

Dartmouth College Oral History Project  
The War Years at Dartmouth  
Interview with David Sills '42  
By Mary Stelle Donin  
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DONIN: How was it that you chose to go to Dartmouth when you were graduating from high school? Did you have other family that went to Dartmouth?

SILLS: Not at all. My father had gone to Wesleyan, and my brother had gone to Yale. I guess I was influenced by a classmate of my brother's who'd gone to Dartmouth, and I liked him, and so I just thought that if he went to Yale, I should go somewhere else. It was sort of brother envy. And so, I applied to Dartmouth and got in. And was given a scholarship, and I had to work for four years as a librarian. But I loved it. I was very happy there even though I couldn't join a fraternity because I was too poor and too busy. And I worked in the library 15 hours a week or 20 hours a week.

DONIN: Wow! What was your job in the library?

SILLS: Well, partly replacing books back in the stacks. And also at the— We had a marvelous librarian, Miss Adams, and I was at the front desk in the evening particularly. But I spent my, you know, a good chunk of each week in the library.

DONIN: So do you remember any experiences in your dorm or your roommates that stick out in your mind? Was it a good experience, living in the dorm?

SILLS: Yes, I lived in the dorm for two years, I guess, and the last two years we rented an apartment down on East Wheelock Street.

DONIN: So you were in Wheeler?

SILLS: We were in Wheeler, yes.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

SILLS: That was wonderful. We had a... There were five of us who rented this apartment. A man named Washburn who was a professor of French, and it was his house on East Wheelock Street. And we

called it the East Wheelock Outing Club. EWOC for short. And it was a very good year, that last senior year.

DONIN: Did you have any other social outlets? Since you couldn't afford to join the fraternities, who was your social group? Was it your—

SILLS: The Outing Club.

DONIN: So you immediately fell in love with Mount Moosilauke.

SILLS: Oh, yes, I had climbed Mount Moosilauke before I got to Dartmouth because I was a counselor at a camp up in New Hampshire. And I used to take those kids up. And then my roommate, Harry Bond, became the hutmaster of Moosilauke. Harry Bond was a very important person in my life. He came back after the war and became a professor at Dartmouth, of English. A very attractive fellow but he was... I saw him during the war and... Harry Bond was a very important person at Dartmouth and I cherish my friendship with him and he died sometime in the '60s or '70s.

DONIN: What did you think about majoring in when you first got there? Did you have any idea what you were going to major in?

SILLS: Oh, I guess, I knew English. And I'm glad I did. I had a very nice— I was an honors student, and I had a very nice professor, Arthur Jensen who was just good. It was a very happy time. But not only did I work in the library, but I worked in the dining room. So I must have worked 20 hours a week, you know. So I was a very busy person.

DONIN: You didn't have much time for social life then.

SILLS: No, I never joined a fraternity, and I didn't have anything of that kind of life.

DONIN: Did you participate in the sort of traditional social events like Homecoming and Green Key and Winter Carnival and all that? Were you able to do that?

SILLS: Well, Winter Carnival, I was very active in the Outing Club. And I remember they used to make ice skating ponds down by the Occom House. And I remember all night spraying water to make the—I was very active in the Outing Club. My activities at Dartmouth were studying, working in the library all the time; I

worked maybe ten or 15 hours a week, 20 hours a week, and then the Outing Club.

DONIN: Was Cabin and Trail part of the Outing Club?

SILLS: Oh, yes. It's the elite of the Outing Club, let's call it.

DONIN: Oh, I see. So that sounds like what your—that's where your friends were, were your friends in the Outing Club?

SILLS: Yes. My four roommates were all—My senior year there were four of us lived on East Wheelock Street, and they were all Outing Club people.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

SILLS: Harry Bond and Jim Thompson and Bob White and Bud Dutton.

DONIN: It also says in the yearbook, it says that you were on the Inter-Dormitory Council Judicial Committee.

SILLS: I'd forgotten that.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

SILLS: It was a pro forma thing.

DONIN: I see. Arthur Jensen was your most memorable teacher because he was teaching you your major, right?

SILLS: Yes.

DONIN: Yes.

SILLS: I was an honor student and we used to go up to his house once a week and report on the reading that we'd done. And Harry Bond was in that group. And it was a very good—being an honor student was very nice, although you focused a lot on what the professors thought were good reading. I managed to get through Dartmouth without—an English major—without reading hardly any English novels.

DONIN: Ah.

- SILLS: Because he was interested in 19<sup>th</sup>-century essays and so forth.
- DONIN: So were there any other teachers that you have particularly strong memories of besides Professor Jensen?
- SILLS: Yes. I had a Joyce. He was an English professor. And I guess I was in my junior year.
- DONIN: Did you participate—did you go watch all the athletic events, the football games and hockey games and all that sort of thing?
- SILLS: Very few. I had a scholarship. But I had to work. I worked in the library about 20 hours a week.
- DONIN: Was it common that the older students lived off campus rather than stayed in a dormitory?
- SILLS: I guess not universal, but not unusual.
- DONIN: Uh-huh.
- SILLS: And generally you were housed in professors' homes?
- DONIN: Well, it's hard to find a house that's not a professor's home in Hanover.
- SILLS: In those days, right.
- DONIN: Do you remember where you were on December 7, 1941, when Pearl Harbor—
- SILLS: Sure do. Five of us had driven down to Bennington College that weekend. And we were in a girl's room. They allowed men in girls' rooms in those days.
- DONIN: Wow!
- SILLS: Bennington was the first place to do it. Now I guess everybody does it. And believe it or not, but a Japanese girl turned on the radio. We were about to leave for Hanover. And there was the announcement of Pearl Harbor on December 7<sup>th</sup>. And so that's where I was on December 7<sup>th</sup>. I'll never forget it. And so we drove back to Hanover. And the next week we were told that the president urged everybody to stay and so forth and so on. And I think most students—most

people.... Some people immediately ran off to a recruiting station. But most of us graduated. This was December 7<sup>th</sup>, and we graduated in June.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

SILLS: And uh....

