

# EDGAR SHANNON

part I

April 15, 1996

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**Mame Warren,  
interviewer**

**Warren:** This is Mame Warren. Today is the 15th of April 1996. I'm in Charlottesville, Virginia, with Dr. Edgar Shannon.

I'm intrigued by — we've been talking about being an administrator, being presidents of colleges, because one of the things I just realized, as I was driving over here, is that you grew up on the campus of Washington and Lee, right?

**Shannon:** That's right.

**Warren:** So did you know Henry Louis Smith?

**Shannon:** Oh, yes.

**Warren:** I've been reading lots and lots of things by Henry Louis Smith just in the last few weeks. I'm fascinated by him, and so it's exciting to me to think that you actually knew him. Can you tell me your impressions of him?

**Shannon:** Well, of course, I suppose he was — I was fairly young. I was born in 1918, and moved into the house, what's now called the Lee-Jackson House, next door to the president's house. My father and mother moved in there when I was two, so I lived in that house from the time I was two until I was twenty, when my father died. He died in May of 1939. Well, '38, excuse me, the year before, really at the end of my junior year. So I lived next door.

My first memories are knowing Dr. and Mrs. Smith and some of his children. His children were all older than I was. I guess the youngest two were two boys, who

were Norris and Frank, and I think Frank was the youngest. I think Frank must have probably – by the time I was taking things in, when I was eight or nine or something, I think Frank must have probably been a teenager. He must have been sixteen or something like that. I don't know the exact ages, but I should guess he was six or seven years older than I was.

Dr. Smith, I guess, died in – I think he was thrown out of a car, of an automobile, and got a concussion, and I think never recovered from it. I think that's the report.

**Warren:** I haven't gotten that far yet, so I don't know that. I can't confirm or deny that.

**Shannon:** Yeah, I think that was the reason for his death. But anyway, I'm pretty sure Dr. Gaines came in 1930. Is that right?

**Warren:** Yes.

**Shannon:** So I think probably Dr. Smith died in '29 or early '30, anyway. I was twelve by the time he died, so I was old enough to know him. He was very dignified, By that time he was very dignified, sort of a white-haired man, and very courtly. I was in and out of the house over there quite a bit, and, of course, I'd always see him, as I did Dr. Gaines, walking back and forth from the Lee House, across the campus, in front of our house, going over to the Colonnade, to their offices.

I suppose he was kind of legendary for quotations that he'd tend to exaggerate. He was known for exaggeration. He recognized it himself. There's a story about him that maybe you've come upon, that he used to have chapel. He was talking in chapel, and he said, "Now, young gentlemen," he said, "beware of exaggeration. It's a very bad trait." He said, "My dear young chaps, myself, I have wept bushels of tears over that very same subject." [Laughter]

**Warren:** That's great.

**Shannon:** He was a Phi Delta Theta, and his sons, at least Norris and Frank, and, I guess, Raymond. I guess it started with Raymond. Raymond was the eldest, I think. Anyway, they all became Betas, and someone asked him how he felt about his sons

being Betas. Phi Deltas didn't have too good a reputation at that time, apparently. He said, "Oh, I'd much rather my sons would be godly Betas than drunken, carousing Phi Delta Thetas." [Laughter] At any rate, he was considered something of a character, but very highly regarded, highly respected, very fine man.

**Warren:** Well, the period I've been reading about, he just seems to have an answer for everything. He's sending out these proclamations to the universe, and telling people why they should be moral people and why they should do the right thing. It's so unlike a modern president, and I'm kind of intrigued and charmed by it. I just wondered if he was like that in person. Was he constantly emoting little sermons? Because that seems to be what he was doing in writing.

**Shannon:** A great deal, I suppose. I suppose so, but, of course, from childhood to twelve, I really didn't see much of that side, though, of course, he came from a very, I guess, a very strong Presbyterian family. I guess one of his brothers was a Presbyterian minister in Little Rock, a very well-known Presbyterian minister in Little Rock.

His brother, Alphonso Smith, was an English professor who was actually the Edgar Allan Poe Professor of English here at the University of Virginia. When Josephus Daniels became Secretary of the Navy under Woodrow Wilson, he asked him to come to head the English and Humanities Department at the Naval Academy. Josephus Daniels brought civilians into the Naval Academy to improve the quality of instruction, and that's continued ever since. The other two academies have only military faculty, but the navy has a considerable civilian faculty.

Alphonso Smith, his brother Alphonso, had a whole series of grammar school textbooks. I grew up on something like fifth- and sixth-grade textbooks written by C. Alphonso Smith. [Laughter] I still remember the example in the book, the difference between the active and the passive voice. The active is, "Marat stabbed Charlotte Corday." The passive was, "Charlotte Corday was stabbed by Marat." [Laughter] From the French Revolution.

Really, my recollections of him are more anecdotal, and also just being generally aware of him, but not old enough to have heard much of his prognostications or his tending to preach. Of course, there was just a lot more of that in the air in Virginia. For example, this thing about my father, he's an elder in the Presbyterian Church, and deeply interested in moral training of those under his care, and I think that's true. I think there was a lot of emphasis even in my day about the importance of character and developing character. I think that still persists at Washington and Lee in the Honor System, but you still don't hear much. That's talked about very much, but in general, I think you don't hear talk in general or exhortations about character and morals in the same way you did fifty years ago, say.

**Warren:** Were you aware of the Honor System as you grew up on campus? Was it talked about it in your household?

**Shannon:** Oh yeah, oh yeah. Sure.

**Warren:** Tell me about that.

**Shannon:** Well, I mean, it was just—the ethos was very much there, and symbolized and talked about. Students left books all over the campus. They'd be going downtown or something. They'd leave books just by the gate there, by the Episcopal Church. Not by the gate, but the opening of the fence there. They'd dump books there and walk on downtown, and so on.

So there was a lot of emphasis on how open everything was. You didn't lock your door in the dormitory or anything of that sort. So it was very much in the air. Then, of course, living there right on the campus, and right next to the dormitories, students were—from the time I can remember—students were around. I used to go out and watch as they were pitching baseball behind the dormitory and so on.

As I got a little older, why, students were always awfully nice to me. They'd throw the balls with you, and throw footballs, and things like that. So I grew up sort of playing with the students, to some extent. Then when I had relatives, who were cousins

who were at Washington and Lee, they would drop in to the house, and talk about it, and talk with my father and mother about what was going on. The Honor System was just present all the time. So I really grew up with it.

We had an Honor System at—I went two years to Lexington High School. We had an Honor System there, and also at Darlington [phonetic] School, where I went. I was president of the Honor Council at Darlington, and then came to Washington and Lee. So it was a very natural part of life when I came to Washington and Lee. In my senior year, I was vice president of the student body and on the Executive Committee, so I had a lot of experience with it.

**Warren:** What was that experience, being on the Executive Committee, like? Did you have any cases that were particularly difficult?

**Shannon:** Yeah, we didn't have a large number, but we had—you felt it as a very grave responsibility, and, of course, we had the tradition that as soon as a charge was made, you dropped everything and followed it through.

