

WARD BRIGGS

July 1, 1996

Mame Warren,
Interviewer

Warren: This is Mame Warren. Today is the 1st of July 1996. I'm in Lexington, Virginia, with Ward Briggs.

You are class of 1967. I did a little homework on you, not too much. I went and looked at the *Calyx* and saw that you're from Delaware. You're the first person I've talked to from Delaware. What brought a Delaware boy to Washington and Lee? What was the attraction?

Briggs: I had gone to a camp. We had long had Southern sympathies. Although Delaware was a border state, our sympathies were Southern. As a boy, I had packed off to a place called Camp Greenbriar in Alderson, West Virginia, and it was basically populated by people from Washington, Norfolk, and Richmond. It had originally been a kind of athletic camp, athletes they were trying to recruit to the University of Virginia, and it was basically people from St. Alban's and St. Christopher's and Norfolk Academy. It was run by someone from Norfolk Academy. There were people who were going to UVA and people who were going to VMI and people who were going to W&L, and that was it. It was not Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, as far as I was concerned. It was those three, and all my friends were choosing between those.

We stopped to visit them two years in a row on my way back from camp. We parked on Washington Street and walked. We said, "Well, here's a sidewalk. Let's see where it goes." The moment we turned that curve and we saw the colonnade, I

remember we all just said it's the most beautiful sight we'd ever seen. It was more beautiful than Charlottesville, as far as I was concerned. I came back for the first time since graduation about '85 or '86, something like that, almost twenty years afterwards, and the same thing happened. I walked up that walk and I saw it again, and you're just absolutely struck by it. It's such a beautiful sight.

So that's what I wanted to do. I had a couple of friends from Wilmington who actually came down. There was actually a reasonable Wilmington contingent here. So down I came. It was the only place I wanted to go. I'd applied to other places and got in other places, but this is where I wanted to go, and there was a fraternity I wanted to be in. When I graduated from high school, my godfather gave me a little key chain with a sort of slab of silver on it for my name and address, and he said, "We'll put down Washington and Lee." I said, "Put down Phi Kappa Psi, Washington and Lee, because that's the fraternity I want to get in, and I'll get in or else." And I got in.

Warren: How did you know which fraternity?

Briggs: That's where a friend of mine from school, who was two years older than me, had gotten into, was at Phi Psi, and he showed me pictures and we went by the house. It's not what it is now. It was a mirror image of the SAE house. It was just this beautiful white sort of wedding cake house, completely rotten on the inside, but it looked the part. It was on this big hill. And all the brothers were just very attractive in all ways. I mean, they were great.

I think I just profited enormously from the fraternity system. I was an only child and had sort of Victorian parents, so I always sort of was at sea about what to do and being sort of serious about life, and all of a sudden I had thirty-five older brothers who very carefully sort of took care of you. I mean, they told you when you were doing something stupid. They told you when you were dressing badly or when you said something that was uncool or something like that. I personally

needed that greatly, and I think a lot of other people, to varying degrees, needed that, as well.

For me, one result of the fraternity system is that I have just—I can say I have never met a socially inept Washington and Lee person. They may not be setting the world on fire intellectually or anything, but they know how to behave, and they're decent, honest people. I never knew anybody here who you just knew was dishonest or would cheat you or anything. There was just something about this place, that was reinforced at the fraternity level. There's plenty sort of debauchery, too, but what was that which was supposed to be instilled really was carefully instilled, and it's integrity and it's just this wonderful sense of honor. So I was very fond, and I remain very grateful, to the fraternity system as it was then. It certainly had faults, but I liked it very much.

Warren: Have you remained friends with your fraternity brothers out in real life?

Briggs: It's funny, actually, no, I don't see them, and I'd love to. I love them all, and I wonder really what happened to them, how they're doing, particularly the ones older than me that I just idolized. I don't know, I don't see that many people from Washington and Lee. Partly that may be the problem with one of its virtues, which was geographical distribution. We were always told that W&L had the greatest per capita distribution of any school, and it certainly was true. I mean, people from Montana, South Dakota, all over come here. So the result is that I don't see them very much. Most of my fraternity brothers were confined to Short Hills, New Jersey, and that sort of area. But now at least half of them are retired and have been so for a number of years, working their way up from the top of daddy's brokerage agency or real estate concern. So now they're even more scattered in places like Aspen and Montrose and places like that, so it would be even harder to get them together.

Warren: Yeah, a lot of people have a leg up before they even get here.

Briggs: That's certainly true.

Warren: You made an allusion to that the fraternity brothers gave you advice on how to dress. Now, you were here during the time period where—one other person has told me about that I'd like to hear more about—you were here at the beginnings of questioning the concept of conventional dress. Do you remember anybody challenging conventional dress when you were here?

Briggs: The only challenge I remember was one transfer student, somebody who came in, I think, came in maybe a sophomore, his sophomore, junior, who had an earring. He claimed that he'd been in the merchant marine or something and had crossed the Equator and was allowed to have an earring. But this made him sort of an instant outcast.

The dam seems to have burst. I think mine was the last freshman class to wear beanies, I'm not sure, and I know we never wore blue jeans. But I think the dam really burst when I left, in '68 and '69. I don't hold myself responsible for the dam bursting, but I think that that's probably when. So I think I really sort of missed that.

Fancy Dress was a big deal when I came, but I don't ever recall going to Fancy Dress. I think that was sort of morbid. One of my fraternity brothers had been president of Fancy Dress my freshman year, but I didn't go to that. I didn't go that year, and I cannot remember going to a Fancy Dress. Our speaker, who went to UVA, just admitted that he went to more Fancy Dress balls than I did. His last one was in '62, though.

