

MATT PAXTON JR.

February 27, 1996

—
Mame Warren,
interviewer

Warren: This is Mame Warren. Today is February 27, 1996. I'm in Lexington, Virginia, with Matt Paxton. Which Matt Paxton are you at this point? Are you number seventeen or eighteen? How many Matt Paxtons are there?

Paxton: [Laughter] It's very confusing, because I'm really the third, but I go by "junior" because my dad and I made the switchover after my grandfather died, which was sometimes done then, and I think was a great mistake, because now I have a son, Matt IV, and he and I were in business together for some fourteen years, I guess, and nobody ever got the two of us straight during that time.

Warren: Well, I'm glad to know I'm not the only one. [Laughter] So the name Paxton goes way back in this area?

Paxton: Yes.

Warren: Want to give me a little family background?

Paxton: Well, it does go back a long time in this area. The earliest ones came in the early days of settlement. Sometime in the 1730s or '40s, a widow with several sons came down from Pennsylvania in the Scotch-Irish migration that came into this area and originally settled it. She was born in Ireland in the seventeenth century. Her tombstone is in an old family cemetery here in the county, and it seems quite remarkable to see a date of 1680-something on a tombstone in Rockbridge County, the date of her birth. Her descendants have continued to live here, some of them, while others have migrated all

over the country, as all families have. We just happened to have been among the less ambitious ones who just stayed put. [Laughter] We've lived here since that time.

Warren: Is your family the founding family of the *News Gazette*? Did you all start the newspaper?

Paxton: No, we didn't. My grandfather bought into one of the two local papers that became the *News Gazette*. We had the *Lexington Gazette* and the *Rockbridge County News* that merged in 1962, but the *Rockbridge County News*, which was my family's newspaper, was started in 1884, and he bought into it in about 1886 or '87, I guess, and then shortly bought the other partners out, and from that time ran it himself, so it's been in the family since that time.

Warren: How far back does the connection to Washington and Lee go?

Paxton: Well, that goes back, I believe, to my Great-grandfather Paxton, General E. F. Paxton, I believe was a Washington College graduate. I always have to go back and refresh my memory on these things. And my grandfather and my father and my brother and I, and then one of our sons is a W&L alumnus.

Warren: So I'm obviously very interested in the oral tradition. How far back do Washington and Lee stories go in your family? Did you listen to your grandfather talk about attending? Did he ever talk about his student days?

Paxton: Well, my grandfather – I was pretty young when he died, actually, and I was too young to have ever been very aware of those things. About the only recollection I can remember from that era were the members of the boat crew races. That seems to have been a great thing in the community. Harry Lee and Albert Sidney, I believe were the names of the two boat crews that raced on the Maury River, then called the North River, and those races were great community events, apparently. The community all picked up sides between Harry Lee and Albert Sidney, so that that's something that goes back in family tradition quite a long ways.

Warren: I'm interested that you brought that up, because yesterday I was looking at pictures of the boat races and today I was reading about them, at the turn of the century. In the photographs, you can clearly see a bunch of houses right down there on the river. Do you have any idea where on the river they did the racing? Because apparently it was a fairly short course.

Paxton: Yes, I think it was in the pond behind the existing dam down there, and there were some buildings. I know there was an ice house down there and there were a lot more buildings down on the river at that time, but I think they used that slack water there behind the present dam at East Lexington for the races.

Warren: So above the dam or below the dam?

Paxton: Above the dam.

Warren: So these houses that I'm seeing probably don't exist anymore.

Paxton: Probably not.

Warren: Because it's like a whole neighborhood there in this photograph, and it doesn't look at all familiar.

Paxton: I'd have to look at it to see if I could get a feel for it. I've seen some of those old pictures. I know that one of the families down there, I can't remember whether it was the Humphreys family or the Shaner family, those are two well-known families in east Lexington, had an ice house down there close to the river, and that might have been one of the buildings that you can see. I don't know.

Warren: Were those crew races still going on when you were a student?

Paxton: Not on the Maury River. I was a student right after World War II, and the crew races were revived after the war. I think there had been crew before the war, and they were revived after the war, but the boat house and the races were down on the James River at Glasgow there, and it was a fairly long course there.

Warren: So it was all moved.

Paxton: It was moved down there. They used, I guess, eight-man shells then. I think probably when they raced on the river down here, they were probably just four-man shells, I don't know, it being such a small course. But it was quite big right after the war. One of the big crew people was Roger Mudd. He raced in the crew races down there. I do remember some of the other people, but I don't think they would be anybody you particularly knew or would remember. There was quite a lot of excitement, even at that time.

Warren: You mentioned that the Maury used to be the North River. When did that name change happen? Do you have any idea?

Paxton: I can remember when it was the North River. I think it probably happened around 1940, plus or minus, I would say.

Warren: I need to track that down. It's just a matter of personal curiosity.

Paxton: That was something my grandfather was sort of interested in, I remember, as editor of the paper. He wanted the river named for Matthew Fontaine Maury.

Warren: So he championed it?

Paxton: I think he did, yes.

Warren: I'm glad he did, because I think it's a lovely name.

Paxton: Well, it is, and so appropriate.

Warren: It fits the river and it fits the personality. It is, it's so appropriate. But tell me why it's appropriate. Let's get that down on tape.

Paxton: For several reasons, the primary one being, I guess, that Matthew Fontaine Maury's wish before his death was that he be carried through Goshen Pass on the river for burial, and he was. That's my understanding. Of course, he wanted to be carried through when the rhododendron was in bloom, I think, and I don't know whether they managed that or not. [Laughter]

Warren: You have to be real organized about when you die if you want the rhododendron in bloom.

