

Dick Yankee

August 1, 1996

—
Mame Warren,
Interviewer

Warren: This is Mame Warren. Today is the first of August, 1996. I'm in Lexington, Virginia with Dick Yankee. I guess my first question is, are you?

Yankee: I am not.

Warren: You are misnamed?

Yankee: I am misnamed.

Warren: Where did you come from?

Yankee: Are you referring to my origination?

Warren: Your original.

Yankee: Well, I came from Germany, or my family came from Germany. Just this last Sunday, my wife and I were in Criders, Virginia, to be with other Yankees on a family reunion they have the fourth Sunday in July every year, and I just found about this very recently.

Warren: But from where do you come from, to come to Washington and Lee?

Yankee: I came from Signal Mountain, Tennessee.

Warren: Oh, so you still live in the town where you grew up?

Yankee: I still live in the town where I have lived most of my adult life. I grew up in Rome, Georgia. My father, who also was an alumnus, is now deceased, was headmaster of a boys' prep school in Rome, Georgia.

Warren: How did you decide on Washington and Lee?

Yankee: Obviously, since my father was an alumnus, I came here because he interested me in the school.

Warren: So had you come as a child? Had you seen it before?

Yankee: I had never seen this school before. I rode the train into Roanoke, caught the Greyhound bus over here, and proceeded to the Phi Psi House and made myself known to an upperclassman named Jon Rugel from Texas, who was overseeing that house. This happened to be in the summer of 1945 when the Special Services School was still in session here, and they had all of the freshman dormitories occupied. The few freshman that we had here that summer lived in the Phi Psi House and the Lambda Chi House over on the other side of town. So that's how I came to be here, and I had never seen it before.

Warren: So did you go to the Phi Psi house because you were hoping to join Phi Psi or because that was where you were told to go?

Yankee: No, that was where I was told to go to. That was, in fact, not operating as a fraternity house at all, but was being operated as a university dormitory at that time.

Warren: And where was the Phi Psi House at that point?

Yankee: It is on East Washington Street.

Warren: So it was where it still is?

Yankee: It's where it still is except it is a different house now. The house that I stayed in there was torn down some twenty, twenty-five years or more ago, and a new facility built on the same land.

Warren: But on the same site?

Yankee: Right.

Warren: That may answer a question of something I was looking at yesterday. All right. Since we have a very limited time here, I'm just going to cut the chase.

Yankee: Okay.

Warren: I hear you've got a terrific story about a prank in Washington Hall.

Yankee: Well, as a matter of fact, memory is a little vague on this, and I spoke with Steve Epley [phonetic] last night on this subject, and he remembered the occasion, and he couldn't remember the details either. So I will tell you that I shan't take the chance of giving you a false story. But Steve and I had a fraternity brother, Betas, who owned a Model-T Ford. While he was away one weekend without his vehicle, some of the friends of his proceeded to dismantle the Model T Ford, and memory serves me that it was reassembled in Washington Hall. I can't verify that through other sources, so I can't guarantee it. But it was moved and reassembled in an area where it was not possible to get it out without disassembling it again. This caused great consternation on this fraternity brother's part to find his car, not to mention the university finding the car, in an inaccessible place.

That's the best I can tell you on that story. I can tell you that that same car had another interesting experience. My fraternity brother and another student went to Sweet Briar in this car on a date one night, if you can imagine driving a Model-T Ford across Buena Vista Mountain to Sweet Briar. Coming back, they burned out all of the forward bands on the car. Now, a Model-T Ford did not have gears, as such, but it had bands that were grabbed by a device that determined its speed ratio and so forth. They burned out all of the forward bands halfway up Buena Vista Mountain, returning, and had to back the rest of the way up the mountain and then, of course, coasted down and then had to back from Buena Vista, back to Lexington. That is a true story.

Another story that I have that is probably of interest, even today to the students around here, in the fall of 1946—I know when this was because I had had my knee torn up in the Homecoming game against the University of Richmond, and I had my right leg in a walking cast, which is to say it did not encase my foot, but it was from my ankle to my hip—on Saturday night in late October, some of the town teenagers invaded VMI's campus and stole one of their four cannons which

they call Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and brought this cannon down to what it is commonly referred to in the fraternity language as Red Square, which is where the Beta House, the Phi Delta Theta House, the Pi KA House, the Sigma Nu House, and the Phi Kappa Sigma House are located down at the foot of the hill behind Lee Chapel. They parked this cannon there in Red Square and left it.