I think we all pretty ungrudgingly wore coats and ties to class. I thought that was okay, and I bought into it. I mean, I really believed that if you took the class seriously enough to dress up for it, you would take it seriously enough to prepare for it. It meant that serious business was going on. For some of these teachers, I wouldn't dream, I wouldn't dream of going to Dr. Leyburn's class without a tie. It

was beyond belief. Dr. Jenks, you know, all these people. Harry Pemberton's class I would go to in a T-shirt, maybe, but not—just because it was more relaxed.

Warren: Let's talk about those faculty people. Who was important to you and why?

Briggs: It's funny, because we're here this week talking about General Lee, and there really are a great number of parallels between, I think, General Lee and Dr. Leyburn, in the sense that Leyburn really, he was distant and unknowable, yet he was accessible to everyone, took the greatest care with every student. If you missed his class too often, you would get a card. He wouldn't call you, but you would get a card in the mail, a postcard, "I notice you have missed my classes. I trust you're not ill. Remember we have an absence policy," things like that.

He was a very interesting lecturer, I thought, and he was, especially now, having been in academic myself for a while, amazing in his ability to return tests. He would return every paper the next class meeting, very carefully marked, every paper. And when the exams were done, if we had an exam in the morning and the exam would get out at noon, he would say, "Gentlemen, your grades will be up at three-thirty or four or something like this." He would take all these exams and go in and grade them, and our grades and exam grades and or final grade would be tallied, and it would be posted on a board, on a kind of bulletin board on a little stand, and it would be brought out to the front of the library where his office was, and we'd all go out to see what our grades were. It was just phenomenal.

Warren: In less than twenty-four hours?

Briggs: In less than six hours. I mean, he would do this. It meant that he was looking for certain things. It meant that he was looking for certain answers. These were all essay questions, of course. That would be miraculous enough with multiple choice, but these were all essay questions. But there was no doubt, when we looked at the exams, we looked at what he'd given us, he very carefully, very carefully marked these.

On papers, he would not only mark errors of fact, but he was particularly good on infelicities of style, or usage particularly, and all he had to do was just mark something in the margin and you never forgot it. I said, "I have always been intrigued by Schiller's response to this," meaning interested in, and he would say, "An intrigue is a mystery. You mean interested in." Bingo. I said, "This is a masterful treatment of the Trojan War," and he'd say, "Masterful means tyrannical. You mean masterly," thinks like that. I didn't try to make these errors, but I loved getting these precise comments back from him. I've never forgotten one that he did. Again, from my academic perspective, all he had to do was say that to me once, point that out once to me or other people, and you never forgot it. I mean, you didn't. Now I grade papers, and I say these same things. I have a system where essentially students write basically the same paper three times in a class, just adding to it, and I'll correct the same error three times and still get it back to them.

I think its importance, it was just the aura that he had, and I think that aura really gave the place its *Zeitgeist*. I think he really was the equivalent of General Lee here in that he was really what the university was about. He was the one faculty member, I think, who really came up to the dignity of the place. I just remember that distant affection that we all had for him. He was always tremendously interested, and he was enormously sentimental about things.

In my senior year, I was taking a class on the Roman poet, Horace, and so I just decided I was going to translate the first book of Horace's, *Odes*, in their original meter, very complicated and a not very friendly English. I did it, and I had the person who did cartoons for the paper, named Gary Apgar, draw up some drawings in watercolor. I mean, he did them with pen and ink and then filled them in with watercolor, the first, I don't know, four or five of the poems or something like this.

When I graduated, I went down and gave it to him in his office, and he started to weep. He just started crying. He was just so grateful for them. I mean,

they weren't any good. They were awful, sort of embarrassing. But he was just absolutely so touched. It was the only I could do to give him back anything like what I felt he'd given me.

And yet that sentimentality led some people to sort of question whether or not he was really performing rather than genuinely experiencing these feelings. In my time, there were two famous lectures, and I heard one of them three times, in his ancient history class. At parents weekend, he would do a lecture called, "Arete, the Pursuit of Excellence." He would start, obviously, with the Garden of Eden the beginning of the semester, and so by October or so he was just starting fifth century Athens, which is where he really felt at home. Of course, parents would come to this. He'd start talking about Athens, and it was this beautiful society on a hill and kind of on a foothill in the middle of Attica, and he said, "And it was full of just beautiful highly intelligent, aristocratic, athletic, golden youths who contended with each other in the arts and games, athletic contests, and literature, philosophy, constantly striving to achieve excellence in each and every area of interest, as opposed to this sort of barren, joyless militaristic society over the hill in Sparta. Whose services were necessary to, certainly necessary to keep off the Persians and people like that, but basically not a society that you could be as proud of as you could this fabulous, fabulous fifth century Athens."

Well, it was very clear, and I don't have the skill to do it, but it was very clear he was talking about Athens and Sparta, but he was really talking about W&L and VMI. It was a bravura performance when I saw it, and the parents just went ape. I mean, the parents couldn't write their checks fast enough. It was really the only lecture I knew that was attended by the University treasurer. Every time it was given, Mattingly was outside the door. The thing I remember, because he was a distinctive-looking guy, he was outside the door, and the parents were there just

handing him the money. They were just so, not literally, but they were just so thrilled. This is what it's supposed to be. I know my parents liked it.

That was parents weekend. And then at Thanksgiving, we'd be at the end of the 5th century, and this would be the day we were to leave. It was the day Thanksgiving vacation started. I think it was probably a Wednesday. Maybe a Tuesday, I can't remember. Probably Wednesday. It was at ten or so in the morning, something like that. And nobody ever thought of cutting their class. There was just no possible way. Now our Thanksgiving vacation starts on Tuesday, and students the previous Friday are wishing me a happy holiday, so they're taking off. But none of us did that.

It was the end of the 5th century, which was the death of Socrates in 399, when he was convicted. He would start talking about how Athens existed to produce someone like Socrates, and yet it was Athens that killed Socrates, and in killing Socrates, essentially killed itself, etc., etc. He went on to the historical and sort of cultural justifications of it. Then he opened up the *Phaedo*, the dialogue that describes his last days, and he would read. The last half of the class or so would be him reading the death of Socrates.

