

Dartmouth College Oral History Project
The War Years at Dartmouth
Interview with Theodore Safford '45
By Mary Donin
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DONIN: How did you first become familiar with Dartmouth and choose it as your undergraduate school?

SAFFORD: Well, it's a fun story. I graduated from Wyoming High School in June of 1941. And in April sometime of that year, my mother said to me, "Don't you think it's time to apply to college?" And I said, "Well, I think it probably is." [Laughter] She said, "Well, when are you going to do it. And I said, "Well, I'm going to do it." And she said, "No you're not. You're going to do it." And she said, "Where are you applying?" And I said, "Dartmouth College." And she said, "Dartmouth College? Why are you applying to Dartmouth College?" I said, "Because I have legacies there." There were three Sisson uncles, and they were graduates in 1918, 1921 and 1923. Something like that. And one of them, Rufus Sisson sired two sons and a daughter and both sons went to Dartmouth. Dale Sisson, his real name is Rufus Dale Sisson, but he goes by the name of Dale, was born in Pottsdam and he grew up in Pottsdam and he was the class of '44. So I knew he was here and the class of '40, from Wyoming High School, had sent five people to Dartmouth.

DONIN: Wow!

SAFFORD: And so I knew that was sort of going to be helpful. So I wrote for an application; I returned it promptly in the mail. And ten days later I got an acceptance letter. [Laughter]

DONIN: Amazing.

SAFFORD: I wish somebody had shaken my shoulders and... Rolf Syvertsen was... I got to know him very well but I'm jumping ahead. But anyway. Came up in the end of August, I think for freshman week. And we went up to Moosilauke and had a great time. Heard lots of tales around the fireside at night and I can't remember who it was at the Outing Club. And it was off to the races. It was very nice. And we were assigned roommates, of course. Loring Wood, who is also a physician and I were roommates at Topliff, 307 Topliff, and everything was going along splendidly. And I had a tryout with

Don—What the heck was his name?— He was the guy that directed the glee club.

DONIN: Oh, great. We can find his name easily.

SAFFORD: Anyway. So I was in the freshman glee club, and that was very nice. And I was premed so I had a lot of sciences and labs and all that sort of thing.

DONIN: In those days then they had a procedure that when you matriculate as a freshman, you have to declare that you're premed?

SAFFORD: I had already decided that I wanted.... My family didn't think I had the stamina and the direction. [Laughter]

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

SAFFORD: To ever accomplish that. I have two younger sisters and a younger brother and my brother is twelve years my junior. And when he was two years old in 1937 he came down with pneumonia. There were zilch antibiotics, none. And the pediatrician who had a two-door Chevrolet coupe and I was very car identifying in those days [Laughter] and he would come to the house everyday. And so he came and Stewart Matthew said, "Kitty," my mother's name, I think we're going to have a crisis tonight and he's either going to make it or he isn't going to make it. It lit a spark. In any event, he passed the crisis and his temperature was normal the following morning and Stewart said that would be the way it would go. He would either be dead or the temperature would be gone. And that was because the immune system had built up enough antibodies for the pneumococcus to knock them out. So picking up again, I had to take physics and chemistry and English. I took a couple of years of German with Professor Schlossmacher. Anyway, September 7, 1941, we all know that the world changed.

DONIN: December 7th.

SAFFORD: I mean December. I said September. December 7th. And it certainly did. Of course we went on an accelerated scholastic program.

DONIN: Did that happen right away like in January, did you switch over?

SAFFORD: Oh, yes. Uh-huh. Yes. I remember, you know, Ernest Martin Hopkins... Everybody on campus went to this announcement that

he was going to make. And he said that he and the trustees were working on an accelerated schedule, and described what it would be like for students, and so on and so forth. So we had the first change was that we had what was called an intersession between the first semester and the second semester. I think we only took maybe three studies. In any event, it was really an earth changer. And I should have changed at the time but I didn't. Anyway, in July of '42, the V-12 program and the ASTP program and a Marine Corps program, which was, I think that was V-5—I'm not sure. Anyway, I signed up for the V-12, and Jim Andrew signed up for ASTP, Army. July 1st we were in uniform, and we were on the federal payroll and all of our college expenses were taken care of by the government.

DONIN: And were you able to continue your premed studies?

SAFFORD: I was able to—I mean all of us premeds were able to continue the studies. And by October of '43, all of us had enough credits—117 credits—of the 120 to graduate. So that was round-the-clock, round the months, you know. There was the end of that semester. And it was very early in October, and Ralph Syvertsen wanted me to take an extra course because he was trying to get me into the class for '45. And I was just too lackadaisical. I knew.... Well, the problem was I'd take these aptitude tests, and I would score very well on them. He would ream me out [laughs] and say, "Why don't you, just a little effort. You know you could be right there." And I've matured a lot since then. [Laughter]

DONIN: So he was pushing for you to be able to join the medical school class of '45?

SAFFORD: Yes. No, he was the med school—

DONIN: He was the dean, wasn't he?