I remember particularly the last one that I was on involved a classmate who was a senior. It happened in exams. He was just within days of graduation, and he was charged with cheating on a test. Somebody said he had seen him, and that he had some kind of material and was turning his pages in a notebook back and forth, and copying from this thing. So we had an eye-witness, but the question was, it still lacked evidence and proof.

Kind of ironically, one of his fraternity brothers was the junior representative on the Honor Committee, and he said, "Well, let me go down to the house and check on it." He was a Pi KA. He went down to the Pi KA house and came back with a notebook that had leaves of some text torn out, or cut out, and interleaved in this ring notebook. This tied in with the examination. Of course, the professor had provided the examination book, so it was clear he was copying his stuff out. So it was an open-and-shut case, but it was very sad. It was sad, because you didn't think this person really

needed to cheat. He was probably going to graduate anyway. He may not have got a very good grade, but he probably would have graduated, and to do that after four years of Washington and Lee just seemed to be unbelievable. And then it was tough for a fraternity brother essentially to convict him. On the other hand, this was remarkable evidence of the honor code taking precedence over other loyalties. It was the supreme loyalty.

**Warren:** What happened to that person? What happens to someone when a violation—when they have—is it a conviction? I mean, would you call it a conviction?

**Shannon:** Well, in that case, the committee is satisfied, and I guess the chairman of the Honor Committee simply gets in touch with the person, and tells him he has to leave, leave the university within twenty-four hours. I don't know how they do it now, but that's what they used to do.

**Warren:** And when he leaves, what happens to his records? Can he then transfer to another school?

**Shannon:** Well, I don't know what—since he was so close to graduation, I don't know what he ever did or whatever happened. Most people do transfer to other schools. Certainly, here at the University of Virginia, we have almost a completely successful record of people who have been convicted, going on to other universities. I don't know what's done right now, but I'm sure in those days, it was on your transcript. It went on your transcript that the person had been separated from the university for violation of the Honor System. I don't know what they do now, and I think it still goes on your transcript here. The law has gotten so tricky on a lot of these things now. I don't know whether it still goes on the transcript or not.

**Warren:** Well, it's certainly an impressive system. It brings a lot of pleasure to me to be in a place where you can trust people.

**Shannon:** Yeah, it really does. Generally, that was the procedure. There is the provision that you can appeal the Executive Committee's decision to a public trial, and

those come up from time to time. There was one public trial when I was not on the committee. It was, I think, when I was a sophomore. It was the first one that had occurred in years, and they had a public trial in the old auditorium in Washington Hall. That's before it had been remodeled and had the president's office in where it is now. There was a large auditorium on the second floor, in the front of Washington Hall.

Matter of fact, that's where the lectures my father used to – for the sophomore English class, which was a history of English literature, he used to lecture one period. We went three days a week in those days. He used to lecture one period, and then I think all the other members of the department had sections of the class that had twenty-five or thirty in them, that met for the other two days for discussion groups. You wrote a theme a week in that one.

But anyway, they had the trial in that auditorium. They selected a random jury, and had some law students as judge and prosecutor and defender. They set up the trial very much in accordance with normal court procedure. It was a day-long trial, and it was open. I remember going and listening to it. I think people came and went because of classes and so on. I don't remember being there for the whole trial, but, actually, they cleared this person. The Honor Committee had convicted him, but on the public trial, he was cleared. He left the university. It was in the spring sometime, and he finished the year, I think, and didn't come back. But anyway, he was cleared. That was kind of extraordinary and memorable. There have been others since then, but I think that was the first one since, oh, something like 1905, or something of that sort.

**Warren:** Well, that's interesting that you were able to witness that. I guess that is pretty extraordinary.

I made a note a few minutes ago that I'd like to pursue. It may be a dead-end street, but it seems like there's a real connection, at least at that time period, between Arkansas and Washington and Lee, because President Denny, Dr. Smith's predecessor,

left Washington and Lee to go to Arkansas in, I believe, 1912, and then your father comes in 1914 from Arkansas, right?

**Shannon:** No, Dr. Denny went to Alabama. He didn't go to Arkansas.

**Warren:** Oh, Alabama. That's right. Okay, yes, all right. So forget – there's no Arkansas.

**Shannon:** Right. There used to be a fairly strong connection, at least to students who came from Arkansas to Washington and Lee. My father had at least two, I think – he had first cousins who came to Washington and Lee from Little Rock before he came. My father had two first cousins, Ross McCain and Arthur McCain, who both graduated from Washington and Lee while he was still at the University of Arkansas, and then he had another first cousin who came as a student after he was at Washington and Lee. Then he had another first cousin, once removed, who was a student, Sam McCain – they were all McCains – who was, again, from Little Rock. I think he graduated, I think in '27. He was a Rhodes Scholar from Washington and Lee, I think the second Rhodes Scholar from Washington and Lee. So there were a lot of family Arkansas connections with Washington and Lee, and there used to be a pretty steady stream of students from Arkansas.

Interestingly enough, both my mother and father's family were really originally from Virginia. My middle name is Finley and there are a lot of Finleys over in Augusta County. Both my mother's family were here, and some of hers were here in Albermarle County, and my original Shannon ancestors, they were originally a sect of the McDonald clan, came over to northern Ireland and lived in the Ulster area of northern Ireland for about 100 years, then probably landed at Newcastle, Delaware, in about 1845, and settled in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. My ancestor, Thomas Shannon, came down here to Albermarle. It was when my mother had an ancestor, and Thomas Shannon, were both on the first board of justices of Amherst County, when it was cut off from Albermarle County.



Thomas Shannon had a brother, William Shannon, who went out to Kentucky, and he became quartermaster and commissary general under George Rogers Clark in the Northwest in the Revolution. He settled in Kentucky and was in the Virginia legislature briefly, and then was in the first Kentucky legislature when it was cut off from Virginia, what, about 1790, '91. So he kind of called the rest of the family and said, "Come on out to Kentucky. It's God's country out here." So my ancestors moved on out there, and my mother's family got out to Kentucky.

My father grew up in Kentucky. It was after the Civil War, of course, but my mother's father sold his land in Kentucky and went to Arkansas after the Civil War. My father was teaching at the University of Arkansas, and my mother was in one of his classes at the University of Arkansas, and so that's how they met. It was rather interesting.

He did have a woman first cousin who was married to Frank Moore in Lexington, who was a Washington and Lee graduate, of course, and was a lawyer there in Lexington for a long time and lived on Jordan Street. I guess the family still owns that house. At any rate, that's really how my father got to Washington and Lee.

**Warren:** Through that connection?

**Shannon:** His cousin, who was Mrs. Moore, cousin Lois, was living there in Lexington, and they knew Dr. Currell was retiring, and so they alerted my father and alerted Washington and Lee, and it all worked out. [Laughter] So we were originally from Virginia, and went through Kentucky to Arkansas, and got back here, and I was born within about 75 miles, I guess, of where most of my ancestors had been a few 150 years earlier, or something like that.

**Warren:** It seems, again, destined, wasn't it?

**Shannon:** Yes.

**Warren:** Well, tell me about growing up on campus. What was it like on campus at Washington and Lee in the twenties? Who were the people you interacted with? What was the atmosphere?