At the same moment every time, he'd say, "He'd drink the hemlock," and would pause, and then he would feel his legs, Socrates would feel his legs going under, and Socrates would be talking to his disciples, and Leyburn would pull out a handkerchief and dab his eyes. Then gradually all the Socratic systems were sort of shutting down. He dabs himself again. And then finally he says his last words, "Remember, I owe a cock to Asclepias." So off would come the glasses, and he would dab and his voice would break, "So ended the noblest life of Western civilization," or something like that.

Then what really killed you was, he always ended exactly on the buzzer. You know, the bell would then instantly ring, and he just brought the house down. You

applauded. You applauded his conviction and his love of it. I now know, as a classicist, there was a lot about what he said that was bogus, but you had to applaud how much it meant to him, and that's what we were all after. It was a wonderful experience to be in his classes.

He had a course in comparative literature, which was just Greek and Latin in translation, classics in translation, which they were just beautifully polished lectures and ranging lots of different aspects of classical literature. But then your paper in there was the influence of classics on anybody you wanted, anybody you were interested in. It could be the influence of the classics on Milton, the influence of the classics on Freud, the influence of the classics on James Joyce, the influence of the classics on Karl Marx, anybody you were studying, because he knew he got people of various different majors. And he'd grade them all.

The way he was able to do that was by, again, bringing certain expectations. Do you talk about the person's education? Do you cite his reading? Do you mention where he cites these authors in his book? He was just sort of looking for that. It's not that he had huge knowledge of all these people, but nonetheless he could intelligently grade all those papers and say something meaningful about it. It made him very admirable.

The lectures were also sort of moral instruction, behavioral instruction. He was describing one time modes of humor. I remember him saying in classes, "Bodily noises seldom divert me." That was a period when bodily noises diverted all of us. We thought there was nothing funnier in this world. He just sort of said that, and, boy, we are not amused, you know. We all took that to heart. Suddenly it wasn't that funny anymore.

He was a wonderful person. I think he was one of those all-time educators who got into the profession to have an effect on people's lives, and it is almost impossible for educators now to do so. It's impossible to challenge students on their

sort of deepest convictions, largely because many of them don't have them, and if you do challenge them, they sort of occur to talk about private property, it's none of our business, get on with it, you're harassing me because of my political, religious, whatever views. I don't know if there could be a Dr. Leyburn these days.

Warren: Did he influence your choice of careers or did you already know what you wanted to do?

Briggs: He influenced me to be a professor. I just thought, I mean, that was the noblest guy I've ever seen, and I said, "This is a decent model." My father was a physician, and I thought he was a terrific role model. But they had me tested, and I didn't have the aptitude for the medical career, because they determined early on that I used to get nauseous at the sight of money, so I was not suited. Also, I couldn't do chemistry and math, so I was hopeless as a doctor. But I thought, "If you could be like Leyburn, it wouldn't be bad. It wouldn't be a bad life." And he sort of convinced me that there was inherent value in this life, and I did it.

He was strictly an amateur of the classics, but he brought the classics into it. I took his sociology courses, I took his religion in society courses. I remember he shocked us once because he was talking about a tribe in—well, the Latin word for character is the plural of a singular word, *mores*. He knew it was a plural word, but it had a singular meaning. I remember one day he said—and he's talking about applying this to a tribe in New Guinea, and he said, "The Maoris' *mores* is something, something." He said "the Maoris' *mores is*." And he said, "And so the *hoi polloi* would say," because he knew *hoi* was the definite article and stuff like this. If you were paying attention and you wanted to pay attention, if you paid attention, you could get a lot out of him. He was basically an amateur of the classical world.

Also, he was one of the few faculty members who produced two really exceptional books, really, really first-rate books, one on the Haitian people. I don't

know how he got interested in it, but really a good book that he did at Yale. And then the Scotch-Irish. I think everybody who lives in Virginia ought to read the Scotch-Irish. It's the history of the indigenous peoples over here. He had that terrific scholarly background that a lot of people didn't have, too. Like Lee, I think he was bold and audacious, also, where he didn't have to be. As dean, he could have taken a defensive strategy and just operated on a problem-solving basis. But he came and tried to radically change the school. He tried to do away with intercollegiate athletics and the grading system, and he even wanted the students to wear uniforms. This is curiously enough what Tom Wolfe remembers about Leyburn, that he wanted everybody to wear uniforms and so forth. I think he was, some people might say aggressive, maybe pro-active on this, but he really did try to make changes. He was ultimately stymied from doing it, but he really did that. This has only just occurred to me this afternoon, but I think you could really make a lot of parallels between Leyburn and Lee if you wanted to.

Warren: Was he still dean when you were here?

Briggs: No, he wasn't, no. I came in '63, and I think he left—he didn't last long as dean, as I recall.

Warren: That's what I thought.

Briggs: He went out in the fifties, early fifties, I think. But he stayed, and I think he could have—I mean, he had family connections here, but he could have gone on, it seems to me, could have gone on other places.

Warren: Well, Rob was right, you do wax poetic. Leyburn, that was a magnificent performance.

Briggs: Oh, no, no. Of course, the other great, great influence I hope will be treated very carefully is my coach, Joe Lyles, who contributed greatly to the tone of the place and also to the legend of the place almost as much as Leyburn did in my era.

Warren: I don't even know this name.

Briggs: Well, Joe Lyles played two professional sports. I think he was a pitcher for the St. Louis Browns, major league baseball, and he played basketball in that golden era of the early fifties, maybe late forties, I can't remember. But he was injured in both sports, but he did play. When I came, he coached varsity soccer, JV basketball, and varsity baseball. In addition, he refereed and he ran PE and he played handball without gloves. I think he singlehandedly made handball the most popular sport on campus. Everybody played handball, but not everybody could play without gloves. As a result, he has trouble turning doorknobs and things now. You'd always see him and his hands would always be sort of vaguely purple from all the hematoma from playing.

