from Virginia, so I looked for a school in Virginia.

Warren: There are a lot of schools in Virginia. Why Washington and Lee?

Dyer: I'd read things about Robert E. Lee. That was the chief influence.

Warren: What was your first impression? Can you remember what it was like when you first arrived here?

Dyer: It was just as delightful as I had imagined. Sometimes people are disappointed. But I had good roommates on either side in the dorm, I had the top floor of the dorm that looked out over House Mountain, and the professors were all wonderful and I enjoyed them completely. So I didn't have any problems.

Warren: You know, I think a question I should ask you that the answer might be different. How did you get here, literally? Did you arrive—

Dyer: I came on the train.

Warren: Tell me about that, because people don't do that anymore.

Dyer: No, but the train is still running. I know people that take them. I forgot the name of the town outside here where it stops and turns around and goes back to Chicago. That was the only time I ever took it. It was the Depression. Very few people had cars, automobiles. I did not have one until my last year, and then I had a fifteen-year-old Dodge that I bought for \$50. But otherwise, we traveled by hitchhiking, for the main part.

One time I wanted to go to Washington, D.C., and I stood out on the highway and lifted my thumb. A car picked me up and took me about thirty, forty miles, and I got out and lifted my thumb and another car took me the rest of the way. That was the way students traveled. When I was going home, I stood out on the highway heading towards the west. A car stopped and picked me up, and it turned out it was

the mayor of Huntington, West Virginia, and he took me all the way there. It turned out he had gone to Washington and Lee, and he told me stories about his stay here.

Warren: That's great. I understand Washington and Lee just goes everywhere.

One story I've heard or I read about is that back when students used to arrive by train that fraternity guys would meet you on the train. Did you experience that, to be rushed on the train?

Dyer: No. There was one Washington and Lee man living in Illinois, and he called on me before I ever got close to transportation and tried to get me interested in his fraternity, which turned out was the one I joined because it was unusual. Most of the fraternities were centered on rather strict lines. My fraternity had been founded in New England long ago and then we recruited people of all nationalities, whether they were Jewish or anything else, and none of the other fraternities did that at that time.

Warren: Which one did you belong to?

Dyer: Delta Upsilon, which unfortunately went off the campus during Vietnam and has not returned yet. I had a lot of great fraternity brothers. At least three of them became college presidents. One became a professor at Washington and Lee and another one wrote plays and went to Hollywood and directed movie making at various times. So I felt I was with a very creative group of people.

Warren: Who was the Hollywood connection?

Dyer: I'm trying to remember his name.

Warren: So you got recruited all the way back in Illinois. That's amazing.

Dyer: Well, I was recruited when I arrived here, too, because they have that system. I did go to visit a number of other fraternities and received bids, but I had sort of decided on this fraternity. I wanted to see the others, too, and they were all nice people, but I chose the one by chance that turns out to be the best for me.

Warren: What impact do you think the Depression had on Washington and Lee? I know you were in the middle of it, but looking back now, can you see things that were related to the Depression while you were here?

Dyer: Well, the professors probably didn't get important increases in their salary, but we all survived without any great effect. The bad effect came afterwards, because this was kind of a fairyland where everything was good, and then when we got out in the world, to find a good job was a real problem, particularly for me because I'd taken philosophy and English literature and courses like that, and that was of absolutely no use when applying for a job.

Warren: Were there any particular professors who were important to you?

Dyer: Oh, a great many. Dr. Latture, who founded ODK, was a great friend. I forgot the first name. There was a Graham, I think, taught French and also the Glee Club, which I belonged to.

Warren: Was that John Graham?

Dyer: I think it was John.

Warren: I know there were lots of Grahams.

Dyer: I'm not sure. We didn't call them by their first name, but I think it was John. And there were several others. There was one professor that had ridden behind Lee on Traveller, and we were pleased to take courses from him because it seemed he connected us back to another generation. But Dr. Riegel in journalism was very excellent. He taught me a great deal about how to write and how to write stories, so I enjoyed his courses. In fact, there weren't any that I didn't enjoy.

