

Dartmouth College Oral History Project
The Wars Years at Dartmouth
Interview with Pete Foster
By Mary Donin
10/12/07

FOSTER: When I joined the V-5 Program in the Navy, back in the forties, and chose Dartmouth as my initial location, the Navy decided no, that they would send me to Yale. So my first 12 months in the Navy, right after graduation from Wethersfield High School, was in New Haven. And after the first year did continue on with the flight training program. And after the war I decided I did not want to return to Yale but rather to Dartmouth. I was familiar with Dartmouth because, Carroll B. Foster, class of '24, had graduated, as well as his younger brother, Kenneth.

ANNE FOSTER: Kendall.

FOSTER: Kendall, excuse me. Thank you. Kendall Palmer Foster had graduated in 1926. And so I was quite familiar with Dartmouth and felt that would be more to my liking than going back to the city.

DONIN: Do you think they initially chose to send you to Yale because you lived nearby there? I mean did that factor into it?

FOSTER: Who knows what the thinking was in the service? [Laughs]

DONIN: Mmmm.

FOSTER: Find so many decisions were made that you could not fathom, and I never tried to really figure it out. But I certainly was close, yes. Right there within 20 to 25 miles of Yale was where I grew up.

DONIN: So you arrived at Dartmouth what year?

FOSTER: In 1946, in the fall.

DONIN: Nineteen forty-six.

FOSTER: Yes.

DONIN: And when you matriculated, did they give you sort of an idea of what year you were in?

FOSTER: They assigned me to class of '48 because they entered me as a junior. It was an arbitrary selection. I actually was enrolled in the class of 1947 at Yale.

- DONIN: Uh-huh. So they gave you two years of credit for your year at Yale and the years you were in the service.
- FOSTER: Yes. The education, as it was, at Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and the university there in preflight training. And after that to St. Mary's College in California; that's in Oakland, yes.
- DONIN: So when you arrived here, John Dickey was a brand-new president.
- FOSTER: Oh, was he? I didn't know how new he was. But, yes. He certainly was, and I had a personal interview with John Dickey. And always admired him greatly.
- DONIN: So you matriculated in the summer of 1946. Yes, so he was here less than a year.
- FOSTER: Is that so?
- DONIN: He started in the fall of '45. So he was still getting himself settled in as well, I would think.
- FOSTER: Well, it wasn't apparent. He seemed to be completely settled and in charge when I arrived.
- DONIN: Now was your first interview with him when—the matriculation ceremony where he signed your card? Do you remember that?
- FOSTER: No, I don't remember that detail. He was interviewing all of the freshmen. And because it was my first year at Dartmouth, I was included in that group.
- DONIN: What was your initial impression of him?
- FOSTER: It was very welcoming, very supportive. And I always had the feeling that if it was needed, I could go back to him with a question.
- DONIN: Wonderful. Hmm. So where did you live? What dormitory were you in?
- FOSTER: Ah. I was in Gile Hall.
- DONIN: Uh-huh.
- FOSTER: I had two roommates and a fireplace in the room. [Laughter]
- DONIN: Boy, that's pretty nice.

- FOSTER: It was grand. Yes, yes. A little better than the bunkhouses that we had been assigned to in the Navy. [Laughs]
- DONIN: I bet. Big improvement over those conditions, I'm sure.
- FOSTER: Well, we had it pretty well in the officers' training program in the Navy.
- DONIN: Right.
- FOSTER: Compared to many others. But Gile Hall was first class.
- DONIN: And you must have been one of many officers who were here following the war.
- FOSTER: Oh, yes. And we all had varied experiences with various branches of services. However, that was not discussed very much at all. There wasn't an interchange of experiences between the returning veterans, that I experienced.
- DONIN: That's interesting.
- FOSTER: And I've found that true since, that I have a good many friends now who were very involved in combat and other experiences, and they don't initiate unless questioned specifically, any conversation or memories or stories about wartime. I think just pretty generally people have put that behind them, and feel that they want to go on with their lives and perhaps forget about many of those experiences. Mine were pretty distinctively pleasurable. So I'm not reluctant at all. And I often interject stories that I remember from the service. But it was, you know, safe and pleasant and good surroundings. And I was always, you know, fed well and clothed well and so forth. And had good experiences with others in the same group.
- DONIN: Do you think Dartmouth did a good job of sort of mainstreaming all these returning vets into the life of the college?
- FOSTER: Well, of course, I don't have anything to compare it with. I didn't feel uneasy about the transition to civilian college at all. Part of it was made easier because I was—I tried out for the soccer team. As a matter of fact I came back a week early before classes started in the fall of '46 after talking to Tommy Dent, the coach, and he invited me to come up and try out. And I made the varsity soccer team. So we were practicing for a week together and eating together and getting used to the campus for that length of time before the normal activities started.
- DONIN: That makes a big difference, doesn't it?
- FOSTER: Yes, yes. That week made a big difference. It was very helpful.

