

Dartmouth College Oral History Project
The War Years at Dartmouth
Interview with Paul Samek '45
By Mary Stelle Donin
September 25, 2010

DONIN: Today is Saturday, September 25, 2010. My name is Mary Donin. We are here in Hanover, New Hampshire, with Paul H. Samek, Dartmouth class of 1945. Okay, Paul.

SAMEK: Yes.

DONIN: The first question that we like to start out with is how it is that you ended up coming to Dartmouth College?

SAMEK: Okay. I have to back up and say that I had been in summer stock theater for a few years when I was in high school, and I got an opportunity to get on Broadway with a show that we tried out in summer stock. I wanted to continue in the theater, but my family convinced me that I should go to college first, that that would be a better move than going right into the theater. And Ort Hicks was my mentor in a way, because he was a partner of my aunt's, who had run and finally sold to Twentieth Century Fox an eight-millimeter film business. So she was set for life and she gave Ort 25 percent of everything because he was her partner at that point. And then Ort came to work here at Dartmouth and so when it came time for me to come to a college, based on the fact that I was talked into it, Dartmouth was the logical choice. That's how I came to Dartmouth.

DONIN: Had you seen Dartmouth before you got here?

SAMEK: Yes. I had been in a summer camp a couple of times in Vermont, Thetford, Vermont and that area. And one time I was very ill. They didn't know what it was and they put me in Hitchcock Hospital, where I was for a week or two for examination and so forth. So yes, I was familiar with Dartmouth at that point. I love Vermont and New Hampshire—beautiful part of the world—and I like the people. But anyway, that's how I came to Dartmouth.

Obviously, I came as a freshman. My freshman year was really the only year that I have developed a loyalty, and friends, and classmates at Dartmouth, and I'll explain why. After my freshman year, I transferred to the University of Wisconsin, because they had an active theater program. In addition to which I crossed Warner Bentley the wrong way and he crossed me the wrong way and I wanted nothing to do with him. So, while

I was at Dartmouth, while I couldn't be involved with the theater because of him, I got involved in the start of the Dartmouth Broadcasting System.

DONIN: Oh, yeah.

SAMEK: Which was done from the dorm to the dorms; it was a very low-wattage broadcasting station. I'm sorry, there was a second—Warner had an assistant at that time that I really liked and respected, and that assistant was the faculty adviser, if you will, to the broadcasting company. And it was strange, but a week ago I got a phone call from the guy that was doing the history of Dartmouth Broadcasting, which surprised me. And he had found a letter that I had written to the faculty adviser. Didn't remember any of it, but it sounded like me because it was about a problem of personalities and it sounded like me. I was sort of in between trying to solve the problems.

I also made a few friends here as a freshman, Peter Beck being probably the closest to me. I had casual friends. Basically, they were not the in political crowd at all. In the first place, we were freshmen, but Pete had a motorcycle and he got a new motorcycle. I remember this distinctly, because he got a new motorcycle and leant me his old motorcycle and we went out for a motorcycle ride. I'd never ridden a motorcycle; I couldn't turn when the road turned. I ended up in a stand of trees, which almost killed me, as you can imagine, and that's the last time I never rode a motorcycle. [Laughter] And I mention it because Pete doesn't remember that part of it. What he does remember is that he and I got a ten-gallon can and filled it with gasoline because of the wartime shortage. We buried it. He didn't remember that it was me that was with him, but he and I together buried it up in the sand someplace, which he dug up ten years later, he told me. And it was very useful; he used it. So, that's one of the things that happened to me as a freshman.

What I didn't tell him or you was I was given a roommate who I found morally disgusting. He would go into Lebanon, date some of the girls that worked in the dime store, and rape them, one right after the other. And I couldn't stand him. So, that spoiled my roommateship, and at that point I think we were in Hitchcock Hall. But anyway, that's that story. So, I was not very happy here at Dartmouth as a freshman.

At the University of Wisconsin, I was very active in both the radio station and the theater there, and I specialized in accents and I taught people how to sound French, Spanish, Danish, whatever, because I have a very good ear. I should back up a little and say that on my way home in January—I remember distinctly, of course Pearl Harbor. We were sleeping late, because we had had a night of carousing of some sort, and I know I was awakened at about noon or one o'clock in the afternoon and told about Pearl Harbor. That was, of course, December 7, 1941.