I loved him enormously. I played soccer for four years and baseball for two, maybe one. I remember we were playing Miami of Ohio in baseball, and Joe, for his own reasons that I still do not understand, used to call me Walt. He knew my name very well. He would write Ward on things, but he called me Walt. He said, "Walt, do you see that pitcher out there from Miami of Ohio?"

I said, "Yeah."

He said, "He's going to be good. He's going to be really good. You'll be glad to know you played against him some day."

I said, "Well, who is he?" It was Mike Schmidt, all-star third baseman of the Phillies, greatest third baseman that ever lived. But as I recall, he was pitching that day.

But my fondest memories were playing soccer with him. I thought of it this morning, because Norm Lord got us all lined up during our little walk this morning at 6:45, and Norm said something that Joe Lyles had said to us that first day on soccer. He lined us all up and he said, "Now, count off by ones."

We sort of looked at him. I remember we looked at Joe, and he said, "Count off by ones."

We all went, "One, one, one, one, one," down the line, and he got mad and we all had to run laps.

Joe said things that were tremendously profound of a Yogi Berra quality. True, there are a lot of bogus Lylesisms going around, but there a lot of true ones, and the way you tell, they have their own distinct quality.

We went up to play the NCA championship in soccer in '65, I think. I think it was November of '65. We left with the university cars, and we had no gas in them. It was Sunday night, a rainy Sunday night, and went out and not only did we have to find a gas station on Sunday night, but we had to find one with a university credit card, which was something like Spud gas or something appalling.

So anyway, it turned out to be a guy's house, and here we came in two cars, two station wagons, maybe three. We hit this guy's house. It was rainy, and he comes out and he's got this slicker on. We honk the horn, and he comes out. I roll down the window. I was driving, and Joe was in the passenger seat. The guy says, "Fill it up?"

I said, "Of course."

Joe said, "No, no, no, don't fill it up. We want 14 3/4 gallons in the tank."

The guy looked at him, "Okay."

I said, "Coach, why 14 3/4 gallons? Just tell him to fill it up."

He said, "Oh, we can't fill up the tank, Walt. There's still some gas left in it."

I thought about this for a while, and took it back to Harry when we got back. And then the next morning we were driving, and the most famous Lylesism of all, I think, I was driving and we were coming up, and Joe had the map. We were going up. I said, "Coach, the road forks up ahead here."

He said, "I know."

I said, "Well, you have the map. What do I do?"

He said, "Walt, you see that fork in the road?"

I said, "I do."

He said, "Take it."

I finally just turned, and somehow we got up to Medford.

So I took these back to Harry Pemberton and I said, "Harry, this guy's nuts, saying these things." Harry found deep meaning. He found most of the essence of Western philosophy in the kinds of things Joe was saying. This was the existential choice. This is pure Camus, pure Sartre. You are going down the path of life and the road forks, and nobody tells you what to do. You take it. You go your way, and that's it. Then you can never purge yourself completely of experience, you know. You can never fill up the tank, because there's always a little bit left in it, and all this kind of stuff. It was wonderful.

I can't remember all of them, but I remember an absolutely extraordinary day, which would probably be of no value to you, but an extraordinary thing. It was two days. I was in the student union. I was having a milkshake or something. My Greek teacher, Mario Pellicciaro, came in. Mario I think was always too busy doing a hundred other things ever to finish his dissertation, which he never did. But he taught us Greek, and two of us went on to become classics professors and published and, you know, we did our thing. But he had a unique way of teaching Greek. But he was always interested in all these other things.

So Mario comes in. I said, "Mario, what are you up to?"

He said, "I'm busy. I've got so much to do. I'm going to this opera over in Lynchburg. I've got to write a review of that for the paper. I'm working on this book. I'm working my way through Dante with some people here. I'm trying to write a commentary on this. Meanwhile, I've got this article I got to go, and Washington's calling. I've got to do all this."

I said, "Mario, I don't understand. Why do you work so hard? Why do all this stuff? This is supposed to be a calm, reflective life. Why are you working so hard?"

He said, "I'll tell you something, Ward. You got to keep working. You got to keep rolling the rock up the hill, keep rolling the rock up the hill, because if you don't, all you got is the wisdom of Silenus, which is that it was better if man was never born, so keep rolling the rock up the hill. Wow. I mean, I was inspired.

The next day, I swear to you, the next day I'm back in the student union, which is nothing unusual in itself. Joe Lyles comes in. I said, "Joe, what are you doing? What's up?"

He said, "Well, I just finished playing a tennis tournament. I had two PE classes this morning. We've got baseball practice starting in the gym this afternoon. Then I've got to play a handball tournament. Then I'm refereeing a basketball game over in Staunton. In the morning, I've got to get ready for this."

I said, "Joe, you're the second guy I've talked to in two days that's working like a maniac. Why do you work so hard? Why do you do this? Why run yourself ragged this way?"

He said, "Walt, you got to keep supplying oxygen to the blood. You've got to put oxygen to the blood. Otherwise, all you've got is lactic acid."

I swear that happened. I swear that happened. It was just magic. Joe's right there. Believe me, I worry about lactic acid a lot more than I worry about the wisdom of Silenus.

That was a wonderful experience and typical about how there was wisdom everywhere on this campus. Everybody, Bob Murray had wisdom for you, everybody. Everybody had something to teach you.

Warren: This is Murph?

Briggs: Murph, the campus cop, yeah.

Warren: Tell me about Murph.

