Interview: Tom Bass, Class of 1954

Interviewers: Judee Showalter, Laurie Preston, Sarah Hendricks

Interview Date: February 13, 2008

Location: McGraw-Page Library, Randolph-Macon College, Ashland, VA

Length: approximately 43 minutes

JS: My name is Judee Showalter and we are here today with the Living Legacies Oral History Project, meeting with Tom Bass, the class of 1954. After Randolph-Macon, Mr. Bass went on to the Virginia Department of Rehabilitative Services and he has also been active in a variety of charities and in Ashland and with Duncan Memorial Church. Also here today are Laurie Preston and Sarah Hendricks. Thank you for coming today. Could you tell us how you first heard about Randolph-Macon College?

TB: I don’t know when I first heard of Randolph-Macon because I grew up in Courtland in Southampton County and there were, over the years, several young men who came to Randolph-Macon and most of the pastors who came to Courtland Methodist Church were graduates of Randolph-Macon because in those days, the majority of the pastors in the Virginia Conference were educated here in their undergraduate years. So I grew up with that knowledge and with my grandmother constantly saying, “If you ever get to go to college, you should go to Randolph-Macon and be a Methodist pastor.” Well I knew from an early age, that wasn’t where I was headed and I sort of put that on hold. Well then in the eighth grade in Norfolk County Schools, I had a young woman teacher for my English and History classes that year, who grew up in Ashland and had attended Randolph-Macon for two years before transferring to Mary Washington, and she was in her first full year of teaching, and absolutely the best public school teacher I ever had. Her name was Betty Thompson. She’s known better today, and her professional name as a sculptor, as Conway Thompson and she is, has died now of course. That really made me aware of what Randolph-Macon was other than a training ground for ministers and it made me aware of what the town of Ashland was and I fell in love with Ashland the first day I got here. But I would not have come had it not rained one Sunday, because I had the Randolph-Macon Catalog and I paid no attention to it, I was either going to William and Mary or the University of North Carolina and I had nothing to read one rainy Sunday and I picked this catalog up and when I finished going through it, I knew I was coming here. So that’s how I got here.
JS: Interesting. Can you tell us about your first visit to the campus?

TB: My first visit was made, about during the week before we were due to arrive, I rode up with a guy from Courtland who was also entering that year. He had to come and straighten something out. So I was only on campus about an hour. Came back on the Sunday and before my mother left, standing on the porch of the west wing of Thomas Branch, I told her, “I think I found the place I’m going to spend my life.” And except for two years, I’ve been in Ashland since that day. So, strong influence here on this campus for me.

JS: Well, and, what, I don’t know if you can put in words what made you feel like this was it?

TB: I have no idea.

JS: Okay (laughs).

TB: No idea in the world.

JS: Don’t know if you can put that in words.

TB: Nuh-uh.

JS: How did you afford an R-MC education?

TB: (laughter) Hard work. I’m a child of the Depression whose father died in 1934 when I was not quite two. He left my mother with one dollar. She did not have a high school education. Fortunately, I had two sets of grandparents who were very supportive. So going to college I knew was always, I always knew that would be difficult financially. I was fortunate enough to receive a scholarship in my senior year of high school from a foundation started by a former Commissioner of Agriculture in the state of Virginia. Mr. Brinkley, and um, he left money for scholarships to be given to a student from a rural county that was worth four hundred dollars a year for four years. So that was the basis and then I worked, I worked a year between high school and college. Then I worked at [5 minutes] jobs here on campus from here in Walter Hines Page Library to, helping Dr. Moreland’s wife clean up their yard. I worked in the cafeteria. I worked at all sorts of things and in the summer and that’s how I was able to stay here, and I was fortunate that the faculty chose me to receive a Carnegie Foundation Grant to go to graduate school so my life was determined by this place.

JS: You mentioned that you worked in the library and Laurie always wants to know (laughter from TB), what was the library like? We have photographs of the Walter Hines Page Library. There is not a student in any of our photographs of the library.

TB: Hmmm.

JS: Did the students study in the library?

TB: Oh yes.

