

Dartmouth College Oral History Project  
The War Years at Dartmouth  
Interview with Robert Barnum '43  
By Mary Stelle Donin  
October 3, 2009

DONIN: How about telling us first of all how it is that you ended up going to Dartmouth. Were you a legacy? Were other members of your family here?

BARNUM: No. My father went to the University of Michigan. The apple business was not very good in 1939 or '38.

DONIN: 'Thirty-eight, yes.

BARNUM: 'Thirty-seven, those years. So he didn't want to pay the way to go to Michigan, back and forth all the time. So he had a friend who was going to Dartmouth. So he said I should go to Dartmouth. So I went to Dartmouth.

DONIN: No questions asked, huh?

BARNUM: No questions asked.

DONIN: Now had you seen the College before you actually came here?

BARNUM: No.

DONIN: And where were you living at the time? Where'd you grow up?

BARNUM: Riverside, Connecticut.

DONIN: Did you take the train up?

BARNUM: I took the train when I came to college.

DONIN: Yes.

BARNUM: I think we came up in a car. First time I think we came in a car.

DONIN: With your father?

BARNUM: Yes.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

BARNUM: Yes, and my mother. They said this is where you're living. I'd already been accepted.

DONIN: Great.

BARNUM: I was interviewed at some school in Stamford, an alumni interview group.

DONIN: I see. Right. And did you feel pretty well prepared for college by your high school?

BARNUM: Very well prepared, yes.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

BARNUM: Yes.

DONIN: And did you have any thoughts about what you were going to major in when you got here?

BARNUM: None. Very few.

DONIN: So what did you think when you first got here? Was it appealing to you, all this outdoorsy stuff?

BARNUM: Yes, the first year we took the mountain trip up to—

DONIN: Moosilauke?

BARNUM: Moosilauke, yes.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

BARNUM: And that's where I met my ultimate roommate. I met a lot of people there, yes.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

BARNUM: It was a good trip.

DONIN: It's a good bonding experience.

BARNUM: But it was exhausting for me.

DONIN: Yes. Had you climbed a mountain before?

BARNUM: No.

DONIN: Now in those days, did President Hopkins come up and greet you up there the way the presidents did?

BARNUM: If he did, I don't remember.

DONIN: And did you sleep over there, up in the cabin?

BARNUM: Yes.

DONIN: And what dorm were you in as a freshman?

BARNUM: I was in Hitchcock. Lot of freshmen there.

DONIN: So you made friends in the dorm pretty fast?

BARNUM: Yes. Mm-hmm.

DONIN: How was it starting classes here as a college freshman? Was it—

BARNUM: It was just another year as far as I was concerned. It was not an earth-shattering experience.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

BARNUM: I took good courses. I had a good classical civilization course. Royal Nemiah.

DONIN: Oh, yes.

BARNUM: He was a very fine person.

DONIN: I remember that name.

BARNUM: Very good teacher.

DONIN: And he made an impression on you it sounds like.

BARNUM: Yes, he did.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

BARNUM: I eventually took Greek One my senior year.

DONIN: Wow.

BARNUM: I think I barely graduated.

DONIN: [Laughter] When did you have to choose your major? Was it sophomore year?

BARNUM: In sophomore year, I think, yes.

DONIN: What'd you choose?

BARNUM: Oh, political science.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

BARNUM: At that point I decided I was going to go in the law business.

DONIN: Yes.

BARNUM: Which I eventually did.

DONIN: Now were you following in your father's practice?

BARNUM: No.

DONIN: No?

BARNUM: No. He was in the laundry business. He lived in Riverside. He was Mount Vernon, New York.

DONIN: The matriculation ceremony when you first got there, do you remember that? Did you go into Parkhurst and have President Hopkins sign your card?

BARNUM: I don't remember that at all. Did we have such a thing?

DONIN: I think so. I think I've seen pictures of it. But I'm not sure whether each student actually shook the hand of President Hopkins or not.

BARNUM: He was not a big figure in my life.

DONIN: You never had any interaction with him?

BARNUM: No.

DONIN: That's probably a good thing. How about the dean of the College, Neidlinger?

BARNUM: I had some experience with him. I wrote some letter to the editor that he didn't particularly appreciate.

DONIN: Oh, and you heard from him.

BARNUM: Yes.

DONIN: What was your social group? I mean were you into sports at all?

BARNUM: Yes, I went out for freshman baseball.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

BARNUM: And I went out for freshman hockey.

DONIN: Oh, wow!

BARNUM: But I got bounced around the boards there one night, and that was enough.