About January '42, I was hitchhiking with someone else that I do not remember the Dartmouth freshman that was with me, but we went hitchhiking and saw in Springfield, Massachusetts a post office that had recruiting, navy recruiting in it. We both went in, signed up for the navy. I was notified that I would be on a reserve program, that they would call me when they needed me, but just continue my college with it. And that was when I went to the University of Wisconsin in Madison.

I graduated there from my sophomore year, at which point the navy called me in and, of all things, sent me back to Dartmouth, which was great. So I was in the Dartmouth V-12. I have to add that once you're in that V-12 program—bear in mind we're wearing uniforms; we're marching; we're spending a good deal of our time on naval science and whatever was necessary for our officership. And therefore, I really had no close ties with Dartmouth or with the people in Dartmouth at that point. I was at Dartmouth for about a year and a half after that. So, I am one semester, or a little less than one semester short of getting a degree and I've never gotten the degree.

I went from Dartmouth, to Columbia University, to midshipmen school. I went overseas. I took a lot of training in the navy. I went to gunnery school, to sonar school—which is for depth charges—to tactical radar school, and then I was assigned a ship in the Pacific as a tactical radar officer. Later, I was a gunnery officer and I handled court martials and few a things. So, I had a lot of schooling in the navy.

When I got out of the navy—didn't really get out, but got on the active reserve, because I was going to make the navy my career. On the active reserve, I met and involved socially with a couple of college professors from Dartmouth, who, when they heard my story said, "Really, Paul, you really ought to apply to Dartmouth for your degree, because with all this schooling, that will be more than the one semester that you missed." My attitude was, I didn't need a degree and I didn't ever apply for it. That's the major part of my degree in college.

Now, as far as loyalty to Dartmouth. I really have been loyal to Dartmouth from the very beginning. You'll find that even when I wasn't making much money, I contributed every year. I, in fact, was one of the officers of a brand-new Dartmouth club in Jacksonville, Florida, and this must have been in 1949 or thereabouts. So I've always been active but inactive, as far as Dartmouth was concerned. I had never been back to Hanover until my son moved to Stowe, Vermont. He owns a restaurant there. And so, when I visited him, I came to Hanover, and I was showing my wife, who had never been here, you know, the city—Hanover—experience of the small town that is a university college town. And that point made me a little bit more active.

Therefore, in California—I live in Studio City, which is part of Los Angeles—in California, I became active as an interviewer for Dartmouth

candidates. I've done that for the last four or five years. I have attended a lot of the alumni events. Every time the president came to town, I attended those. That's my story as far as Dartmouth is concerned.

I wish I had more to tell you about the time in the V-12, but during V-12, you didn't have time or energy or interest in being really involved in the college experience. You were involved in keeping your head above water. We had college courses we had to take. We had to get a pretty good B+ in the college courses. I was company commander when I went to midshipmen school, which was a very exciting but difficult job, because you had to have your shoes shined more than the next guy. You had to be the first one up the steps to the dorm; the first one down to retreat—whatever. So, a lot of self-discipline was involved in that. That I remember.

But, I had very little experience to remember that V-12 program, except there was one guy in the V-12 program that I became friendly with. Don't know if I roomed with him or what, but I know I became very friendly. He was shipped out to Okinawa and killed, which is an experience that I carried separately for a second experience. In the navy, I had a lot of experiences, but nothing really too much—Yeah, I could talk about it, but that's not really what you want to know.

DONIN: Well, going back to the V-12—

SAMEK: Yes.

DONIN: How much interaction did you have with the civilian population? Were they in your classes? Some?

SAMEK: Some of them were, yes. I don't really recall any particular activity with civilians.

DONIN: And in terms of your professors, they were a mixture of military officers and Dartmouth professors.

SAMEK: Yes, because I remember I took a course in psychology. I took courses in Spanish. Those were the two areas that I can remember taking more advanced courses in college.

DONIN: Yeah. And what about the other part of college life, besides the academics? I mean, did you—

SAMEK: There was no other part.

