

JOHN M. STEMMONS

Mame Warren,
Interviewer

Warren: This is Mame Warren. Today is the tenth of February, 1997. I'm in Dallas, Texas, with John Stemmons. And, boy, I have been looking forward to chatting with you, mostly because of the interesting time you came to Washington and Lee. What brought you to Washington and Lee in the first place? What was the attraction?

Stemmons: I had a brother preceding me. He was a great devotee of the Confederacy, and he was a lawyer, and so it just followed that I would go to W&L, having never been there and knowing nothing about it. But it was a great choice.

Warren: Tell me why.

Stemmons: Well, I was a country boy, raised in a small town, Dallas. I had been given the privilege of travel with my family, my father. My mother died when I was six months old, so I never knew her. By the way, she went to school in Staunton, at the school there.

Warren: Mary Baldwin?

Stemmons: Mary Baldwin. But she died right after my birth, and so I never saw her. But we had lots of trips together with family, never, as I remember it, as a youngster, before going to W&L, to Lexington, but all over the world, all over the continental United States and Canada and all the states of the Union and New England, but not necessarily in the South. But the idea that I could go to a school like that—I was not a good student. I hadn't been a good student in high school and was not a good student at Washington and Lee, but I enjoyed it tremendously because it was a cosmopolitan atmosphere that taught me a great deal more than I think book-learning would. I

became connected and associated with people from all over the country. They broadened my views of things, and I think it gave me a real wonderful liberal education, though I was certainly never a student like my brother-in-law, who put me on this board.

Warren: Well, we're glad he did, from what I understand. Do you remember your first impressions when you got to campus, what you thought of the place?

Stemmons: Well, in the days of yore we traveled by either automobile or train, mostly by train, and I sojourned up to Staunton, Virginia, by transferring on trains from Dallas to St. Louis to Staunton. And having had this brother of mine who was a very prominent person at the school, he was a great football player, he was a great athlete, he was a good student, he took his law degree there, and the law degree was given there in five years, and I had introductions to many of his friends and mostly to the friends in his fraternity who decided that they wanted me to join their lodge, which I did, and enjoyed it tremendously.

Warren: So that's how you became a Beta?

Stemmons: That's right. Dr. Smith used to say, when his son was a Beta, he said, "Oh, I'd rather my son be a godly Beta than a drunken, carousing Phi Delta Theta."

[Laughter] Dr. Smith was the president of the university and welcomed me at his home every time I came into it because I was a perfect stranger to him. He was a great person.

Warren: Tell me about him. I'm very curious about him.

Stemmons: Well, he was a scholar, simply a scholar. This was his forte in life. He had a family that lived on campus, and two of his boys went to school there, and they became Betas. He, frankly, unlike Dr. Gaines, who came to the school to meet every one of us and recognized the names of the whole freshman class on the party that they always had for the new arrivals, but Dr. Smith could never remember a single thing,

just like I don't now. [Laughter] But he was a scholar and a wonderful man to head the school. That's about all I can say to him. He was a wonderful gentleman.

Warren: So you were there during that transition when Smith left and Gaines came in.

Stemmons: Yes.

Warren: That's an interesting time. Tell me about that.

Stemmons: I know nothing about it other than the fact that Gaines came in, and Smith had been so awe-stricken, from the students' standpoint, to have a man come in as congeniality expounding from himself was a very great transition. Gaines was a brilliant man, but he was the man that I think invented the Nut Institute. You remember, you've got to put your mind on some little spot to remember every name of every man that you ever knew, and he did that. And he followed through as president tremendously well, as I think Smith did very well during his tenure, but Gaines made a real mark for the school and himself during the time that he was there, because he knew every student by name, and he was congenial.

Warren: I understand there were several deans who could do that, too, at least later on. I just think that's remarkable.

Stemmons: That's just absolutely amazing.

Warren: And it seems to have made such an impression on everybody, because everybody wants to be known and recognized.

