

Dartmouth College Oral History Project  
The War Years at Dartmouth  
Interview with Robert H. Nutt '49  
By Mary Stelle Donin  
February 19, 2008

DONIN: I'm looking at your 50<sup>th</sup> reunion book where you say 12 members of your family have attended the college over four generations and 125 years. So I guess I shouldn't ask what brought you to Dartmouth. It was in your blood.

NUTT: Well, it goes back to three great-uncles in the 1880s.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

NUTT: And then my two other uncles and my father attended Dartmouth, graduated. And then three in my generation: my brother, a cousin, and myself.

DONIN: Amazing.

NUTT: And then three in the succeeding generation: I had two daughters graduate and one of their cousins, a nephew of mine.

DONIN: Yes.

NUTT: So I'm hoping it won't stop. But I have only two grandkids, and one of them is already at another college. Maybe the last one will apply here, but I don't know what'll happen.

DONIN: Well maybe some great nieces and nephews will carry one.

NUTT: Well, I wanted it to be each succeeding generation, but that's not going to happen I think.

DONIN: Yes. That's probably hard to see but that's what happens.

NUTT: When I applied to Dartmouth it was 1945; the war was still on. And I didn't apply anywhere else. People didn't apply to six or eight different schools. And I don't suppose we ever really worried that I wouldn't get accepted. But it could have happened.

- DONIN: And from listening to other people talk about, you know, finding Dartmouth or coming to Dartmouth, a lot of people had not even seen it before they got here. I mean they just applied and arrived on, you know, the first day.
- NUTT: Sure. That doesn't happen much today.
- DONIN: No, no.
- NUTT: I had been here because my brother had come here.
- DONIN: So you'd spent time here before you came and matriculated.
- NUTT: A couple visits, short visits. But not more than that.
- DONIN: So when you got here, I mean I assume there was all this lore surrounding Dartmouth, given the number of generations in your family that had come here. Did it live up to your expectations of it?
- NUTT: I think so, yes.
- DONIN: Even despite all the weirdness that was going on here because of the war.
- NUTT: It was. I graduated from high school in late May or early June of '45 and began at Dartmouth a couple of weeks later, the summer.
- DONIN: Right. Because at that point they had started a summer term.
- NUTT: Although there were a handful—Mythology has it that there were 49 Forty-Niners who started in March,
- DONIN: I've heard that.
- NUTT: I'm not sure if the number's right, but there were definitely some of my classmates here when I got here. And there were quite a few; and then some more came in the fall, September, right at the point where [John Sloan] Dickey took over. I was in the last group to be matriculated with Ernest Martin Hopkins.
- DONIN: He signed each of your matriculation cards, do you remember that?
- NUTT: Yes.

DONIN: Yes. What were your impressions of him? You must have had some exposure to him before you got here.

NUTT: I'm not sure that I did. I certainly knew the name because he'd been here for 30 years by then.

DONIN: Yes, yes.

NUTT: Or almost 30 years. Of course he'd been here right after he graduated, he came back here. But president from I think 1916 on.

DONIN: I think that's right, yes.

NUTT: And I didn't have much interaction with him. But in the theater at that time, which was different but great, his daughter, Ann Hopkins Potter, was one of the reliable female actresses around town. And so I did...I did a radio show with her on what we called WDBS, Dartmouth Broadcasting System.

DONIN: Uh-huh. And that was the sort of forerunner to—

NUTT: DCR.

DONIN: WDCR. Uh-huh.

NUTT: Yes.

DONIN: When did that start?

NUTT: The radio station?

DONIN: Yes.

NUTT: It was here—yes. It must have been in the '30s or maybe late '20s.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

NUTT: And rumor had it that they disseminated their programming through the College radiator system.

DONIN: I've heard that. [Laughs] I've heard that, too.

NUTT: I'm not sure I believe that either.

DONIN: They had some wires hooked up to the radiator.

NUTT: Yes.

DONIN: Yes, I've heard that. And the radio was functioning then even when you were here in '45. Oh, interesting.

NUTT: Yes, and certainly later. I don't know how—it was maybe only a few hours a day.

DONIN: Yes.

NUTT: I can't remember.

DONIN: Yes, yes.