When the cadets arose on Sunday morning and found that one of the cannons were missing, they sent some scouts out, and, sure enough, they found the cannon. Obviously, they assumed that the Washington and Lee students had stolen this cannon. So they descended in large numbers on the fraternity houses of Red Square. I knew this first when I was unceremoniously dumped out of my bed on the third floor of the Beta House, with the bed being turned over with me still in a cast. By virtue of being in the cast, I did not have to participate in the return of the cannon, but many of my fraternity brothers, with our housemother, Mrs. Martin, in her bathrobe and bedroom slippers, accompanying them to be sure that none of her young people were injured, they pulled the cannon back up to the VMI campus.

Now, unfortunately, in the process of all of this, the cadets were pretty wild. They did such things as turning over all of the breakfast tables in the Phi Delphi Theta House with orange juice and water and sugar and this sort of thing. The sum of the whole thing was that the cadets had to raise among them, at the insistence of the commandant, somewhere in the thousands of dollars to pay for the damage that were done to the fraternity houses. That was quite an experience.

Warren: Oh, I dare say. So was it ever confirmed that it was town kids who did it?

Yankee: This was common knowledge. There were never any town kids incarcerated or interrogated in any way, so far as I know, but that sort of thing went on occasionally. It was certainly a rather striking example of how Washington and Lee and VMI interacted, and sometimes with the influence of the town people being felt to bring this on. We weren't always—well, we were not normally destructive at

all with the cadets. We were more inclined to sit on the front porch on Sunday morning when they marched by on their way to church while we were still in our bathrobes and bedroom slippers, cheering them on, and that kind of thing. But I am unaware in my personal experience of any instance where there was anything unpleasant between the cadets and the Washington and Lee students. That tended to be more between VPI and VMI than Washington and Lee because those two schools had athletic events with each other, and we did not at that time.

The only time we ever encountered VMI on the athletic field in any way was in our wrestling. In this instance, both of us were members of the then Southern Conference. In the wrestling program, when they had the conference tournament, we sometimes wound up with Washington and Lee and VMI students opposing each other there. That was just the luck of the draw how it might work out. But that was the only time we ever had any direct encounter with them.

As a matter of fact, as I indicated earlier, I did play football here until I tore my knee up. In the fall of '46 before the school year started, we scrimmaged the VMI football team on several occasions. It was pretty good fun. [Laughter] We had a few extracurricular activities once in awhile, but nothing serious.

Warren: Well, like what?

Yankee: Well, there'd be a shoving match, and maybe somebody would push somebody else in the face or something and get a little mad. The coaches would step in between them. This happens in a scrimmage among your own peers in your own school program. So that's nothing unusual and nothing was ever unpleasant with it at all.

Warren: I've seen something on the athletic field that probably was over with by the time you got here. But it seems like there was something between the freshmen and sophomores that involved some huge ball.

Yankee: We didn't do it. No, no.

Warren: I think it had happened much earlier.

Yankee: I'm not aware of that.

Warren: I also hear that you have a story about the trip to West Point.

Yankee: This is a story that Dan remembers far better than I. Herb Hunt was a fraternity brother of mine. He was a classmate of Dan's.

Warren: Who was Herb Hunt?

Yankee: Herb Hunt is a wealthy Texas oil man whose father was H. L. Hunt. It was obviously because it was a convenient number to use, but the story around at the time that Herb was in school here was that his father, H. L., was worth \$365 million. That made a good story because of 365 days, obviously. I have no idea, but he was a very wealthy oil man. Herb was a fraternity brother of mine but two years behind me, but a classmate of Dan's. Dan probably knew Herb as well I did from his association with him in class operations. Freshman and juniors don't tend to get together as much. I knew Herb well, but not real well.

Dan tells me, and I remember this in a very vague sort of way, that when the football team was in—I was not on the team at this time. I had torn my knee up and wasn't playing anymore. When the football team was going to West Point to play the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, that apparently one of the managers managed to leave all the train tickets behind. When the conductor was threatening to have the train stopped and put them all off, Herb said, "How much do we need for this?" and proceeded to take his wallet out and pay the conductor for new tickets. If this is so, I can't verify it. It's a story that I remember in very vague terms, but it was not something that made a great impression on me. I'd have to say that Herb Hunt, during my knowledge of him for two years in the fraternity house, was one of the most self-effacing young men I ever knew. To have all the money he had, you wouldn't have known it. There were a lot of people around with a lot less money but acted like they had more. [Laughter]

I did go one Sunday morning with Herb over to Hollins College to get his car, which he had managed to get stuck in the mud when he was out sparkling with his girlfriend the night before, and he had to catch a ride home with some of his buddies that night. We got another fraternity brother's car the next day and drove back over to Hollins and up on a hill behind the school there and managed to dig the car out of the mud. [Laughter] Those things happened all the time, though.