Stemmons: That's right.

Warren: I think that's part of why everybody loves Washington and Lee so much.

Stemmons: Well, you know, I had difficulty thinking about this meeting, trying to recollect the names of certain people, and I simply do not recall and have not been able to recall the name of the president of the school when they put me on this board.

Warren: Wouldn't it have been Bob Huntley or Fred Cole?

Stemmons: No. No. I put Bob on the board, but this is the president before.

Warren: Then it was Fred Cole.

Stemmons: Fred Cole. That's right, and he went off to the education section of New England or something like that, a real great guy, but I'd forgotten his name.

Warren: That's who it was. I talked to his son recently.

Stemmons: Is that so?

Warren: Yes. Fred Cole has died, but I talked to one of his sons. I went through a lot of his papers.

I'm real excited to be talking to you, because you're one of the few people I've talked to who was there during Prohibition times and the Roaring Twenties. Were they roaring in Lexington?

Stemmons: Well, honey, when the boys met me at Staunton, they took me to the Beta House, and even though a Beta didn't pin a pledge button on me, a Phi Delta Theta called and said that he was bringing me down and he was going to put the Beta button on me, simply because I was one of four young brothers. Dale Thomas, who is editor of this book, the *Calyx*, and three other boys were hand-me-downs. So they indoctrinated me to the Beta House and how it was operated.

While there were very few automobiles owned by the students, there were a few, and I was told that we would, in a couple of weeks, go to the mountains. So we went to the mountains, and we passed people that looked suspiciously like they didn't like us there, and the farther we went into the mountains, why, the further the people were reticent to accept us. But finally, why, we came upon one old farmer who knew the crew that was there, and we went to the woodpiles here and the woodpiles there, and we took Mason jars out of that one, and we took Mason jars out of this one, and we took Mason jars out of that one, and we drove back with sixty gallons of whiskey.

Warren: Sixty gallons?

Stemmons: Sixty gallons of whiskey in Mason jars, white corn whiskey. I was given the opportunity, and took it, to take a tin cup and hold it under the still and let it drip to the still and taste the whiskey, and it was nearly poison because there was so much oil

in it. But the stories that are told about the school in Prohibition are so, they're true. Most of them are true, I'm sure.

Warren: But, you see, I haven't heard many stories, so I'm asking you to tell me the stories.

Stemmons: [Laughter] Well, that sixty gallons, we took it back to the lodge house, and we acquired some charred kegs. They were charred in the center of the kegs, and we poured the whiskey into those kegs, and we also had some iodine sticks – we called them iodine sticks, that would color the whiskey real fast. But we'd put those kegs in, and sometimes we'd go in the lodge house, had to rock – get in a rocking chair and rock the whiskey in the keg to where it would mellow faster.

There was many times when we went back to the mountains and got more supplies. At one time, I remember distinctly, we hid them in the coal bin, and there was an investigation by the administration about whether we had whiskey in the house or not. They knew we had whiskey in the house, but they never did find the bottles that were hidden in the coal bin. But we dug lots of holes and planted the kegs, and I, frankly, think that I still have one keg of whiskey under the Beta House that I should go and resurrect. [Laughter]

Warren: I dare say you should. Wouldn't that be a great thing to do for the 250th anniversary?

Stemmons: It surely would.

Warren: We could have a ceremony.

Stemmons: Well, you know, they had some sort of a clam bake there that they gave away whiskey, and I have a bottle of that, by the way, and still have it in my bar, Washington and Lee's best whiskey. Of course, it was legal then. But there were times when you could get a doctor to give you a prescription with which you can get a bottle of Old Crow whiskey, something like that, from some little town next to Lexington.

Warren: Really? Well, it's good for what ails you, huh?