JS: Did they? What was the library like?
TB: Some people did. It was actually a rather busy place, I worked on the circulation desk, which was upstairs where the administrative offices are today in Peele Hall. And so I saw the comings and goings and there were people who were working in the main room, people who worked in the stacks, there were little carrels at the ends of some of the stacks and people worked there. There was in those days a music room, very small room about the size of this room that had very good, for that day, hi-fi equipment and a fairly good collection of records, that’s where I really learned to appreciate classical music and I used to, since I had the key to the library because I closed up several nights a week, Flavia Owen, the librarian, allowed me to be in there after hours, I did most of my studying in... in that music room. Which was, so this, this whole building means a lot to me.

JS: Can you tell us about any other activities on campus? What, what other than studying, what were the activities the students enjoyed? Did you belong to clubs?

TB: I personally did not belong to anything other than Lambda Chi Alpha Fraternity as an ongoing thing because I really was busy working morning, evening, night. Because not only did I work in the library and the, and the dining hall, I also worked in the Alumni Office. So I was scooting back and forth to various jobs; it was amazing how many jobs I was able to secure through the college. I thought back on it not long ago and thought that’s really amazing. And I was not the only person doing that. But, I was not much of a joiner when I was here because I simply didn’t have time. When I had free time, I was really trying to have fun (laughter). ‘Cause I had a lot of that too.

JS: And what, what did you do for fun? What was fun to do in Ashland?

TB: Well usually you left Ashland to have fun in those days. We would go to Richmond, hitchhike into Richmond because very few people had cars. And we would hitchhike, which I think back on it today and think of all the hours I spent on Route 1 and other roads in Virginia during those years and how I am...am appalled that people would even think of doing that today. We went to movies a lot. I went to Mary Washington a lot. Things like that. Other people found other enjoyments. There was a, if you were old enough to drink legally, and maybe in some instances, not old enough to drink legally, there was a little place here in town down on the railroad tracks called Ivy’s that people congregated in, it was a good place to meet local girls too.

JS: Can you tell us about some of your relationships here in the college, either with other students or with professors?

TB: Oh wonderful.

JS: Faculty?

TB: Wonderful relationships were built in those days because after my freshman year, we became a very small school. The last large group of World War II veterans graduated in 1951, and after that we dropped back a great deal in numbers. So, you actually knew just about everyone on campus at least by name or sight and in those days, something I wish they would reinstitute [10 minutes] over here, when you were a freshmen you were required to wear a beanie up until the end of the first semester, unless
we beat Hampden-Sydney in football, and then you could get rid of it. You also wore a badge with your name on it that was large enough to be read by people and you were required to speak to every person you met on the sidewalks and in the buildings. And I walk on this campus today and I pass students and I say, “Good morning” and nothing. No response.

JS: (whispered comment)

TB: Well they do have phones in their ears, most of them, yes. But there’s just no response and I wish we could go back to that because that engendered the knowledge of who your fellow students were at any rate if you didn’t, even if you didn’t get to know them well. But being a small school in those days, we really got to know people fairly well. So that it’s been wonderful over the years to run into people that, and to have them not, not only for me to remember them but for them to remember me and we usually have something that we can share and discuss. So it was a very friendly place. And as I say, I wish we could reinstitute some of that.

JS: Yes, we have some of the beanies upstairs and the.

TB: Someone took mine. I left my things, I had the same room for several years and I left some things in it one summer and that was the only thing, that and a little dish were the only things that were missing when I came back. Someone just wanted a beanie I suppose.

JS: Interesting.

TB: So I envy those people who still have them.

JS: How about faculty? What was your major?

TB: I majored in English. Dr. Grellet Simpson, who went on to become the president of Mary Washington after I had left here, was a major influence on my life. I had him for three or four classes and he was the person who chose my senior project topic for me because he flattered me by saying, “I’ve been waiting for just the right person to do this.” And I thought, oh good, I’m gonna get to write my project under Dr. Simpson. He was the Dean of the Faculty also. He said “Unfortunately I don’t have time to handle any senior project people this year so Mr. Hasker,” who was my advisor, “will handle it for you.” Well the novel was not Dick’s field and I was writing on the Bronte sisters so it was an interesting project from that standpoint. Grellet Simpson is the best college professor I ever had anywhere. Absolutely hands down, he treated you as a mature thinking adult and he required that you be that. You did not take a test and/or exam under Dr. Simpson and give him back what he had given to you. He wanted you to take what he had given to you, use your thought processes and come up with your own interpretation and back it up. So it was thrilling to work under him. The overall quality of faculty in those days uh... was, I think, exceptional, particularly in a school this size. It was such that when I went on to George Peabody College of Education in Nashville for my master’s, I felt as if I had gone from college to kindergarten. So, the Randolph-Macon education, I think it’s the most important thing in my life, other than family and friends. It has shaped my entire life since leaving here.