**Shannon:** Well, it was a very pleasant atmosphere, on the whole. I grew up—I've got a picture I surely should pull out and show you. I used to ride my kiddie car on the sidewalks when I was just big enough to move around. I used to ride my kiddie car down the hill, down in front of the R.E. Lee Church.

Then later, of course, as I got larger, I had a tricycle and then I had a bicycle. Those walks on the campus, I'm not sure all the roads were even paved in town in those days. I know out where Farris lives and all out that way was all dirt roads, and so a lot of the young people, my age particularly, when we were, I guess, about twelve, ten to twelve, fourteen, something like that, after school, used to congregate on the W&L campus and ride bicycles around. It got to be, I guess, so many of us, that we got to be a nuisance. [Laughter] Mr. Penick, who was then the treasurer and looked after buildings and grounds and so on, came down with an edict that we couldn't ride bicycles on the campus anymore. By that time, I'm sure by the latter part, I remember, the streets were paved, and I used to ride bicycles around, ride a bicycle around town on the streets quite a bit. Of course, the traffic wasn't anything like it is now, and, of course, we never thought about helmets, or anything of that sort.

The students were always walking back and forth, certainly in the daytime, not much in the afternoon. The meal situation in those days was that everyone had the big meal, dinner was in the middle of the day, and the college schedule ran 'til two o'clock. All the classes ran 'til two o'clock, and then everybody had dinner at two o'clock, and then the afternoon was free. There were no afternoon classes. Afternoon was free for athletics and that sort of thing. But the whole town was really on that schedule. Then you just had supper at night. You didn't have a big meal at night. Usually you had supper about six o'clock, and fraternities had a meal at six o'clock.

One of my experiences, particularly, was – well, let me go back. I'm wandering around here. You saw the students walking back and forth all the time, and, of course, we had the old speaking tradition, where everyone spoke to everyone else, whether you knew them or not, but Washington and Lee was small enough. We held it to, I guess, 900. I think it was 900, maybe 950, when I was in college, but I'm sure it was a bit smaller, probably only about 800, something like that, when I was growing up. So most all of the students knew each other by name, at any rate. So it was a friendly atmosphere.

The students all wore freshmen caps. I mean the freshmen wore caps. You had a sort of a little beanie, a little blue cap, sort of like a baseball cap, but it didn't have anything like the visor that you have on a baseball cap now. Just a tiny little visor, and then a cap to wear on the back of your head, with a white button on it. I think it had W&L on the front of it. You had to wear that as a student, a freshman. You had to wear that your first term, so that freshmen were all identified. We had an Assimilation Committee that if you were smart-alecky and didn't speak, or things like that, you got called up before the Assimilation Committee, and got paddled. [Laughter]

**Warren:** Literally paddled?

**Shannon:** Literally paddled. Then the second term, you had a sailor hat, which was a dark-blue sailor hat with a white band around it. You wore the sailor hat about half-way through the second term, I guess, and then you finally got rid of your identification as a freshman. But that's jumping over a little bit.

My particular experience growing up on – what made me think of this, and everybody wore hats then, too. I mean, you wore these caps as a freshman, but everybody else wore a regular felt hat. So when the snow was on the ground, we were really – I can't remember who the other culprits were, but at least there were some kids my age, say when we were about eight or nine, when it snowed, we used to throw snowballs at students' hats. [Laughter] As they came, we'd get up there on the bank,

just as they came into the campus, right by the Episcopal Church, we'd get up on that bank and throw snowballs at them, and then run away. [Laughter] But we weren't very damaging. I don't think we ever really hit a hat, maybe once.

But my special experience was that I had a pony. My uncle – well, my father sort of believed, from Kentucky days, that a boy couldn't grow up without a horse. I had an uncle out in Arkansas, my mother's brother, who had a farm out in Arkansas. He was raising a few ponies just for fun. He just liked them. He had a pure-bred Shetland pony that was a stud pony, and he was raising some. I was out there to visit. My mother and I went out there to visit, I think when probably I was about five, and he had a colt that he said he was going to send me when he got the colt broken, and so on.

After about a year, when the colt would've been old enough to be sent to me, I guess, he decided he didn't like his temperament, thought his temperament wasn't quite right. So anyway, by the time I was seven, he had the stud gelded. He was a wonderful pony. He was a pure-bred Shetland, had blood lines that were registered, and had already been named before my uncle got him, Marshall Foche [phonetic]. So his name was Foche, and he was a flax chestnut pony with flax mane and tail, and he had a wonderful disposition.

So he sent me this pony when I was seven, from Arkansas, and I wasn't really old enough to handle him properly, but in those days, the campus wasn't groomed and kept up the way it is now. There was just lots of tall grass around the edges, and even the grass didn't get cut that often on the campus itself.

Living in that house, the Lee-Jackson House, we had a pretty good size of a backyard and a high privet hedge. There's still a privet hedge there, but it's kept to only about chest-high now, but this used to be up to seven or eight feet. So it was a pretty completely private backyard. So I kept the pony in the backyard a good deal of the time, and then at night, particularly in the summertime – and, of course, we had no

summer school of any kind in those days – I'd just drive a stake in the ground with a rope, and stake him out on various parts of the campus to graze overnight.

I guess my first two or three years we had him – I probably wasn't seven, eight – until I was nine, and certainly in the winter, we always boarded him out on a farm. From the time I was nine 'til I was thirteen, I think, I had that pony, and just really kept him on the campus from May, something like May 'til October.

**Warren:** Where did you ride him?

**Shannon:** Well, as I say, in those days, all the roads, the minute you got out of town, except for U.S. 11, were not paved. They weren't even graveled. They were just dirt roads, and they were marvelous for riding. He had very hard hooves, and I wasn't riding him that hard at first, so that I guess for a couple of years, we never even shod him, never even put horseshoes on him. When I got to riding him a good deal and getting out on the roads a lot, we did put shoes on his front hooves, but never had them on his hind hooves.

Used to ride on the VMI Parade Ground quite a bit. You'd gallop up and down on the Parade Ground. I had one other friend, who was two years older than I was, who, I guess by the time I was about ten, he got a small horse, and then we later had another friend who had a horse. But with this friend with a small horse, Souther Tompkins – he graduated from Washington and Lee, also. He's been an orthopedist. He's retired now, but in Oklahoma City for many, many years. At any rate, we used to ride regularly, and take long rides out in the country, on the country roads.

But this pony, I think he really had a sense of humor, and I can remember some rides. I rode him bareback much of the time in the summer. I can remember riding bareback on the VMI Parade Ground. It wasn't a lot, but I can remember from time to time I would inadvertently slide up a little forward, up on his withers, where I wasn't comfortable to him to be quite that far up over his – and I'd be galloping on – over his shoulders and his forefeet. He never bucked, and I don't think he ever kicked me but

once. I think one time, some way again, I inadvertently tickled his flanks, some way in currying or something, and he kicked out with one foot, but that's the only time I ever remember his kicking.