Briggs: Murph was magical, because he had just a seventh sense, a sixth sense or a seventh sense about where trouble was going to be. At a fraternity, you'd have problems. All of a sudden you'd say, "Okay, the parking lot. Let's go." You go out to the parking lot, and all of a sudden Murph would just sort of show up. And problems with townies sometimes. You'd square off against townies somewhere where you shouldn't be or they shouldn't be, either one, and then Murph was suddenly there, his presence.

He was like a mafia enforcer in that he was kind of a parapolice, paramilitary. He wasn't really the police, but if you had any problems, he was just magically there, like this sort of fairy godfather, and he always forestalled any kind of violence or trouble, because no one dared challenge Murph. I mean, it was out of the question. I mean, grown men. There were some people who prided themselves on campus as being tough. I knew one maniac who used to go over to UVA and just challenge guys, whole fraternity houses to fight, and he wouldn't touch Murph. He wasn't going to have a problem with Murph.

But then, if you did get into trouble, if you broke a window downtown or got caught for drunk driving or something like that, Murph got you out. Today you'd go to jail and you'd lose your license and you'd be in trouble, but Murph just got you—he just said, "These are W&L boys, and I'll take care of it from here." Then if Murph told you not to do it again, then you just didn't do it again, that was all.

Warren: I need to turn the tape over.

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

Warren: You've used the word magic several times. A lot of people use that word around here. What is it? What is it about this place?

Briggs: Well, essentially it's unreality, I think. There was a time when there was a lot going on in the country. We didn't know much about it. We were sort of

happily out of it. I never remember any drugs, apart from Dexedrine to stay up all night to do a paper. There was no drug culture, there was no significant anti-war culture, though I think there were plenty of liberal faculty and liberal students, of which I was one. I don't recall being terribly troubled by what was going on in the world.

People flunked out. Friends of mine flunked out and got drafted, and you felt this enormous sadness for them when they left. One friend of mine, one fraternity brother of mine, was the son of Lewis Puller, the most decorated soldier of World War II, maybe a Marine. He came down, and he was very sort of nerdish, even more nerdish than I was. He was in my fraternity, pledged my fraternity house, and was obviously very troubled by his relationship with his father. He just had not been the son his father wanted. He spent a lot of his time playing bridge, I remember, just playing bridge all the time and not doing much work, and he flunked out after our freshman year.

We had a wonderful visit by "Chesty" Puller to the fraternity house on parents weekend, which was joyous because he told us, I remember him saying that it only took eight pounds of pressure on your hand to pull someone's ear off, so if you wanted a good way to get a psycho—he had a burr cut and that sort of round, biggish head. He said, "Boys, if you want to get a good psychological advantage, pull a man's ear off and shove it in his mouth. It's good for you." We were terrified.

He said, "Well, I've got to go to the head now." He went to this door and opened this door. It was off the kitchen and near the dining room, so it really should have been a bathroom door. He opened it up and looked at us, as we were all sort of staring at him, and said, "Hell, boys, you never buy beer. You only rent it." And he took a step, and it was the basement, the cellar, and he tumbled down the stairs of the fraternity house. We were all too scared to go help him.

Warren: He'd pull your ear off.

Briggs: Yeah, who knows. He came back up and said, "Where's the head, boys?"

[Laughter]

"It's down that way." It was terrible.

Lewis [Jr.] went to William & Mary for a while, and then he, for incredible reasons, decided to enlist in the Marine Corps, and went in and in his first battle he stepped on a mine and was basically—it blew off about everything that could be blown and still have him survive, legs and arm and fingers on the one hand. But he came back and rehabilitated himself, which I think the rehabilitation was worse than the trauma in Vietnam. But anyway, he did that, and he wrote a memoir called *Fortunate Son*[: *The Healing of a Vietnam Vet*] and won the Pulitzer Prize one year. But he still struggled. He wrote me one summer, the end of the summer, and then he killed himself about six months after that. It was very sad.

But anyway, in this book, I don't know if this is useful, but in the book he talks about his—and all the reviews said what an honest, the reviews in the obituaries all said, "What an honest book. He doesn't step back from the full-length mirror. He shows the whole detail." He never mentions that he came to W&L, never says he was here, never says he flunked out, and yet he remembered to write me and ask how people were doing and what had happened to friends of his and so forth. His was really the saddest case. I'm glad he got the Pulitzer Prize out of it.

He also did a very noble thing on Veterans Day, whatever the year that was, '93 or '94, something. Clinton was speaking at a Veterans Day rally, and the veterans were heckling him and razzing him because he hadn't gone. Lewis went up to the podium while they were heckling and said, "He's my president and he's your president, and we're going to listen to what he says." They all got quiet. Just a really wonderful thing. There's a scene in Roman literature that's a little bit like that. I thought that was a wonderful thing.

But I've had plenty of others who flunked out. It made you so sad that they were leaving this wonderful experience, this wonderful place. It simply was not the real world.

Warren: Was anybody really cognizant or thinking about the fact that you were living in this very all-white place in a time of civil rights upheaval?

Briggs: I can't on the one hand say that I was aware of really overt racism. People from more rural parts of the South that I knew, racism sort of popped into conversations unpleasantly, sort of like a bodily noise. But then I wasn't nearly as aware of it here as I am today in South Carolina, where racism is just rampant.

I think there was a great deal of sympathy with the civil rights struggle, which was still nascent. Dr. King was still alive and so forth. But there really was this sense that Leyburn described of Athens, that we were basically a homogeneous student body, that we're here for our own purposes, that we had always been here and were sort of honored by time, and Athens was essentially a homogeneous population, and so were we.

That's certainly not to say Leyburn was a racist, and it's certainly not to say that he wouldn't have welcomed blacks in at the time. I am not aware of that. We all had black houseboys, I remember, at the fraternity house, and we had a wonderful guy that we just loved. He would take us to these black concerts. We'd go to hear these Motown people at Roanoke. I remember seeing Major Lance, and David took us to that. We had a wonderful—we were just really close. I don't know. I don't think I'm aware of that sort of thing.

