

EDGAR SHANNON

part II

May 24, 1996

—
Mame Warren,
interviewer

Warren: This is Mame Warren. I'm back in Charlottesville, Virginia, once again with Edgar Shannon. It's the 24th of May 1996.

We were just talking a little bit about the footbridge.

Shannon: Yes, I was just saying we calculated just now that I must have been about nine years old when it was built, and I do remember very specifically what it was like to have to scramble down through the railroad track and sort of around the edge of the ravine and up some wooden steps, up to Wilson Field before it was built. It certainly was a very exciting thing, and at the time it was touted to be the longest and highest pedestrian bridge, or footbridge, entirely limited to pedestrian traffic in the country. I don't know where the verification for that came from, but everyone—it was really quite an exciting addition to the campus.

I remember also we used to, as children, as I recall, we used to enjoy running on it. Particularly I remember using it so much and particularly in the summertime, going over to the tennis courts to play tennis.

Warren: So were the tennis courts there first and then the bridge was built after?

Shannon: Yes, the tennis courts were first.

Warren: I've been wondering that, when I walk across it and look down and say, "Which came first?"

Shannon: Yes, they did. I'm sure the courts were reconditioned and done over and so

on after the bridge, but there were clay courts there before the bridge.

Warren: So do you have any idea how the bridge was funded and how all that came to be?

Shannon: No, I have no idea. Of course, at that tender age I was only interested in the object and was fascinated by the object and what it accomplished. I wasn't worried about where the money came from, as I later became very specifically, as you can well imagine. [Laughter]

Warren: Apparently the records aren't very complete on it, so there's true curiosity about how it came to be paid for.

Shannon: Well, it's really a very attractive bridge, and it seems to have held up pretty well, too, remarkably.

Warren: Remarkably so.

Shannon: And it had to be pretty high, because we had two trains coming in there in those days, more than two, but I mean we had both the C&O and the B&O trains. The B&O came, was a branch from Staunton, and the C&O was the branch from Lynchburg. So we had a lot of trains coming in there. I can remember them very well, too.

As you probably know, the grade from down in east Lexington down at about the river was so steep coming up to the old railroad station, which is now there at the Lenfest Center, that they had a Y, as it was called, a switch down there by Maury River, so that when the trains came up from Staunton and from Lynchburg, they then went over on the Y and then turned around so that the trains had to back into town so that the engine was on the back of the train instead of pulling the train, because either they had some experience with it or were afraid that cars would break off and run away, so that the engine was behind, pushing them in, rather than driving up and pulling them in.

Warren: We're getting way off what we're supposed to be talking about, but —

Shannon: Information that you might like to have.

Warren: Something else I've heard about, and I don't have any idea when it supposedly happened, but that a train was stolen by a bunch of fraternity guys. Have you ever heard that story?

Shannon: No.

Warren: Did that happen in your time?

Shannon: I don't recall that.

Warren: I don't have any idea. Everybody says, "Have you gotten the story about when the train was stolen?"

Shannon: No, I don't know that.

Warren: I haven't found anybody who admits that he was around at that time.

Shannon: I remember when I was in college, I think I was a junior, so that would have been in the winter of '38, probably, like February in '38, I suppose, and we had an alumnus come back to Washington and Lee, I think he graduated something like 1920 or '21, something like that, and he'd never been back to Lexington since, and so he still assumed the only way to get to Lexington was take the train – he was coming from the Middle West somewhere – to take the train from Lynchburg to Lexington. There still was a train, it was primarily a freight train, but it had one passenger car on it, and he came to Lynchburg, spent the night in Lynchburg to be able to take the train to Lexington. [Laughter] And he rode up on that one car on the train to Lexington. I think he was the only passenger that had been on that train for probably five years or something like that. He got to Lexington and came down to the Beta House. We all had the flu. We were having sort of a flu epidemic. So his return to Lexington wasn't very happy. [Laughter]

Warren: He probably didn't come back for another twenty years. [Laughter]

Shannon: He probably never came back. [Laughter]

Warren: You know, since I was here, we've had Reunion Weekend, and I have a whole different feeling about reunions and alumni now. They put on quite a show over there.

Do you go over every five years?

Shannon: Oh, yes. It's a good exercise. Yes, I didn't get to as many of them in the early years, because I was away and doing other things, but I've been there for my fortieth, forty-fifth, and fiftieth. '39. I think we had our fifty-fifth, didn't we, in — let's see. '39 to '89 is fifty. Yes, we had our fifty-fifth in 1994. I remember our class agent, in the mail, gave us a big come-on about being sure to come to this one because this would probably be the last one we'd ever have. [Laughter] We had about twenty-five people, I think, back for it, and we gave him a hard time.

Warren: I bet you did!

Shannon: We gave him a hard time at the dinner, so he agreed we'd shoot for a sixtieth. We will have a sixtieth. [Laughter]

Warren: I suspect you'll be there.

Shannon: Well, I hope to be. It's getting closer. Only three more years now.

Warren: Well, I'll be looking for you. I'll be expecting you there.

I came specifically for a story you wanted to tell.