DONIN: No sports.

SAMEK: No sports. No anything, because we were being paid by the navy to come to college; we were being paid by the navy to become officers, and that, plus academics, took up all our time.

DONIN: Like physical training. Did you have physical training?

SAMEK: Yeah, a certain amount. But, again, it's something I don't even remember much about.

DONIN: And how about these descriptions that I've heard of, that you were all put into a dorm, but the dorm was sort of a pretend ship in the sense that it was renamed and that time was called out as, you know, zero-eight hundred.

SAMEK: Time is called by navy time, that's true.

DONIN: And you had to go out in—what do you call it? Formation.

SAMEK: Formation. Yeah. That's true.

DONIN: To go to meals. And do marching around on the Green out there.

SAMEK: As far as my memory goes, that is all very true. But that left no time for any socialization or relationship with either the people who live in Hanover, or the college and its civilians, let's put it that way,

DONIN: But when you came back as a V-12er, as a so-called—by then you were sort of a junior, let's say—were any of your friends left here? Had they all departed to enlist?

SAMEK: I do not remember any of my friends still being here.

DONIN: Wow.

SAMEK: Now, as far as my class of '45 goes, there were a lot of people active in it. And I got a lot of information over the years with names, class letters, class—all kinds of things—the Dartmouth magazine with their names. So, I became familiar with the names, but not with the people. And right now, I'm becoming familiar with the people. That's what this is. Now, I did come to my sixtieth. That was the first and only reunion I'd ever been to.

DONIN: Wow.

- SAMEK: And I felt—I really enjoyed the companionship—comradeship, if you will. So, when the sixty-fifth showed up, I said, “I’m going to go to the sixty-fifth.” And, of course, my wife encouraged me because she found the sixtieth very interesting, too.
- DONIN: Yeah. So, when you left here at the end of your freshman year—
- SAMEK: Yeah.
- DONIN: Had you sort of made up your mind to, you know, forget Dartmouth because of your bad experience with Bentley?
- SAMEK: Yes, pretty much. Pretty much so. That’s why I went to the University of Wisconsin, where they had an active theater program and where I could be active in it. I have to go back and tell you that because of my experience in the professional theater before I arrived at Dartmouth, Bentley thought I was an upstart kid, really one that thought too much of himself. That sort of an attitude. And I don’t know if you’ve ever known Bentley, but he was a very egotistical man who just decided that he didn’t like me because I claimed that I had been a theater, you know—professional theater before he saw me. And I had been. I had done radio announcing. In fact, when I got out of the navy—or I didn’t even get out that that time—but when I was put on inactive duty, my career was in radio, because that was all I knew to do. I had been on the radio before I’d come to Dartmouth.
- DONIN: Where’d you grow up?
- SAMEK: New Rochelle, New York.
- DONIN: Oh. My husband.
- SAMEK: Okay.
- DONIN: Amazing. I’ll have to ask him. Did you go to New Rochelle High School?
- SAMEK: I went to New Rochelle High. And the fascinating part of it was that—I guess that was when my feeling with the theater started in New Rochelle High. A guy by the name of Pop Burke. Your husband—I don’t know if he’s near my age or not, but he would remember Pop Burke if he was my age.
- DONIN: We’ll ask him when we’re done here.

SAMEK: But that's all that—That started me into the theater, because I was active in extracurricular things at New Rochelle High, which is how I got into Dartmouth. There's always been a competitive thing to getting into Dartmouth. I had two things going for me: one, Ort Hicks, and two, my experience in extracurricular, where I had been president of this, and chairman of that, and whatever. And I had pretty good grades. You know, I was a B+ student; let's put it that way. That's my story.

DONIN: Interesting. So, when you had that first year here—

SAMEK: Yes.

DONIN: I assume your whole social life was wrapped around the theater and then, of course, the radio station.

SAMEK: The radio station, yes. The theater, no, because of Bentley. I just stayed away from him.

DONIN: Yeah. And you weren't allowed to pledge for the fraternities, so you didn't get involved in the Greek life.