DONIN: That was enough.

BARNUM: I couldn't handle that. I was too slight.

DONIN: You were skinny probably.

BARNUM: Yes.

DONIN: And hockey's a pretty rough sport.

BARNUM: Yes, I wasn't that good.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

BARNUM: I'd just played pond hockey. Thought I was hot stuff but I wasn't.

DONIN: Well, you were probably hot stuff on the pond. Maybe not—

BARNUM: That's right. A very small pond.

DONIN: [Laughs] Yes, that's right. Right. And was that your group of friends, the teams or was it more your dormitory?

BARNUM: Well, I ended rooming with a fellow who was a year ahead of me who lived in Greenwich. So I met his friends, and my friends intermingled.

DONIN: Between the two classes.

BARNUM: Yes.

DONIN: Did you join a fraternity?

BARNUM: Yes. I joined the one that he belonged to.

DONIN: Which was?

BARNUM: Theta Delta Chi.

DONIN: And did that become the center of your social life?

BARNUM: Yes, yes.

DONIN: And what kind of behavior was going on in the frats in those days? Did you drink beer in the basement like they do now?

BARNUM: Yes.

DONIN: Yes.

BARNUM: There was the glee club and we had a lot of discussions of politics and the coming war and all that.

DONIN: Yes. There was a lot of talk. Well, it was 1939, yes. That must have been pretty much on your mind.

BARNUM: I think it was 1940 that the Green Key dance had Glenn Miller at one end of the gym and Red Norvo at the other end.

DONIN: That's a big event.

BARNUM: A big event, yes. It might have been '41, I think.

DONIN: So speaking of '41, were you on campus on December 7<sup>th</sup>?

BARNUM: Yes.

DONIN: Do you remember that day?

BARNUM: Oh, yes. I was just coming out of the library, and all the bells were ringing. It was around three-thirty, four o'clock in the afternoon.

DONIN: It was a Sunday, wasn't it?

BARNUM: Sunday.

DONIN: And you must have wondered what the bells were all about.

BARNUM: I didn't know what it was all about. And somebody told me. And where's Pearl Harbor and all that? I think I knew.

DONIN: It was probably on everyone's mind that this day was coming.

BARNUM: Yes.

DONIN: And I gather President Hopkins called the College together, what, the next day?

BARNUM: I think so, yes.

DONIN: In Webster Hall.

BARNUM: Yes. That's right.

DONIN: And had a school meeting or whatever you called it.

BARNUM: Yes. And then that was 1941. Of course everybody was joining the Navy or the Army or whatever. I remember that Christmas at home we had a Japanese friend who was going to Harvard. And he couldn't get in anything. His parents had been restrained to the state. They were teaching Japanese to the Army at Yale. They were all restrained.

DONIN: And there were Japanese students at Dartmouth as well.

BARNUM: I guess there were. There was one in my class, I think.

DONIN: Yes. His last name was Mitsui.

BARNUM: Yes, that's right.

DONIN: And I guess he was sort of taken—President Hopkins sort of took him under his wing.

BARNUM: Yes, I think so.

DONIN: As a guardian of some sort.

BARNUM: Yes. My friend from Riverside was a... Prince Konoye who was the prime minister was his first cousin.

DONIN: Ah hah.

BARNUM: So they were high up in the Japanese hierarchy.

DONIN: Society, yes.

BARNUM: Anyway, the fraternity took over, of course, after sophomore year. I'd made a lot of friends freshman year as well.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

BARNUM: And baseball and other activities.

DONIN: But did you see any of your actual friends decide to leave and enlist?

BARNUM: Yes.

DONIN: So some of them just went right off and signed up.

BARNUM: Yes, yes. Chuck Bolté...

DONIN: Oh, Charles Bolté. He became famous.

BARNUM: He went to Canada I think. Signed up with the Field Service and lost a leg or an arm. He started the one of the veterans' societies, the V—the Veterans... AVC, the American Veterans Committee.

DONIN: Oh really? Oh.

BARNUM: He started that. He was the Class of '42 I think.

DONIN: And did the faculty, some of the faculty, go off and sign up as well?

BARNUM: I don't know.

DONIN: You didn't lose any of your teachers to signing up.

BARNUM: Not that I knew of.

DONIN: Right. And I guess they started, pretty quickly they started, year round classes, didn't they, when you came back after Christmas?

BARNUM: Yes. We went through the summer of '42.

DONIN: Right. So did you graduate early?

BARNUM: December '42. The whole class graduated December '42.

DONIN: Oh, of course. Sure. Because at that point you were...

