Living Legacies

Living Legacies Oral History Project, Randolph-Macon College
Transcript of Interview 2 with Mary Alleta Pannill

Interviewee: Mary Alleta Pannill
Interviewers: Judee Showalter, Laurie Preston, Sarah Hendricks
Interview Date: March 18, 2008
Location: McGraw-Page Library, Randolph-Macon College, Ashland, VA
Length: approximately 19 minutes

JS: My name is Judee Showalter and today is March 18th, 2008. We are here today with Mary Alleta Pannill to hear some more stories about her time at Randolph-Macon College.

MAP: Thank you, Judee. I want to speak about some things today in sort of a special theme, changes that have occurred during my stay here. Blackwell Auditorium, which was opened in 1953, became a center for convocations, lectures, concerts, and for a brief period, the Hanover concert series. Bill Troxell was the director of the Randolph–Macon Glee Club choir and the Yellow Jacket quartet barbershop harmony deluxe.

Formal and informal music performances conducted by Mr. Troxell were special events as were visits they made to other locations. Graduation ceremonies were in Blackwell until we outgrew it. Crenshaw Gym served for several years, then an outdoor setting under the oaks and maples of Jordan Wheat [Lambert] campus. They were very memorable. In 2007, of course, the fountain, Frank Brown plaza became the center for graduation exercises.

With Blackwell and Duncan Memorial in use, the chapel, partially condemned as unsafe, became the Old Chapel. Pete Kilgore, founder and director with Nancy and Muriel, founder of the Barksdale Theatre became professor of drama and renovator of the first floor to hold the Randolph-Macon Old Chapel Theater, home of the Drama Guild productions. It was a marvelous make-do theater in the round. The old folding chairs were arranged around support posts to face an extended floor level stage. All was hand done by the director and his students in his classes. The drama, comedy, and musical productions from this director who inspired and challenged student actors and stage designers will be remembered by all who witnessed their magic.

When Frank Hall was condemned in 1955, all the administration offices were moved to Mary Branch. The president’s office occupied the first floor public rooms. The extensive basement, and it is huge,
contained the dean’s offices, the treasurer’s office, the registrar’s office, admissions office, and the college bookstore. During this ’55 to ’60 period, Burnell was serving as Dean of Men. One spring semester, the registrar, which was a one person office, she resigned shortly before the end of spring term. Dean Simpson asked me to take over for the final month of the term. With no ability to type, and that’s how reports were recorded, I agreed. He promised that there would be no delay in faculty grade reports. So I did transcripts by hand and all term grades reports were sent to parents, yes, on schedule. Bill Robertson became registrar.

Book orders for curriculum requirements in the book store needed a co-manager. I became the co-manager for book orders which was in Mary Branch also. At the end of one year though, I decided my term in Mary Branch administration was all I needed so I retired. When McGraw-Page Library was completed in all its splendor, Randolph-Macon students formed a line between the two locations. Books were moved hand by hand, televised.

Okay. Peele Hall, named in honor of Bishop Peele, Virginia Conference Methodist Church, was a friend of Dr. Moreland’s and of Randolph-Macon. [5 minutes] Peele Hall then became the administration building with the addition of a wing for the president’s office. This required the demolition of the Old Gym, a venerable court-size building of red brick. There was much opposition to this action but it was, in reality, necessary. Bricks left at the scene were soft hand-made clay bricks. They crumbled at the slightest pressure. I collected quite a few pieces before the space was cleared.

In the late 1960s Randolph-Macon faced serious financial problems. The Board of Trustees explored co-education. Burnell was appointed chair of a committee: board members, faculty, and alumni - many meetings, much opposition, more meetings. A decision amicably was made and was announced at the meeting in 1971. The first coed class entered the fall of 1971. Results were admirable. Even the naysayers in all quarters were won over.

The Campus Circle was an organization composed of the faculty wives. There were officers and programs established about 1955, I think. This was possible because all the faculty families lived near the campus. The purpose of this meeting was for faculty members, faculty wives, to become acquainted and to help with any projects they could on the campus. This organization I think lasted for about 15 to 20 years. At the spring meeting of the Alumni Board of Directors in 1976, a newly created award was announced, Honorary Alumnus/Alumna. To be awarded the recipient of that was a great honor for me.

November of 1986 the resolution passed by the board of trustees in 1981 was accomplished.

LP: Here with us again.

Mary Alleta Panill: Pannill House was dedicated that Saturday with the participation of President Payne, trustees’ chair John Clements, and Professor Howard Davis. This was indeed a treasured day for me. The house is an attractive two story brick formerly owned by Dr. Fox - Fox Hall was named for him - and acquired after his death by the college. It was available for the dedication in ’86. It would become a Pannill - it would hold a Pannill library room. Shelves filled with my books, accounts of Burnell’s career at Randolph-Macon, and various framed awards on the walls. This will remain a repository to identify
Burnell Pannill and to present a person in whose honor the dedication was made. Renovation is now in progress to install financial aid offices in other rooms of the house, with Pannill House still on the plaque.