Paxton: You really do. But then, of course, Maury, being a very important individual, really, had the local association, having been here at VMI, so it was appropriate that something here be named in his honor. Since he was the Pathfinder of the Seas, we should name some water in his honor, probably. [Laughter]

Warren: And since it probably would have been a little hard to change the name of the James River.

Paxton: [Laughter] Yeah, probably would.

Warren: You grew up in Lexington. Can I ask what your birth date is?

Paxton: February 26, 1927.

Warren: One of the things I'm really interested in is what went on here during World War II.

Paxton: Oh, yes.

Warren: I would love to have you tell me about that, because I understand it was a very different place in that time period.

Paxton: Yes. Well, of course, I think every place was very different during the war, because our social fabric was greatly disrupted and changed during the war, you know, when all the able-bodied men went off pretty much. Of course, one thing that made it quite different here was the Honor School for Special Services in Washington and Lee that brought in quite an interesting group of people.

Warren: Tell me about that.

Paxton: I was a little to have had a whole lot to do with it, but I do remember some of the interesting people who came through, people like Ben Hogan, the great golfer, who played on our little golf course out here and could practically drive the greens out there. Red Skelton. I can't remember. A good many people who were pretty well known at the time, since it was for people who were going to provide those special services of entertainment and other things for the services.

Warren: What did they mean by Special Services School?

Paxton: I never saw it defined exactly. It primarily had to do with recreation, though, various kinds of recreation, sports, music, shows, canteen, whatever was being developed as entertainment for service people. These individuals went all over the world helping morale, of course, of the troops with shows and with various other services.

Warren: So while these people were here in town, did you, as a local person, have any interaction with them? Did they give shows here?

Paxton: They did give shows here.

Warren: Do you remember?

Paxton: I remember going to several of them, yes. A school class would go through here every so often. I don't know exactly how long the school ran; let's say two or three months. I'm sure all that's documented somewhere. They had a permanent faculty here, of course, to conduct the school, faculty and staff. Then the people who were being trained would come through in classes for several months, and at the end of each class, they would put on a show. It was always good entertainment, and people in town went to it.

Warren: Where did the shows take place?

Paxton: As I recall, they took place in Doremus Gym, I think. I think I'm right about that. That's where I remember going to see one. These things get to be a little cloudy in your mind when you haven't thought about it for all those years. [Laughter]

But then, of course, meanwhile, the regular student body shrank down to almost nothing. I remember my class, when I entered, at that time the school was going year 'round in order to accelerate people as much as possible so they could get in whatever education they could before they went into the service. I started in the summer of '44, and my mother was just reminding me that she had my entire freshman class to lunch, which was nine people, and that was the size of my class when I started off. [Laughter] So the student body went down to practically nothing.

Then, of course, as soon as the war began to come to an end, it bounced back very quickly. In fact, immediately after the war, it went up to a record size. Colleges were trying to accommodate as many people as they could just to get people through, the backlog of people who had been in the service, of course.

Warren: So then did people come back and join your class?

Paxton: Yes. At that time, right after the war, classes were pretty mixed up. A number of people were coming back from the war, others had not been in the war, and so there was a mixture of veterans and non-veterans.

Warren: Tell me about that. That must have been an interesting time to be in college. You had people of all kinds of different ages there.

Paxton: Yes, much more of an age spread and more maturity, I think, than probably at a later time, which meant that most of them were pretty serious about it and pretty serious about getting their college education. A lot of them were here on the G.I. Bill, of course, and some of them wouldn't put up with all the high jinks that had gone on on campus before; they were a little past that, you know, the fraternity pranks and all those things. There was enough of that, but I think probably less than had gone on before and maybe went on afterwards, probably.

Warren: Was fraternity life functioning?

Paxton: Fraternity life picked up. Fraternity life came to a halt during the war. I don't think there were any active fraternities at that time. When my group entered school, there was one fraternity house that was sort of serving as a boarding house, providing meals. As I recall, it was sort of handled that way. One of the fraternities just provided those. Of course, the dorms and so forth were being used by the school for Special Services, so they housed students and fed them in one of the fraternities, but the fraternities themselves were not active during the war. But immediately after the war, they started back again in full force.

Warren: But you're saying that the normal high jinks weren't happening then?

Paxton: Well, I think there was less of that. The guys, most of them being a little older, just wouldn't tolerate as much quite of the pranks and the fraternity hazing and all of that as had gone on before, probably.

Warren: So as you were growing up, did you know you were going to go to Washington and Lee? Was that a given in your family?

Paxton: I don't know that it was, necessarily. Sometimes it's hard to know how you wound up taking a certain path in education. I think probably most people at that time went to school a little closer to home than they did at a later, more mobile time. People didn't have as many cars. There were a good many student cars at W&L, because there was an affluent student body then as it is now, but I think that was a factor. There were a number of local students. I believe there were more Rockbridge area students in Washington and Lee then than there are now, probably more at VMI. I think that was probably one factor. If you had a good school close by, you were more likely to go there. Right after the war, more people lived at home. A lot of day students at that time.

Warren: Were you one of those?

Paxton: I was a day student. I did belong to a fraternity and took some of my meals at the fraternity and was involved in those activities, but I and most of my local friends here lived at home. Charlie McDowell was one of them. He was in school at that time here.

Warren: I did an interview with him a couple of weeks ago.

Paxton: Pat Robertson was another one.

Warren: Did he go to W&L?

Paxton: Oh, yeah!

Warren: I didn't realize that. I knew he was a local person.

Paxton: Yeah.

Warren: Oh, there's an interesting story.

Paxton: Oh, yeah. See, I finished in '49. I think Pat finished probably a couple of years later, about '51. He and I were fraternity brothers at the SAE House. Charlie McDowell was an SAE. A fair number of the local boys happened to affiliate with SAE at that time. There were more SAEs than Delts. Some of the local boys went Delt, some of them went other things, too. But, yeah, Pat was in school at that time. Pat has continued his allegiance to Washington and Lee. He gave a very nice gift in the recent capital campaign. So it was an interesting crowd.