SAFFORD: He was the dean of the med school.

DONIN: Yes. Right.

SAFFORD: Wonderful, wonderful man. And he said, "I don't understand why you're so lackadaisical. There are a few things about you that I really like. [Laughs] I think you might be a decent doctor." But it was wonderful to know him because he was just a.... I mean the college couldn't have had a better dean of the medical school than he. But

looking back on the whole picture, if I had gotten down to business and done what I should have done, I would've gone to the two-year medical program. But then I wouldn't have met my wife of 60-plus years. So life is interesting. Early October of '43 I had a choice of staying and taking this course that he thought I ought to take. And I said, "I've got to get away from the books." I mean I was working harder. But there was an awful lot to do. And I just needed a little respite. So I said to the V-12 office that I would like to be transferred to the Great Lakes Naval Training Station. So I did indeed get sent out to Great Lakes. [omitted 7 minutes of narrative about war experiences]. But back to Dartmouth. Well....

DONIN: What are your memories of President Hopkins? Did he go up to Moosilauke when you went on your freshman trip?

SAFFORD: No, he did not go up. I mean he was appropriately revered—I mean I think of him as.... He wasn't very tall, but he pro every student in the college. I mean you could go over to Parkhurst almost anytime and you were welcome to see him. Oh, I think he certainly had some detractors, but he was a representation of the 20th-century progression that the college made. Of course it was only 40 percent over at that time. He was president when the college went from a small college in the country, but there are those of us who love it. Every decade up to the time that I came here, there was something major that had happened. You know, Topliff Hall was built when I was born, 1923. And I mean it was his leadership and the growing support of the alumni that made it possible through their generosity, people that had gotten out into the business world and made a little money, and they wanted to give it to Dartmouth.

DONIN: Mm-hmm. Do you remember December 7th?

SAFFORD: Oh, vividly.

DONIN: Do you remember where you were, what you were doing?

SAFFORD: Yes. I was standing outside of Topliff Hall. And I had a glass of water, and the temperature was, I don't know, 10 below zero or something like that. And I was trying to see if I could throw the water up high enough for some of it to freeze before it came down. Just as a little experiment. Okay? [Laughter] Dale Sisson, who also was living in Topliff, came out and said, "You'll never guess what has happened." And I said, "What's happened?" And he said, "The Japanese have bombed Pearl Harbor." And I said, "Pearl Harbor?"

And he said, "That's a big naval base in Honolulu." And I said, "Oh, my God!" So we went back and listened to the radio. I mean it was a stunner. And then Roosevelt came on and gave his famous speech. I think most people listened to that, too. That was really the start of the United States going from being an isolationist situation to a kind of world power and in the process become a productively...the war was... It was just amazing how the production of the war requirements were, and how many brave guys gave their lives in all the battles that were fought.

DONIN: Did you immediately decide that you wanted to enlist as opposed to wait to be drafted?

SAFFORD: No, I was scared to death to get drafted. [Laughter] To be perfectly honest. And I was... I thought about maybe going into the Air Corps. But when the V-12 program came along, and it was obvious that we were going to be able to finish a good bit of the premed, that I decided—well, I mean a lot of us decided—that that was a good way to go. So after I went on to med school, when I graduated, I also became a lieutenant JG in the Navy.

DONIN: And that was because of the V-12 training?

SAFFORD: Yes, indeed.

DONIN: Well, what was it like making the transition from a, you know, you were a traditional freshman undergrad your first term.

SAFFORD: Yes. Mm-hmm.

DONIN: And then suddenly like that you transition into being in military, sort of semi-military training here.

SAFFORD: Yes. Well....

DONIN: Did they move you out of your dorm and change your class schedule?

SAFFORD: Well, they didn't change the class schedule. But we had to file up every morning, you know, in uniform and get orders of the day from the quartermasters and the chiefs.

DONIN: And you were using a new language. I mean everything was being called sort of military lingo, wasn't it?

SAFFORD: Oh, yes, yes, yes. It was bulkheads and, you know, all that kind of stuff.

DONIN: The dining hall was now the mess hall.

SAFFORD: Mess hall.

DONIN: And the time was announced in military time and all that kind of stuff?

SAFFORD: Yes.

DONIN: How did you learn to march? Who taught you how to march?

SAFFORD: Well, there wasn't a great deal of emphasis on it, but some. And—even in med school, because V-12 carried on even in med school.

DONIN: The classes that you took, were you still taking.... It was a mixture then of military training and traditional....

SAFFORD: Well, yes. There was the military training. And, yes, we did have to learn how to march. But otherwise, you know, they didn't blow taps at night or ring a gong.

DONIN: Did you stay living in Topliff?

SAFFORD: No. I moved. Well, for that intersession that I talked about, I was in Butterfield, which was a brand-new place. Dick Hinman was there as a matter of fact and a few others. And then after the intersession, Dale Sisson and I and Jim Andrew and two other guys took a rental at 23 Lebanon Street. Which was very nice. I guess we were there up until Jim went his way and I went my way out to the Naval Station, Great Lakes.