Warren: Did a lot of people have cars?

Yankee: Not a lot of people had cars, but you have to understand that this was right after World War II, and we had a large number of veterans back from the war who were fellows (a) twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three years old, some of them; (b) on the G.I. Bill, so that they had more financial resources than some, and, consequently, there were a fair number of cars. Cars were hard to come by in 1946 anyhow. But, yes, there were a fair amount, but nothing like the cars that you see around today. Parking was not the problem that it is today. In our fraternity house, we had, I guess, among some seventy-odd brothers in the house, we had five or six cars. So that shows you we had relatively few.

We had a very interesting fraternity because we had now Senator John Warner was also a classmate and fraternity brother, and the late Fred Vinson, Jr., whose father was chief justice of the Supreme Court. Fred was associate attorney general of the U.S. at one time. We had Herb Hunt, whose father was one of the wealthiest people in the country. Had a very interesting group of people.

Warren: So what was it like to be buddies with these guys?

Yankee: I can best illustrate that by telling you that in a summer session that I was here with Fred Vinson, the chief justice would come down on weekends on many occasions and spend the weekend with us. Fred was playing semi-pro baseball. He was an excellent baseball player for the university. But during the summer he was doing some summer class work and playing baseball for Big Island in a semi-pro

baseball league around here. I believe I'm correct in saying, basically, textile mills that had these baseball teams as adjunct to their program.

The chief justice would come down and spend the weekend with us, and we'd sit around in the fraternity living room and talk about everything under the sun. I never realized there was anything particularly special about this. I'd be overawed today to sit down with Judge Rehnquist every weekend and talk about what's going on in the world, but at that time I didn't know there was anything different about it.

I was the same way with—and, of course, John Warner was a Washington boy, the son of a doctor from Washington. His father was, as a matter of fact, I believe I'm correct, was dead at that time. His fame came after that, after he had married (a) the Mellon girl; and (b) Elizabeth Taylor; and (c) become a senator. [Laughter] In that order. But John was one of those that did have a car. He had a Buick convertible. I borrowed it on one or two occasions, and, thankfully, it came back in one piece each time.

Warren: So what would you borrow it for? Were you headed off on road trips?

Yankee: Oh, go out to Goshen Pass with a date to go swimming or something like that.

Warren: Tell me what it was like going to Goshen Pass.

Yankee: Well, going to Goshen Pass in those days was very pleasant. It was one of the places you could go and get away from the university atmosphere pretty completely. It was fun to go out there and maybe take a picnic and have a picnic lunch on the weekend and go swimming in the river. A lot of us did.

As a matter of fact, one of my first introductions to recreation around Lexington was that first summer I came here—incidentally, seventeen years old, barely. I turned seventeen that summer. I really was only sixteen when I got here. But Matt Paxton, of the *Lexington Gazette*, had been a classmate of mine at

Darlington School, and my father knew his father well. So the Paxtons invited me the first Sunday I was here to go out to Goshen with them, to the Pass to go swimming. So that was the way I first became accustomed to using Goshen Pass as a recreational area. There's really not a whole lot more to say about it. A lot of us in the school in those days used to go out there.

Warren: Was the road paved at that point?

Yankee: Yes, it was paved. There were no problem going out there. I used to, my first year here, Joe Rowe and I—now, this is the Rowe family that owns the Fredericksburg newspaper—Joe and I were here together. Charlie's younger brother. Joe and I shared the teaching of—now hold on, this will shock you—he and I shared the teaching of a Sunday School class at the Methodist church here in town.

[Laughter] This was before we found out college kids didn't do that kind of thing.

[Laughter] He and I did it jointly, and we had a lot of fun with it.

We got acquainted, and I bring this up because we got acquainted with the young people in the town at the First Methodist Church and went on several outings out to Goshen with them and had a good time. Gradually separated from our associations in the town. I had dates with one of the town girls here through the fall of that first year that I was here. They were lovely people. Nothing against them at all, but by the time you got to be a sophomore, I guess you just thought you were a little too good for that, maybe. I don't know. [Laughter]

Warren: And so then what?