Warren: A very distinguished crowd. So you talked about how small your freshman class was when you started. What about the faculty? Was there much faculty?

Paxton: Not much faculty, no, no. Again, so many of them off in the service. Just a very small number were here. I don't know how many Washington and Lee people were associated with the School for Special Services. Some were, I think, but not a lot. I think it would be mostly probably staff people, maybe some of the faculty wives or whatnot were staff people, but just a large number of faculty people were off at war.

I remember hearing a story that Washington and Lee was able to get that school through General George Marshall. I don't know whether that's true or not, whether that's just a rumor, but Marshall, with his VMI connection, was able to help Washington and Lee. I've heard that story.

Warren: I'll have to track that down.

Paxton: Whether that's a legitimate story or not, I don't know.

Warren: So growing up in Lexington, did you know all these faculty people before you walked into their classes?

Paxton: Yes, certainly. Most of my parents' friends were faculty people, a lot of them were. President Gaines' sons went to Washington and Lee. Edwin Gaines was in school with me, and Dean Gilliam, Frank Gilliam, who was dean for so many years, his son was in school at that time, Fontaine. So there were a lot of town-gown connections in those times.

Warren: Have you seen that tradition continue?

Paxton: I think so, to some degree, certainly. I think fortunately there is town-gown cross-fertilization, or whatever you say. [Laughter] I think it certainly has continued.

Warren: Am I correct? It seems to me when I first moved here, does Washington and Lee offer free education to people who are born here?

Paxton: Washington and Lee offers a wonderful Rockbridge Scholarship. At one time I think it was free. They were not able to continue to make it totally free, but it certainly is a wonderful financial aid plan that they offer, which is really unusual among colleges, I think. I think Washington and Lee is a wonderful corporate citizen of this community. They certainly have been wonderfully responsible corporate citizens, I think.

Warren: What does that mean, a corporate citizen?

Paxton: Of course, any corporate entity is a part of the community, but I think when you use the term "corporate citizen," you mean a corporate entity that takes its responsibilities to the community seriously as a citizen in the community.

Warren: Elaborate on how Washington and Lee has done such a good job of that.

Paxton: I think Washington and Lee's been wonderful in many ways to the community, not just in the Rockbridge Scholarship, but in making its facilities available very generously, in community service by people on the faculty and administrative staff have been the backbone of the community leadership in so many ways, you know. Just generally providing the kind of community leadership that you hope that an entity like that would provide. It's made a great difference, made it a much more pleasant community, certainly.

Warren: For a place its size, it certainly is. One major event that happened while you were a student, I think, was the Bicentennial of Washington and Lee.

Paxton: Yes, I was in the Bicentennial class of '49.

Warren: Tell me all about that. Did they tell you that when you arrived? Did you know that from the beginning?

Paxton: I don't remember that they made a great to-do of it. You know, in those days, public relations was just in its infancy, you know. We didn't know at all about how to beat the drums of public relations like people do now, you know. It was a much simpler society in those days. When I think about how the Bicentennial was observed, I think we would certainly pull out the stops more now for something like that.

Warren: I think we're going to for the 250th.

Paxton: I think so.

Warren: Tell me what did happen for the Bicentennial.

Paxton: I can't remember that a whole lot did, to tell you the honest truth. I know that they had a postage stamp issued, and that was a big do. That took quite a bit of doing. What else? They had a major, what was for them then a major capital campaign. I think the goal was something like \$3 million, which I don't know that they ever raised it. I'm not sure they did. But that was the first time in recent times, I think, that a major fund campaign had been launched. That was certainly a sizable activity of it. But beyond that, my memory doesn't pull up a whole lot. I'm sure there were things, convocations and things, I imagine. I'd have to go back and dredge that up.

Warren: But there are no events that stand out in your mind that were associated?

Paxton: Not that stand out tremendously. We had all the good things that they have now, the mock convention and the other things that go on and are a lot of fun. Fancy Dress was big. But specifically Bicentennial things, I really think that probably there was more impact on the alumni than there was on the students for the Bicentennial. We were so busy doing our thing that we just weren't too taken up with the Bicentennial.

Warren: You mentioned Fancy Dress. Tell me about going to Fancy Dress.

Paxton: Well, Fancy Dress was, again, one of those things that was revived after the war, with great verve and enthusiasm, and I think very much as it had been before the war. At that time, Fancy Dress really meant costumes; it didn't just mean formal dress as it seems to mean now. The place we went in those days for costumes was Van Horn

in Philadelphia; I still remember that. One of the great things about the costumes was that you could get your date's measurements. [Laughter] You had to get your date's measurements. Then the costumes came, and they didn't remotely fit. They didn't even begin to fit. They just threw any old costume in there, after you'd gone to all this trouble. The girls were so, so upset because the costumes didn't fit, you know. [Laughter] But somehow we managed and got through the whole thing.

Warren: How did these costumes arrive?

Paxton: They came in these great boxes, and you had to go down. It was all a great process, you know. Various committees would distribute the costumes and so forth. It was quite a thing, the whole business of getting measured and then ordering and then the costumes coming in. Just all kinds of bizarre things that I'm sure they used for every kind of affair. They just would dust them off for anything that was coming along, you know.

Just happened that I guess it was my senior year, my fraternity brother, who was president of Fancy Dress, was having academic difficulties and had to withdraw as president of—I guess that was in '49. Since I had fairly good grades, they asked me if I would substitute for him, so I got to lead the Fancy Dress that year as George Washington, and yet I hadn't gone through the regular channels of being chosen president. That was one of the elective offices, I believe, president of Fancy Dress, and was quite a plum. Politics were big on campus then, as they are now. So I just got a free ride as president of Fancy Dress without ever having to go through the political process to get there.

