

Dartmouth College Oral History Project  
The War Years at Dartmouth  
Interview with Katharine Fisher (spouse of Walter Fisher '50)  
By Mary Donin  
December 3, 2007

DONIN: Okay, Mrs. Fisher, now I guess what we'd like first is a little background on how—we talked to your husband last week.

FISHER: At length. [Laughs]

DONIN: At length. And he was weaving you into most of his narrative. But he didn't go into detail about how you met and all the romance stuff.

FISHER: And that's what you want to hear?

DONIN: [Laughs] Yes, to start.

FISHER: Well, I was at Briarcliff at the time. And I came up here on a blind date, not him. And I met him in think it was the Theta Delta house. He was escorting an engaged couple, which he probably told you about.

DONIN: No. An engaged couple?

FISHER: It was Dick Van Deusen and his fiancée, Barbara Van Deusen.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

FISHER: Barbara Condon as she was then.

DONIN: Uh-huh. And what does it mean to escort a couple?

FISHER: [Laughs] Oh, he was just with them.

DONIN: You mean like chaperoning?

FISHER: No, she was going to sing. She sang with the Whiffenpoofs, and they were giving a program.

DONIN: Oh, I see.

FISHER: So he was kind of steering them around and showing them places and partying and so forth. And I met him there at the fraternity

where I had a date with somebody who didn't intrigue me in the least.

DONIN: Was this a blind date?

FISHER: Yes.

FISHER: And I met Walt then. I had known his brother slightly in New Canaan where—I lived in Darien. But back in those days we all had sort of—all the towns had a Christmas party. And so we got together that way.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

FISHER: So anyway, that's how I met him, up here.

DONIN: Was this your first trip to Dartmouth, this time when you met him?

FISHER: I think so.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

FISHER: Yes. And then I later came to Green Key with him.

DONIN: Oh, so there was a spark right from the beginning.

FISHER: I suppose. [Laughter]

DONIN: That's a long way to journey for a weekend, especially in those days.

FISHER: They used to do it every single weekend.

DONIN: All the way down to Briarcliff?

FISHER: Yes. Walt and a friend who was dating a friend of mine, a very close friend of mine, they'd come down every weekend.

DONIN: It's tough on the homework schedule.

FISHER: I know.

DONIN: In those days when you came up here, where did you stay? Where were you put up?

FISHER: Well, I don't remember.

DONIN: Other people have said that faculty would open their houses to girls.

FISHER: I don't think so. I really can't remember.

DONIN: So this was when he was a freshman or sophomore?

FISHER: He was a senior.

DONIN: Oh, he was a senior. OK. So this was like '49, probably. Because in those days there were all sorts rules about girls staying in rooms and parietal hours and all that stuff. Did you have parietal hours at Briarcliff, too? I assume.

FISHER: I assume. They would not permit boys.

DONIN: Yeah. You had to receive the gentleman downstairs in the living room or something like that. Right?

FISHER: I've forgotten all that.

DONIN: I suspect it was probably the case here as well.

FISHER: Yeah, I just can't remember where we stayed. Isn't that silly.

DONIN: Well, it probably wasn't ... You probably didn't spend much time, wherever you were staying you probably didn't do much other than go to sleep there.

DONIN: What were you sort of impressions of Dartmouth when you first came up here?

FISHER: When we were married, we sat Professor Neale's house out—did Walt tell you that?

DONIN: Yes, right.

FISHER: On Lyme Road. And when he was in classes, I used to go over to the ski hill, which was Oak Ridge or something like that, and we got a dog. And I would go down to the games, walk to the games, the lacrosse games, with the dog.

DONIN: And was there any—I realize you were only here for a short time—you were married when?

FISHER: February.

DONIN: Right, of '50.

FISHER: They gave us a week, a week's honeymoon.

DONIN: Oh, really!

FISHER: [Laughs] Yes.

DONIN: Oh, I guess he had to get permission to leave school.

FISHER: Oh, yes.

DONIN: Oh, yes. Especially from the coach, right?

FISHER: From the coach, Tom Dent, and the dean.

DONIN: Dean Neidlinger, I think it was. Yes. So what sort of a life was it for a young married wife, not even living in the—you know the marrieds were in the dorms.

FISHER: I know. I don't know exactly what I did. I don't remember really. I'd made some friends. We had some friends, married friends.

DONIN: In Fayerweather or Wigwam or Sachem?

FISHER: I think it was one of those. I think it was Wigwam. And we had, well there were several good friends that, well Walt of course knew the husbands.