NUTT: Later it was...I don't think it was ever 24 hours. Maybe it is now?

DONIN: I'm embarrassed to tell you I don't know.

NUTT: I don't know.

DONIN: I don't know.

NUTT: And I know subsequently one of my daughters who came here was a DJ at the radio station.

DONIN: Oh, that's great. That's great. A tradition carried on.

NUTT: And it's always been in the same spot in the upper floors of Robinson Hall.

DONIN: Mm-hmm. So what did you find here in the sort of early summer of '45? It must have been lots of military training stuff going on.

NUTT: Yes. I don't think we were affected by that so much. But we were all—Of course it was all guys. We were all wondering about the war. It was VE-Day had come and gone.

DONIN: Right.

NUTT: VJ-Day...That's one little cute story: Towards the end of the summer, it looked like the war might continue for a while. But this was before the atomic bombs. And I decided I would enlist in what

was called I think the V-5 Navy Aviation. And it was something like a seven- or eight-year commitment. It would get me through... At that time it was supposed to be that commitment. That would certainly get me through college. And funds were tight. I didn't have any kind of scholarship aid except I worked at the DDA, Dartmouth Dining Association. So I enlisted in the V-5 and was accepted. And was due to report for signing in on a certain Tuesday in September. That Sunday, previous Sunday, there were rumors about VJ-Day. And I think on Monday the Japanese did surrender.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

NUTT: So I did not show up Tuesday. I didn't go to Boston and raise my right hand. I just ignored the whole thing and nothing ever came of it. But then a year later, to take advantage of the GI Bill, I did enlist, and the war was over. But I enlisted just in the Army and went to Japan in the Occupation where I spent a year. An interesting year. And then came back to Dartmouth and finished and actually graduated in 1950, but stayed with the Class of '49.

DONIN: Was that a standard decision. That despite what the timing was they—

NUTT: They could keep their class, yes.

DONIN: Identity.

NUTT: Some people did, some people didn't.

DONIN: Did it affect your feeling of whatever—solidarity?—with the Class of '49 that you weren't with them?

NUTT: I can't remember what my thought process was. My cousin who was about the same age and had come up here just about the same time and had gone away about the same time in the Navy, decided to go with the Class of '50, although we graduated the same day.

DONIN: Yes, yes. That's funny.

NUTT: So it was just a matter of choice. And I don't think the College really cared.

DONIN: Mm-mmm. It seems to be lots of both. That people stayed with the class that they matriculated with; others who had more friends in another class and chose to....

NUTT: Sure.

DONIN: Do you think that impacted the whole sort of unity of the class, that everybody graduated at different times and were gone part of the time?

NUTT: Probably less unity because the age range in my class—or when I was here at college as an undergrad—the age range of people on campus was maybe ten years.

DONIN: Huge. Yes, yes.

NUTT: In fact my brother and I, he was five years ahead of me. He and I wound up spending one semester together here.

DONIN: Amazing.

NUTT: He'd come back in '45, and I guess it was maybe the fall or winter term of '45.

DONIN: You were both on campus.

NUTT: Yes.

DONIN: Isn't that funny.

NUTT: We were both in New Hampshire [residence hall] where they're now gutting it.

DONIN: Oh, in the same dorm! Oh, I thought that was Topliff they're gutting. Oh, that's New Hampshire?

NUTT: Yes.

DONIN: Oh, okay. Also by '45, by the time you came on, there were members of the V-12, all the training groups that had done part of their time here, who I understand came back and wanted to actually finish their education, their degree, from Dartmouth.

NUTT: Yes.

DONIN: So that you had traditional undergrad civilian types like you plus guys from all different classes, plus all these people that hadn't actually matriculated at Dartmouth.

NUTT: Right.

DONIN: So it was a real—

NUTT: Mishmash. [Laughter] Exactly.

DONIN: Mishmash. No wonder the classes felt mixed up.

NUTT: Yes. My class has in the intervening years generated quite a lot of class unity. And there are, as you probably found out, a dozen of us or more who've moved back to this area. And get together once in a while.

DONIN: Do you have a lunch or something once in a while?

NUTT: Well, we actually did have a lunch last week. Maybe two, three, four times a year, Punchy Thomas, who is our majordomo.