Yankee: So then you seek out Hollins and Sweet Briar and Randolph-Macon and Mary Baldwin. And if you're a little bit short of money, you'd go to Southern Seminary, because it's only six miles away. [Laughter] And that's a terrible thing to say, but that's the way it is. As a matter of fact, I dated one or two girls at Southern Seminary who were lovely people. I enjoyed them very much. They were great people. I married a Sweet Briar girl. So I'm delighted to have found that place.

I had a fraternity brother and classmate, who will remain nameless, who, the weekend before graduation, had the misfortune of being caught by the authorities at Hollins climbing the rose trellis to the second floor of the girls' dormitory. When this was reported to Dr. Gaines and Dean Gilliam, this young man was not allowed to graduate with the class. He did graduate. He was sent his diploma at home, but he was not allowed to march in the procession or receive his diploma on graduation day. So those kind of things did happen occasionally, too.

Warren: Were there other antics that happened with the women's colleges that you can remember?

Yankee: [Laughter] No. Fortunately, I've managed to put most of that out of my mind.

Warren: Oh, I'll bet you've got some good ones.

Yankee: No, I really don't. Before I met my wife at Sweet Briar, Fred Vinson, who I've mentioned previously, a very good friend, was dating a young lady at Randolph-Macon Women's College. She had a very close friend that did not have a steady boyfriend. Fred persuaded me to date this young lady so that his date would be comfortable coming over here for affairs and things like that. And I did.

We went over to Randolph-Macon Women's College the week after I was thrown out of bed by the cadets—and I still had my leg in a cast—to a dance over there. My date happened to be president of the sorority clubs there, and it was their dance that was being held, so she was leading the figure for this. I had to get out there and lead the figure and dance with one leg in a cast, which was a little bit tough. But Fred and I spent the night in a rooming house nearby Randolph-Macon Women's College, and the misfortune of this is that we were sharing a room which happened to have just one double bed. We went to bed, and that was fine, thought nothing of it.

The next morning when I woke up, Fred was not in the bed, and I assumed he was already up using the bathroom and getting shaved and that was great. Then I looked over and I saw Fred asleep on the floor. I called him and said, "What in the world is wrong with you?"

He said, "Well, about the third time you nearly kicked me out of bed when you rolled over with that cast, I decided I was safer on the floor." So he spent the night on the floor. [Laughter]

Warren: Oh, that's great. My husband complains about my elbows all the time. I'll tell him that story.

Yankee: I have been in sales work most of my adult life, and, consequently, I don't share a bed with my wife at home because I'm too used to sleeping in a bed by myself. I'm about twice her size, and I flop around a good bit, and it just doesn't work.

Warren: Well, let me ask you one last question, because I know I don't want to have you be late. Do you know the story, I don't know whether it happened during your time or before your time or after your time, but I've heard that some bunch of fraternity guys swiped a train. Do you know that story?

Yankee: I have just a vague hint of a memory of that, and I don't know the story.

Warren: And that the fraternity got closed down as a result of it? I don't know which fraternity it is. I don't know when it happened.

Yankee: I don't either. I don't either. I honestly don't.

Warren: I've got to find that story because that sounds like it's going to be a good one if I can get it.

Yankee: And I'm sure, I would bet you that it did happen sometime. I just don't remember.

Warren: You know, I ought to ask you about going to school here. Were there any teachers who made a big difference for you?

Yankee: Washington and Lee was a special—we're here. We come back all the time. My wife and I came to the first Alumni College, and we've been coming ever since. We haven't made every one of them, but we've been to most of them. We came up here for John Wilson's inauguration. We were back here last fall for John Elrod's inauguration. We love this place.

Dr. Bean was a good friend of my father's, and he was wonderful to me. School administrators, even presidents of schools, don't make a whale of a lot of money. So, Dr. Bean, knowing this, gave me one of his personal copies of *Civil War and Reconstruction* that I used in his class rather than having to buy the textbook.

Dr. Pusey was a special person for me, head of the German Department and interim president of the university after Fred Cole left before Bob Huntley came on board.

Those two teachers probably more than any made a significant impression on me, and that in spite of the fact that I was a chemistry major and spent most of my time—well, one other in the Chemistry Department, Dr. Gilreath was a super guy.