DONIN: Did you feel there were distinctions made between the vets and the small number of regular undergrads who....

FOSTER: You know that's one of the things that I've always appreciated about Dartmouth is that there was no segregation or distinction or difference made by anyone either in the administration, the faculty, or other undergraduates. It was a very homogeneous, you know, equal-status situation. And there were great differences in financial status of the family, for instance. But it was not distinguishable—or easily. It was as if we were all brothers together.

DONIN: That's great.

FOSTER: Yes, it was a great feeling.

DONIN: So the class developed a cohesiveness even though you were only together really for two years.

FOSTER: Well, I don't think the classes were as well organized as they are today. We didn't do a lot as a class, except perhaps—and I'm not even sure about that. Very early I was invited to join the SAE [Sigma Alpha Epsilon] fraternity. And that's the group that I really got to know better and worked with and formed groups: intramural competition and so forth, were organized on that basis rather than by class, in my memory.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

FOSTER: We didn't really identify with the class particularly until after graduation.

DONIN: Anne's shaking her head in agreement. Interesting. Were you more closely tied to the SAE group after you graduated? Did you stay more in touch with them?

FOSTER: More in touch—postgraduate activities centered around the class rather than around the SAE. I have kept in touch with the fraternity and returned several times and been invited to participate with support and contributing ideas and attending meetings occasionally. But more than that, the class came together as an entity in my experience foremost than the fraternity.

DONIN: Just so I understand this: So while you were here as a student, you felt more an affinity with your fraternity. But after you graduated, it was then that the class—

FOSTER: Yes. As a matter of fact I had an opportunity to move into the house; and therefore my room was in the house. And so that was the center of my associations other than classroom associations with other students.

Rather than in any kind of meetings or organized events on the part of the class. I don't think—the class wasn't really very well organized at all or felt that there were things we should do as a class to any great extent.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

FOSTER: There were still some of the old traditions where the class would be called out on the center of campus for some kind of a traditional ritual and so forth. For instance, we did run the gauntlet, you know, with the seniors line up, and the undergraduates have to run through and receive swats on the tail. We did that I remember as a class. And perhaps after a sports event or football game, there would be class get-togethers where we would do a snake-line dance down through the town and across the Ledyard Bridge and back and that sort of thing. We did sit together at the football games.

DONIN: Oh, really?

FOSTER: Yes. To cheer the team on. [Laughs] But the class wasn't very foremost in my attention at that time, no.

ANNE FOSTER: It really was the mini-reunions where you began to get acquainted.

FOSTER: Right, right. And I didn't really know members of my class as members of the class. I didn't know who was '48 and who was '47 and who was— And we were pretty well mixed up. In the fraternity house, you know, we had, oh, class of 44 and class of '45s along with the early—

DONIN: Well, I think that was the case especially during those years because people were coming and going.

FOSTER: That's right.

DONIN: Spending years away in the service. And coming back. So there was probably less emphasis on class—your class identity at that point.

FOSTER: Mm-hmm.

DONIN: But speaking of classes, let's talk about classes as in classrooms and classes that you took. Did you have any particular strong memories of professors that made an impact on you or courses that you took that made a big impact on you?

FOSTER: That's one of the things that's really bothered me. I know other people do have strong memories of particular professors, and I have to stay that in general I do not. I had favorite subjects.

DONIN: What were those?