DONIN: Do you remember whether there was much socializing with his fraternity brothers? He belonged to a fraternity, right?

FISHER: Yeah, Deke.

DONIN: Yeah.

FISHER: Well there must have been.

DONIN: Mm-hmm. Because some people say that, you know, the marrieds were sort of set aside, set apart, from the traditional undergrads.

FISHER: Well, I think probably that's the case. I mean I don't remember doing lots of parties, to be honest with you.

DONIN: Uh huh.

FISHER: Big weekends, but....

DONIN: The real socializing took place on the weekends.

FISHER: Yeah.

DONIN: But he was still active on the lacrosse team, is that right?

FISHER: Right, right.

DONIN: So that must have taken up quite a bit of your sort of free time anyway.

FISHER: Yes.

DONIN: Watching him compete.

FISHER: Yes, I did do that.

DONIN: Uh-huh. Yes, he said, your husband said, that lacrosse and Tom Dent really helped him survive life at Dartmouth. That that was the most important thing for him.

FISHER: I guess it was, yes. Because it was tough for him, I think. Well, it would've been with having been in the service and coming back.

DONIN: He was a lot older than—although there were a lot of people in the same boat.

FISHER: Well, there were. I mean the friends that we had over there that I met, his friends, were all his age, having spent time in the service.

DONIN: Right. Were women encouraged to get jobs, part-time jobs?

FISHER: No. We were only here for the term, you see.

DONIN: So there wasn't much you could do.

FISHER: I mean there really wasn't much I could do.

DONIN: Mm-hmm. Some people talked about taking in boarders. Ah, no...

FISHER: Well, we did for one weekend. We did take this guy who knocked on the door and said his girl had always stayed with the Neales.

DONIN: Oh, nice.

FISHER: And so we did give her a room for that weekend, whatever it was.

DONIN: And were you aware that any of your contemporaries, you know, the young married wives, were any of them working? Was that your sense?

FISHER: No. Some of them had kids.

DONIN: They already had children. Sure.

FISHER: Actually, these three couples I remember had kids.

DONIN: So there was no pressure on them to be in the workplace because they were raising babies.

FISHER: No.

DONIN: Any memories of John Dickey?

FISHER: Nope. Don't remember him at all.

DONIN: Well you were probably pretty focused on your husband in your brief time here. Just being a newlywed yourself. But clearly this must have formed a good impression for you since you both ended up coming back here many years later.

FISHER: [Laughter] Well, we came back for reasons unrelating to Dartmouth. We felt it was time to get near one of our four daughters. But I think... I love it here. It's nice. I love Kendal. It's great. And I'm glad we have our farm to go back to.

DONIN: People have said that the key to enjoying a place like Kendal is having someplace else to go.

- FISHER: I think that's very true.
- DONIN: To sort of escape. Because if that's your only place, I am sure it can become confining.
- FISHER: Very, I would think.
- DONIN: So did you keep up any social ties with any of the friends that you made here while you were...
- FISHER: Yeah... Well, I met a couple and we all ended up in New Canaan at one point. This was Betty and Stuart Kay and Betty and I ended by writing two books together.
- DONIN: Really?
- FISHER: Quilting. *Quilting from Squares* and *The Craft of Smocking*.
- DONIN: Oh, yeah.
- FISHER: Both how-to books. Scribner's published.
- DONIN: Wonderful. Just... Was this right after you left or later?
- FISHER: No. No. This was years later.
- DONIN: That's nice.
- FISHER: Yeah. We had a good time doing it. But I was here for such a short time that you know I don't really remember an awful lot of it.
- DONIN: It was a quick interlude before you got... Because your husband said that his feeling when he was here was that, and it was not unlike a lot of the feelings that others have expressed which is that especially coming here as an undergraduate after your military service that you really were just anxious to get out of here and get on with your life.
- FISHER: Yup. That's true.
- DONIN: You know, they'd put in their time in the War, many had gotten married and they were feeling like, OK, let's get through this and...

FISHER: I think that's it in a nutshell really.

DONIN: ...And get started.

FISHER: Yeah.

DONIN: OK. Well, unless you've got any wonderful little anecdotes or memories...

FISHER: [Laughter] Not really.

DONIN: Do you remember how Main Street has changed from when you were here?

FISHER: Well, the Dirt Cowboy was something, I don't remember what. And then Murphy's was The Green Door.

DONIN: The Green Door?

FISHER: Café.

DONIN: Oh, it was a café?