Stemmons: Honey, it was — the boys used to go to Kentucky to the basketball games, and there was a medical school in Lexington, I guess, in Kentucky, that would sell them plain White Lightning alcohol, and we'd use the alcohol — we'd always got it if we could, but we'd use the alcohol to play tricks on people, and when we'd drink this corn whiskey, we either had to drink it with some sort of a soda pop that would kill its taste or find a chaser, just chug-a-lug it down and get a chaser of some sort. And I remember one time we had a little glass of the whiskey. Of course it would be, by this time, brown, a gorgeous brown color. When it come out of the still, it was creamy white. We had had a party of some kind, and a man took a drink of corn, and then he got a glass to chase it, and it was alcohol. [Laughter] And damned near — he nearly died.

But we had a good time. We enjoyed what we called rot gut, and, frankly, aa a young kid from the Wild West, I didn't know a thing in the world about whiskey except possibly a little wine and a little beer that my father would make. But the stuff flowed freely.

Warren: Did anybody ever get hurt from this stuff? I've heard stories in the past about people, not at Washington and Lee, but about people getting hurt from drinking some country stuff.

Stemmons: I'm sure they did, but as far as I know, no one ever got injured physically from drinking the whiskey. And I don't say they wouldn't get injured, but they got over it.

Warren: Well, that's good. That's good. Back where I came from, I heard about somebody dying from drinking it.

Stemmons: I'm sure they did, because I'm sure they were poisoned by it. It was the worst stuff you ever saw in your life. Lots of it was oil. But it was the thing to do. [Laughter]

Warren: I guess it must have been worth it.

Stemmons: It was the thing to do. We used to have a good time doing it.

Warren: So was this something that just the Washington and Lee gentlemen took part in, or did your dates have a good time and have a drink or two as well?

Stemmons: They had to. They would doctor the stuff up to where it would taste at least acceptable.

Warren: Did you have a car when you were there?

Stemmons: No, I didn't.

Warren: But did you go down the road? Did you get to the women's colleges?

Stemmons: Oh, frequently, but not much. Not much.

Warren: Do you have any memories of road trips?

Stemmons: Well, not to the schools. I didn't go to Hollins and Macon. We probably went to Randolph-Macon more than we did Hollins or Sweet Briar, and we went to Southern Seminary some and to the school in Staunton some, but not a great deal. I never did—that was not my forte at that time. But the girls would come over, and they would come over for all the festivities and dances, and we had a good time.

Warren: Did you go to Fancy Dress?

Stemmons: Yes, indeed. I think we went to all of the parties.

Warren: What do you remember about that?

Stemmons: I was never a good dancer, and it was an occasion for drinking rather than dancing.

Warren: I was looking at the yearbooks from your time period, and I saw that the theme for Fancy Dress one of the years you were there was Robin Hood.

Stemmons: Yeah. [Laughter]

Warren: Do you remember those costumes?

Stemmons: No, I don't. I certainly don't. But they did a good job in Fancy Dress. They just knew how to throw a good party.

Warren: Well, they still do. They still do. I've never been to a place that had better parties than Washington and Lee.

So I've got to ask you about a couple of people in particular that I would love to know something about. Did you know Annie Jo White, the librarian?

Stemmons: Yes.

Warren: You did?

Stemmons: Yes.

Warren: Tell me about her.

Stemmons: But not well. She lived up on the crook of the street that went from Washington and Lee in front of the Beta House. Just casually, just casually, but not anything that I can remember. I was impressed with her. I thought she was a grand gal, and that's all.

Warren: I understand she rented rooms out?

Stemmons: What's that?

Warren: She rented rooms to students. Did you know anybody who lived there?

Stemmons: I don't know. There were a number of houses up in that area. It was on — comes from W&L to VMI. A good many houses in that area, and two of my good friends from Dallas had rooms there, and I don't remember whether they were at Miss White's or not. I just don't remember. But when I first came to Washington and Lee, I had a room way up in the opposite direction from that. But I didn't live in the dormitory. I lived in that private home, and it was a very nice thing to do.