Warren: You arrived in 1930, right?

Dyer: I was going to say '31.

Warren: '31? So you were here right when Tom Riegel first arrived, because he came in 1930, and so did President Gaines.

Dyer: Yes. President Gaines, I'm not sure how the faculty liked him, but the student body liked him very much, and I'm sure he did a very good job raising money for Washington and Lee. He had a lot of one-liners that he would give in speeches that the students enjoyed. I only remember one right now, that high heels were invented by the girl who got kissed on the forehead, and the students thought that was very funny.

Warren: That's great. I've heard a couple of his speeches. He really was an attention grabber.

Sure, we'll pause. [Tape recorder turned off.]

Dyer: Another professor that I liked very much was Dr. Campbell. I think his family had been connected with Washington and Lee for a generation before that, and he had ridden behind Traveller, behind General Lee on Traveller. He taught geology, and he was a delightful person. He had part of his education in German universities, and in those universities, instead of clapping over something, the students stamped on the floor to show their approval. And so it became a practice to stamp on the floor in his classes when we students liked something that was going on, and that was sort of unusual. I think his son also became a professor here, and just died recently. Wasn't there a Campbell?

Warren: I haven't been here that long. I'm a real newcomer.

Dyer: There was a recent death of that family. The other contact I had with him away from class was, I had decided I wanted some adventure in the world and I wanted to take a year off to go to sea and do a lot of traveling, hitchhiking, and whatever. And so I thought if I go through in three years, then I'll justify in taking that year off, and I had to get permission from Dean Campbell to do this.

And so I interviewed him, and he looked at my record and saw that my middle name was Campbell. His Campbells had been involved in the Battle of Kings Mountain in this area, so he asked me, hoping that my Campbells had been

involved in that battle, but they had not. They hadn't come over from Scotland at the time of that battle. But I believe that he gave me the privilege of going through in three years because my middle name was Campbell, for which I'm grateful.

Warren: That's great. [Tape recorder turned off.]

Dyer: One of the things I remember as I grew older that there were a remarkable number of young people growing up in Lexington when I was here. They were perhaps five, ten, twelve years old, that they became famous in one way or another. There was a Robertson who was the son of Senator Robertson that is even today a prominent national figure in the political area. Dr. Shannon's son, I believe, became president of the University of Minnesota [sic Virginia]. Cy Twombly was the son of the swimming coach at Washington and Lee, and he is now living in Italy and he gets about nine hundred thousand or a million dollars for each painting, and he grew up in Lexington, the son of a swimming coach. Isn't it a marvelous world where things like that can happen?

Warren: He's actually back here part time now.

Dyer: I would like to meet him sometime.

Warren: He's a very nice fellow.

Dyer: He wouldn't remember me.

Warren: I did a little checking back in the old *Calyx* to find out some things that you were involved in, and I understand you were on the wrestling team.

Dyer: Yes.

Warren: Can you tell me about that? I haven't talked to anybody else who was on the wrestling team. What does it mean to be on the wrestling team?

Dyer: I went out for the wrestling team because I couldn't make the football team. In those days, Washington and Lee had a very high-class football team, and they were playing in the big time. They played in bowl games. I discovered after one day that I was never going to make that team, so they called out for wrestling practice and I

went out for that. I did make the freshman wrestling team. Later on I made the cross-country team, too. I was grateful to find teams I could make, because Washington and Lee was very good in athletics during that period.

Warren: So athletics were real important?

Dyer: It was important to the school, but every student would like to do something while they're in school if they can in athletics. It always adds a little diversity.

Warren: How about social life back then? Did you attend Fancy Dress balls?

Dyer: Certainly.

Warren: Tell me about what it was like back then.