JS: Which leads to our next question, which is what did you do after graduation?
TB: (laughs) Well I intended to teach, and I taught for three semesters, in public schools. A full year in Newport News and we wanted to be with, I married between Randolph-Macon and graduate school. Married an Ashland girl so I could come back and live in Ashland. We had been in Nashville a year and then we were in Newport News a year and so we both secured teaching positions back in this area. Carlene was to teach here in Hanover County and I was going into Richmond. [15 minutes] I had managed to avoid the draft that far, they had deferred me for educational purposes; this was the Korean War going on then. They caught up with me the summer that we moved back to Ashland and I went for my physical and I had a history of migraine headaches, and they said, “Well, send that information to us right away.” Well the draft board office here was closed for three weeks for vacation so I was classified 1A and called up for induction in January and I took the documentation from Dr. Ray, the campus physician, about the history of migraines, and they kept me ten minutes that morning and sent me back, but I had resigned my teaching position in Richmond, thinking I was going into the Army. And, I called and they told me that in the event that I didn’t go to let them know. Well I called in and they had not filled my position permanently. So I went to work in Richmond and it was the most unhappy experience of my entire life. I was in Chandler Jr. High School, I did not find anything enjoyable about that experience that semester and my grandfather, who had basically raised me, was dying during this period so it was just a bad situation and I came back after Thanksgiving holiday and told them I was leaving at the end of the semester. I then went to work, through the auspices of a Randolph-Macon graduate who had also, who had grown up here in Ashland. Bill Ray gave me a job working with him at the Massachusetts Mutual Life Insurance Company. And after twenty-two months of struggling to be an insurance salesman, Bill suggested that I might find another job and he helped me find one, at the Virginia Stationary Company. I stayed there nine years and rose to the manager of the store, and then realized that I was in a family-owned business with two sons coming along, there was not a lot of future, and decided to leave and that’s when I went with the Department of Rehabilitative Services and stayed twenty-five years. And I retired in 1989 when they offered their first early retirement, I fit the description perfectly and said I’ll take it. So since then I’ve been unemployed, but I’ve had a wonderful time.

JS: And what are some of the things you’ve done while you were unemployed?

TB: We travel a great deal, as much as possible. Carlene is also, she had retired two years earlier. I enjoy my children and grandchildren, all of whom are within twenty-seven miles of us, except for one who is a junior at Tech at the moment, she is there. But unfortunately this summer, one son and his family are moving to Roanoke for employment purposes. But we’ve been blessed that way of having them for so long here. I am affiliated with, at, currently my only real affiliation is with the Shepherd’s Center of Richmond. I have served there as a board member and still am a board member there. I’ve been the vice president of the board, the president of the board, I’ve taught classes, arranged classes in their open university. I’ve done various things here in the community, I emceed the Ashland Variety Show for the first nine times it was done. Over the years I had been affiliated with the Barksdale Theatre, trying to be an actor. That’s been a joy to be with them and I started that in the late ‘60s so I sort of grew up with the Barksdale here and am still affiliated with them. I just recently did a radio play
version of “It’s Wonderful Life” that we took to nursing homes and that sort of thing in the community. So I manage to have a full life.

JS: Sounds like you keep busy.

TB: And then of course Randolph-Macon has been a passion so I’ve served on the Alumni Board, I’ve been president of the local chapter of alumni, I’m currently the vice president of the Old Grads Association. And, so I’ve stayed busy in a lot of ways. It’s been a wonderful time. [20 minutes]

JS: And, obviously, you didn’t just jump into the Old Grads. So before you became an Old Grad, what other things did you do with the college after graduation? How did you stay in touch?