Warren: So you were George Washington. Was that a tradition or was that the theme of that year?

Paxton: That was the theme of that year. But you never saw anything like the variety of costumes. I mean, just because George Washington was the theme didn't mean that you didn't have people from Fiji Islands and every place else, you know. [Laughter] But it

was quite fun. At that time, Mrs. Desha, Mrs. Lucius Desha, faculty wife, was the arbiter of Fancy Dress protocol and so forth, so as president of Fancy Dress you had to go and call on Mrs. Desha, and Mrs. Desha told you just how you should behave and how we did things and so forth. So we went right by what she told us to do. So there was a lot of tradition that was passed down.

Of course, Fancy Dress continued pretty much that way until the terrible sixties, I guess, when everything was being turned topsy-turvy, you know, and Fancy Dress went by the boards just like so many juvenile college things. Things were all juvenile in the sixties except protest. So it then was discontinued, and when it was later revived, it was on a rather different plan with just the formal dress being considered Fancy Dress.

Warren: I sure would like to see the old costumes revived. That sounds like so much fun.

Paxton: Oh, it was, it was just a lot of fun, it really was, because they were just outlandish, a lot of them. You would just have such fun seeing who came as what, you know. So it was really quite a lot of fun.

Warren: Where were they held and how were they decorated?

Paxton: They would have them in Doremus Gym, and Doremus Gym was elaborately decorated for it. It was quite an affair.

Warren: How was the theme picked?

Paxton: I'm sure that the dance board probably picked the theme each year, but I was never on that. I just kind of came up unexpectedly to lead the Fancy Dress. When they spoke of leading, of course, they had what they called the Figure, which meant that it was sort of a grand march, I guess you'd say, you know. At the appropriate time during the dance, the people in the Figure, and that would be I don't know who all, class presidents and this and that and so forth, would assemble with their dates, and then they'd promenade down the floor, you know, two or three times, then have their own

private little individual dance, then the thing would go on. But when it's referred to leading the Figure, that was sort of what it amounted to, I guess.

Warren: You made mention of politics being a big thing on campus. Tell me about that.

Paxton: Well, the student government politics were big, as I suppose they still are. I don't know exactly how it works now. I guess the campus sort of divided itself politically into what they called the Big Clique and the Little Clique at that time. There were a certain group of fraternities that sort of banded together to form the Big Clique, and then there was another group and maybe the non-fraternity people in that group that was the Little Clique. They would have elections for student government and class officers and so forth, and the dance leaders and one thing and another. The two parties would, I guess, vie for things, and the Big Clique probably won out more often than not, but not always. Sometimes the other candidates would win.

Warren: What kind of things were they running for?

Paxton: Student government, the executive committee, president of student body, vice president, and so forth, and class officers, president and so forth of the various classes. I think the presidents of the dances, Fancy Dress president, I think was another office that they ran for. I was never much of a politician, so I didn't get involved in all that too much.

Warren: Were you a journalism major?

Paxton: No, I majored in English. I did take journalism courses.

Warren: Did you work on the *Ring-tum Phi*?

Paxton: Yeah, I did work on the *Ring-tum Phi* some.

Warren: Were you covering these political clashes?

Paxton: I don't remember that I did. I just can't recall that I did, but I did do a little bit of work on the paper, as I recall, not a whole lot.

Warren: So that wasn't real important?

Paxton: Wasn't a real big thing for me, as I recall.

Warren: As you progressed through your career at Washington and Lee, the faculty started coming back?

Paxton: Oh, yes. Everything snapped back to normal so quickly after the war, it was just amazing. They mustered people out of service pretty quick. As a matter of fact, at one time it looked like there was just going to be bedlam, and then they kind of slowed up a little bit and phased it a little bit so that everybody just wouldn't be thrown out on the public right at one minute, you know. But demobilization was fast, so that within a year of the time the war was over, everything was pretty much back to normal, so it snapped back fast.

Warren: I've certainly seen the Memorial Gate down there. Was there a strong sense of loss of the people who had been lost in the war?

Paxton: The Memorial Gate, actually, I think was maybe for World War I. That Memorial Gate goes back before World War II.

Warren: But there are a bunch of names up there for World War II.

Paxton: For World War II also.

Warren: And Korea and Vietnam.

Paxton: Yeah. Yes, there was feeling for people who were lost, and there were more lost, of course, in those other wars, too. There was that. I think people were just real anxious to get on with their lives, and everybody had been through a lot, but there certainly was a sense of loss for the people that were lost in the war.

Warren: Were there any local people that you remember?

Paxton: My friends, I had more friends lost in the Korean War. I had three or four friends lost in there. I really just kind of got in on the tag end of World War II, so the ones who were lost in that war were really of an older group than I.

Warren: How about the relationship with VMI? What was going on with VMI at that point?

Paxton: Well, the relationship was kind of hot and cold. There was some friction, although all of us at W&L probably had friends at VMI. The VMI cadets would come up to the fraternities for things and so forth, and we'd go down there. I remember going to dances down at VMI. But then pranksters would go down and roll a canon down the hill or something like that, and the cadets would come up and make a raid on a fraternity house or something, you know.

I remember one story about the cadets coming up after something like that to the Beta House, which is still down there at Red Square, and it was about the closest one to VMI that they could get to, and they went in, started rousting out all the boys, and the house mother came out and she was pleading with them not to take her boys, you know. It was quite a dramatic episode, but usually didn't amount to anything much. They'd march them up to VMI, maybe, and make them roll the canon back up the hill or something like that. Then sometimes they'd come over and put some paint on the columns at W&L or something like that. But there was not a lot of that that went on, and it was just more in the nature of something fun to talk about than anything else, I think.

Warren: Did other local people go to VMI like you went to Washington and Lee?