Warren: So you never lived in the dorm?

Stemmons: Yes, I lived in the dorm. I never lived in the dorm; I lived in the lodge house, but never in a dormitory.

Warren: So you lived in a private home as well?

Stemmons: Uh-huh.

Warren: Tell me about that.

Stemmons: Oh, it was a delightful, delightful home, and I couldn't remember the lady's name who owned the home, but she was such a wonderful girl. There were several

people from Dallas that lived in one half of it, and my cousin and I lived in the other quarter of it, and for another quarter was some other people. My father thought that this brainy cousin of mine, who had gone to Illinois, would be a good environment, would set a good environment for me, and so he came to Washington and Lee, graduated there, by the way, in law, and was actually the secretary of United States Steel Corporation, a good student, and God knows I needed some tender care.

[Laughter]

But it was good, it was interesting living. The transition was a little bit better than just coming into the dormitory, but, of course, we were half a mile from the school, and we didn't walk that frequently. We would just go when we had to. Mine was a life of play and enjoyment at W&L.

You know this fellow that just gave Washington and Lee a lot of money from San Antonio, and Dr. Desha told him, said, "You're neither a gentleman nor a scholar."

[Laughter] Kicked him out, and then he gave twelve, thirteen million dollars to Washington and Lee later on. I was certainly not a scholar, but I enjoyed the camaraderie of that great institution.

Warren: You know, we ought to talk a tiny bit about the academic side of things. Were there any teachers who made a difference for you?

Stemmons: What's that?

Warren: Were there any teachers whose classes you did enjoy?

Stemmons: Yes, and I've tried to remember the names of the professors that taught the things that I really reveled in. I was primarily coming up there to make a major of engineering, but I never did do well in it. Physics was a pretty rough deal for me. I just don't have the memory to keep those names, though.

Warren: Sure.

Stemmons: I can't tell you.

Warren: That's perfectly okay.

Stemmons: The man who taught comparative religions was very interesting to me. The man that taught about development of the sheep industry was especially interesting to me.

Warren: The sheep industry?

Stemmons: Uh-huh, because of Texas. I was from Texas, and the sheep industry was pretty much cornered at that time in west Texas, and I became very interested in his classes.

Warren: So you were in the commerce school? Is that right, School of Commerce?

Stemmons: Uh-huh.

Warren: Well, something must have rubbed off on you. You've done all right.

Stemmons: [Laughter] Well, it wasn't because I studied.

Warren: I've got to ask you about a story. You may or may not know a thing about it, but I've heard rumors that sometime, and I think it was before you were there, some group of students hijacked a train. Have you ever heard that story? Do you know anything about it? It sounds like a great story, but nobody seems to know when it happened or who did it or what. It seems like there must be somebody out there who heard about that. I keep hoping. I ask everybody.

Stemmons: Well, it was not during my tenure, I don't think, but the train was the accepted travel. In the 1920s and thirties and forties, you went by train, and you didn't get on a airplane. Now, during my tenure, we've had a couple of boys that were graduated and flew airplanes, and they would fly down to Lexington and put on a little show.

Warren: Really?

Stemmons: Uh-huh. Out towards—in the area of Roanoke Road.

Warren: That's interesting.

Stemmons: But not much. We drove a car. Many times when I went home, some of the boys were from Dallas, and they had a car, and I drove with them.

Warren: That must have been educational. You saw a lot of the country that way.

Stemmons: Yes, we did. As a matter of fact, when I first went to — one of the times I went to Washington and Lee, I had a relative, a dear old aunt in Charlotte, and I took an uncle of mine with me, and we drove to Charlotte and to Lexington, and I don't know where in the world I got the car because I didn't have it at school. But most of the time, though, we went by train, and I'm sure that if it were during my stay at Lexington and there was a train robbery, I would have known about it. [Laughter]

Warren: I think it happened before you, but I figured it must have been such a big deal that people were still talking about it by the time you got there. Maybe they didn't want you to know about it so you wouldn't get any ideas yourself.