Dyer: Well, what it was like is, all the girls schools were over mountains and cars were very scarce, so you had to make careful arrangements to find somebody that had a car, and usually they were willing to take some other passengers if other passengers paid for the gas and oil. That was the way to get to the girls schools. So every weekend we all gathered and found a ride and got our invitation to the girls schools and had a wonderful social life. Of course, as everybody knows, in those days the school was not coeducational, so we had to go far afield to find our dates. But all the girls enjoyed an invitation to come here. Washington and Lee was a popular place for them.

I think it's better now that it's coeducational, though. I think that's a great improvement. In fact, if it hadn't happened, I don't think Washington and Lee would have the high standing that it does. When I was talking to the president at the time of the change, he said the problem was that they were not recruiting the boys, the school was not recruiting the boys they wanted because they boys they wanted with the high grades frequently wanted to go to coeducational schools. So Washington and Lee became one, and I think it's helped keep up the high level of the new students that are coming in.

Warren: Do you remember, thinking about Fancy Dress back in your day, do you remember any themes that there were?

Dyer: I'm sorry. I attended all while I was here, but I do not remember the themes. They had big orchestras imported.

Warren: Through the years, apparently it's changed. Was it a two- or three-day event when you were here, do you remember?

Dyer: I only remember it being one day, except the girls came in earlier, so there was a social life. They may have stayed over—they certainly stayed overnight, and they were carefully guarded, and they probably in some cases came in a day early, though I only remember the dance being one afternoon and night.

Warren: These trips to the girls schools, would you go to different schools or did you link up with one school particularly?

Dyer: Most of the boys linked up with one girl at one school, and I liked all the girls, so I tried to link up with a girl in every school, and succeeded to some extent.

Warren: Were there any real distinctions between a Sweet Briar girl and a Hollins girl?

Dyer: Sweet Briar girls were probably slightly fancier and more careful about who would they date. Hollins, they were very nice. There was another school in Lynchburg.

Warren: Randolph-Macon?

Dyer: Randolph-Macon, a women's college. I think more boys went to that one than any of the others for their dates.

Warren: Any particular reason?

Dyer: I don't know of any, except that I think if you'd get acquainted there, then they'd introduce you to other girls, and it kind of spreads. And then we had a special occasion where we invited all the girls over, with that school's cooperation. They

rented a bus and they brought all the girls over. They stayed in the homes of ladies in Lexington. That was one of the best of the gatherings, social gatherings.

Warren: You mentioned that you were in the Glee Club. Did the Glee Club travel around

Dyer: Yes. We traveled to girls schools and to Richmond. We had a very good time. I can't say, but the audience cheered, so I guess it was all right.

Warren: Was that a way to meet girls?

Dyer: To some extent, yes, that is true. When we sang at a girls school, why, quite often we had an opportunity to meet girls. There was a very full social life at Washington and Lee.

Warren: It almost sounds like the Depression passed Washington and Lee by.

Dyer: It did to some extent. I think we were very fortunate, but, as I say, a number of students didn't come back in our second year because their families couldn't afford it, so it did affect. I suspect the school suffered in attendance in some of those years because of the hurt that their families were getting financially.

Warren: Did students have student jobs back then? Would they have helped to bring in money themselves?

Dyer: They had student jobs in the summer, and the jobs available around Lexington, there were some, but they were very few and very poorly paid. I think the newspaper was one, as I remember.

Warren: What about the newspaper?

Dyer: I think that was one place where they could sell or deliver, as I remember. That was the only thing I can think of.

Warren: What about the town of Lexington? What was it like back then?

Dyer: The inhabitants here were just wonderful. They were great, the people. They seemed to enjoy having us here.