Randolph-Macon’s 150th anniversary was in 1980. Papers were written by several faculty members, invited speakers, and events recorded in a publication by an alumnus, Bob Armour. You have a copy of that book in your file. Burnell had just returned from a long hospital stay in mid-August. He hoped to be present on the stage for the convocation on September the 18th, the climax event and celebration. We, we were notified early in August that a newly endowed chair would be announced at this convocation, the Blackwell Chair in the Humanities to be held by Burnell and to be presented at the ceremony. In the event, it was I who accepted the chair, the presentation on his behalf. The chair was left in Burnell’s name for several years. [10 minutes]

I think you asked me at the very beginning, why establish a scholarship at Randolph-Macon College? Burnell and I wanted to honor our relationship with and gratitude to Randolph-Macon by continuing to recognize students. His objective was to endow a scholarship from our estate. His death in 1980 left the responsibility to me to formulate his plans. The H. Burnell and Mary Alleta Pannill Scholarship was endowed in 1985, an annual award specifically designated by qualifications. The first award was made 1996-97. It has been my effort to meet each recipient on a personal basis in order that I may acquaint that recipient with the identity of the donor and his relationship with Randolph-Macon, to give a personality to this particular scholarship. Any award, any building, any finite object given to and part of Randolph-Macon, should have an enduring identity, a personality, a meaning, if it is to have a lasting significance in the life and history of this college. Changes there must be, but it is in the traditions we keep and honor that we have continuity on which to build our future. Thank you.

LP: Okay.

JS: I think my biggest question is, you have such a broad view of Randolph-Macon, and most of us only have.

MAP: You’ll have to speak louder.

JS: You have such a broad view of Randolph-Macon, and most of us only have four years. What do you see as the biggest changes that the college has gone through? Is it Physical or?

MAP: I hope. I hope it’s physical and I think for the most part that is the biggest change. I do think, truly, that those of us who have known the traditions of the past, the um, the reason Randolph-Macon was founded, the purposes it followed, the excellence of faculty chosen, the leadership it has had, needs to be kept intact if, if we don’t have vast changes other than physical.

JS: And when you talk about the traditions of the college, what, what do you have in your mind, what are you thinking of?

MAP: I have in mind the quality, the distinction that Randolph-Macon has always held in, in my view. There has always been a spirit that was particular to Randolph-Macon. When we would visit other
college campuses for Burnell to make speeches or to represent Randolph-Macon in various ways, I was quite aware of a difference between the college we were visiting and the college I came back to because of the relationship between students and faculty, because of the relationship which existed between faculty members in those early days. There was an age difference between the group which was here when we came and us, and yet there was a, almost a continuity that went from them to us without any break of age, you see. The faculty acted as a whole. They formed clubs together, literary clubs, that kind of thing, and there was a familiarity that set them apart. [15 minutes]

There were certain, there were certain codes that were followed which unfortunately, I think, we haven’t today. Our honor code was changed drastically and that is one of the most unfortunate things that’s happened I think. Many of us would like to see the honor code restored. So, the traditions of which I speak is a matter of being contemporary, contemporary in a style that was and continuing that to be contemporary in a style that is, and that may continue into the future without drastic differences.

JS: Those were my questions, any other questions?

LP: I think my question would be that you’ve seen a lot of students come through Randolph-Macon. Would you characterize that they’re more similar over time or that they’ve changed significantly over time?

MAP: It’s an interesting question. It’s a little difficult to say. I think of the time when there were only men here and that was very nice. We enjoyed that. During that time of course there was a dress code, the men wore sports coats and ties and the faculty all dressed and when I speak of the Glee Club and its performances, there were formal and informal occasions.

When women were admitted in 1941 [1971] it was a marvelous, marvelous experience. The objections interestingly enough, were often from faculty members, who thought they would be having to redo their lectures on a much lower level if they were to be able to teach women. They were quite surprised at the end of that first year when the women students were making very much higher grades than many of their men students. And we had one particular faculty friend who said, “Well I have to admit, though I had to quit telling some of my best jokes, the students were even better.” You may or may not be able to guess who that was. But um, and the alumni who were opposed to it, quickly recast their opinions because when they came back and saw women living in their rooms in Mary Branch dormitory, sometimes their daughters, they were quite happy.

I don’t, I think the only change in the student membership would be in the demographic change that has occurred everywhere. Do you think that? I think, and I think our growth as a college, as a co-educational college, has been very, very excellent.

LP: Thank you.

JS: Well, thank you very much for sharing with us today. I think we’re done.