So he had an excellent disposition. Some ponies have sort of mean dispositions, but he had an excellent – anyway, he would just stop, and I'd go right over his shoulder. So he didn't buck to throw me. He'd stop, and I'd slide over his shoulder. I would be hanging on, so I wouldn't go anywhere, and I would fall right down under his feet. He'd stop, dead stop, so he didn't step on me, and then would just stand there and kind of nuzzle me, like, "What the heck are you doing down there?" [Laughter]

I was visiting an uncle up in Erie, Pennsylvania, an uncle and aunt up in Erie, Pennsylvania. They had a summer place out on the lake, and they said, "I think we've got a pony cart up in the attic in the barn out there." So we went out and looked at this pony cart, and they did. It was a very nice pony cart. It needed a little bit of paint and repair, but they sent me this pony cart, so I had a pony cart. It was a little big for him, but Foche could handle it all right, and it didn't take any problem breaking him to pulling the cart. So I had him with this pony cart, and used to drive him around town a lot with this pony cart.

I remember, I guess when I was something like twelve or so, I had a crush on a girl that lived out on Sellars Avenue, and I used to drive my pony cart out there. There were all these children who would sort of collect around the pony cart, and I'd give them rides up and down Sellars Avenue in the pony cart.

**Warren:** Were there many other children on campus?

**Shannon:** Yeah, there were. I think I was sort of in between. The Smith children were a bit older. Dr. Campbell had a couple of sons. The younger one was several years older than I was. But then there were quite a few children down in the hollow, down below the chapel, you know, Charley McDowell and the Bean boys. Those I remember particularly. I can't remember for sure. But there were quite a few that, say, were about

four or five years younger than I was, that were growing up down there, and you saw something of them, and all that levels out, even when you get up toward teen age. But when you're children, if you're twelve and somebody's seven, you're aware of them, but you're not really playing with them very much.

Talking about seven, I remember my seventh birthday, we had a birthday party. It was a baseball party, and I remember we had about – I don't know, it must have been a fairly good-sized group. I think we had about fifteen people for the party, and played baseball out between what's now the Commerce School and the Morris House. Doesn't seem like much room in there now, but the building wasn't quite as big as it is now. That was the old library. We played baseball out there and had a marvelous time. Of course, it wasn't very good baseball at seven years old, but we thought it was terrific.  
[Laughter]

I guess I had my – really, the person just my age was a boy named George Barton. His father was a professor at VMI, taught Latin and Greek at VMI, and lived in one of those houses that's just on the bend going down to Gaines Hall. There are about three houses in there, and they lived in the last one, I think the last one that's still there next to Gaines Hall. We played a lot together, particularly when we were about third-grade age. What would that be? I guess in those days, I guess we were about eight, something like that. We were pretty much inseparable. So he was not on the campus, but he was right nearby. We played on the campus a lot.

**Warren:** Let me turn my tape over. Just a moment.

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

**Shannon:** It was just a wonderful place to grow up, because Lexington, as a town, was a wonderful place to grow up, but also the campus gave you so much room to play on. We used to play – in the summertime, for years, Miss Belle Larick [phonetic] used to run the Campus Inn in one of the dormitories. I guess she was in the – Lees dormitory is the first one. What's the second one?

**Warren:** Graham-Lees?

**Shannon:** Yeah, I guess it was in Graham dormitory. People used to come there from Richmond and some places in the tidewater, and other people from away, sort of as a summer resort place. It's a little higher ground, a little cooler in Lexington, in the summer nights, before we had air-conditioning. She used a certain number of the dormitory rooms and used what's now the bookstore. It used to be the dining hall. It was always called the Beanery, and served food there.

This aunt and uncle from Erie, Pennsylvania, and two cousins, who were slightly older than I was, they used to come and stay for a week or so. There were enough children around, so we used to play what we called Fox and Hounds, I can remember. It was a kind of Hide and Seek game, on the campus.

**Warren:** Was this run by the university, or they were just using the facilities?

**Shannon:** No, they just let her use the facility. I don't know, she may have paid something for it. I guess she did, but she was just running it privately.

**Warren:** And what years would this have been, about?

**Shannon:** Oh, this would have been, I guess, probably from about 1928, '27, something like that, to probably into the thirties. She may have run it earlier than that, but I think she stopped. She lived on Lecher Avenue, had a house on Lecher Avenue, and took students to board, but then ran this thing in the summertime.

**Warren:** Oh, I'll have to watch for that. That's about where I am in my research, so I'll have to watch for mentions of that.

**Shannon:** Then the ravine over there, you know? I mean, it was just a woods in those days.

**Warren:** Is that where Woods Creek is?

**Shannon:** Yeah, what we used to call a ravine. When I was, I suppose, six, seven, something like that, they still ran the sewage in Woods Creek, so you couldn't play in the creek, but still, there were all kinds of those paths down through there. There were



just all kind of woods to play in, and play Hide and Seek and things like that. Then, I guess by the time I was ten or eleven, something like that, they piped the sewage and cleaned the thing up, and you could catch frogs and water snakes, and all that sort of thing.

Then you could play tennis, when we got a little bit older. I guess we were playing tennis by the time we were ten or something like that. So we played tennis on the tennis courts, and then, of course, there were athletic events to watch. Of course, I was a big W&L fan of W&L football, basketball, baseball, track. Particularly used to go to the baseball games. I think we were more interested in baseball than football in those days.

**Warren:** Really? So I bet you knew *The W&L Swing* before you knew anything else.

**Shannon:** Oh, yeah. [Laughter] Certainly did. As I say, you just couldn't imagine a more ideal place to grow up. When we were older, we used to play touch football.

There were a bunch of us, I guess when we were in high school, those first two years I was in high school, we used to play touch football down on the VMI Parade Ground.

There were a number of boys my age, sons of VMI professors, that lived on Letcher Avenue and around. We used to play touch football on that little part of the Parade Ground which is right opposite the Marshall Library. Even when the cadets were drilling some, we'd be pretty much out of their way up there. One of them, John Cooper's father, was a professor who lived in one of those houses, faculty houses just around the bend from the Marshall Library. That sort of gave us the authority to play there, because his house was right there. We used to have a marvelous time with those football games. So we were playing touch football long before the Kennedys made it popular. [Laughter]

**Warren:** Was it a foregone conclusion that you were going to attend Washington and Lee as a student?

**Shannon:** Well, pretty much so. I think my family thought I ought to – I was an only child, and I think they thought I ought to have some other experience, that I ought to go away somewhere. I was pretty adamant that I wanted to go to Washington and Lee, so that really was one of the motivations for my going to prep school, for my going to Darlington, so that I would get – well, my father wasn't satisfied entirely with the – certainly, with the Latin I was getting at Lexington High School, and just didn't think I was getting as strong an academic preparation probably as I needed at that point, so they were inclined to think prep school would be a good thing, and then, particularly, if I were coming to Washington and Lee, to get some experience somewhere else.

**Warren:** Can you remember why you were so set on going to Washington and Lee?

**Shannon:** Oh, well, I had grown up there. It was just a part of me. I knew the students. I had, as I say, thrown footballs and baseballs with them, and I just couldn't wait 'til I could be a part of it all. Having been there and lived there, but just being a boy, not being able to do it, I just wanted so much to be there and be a part of it, as I say. They'd talk to me some about Harvard or Princeton, but, boy, I was absolute, by the time I was at Darlington and getting ready to go to college, why, I was really set on Washington and Lee completely. So they didn't really push it very hard. [Laughter]

**Warren:** So what was it like to make that transition from being the kid who was playing these games, to the student in the classroom of the fathers of your friends?