Paxton: Yes, a number of my friends went to VMI, and there were more local boys at VMI than there are now, I'm sure.

That was also the year, of course, of the big bands for the dances, and that was great fun, people like Louis Armstrong and Glenn Miller and Harry James and Benny Goodman. Just everybody you can think of came to Washington and Lee. I remember when the Dorsey brothers came in twin Cadillacs, and people were talking about that. But it was just wonderful music to dance with for the dances, you know, and we would go up to VMI when they had the big bands, just as some of them would come over to our dances.

Warren: Those are pretty big names.

Paxton: Yeah, they had the top people, the top names.

Warren: How did you go about booking names like that?

Paxton: I don't know, because I never was in on any of what the dance board did.

Warren: That's pretty impressive.

Paxton: Yeah, it is. Well, obviously those bands played around at the colleges, and it was a very businesslike thing. They were used to doing this and it was pretty well organized and handled in a very businesslike way. They had advice from people like old Sam Rayder, who advised the dance board for years. He's still around here at ninety-something.

Warren: I saw his picture just the other day.

Paxton: And I think he was advisor to the dance board, maybe, for a long time. I'm not sure. But he was advisor to various things over at W&L, and treasurer of this and that, and helped the boys with a lot of things. They needed something like that for continuity, you know. You get a whole new bunch of students and there's so little continuity, so various people, faculty advisors and people in town like Sam Rayder, who were alumni, as they still do, alumni here are still faculty advisors for fraternities and that sort of thing, you know, provided the continuity.

Warren: We're just about at the end of this side.

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

Warren: Let's talk a little bit about Lexington. What were the hangouts in Lexington when you were young, and did students come up to the local places?

Paxton: Yes, students did, I'm sure. I'm trying to think about some – one of the hangouts, I guess even before I got to college, was a place called Mike's Place. You've probably heard some other people talk about that. Mike's Place was a little dive – not a dive, but a night spot located right on the corner of the road that goes into the golf club. The building is still there. It's some sort of apartments now and they've added other units to it. But at that time it was the main night spot that young people went out to,

and Mike was a real character. He had a little zoo, I think, that went along with it, had some animals. But the nightclub or night spot or whatever was where we all went, and I think he had a juke box, you know. We danced and had booze all around the place. That's the main place that I remember. There were other places that came and went.

Warren: This was out on South Main?

Paxton: Uh-huh.

Warren: I've never heard of Mike's. That's a brand-new one to me.

Paxton: Oh, yeah, that was a big local spot back in those days.

Warren: Do you think any photos have survived of that?

Paxton: I wonder, because he was around here for a long time, and they would get him to bring his animals out for like the mock convention parade and that sort of thing.

Warren: Who was he?

Paxton: His name was Mike Brown.

Warren: That's a new one on me.

Paxton: Then there were things downtown. Of course, there was the Liquid Lunch. Have you heard about that?

Warren: No. This is great. What's the Liquid Lunch?

Paxton: The Liquid Lunch was down where the Camel Inn is now. That went through a number of names. That was just strictly a beer joint, pretty much, and that wasn't the official name of it. I can't remember what the official name was. [Laughter] But that's what everybody called it.

Then there was Jabo's, which was where the Willson-Walker House is. Jabo Morris. And he provided everybody with beer, pretty much. He delivered beer at W&L and VMI, and he had his place down there.

Warren: It was a restaurant?

Paxton: It was really just a beer joint, I guess we'd call it, just a place where you could go in and drink beer. He must have had a restaurant, too. I think the ABC laws have

probably always required that you had to serve some food where you served beer or wine or whatever.

But then another big place was Doc's Corner Store. I know you've heard about that. You haven't heard about that?

Warren: The Corner Store.

Paxton: The Corner Store.

Warren: Charlie was telling me about that.

Paxton: Charlie would remember the Corner Store.

Warren: But it was called Doc's?

Paxton: Yeah, Doc Collette [phonetic]. I don't know what Doc's first real name was, but his last name was Collette.

Warren: Where was that located?

Paxton: That was right there on the corner where the post office is, across from the post office where the Quik Print place is, Quality Quik Print. Collette was a character for years. When I was in school here, that was really the big beer-drinking place where he just had booze on the counter there. He supposedly served food, as all those places did. And the ABC people were just not nearly as strict as they are now about underage drinking. Of course, I guess the age was a little younger then, too, maybe. But Doc's was just an institution. They had a fire there one time, I remember, and Doc's poor little dog got burned up, and that was a great source of consternation for quite a while. But he operated that place for a good many years, but its heyday was in those post-war years when I was here.

Then there was a place down at the Dutch Inn for a while, a little bar or whatever down there. You know where that is on Washington Street?

Warren: Yes.

Paxton: I can't remember what they called that exactly. That was in business for a while. So those were the main places. And then the fraternities were a center of that sort of thing, social activities for the college-age crowd.

Warren: Today we're a real magnet for tourists. Were tourists coming through back then?

Paxton: Tourists were coming through then, not nearly in the numbers that they are now, but tourists have always come through for a long, long time on account of the Lee-Jackson graves and the Lee connection with the college here and so forth. And, of course, there was always a certain amount of travel through here on account of colleges, people coming and going for colleges.

Warren: And I wonder weren't people coming through just because it was a major intersection.

Paxton: Yes, yes. When 11 and 60 crossed right there on the main corner of town, there was a certain amount of travel that just came through because of two major highways.

Warren: I came across a reference recently to the finishing paving Route 60 and that they were almost done paving all the way to Staunton.

Paxton: Right. [Laughter]

Warren: I thought, oh, my God, I guess there was a time when it wasn't paved.