FOSTER: Math and physics particularly. But as an elective I took French because I had taken it in high school. I did enjoy the French professor, and I could not come up with his name if you asked me. The physics professor and the math professor were also very helpful.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

FOSTER: But again, you know, I don't remember them by name at all. I had some interesting after-class discussions with some of them. But, you know, I applied for and was admitted to Thayer School in my senior year. And I had started in electrical engineering courses at Yale. And so I chose to go that route at Thayer. I have to admit that because I had not made the varsity team in high school, I was more interested in my soccer letter than I was in the diploma. I remember thinking that that's not right, but that's really what means the most to me is to get that soccer letter. And I think maybe to the detriment of my dedication in the eyes of the professors at Thayer School, I even was proud enough to wear my letter sweater to class. And I think that probably I was the only engineer with a Dartmouth letter on his chest.

DONIN: That's quite a distinction.

FOSTER: And it was. But I don't think it set well with the professors. I was not invited back for a second year at Thayer. And I never was able to get an answer as to why that was so. No one would talk to me about it afterwards. Not a professor. Everyone had "gone on vacation," you know, after I learned that I was not invited back.

DONIN: Was it because of grades, do you think?

FOSTER: I don't know.

DONIN: That's very odd. We'll have to poke around in your record and see why. [Laughter]

FOSTER: You're perfectly welcome to do that. [Laughter] I probably missed a few laboratories when they would've expected me to be there. But I was on the soccer field practicing because the game with Harvard was coming up. Or something like that you know. So my priorities were not probably those that the professors felt were appropriate.

DONIN: Was it a program that was supposed to go for two years?

FOSTER: Yes. To get a master's degree you would go back for a postgraduate year.

DONIN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

FOSTER: At Thayer. And I was looking forward to that very much. As a matter of fact, when the interview teams arrived at Dartmouth from industry to recruit graduates for entry into various jobs in the working world, I paid very little attention because I felt that I'd be another year at Thayer.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

FOSTER: And so I didn't participate in that [Laughs] to any great extent. I did have a couple of interviews. But that was sad—a sad way to end an otherwise very enjoyable two years here in Hanover.

DONIN: I can imagine. I'm surprised you have as fond memories as you do—or fond feelings.

FOSTER: I have mixed emotions.

DONIN: Yes. I can imagine. That's too bad. So obviously the soccer played a big role in your life here. Who was the coach?

FOSTER: Tommy Dent. He coached lacrosse and soccer. We had two very successful years. We lost one game in each season.

DONIN: Wow.

FOSTER: And neither of those games that we lost were Ivy League. One was Springfield College and one was Wesleyan.

DONIN: So you were undefeated in the Ivy League.

FOSTER: Yes, we were. We were Ivy League champions.

DONIN: Mmmm!

FOSTER: Yes.

DONIN: Well, it's easy to understand why it's exciting. And why you're devoted to it.

FOSTER: And my father, of course, was very proud. He had a Dartmouth D sweater at home.

DONIN: Oh.

- FOSTER: Which I was familiar with. He was on the track team and I believe the baseball team. So I lived up to my father's expectations when I came home with a sweater with a letter on it. [Laughs]
- DONIN: Terrific. Well, that's pretty important. Let's see now. We've talked about your fraternity experience. What else have I forgotten to ask you?
- FOSTER: Well, I think probably as far as the war years are concerned, my experience as an undergraduate at Yale from the standpoint of being in the Navy program were probably pretty much what I would have experienced here on the campus. Seeing the pictures, I've seen pictures of the drills being done on the Green. And we did that in New Haven. The populace would come out on Saturday and watch us march on the Green in New Haven. We were roused out early in the morning and had to go for a run around the cemetery together. And then assemble. And we had inspections, and we took some military courses, naval history and that sort of thing in addition to our regular college undergraduate courses. And I'm sure that that would've been essentially the same as it was here.
- DONIN: I suspect the model was pretty much the same.
- FOSTER: They were governed by the services rather than by the college.
- DONIN: Right, right.
- FOSTER: But yes. But I did take, you know, as a freshman I took English, and I took mechanical drawing, engineering drawing, some physics and math courses and so forth, as any freshman would.
- DONIN: Mm-hmm.
- FOSTER: Other than the fact that at Yale in order to get from one class to another, I quite often had to hop on the trolley car.
- DONIN: Oh. That wouldn't happen in Hanover.
- FOSTER: It's spread out even greater than it was here, much greater. So that's one of the things that I didn't like about being at Yale. The playing fields were a great distance away from the campus.
- DONIN: Mm-hmm.
- FOSTER: And the physics and engineering courses were exactly the opposite direction away from the campus. So distance and being surrounded by a city was not really what I was looking forward to.