DONIN: Did you ultimately ever get a degree from Dartmouth?

SAFFORD: Very good question. We did. Ernest Martin Hopkins made an announcement that for all pre-engineers, premeds, because you have so many credit hours, I'm going to try to convince the board of trustees to let the college give you your degree if you pass your first semester in your special school, your advanced school.

DONIN: Terrific.

SAFFORD: So my degree. They were all nicely doing in the mail. And it's signed by Nelson Rockefeller because he was the chairman of the board of trustees and by Ernest Martin Hopkins. And it was all in Latin and I'd taken a lot of Latin in high school but I was a little rusty on it. I was delighted to have it and it's still framed and it's in a box somewhere. [omission of narrative about family]

DONIN: Did you do any sports while you were here? I guess you didn't have much time.

SAFFORD: No, that's right. I played freshman basketball.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

SAFFORD: And I was the same...my persona was the same about basketball as my getting into med school. [Lauhgter] Only my talents—I think my talents, my mental gifts, were better suited for medicine. But as I said, I sang in the freshman glee club. But then when this condensation of everything.... I mean, classes in the morning and labs in the afternoon, and that went five days a week. And maybe a class or two on Saturday.

DONIN: Did you have a job? Some kids had jobs.

SAFFORD: No. My father paid for the first semester. So he got me through to Pearl Harbor. Then these other programs came along.

DONIN: Sure.

SAFFORD: And he didn't have to shell out much, which was good.

DONIN: Did a lot of your classmates go off and enlist and just leave?

SAFFORD: Oh, yes. There was a huge patriotic response.

DONIN: And some faculty, I gather also.

SAFFORD: And some faculty, too. Yes.

DONIN: So the population on the campus shrank down, and then grew up with a new population of people coming in in the military training. Was that your sense?

- SAFFORD: Yes, yes. So things were pretty... The number of people participating in the Dartmouth process was fairly steady during the war.
- DONIN: Which is the only way they could've survived.
- SAFFORD: Yes, yes.
- DONIN: What did that do to... I mean I realize you didn't stay here that long. But what did it do to any kind of feeling of class unity? I mean so many of them went off to enlist, and they were replaced by these military types.
- SAFFORD: Well, that's a very good question. I can only speak for the class of '45 and using my own experience. I think it was we had a very disparate kind of situation. And it was because several of us going to professional schools, postgraduate; you know we were through in October of '43. For people who started in our class and came back after the war, a lot of them didn't graduate—I mean there was no graduation. We never had a graduation until I don't know, when was it, 1990? Yes. Well, I forget. Anyway, I think it was '95 because it was.... Yes, that's right. It was '95. So we were all officially either present or *in absentia* all granted—
- DONIN: Degrees.
- SAFFORD: Yes.
- DONIN: Isn't that nice.
- SAFFORD: But there was a—happily there was a formative group of guys that.... Harry is one of the outstanding guys, Harry Hampton.
- DONIN: Mm-hmm.
- SAFFORD: And he and Nick Sandoe and several others were the glue that held the class together. Then as we came up on our five-year celebrations, each time a few more would return...some who graduated in the class of '49 or '47, '48. But it really...I think we paid a pretty big price for... And to be, you know, even where we are today, I think we were pretty lucky, pretty lucky. Yes.
- DONIN: Mm-hmm. Did some of the original '45ers transition to another class because when they got back here they were actually with....

SAFFORD: Well, no, as I say, that is exactly what happened. You know they were a little bit older than the guys they might have been going to class with. But many of them elected to stay with those classes.

DONIN: Right. So there was sort of migration to a different class after they got back.

SAFFORD: Yes, yes. And I don't know the numbers. I don't think we've ever taken, as a class, taken time to go through the book and really figure it out. I think I've been to every reunion since our 15th. That may be a little exaggeration. The Upper Valley class of '45 people are a lot of very important people to the cause.

DONIN: Right. And they're active.

SAFFORD: And they're active.

DONIN: Now were they all.... Is your sense that all of the active members are sort of original—started as original traditional undergrads, you know, matriculating in the fall of '41? Or are some of them part of the class because they came as part of the V-12 program or the V-5 program and then petitioned the college to actually graduate?

SAFFORD: Yes, yes.

DONIN: There are some of those as well?

SAFFORD: There are some of those. I have no idea of the number. But definitely, yes. And I think most of the war classes had that same experience.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

SAFFORD: People would get assigned to come to Dartmouth from schools all over the country. But the Dartmouth experience was a wonderful one and I'm still kicking myself for....

DONIN: Being a cheeky youngster and not taking advantage.

SAFFORD: [Laughter] Yes.

DONIN: There are some of those in every generation, aren't there?

SAFFORD: I know. I know.

DONIN: OK, well I think we're done unless you have something else you want to share.

SAFFORD: No.

[End of Interview]