Paxton: Yeah. Well, there was a time when Lexington was very isolated travel-wise, really. When Lee was here, it was extremely isolated. Of course, at that time the canal was still in operation, but later on people just despaired about getting in and out of Lexington. At one time the best way to get in and out of Lexington was to take a stagecoach through Goshen Pass and catch the train in Goshen. You can imagine what that trip through Goshen Pass in those days must have been like by stagecoach. So travel was not good.

Warren: I came across a reference where it talked about the various ways—this is about 1850—the various ways to get in and out of Lexington, and it said whichever way you

chose, you wish you had chosen the other way. [Laughter] I thought that was a real good quote.

Something you've alluded to a couple of times is fast upon us, is the mock convention.

Paxton: Oh, yes. Well, that's certainly been a great tradition at W&L, and that trust for authenticity has been true going way back. It has become more scientific in recent years, I'm sure, and they've probably been in close touch with all the party functionaries and so forth to try to get an authentic feel for it, but I was in school, of course, for the one in '48, and that was one we missed, I believe. I'd have to go back and look. But there was a real push for authenticity.

The mock convention has also historically attracted some very prominent politicians here, including President [Harry S.] Truman and, of course, former Vice President Alben Barkley, who died here. That was, of course, a thing that focused a lot of attention on it. Bill Clinton, of course, spoke here when he was governor. [Jimmy] Carter, before he became president. [Barry] Goldwater. Just many, many really high-profile political figures have come here, and it's been taken fairly seriously by people in the political sphere, I think.

Warren: So you've covered mock conventions not only as a student, but as a newspaperman.

Paxton: Yeah, sure have.

Warren: So you've got a real continuum. Describe what that's been like through the years. How has mock convention evolved in your life here in Lexington?

Paxton: Well, it's one thing that has really had a pretty steady course through the years, it seems to me, and in my time, I can't speak for what it was like before World War II, but ever since the war, the forties, it's been pretty much what it is today, although it, I'm sure, is more of a production. There was nothing like the money spent on all of this in those days, of course, that there is now. But even in those times, they had coverage in

Life magazine, which was a big thing, you know, and this sort of thing. So it has certainly remained a strong tradition and very much what it is today, really, over those years.

Warren: I'm intrigued that the students are able to entice these big-name people here. How do they do it?

Paxton: I don't know. I think they do it lots of times by political pull of one kind or another. For instance, I remember when Jimmy Carter came up here, at that time he was governor of Georgia, I guess, my friend Dick Denny [phonetic], who was somehow connected with Carter, maybe in the state administration or whatever in Georgia, got him to come up here, I'm sure. He was a W&L alumnus. I'm sure lots of times it's just through some sort of connections. I don't know how they got Newt Gingrich to come this time, but I'll believe he's here when he gets here, because it's mighty hard for a man like that to break loose. Historically, the people they've gotten have been people who either have been in top political office or have not yet arrived at top political office. It's very unusual to have people like Gingrich, who are right in the thick of it at this time. That really is something different, and I'm going to be interested to see whether it will work out.

Warren: Me, too. I'm curious whether they say, "Well, Jimmy Carter was nobody when he came to mock convention, and after mock convention, look what happened." And the same thing with Clinton. I wonder if they don't have some line they use.

Paxton: I don't know. They might. They might have something that they use to help. I'm sure they've used everything they can to entice them here.

One of the real challenges of the mock convention through the years has been to kind of keep the lid on student high spirits, you know, with a few beers flowing here and there. People just get in high spirits and fall off floats and that sort of thing, you know. And also they sometimes have to be encouraged a little bit to tone down some of the floats, because the school kids get out of school to watch the parade and so forth.

Warren: Oh, they do?

Paxton: Yeah, they do and will this year, I think. So that's one thing. I had a good time just this spring. My son has a little magazine that he gets out for the tourism business, Lexington for the travel industry. He asked me to do a little piece for it on the history of the mock convention, and I had a real good time going back through files of the paper and looking at those stories I had written all those years ago, you know, remembering some of the things.

One of the funny things was the time that Truman spoke. Some of the politicians had a real good sense of what this was all about and how you really wanted to get into the swing of it and make this a real convention speech, you know, but some others haven't quite gotten the drift of it as well and they've undertaken to kind of lecture the students, you know. "You young men should," you know, and so forth. And that doesn't go over well at all. I think maybe Truman was a little bit that way, and the crowd got a little bit restless. This one guy, in a quiet moment, in the room he just rolled this beer can down the aisle, and you could just hear that thing clanging down. It was very embarrassing to all the W&L authorities and so forth, but this is the kind of thing they've had to contend with, of course.

But through it all, the student leadership of the mock convention has really done a wonderful job in keeping it to its purpose and keeping the high jinks within bounds, and the demonstrations on the floor, kind of keeping them within reason and so forth.

Warren: That's a pretty good description. I think that's just great.

A couple of times you've made mention of the high jinks, the beer-drinking, and you've watched this both as a student and probably participated a little as a student, but as a newspaperman following the town-gown relationship through the years. What have you observed? Does Washington and Lee have a drinking problem?

Paxton: Well, I'm sure it does, as does every college campus. It's gone through phases, I think. I remember when I went down to teach at McCauley [phonetic] Prep School

down in Chattanooga after I finished here, I met Mr. McCauley, and he had gone to Washington and Lee and he told me that he would never send a son of his here because they drank so at Washington and Lee. I came home and mentioned that to my father, and he said, "Why, that man never drew a sober breath the whole time he went to W&L." [Laughter] So I think your point of view changes, you know, sometimes from the time you're a student to the time you're older and so forth. There have been problems with drinking, of course, and parties and that sort of thing.

I think that there's a lot more recognition now of the danger of alcohol abuse than there was in my day. We thought it was just funny when somebody got drunk. Now they are beginning to recognize the beginnings of an alcohol problem when they see one. I think people are much more aware, even young people in school, than we were, and I can't say that the problem is any worse than it was then, if it's bad now. The fraternities now, of course, now are equipped with these party rooms that handle the noise and all, and drinking so that it doesn't spill out on the streets as much as it used to.