**Shannon:** Well, it had some interesting aspects. Of course, I knew them all, and most of them knew me as a boy. I did live in the dormitory my first year. Again, the family thought it was important for me to live in the dormitory and get to know my class, not just live at home, even though I was just about 100 feet away from home. But it meant I was completely – I was at Washington and Lee, rather than being at home.

I didn't pledge a fraternity right away. My family were pretty strong that I should take my time. In those days, they started rush as soon as you landed on the

campus, and you could pledge by the time you actually matriculated. So in some instances, it meant that Rush Week lasted about three days.

So they insisted that I hold off, and I'm so glad they did, because I would've pledged Delta Tau Delta instead of Beta if I'd done it that first week. It's a good fraternity. I mean, I certainly would've been happy there, but—I guess, to some extent—my grandfather, my mother's father, my grandfather, was a Beta, and my father had been instrumental in getting the Beta chapter started at Washington and Lee. He was a DEK, actually, and they had a group that organized to petition a fraternity, and they petitioned DEK, and didn't get it. My father felt they were a fine group of young men, and they ought to go ahead and get a fraternity, and when DEK didn't give them a charter—I don't know all the background, but some way he'd got to know some of the presidents and national leaders of Beta Theta Pi, and thought it was a good institution, so he helped them petition Beta, and they got it.

I think a cousin of my mother's, and I think maybe one of my father's cousins, was, by that time—yeah, Howard McCain, they were both in this group that was petitioning. So anyway, he had a hand in getting the Beta chapter started, and my mother. It had been a strong chapter all along, and my mother's father, my grandfather, being a Beta, I think they wanted to be sure that I had a good look at Beta before I pledged. It was all right. I mean, they weren't going to insist I be a Beta at all, or that I not pledge something else, but they wanted to be sure I took a good look at Beta.

So I did, and joined Beta, I guess in late October, early November, something like that. Then I ate all my dinners at the Beta House, and went home for lunch, so I saw my mother and father at lunch. So I felt I was away at college, that I wasn't just living at home and going to college.

It was interesting being in some of those classes, with people I knew quite well. I'll always remember Dr. Livingston Smith, Livingston Waddell Smith. I don't whether you've come upon him or not.

**Warren:** Not yet.

**Shannon:** He was a Cincinnati professor of math, and quite a character. He was a grandson of the founding superintendent of VMI. I had freshmen math with him. His daughter was a year younger than I was. I used to play with her. We'd go to birthday parties of hers and so on. She was very shy, and I never really did know her that well. But anyway, she was part of the social scene, and I knew her mother and father quite well.

Again, he had a big classroom up in Washington Hall, and it was set up so that about half of it was open. There were blackboards on both sides and in the front, so the blackboards went all the way around, then seats were the other half. He regularly taught class by—I had trigonometry with him the first term and college algebra the second term. He always taught class by sending a lot of people to the blackboard, to work problems on the blackboard, and other people worked at their seats. He'd lecture and teach part of the time, then work these things, and then he'd go over what was on the blackboard, and show what people had made mistakes, and what the problem was, and he'd work on it.

And he had a very funny way of talking. In trigonometry, I remember, he used to take a yardstick, and he'd make angles with his yardstick, sitting at his desk, and then ask you questions about it. I can remember, and he'd say, "All right, what would the cosine of Angle B be? Shannon?" You never knew who he was going to ask, and he'd scare you to death, nearly. [Laughter] Then he used to get up and work examples for us, teaching us on the blackboard. In the spring, particularly, spring and fall, he'd have the window, big window, open, out to the side of his desk, and he'd get the chalk down a little short. He'd throw the chalk out the window. [Laughter]

Generally, he was known as "Dr. Liv," and I grew up as boy, you know, calling him Dr. Liv. I remember, "Great day!" was one of his favorite expressions. He'd say, "Great day! Jones, you ought to know better than that!" Another one—he had a fellow

named Faulkner, I remember, in the class. By this time, a lot of people in his class were sons of people he'd taught before. I remember, Faulkner wasn't doing too well, and he'd say, "Faulkner!" and he'd stumble around, and he'd say, "Great day, Faulkner! Your father could do better than that!" [Laughter]

So one day, he was working something on the blackboard, and there was some discussion about what was right, and so on, and I got into a discussion with him. He said something, and I was intense about something, and without even thinking, I said – I can't come up with it, but anyway, I said whatever it was, "Dr. Liv." The rest of the class nearly fell out of their chairs, calling this austere figure "Dr. Liv." [Laughter] But, of course, he was familiar with me. It didn't bother him. He never blinked an eye, we went right on with the discussion. But it just came out inadvertently, "Dr. Liv." People asking me, "What in the world are you doing, calling him 'Dr. Liv?'" [Laughter] So that was one aspect.

**Warren:** Wonderful story. Tell me about some of the other faculty members. Tell me about the other people you thought a lot of, or interacted with, or people you didn't like.

**Shannon:** Well, another one of the great characters in my time was Hig Williams. I don't know whether you've heard about him or not.

**Warren:** Tell me about him.

**Shannon:** He was an excellent teacher, and quite a character.

**Warren:** What did he teach?

**Shannon:** He taught political science. I had, as a sophomore, introductory, general political science, I guess a full year of it with him. Then he taught a course in international law, which I took my senior year. It was big class. We had about fifty people in that class. He'd been in the diplomatic service. I think he'd been a consul in the state department. I've forgotten. I think he'd been a consul to Ceylon, and so he

had some stories about diplomatic service overseas. He lectured and asked questions, and he was really a very good teacher, but he also, as I say, had his quirks.

I think that senior year was a good class, that international law course. It was really sort of the history of international law, introductory history of international law. It was a good course, but, I don't know, quite frequently, he'd come in – I don't know whether he wasn't well, or what, he'd come in, and call the roll, and then dismiss the class. [Laughter] He'd call the whole roll, nearly fifty of us in there. "Shannon" was down toward the end of the roll, in that course. I can remember his calling the roll, getting down to "Shannon," and somebody named "Wysong". A man named Wysong was the last man on the roll, and he'd call through this roll, and say, "All right, class dismissed." [Laughter] As I say, we got a lot out of it, and he mostly lectured in that course. I remember it was a good exam. I enjoyed taking his exam. But he dismissed class quite frequently. We used to go in there sometimes, taking bets on whether we were going to get dismissed or not. [Laughter]

**Warren:** Did you ever know why that happened?

**Shannon:** No, I don't know why it happened. He just had a marvelous personality, and he was good. I mean, you really learned a whole lot from him. He did expect good performance. I remember in that sophomore class, he used to throw pop quizzes every now and then in that sophomore class, give you a little pop quiz for about ten minutes at the beginning of the class. One day, I really hadn't done my homework. I was on the Dean's List. I don't know what they do now, but in those days, if you were on the Dean's List, you had unlimited cuts. Otherwise, other students had only so many cuts. You could only miss so many classes without getting on probation. But I had unlimited cuts, and I came into this class and sat down. I saw him get up and start writing on the blackboard, and I knew he was going to write a pop quiz up there, so while he was at the blackboard, I got up and walked out. [Laughter] I was told afterwards that he was going on talking about something, and he would ask questions from time to time. And

he was going along, and he said, "Well, what about that, Mr. Shannon?" and no answer. He looked up, and somebody said, "Mr. Shannon's not here." He said, "Well, I thought I saw Mr. Shannon in this class. In fact, I'm sure I saw Mr. Shannon in this class!"