DONIN: Thomas? What's his first name?

NUTT: Gordon.

DONIN: Oh yes, I interviewed Gordon.

NUTT: Punchy.

DONIN: Oh that's right. I forgot. Punchy.

NUTT: He had that name for 60 years.

DONIN: Okay. Well, let's go back to your first year here before you upped and enlisted. How did you make out that first year in college? I mean were you a good student?

NUTT: Like, I suppose, 90 percent of students wherever they go, you never do as well as your parents say that you can do. Or your teachers say that you can do.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

NUTT: I did okay. There were some courses that I wasn't terribly interested in. I was interested in the theater and writing and acting and production work. Physics was a challenge, economics. And they still are.

DONIN: Right, right. Exactly. So did you have any memorable teachers in drama or English or writing?

NUTT: Oh, yes. This was the Warner Bentley era.

DONIN: Oh, yes! Oh.

NUTT: And Henry Williamson and perhaps most of all George Schoenut, whom I stayed with friends with him many years. And in fact moved to Thetford 20 years ago just down the street from where the Schoenhuts lived.

DONIN: Oh, nice.

NUTT: And he was just a great guy. Walter Bentley was a tough guy. But I found that in my life that some of the toughest guys is where you learned the most. Or it's possible it happens that way. There have been a couple of other cases. But, yes, that was.... Sadly, Warner Bentley, who had come here 20 years earlier to build the Hopkins Center and hadn't yet and wouldn't for another 15 years, had to use Robinson Hall for his theater.

DONIN: That was a long haul getting Hopkins Center built.

NUTT: There were other professors like Francis Childs, who taught English. He had the famous Shakespeare course of his day here. There have been others since. What's his name?

DONIN: Peter Saccio?

NUTT: Yes, Peter. Who I know and should remember his name. Is famous or has been famous for Shakespeare courses. And Francis Childs was the Saccio of his day.

DONIN: I see.

NUTT: There were a few others. Of course this as the era when John Dickey invented Great Issues. And I liked that course. Probably



didn't give it as much as I might have. And there were teachers in that area that were pretty well known and a lot of guest speakers. It was almost like the Montgomery—

DONIN: Fellows now.

NUTT: Fellows of their day.

DONIN: Yes, yes.

NUTT: But there were maybe more of them in a year.

DONIN: Did you find that the faculty was diminished at all because some of them were off at war. Did you get any sense of that?

NUTT: No.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

NUTT: None. I'm sure that there were....

DONIN: It may have been earlier than when you were here.

NUTT: Yes. And I mean there were probably some earlier students who would have suffered. But they were pretty much back by 1945.

DONIN: Right, right. Exactly. And it sounds to me like the focus of your social life was probably centered around your drama and theater activities.

NUTT: Yes. I never joined a fraternity. Mostly because I, well, I thought it was an expense that wasn't in the cards, although I probably could have swung it somehow. My father had been. I could have used that as a wedge. But I didn't want to. You don't do that when you're 16 or 17.

DONIN: Right, right. So you waited until you turned 18 to enlist obviously, right?

NUTT: Yes.

DONIN: When you got here you were—

- NUTT: For the GI Bill really. That was the purpose. And I hoped desperately to be sent to Europe because I was Europe-oriented. And disappointed when I was sent to Japan. But looking back on it now, it was a—I've been to Europe quite often since then. And back to Japan only once or twice on short business trips. So it was interesting. That's back when this country knew how to run an occupation. Unlike today.
- DONIN: Yes, yes. Interesting.
- NUTT: They had planned. And they just did it right.
- DONIN: So you were there a year?
- NUTT: Yes.
- DONIN: Did you find when you returned to Dartmouth, did you find that you were a different student? I mean....
- NUTT: Yes.
- DONIN: In what way?
- NUTT: I had matured more than a year's worth probably. Actually back then at that window of history you could enlist for 18 months.
- DONIN: Ah.
- NUTT: And that's what I did. And I was out after about 16 or 17 months.
- DONIN: Mm-hmm.
- NUTT: So it was a godsend at that point.
- DONIN: And at that age, 16 or 17 months can have a profound change on you doing something like you did.
- NUTT: I guess so.
- DONIN: I mean you were young, 18. So did you find the studies here easier when you got back? Or were you more focused? I guess I should say.
- NUTT: Probably. Just a little bit more mature.