TB: Well I’ve never lived more than seven blocks off the campus since we came back to Ashland so, and I go to church on the campus, at Duncan Memorial. So I have been on this campus almost every, at least every week, since 1957. I’ve just done all sorts of things. I, it’s hard to go back and pick things, chairman of the Homecoming Committee for a number of years, mostly worked through the Society of Alumni and of course then enjoying all the benefits that the college offers by being here. Because it’s very much a community based organization and it’s just great being associated with it.

JS: Your family recently established a scholarship.

TB: Um-hmm.

JS: Can you tell us, what was your inspiration for doing that and who is it for, does it have specific criterion?

TB: The reason for it is that without scholarships, I would never have gotten an education. And it is my hope that there will always be scholarship money available for young men and women to go to college who could not go otherwise and I think schools such as Randolph-Macon are the perfect breeding ground for young people coming, particularly coming from small towns as I did, it gives you a small atmosphere in which to live and yet they grow you to live in a larger environment and atmosphere. So I’ve always known that I wanted, it’s has always been a wish that I would be able to establish a scholarship ultimately, through the very good auspices of my wife’s knowledge of finance, we’ve been able to accumulate, not a lot of money, but we’ve been able to live comfortably, do a lot of the things we would like to do and we want to share with that. This is actually the second scholarship in our name that’s been established here. I was the lay leader of the Ashland District of the United Methodist Church for four and a half years and when I retired from that, the people of the district contributed to a scholarship in my name which has now been used. And so when the Brown Challenge came up several years ago, Carlene and I decided that we would establish a scholarship and we would do it in the name of our family, not just in our names, so it is the Bass Family Scholarship. And at the present time, this is something that we are going to be working on, coming up with a little more definitive definition of who might be eligible. It simply says in the founding papers, I believe something to the effect of, “people in need of scholarship money.” We may, we were talking about this just yesterday with one of our sons, and we were talking about the fact that we need to fine tune it and I’m not sure exactly how we will, but
within the next few weeks we’ll be doing that. The Brown Challenge was a wonderful opportunity to take what is not a large amount of money in the overall scheme of things but to have it doubled by meeting that challenge and so we are very interested in that. And through the use of charitable trust we... there will be other monies coming when we are both gone, to augment that scholarship. So I... I’m very... very appreciative of people who give scholarships and I’d like one day to uh... to be remembered as a person who helped me go to school, so.

JS: Those are all my specific questions, are there any thoughts about Randolph-Macon you would like to share with us? Any favorite stories? [25 minutes]

TB: I’m not sure you want some of my favorite stories as part of oral history, no (laughter).

LP: Oh yes we do (laughter).

TB: The fraternal life on this campus while I was here was such an enjoyable thing. I came here having several friends from Courtland who were already here who were members of Lambda Chi. And I thought, I’m not sure I’m going to be able to afford a fraternity but if I do, I certainly want to be become a Lambda Chi because I like those guys. And I went to other rush parties and other places and I didn’t see anything in any other house that equaled what I saw in the Lambda Chi house, the spirit of camaraderie, the wide variety of personalities that were part of that membership and so I sort of set my goal on that’s where I’m going to be. And we went through the bid process and I didn’t get a bid from anyone. And I was very hurt and the next day I went to pick up my mail and there was a bid from Lambda Chi. I don’t know how that came about whether, the famous Ashland Post Office with its talent for misplacing mail sometimes had misplaced it or what, but it was quiet a relief to get that. That was the basis for some of the great friendships that I had here. I have to admit, though, that once I had been out of Randolph-Macon, oh, maybe ten years, I had not been in the new Lambda Chi house but one time because I sort of put that behind me, as I moved on to adult life I felt that I no longer need the rah-rah spirit that was there. I still am an advocate for people belonging to fraternities and sororities; I think it, it offers a lot. But just the general atmosphere of Randolph-Macon over the years has, it’s been wonderful to see. I mentioned earlier that I wished that people spoke to you more, but I still see such wonderful things going on with the students here. I’m so proud, still, to say that I’m an alumnus of Randolph-Macon because of what these students do today. They do things we didn’t do. They go out into the community a whole great deal more than we did. They raise money for worthy causes, this dance marathon for example is, this idea that the college has today of the students being involved in the community and requiring, I don’t know if they require but certainly encourage the students to do public service. I just think it’s wonderful. I would like to, in a way, to start all over again except that I don’t think Randolph-Macon would accept me today. (laughter) I really don’t. Not with the same background that I had then. I’m not sure that I would make it. Because I was amazed that I made it fifty seven years ago, fifty seven years, fifty eight years ago actually. But it’s, I just wish everyone had the opportunity to come to Randolph-Macon. I really do. And I hope that we continue, I see the spirit continuing. I hope that it does continue for another two, how many years is it now? I don’t even remember. But to go on that long again. There’ve been things that of course over the years that I’ve looked askance at, and with my good friend Henry Chenault I’ve fussied about what was going on but it all worked out in the end.
And, so, I hope that it will continue. I think that this project that you are doing will be great for people fifty years from now if the technology will still allow it (laughter) to be played, will be helpful perhaps to people to see what it was like here. I’m really glad that I got the opportunity to come with the veteran, with some of the veterans of World War II though. Because getting to know those people who were older than I, and to hear what they had been through, really made me, I had an uncle who was a veteran [30 minutes] and had been in the South Pacific but he would never talk about anything so I really wasn’t too aware of what some people had been through and to hear them occasionally tell a story about that was a great help to me in some way that I can’t quite define. So I’m glad I had that experience and then I’m glad I had the experience with being in school with young men who were my contemporaries without that. So I think I had the best of both worlds as an undergraduate, in that respect. But I just, I loved being an undergraduate and Gertie Sloan [Gertrude Hatcher Sloan] used to say that she thought I would be happy staying at Randolph-Macon my entire life and she was absolutely right. So living just off the campus has been as close as I’ve come to that. My dream was always to have Gertie’s job which is now Susan Donavant’s job, to be director of alumni. But in those days, the pay was such that with three small children, when it did become available the one time, I couldn’t afford to do it. But in another life I’ll come back and do it, who knows.