[Laughter]

**Warren:** Gotcha!

**Shannon:** Yeah. But he didn't give me a hard time about it. Anyway, I avoided that pop quiz.

Of course, Fitz Flournoy was really one of the well-known teachers. I guess he was our first Rhodes Scholar. He got a "first" in English at Oxford. I had Chaucer with him my senior year. I would have had it with my father. I did have Shakespeare with my father, which, of course, was a great experience, my junior year, all year. He died just, I guess about three weeks before the end of the term, had a coronary thrombosis. I'd come home for lunch, and he said he wasn't feeling very well, didn't feel like eating very much, and just ate an egg and a piece of toast, I think.

We'd generally lay down for about fifteen minutes after lunch and just chatted, Mother and I and my father. We had two big double beds in the big front room there, on the second floor, in the Lee-Jackson House. I was lying on the bed beside him, and all of a sudden, he sort of snorted, and I thought he'd just dropped off to sleep, as he occasionally did after lunch. But then he got very red in the face, and it looked as though he were choking, and I realized something was wrong. Mother said, "Run, call Dr. McClung."

The doctors all used to have their offices on Washington Street, just going up on the right-hand side, going from Washington and Lee up to Main Street. They were on the right-hand side going up the hill there. So I called Dr. McClung. He was in his office. It was one o'clock or something. By this time, we had abandoned the old two-hour dinner thing. There was a break from 12:30 to 1:30, or something like that, and

then there were afternoon classes, a couple of hours of afternoon classes. You did have lunch and ate dinner at night.

He just had a coronary, and so was gone by the time the doctor had got there. There was really nothing that could have been done about it.

But at any rate, of course, it was a great experience to have that class with him. I was going to have – my senior year, I would have had Chaucer, Anglo-Saxon, and nineteenth century poetry with him. I would have had three out of my four classes with him, which was a great loss.

I did have Chaucer with Fitz Flournoy, which was very good. It made me think of it also, when we had that case, that honor case, it was the night before my Chaucer exam, and that just knocked out my final review for the Chaucer exam. I had an "A" going into the exam, but I certainly knew if I didn't have a chance to study – so about eleven o'clock, I got back from the Honor Committee thing, and I called Fitz – I didn't call him Fitz – but called him, and told him what the situation was, and asked him if I could have the morning to study and take the exam in the afternoon. He said, "All right," he would do, and if I'd be sure not to come on the campus and talk to anybody who had taken the test. He'd just give me the same test, which, of course, I said I'd do.

So I did get a chance to study, but it had sort of broken my routine. I went into that exam and looked at it, and the first question, I just drew a blank. I couldn't – well, I had sense enough just to let it go, and went on. I saw questions I could answer, and I went on and answered questions. Then by the time I'd got relaxed and got in and answered the other questions, I went back to it, and it all came to me, and I was able to write it down. But it was a scary, scary feeling. I just suddenly tensed on it somewhat.

**Warren:** Tell me about him as a teacher, Fitz Flournoy.

**Shannon:** Well, he was a very good teacher. Again, he was something of a character. I never observed it, but the story was, he used to come to class with a black shoe on and a brown shoe on, sometimes. [Laughter] But he loved the literature and the Chaucer. He



loved to read it, and he loved to talk about it, so he was a very warm, infectious teacher of literature.

And then Ollie Crenshaw, I had history with Ollie Crenshaw, American history with Ollie Crenshaw. He was an excellent teacher. Big, tall, gangly fellow. He used to walk around a lot at the front of the class, but nobody walked around the way Liv Smith did. He'd start a problem on one blackboard on this side, and keep on going all the way around, come all the way around, walking around, doing the thing on three blackboards, demonstrating it on three blackboards, and then throw his chalk out the window. [Laughter] Sometimes he threw chalk at people, too, when he got exasperated with some boy who hadn't done his homework, or wasn't coming up with the answer, he'd throw chalk at you. I never got chalk thrown at me.

**Warren:** I can remember an eraser hitting me on the side of the head in high school. I know the feeling. It only happened once, though.

**Shannon:** To go back to Liv Smith, also I remember one time he sent a bunch of us, about six of us, to the blackboard to work, and he had the rest of the people working down at their desks. It was a very hard problem. I can't remember. We were all struggling with the darn thing, and I think none of us had really finished the problem, and finally, he said, "Well, let's see what the bright boys have done." [Laughter] We were all "A" students that he'd sent to the board, and none of us had gotten it, so he went over it and showed how we'd all messed up. "Oh," he said, "they didn't do very well today, did they?" [Laughter] He really liked to ride people.

Let's see. I guess – whom else? I can't think of his name – we had a man, Dr. Hoyt was the head of the biology department. Of course, his nickname was "Bugs," Bugs Hoyt. But I didn't have a course with him. Again, he had two sons. I was just the age of the youngest, and the other was about two years older, and I played a lot with them. They lived over on Washington Street, over there, right opposite the SAE House.

I played a lot with them. There was a younger man who died real early, whose name I can't remember, but I had biology with him, and I really enjoyed that biology course.

I took Dr. Howe – it was not the introductory. I'd had physics in high school, in prep school, so I was able to take – I didn't take the absolutely introductory course in chemistry. I took the first term of it, I guess, and then went into a more advanced chemistry course. That was a big course. There were about fifty of us in there. I learned a lot of chemistry, and Dr. Howe was quite an eminent professor. He didn't teach; he lectured, primarily. He really didn't teach a lot. He threw an awful lot of stuff at you without – we used to have all kinds of homework problems that we didn't get much help with. You had to figure it out yourself. I didn't feel often that he was as helpful as some other professors. I got an "A" in the course. I think there were only about six or eight of us that got "As," and it was a five-hour course, so an "A" with a five-hour course, you got fifteen quality points. That was a big help in those days. [Laughter] So it was a good experience, and I knew Dr. Howe well. I knew him growing up as a child, very fond of him, but I didn't feel he was as good a teacher in his subject as some of the others were, particularly this man in biology whose name I can't remember.

Dr. [Leonard Clinton] Helderman in history was an awfully good man, also. I didn't have a course with him, but I wrote an essay for the Society of Cincinnati Essay Prize, which I got, and I guess he was really the judge for the competition. I don't think there was much competition. I don't think there were more than about three or so of us that wrote for it. He called me in afterwards, after I won it. I knew there were records in the state library, original documents. He said I ought to go consult those original documents and add to my essay and get it published. so he was very encouraging about that. And I did, that summer, after I graduated, I went down and spent about a week working in the state library, and got all those documents, and – well, it really was

an essay about my collateral ancestor, William Shannon. I got it published in the *South Atlantic Quarterly*. He was a very fine scholar and teacher.