Stemmons: That could be.

Warren: The other thing I noticed when I was looking in your yearbook is that you were there at the same time Leigh Williams was. Did you know him?

Stemmons: Uh-huh.

Warren: Boy, he was a legend there.

Stemmons: Big old tall boy and great athlete and just a hell of a nice guy.

Warren: Tell me about him.

Stemmons: I never did know him but casually, but I knew him on the football field, and he was a good athlete, a real good athlete.

Warren: He seems to have been involved in everything.

Stemmons: Yes, I think he was. You know, I didn't know — give me that *Calyx* over there and let's see what he was involved in.

Warren: I think he was in at least four sports.

Stemmons: Leigh was in my class. [Reading from yearbook] Football: one, two, three, four; basketball: one, two, three four; baseball: one, two, three, four; captain: three; track: one, two, three, four; Southern Conference champion for 440; Monogram Club, president: four; champion indoor, outdoor mile relay; vice president, Athletic

Association. He just was a hell of a damned all-around person and was a tremendous athlete, and I suspect he was a good student, but I don't know, from Norfolk.

Warren: He sure seems to have been an asset to the school.

Stemmons: Oh, yeah. He was a good asset. He was a real fine asset. "Hartwell Leigh Williams, Jr., Phi Kappa Sigma, ODK, Sigma."

Warren: Another story I've heard connected with Leigh Williams is that it was Lewis Powell who went and got him and talked him into coming to Washington and Lee. Do you know anything about that?

Stemmons: He probably did.

Warren: Did you know Lewis Powell?

Stemmons: Very well.

Warren: Tell me about him as a student.

Stemmons: Well, Lewis was a great man on campus. He was a no-frivolous boy, but he was a good fellow on campus. I think he was a Phi Psi, as I remember it.

Warren: He was class of '29.

Stemmons: Well, the class of '31 law.

Warren: Maybe so.

Stemmons: Must be, because —

Warren: I think the law class is up in the front.

Stemmons: Ross Malone was a real great man. I don't know. Of course, Lewis was on this board with me, and, of course, when Lewis was on the damned court, one thing and another, so we'd have meetings, and I had a meeting in Washington at the Marriot Hotel out on the — what's the big airport out from Washington?

Warren: At Dulles?

Stemmons: Dulles. And I had to raise some money for the school, and I got all these people in the room, and I said, "We're going to have a Baptist meeting. I'm going to lock the damned door, and, by God, we're going to get the money, by God, right now.

We're going to raise this money now, and we're not going to let anybody out." Well, Lewis ate me out. Goddamn, he ate me out and absolutely just said, "Don't ever do that to me again. Don't ever do that to me again." Of course, I kidded him about it. But he came by Dallas one day and apologized for chewing me out. [Laughter]

But Lewis was a good student, a wonderful person on campus, and I have known him and seen him considerably since then because I am on the board with him, and quite frequently I go to see Jack or something like that, we're normally at church if somebody has seen Lewis. He's a great guy.

Warren: From what I understand, that's true. I haven't had the pleasure of meeting him yet, though.

I need to turn the tape over.

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

Warren: Did you have any classes with Lewis? I guess he was older than you, so you probably didn't.

Stemmons: No. No.

Warren: One of the things that Washington and Lee is really known for and that we're real proud of is our Honor System. How did you learn about the Honor System, and what did it mean to you?

Stemmons: Well, it's a very unusual structure that the school is renowned for. It's breached occasionally, but not frequently. The school would not have been the school that it was had it not been for that system, operated by the students. It's not operated by the school. There are breaches of it, but it's not usual. It's very, very — it's one of the things that made the school desirable and renowned. I don't know what it has been since then, but I've never heard anyone that's been to the school that has not felt that it was the most important thing, one thing that a man had to learn and understand and conform to if he went there.