BARNUM: That was our spring semester.

DONIN: Yes, I see.

BARNUM: And fall was our fall semester.

DONIN: And they accelerated the classes anyway.

BARNUM: Yes. At the fraternity, I was president of the fraternity at the time. So it was a big part of our social life.

DONIN: The fraternity was?

BARNUM: Yes, yes.

DONIN: Yes.

BARNUM: And my family had a great-uncle or somebody who had a cottage up on Lake Morey. So we took the fraternity... The College took the fraternity up there two or three times for picnic outings.

DONIN: Did the campus change a lot that last year when it was going year around?

BARNUM: Yes. The Navy took over.

DONIN: Those were the... What did they call them? The 90-day wonders. The officers were coming in to be trained, weren't they?

BARNUM: Well, they were trained. The 90-day wonders were the people going to midshipman school.

DONIN: Right, right.

BARNUM: But these people were appointed.

DONIN: And they were actually sort of—I got the impression they were sort of co-directing the school along with President Hopkins, weren't they?

BARNUM: They were? I don't know.

DONIN: Well, the high-ranking officers from the Navy.

BARNUM: Yes. Probably. Yes, they were staying in New Hampshire.

DONIN: Oh, New Hampshire Hall.

BARNUM: Hall.

DONIN: Oh, yes.

BARNUM: And the one next to it, I've forgotten the name of it.

DONIN: Topliff?

BARNUM: Topliff. I think that's where they were.

DONIN: These were the officers.

BARNUM: Yes.

DONIN: Right, right.

BARNUM: They were drilling on the campus.

DONIN: And at that point weren't they also—They were doing reveille every morning and formations and marching to breakfast.

BARNUM: Yes, yes.

DONIN: How was that, having them on campus?

BARNUM: They were not very intrusive. I was only there one semester, I think.

DONIN: Right. It was short for you.

BARNUM: Yes, it was short. I didn't really appreciate it. That was just a selfish view.

DONIN: Did you interact with them much?

BARNUM: No, never.

DONIN: They sort of kept to themselves.

BARNUM: Oh, sure.

DONIN: So was it in the cards that you were going to have to serve?

BARNUM: I had to sign up. We signed up in December of '41.

DONIN: Oh, really! Up here in New Hampshire.

BARNUM: No.

DONIN: Oh, when you went home for Christmas?

BARNUM: Christmas, right.

DONIN: And was the draft board going to leave you alone until you graduated?

BARNUM: Yes. I signed up for this program in the Navy, which was called V-7. Half my class was in it because when we went to Notre Dame in January 1942, the dorm was practically all Dartmouth.

DONIN: Oh. Well, that must have been nice for you to have friends with you.

BARNUM: Yes, yes.

DONIN: And how long did you train?

BARNUM: Hundred and twenty days, four months.

DONIN: Oh, yes.

BARNUM: Got out in may, assigned to a ship.

DONIN: Did you have any Dartmouth men with you when you got assigned to the ship?

BARNUM: No.

DONIN: That was it. I mean once you left Notre Dame, you all dispersed.

BARNUM: Yes. It was an interesting time. It ended up with tremendous responsibilities for some people our age. I think I must have been...

DONIN: Twenty-one maybe?

BARNUM: I was born in '21, so I was barely 22.

DONIN: You were barely 22.

BARNUM: Ended up in command of a ship at 24 years old.

DONIN: My goodness. Thrown into huge responsibility.

BARNUM: Yes. It was a great experience.

DONIN: It was a great experience. We were lucky to have all of you.

BARNUM: I guess. It was a one sided war. I mean there were no... There were some people who were opposed to war entirely.

DONIN: Yes, you had some—

BARNUM: There were no two sides politically. It was all—The entire country was involved.

DONIN: But you did have a number of conscientious objectors.

BARNUM: Yes, yes, we did.

DONIN: Who did different sorts of service.

BARNUM: Yes.

DONIN: And of course before the United States got in the war, weren't there some pretty heated discussions on campus about whether or not—

BARNUM: Oh, yes. Sure. Lindbergh and all that. Sure.

DONIN: Right.

BARNUM: But it turned very quickly.

DONIN: Once Pearl Harbor happened? Even on campus?

BARNUM: Sure.

DONIN: And President Hopkins made some pretty moving speeches about what your responsibilities were in terms of participating.

BARNUM: I don't remember much of that.

DONIN: I only know because I read them.

BARNUM: Sure.

DONIN: So you guys didn't get any kind of graduation ceremony, did you?

BARNUM: No.

DONIN: How did you get your diploma?

BARNUM: Mail.