SAMEK: No, not at that point. I had no fraternity—in fact, I've been an anti-fraternity guy until my son joined a fraternity against my feelings, became president in his sophomore year, and I credit that with his success. He's a very successful guy, making more money than I ever made. But I credit the fraternity with that.

DONIN: Why?

SAMEK: Because of his relationships. Becoming president of the fraternity his sophomore year meant a lot of unusual ability, which he continued having. And he's, to this day, at the age of thirty-five, very active—

DONIN: In his fraternity.

SAMEK: No, not in his fraternity. He never looks back. I've asked him about it, about his college. He doesn't look back to the college; he doesn't look back to his high school. He was in a private high school which was very good. He doesn't consider that at all, except that most of the people he associates with have been involved in that fraternity. Pike is the familiar name of it. It's Pi Kappa Alpha, or something of that sort. And he has gotten jobs for them; they have become successful. They help each other out commercially and career-wise.

DONIN: So he learned a set of skills in his fraternity life.

SAMEK: Absolutely. He learned leadership.

DONIN: Interesting.

SAMEK: But that's something that, as I said—I felt that fraternities were not for me. I felt the fraternities were too selective of the kind of person you are before you ever got to a fraternity. So therefore, I rejected the idea of fraternities. But that's me.

DONIN: They were exclusionary, and they were discriminatory, and all sorts of bad things.

SAMEK: Yeah.

DONIN: So did you, in your one year here before the war—

SAMEK: Yeah.

DONIN: Did you have any experience with Ernest Martin Hopkins? Did you meet him?

SAMEK: I met him and, you know, he addressed the class. His successor, who at that time was dean—Dean Neidlinger?

DONIN: Dean Neidlinger was the dean of the college, yep.

SAMEK: Anyway, I think Dean Neidlinger—Anyway, I remember him sitting us down in chairs on a row and saying, "Look to your right; look to your left, because one of you isn't going to be here to graduate."

DONIN: Scary.

SAMEK: So that was his speech.

DONIN: Yeah. And let's see, when you came back, was Hopkins still here or was Dickey here?

SAMEK: Uh, I remember both Hopkins and Dickey, so I don't know who was here or who wasn't at that time. But when I came back—bear in mind I was still—I was really involved with the navy V-12. I could not—didn't have time, energy, or desire to get involved with the college.

DONIN: Well, and the school, let's face it, at that point was sort of co-run by the military and by the president.

SAMEK: Yeah.

DONIN: It was the only way they could manage to keep the place running, was to have these military training schools going on.

SAMEK: Right.

DONIN: So when you left here, you didn't identify with this class.

SAMEK: I didn't identify with the class or with anybody other than the few people that I developed as friends. Like I mentioned, Pete Beck. I don't even remember the broadcasting thing that clearly until this guy handed me a lot of the stuff that I had written when I was involved in the D.B.A., or whatever it was called at that time.

DONIN: Now, here's a letter to the editor, signed by you, to the *Daily Dartmouth* on an issue of, I think, cutting classes. I don't know if this rings a bell with you at all.

SAMEK: Well, let me kind of glance at it and see.

DONIN: Yep. Definitely.

SAMEK: It certainly is—Well, it's both of us.

DONIN: Yeah.

SAMEK: And what time—Well, this was March 5, 1943. So that was—I was in the—

DONIN: What was the date on it?

SAMEK: Forty-three.

DONIN: Oh, '42. Forty-two.

SAMEK: Okay. I took my glasses off.

DONIN: Yep.

SAMEK: Yeah, it's '42. So let me kind of glance at it.

DONIN: That was when you were still a freshman then.

SAMEK: Yes.

DONIN: Yep.

SAMEK: “*The Dartmouth* sometime ago proposed a plan where the student would have two modified weekends, would have to go to work to receive no additional attention. Maybe I’m out of place stating what my ideas are on administrative policies, but I still have free speech. As far as I can see, the plan of modified weekends is the only solution to the cut worries. If the students had some definite social activities such as the modified Green Key Weekend, there would be—a couple of weekends—there’ll be a chance to turn around—and so forth. The main trouble with the proposed cut system as I see it is that it fails in just one point: it sees the error, but finds the wrong diagnosis.” [Laughter] That sounds very educated, very—

DONIN: It does. So you were fully engaged your freshman year, it seems to me.