Warren: I'm always curious about how it's affected people's lives later in life, how people seem to have kept those principles all through their lives. Is that your experience?

Stemmons: Well, honey, the basic principal is honesty, and this was engendered through this system, as far as I'm concerned, at Washington and Lee. I think that people that went there were blessed with the fact that it was a system run by the students themselves. I think so.

Warren: I think so, too. Something really unique that you were there for, and you're the first person I've talked to who was there at this time, you were there as the Depression started.

Stemmons: Uh-huh.

Warren: Did the stock market crash touch Lexington? Were you, as students, aware of what was happening out in the world?

Stemmons: Oh, the crash was very, very severe, but not in Texas. It didn't hit Texas to the degree that it hit the Northern states. The oil field had been discovered in east Texas, and that was one of the reasons it didn't hit Texas to that degree. But the people would come down and talk about the stock crash, and I wouldn't pay any attention to them. I didn't know of anything. My father just put me through school, and he didn't talk to me about the crash, so to speak. There were a lot of people affected by it tremendously, I'm sure, but I think the boys that went to Washington and Lee were primarily of the group that had sufficient backing in their parentage to put them through it. I don't remember anyone that looked for aid from the school. I'm sure there were people. And the Thomas tribe, they fussed about it a good deal. I roomed with Bill Thomas, Jack's brother.

Warren: I didn't know that.

Stemmons: Bill put this book out. He was the editor-in-chief of this book. He was a Beta. He was one of the little brothers that had to join the lodge. Bill and I have been

very, very close friends, of course, since Ruth married me, and we've visited with them a great deal, and we've taken trips with them considerably, with Liza and Bill. They just live in Bedford, just over the mountain.

Warren: I also noticed in the yearbook that you were on the crew. You were on the Albert Sidney crew.

Stemmons: Yes, and I'm not proud of it. I don't think I rowed as hard as I should have.

Warren: I've talked to a couple of people who were on the crew later on, but you're my first Albert Sidney man.

Stemmons: Well, the crew was interesting, but – well, let's see. As I say, I've always resented the fact that I didn't think I pulled my oars as hard as I could have, and [unclear] beat us.

Warren: And you were on the *Ring-tum Phi*?

Stemmons: Yes.

Warren: Was that important to you?

Stemmons: Not particularly.

Warren: What did you do? Did you write for the *Ring-tum Phi*?

Stemmons: No. No. I was just in the business department of it.

Warren: Oh, you kept it going, huh?

Stemmons: Yeah.

Warren: Well, that's an important job.

Stemmons: Yeah.

Warren: Well, let's switch over to your years on the board, when you were on the board of trustees. You were there during some interesting times. You were on in the late sixties, is that right, and early seventies?

Stemmons: 1965 to 1970-something.

Warren: It's right here, isn't it, tells us. 1965 to 1977.

Stemmons: Long time, and I was on the board — when Jack called me and asked me to get on this board, to consider going on this board, I thought he was drunk. And Jack [unclear] I don't think, [unclear] Jack one time was when we finally broke through and stopped life tenure on that board. I had no idea of being invited to go on the Washington and Lee board. I had no idea. My brother might have been invited, but not me. But for some reason, Jack, who was rector of the board, they wanted a man from Texas, and Jack Thomas proposed me to go, I guess, and then he called me, and I said, "Well, Jack, I can't go on that board." But I did, and it was a fabulous experience, wonderful.

Warren: Tell me why.

Stemmons: Wonderful. Well, it was a wonderful experience. We had good people. We hired good people. Bob Huntley was a star, absolute star. You know, he wasn't president — well, we elected him president. I was on the board that elected him president. Bob was just a real, real wonderful man and gave the support to the board that a president should give.

I was adamantly opposed to coeducation — adamant. I was also adamantly determined to do away with life tenure on the board after I got on it, because there were people on it who had been on it for thirty and forty years, something like that, and they were old and addled, and they could not be constructive as a member of a live board like they had to be. So I took that position of absolute adamancy to life tenure, which was — I was appointed to life tenure on the damn board. [Laughter] And I was adamantly opposed to coeducation.