DONIN: Yes. Did you know at that point you wanted to major in theater or in English?

NUTT: Yes. In fact beginning in 1946, just before I enlisted, I began doing summer stock.

DONIN: Oh.

NUTT: And I did a year in 1946. And actually with some help from people like George Schoenhut and the theater department, I got an introduction to a pretty well-known theater, summer theater, in Cohasset, Massachusetts.

DONIN: Oh, yes.

NUTT: And that was a great experience. I even did a show with Thornton Wilder.

DONIN: Amazing.

NUTT: With him. He was the star.

DONIN: Amazing. What an opportunity.

NUTT: *The Skin of Our Teeth.*

DONIN: Oh, yes, yes.

NUTT: We didn't have many scenes together, though. And then after I got back from the Army, I did three more years of summer stock down at Bucks County.

DONIN: Mm-hmm. Mmm.

NUTT: Which was nearer my home.

DONIN: So at this point the College was back to running the traditional two semesters, and you had the summer off. They weren't running year round at that point.

NUTT: Yes, that's right.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

NUTT: And I think my.... This'll tell you something about what you're looking for maybe. In 1950 I was going to go back to the Bucks County Playhouse for I guess my second year. Maybe the third. I can't remember now. And the first show began on something like June 15<sup>th</sup>. And graduation was the 17<sup>th</sup>. And they wanted me back. And I went all the way up to John Dickey saying I wanted to miss graduation. And he wouldn't let me.

DONIN: Wow.

NUTT: And I'm sure he made the right decision—now. I was annoyed at the time. But not that annoyed. I took it in good grace. But he wanted.... I mean nowadays I don't think that would be as big a deal. But he thought it was.

DONIN: Mm-hmm. Especially since you were not even with your own class. I mean you were going to be a special member in this 1950 graduation, of which there were....

NUTT: That didn't.... People weren't looked upon '48s, '49s, '50s, '51s as much.

DONIN: At that point, yes.

NUTT: At graduation. Yes.

DONIN: Yes, yes. How do you think the College did sort of mainstreaming this incredibly diverse group of young men—diverse in the sense of age, military experience or not, traditional matriculation here or coming in as a graduate of the V-12 program, wanting to finish here. It was a real mixture of men from different backgrounds and different experiences and different sort of levels of education.

NUTT: I remember there was a guy in at least one of my classes who was badly scarred by something like a fire in an airplane crash or something. And there were probably a couple of others. I don't remember many disabled veterans other than this one. Back then, if I'm right, the drinking age was 18. Which it probably ought to be again. So if it had been 21 and there were a bunch of vets over the age and a bunch of freshmen under the age, it probably could have been a problem.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

- NUTT: And there may have been some problems, but I don't recall any.
- DONIN: Mm-hmm. People allude to the challenges of providing a social life that was appropriate for, you know, a 25-year-old man versus, you know, some kid right out of high school, 17 or 18 years old. The challenges of providing appropriate social activities that were not necessarily appropriate for 17-year old boys and they ended up having to – I think this is in the Dickey interview, John Dickey's interview – they ended up having to go over to strip joints in White River Junction or something.
- NUTT: I don't recall that. What I think it was—and maybe still is—the SAE house just right here.
- DONIN: Right here, right.
- NUTT: Was not a fraternity *per se*. It was open. It was kind of a rec hall—recreation facility—for almost anybody. I can remember playing pool in there. And there would be some of the returned servicemen.
- DONIN: Were there pubs in town?
- NUTT: No.
- DONIN: That they could go to?
- NUTT: I think the only... There was a place... I think on Allen Street there was a bowling alley.
- DONIN: Oh, yes. Oh, people have talked about that. Yes, mentioned it anyway.
- NUTT: And there was also I guess some kind of a convenience store where you could get beer. I don't remember all that much drinking. The only place where you could sit down and order a beer that I can recall is at the inn.
- DONIN: Oh, yes.
- NUTT: Where they had right on Main Street where they had Simon Pierce's. It was a bar and grill kind of.
- DONIN: It looks like it was probably a bar and grill.