Warren: What about that period when it was spilling out on the streets? What was it like covering that in the paper?

Paxton: Well, I think people in college towns are just reasonably tolerant of that sort of thing. They've been through it before and they realize the college scene is important to the community. I don't recall that it's ever spilled out to the extent of it being a really serious problem. One of the most annoying problems with it has been the litter problem, you know, paper cups and all strewn up and down the streets after a Saturday night party, and that's annoyed me greatly, because I like the town and I don't like to see it littered like that. But that's a problem that they've tried to deal with one way or the other.

Warren: How does it get [unclear]?

Paxton: I think it's better. I don't think it's as bad as it used to be.

Warren: You mentioned what was going on here in the sixties. What did go on here in the sixties?

Paxton: Very much the same thing that went on in so many campuses. The real division in our society over the Vietnam War and the prominent part the students played everywhere in the protest of the war, it seemed to some people that it was just going to be the end of civilization, the students were just going to destroy everything, you know, like the Red Guard in China. I remember one very tense moment at Washington and Lee. You've probably come across this in talking to people, when Bob Huntley was president during that time. I hope you'll talk to him at some point.

Warren: I'm waiting for him to get back from Florida.

Paxton: But things reached kind of a crescendo, and the students were threatening to close the college down, I think, that spring, and what year that is I would have to go back and look. There was a real counterculture type of student who had gotten to be head of the student body, I guess, and he was making demands and so forth. Finally the thing sort of came to a head with this outdoor meeting on the front campus lawn there, in front of Lee Chapel. We put up a podium there, and Bob Huntley addressed the students and did what I thought was a masterful job. I went over to hear him. I thought he handled the situation very well and seemed to sort of defuse the thing. They didn't make good on their threat to shut down the school. I can't remember what all the demands were that they had, but I remember feeling that he had really handled it very well, and from that point on, that seemed to be the passing of the worst of the crisis at Washington and Lee.

But it changed life on the campus for all time, no question about it, and that Fancy Dress thing was just one little manifestation of it, I'm sure, and I know the curriculum underwent certain changes, and various things were changed. I'd have to go back and refresh my memory on all that, but life was different just as it was everywhere after that period, you know. I'd be interested in hearing what Bob's recollections of that

were, Bob Huntley. That was a terribly stressful time to be a college president. Our friend Edgar Shannon, who was president of the University of Virginia at the same time, of course, he's a W&L alumnus and would be a good person to talk to also.

Warren: He's on our list, too.

Paxton: He underwent that over there. It was just an experience that would age a man, very, very nerve-racking.

Warren: This is an off-the-wall question, but satisfy my curiosity. Do you know why Red Square is called Red Square?

Paxton: I'm not sure that I do, really. It's been called that ever since I can remember.

Warren: So it goes back to when you were a kid?

Paxton: Oh, yeah, I think so. I think it goes back to about the time those fraternities were built in the thirties, and I think it just has to do with the fact that those red-brick fraternities were built in a square.

Warren: I wondered if it's that simple an answer.

Paxton: I think so. I think it is.

Warren: It's kind of a loaded name, you know.

Paxton: I know. Yes, it sure it. It sounds like it has some very sinister connotation.

Warren: It's been a question I've been meaning to ask people, but it never seems like it's appropriate. I thought you, as a newspaperman, might have tracked it down and know the answer to that.

You mentioned that you weren't exactly classmates with Roger Mudd, right?

Paxton: No, Roger was a year behind me. Roger was in '50, I think, but we were good friends. He was a Delt, and the Delts and SAEs went back and forth quite a lot together.

Warren: Washington and Lee has produced some pretty impressive alumni, Roger Mudd being one of them. What was it like going through with somebody like that? Did you have any inkling of who he was going to be? Tom Wolfe was the same time here.

Paxton: Tom Wolfe was a little later. Tom Wolfe came along about six or seven years, five, maybe not quite that much.

Warren: Not that much.

Paxton: He was a little later.

Warren: '51 or '52, I think.

Paxton: Was he? Because I didn't remember that we had overlapped. He was in school with my brother, who finished in '54 at W&L. Roger was a colorful character at Washington and Lee, and he was obviously destined for something good. He really didn't know what he wanted to do when he got out of school. I hope you get to talk to him. He had a real sense of the dramatic. They used to have these performances on campus to raise money for what they called the Student War Memorial Scholarship Fund. This was years after the war. They'd have a big production. I remember Roger was in that one year, and he was playing the role of Dr. White, the university physician, and they called him Mr. White. They just did everything they could to irritate the powers-that-be, you know. Roger just wowed them on stage. I remember he got this hypodermic needle and ran all the way across the room to jam it into somebody. He had some real good lines. He had this booming voice, as he does now. He was obviously a person who was going to make himself known later on.

Warren: Were there people that you thought were going to develop into something and you never heard from them again?

Paxton: [Laughter]

Warren: You know, there's sort of that feeling as you go to college, that certain people are going to be something special.

Paxton: Yeah, and then not. I'm sure there were, because I remember even in high school when you'd have the Most Outstanding and so forth, and the Most Likely to Succeed in the annual, you know, and they'd never be heard from again. Those particular ones would never amount to anything. So you certainly couldn't always tell.

Warren: When you were there and until relatively recently, Washington and Lee was a male bastion if ever there was one. Where did the girls come from?

Paxton: Oh, they all came from the girls' colleges around, you know, Sweetbriar and Hollins and Randolph-Macon and Mary Baldwin and Southern [unclear].

Warren: Did they come to you or did you go to them? What were the logistics?