DONIN: Mmm. Any sort of traditions or events at Dartmouth that you were particularly fond of?

FOSTER: Well, yes. I do have to tell you the story about the Indian symbol.

DONIN: Oh, yes.

FOSTER: I was very proud to be a Dartmouth Indian. And in my first week here I told you I came up early and was playing soccer. Well, we didn't play soccer eight hours a day. So I did have time on my hands to not only look around the campus and get used to and get my room ready and so forth, but I had extra time. And the first thing that I did was to go down to the woodworking shop. And I found an Indian symbol. Since we had a fireplace in our room, I said, we need something over the fireplace. And I copied on a large piece of plywood an Indian head, the traditional Indian head symbol which at that time was commonly used by the college.

DONIN: Is it the one that was of the Indian in profile?

FOSTER: In profile, yes. With the feather hanging down and so forth.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

FOSTER: And I used the equipment down there, the jigsaw and so forth, to cut that out and painted it. And hung it up very proudly over our fireplace in Gile. And then took it of course to the fraternity house when I moved in there. And I still have that image at home, and I'm still proud of it. And I have felt that a great mistake was made when Dartmouth disassociated itself from the Indian symbol. And I have had a lot of contact with Michael Hanitchak in charge of the Native America Program here to try and get recognition by the college of the origin of the college through Samson Occom's efforts. And only recently has some recognition been made of Samson Occom in the new developments and so forth. But I've been in tough with the Mohegans down in Connecticut. As a matter of came up with the chairman or whatever they call them of the Mohegans to talk to Michael and see what could be done about reinstating and educating freshmen for instance on how Dartmouth was founded and under what circumstances—Eleazer Wheelock who came from Connecticut close to where we live. And used the money raised by Samson Occom in England, £12,000, to get Dartmouth started. Supposedly as a place where Native Americans could be educated and converted to Christianity.

DONIN: I should tell you—this is I guess off the tape; this isn't relevant—but I hope you'll stop by and take a look at Occom Commons. It's part of the new cluster of buildings down there.

FOSTER: I would like to see that.

- DONIN: I'll tell you where it is when we get off the tape.
- FOSTER: Wonderful.
- DONIN: Right, right.
- FOSTER: Yes, I'd like—I've got my camera with me today, and perhaps I could get a picture of it.
- DONIN: Good.
- FOSTER: Yes. Maybe not in the rain, but....
- DONIN: Well, it might clear up. So, Anne, can you fill in any details that Pete might have left out?
- ANNE FOSTER: I don't think so. Except to the point of the cohesiveness of the class. We've heard over and over during the years that because the members of the class were from so many different original and different classes and there was an age spread in there, that it really wasn't until after they graduated and started having the mini-reunions that they all got to know each other well. And this certainly was our experience. That when we came up to our first mini-reunion and didn't feel as if we knew people very well, but now it's been several years, and it's really a very nice close feeling. So I think this is unusual in some college experiences that it would be after you graduated from college that you really got to know your classmates.
- DONIN: Mm-hmm.
- FOSTER: Yes, the classes really, perhaps subconsciously, made up for a lack of identity as undergraduates. And we have not only our regular every fifth year reunion, officially. But we have two mini-reunions each year: once in the fall and once in February right around Winter Carnival time. But it was designed for skiing, a skiing weekend.
- DONIN: Sure.
- FOSTER: And we have really established traditions like that. And done a pretty good job as a small class. We had a tiny class.
- DONIN: Yes.
- FOSTER: We only have at this point around 200 left.