Warren: Tell me about that.

Stemmons: Well, I'll tell you this, that I think it's been very successful, but I still think it was wrong for Washington and Lee. The boy that's going to have lunch with us is a real good Washington and Lee boy. He works for me.

Warren: Who's that?

Stemmons: Lee Halford. He's a Phi Beta Kappa ODK in his junior year, so you know that he's a student.

Warren: That tells me something.

Stemmons: He's a brilliant man, and I've invited him to have lunch with us just because I want you to get his viewpoint of Washington and Lee.

Warren: Marvelous. Thank you.

Stemmons: Because he's a real brilliant boy, and he's been a very successful man in our business.

I didn't know what had happened to me when they appointed me head of the development committee, and I didn't realize what that entailed, but I found out pretty thoroughly. But the board tenure was delightful in every respect.

Warren: Did the issue of coeducation come up during your tenure?

Stemmons: Oh, good God amighty, yes, yes, yes, and we knocked it down, knocked it down, and knocked it down.

Warren: Tell me about the arguments against it.

Stemmons: Well, the arguments against it we didn't fool with. The arguments for it were ridiculous because we were going to a male institution, and why should you not have a male-exclusive institution? Why shouldn't you have a VMI? Why shouldn't you have one of those schools [unclear]. I would never think that the girls would see any advantage in Lexington, Virginia, to live in, going to school. Hell, they've got Sweet Briar, they've got Hollins, they've got Macon. They've got all those schools right around them and all the women [unclear], but apparently it got [unclear], and it has been successful. I'll have to admit that. Lee's daughter is going to school. She's a coed there, and one of Bill Thomas' children are going to school as coeds.

There was everything to say against it and nothing to say for it. A men's school seemed to me to be a very preferable thing for a man to go to, rather than a coed school. We frequently went to the University of Virginia, but we didn't see that advantage at

W&L. I don't think they were at VPI. As I remember, women weren't involved in VPI, I think.

Warren: Not then, no.

Stemmons: But as I say, I'll have to admit that it has been successful, because it's assimilated real wonderfully well, and it's been accepted now, and I'm just what you'd call an old fogey. [Laughter]

Warren: I like old fogies. Well, how did you feel when you heard the decision had been made to go for coeducation in '83?

Stemmons: Oh, I thought the world had ended. I thought that they had elected people to the board of trustees that were nutty and didn't have the feeling of the school, but I was wrong, absolutely wrong, because it has been successful. I dare say that if I'd been on the board, I would have voted adamantly against it. I know I would.

Warren: Is there anybody out there who still sticks by his guns? I can't find anybody who's still against it. I'd like to find somebody who's still against it. I've yet to find somebody.

Stemmons: I would be against it. [Laughter]

Warren: If you could vote on it today?

Stemmons: If I could vote on it today, I would be against it. I think it's a better school as a men's school than it can be as a coeducational institution. There are many advantages of having the gals at hand. There are many disadvantages, too, as I see it, but I just think that a male school is a good thing. I think a female school is a good thing. I think Sweet Briar is a good thing. I think that college is a good thing. I hope that they stay that way.

Warren: Oh, they're still there. They're definitely still there. Another thing that happened, I think, while you were there was that Washington and Lee started admitting black students. Was that an issue that came before the board?

Stemmons: No, no. And I don't think I ever heard it.

Warren: Didn't hear it being talked about?

Stemmons: No, I don't believe so. I don't think it was—I just don't—I'm blank. That's a blank spot. I'm surprised, when I think about it, that it wasn't thought about, but I didn't think about it.

Warren: It seemed to be a big issue going on in the country, so I wondered whether it was among the board.