FISHER: Yes.

DONIN: Oh.

FISHER: And then Lou's was there.

DONIN: Where did you shop for food?

FISHER: At the Co-op which was in the middle of town.

DONIN: Couldn't have been as big as it is today then obviously.

FISHER: Oh, no! [Laughs] I remember going in there in the middle of the winter and asking for asparagus. And the guy said to me, "We don't have asparagus this time of year." [Laughs] You know I didn't know how to cook.

DONIN: Oh, yes.

FISHER: I mean that's what I really spent a lot of time doing.



DONIN: So at the Neales' was your first—

FISHER: The first place, yes.

DONIN: That you had to learn how to cook.

FISHER: Yes.

DONIN: Who taught you?

FISHER: Well, my mother taught me how to make a white sauce. And how to do eggs and bacon and so forth.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

FISHER: But that was about it. And I remember once I had a ham for some reason. Did Walt tell you this story?

DONIN: Mm-mmm.

FISHER: [Laughs] He's never forgotten it. I had cooked a ham. And then of course I had with two of us a lot left over.

DONIN: I'll say.

FISHER: So I was going through the cookbooks looking for what to do with it. And I ended up by making a ham mousse. And it was freezing cold out, and Walt came back for lunch, and he said, "Where's the food?"—"Where's lunch?" And I said, "It's in the refrigerator."

DONIN: Oh, no! [Laughs]

FISHER: He's never forgotten that. [Laughs]

DONIN: Not what you want to eat on a day like this.

FISHER: No....

DONIN: And did you go to a lot of Dartmouth events while you were here?

FISHER: Just to the games, football games.

DONIN: Did you go to movies? Maybe you were too broke.

FISHER: We probably went. I don't know. Speaking of broke, I'd go to the grocery store, and I'd spend \$25 a week.

DONIN: Wow!

FISHER: Now I spend \$25 a time.

DONIN: \$25 a bag.

FISHER: Yeah.

DONIN: Do you remember going to his graduation?

FISHER: Yeah.

DONIN: Where was it held? Was it up on the Bema?

FISHER: I think it was where it is now.

DONIN: Oh, on the Green?

FISHER: I think so.

DONIN: Oh.

FISHER: I'm not sure.

DONIN: Who came?

FISHER: His mother.

DONIN: Nice.

FISHER: And that was it.

DONIN: It probably wasn't the big deal then that it is today.

FISHER: His brother was here. Whether he was there or not, I don't know.

DONIN: Right. His brother was here meaning attending?

FISHER: Attending Dartmouth.

DONIN: Oh. I didn't know that. He was a regular undergrad?

FISHER: He was. Yes.

DONIN: So he was...

FISHER: He would have been, well, let's see, he was a year younger than I am. I think he probably was a junior maybe.

DONIN: And he was sort of a traditional undergrad. I mean he hadn't done the military service first.

FISHER: No.

DONIN: He'd come directly from private school...

FISHER: Deerfield.

DONIN: Deerfield. Oh that's right. They all went to Deerfield.

FISHER: Yeah.

DONIN: Oh, so his brother was here when he graduated. That's nice. He didn't tell me that. Did the lacrosse talents pass down to the brother as well?

FISHER: Ah, yes I think so to some degree. And of course one of our grandsons is just crazy about lacrosse and he goes to Denver University. And he's very impressed that his grandfather was an All-American. [Laughter]

DONIN: A star, yes. That's great. So that was graduation and then off you went to his first job and returned fifty years later, or whatever.

FISHER: We came up to I think a tenth reunion and then fiftieth.

DONIN: Yeah, which is the big one.

FISHER: And that was it.

DONIN: Now did he stay in touch with Tom Dent after you left here?

FISHER: Ah, I think so. I think he did.

DONIN: Seems like Tom Dent had an amazing impact, a profound impact on a lot of students.

FISHER: He did.

DONIN: It's a shame that the tree fell through the... Have you seen a picture of what happened to the cabin?

FISHER: I heard about it.

DONIN: His daughter, Barbara Dent [Hinman] was just in here.

FISHER: Oh, was she.

DONIN: Yes. She said they had just... Let's see, what day was it. I think it was day after your husband was here. And they had driven by the cabin to see if the roof had been fixed and it's still just covered with a tarp.

FISHER: Really.

DONIN: Terrible. I feel badly about that.

FISHER: Well Barbara must have had a lot to say, growing up here.

DONIN: Yes, she had some good memories.

**[End of Interview]**