SAMEK: Yeah.

DONIN: Fully engaged in the life of the college.

SAMEK: Yes I was, as long as I could stay away from Warner Bentley.

DONIN: Yeah. That’s a shame.

SAMEK: Which is interesting, yeah.

DONIN: That’s a shame.

SAMEK: So, that’s my experience and it’s about as far as I can explain it to you, except that things keep coming back as I talk to these guys. As I said, their names are more familiar than their personalities, as far as I’m concerned.

DONIN: Well, it’s so interesting to see—you know, to see what evolves from these interviews, because so many of the ’45s left here feeling disconnected to the class. Not through any fault of the college, but—

SAMEK: No, I never felt disconnected. I mean, there was a time that I never accepted the fact that I didn’t have a degree. If anybody would ask me, I was a Dartmouth graduate. You know, that went on because I felt that it

was necessary to present it that way, which at this stage of my life there's no point.

DONIN: Doesn't matter.

SAMEK: Exactly.

DONIN: But the college has done a very good job, and I think the class of '45 themselves have done a very good job, of sort of pulling everybody back together again.

SAMEK: They have. And a lot of it has been collecting money.

DONIN: Yep.

SAMEK: Because that has made a lot of difference.

DONIN: Yep.

SAMEK: I'm proud of the fact that I've contributed for so many years, no matter how much it was or how little. You know, I'm happy to be involved. I find in my interviewing some of these kids that I find really unusual high school kids who are graduating that I think are just unbelievable. They're so much ahead of where I was at that stage of my life, yet they don't get accepted; Dartmouth won't accept them. The competition is tremendous. Now, we had—Well, probably the group that I was in, we probably interviewed a hundred kids. Two got into Dartmouth, and that's about the norm.

DONIN: Right. Well, it's very different today than it was back then. Hard to get in.

SAMEK: Any other area that you want me to talk about? I really think that for your purposes I've already exposed everything that I can think of.

DONIN: I think so. One other question is the issue of discrimination here in the '40s against people of—

SAMEK: I found it normal. I accepted the fact that there was a 5 percent Jewish population, that there was—

DONIN: A quota. A quota system.

SAMEK: A quota. That there was a reach out for blacks and we accepted only a few. That we reached out as a college—not me, but the college itself. And I thought that was good. People talk to me about quota systems as being

evil. I don't see it that way, particularly in a college where you're trying to expose people to real life. So, I did not find it objectionable, although I don't think I'm the—I don't know of anybody else that agrees with me on that.

DONIN: Well, you know, looking back at it, I think people tend to have different judgments. Living through it or looking back on it—

SAMEK: Possibly, possibly.

DONIN: They may have changed their mind one way or the other.

SAMEK: I have to start off—I should explain that I am Jewish.

DONIN: Oh, really.

SAMEK: Yeah, but not religiously so inclined, but for as many generations as I can go back, we're Jews.

DONIN: And did you ever feel any discrimination here?

SAMEK: Never. Not here. Now, as an officer in Hollywood, Florida, I lived in an apartment that had a sign outside that said: No dogs or Jews. That was, again, normal. And it didn't make me happy and I realize it's straight discrimination and I was very much against it, but on the other hand, I accepted it. I've lived in the South much of my life and I had to accept discrimination in terms of Negroes at that point.

DONIN: Well, and when you came here there were fraternities that didn't admit blacks, that didn't admit Jews.

SAMEK: Correct, correct.

DONIN: I think there was a Jewish—

SAMEK: A Jewish fraternity. There always is, and that annoys me as much as the fact that they couldn't be accepted by everyone else, because my philosophy of life is different.

DONIN: Right. But you yourself didn't experience it here.

SAMEK: No, not personally. Not in the Dartmouth experience.

DONIN: Well, I think we've covered everything then.

SAMEK: Okay.

DONIN: You're a good interviewer; got a good voice.

SAMEK: Well—

DONIN: A good narrator, I should say, and you've got a good voice. Good strong radio voice.

SAMEK: Well, I thank you.

DONIN: Thank you. So, I'm going to turn this off, but I want you to come meet—

[End of interview]