Warren: Gilreath?

Yankee: Gilreath. He's now dead. Dr. Gilreath was head of the department for several years. Bill Watt can tell you all about Dr. Esmarch Gilreath, because he knew him well. You do know Dr. Watt, I'm sure. So he can fill you in on that. I took Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis and Advanced Qual and Quan and Advanced and Organic all from Dr. Gilreath.

Dr. Desha taught me freshman chemistry because the younger professors weren't back from the war that first fall here.

Warren: What was that like that first fall? When did Special Services close down?

Yankee: Special Services got out of here during the fall. I believe I'm correct, because after Christmas we took back over the university pretty well. But that summer and the fall, we were just sort of orphans on the campus. Special Services

pretty well—I had a wonderful time. I have to tell you, I'm a big sports fan. A fellow named Pat Mullen, who was an outfielder for the Detroit Tigers major league baseball team, was here at Special Services, and he and I got acquainted. He knew I was a sports nut, and he was trying to keep his baseball skills up, and I pitched batting practice for Pat Mullen on a number of occasions that first fall and had a great time doing that.

Warren: That must have been a thrill.

Yankee: It was, indeed, for a seventeen-year-old kid to get to pitch to a major league baseball player of some note. It was a different life. We really didn't get into the university life until the second semester of '45-'46 year.

Warren: How much faculty was actually here?

Yankee: Well, there was very little faculty here until the start of the spring semester. I took my freshman chemistry under Dr. Desha. I took freshman English under Dr. Moffatt and Dr. Flournoy, who were co-heads of the department. I took my freshman math and calculus under Dr. Liv Smith, Livingston Smith, who was retired at the time but came out of retirement to teach mathematics. So I had all old veteran teachers at that time.

Warren: You came at a great time.

Yankee: It was nice from that point of view.

Warren: You were exposed to all the giants.

Yankee: That's right, exactly. And got to know them and, of course, Dr. Bean. It was sort of fascinating that in those days we knew most of the teachers pretty well. Most of the professors were good friends. You'd see them on the campus. I knew Dr. Moger and Dr. Crenshaw and all of those people, Dr. Stephenson. Hig Williams. You may have heard that name, I don't know. He was in the political science area, and he was an institution himself. I took political science under Hig Williams, and that was a delight. Dr. Pusey was super.

I can't think of any of the teachers here that I disliked at all. Even when Dr. Welch sent me home at Christmas of my sophomore year with my advanced calculus being in a shambles, and Dr. Welch sent me home with twenty problems to work out over Christmas holidays, and a note for my father, a school man himself, as I told you, that said, "Mr. Yankee hasn't been in class often enough to know the name of the course much less what we're doing there." [Laughter]

Warren: Was that true?

Yankee: Unfortunately, it was. Dean Gilliam said that I was one of the few students he had ever known who never missed making the Dean's List alternately—the good one and the bad one. He said, "Dick, you're just not able to stand prosperity." I would make the Dean's List and have unlimited cuts, and I would use them profusely. Then I'd wind up on probation the next semester. It's just the way it goes sometimes. Fortunately, I have a daughter who took after her mother and is a summa cum laude Phi Beta Kappa with a doctorate in clinical psychology now. So I've got something to hang my hat on. [Laughter]

I graduated as one of three students graduating with a B.S. in chemistry that year. As Dr. Gaines read the names out—and I know the fellows well to this day—he said, "Peter Williams, B.S. in chemistry, summa cum laude." Then he said, "Warren Choate, B.S. in chemistry, cum laude." Then he said, "Richard Yankee, B.S. in chemistry." Period. [Laughter] He didn't say "period," but that was the end of it. So he gave summa cum laude, cum laude, and then I graduated by the grace of God. And if I do say so myself, I have more sense than that. I just didn't have enough maturity in those days.

I would subscribe strongly to the idea of two years of military service and then going to college. To this day, I think kids would get a lot more out of it. I watched the veterans that came back here, many of them married, of course, by this time.

They had a completely different attitude about school. They were here to learn something. That isn't to say that some of them didn't [unclear].

Warren: But they were more serious?

Yankee: They were more serious. They were more mature.

Warren: And you've got to go.

Yankee: I've got to go.

Warren: This has been delightful. Short but sweet.

Yankee: Well, thank you for letting me participate in your program. I'm afraid I didn't give you much.

Warren: Yes, you did.

[End of interview]