Shannon: This is about the so-called Shannon Window by some, at any rate, in the Lee-Jackson House. If you notice, the front room there is a small room. If you look at the front of the house, there are three windows across the front, and right up under the eave or the overhang of the front porch and the four white columns, the one on the right goes into a small room that's really we always had as a single, and I think everyone since has a single bedroom, then a fairly large bedroom on the other side that has two front windows. It also has a side window looking out toward the president's house, toward the Lee House.

That was my mother and father's bedroom, and I had this — well, I guess when I was a child, I can't quite remember. I think I was in the room in the back, but at any rate, because my grandmother, I think, lived with us part of the time and she lived in that small front room.

But at any rate, from the time I was about ten or twelve, something like that—my grandmother died, I think when I was about nine—I lived in that little front room and it was really a very dark room because it just had that one window. I liked to lie in bed and read, and so I really had to read almost all the time by electric light. I had a desk in front of the window, and the bed was over on the side right by the corner wall, and a bookcase on the right side if you were in the room looking out.

So for my fourteenth birthday, my father and mother decided to give me a window, and my father went to Mr. Penick, who was the treasurer then and watched his pennies very closely, and said, if they would pay for it, if he would pay for it, could the buildings and grounds cut a small window on that side where there was no window. Mr. Penick agreed to that, and so they cut a casement window there. If you look at it, I think it's probably about fifteen inches wide and maybe three and a half feet tall, something like that. It was just perfect. You just had that casement window and it did help a whole lot, the whole room. It helped the light in the whole room a great deal. But I could lie there in bed with the light coming over my left shoulder and read to my heart's content, and that was my fourteenth birthday present.

I lived in that house until—of course, I lived in the fraternity house in my sophomore and junior and into my senior year, but I lived in that house and I lived in the dormitory my first year. But at any rate, I lived in that room from the time I was fourteen 'til I was, I guess, seventeen. I had about four years or so in that room, with the window which made a great addition.

Of course, in these days, you'd have to put it through the Art Commission and gosh knows what, a historical building like that, but in those days, nobody thought about it. Edgar needed a window, and so we got one. [Laughter]

You'll have to check the records, but I suppose it was somewhere along in, I think, probably the early sixties, something like that, they were doing quite a bit of renovation on the grounds, and I think they started with the Lee-Jackson House.

Really, it had got in terrible shape, apparently. When they took the ivy off that wing that was not an original wing, that was built toward the Morris House, apparently the wall was only a brick thick and it was pretty much the ivy that was holding it up. It was nearly ready to cave in. At any rate, they did a complete renovation of the house then, and I think they made a few interior changes, but essentially it was a matter of getting the house in excellent condition. By that time, of course, we were curious about historic things, and I wouldn't have been surprised if they'd blocked up that window, but everyone agreed that it was really a very necessary improvement to the house, and they restored the house and kept the window. So my window is still there.

Warren: That's a great story. You're right, it would take an act of Congress to do that now. The other thing I don't think I asked you about, and I found some pictures of the other day, is the fire at Tucker Hall. Do you remember that?

Shannon: Yes.

Warren: Can you tell me about that night?

Shannon: Gee, what was the date of that? I was still fairly young, as I recall. Let's see. I'm not sure I do remember that. I think I was away at prep school when it happened.

Warren: Did it happen in the thirties or twenties?

Shannon: It was in the thirties.

Warren: So you were in Georgia then?

Shannon: Yeah.

Warren: That's too bad.

Shannon: Because I remember – I'm vague about it.

Warren: I expect you'd remember.

Shannon: I think I would remember if I'd been on the campus, and I'm sure I would have been over there standing outside watching it. I don't remember that at all.

I always remember the story that Heywood Moreland – Dr. Moreland was the dean of the law school, and lived in the house, in my time, all the time I can remember

when I was growing up as a child, until I was through college, he and his family lived in the house that's now the Alumni House. As a matter of fact, he and my father apparently came to Washington and Lee at about the same time, and he was assigned to Lee-Jackson House and my father – I take this back. They came about the same time, but neither one of them, I think, was able to have a house on the campus right at first. My mother and father lived in a house up on Houston Street, I think, for my first two years, and then they moved onto the campus.

But anyway, I don't guess they ever lived in the – I'm vague on this, whether they ever lived in what's now the Alumni House or not, but at any rate, they got assigned that, and my father got assigned that one, and Moreland got the Lee-Jackson House, but I guess the Morelands had three children, and I was only one child, and so they switched houses because there was more room in the Alumni House than there was in the other house. So that's how I got to grow up in the Lee-Jackson House.

But I always remember the story. Heywood Moreland, his eldest son is sort of a character and kind of marched to his own drum, and he graduated from Washington and Lee but didn't distinguish himself, I believe, and then went to law school and graduated from law school, but he wouldn't go to the graduation. Graduation, in my time, too, in those days – he was four or five years older than I was – and in those days the graduation was held in Lee Chapel. Apparently he sat up on the – the old building is still there, the granite building – he sat on the porch of that building through graduation and wouldn't come down, wouldn't march and get his diploma. [Laughter] So that was quite a yarn around Washington and Lee that Heywood Moreland didn't go to graduation. And it wasn't as though he were doing something else; he just sat up there and watched it. [Laughter]

Warren: So they had graduation in Lee Chapel?