- NUTT: It was bigger, too. And it's changed over the years quite a bit.
- DONIN: Mm-hmm. And did you have any interactions with John Dickey other than your appeal to skip graduation?
- NUTT: Talking with him? I doubt it. Certainly he would show up at Great Issues events. Other than matriculation I can't remember being in Parkhurst Hall very much, if any other occasions.
- DONIN: In those days you didn't want to be called into the dean's office, unlike today.
- NUTT: I was a pretty good kid in the sense that I didn't get into trouble or push the envelope.
- DONIN: Now when you came back, did you go back to living in a dorm, or did you live off campus? Or where did you live?
- NUTT: Well, no, I came back. The first roommate I was assigned as a freshman; we weren't very close, never became friends. So the second term I roomed I think in New Hamp with still another guy I'd become friends with. And the third term before I went away was still another guy who enlisted just about the same time. And who was actually in Japan almost the same time working in the PX at MacArthur's headquarters in Tokyo.
- DONIN: Amazing.
- NUTT: And used to go almost every night to the movies where MacArthur would be. MacArthur watched a movie every night. Anyway, when we both came back, we roomed together off campus from then on.
- DONIN: Mm-hmm. Where'd you live? In somebody's house as a lodger?
- NUTT: Well, on School Street for some of it. And on West Wheelock down the hill.

**[End of Part 1]**  
**[Begin Part 2]**

- NUTT: Something like 17 West Wheelock, just down the hill. It was back in the day when you put ice cream out on the windowsill during the winter because nobody had a fridge. And fridges weren't allowed

on campus for years. Maybe it was the 1970s before they were allowed.

DONIN: Right. I never had a fridge in college. It's definitely a modern necessity. Or not a necessity.

NUTT: Yeah. The nuker.

DONIN: Yes, or the microwave. So you took your meals at the place where you lived?

NUTT: Both John and I, John Borys was his name, had worked at the dining hall.

DONIN: Oh, yes. So that included free food.

NUTT: Thayer.

DONIN: Oh, that's a good deal. Good deal.

NUTT: So I think.... In fact Thayer, going way back to the beginning, VJ Day I was working washing pots and pans in the basement of Thayer when we heard about it. And everybody dropped everything and went out to celebrate.

DONIN: Yes, we have pictures of the Green just covered with people dancing and having a good time. I think it was VJ Day. But there was also a bunch of marching around I think, formation and all that kind of stuff.

NUTT: I don't recall.

DONIN: Yes.

NUTT: I don't think there's much more to talk about with Hopkins or Dickey. But they were icons.

DONIN: Indeed. Hopkins basically, you know, it sounds to me like he made this deal with the Navy in an effort just to keep Dartmouth open.

NUTT: I think so. We certainly heard that. Yes.

DONIN: That ended up being the largest V-12 training program, I think in the country. I mean there were a lot of these training programs around

at the colleges. But this was the largest and most successful in the country.

NUTT: And of course Hopkins—this is a slight exaggeration—but he almost invented the alumni magazine. Not just ours but the whole alumni magazine.

DONIN: Really! I did not know that.

NUTT: There may have been some sporadic newsletters at other colleges. But he was the first. And I think we just had our 100<sup>th</sup> a couple of years ago. Nineteen four, five, six, something like that.

DONIN: Amazing.

NUTT: He started the alumni magazine.

DONIN: Yes, because his class is '01. So that makes sense. He came back.

NUTT: He came back as a secretary to the president.

DONIN: Yes. I think that's right.

NUTT: There might be an argument.

DONIN: That somebody else is going to claim that theirs was the first. [Laughs] So he must have played a part in the whole, you know, this folklore about the sense of loyalty that the Dartmouth alums feel for their school.

NUTT: I think so.

DONIN: I mean many people credit the location and the fact you're sort of isolated up here in this place. You bond more deeply because of that. But one could easily see the argument being made that the alumni magazine certainly contributes to that once you've departed this wonderful place.

NUTT: Yes and there probably were financial reasons to stay close to their alumni.

DONIN: Indeed. Right.



NUTT: As well as.... Talk about legacies, I don't know the figures, but 50 years ago or more, 70 years ago, we were probably 25 percent, 20 percent legacies. And now I think it's half that; and it's probably the way it should be. But it certainly annoys alums whose kids don't get in.