We were very much aware that there were segregated Jewish fraternities, and Phi Psi, my fraternity, my junior-senior year brought in a Jewish member, which caused some discussion. He was a football player, John Wolf, who I think is now a big deal in alumni. I seem to see fund-raising letters signed by him or something like that.

Warren: I met him the other day. He's the chairman of the alumni fund.

Briggs: Yeah, that could well be. Is it Philadelphia or some place like that?

Warren: I'm not sure. I just met him the other day.

Briggs: He was the first Jewish member ever of our fraternity. I think maybe that was where we made our gains in that area. But, boy, other houses would not think of—I think the Southern houses, and we were basically a Northern house. The Southern houses, I think, were very opposed to having Jewish brothers. So, yeah, I was sort of aware of that, but very much a sense that that was in order that people—you never heard the Jewish fraternities complain about it that I knew about.

Warren: Just the way it was.

Briggs: That's the way it was, yeah, status quo.

Warren: One of the things I learned about you in looking at the *Calyx* is that you were a columnist of the *Ring-tum Phi* for four years.

Briggs: Oh, just movie reviews, basically.

Warren: Oh, yeah?

Briggs: Yeah. I was very interested in movies. I worked up at the Lyric Theater for Ed Side [phonetic] for about three years, which was a wonderful experience. I sold refreshments. Ed Side was just really a great character that everybody knew. He was from New York. He was a little Jewish guy from New York. He looked like a cartoon of Nixon, sort of. He had that sort of prehensile jaw and always a five o'clock shadow. He could never be really clean-shaven.

He could bring five movies to town in a year—*The Great Escape*, *Casablanca*, *The Magnificent Seven*, *One-Eyed Jacks*, which he would play four or five shows a day for a week, and *Brother Rat*. He would play *Brother Rat* in the week after W&L was gone, but VMI was still here. And he could pay his bills for the year on those five movies. As a result of this, he got all kinds of wonderful sort of art movies and odd old things that he loved. He was devoted to the movies, and he was a

wonderful, wonderful character. I thought he was just great, and very warm and friendly to the students, a nice guy.

I just essentially reviewed the movies that were playing at the Lyric, which used to make Ralph Daves [phonetic], '43 or whatever he was, he was an alumnus who owned the other theater in town, angry, because he would give passes for the reviews and then we never reviewed any of his movies, because they were all Elvis movies and they were all these drecky movies. I mean, that's what I did, just that.

Warren: And you were in the Troubadours?

Briggs: I was in the Troubadours, until the selfsame meeting of the NCAA tournament. A man named Jones was the director. This was also to be his last year, too, with the Troubadours. He was the director. He was an enormously histrionic type.

I was cast in "The Merchant of Venice," I think, and I had it all perfectly coordinated between soccer practice and rehearsals and the games, and then the performances started two weeks after the last game. I was out of breath constantly, but I had it worked out so it would go. And then it got down to the season was over and we got the bid to the NCAA, the top four teams in the country.

I went to Ed Atwood, who was the dean of students. I was terribly troubled by the situation. I had to make a choice. I simply had to make a choice. I don't know if it was the Apollonian Dionysian inside, but it certainly seemed like the male and female sides that I was choosing between. It went to Atwood and I said, "Look, I've got this terrible problem." I showed him my schedule I had made up. "I did this in good faith, but now I'm on the horns of a dilemma. You've got to help me. You've got to intercede. I don't care which one of these I do, but I think it would be in the University's interest, since I'm the starting goalie on the soccer team, that I go to the tournament. Help me out with Jones, because I don't want to face him."

Atwood said, "I'd be glad to. Certainly. Let me just make a call."

He called up, and he said, "Yes. Well, no. Yes. I know. Well, certainly, certainly. Well, I'm glad we understand each other. Thank you." He hung up and he said, "He'll be glad to see you right now." He didn't do a damn thing for me.

So I had to go down there and face this guy. He strutted up and down the stage about how unreliable people could be and we live in a world of perfidy and irresponsibility, but the theater is no place for that, and he was smoking all the time, demonstrating with a cigarette. He finally flashed the cigarette down on the floor and said, "Because regardless, if I have to play every role myself (which I think was his secret desire), if I have to play every role myself (bam! he stomped out the cigarette with his foot), there will be 'The Merchant of Venice' next week."

I was happy to get on with my life. Then I sort of beat a hasty retreat.

Then Lee Kahn came in, and I did some more. I liked Lee Kahn hugely. He was very nice. He helped us make—I was in Oscar Riegel's movie class, and Oscar Riegel, we called him Commander Riegel, because he had been in the navy, I think. This was one of the first classes I think in the country where he wanted you to make a movie, actually go out and make a movie. We talked about the history of the cinema a lot, and I was utterly into it at that time.

I was going to make a movie about a man being caught by a fish, and the idea was that a fisherman was out there and he sees a can of beer on the shore. He drinks it, and then all of a sudden a hook appears in his jaw, and then he's sort of drawn out into this lake. I prevailed upon a friend of mine to be the actor. But Lee helped us make the prosthetic for the hook and all that stuff. He was very helpful.

The nice thing about the troupe, there were a lot of faculty wives who would play with us and so forth. It was lovely, but it was a small operation. It wasn't like what it is now.

Warren: I'm intrigued at your obvious ease that you knew all these professors on a first-name basis even while you were a student. Was that normal?

Briggs: It was pretty normal, because if you'd ask the faculty about this, they'd say, "Well, the students are just much more interesting than their colleagues," and I think that was probably true. I think the professors enjoyed talking to us. You got this real sense that they really thought we were interesting.