The only other thing that was a little bit of a problem, not for the town but for me, were the initiations at fraternities. They sometimes beat the people with paddles strongly and physically more than they should. The fraternity I belonged to did not believe in paddling, but they did assign us tasks. Hell Week was the week where you were initiated. You'd been pledged earlier. My fraternity, they assigned another pledge and myself the job of stealing the clapper out of the bell over at the college which rang every day to call the classes to order. And so we had to go there in the middle of the night, with the night watchman not around, and climb up and unscrew the bolt that was holding it without making any noise. We succeeded in doing it, and the next morning the bell didn't ring for school. So Dean Campbell sent out a plea to bring it back. So we'd done what we were supposed to for our fraternity, so we took it back and put it on the front porch of the dean, so it was only a problem on one day.

The only other incident that I remember was, I said my fraternity did not have the heavy paddling. However, in the last Hell Week, they did assign something. They had all the pledges, I don't know how many there were, fourteen, I guess, or more, we all had to come out to the house at three in the morning and close down the windows and turn on the heat so that when the students woke up they'd be warm. Of course, since we'd lost a lot of hours of sleep, we weren't going to let them sleep, so we made so much noise that they called the pledge master to do something about it. So he brought us down. The fraternity house was on Main Street, but it was three o'clock in the morning, and he had us out on Main Street and we were to form into a group and march up and down. That was just to keep us out of the way until it was time for the graduate students to get up.

So we were marching up and down. Well, it was maybe about three in the morning, and this countryman who had been drinking in town came wandering out towards his home out in the country, and when he saw what we were doing, he

wanted to know what it was all about. We said, "Didn't you hear? War had been declared with Japan, and we're forming a company to go to war."

He thought about it, and he said he would like to join in. So he joined in, and he was marching up and down with us, until he finally started to wander off. We told him, "You enlisted. You have to come back." So we finally let him go on. We all got tired and went in. But it seems strange because we told him we were at war with Japan, and of course about three or four years later we were. We thought it was a joke, but it wasn't a joke later on.

Warren: Of all countries for you to have picked. How about VMI? Did you have any relations with the cadets at that point?

Dyer: No. I had understood that in years before that that the two schools fought, had fist fights, and it was so bad that they had to stop playing each other at sports because there would be riots, but that was all before our time. By the time we were here, we didn't have any social connections with them, but we didn't have any fights, either.

Warren: Were there any places out in the country that you all liked to go in the countryside?

Dyer: I climbed House Mountain one time, but only once. Oh, yes, the rivers. There were beautiful places to walk along the rivers.

Warren: How about Goshen Pass? Did you go out there?

Dyer: Yes.

Warren: How would you get out there? That's a long way.

Dyer: Well, some of the places we could walk to, but others, there was always somebody that had a car, and if you paid gas, why, you could get a ride.

Warren: So even during the Depression students had their own cars?

Dyer: Not very many, but probably every fraternity house had at least one. It wasn't like it is now, where every student has a car.

Warren: That must have been a good way to be popular, to have a car.

Dyer: Yes.

Warren: Well, is there anything more that you'd like to talk about, any memories that you have that you'd like to share?

Dyer: No. Washington and Lee, I have only very wonderful memories of it, and I'm so glad that it continues to be a strong and healthy school. I had a great time here, and I had wonderful professors.

The other important thing is the Honor System, because I think in many high schools, then and now, there is cheating going on to some extent, and the Honor System and the control over it was a very healthy thing. While I was here, perhaps one or two people were thrown out for cheating. Out in the world, honesty is very helpful, and the Honor System encourages that.

Warren: You have both a son and a grandson have come to Washington and Lee.

Dyer: A son and two grandsons.

Warren: Two grandsons.

Dyer: Yes.

Warren: How did that come to be?

Dyer: Well, I did not persuade them or try to coax them into coming. They came on their own. I'm sure the fact that I'd gone here was an influence, but I never would try to sway somebody to go to a school unless they wanted to on their own. But both son and grandson and now another grandson have all been very happy here and have good careers. It's worked out well.

Warren: You started a dynasty, the Dyer dynasty. Well, thank you. I really appreciate your taking time from the alumni college to share some thoughts with me.

Dyer: I was very glad to do so. Thank you.

[End of Interview]