DONIN: Yes, yes. It's tough and I don't know if it's going to get any better. I mean it's not like you're going to see that diminish just because a certain generation is going to be dying off. I mean I think there are members of the classes of the '70s and '80s that are now also saying that their legacy doesn't mean anything when one of their offspring doesn't get in.

NUTT: Not as much as it used to anyway. My daughter who has children was the class of '80. You know she's been a loyal alum. But she's married to a Cornellian, and he's not pushing for either of their daughters to go to his school. But I bet there are many cases where female alums from Dartmouth are married to alums from other places who tend to override her.

DONIN: Right, right. Isn't that the challenge also of, the challenge of development and fundraising. Is, you know, where is that family dollar going to go? Is it going to the father's school or the mother's school? It's a tough call. Tough call.

OK, well unless you can think of any other gems you want to tell me, I think we're done.

NUTT: I don't know. This is mostly the war years?

DONIN: Yes. You know it's a very closely constrained time period we're looking for.

NUTT: Other people have probably mentioned this too. But the controlling factor back then was that people didn't have—undergraduates didn't have cars.

DONIN: Oh, right.

NUTT: And so you were pretty much stuck here. You'd come up on the train.

DONIN: And hitchhiking, too. There was a lot of hitchhiking then.

NUTT: People used to say that the old B&M, Boston & Maine with the square wheels. They used to complain about that. [Laughter]

DONIN: Where were you traveling from?

NUTT: Staten Island, New York.

DONIN: Oh, yes. So that was a... How long a ride was it in those days?

NUTT: Well, four or five, six hours.

DONIN: It hasn't changed much today.

NUTT: No, it hasn't.

DONIN: It still takes about six hours to White River on the train anyway. Because they stop for half an hour.

NUTT: I did have one friend, this was toward the later part of my stay, who had an MG. He came from some money. One of the early MGs. And he would drive back to New Jersey and drop me off in New York fairly often. And I can remember one— He was a wild driver. I remember one time going from Hanover to Manhattan in three and a half hours or something. It was just....

DONIN: That's really terrible!

NUTT: Yes.

DONIN: Scary.

NUTT: We'd leave at two or one o'clock, maybe after a show.

DONIN: Oh, so it was in the middle of the night.

NUTT: He was in the theater, too.

DONIN: No traffic.

NUTT: Yes.

DONIN: Was gas rationing over by then?

NUTT: I couldn't tell exactly when it ended. But probably...

- DONIN: Towards the end of your time here probably.
- NUTT: Oh, yes, certainly by then. Yes.
- DONIN: Yes, yes. Did that prevent the famous road trips that everybody talks about—you know to the women's colleges around here—the gas rationing and lack of cars?
- NUTT: Well I had another friend, and we used to—and he had a car—and we'd go down to what was then Colby Junior. I don't remember... I didn't go on any longer trips. I think maybe once to Smith or Northampton or Mount Holyoke. I don't remember the occasion. I don't think... The number of times I went to Boston during the time I was in Hanover was very, very few. And I didn't go on any sports trips.
- DONIN: Right, right.
- NUTT: I wasn't—I did play a little bit of soccer. But I wasn't on any of the other teams.
- DONIN: It sounds like your focus was pretty much the theater and radio and drama stuff. And that can be pretty all-consuming, I would think.
- NUTT: Yes.
- DONIN: A much more productive pastime than....
- NUTT: I'm still doing it, some.
- DONIN: That's great. Okay.
- NUTT: It was definitely different back then.
- DONIN: It sure was.
- NUTT: But nicer than the Vietnam era must have been. I wasn't here then. And my kids were too young then. But I've read a lot about it, of course, in the alumni magazines.
- DONIN: Sure. Tough times for Mr. Dickey. He looked just so unhappy when he retired. It was a hard decade for him.

NUTT: Is Hopkins's daughter still alive, Ann Potter?

DONIN: That is a good question and I don't know the answer.

NUTT: She'd be...I was just 80 a week ago yesterday.

DONIN: Congratulations.

NUTT: So she'd be 84 or 5.

DONIN: Okay, I'm going to turn this off.

**[End of Part 2]**

**[End of Interview]**