**Warren:** Tell me about Ollie Crenshaw. Of course, you know I'm following in the footsteps of Ollie Crenshaw, with his having done *General Lee's College*. So I'm very intrigued by him as a person.

**Shannon:** Well, I don't know exactly what to say about him. He was a good teacher, covered the work thoroughly, and his presentations were interesting. He was a big, tall, lanky fellow. He played on the tennis team. He was just an awfully nice guy. He was just a very enjoyable person to have a class with. It was an interesting class. It was only that one class that I had with him. His nickname was "Jolly Ollie." He was always very jolly. [Laughter]

**Warren:** I've never heard that before. There are some great nicknames at that place. There are some wonderful nicknames.

**Shannon:** Well, Dr. Easter, who was the head of French department, he taught French; I guess he was head of Romance Languages, he lived in what's now the Morris House the whole time I was growing up. I guess he died there about the time I was a sophomore at Washington and Lee. His nickname was "Cutie." He was a little sort of chubby fellow, and smoked a little pipe that ran down like that. So he was known as "Cutie." [Laughter] I never had a class with him.

I took French. I had French with George Irvin [phonetic] my first year, and with a man named Smith. I guess he died in my freshman year, because a man named Smith—what was first name? I can't think. At any rate, I had second-year French with him. He was a good teacher. Boy, did he ever bang those French idioms into us. We really worked like dogs on those French idioms. Can't remember any of them now, probably. [Tape recorder turned off.]

I guess we were talking about Ollie Crenshaw. I don't think I can add much more to that. He was just an awfully nice man and a very good teacher.

One of my extremely valuable experiences at Washington and Lee was actually a course in art history taught by a man named Wahl [phonetic], who wasn't there very long, so he was not really much part of the history of the faculty at Washington and Lee, not a person that we really – I think he was associated with Washington and Lee, but he really gave us a good course, and we used Gardener's [phonetic] book of – Gardener's – what's her name? Helen Gardener, I guess. Probably superseded now, but it was a standard for a long time, a history of art. That was a two-semester course, from the beginning to modern times. We had a lot of emphasis in the second term on the French Impressionists.

VMI – actually, Dr. Mosely [phonetic], Colonel Mosely, down at VMI, was a very good art teacher there. VMI really had a better collection of prints and slides than we had, so we spent a lot of time at the VMI library. Again, Wahl made us know this stuff. The tests were slides, where you had about a minute. He threw a slide on the board, and you had about a minute to identify the name of it and the painter, and write a quick little comment on it.

**Warren:** That was a fairly new thing, to have the arts at Washington and Lee at that point.

**Shannon:** Yeah, it was. It gave me an enrichment and a background that I've treasured ever since. I got a wonderful education at Washington and Lee, really, and a very broad one. I majored in English, but I took quite a bit of history and political science and language. I did French through third-year French, and I did one year of German, and did science with a full year of biology, and a full year of chemistry, a good year of math. Dr. Liv wanted me to – it was funny, in those days, calculus was a sophomore course, and very few people took calculus. I didn't take calculus in high school, so I never had calculus, but Dr. Liv wanted me to go on. I was doing so well, he wanted me to go ahead and take calculus. I would liked to have done it, but with all the stuff that I knew I wanted and needed as background to go ahead, I was pretty sure I was going

ahead in graduate school in English, and generally, with other things I thought I needed to have for English, I just didn't have time to take it. My sophomore year, one term, I think I took—I think I had something like seven classes one term there. It nearly killed me, but I managed it. [Laughter]

**Warren:** That's quite a load.

**Shannon:** Yeah. I may be exaggerating. I had quite a few extra hours, just in order to accommodate what I needed to do at that point.

**Warren:** Well, you've really spent your entire adult life in education. Looking back, do you feel that Washington and Lee gave you a good background?

**Shannon:** Yes, it really did. Excellent. It was just such a marvelous place to be, too. I don't think I could've done any better. I might have been challenged more at Harvard or someplace at that point than I was at Washington and Lee, but I had all I could say grace over. Also, I was very much interested in campus politics and extracurricular activities in those days, too. [Laughter] I was trying to keep up a first-rate academic record, and very much interested in learning. At the same time, I was interested in what was going on outside of Washington and Lee.

**Warren:** Well, I know Washington and Lee is very proud of you.

**Shannon:** Well, I'm very grateful to Washington and Lee, and I'm very proud to have had the opportunity to stay in touch with Washington and Lee, and particularly to serve Washington and Lee by being a member of the board, which was a very high honor and a great experience. Certainly pleased to do it. One of the nice things about the board is getting to know people that are from different eras of the university. I was just out skiing with Fox and Zinkie Benton, out in Utah, about ten days ago. Fox and I were on the board, and also, Jerry South, we were on the board together. Both of them, I think, were something like class of '61 or '62, something like that, so they were a good fifteen years behind me. I didn't know them at all. When we served on the board, we got to be great friends.

**Warren:** What years were you on the board?

**Shannon:** I think something like '74 to when? Two six-year terms from '74 would have been—I think to '86. I think '74 to '86, something like that.

**Warren:** So you were on the board during the coeducation decision?

**Shannon:** Yeah, I was chairman of the Academic Policy Committee when we did—

**Warren:** I thought we were going to end up, but can I have ten minutes more of your time, and pop in another tape?

**Shannon:** Yeah.

[Begin Tape 2, Side 1]

**Warren:** This is Mame Warren. I'm still with Edgar Shannon in Charlottesville, Virginia, on the 15th of April 1996.

We just got to talking about his period on the board, and I'm real excited, because you were involved in the coeducation decision. Tell me about your experiences with that.

**Shannon:** Well, I think it really was a fine experience for the board, because we did spend a little over a year, I suppose, with each committee of the board, undertaking a thorough study of what coeducation would mean, how it would affect that area of Washington and Lee. By the time we got through with that analysis, of course, it was solid background we needed to make the decision, but we knew more about Washington and Lee than we'd ever known before. So I think the board really had the feeling of—I certainly had the feeling that I understood and knew more about the entire institution than ever before. So I think it made us all better board members than we would have been otherwise.

We had told John Wilson, as a part of the interview—I was on the selection committee for John Wilson. When we interviewed him, he actually said he admired Washington and Lee for, to some extent, sticking to its guns, maintaining an all-male institution when so many people are going otherwise. But we also told him—and I'd

been on the committee that reviewed coeducation – when was it, in '75, I guess – and we came to the conclusion that everything was going well, and other than the fact that we were denying a Washington and Lee education to women, there was no compelling need, in terms of the quality of the institution – alumni support, finances, and so on – to become coeducational, but we felt, in our report, that situations can change, and the whole educational ethos and the circumstances of higher education can change, and we'd need to revisit it, and be prepared to revisit it as circumstances warranted.

So we told John, and I think some of the other members of the board weren't aware of this until, really, at the time we were making the decision. I was glad we had the chance to clear it up, actually, but the selection committee had told him that we realized that things could change, and that we felt that he should be free to examine this. If he became president, he was free to examine coeducation. We weren't saying it's cast in stone.