- DONIN: I'm going to stop you just one second. [Pause to change cassette.] Okay. Well, you could see—when Anne was looking at the Green Book there, which is the freshman book, you could see what a small class it was who matriculated, certainly as freshmen. And that represents, I think, a small percentage of what ultimately ended up being the class of 1948.
- FOSTER: Yes. They filled in with others as they came back. And that's one of the reasons I was put in '48 probably was a small group. Yes.
- DONIN: But it's interesting that you've all—that it sort of coalesced during the last two years when everybody was here together. And although you didn't feel any identity particularly when you were here, that it really happened after you graduated that you got organized.
- FOSTER: Yes. And I'm not entirely clear on that. I don't know how, for instance, I was chosen to be treasurer of the class immediately after, or shortly after, graduation. Maybe I wasn't the first treasurer. I might have been the second. But I did serve in that capacity. And I don't know how I became known well enough for me to be chosen to do that. So there must have been some class activity that isn't very memorable to me, I guess, that took place.
- DONIN: Well, and also it probably helps that you were a soccer star.
- FOSTER: [Laughs] Well, not a star. But I did play and enjoyed that very well.
- DONIN: Yes, yes. Well, we've got about six minutes left on here. So I don't want to put any pressure on you, but any final thoughts that you want to share?
- FOSTER: Well, I do have a number of other thoughts. But I don't know exactly what you might be looking for in this collection. I was, as you know, I got to know the soccer players first. Those were the first ones I met. I didn't know my roommates until after I knew all the soccer team. Bob Craig, who was the class ahead of me, was a halfback on the soccer team. For some reason we enjoyed each other's company. And he was the one who proposed me for membership in the SAE fraternity. So I've always been grateful to both the soccer team, the soccer coach, and Bob Craig in particular for really welcoming me into the Dartmouth community. And also, of course, John Sloan Dickey who took part in the Great Issues course by inviting notable, worldly speakers to come and present themselves. Which I have to admit I didn't appreciate the value of that at the time. I didn't see where that would have a great bearing on my future. [Laughs] And I didn't do well—Great Issues was my poorest course.
- DONIN: Mmmm.

- FOSTER: And now that I look back, of course, it probably was one of my more valuable courses. I don't know why that format doesn't exist today because it really was a great experience, and we heard some marvelous and worldly, intelligent men, particularly. I was not in favor of the college going coed. I felt that even though it was the last Ivy League school to go coeducational, that there should be available a choice. If you wanted to go to an Ivy League school and you wanted to have it an all-male experience, I thought there should be that choice available. Not to say that women shouldn't receive an equal educational opportunity to men. I'm not saying that at all. I think we are yet to see the full value of women's participation in the future of our country. But I thought that we were just playing copycat, and I didn't think we needed it. There were plenty of valuable and highly academic applicants to Dartmouth. Dartmouth was very popular then, as it is today.
- DONIN: Mm-hmm.
- FOSTER: And it was not something that I have enjoyed seeing happen. But that was just one of the first things that happened since I left the campus that I haven't appreciated.
- DONIN: Well, you're not alone. [Laughter]
- FOSTER: No, people don't talk about it. You were kind of in a distinct minority if you didn't think that that was a great idea. I still don't think.... I think that it's a distraction from the academic objectives of the school.
- DONIN: Mm-hmm.
- FOSTER: We were able to, you know, back in the forties not think about women as a part of our life. At least until the weekend. [Laughs]
- DONIN: Right.
- FOSTER: And not then as a very serious part of our life until Winter Carnival came along.
- DONIN: Mm-hmm.
- FOSTER: Which made Winter Carnival really special. And so some of the old traditions that we had I'm sorry to see gone from the campus.
- DONIN: Some of them are still here in a different format.
- FOSTER: [Laughs] There are some. The snow sculptures for instance aren't what they used to be.

DONIN: No.

FOSTER: In the old days.

ANNE FOSTER: Either is the snow.

FOSTER: The activities. [Laughs] I don't think you can blame it on snow.

ANNE FOSTER: There isn't the quantity.

FOSTER: And, you know, some of the regulations that have come along to prevent, for instance, jumping off the Ledyard Bridge in the spring, and rushing the field after a football game, and that sort of thing, it's a little sad in my mind.

DONIN: Okay.

FOSTER: Okay. Thank you.

DONIN: Thank you. I'm going to turn this off.

FOSTER: It's been fun to remember.

DONIN: Oh, good. I'm glad.

FOSTER: You know you don't have a chance to talk about these things. Not very many people are interested in the first place. And you just don't bring back those memories. But it's a joy to do it. And I thank you very much for the opportunity.

DONIN: Well, I'm glad that you came in today.

[End of Interview]