Shannon: Yeah.

Warren: I didn't realize that.

Shannon: You walked across the stage and got your diploma and came back down.

Warren: Maybe some pictures I've seen, but I assumed were baccalaureate and might have actually been graduation.

Shannon: Yes, they probably were.

Warren: I wonder when that tradition changed. I guess as classes got bigger, probably.

Shannon: I think they were held there, because I was in the class of '39, and then the war came along right away, so I think they were held there until the Second World War was over, and I imagine when veterans came back – they always kept the size. The plan was that I think we only had nine hundred in the student body, and after the war, I'm sure the student body expanded to take care of veterans and people that were old enough to go to college but were in the war and didn't go. That's why I'm pretty sure it must have been somewhere between '45 and '50 that they moved to the gymnasium or out on the lawn. I think they went in the gymnasium first, then went out on the lawn.

But I remember my mother saying that – and the graduates used to sit in the center section of the pews there, and faculty would sit up on the – the faculty wasn't all that large then – would sit on the stage, and then parents and others and so on would sit around the edges and up in the gallery. My mother said when I was born, she said later, at any rate, that when I was a baby, I had pretty big ears. She said, "I sat in enough graduations in the back row of the chapel to see all those graduates with ears that stuck out, and I was determined your ears weren't going to stick out," so she was very scrupulous in keeping a cap, apparently, on my head, so that when I rolled over, I wouldn't roll. She said my ears were just paper thin and that when you rolled over, they were just crumpled over, and she was sure they would be sticking out. So I do have pretty flat ears. She was determined, from sitting in graduation and seeing all those ears sticking out, that I wouldn't have sticking-out ears. [Laughter]

Warren: I have a friend who kept trying to straighten his daughter's nose when she was born, because he said it was still pliable at that point and he could do it then.

What happened after your father died? Did your mother have to move out of the house right away?

Shannon: Yes. He died in May, and we spent the summer in the house, but we moved out in August. We'd been in that house for – well, let's see. We'd been in that house for nineteen years, seventeen years, so you collect a lot of junk, particularly – you always do, but when you're living in a fairly big house, you can expand a good deal. My father, not surprisingly, had lots of books and so on. So we went to work in June, but I think we got out about the first of August and moved into an apartment in a house over on – what's the name of the street? The house was right above the old railroad station.

Warren: Jackson Avenue?

Shannon: No, it's the next street parallel.

Warren: Myers?

Shannon: Yeah, Myers. I don't know whether Huger-Davidson Wholesale Company is still there.

Warren: It's now Lexington Supply.

Shannon: It used to be Huger-Davidson. There were two Davidson brothers that were in that firm, did well. It was a prosperous small-town firm, and they built two houses, pretty substantial brick houses, right there on Myers Street, just at the beginning of it when you're coming into it on the end, coming from the Catholic church. Both the brothers had died, and their widows were living in those houses, and they had room. Each one of them made an apartment, and mother and I moved into an apartment. My mother really moved into it; I stayed in the Beta House. I was president of Beta House, so I lived in the house until March, I guess, when my successor was elected, so I didn't have to live in the house, so I moved back into the apartment with Mother my last two months, something like that.

Warren: I wondered about that after I left that day. I wondered did she suddenly have to give up that wonderful house. On top of your father dying, that must have been a

really hard thing to do.

Shannon: Yeah. Well, she was a remarkable lady and quite a good soldier, so she took it very well. But the big job was just getting out of the house. [Laughter] But we packed some of those books in wooden boxes, wrapped the books. We were very careful in wrapping all the books in newspaper, wrapped those books, and I still have some of them. There are boxes that I'd never opened, that I had in the attic at Carr's Hill over here when I was president of the University of Virginia. When we moved out of there, I finally opened the last of those boxes, and the books were in perfect condition. If you wrap them up in newspaper, apparently, even with bad dampness and climatic conditions, they don't seem to mildew or lose their shape.

Warren: I'll remember that. I hope I don't have to move again anytime soon, though.

Shannon: So that was one of the things that took a long time, took a lot of time. Mother and I wrapped most of those books ourselves. As I recall, we had a black man, a very reliable black man named Clarence, who was sort of a general factotum that came once a week or something like this and did some certain amount of heavy work around. Clarence packed a lot of those, too.

Warren: Are there any other stories?

Shannon: No, I think not. You've got me rambling on here.

Warren: I'm really glad to get that story about the window. Pam Simpson will be delighted to get that. She's writing a big chapter on the campus, and I'll bet that's a story she might not know.

Shannon: Farris and, I'm pretty sure, Frank and others know it pretty well, but it's just one of those things that doesn't necessarily get spread around.

Warren: It will now.

Shannon: It is a change to that building.

Warren: I'm going to take a look at it on Monday morning and check it out.

Shannon: I've taken my girls over there and pointed it out to them.

Warren: You need to put a little plaque up there. Thank you for letting me come back.

Shannon: I'm just glad you could do it.

Warren: Me, too.

[End of interview]