DONIN: Did you stay in touch with any of your professors or anything?

BARNUM: No.

DONIN: After you left?

BARNUM: No. I was in the South Pacific on a ship. My ship was the world, you know.

DONIN: That was it.

BARNUM: I didn't see many other people. It was a cold winter, I remember that.

DONIN: Which winter? When you were on the ship?

BARNUM: Yes. I think it was a cold winter the winter after we graduated, '42.

DONIN: Oh, really.

BARNUM: Exceptionally cold.

DONIN: Oh, that may have been the winter when the temperature dropped to minus 40 or something?

BARNUM: 'Forty-eight degrees or something. I was on the business board of *The Dartmouth*, the paper, circulation manager. So I hired myself to take one of them on. I took the off-campus route.

DONIN: What do you mean, "the off-campus route?"

BARNUM: We delivered papers off campus.

DONIN: Oh, really! So you mean to faculty and all that?

BARNUM: Yes.

DONIN: It's an early morning job, isn't it?

BARNUM: An early morning job it was, yes. Yes indeed. Living in the attic of the fraternity house; there was no heat up there either. Sort of glad to get to Notre Dame which was another terrible blowy place.

DONIN: But did it have heat in the dorms for you anyway?

BARNUM: We had heat in the dorms, yes.

- DONIN: But it's no warmer in South Bend than it is in Hanover, is it?
- BARNUM: No. Then I think I went to Cornell Law School—
- DONIN: Ithaca's not exactly... [Laughter]
- BARNUM: That was cold, that was bitter.
- DONIN: So you've got a lot of miles on you in cold climates.
- BARNUM: Yes. But I was involved with weddings of classmates and class of '42 as well. Ad Winship; I was in his wedding. Ollie Quayle who died early. So they were some pretty long-lasting relationships.
- DONIN: Was your class impacted by the fact that some of your classmates left early to join the service and you didn't get a graduation ceremony and, you know, you all sort of dispersed?
- BARNUM: Well, I never had a graduation ceremony to compare it with. So probably.
- DONIN: Yes.
- BARNUM: I didn't know what...
- DONIN: You didn't know what you were missing.
- BARNUM: Didn't know what I was missing, no.
- DONIN: But those first few years before the US got involved in the war, you all had the regular sort of college traditions to enjoy.
- BARNUM: Yes. Yes. We did.
- DONIN: Fall Party Weekend or whatever they called it. Did they call it Homecoming? I don't think they called it Homecoming. Party Weekend or, you know, with the....
- BARNUM: Alumni Weekend.
- DONIN: Maybe. Yes.
- BARNUM: We had the Paddle Group on the campus.

DONIN: You had Winter Carnival, and you mentioned Green Key.

BARNUM: Yes. We had all those things. We had a full college.

DONIN: Right.

BARNUM: And the summer was a lovely time here. We had a very good class, and I've enjoyed these reunions. Meet an entirely different group of people.

DONIN: Each time you come?

BARNUM: Well, no, they're the same people, but nobody I ever knew at college.

DONIN: Oh, interesting.

BARNUM: Basically.

DONIN: Yes, yes.

BARNUM: Don Crance, but he doesn't get here very often. He lives in Georgia right now. And Ad Winship, he was class of '42, but he died.

DONIN: How about your fraternity brothers? Are there any of them that still come?

BARNUM: Well, no.

DONIN: Lost touch with them?

BARNUM: I've got one, one that I see. Bob Costello and Don Crance That's all I really see.

DONIN: But some, you know, some of those students from sort of your year forward actually migrated to a different class because they spent so much time with a different class.

BARNUM: Yes, yes. We got through with the same group. We were not a split class. By and large we were not split up. Some people dropped out.

DONIN: Sure.

BARNUM: Went in the Army or Navy earlier. Came back. But very few.

DONIN: Most of the '43s, though, stuck with the class of '43. Nobody migrated. Even the ones that came back after military service.

BARNUM: Oh, I don't think they did.

DONIN: They stayed with '43.

BARNUM: I would think. I'm not positive about that.

DONIN: Right. And of course you didn't have any that were joining the class as V-12ers or anything because they came later on. You were all gone when they got there.

BARNUM: They were here, but we were not V-5—that was the Air Force. V-7 was tech officers.

DONIN: V-12 was what? Navy.

BARNUM: V-12 was older—I don't know what they were.

DONIN: Officers, weren't they?

BARNUM: Yes, they were officers when they started out. They were appointed by governors and politicians.

DONIN: Right. Because you have the later classes actually had lots of V-12ers join them because they—

BARNUM: Yes, in the classes.