Stemmons: Well, it's a terribly important thing to have it accommodated, because this country, while it's been dominated by the white race, they're going to be in the minority in the next few years and in the great minority in fifty or a hundred years.

Warren: Times are changing.

Stemmons: They certainly have.

Warren: You alluded a while ago to when you retired from the board. When I was looking things up, I found an article in the alumni magazine that said that you retired at the same time that the new law school was being dedicated, and that's when they had that big party with the keg of whiskey that you were talking about, that you have the bottle of whiskey left.

Stemmons: Uh-huh.

Warren: I'm just wondering whether that party really was for Lewis Hall or whether it was just a big party to send you off, say "thank you" to you. Apparently it was quite a party.

Stemmons: I don't understand what you mean.

Warren: Well, I just think they were probably showing their gratitude for all you had done for Washington and Lee.

Stemmons: Oh, no. No, no, no, no, no, no, no. This was a wonderful thing, to build that school down there. I've always worried—there was one thing I've always worried about, is that pine forest right next to it. They let that pine forest grow to such a degree that it's a hazard from the standpoint of fire.

No. Washington and Lee, they had that hooch, that bottle of hooch, I don't think I was any instrument of this, its origination, but the building of the law school and the development of the library were really important things when I was there that we would get done.

Have you ever read my degree from Washington and Lee?

Warren: No. Where is it?

Stemmons: If you'll get over there and take it off of the wall, way over here to the right, to the left, the left, it's right there. Just pick it up. That's my degree. Well, you take it over and you read it. [Laughter]

Warren: "Whereas John M. Stemmons has rendered conspicuously distinguished service to his alma mater for twelve years as a member of the board of trustees, and whereas the same twelve years have brought to the university an undue share of its thorniest problems and its most demanding challenges, and whereas John M. Stemmons has repeatedly given dynamic and forthright leadership to his alma matter in meeting these problems and challenges, and whereas John M. Stemmons has, upon his retirement from the board of trustees, been elected by his fellow trustees to the position of trustee emeritus; now, therefore, be it resolved that the board of trustees of Washington and Lee University hereby express its heartfelt appreciation to John M. Stemmons for his leadership, his generosity of spirit and of material substance, for his unflagging good humor; and, furthermore, that the board of trustees hereby convey their sense of affectionate regard and profound esteem to Ruth Stemmons, without whom only the Almighty knows what John would be, and, furthermore, that the board of trustees hereby proclaim that Cousin John is declared to be a pigeon hunter supreme, trap runner nonpareil, and, above all, a valued friend forever."

My goodness. I suspect that Frank Parson's voice is in there somewhere.

Stemmons: [Laughter] Probably.

Warren: I can hear Frank's voice in there. That sounds a bit like Frank. That's wonderful. I'll bet you were touched to receive this. I would have been.

Stemmons: Well, I certainly was. You know, as I say, I wasn't a student and I never did graduate Washington and Lee, of course. There was some discussion of an honorary degree and I said, "Don't even talk about that." I consider that an honorary degree.

Warren: Well, that's a pretty nice one.

Stemmons: It sure is.

Warren: That's a lot more personal than just a regular old piece of parchment. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?

Stemmons: No, honey, I don't know of anything. I'm sorry that my mind is so void of knowledge.

Warren: You've done terrifically. You gave me false advertising at the beginning of this morning. You've done just great. We've made it through the whole list, and you've told me wonderful stories.

Stemmons: All right, child.

Warren: I got what I came for.

Stemmons: Well, bless you.

Warren: Well, thank you.

Stemmons: I want you to take in after Lee, Jr., and let him tell you the stories that he has. Lee and my nephew roomed with Dr. Leyburn in his home.

Warren: Oh, wonderful!

Stemmons: They had, I think, one or two years, I think maybe one, I know one and maybe two years in Dr. Leyburn's home and they know his intimate work, and I want you to delve into him about Dr. Leyburn.

Warren: I will. Thank you for that.

[End of Interview]