I remember they did an amazing production of *Marat/Sade* one year, and Jimmy Boatwright played Sade, I think, as I recall. There were other faculty involved in it, too. It was a tremendous production. It was really great. I remember us all having dinner. The nights of the rehearsals, we'd all have dinner together. It was just a matter of course.

I remember when they built the new student union, then new, they had all the booze out, and then they had a separate room of booze for faculty. The faculty were just furious about this. They didn't want a separate room. They wanted to be with us, and, indeed, that did happen.

I remember Leyburn said he felt that the school was in dire straits when there were more eccentrics on the faculty than there were in the student body. He felt they were all becoming cut out of the same cloth too much.

Some people, I guess, were trying to polish the apple, but most of us just looked at them as real friends, more intelligent, more educated, helpful friends. It was a huge part of the experience, absolutely without question. It helped being in a small town. The social life was very close. If you had a party, you invited faculty, sure. It was very common, common indeed.

Warren: How about being in a small town? What was Lexington like in the sixties?

Briggs: It was very small and very isolated. I don't know, it was—I mean, it seemed sufficient to us. I don't remember people having to go away a lot. People at Davidson, Davidson was a suitcase college. People just left every weekend for the weekend. They'd just go someplace else, because it was in the middle of nowhere. It's only about 20 miles from Charlotte, but people would just leave.

There wasn't much of that here. One of the things I remember is, you could still rent an antebellum house to live in, sometimes in the country, as friends of mine did. This contributed to the unreality of things. You just don't live in antebellum houses with great staircases carved as snakes or the snake's head with red eyes on the newel posts so that the slaves wouldn't go upstairs. I myself, my senior year, lived in the Stonewall Jackson house. It was owned by a man in Charlottesville. My roommate, who was two years younger, met the guy, and he said we could have it for \$100 a month, we could live in there.

Warren: You had the whole house to yourself?

Briggs: We had half of the house, the upper stories of the house. There was still furniture from—now, this is above the part that I think is now the gift shop. We had access to the whole house. There was still the furniture that Governor Letcher had loaned Stonewall Jackson in there from the old days. I remember this incredible dining room table that sort of went up and on a cam and cantilever and stuff.

Warren: So this was after it had been the hospital?

Briggs: Yes.

Warren: And then someone bought it?

Briggs: Yeah. I don't know the exact history, when all this had happened, but somebody in Charlottesville owned it and we rented from him. Downstairs was an insurance agency, I think, some kind of business. As I say, this was not the whole house, but it was two floors of the building on that side, and it was all of Stonewall Jackson. That was fun. It was magical. You'd just open a door and just literally walk into the 19th century. It was terrific. It was a lovely place to be. I mean, that made it sort of unreal and unusual and magical to be able to do that.

It was unreal to sort of get away with public drunkenness and traffic offenses and things like that, because Murph would come in and just sort of get you off. I

think in a lot of ways, though you were learning and though you were becoming skilled, it was really a prolongation of adolescence, because you really were protected and you were really—you were cherished. Faculty were not these distant taskmasters. They were like uncles or older brothers. Contact was very close and agreeable and helpful, and that helped you learn how to act like an adult, being with those guys. Maybe that's why it was so pleasant, so nice. And then when you got to graduate school, it was really kind of a shock, because you got into the real world of the sixties, and things changed in '68 when I was out. You had serious demonstrations and problems, and '68 was a horrible year. But then you realized what real working class was like and what was going on, that there were some real issues out there to be worried about. So I think the dream was over.

Warren: So why did it take you so long to come back? You were gone for almost twenty years. There are guys here who we can barely shoo them away.

Briggs: I know. One of my classmates came back shortly thereafter and is still here. I'm just amazed whenever I see him still here.

Warren: We have some very well-educated carpenters in this county.

Briggs: And you can imagine what Chapel Hill is like. Boy, they're all over the place in Chapel Hill.

I sort of had personal reasons for not wanting to come back to Lexington. It was just a stage I think that I just wanted to get behind me for a while. I'd come back a couple of times when I was in graduate school. I was going to go to film school after I got my M.A. I called up Commander Riegel. I had to make a movie to get into film school. I said, "Can I borrow a camera?" And I got Lee Kahn's children and I got to use the church, the R.E. Lee Church, and all this kind of stuff, made a movie here and got into film school. I ended up not going. So I did come back sort of shortly thereafter, but then, I don't know, just sort of moved on.

Then they invited me back for something. I was happy to come back. There's a point at which your life gets so involved with sort of reality. I would come back here and say, "This isn't—you know, I had friends who were living here. I said, "This isn't life. This isn't the world. You can't live this kind of antebellum dream here, so abstracted from problems of the world, race riots and all this horrible crime and stuff that's going on."

They would say, "Why not?" That was the end of the conversation, I guess.

Warren: I have a lot of those conversations myself these days.

Briggs: Yeah. It's a heavenly place.

Warren: Well, this has been really terrific for me. Is there anything more you would like to talk about? I mean, I could ask you lots and lots more questions, but I think I've gotten a lot of gold here.

Briggs: Oh, well, I can just go on. Gosh, I don't know.

Warren: Any other teachers you'd like to talk about?

Briggs: We all had favorites and we all had—there are certain teachers who were beloved, for various reasons. There were people who liked Keith Shillington, for reasons I didn't understand myself, but then, again, I didn't do chemistry.

I wish I knew more about Commander Riegel. He was wonderful, and he showed back up at my lecture last year. I said, "Commander, I can't believe you're here," meaning, "I thought you were dead."

He said, "Where did you expect me to be?" meaning, "Did you think I would be dead?"

Whenever you see old W&L people, one of the names that always, always comes up is the name of Dave Futch in history, who gave really just lectures of a sort that I guess maybe to an extent I've also tried to sort of model. He just saw history as a series of anecdotes, and mostly racy anecdotes. He gave a famous lecture on openings weekends, when you'd bring your best girl from high school over.