So after he'd been there a year, maybe into his second year, he was getting word from Hartog that there were real problems in admissions and we weren't getting the quality of admissions. Our admission was dropping off, and the faculty were getting disturbed about the quality they were seeing in the classroom. So he asked Hartog to make a study and make a report to the board, and Hartog had done a very thorough study that showed trends, he felt, in the next ten years, and that the trends were going to be going against us, particularly because we were only able to deal with half of the cohort that was out there – half or maybe not quite even half – and that probably we were going to be slipping down academically pretty badly.

So at that point, John said he would like to study the whole thing further, and would the board go ahead and study it by committees, which we did. Certainly on the academic affairs side, it was perfectly clear that our selectivity, and the board scores and rank in class and everything, was dropping. Over a three-year period, it was just dropping steadily, and it didn't seem it would reverse. Particularly the Student Life

Committee, they were very much concerned, of course, about how it would affect the fraternities and athletics and all of that sort of thing.

And then the question of the size of the institution was a big one. We felt that one of the strengths of Washington and Lee was its relative smallness. I guess the Finance Committee felt it would help the finances. At any rate, we were in a position where the committees all studied the thing thoroughly and all made their reports. Of course, having been through it over here, at the University of Virginia – I was president when we did it over here. Of course, we had the added impetus. Legally we didn't have a leg to stand on as a state institution. Washington and Lee was not under that compulsion, but, still, I think we were all beginning to be concerned that we were isolating ourselves from a lot of experience that we needed and that men needed.

At any rate, we had a few people who were diehards, to some extent, but a very open-minded board, I think. I guess we had a preliminary meeting where it pretty clear, where we had the reports from the committees, I think. No, I guess we had a special meeting in the summer, specifically to address this, and I guess we had a day meeting for committee reports and discussions. Then we decided that we would have the final discussion and vote. There was some concern, a feeling that it ought to be decisive, that we didn't want to be in a position where it was a split vote, maybe only carried by one vote or two votes, and so the board was split. We came to a basic agreement that whichever way it went – and at that point, literally, I had no sense of which way it was going to go. I felt very strongly that we should go coeducational, particularly on the academic side, but I no idea where it was going.

There was then some idea that maybe we ought to pass a resolution that unless it was, say, two-thirds – I think there were twenty-two on the board then, something like that – unless we had seventeen for it or against it, we wouldn't go with the majority. We'd stay where we were until we could go with it further. But we voted that down. We decided we ought to leave it just however it came out. And then we agreed that



whichever way it went, everybody would fall in line, that we weren't going to have any minority reports, we weren't going to have any people trying to undermine things. We would stand by whichever way it came out.

Then we started going around the table and letting everybody have his say. We started with the president here, and started on his left, going around. I was next to the last one, I think, over here. But by the time it got around to me, it was pretty clear we were going to go – I mean, we were going to go coeducational. But, of course, I put in my strong view about it from the point of view of academics.

Also, we had a major survey of the alumni. We got a firm to do a major survey, and the alumni, obviously – I've forgotten exactly the figures, but they were something like 76 percent against coeducation, if you just – on coeducation, or not, on the "druthers." But they also had a question – they had other questions – but they had a question, "If it's a matter of the academic quality of the institution that hinges on coeducation, would you approve it?" I think it was something like 82 percent said if it was a question of academic quality, if that was what was required, why, they would support it. So that was evidence of some pretty strong support, even though sort of intuitively most people felt, this is the way it is and we don't want to change it, it's done well for all these centuries.

At any rate, by the time we got through, it was pretty – and some people said they woke up in the middle of the night and made the decision finally that they should be in favor of it, and hadn't made up their mind until then.

I think that a few people blamed John, were a little bitter about it, because they thought he had come with an agenda to make it coeducational, which was not so at all. Those of us who had been on the selection committee, we knew that it was just the opposite, actually, and he had only come to it and finally recommended it through careful study and evaluation of the whole situation, and feeling for the future of the institution. And he was very wise, too. I think he said to me, he said – he may have

said it to others, probably did – that he felt we had to get this behind at the beginning of his time, that either we'd get it settled one way or the other, and go ahead, or it would be dragging on, and it would be interfering with everything the whole time. And so I think he was very wise to go ahead and face it right away, even though it was going to be a hardship, and he got a lot of hate mail.

At any rate, we then took a straw vote, and I think it was seventeen to six, or whatever, seventeen to five, or whatever it was. So we had what we would have required had we passed that resolution. Then we took a formal vote and passed it, and went out and told the press. A couple of the people, several of us, I think about four of us, went to the press conference, and at least one member who had been very much opposed to it came right along and stood right behind it. So we never had any acrimony or division on the board about it at all. It was really, I thought, a very heartwarming, wonderful process that we went through to come to a decision that turned out to be vital, and a great help to Washington and Lee in the long run.

**Warren:** Did you ever have any hesitations, as an alumnus, about doing it, or had your experiences at the University of Virginia overwritten any hesitations you might have had?

**Shannon:** Well, back in '75, when I was on the committee, I was certainly in favor of staying single-sex then, but by the time we got to the second go-round, it was clear to me that the welfare of the institution really depended on it. And so it wasn't just that we needed – it wasn't because we were losing a lot of women, but the quality of the men was really deteriorating, because men didn't want to go to an all-male institution anymore.

We were still being considered a selective institution, but that last year we admitted something like 60 percent of the people that applied, so we were not selective at all. Davidson and other institutions that really were our peers had already done it and had excellent results from it, so all the testimony we got from other places, too, was

very favorable. So I had no qualms about it at all, thought it was essential, and, of course, it rescued our selectivity. I think this year, we're something like 30 percent, only accepting 30 percent of our applications. So we're in the high selective area now.

And, before, the faculty were opposed to it, also. There were only a few people in the faculty. I guess the time before, the faculty were split on it. They were slightly – I think it was nearly fifty-fifty, maybe 51 percent for it, for coeducation. This time, the faculty was over 80 percent for it. I mean, the faculty were really demanding it, almost. They could see what was happening in the classroom.

**Warren:** Well, there are a lot of grateful people, to you and to the people who made that brave decision. It was a brave decision.

**Shannon:** Yeah, well, it was, and we took it very seriously. As I say, I think we really did an excellent – it wasn't something we hurried into or jumped into. We did an excellent exercise of leading up to it, and everyone, or most everyone, was convinced, and the people who opposed it, as I say, fell right into line. I think even all of them have come around now.

**Warren:** I don't see anybody who's regretting it now.

**Shannon:** Had a little tension there at first, because some of the residual male classes were not as strong as the entering classes and they were challenged a lot by these women, these bright women who came in, too. There was a little friction for a couple of years, but, still, considering everything, it was a very smooth transition.

**Warren:** Well, thank you. I've taken a great deal of your time, but I am really, really grateful to have gotten that down.

**Shannon:** Well, I'm grateful to have a chance to talk with you.

**Warren:** It's been really delightful, as everyone promised me it would be. Everyone said, "Oh, you're going to see Edgar Shannon? You're going to have a great time."

Thank you.

[End of interview]