DONIN: Yes, because they came here for their training, and then they came back and wanted to matriculate at Dartmouth after the war and joined whatever, class of '48, '49. There was one class, I think it was maybe the '49ers. They had something like fifteen different classes represented at their graduation because of all the students who were coming and going at different times. So many different circumstances that people got involved in and they didn't get around to graduating until much later than their original class that they were assigned to. But that wasn't the case so much with your class.

BARNUM: No. We had very few cars on campus, too. That's another thing. There were very few cars.

DONIN: Well, in those days—

BARNUM: If I was going to go to Smith, I'd have to bum a ride with somebody.

DONIN: Isn't that how you all got around, you guys, getting....

BARNUM: Yes. Some people had cars. I don't know, they....

DONIN: Really.

BARNUM: My roommate had a car the last year, I think.

DONIN: So did you go off campus a lot for your social life with the girls?

BARNUM: Yes.

DONIN: And did you invite dates up for Carnival and all that?

BARNUM: Yes. Yes.

DONIN: Any particular school was your favorite?

BARNUM: Smith, I guess. I don't know.

DONIN: Yes. Did a lot of you and your classmates because of, you know, the Depression, did you all have part-time jobs when you were on campus? Did a lot of you work?

BARNUM: Yes.

DONIN: Part-time jobs? Did you have a job?

BARNUM: Yes.

DONIN: Where'd you work?

BARNUM: I worked— Bill Brayton, who was also in my class, and I got together waiting on table.

DONIN: Oh.

BARNUM: At different places.

DONIN: You mean different dining halls or actually restaurants in town?

BARNUM: Restaurants.

DONIN: Oh.

BARNUM: No dining halls. But I got a job and Brayton and I decided we were, instead of working at these jobs, we would hire people to work these jobs. And the pay would be where'd you get meals from there. So we did that. It was quite successful. But we had an awful time during Carnival.

DONIN: Oh, yes.

BARNUM: The dates.

DONIN: Oh, dear.

BARNUM: And you'd call up. And Joe Sayer or somebody, he needed help. I had to go down and help him.

DONIN: Oh, gee. Because you couldn't get anybody else to do it.

BARNUM: No, no, I couldn't get anybody at that hour.

DONIN: So the restaurants used you like an employment agency.

BARNUM: Right. Right.

DONIN: Oh, good for you. Very entrepreneurial.

BARNUM: Yes, well....

DONIN: [Laughs] And you fed yourself that way.

BARNUM: We did.

DONIN: You saved yourself a lot of money that way.

BARNUM: Well, we had to eat. I worked the summers. Good summer jobs.

DONIN: At home? Did you go home for your summer jobs?

- BARNUM: Yes, I worked one summer. I guess the first summer I worked at Yale in town, the lock company in Stamford, Connecticut.
- DONIN: Mm-hmm.
- BARNUM: Second summer I got a job on an oil tanker; the tanker went from New York to Texas. Made three trips or something. Another job I had was trying to interest people in credit cards out of gasoline stations. Gulf stations, trying to sell Gulf cards, knocking on doors.
- DONIN: And how did you get paid? On how many cards you convinced people to take?
- BARNUM: By the week.
- DONIN: So it wasn't on a commission basis.
- BARNUM: No. The tanker job I guess paid me the most. I made, I think, \$90 a month. And room and board of course. So I always had some money when I came back to college.
- DONIN: Which is a good thing.
- BARNUM: That's right. My father, he had a tough time during the war, so I became independent quite soon.
- DONIN: Well, I think that was pretty common in those days.
- BARNUM: You had to, that's right.
- DONIN: I mean you were lucky to be able to go to college at all. To be able to afford to go to college, a private college like Dartmouth.
- BARNUM: I felt that way.
- DONIN: Yes, I bet.
- BARNUM: Well, Connecticut Aggies, which was what UConn was called. I didn't want to go to an agricultural school.
- DONIN: What were most of your classmates from high school doing? Were they going or not going?

BARNUM: They were going to Swarthmore, Yale, Harvard and to Princeton. No Princeton. And they went to universities.

DONIN: So most of them were going off to college despite the cost?

BARNUM: Yes. Well, the cost was \$450 a semester.

DONIN: That was a lot of money to come up with. If you didn't have it, it was a lot of money.

BARNUM: It's not like the \$50,000 a year for my granddaughter going to college.

DONIN: Have you had any generations following you coming to Dartmouth?

BARNUM: No. I find if you talk somebody into it, they'll hate it.

**[End of Interview]**