This was when we had Saturday classes, and you'd bring her over. This was his story of the loose alliance of countries around Prussia, Germany, in the years before World War I. This was known as the famous *cordon sanitaire* lecture, and this alliance was called the *cordon sanitaire*. But this was the most trope-laden lecture I've ever heard.

My first year was his second year here, and his first class, in fact, you met in a chemistry room. He was so fastidious and obsessive and so forth. The chemistry class had left sort of the room a mess, so he was trying to fix everything up. The bell rang, it was time to start, and all these drawers in this desk were open. So he was standing at this desk and going like this, trying to close the things with his feet and moving like this. Everybody was just sort of laughing. We didn't know what this guy was doing. He said, "You don't know how difficult it is to lecture with your drawers open." That was the first thing he said to us, and everybody just fell out.

But anyway, he would give this famous *cordon sanitaire* lecture, and he'd have a map and he'd say, "What is this, the *cordon sanitaire*. Who can translate the term, *cordon sanitaire*? Can anybody translate this for us?"

Some bright spark would always say, "The sanitary belt."

He'd say, "That's right, the sanitary belt. What was the purpose of this sanitary belt? Well, it was to stanch the periodic bloodshed that was staining Europe at the time." He'd go on like this. Well, I mean, he's had twenty-five years to perfect this lecture now, so God knows how packed it is.

I'm telling you, on openings weekend, in this little duPont annex he lectured for a while, they would put chairs on the porch outside so people could look in the window at this lecture on openings weekend, it would be so crowded. It was screamingly funny. Of course, it would be immediate prosecution today if he did the same. I mean, his lectures were great. He's a name everybody remembers. A couple of years ago, he came down to Raleigh to lecture to the alumni club on

Herzegovina or something. Impossible. The place was jammed. People came from Georgia because he was going to talk. So, I mean, he was one of the real campus characters.

Jimmy Boatwright was a great figure, who, again, really guided a lot of students into how to be sophisticated about literature and about dealings with people and so forth. He was a wonderful mentor and friend.

Those were the ones that I was sort of aware of, that I took. Some day when we write the secret history of W&L, there'll be lots of other stories to tell.

Warren: Well, the secret history gets less and less secret all the time.

Briggs: Well, maybe so. I bet. I did a book of biographies of six hundred American classical scholars. I would write to people for information, and they'd all say, "Here's what you can publish, but then here's the aside." I've got plenty for a secret history if I can ever produce it.

Let's see, [shuffling papers] [unclear]. I don't think I thought anything very noble. No, I didn't. That's about it. But, I mean, Leyburn and Lyles, that's W&L to me.

Warren: You know, there's one name you mentioned that nobody else has talked about, Harry Pemberton. Who is Harry Pemberton?

Briggs: Harry Pemberton was a Platonist—is—and he reveled a little too much in the Socratic method. He convinced us that the Socratic method as used by Socrates was a means of arriving at the truth, but that didn't mean that the Socratic method, as practiced in our classes, always ended up with the truth. He influenced a lot of people.

He was, again, one of these charitable, friendly, honest, faculty members such as you just rarely, rarely find. He remained a friend, and he had a large influence in the sixties on people in my class. The two main influences sort of in my circle were really Boatwright and Pemberton. They were really the people who students came

to as sort of repositories of how you wanted to be. You wanted to be able to argue like Harry Pemberton and master the sort of gentlemanly dialectic that Harry did.

I'm not sure it was always terribly profitable and that people learned a lot about Socrates from Harry, but he had a big effect in my era. He's remained a friend, who I've seen since I've been back. I mean, he just so thoroughly identified with Plato. His classes were not lectures, they were sort of Socratic sessions with people. You often might feel embarrassed in front of the class, but you never felt embarrassed in front of Harry. In other words, Harry could run rings around you, I guess, if he wanted to, but you always felt that he loved the exercise and that that's what it was about and not trying to best a student. I have colleagues who say, "Well, if I can just dazzle my students, that's all that counts." That doesn't count for anything in my book. Harry made you realize that this was something that could be loved and that you would be a good person if you did love it, and that helped a lot. That had a big effect.

The other thing was, Harry really lived it, and Boatwright really lived modern poetry, the life. He was very much into the life, editing *Shenandoah* and going to receptions and bringing important people down here. He was really into it, and that was really appealing, that was really attractive. They were both very attractive people, so that was very nice.

But, yes, I think, particularly in the sixties—I mean, Pemberton was kind of the William Sloane Coffin of W&L. He was really in this time when everybody was questioning values. Harry was giving people tools to do it. So a lot of people became philosophy majors, went into the ministry. That was the kind of thing that was done in that era, but I think Harry made encouraged them, too. He was really influential.

Warren: Okay. Well, I see my little light flashing again. Any last words, last farewell?

Briggs: May history just treat us all kindly. That's all I hope for.

Warren: Oh, wow. I don't think that's part of my job description.

Briggs: No?

Warren: It's part of my nature, but it's not part of my job description.

Briggs: Well, the emperor Antoninus Pius said, "Happy is the era whose annals are brief." The annals are probably fairly brief. The next four years after I left, I think, were crowded with incidents and trouble.

Warren: They were indeed. A lot of angst and well illustrated, too.

Briggs: It is remarkable how well the identity has changed. One thing I do notice, when I go to alumni meetings in Columbia, South Carolina, or Wilmington, Delaware, to greet people, the freshmen who are entering W&L, how across the generations everybody looks the same and they're dressed the same. There's no sort of blue-jean era and overall-and-batik and tie-dyed and three-piece suit era. They're all just perfectly the same, which is another way of saying W&L has really kept its identity. It's remarkable that it weathered the sixties. Maybe this magical isolation, this sort of *Brigadoon* quality or something, has really helped it keep its identity. It sure seems to. It's a wonderful place to come back to. That's all I will say.

Warren: Thank you.

[End of Interview]