JS: Well thank you very much for coming and.

LP: Actually, I think since, you really have a very unique perspective to provide, having not just gone here, but gone here at a time when Randolph-Macon was a very traditional, all male, undergraduate, liberal arts school in the south. And then you came back and observed it as, not just an alum but also a resident of the community and you were here during enormous change.

TB: Yes.

LP: On this campus. Not just going co-ed but the sixties and the seventies, the war, the issues on campus about changing the nature of the education here as well as, you know, the changing student body and the changing needs of the students and just the world in general, changing. Could you talk a little bit about how you mentioned about how students don’t speak as they walk around campus, what other things do you think are just really the biggest changes?

TB: I think the large number of automobiles that are on campus today. I’m convinced that there’s not a student over here that doesn’t have at least one vehicle and I’m, I’ve seen one instance of one young man that I think had two, because I saw him on two different occasions get out of one, go unlock another one, get something out. And a week later I saw him the reverse. So I think he had both a pickup truck and a very expensive sports car. They don’t stay on campus as much as we did. People, we say, once we’re coming to Duncan Memorial, “Oh, it’s Sunday morning, we’ll be able to get a parking place.” If you come during the week, you can’t get a parking place. I think the fact that the students are so transient today that they perhaps don’t get to relate in exactly the same way we did. Not having experiencing that however, I can’t say that is actually the case but I am not sure that they stick around as much as we did and see aspects of the community that we do. They probably see others. Of course, Ashland has changed a great deal since I was an undergraduate so it’s like comparing apples and
Interview

oranges I guess. I think the students here today, and by the way with the change to co-education, I was vehemently opposed to, I’ve been happy to eat my words. It’s been the salvation of this college. and I’m happy to see the young women on campus and to see them doing so well. I’ve forgotten what my thought was before I diverted myself with that comment. Oh, I’m so happy today though to see the involvement the students have with causes and to see the number of groups that have formed on this campus. When I was here, we had the seven social fraternities, we had the Clericus which was the, um... the persons preparing for ministry. We had the Y, a branch of the YMCA, [35 minutes] we had a couple of other organizations like that but there were not a lot of, there were no groups formed solely to perform public service or something of that sort. I’ve been interested to see the number of things that students do here today, I mentioned the dance marathon before but I’m constantly seeing evidence of where they are involved in things around, we didn’t do that so much. Of course being a lover of the theater I’m so pleased to see what is happening with the arts here today. We had the Randolph-Macon Players but it was a very loosely organized group. There were no theater courses. There were no, there was not a division of fine arts. Jon Longaker came during my junior year to, and taught art history and that was the first art course that Randolph-Macon had had. So there was no opportunity to take music, to take drama, to take art, in any way which is here today. And I’m sorry. I’m sorry to have missed that but I’m glad it’s here now. It’s just, it’s been interesting to see this college grow with the times and to... to reinvent itself and yet to remain Randolph-Macon at the core. Did that answer your question?