Paxton: The logistics of it was that you went to them. They would not come to you. You went to them. You went and you picked up your date and you squired, or a friend would go and pick up maybe several dates or something like that. Sometimes they'd come on the train. The train days were pretty well over by the time I was in school, but I remember one – it may have been a Fancy Dress, when a bunch of them came up on the train because of a big snow. I can't remember all the details of it.

Warren: So do you remember the train station still being functioning?

Paxton: The train station, in my time, was definitely past its heyday.

Warren: So it wasn't a passenger terminal anymore?

Paxton: They had passenger service here until about the mid-1950s, but nobody ever used it. The little car was half a passenger car and half a baggage car or something, and it rolled back and forth between here and Glasgow, Balcony Falls, they called it.

Warren: So it was just a spur? It wasn't on the main line?

Paxton: No, it wasn't. It never was on the main line here. The B&O was coming down the valley from Webster and Harrisonburg and Staunton, heading for Salem, which was then more prominent than Roanoke. It got as far as Lexington. Meanwhile, the railroad became the N&W, did an end run and came down through Buena Vista and took the river ride, which was a much easier ride, and got to Roanoke, and that pretty well cut off the B&O. So we never were really on a through rail line here.

To go from Lynchburg, I remember hearing my mother-in-law talk about coming to Mary Baldwin from Lynchburg. She would take the train from Lynchburg to Balcony

Falls – that's Glasgow – take another train from Balcony Falls to Lexington, and change again and take another train to Staunton. It was an all-day trip. [Laughter]

Warren: I've found these references to how long it took to get from Clifton Forge to Lexington by train, it's like four hours. I wondered what on earth were they doing all that time.

Paxton: Oh, I don't know. You probably had to change. From Clifton Forge to Lexington, you'd come to Balcony Falls and then take another train up to Lexington, or you could go to Staunton and take a train down the valley to Lexington. So it was not real convenient.

Warren: So by the time you were a student, the car had pretty much taken over?

Paxton: The car had really taken over. Back in the twenties and thirties and before that, people did travel in and out by train. They'd have some special trains and excursion trains and trains that would come in for football games and that sort of thing, you know, but by the time I was in school, that was really past.

Warren: And how about buses? Did students travel by bus?

Paxton: Students did travel by bus, yeah. They did use the bus.

Warren: I've seen a picture, and I don't know whether it's students or faculty or whom, but of a lot of people leaving for World War II behind McCrum's. That's where the bus station was?

Paxton: That's where the bus station was at one time.

Warren: Do you remember that?

Paxton: Oh, yeah. I don't remember being there to see that group off. The bus station was at McCrum's for quite a long time. I don't know just how many years, but quite a long time. There was a lot of bus travel then.

Warren: I guess you were a little young. You were probably in school the day everybody took off.

Paxton: Yeah, yeah. I didn't get in the service 'til just about the end, the closing months of the war.

Warren: Your timing was real good.

Paxton: It certainly was. Excellent.

Warren: I've asked you just about all the questions and gotten wonderful, succinct answers. Is there anything you'd like to talk about, about Washington and Lee or Lexington or the relationship?

Paxton: Well, it's just been wondering to me to live here and to be a W&L alumnus and to live in the town and enjoy all the wonderful advantages that you get to enjoy in a college town.

I think one of the greatest people from Washington and Lee was Dr. [James G.] Leyburn, and I hope that this will come out in some of the interviews, about what he did for the academic quality of the school.

Warren: Tell me about that.

Paxton: Well, he came here from Yale, you know, as dean, and offered what he called the—he didn't call it, but it became known as the Leyburn Plan, because he wanted people to be able to equate Washington and Lee with Ivy League schools. He certainly greatly strengthened the curriculum and the academic quality of the school, I'm sure, and just his own wonderful learning and his marvelous interest in the students and everything that he meant in so many different ways.

He had a tremendous impact. He personally had a great impact on a lot of students who just practically worshipped the ground he walked on. He wasn't as popular among the alumni of the day, because they blamed him for the problems of de-emphasis in athletics and so forth. Well, he had said some things that maybe left him a little open for criticism by the alumni. But I think he stands out as being a very important person in the history of the school.

On another level, I hope you'll ask about the Gauley Bridge Hunt Club. That was a funny thing that was active right after the war. I never was a member of the Gauley Bridge Hunt Club.

Warren: What's the name?

Paxton: Gauley Bridge. That's the name of a little place in West Virginia, on Route 60 in West Virginia, between here and Charleston. You'll have to ask Charlie McDowell or Pat Robertson about that. I think it was just a fun kind of a drinking thing as much as anything else, but you'll have to ask them about Colonel John McQuarter [phonetic], who was a real big person in that. But it was just something that people laughed about and had a good time about. I guess it arose from some trip that people took to Charleston one time or something and then probably stopped in Gauley Bridge for a beer or something. [Laughter] But they'd march around and had this outfit they would wear, which is one of those funny things, like the White Friars in Phi Alpha Nu.

Warren: There are a lot of those kind of things around here. I don't know much about them; I've just seen pictures in the *Calyx*.

Paxton: They were just clubs of people, just a social thing, and didn't amount to a whole lot, pretty much, but there were more serious things, of course, like the debating groups and things like that.

Warren: There certainly are. It's an organized school if ever there was one.

Paxton: It's full of organizations.

I think I've bored you for long enough, but I've enjoyed it.

Warren: You have not bored me at all. This has been a wonderful interview, just as Frank [Parsons] promised.

Paxton: I'm glad if it could be of some help, because it's been fun doing it.

Warren: I didn't know a thing about the Gauley Bridge Hunt Club until today, so you set me off on a new tack. We'll see what comes of it.

Paxton: I don't think much will come of it. [Laughter]

Warren: Thank you. I really appreciate it.

Paxton: You are so welcome.

[End of interview]