LP: Yes, absolutely. And I guess my only other question might be that the college was in such severe financial difficulties and came, skated on the edge many times, both financially and because of curricular issues.

TB: Yes.

LP: Of closing. Were you aware as a member of the community and an alum that, that it was that close?

TB: Yes, and I’m not sure how I was aware but I was very much aware. I think it was because I was so close to the school and people who were faculty and staff were friends. And so we heard that way; probably I had more knowledge of that then some of my peers who lived in other places had. And of course I was here during the ‘60s and ‘70s and saw some of the things that were going on here that were going on across the country. We were just a reflection of everything else and I know that the administration at that time took a terrible beating for the way it handled it. I for one think it was handled as well as it could be handled because it was an explosive situation that was about to occur and so I think that Luther White handled it in the proper way. There are some of my fellow alumni who do not agree with me but, so yeah I have, I’ve been aware of those things. I think because of my proximity to the campus and, but I was aware of some of the very serious problems that were going on and when they came up with co-education, my hackles went up and I thought never, not in our men’s college, they’ve got their own college. I’m happy to say I’ve eaten those words a thousand times. It’s the best thing to ever happened to this school, I think. And it has, it’s been interesting over the years to see how the balance of male-female, one year will be slightly higher one way and the next year the balance is
out. And what the women who have gone through this institution have done, for this institution after they’ve left sort of puts those of us, who are men, to shame.

LP: Thank you.

TB: You’re welcome.

JS: I’m gonna ask one more question because I don’t know if we’re going to interview anyone else who would know him. And obviously he was not a professor here when you were here but if you worked with the Barksdale, you knew Pete Kilgore.

TB: Oh yes. Oh yes.

JS: Would you tell us a little bit about Pete Kilgore, who was a huge fixture at Randolph-Macon?

TB: Well of course Pete was the first drama professor here, started the theater program. I knew Pete before he started here because we first met, I first worked at Barksdale in ’67 but I had known Pete before that, not well. [40 minutes] I, in fact I had known the, met all 6 of the original people who founded Barksdale.

JS: Barksdale was founded in the Hanover Tavern.

TB: The Hanover Tavern, the Hanover Court House, in 1953.

JS: I didn’t realize it was that early.

TB: They came in ’53 and bought the place and the first show went on in ’54. Pete Kilgore was a veteran of World War II, in the submarine service. He used to complain that he was sorry he hadn’t been an inch taller because he would have been too tall to serve in the submarines and he thought it would be exciting until he did it. He and Muriel McAuley literally were the people who built the Barksdale Theatre and kept it going. Pete was one of the most demanding people in the theater itself and the biggest pussy cat out of the theater. He’s just a wonderful person to know. He fought for the drama department here at this college. And he had to, I mean they hired him and then he really had to fight to get something going. And he changed the downstairs of the Old Chapel into that wonderful theater. And another person at that time was Buster Ward, who was the first music professor here. And of course he worked at Barksdale a great deal too. And Buster and I were neighbors at that time. Uh... so they brought a spirit of bohemianism perhaps to the campus that wasn’t here before and yet brought such a change in the atmosphere, in the life of this college by introducing those subjects. Pete remained, until his death, one of my favorite people. I understand that there is some talk going on at the moment about honoring Pete at the college in some way, honoring Pete now and I’m all for it. I think we need to recognize those pioneers, those modern pioneers who brought new things to this college. I sit, I sit at graduation looking through, I follow the names in the program as the young people go across the stage to get their degrees and I look at what they majored in, and time after time I see theater is either a major or a minor and I think wouldn’t, isn’t Pete up there just grinning to know that a
program he started is producing people who are going out into the world and doing this. So yes, we could do a whole thing on Pete Kilgore. (laughter)

JS: Well thank you very much for coming in today. Any other questions?

TB: Well thank you for allowing me to come.

JS: We appreciate your time.

TB: It’s been a pleasure.