DONIN: But some of your classmates cut off finishing their senior year in order to sign up.

SILLS: I'm sure some did. But the president urged us not to. But I suppose actually—seniors were different because we were not subject to draft almost because of our age. But the younger classes, I think a lot of them joined up. I'm sure there are data. But a lot of people went off. And Hanover became a different place after December 7<sup>th</sup>. All the business about should I go and should I wait and graduate and so forth. A lot of that. But we used to sit in the Hanover Inn dining room, the breakfast room they had on Wheelock Street. And talk about the war. I remember all these conversations and all of the.... Paris fell in June. A professor from Smith came up and talked. And he said, "Paris has fallen! Paris has fallen!" And he started to weep on the stage. It was quite dramatic.

DONIN: Mmm mmm. And I'm sure everybody was involved in these sort of discussions about—and this is before Pearl Harbor—about whether the US should join the war and how soon people should sign up. And then that changed after Pearl Harbor. Everybody wanted to sign up.

SILLS: Pearl Harbor was a great mind changer. But the college was very good and urged particularly seniors I guess to stay. I guess we got some kind of draft deferment; I don't know.

DONIN: Did you have a traditional graduation ceremony in June?

SILLS: Oh, yes. My parents drove up from New Haven.

DONIN: And Stubbie Pearson was your valedictorian, wasn't he?

SILLS: I believe so.

- DONIN: It must have been a sad time though because obviously most of you were thinking that you were going to be signing up for service at that point.
- SILLS: Well, I remember that some people were conscientious objectors, a couple of friends of ours. And I understood that. No, we used to sit in the coffee shop in the Hanover Inn for breakfast, reading the *Times* and talking about the war for that last year. You know, we were the seniors, and we could occupy that breakfast room there. I guess I didn't know anyone who left. Some people did leave immediately but we were urged by the college to stay and I guess the college behaved rather well.
- DONIN: I guess President Hopkins at that point made the decision that the college was going to have to run all year round and I know this didn't impact you because you were all graduating in June anyway but that the younger classes were going to be coming right back and continuing on taking classes over the summertime.
- SILLS: Well that decision was made after I left.
- DONIN: So did you stay in touch with any of your classmates once you signed up for the service? Were you in the Tenth Mountain Division?
- SILLS: Yes.
- DONIN: With Harry Bond.
- SILLS: But Harry got, he was— The Tenth Mountain Division was trained in Colorado, Camp Hale, Colorado. But Harry got—I'm not sure why—but he left rather soon. I was at Camp Hale just a few months with Harry, and then he went off. He also became a general's aide. And he wrote a book on Cassino, a famous book on Cassino. So I saw him a little bit at Camp Hale. But actually when I got to Camp Hale, Harry was just about to go for some technical reason. There were a lot of guys from Dartmouth in the Tenth Mountain Division.
- DONIN: That's because of your expertise on the ski slope and on mountains, wasn't it?
- SILLS: Yes, skiing and I guess a little bit of snobbishness going in there, feeling that it was an elite group. It was an elite group.

DONIN: Elite in terms of your physical prowess or your mental prowess?

SILLS: Well, we could ski.

DONIN: Right. But you were also smart.

SILLS: Well, I don't know. The Army didn't give intelligence tests.  
[Laughter]

DONIN: But the Tenth Mountain Division was well-known.

SILLS: Yes.

DONIN: So you had no reason to have to come back to Dartmouth. You were finished when you graduated.

SILLS: Well, I graduated in May, an early graduation.

DONIN: Oh, did they accelerate the graduation day?

SILLS: Yes, yes.

DONIN: Ah. And that was to let you get on with....

SILLS: So many people had been drafted and enlisted or whatever. So I went off to the Marine Corps training place with Bob White. I hated it. And I decided I was going to go into the ski troops. And so I managed to swing a transfer. But Bob White became a Marine officer. He was a roommate.

DONIN: So did all five of your roommates sign up after graduation?

SILLS: Yes. Dutton, Bud Dutton, did—and I forget just what he did. I've seen him a couple of times since graduation. But I forget what he did during the war. Jim Thompson was in the—He's a geologist, and he did something to do with weather and so forth during the war. And Harry Bond was with the Tenth with me, and then we were off to— He became a general's aide and he wrote a book about the battle for Cassino. His mother was a prominent journalist in Boston. Let's see, Harry got married to Nancy, and I was an usher at their wedding in Boston. Then he came back as an English professor; I guess you know that.

- DONIN: So what are your memories of President Hopkins? Did you ever interact with him personally?
- SILLS: I shook his hand when I matriculated.
- DONIN: And you went on to get your graduate degrees at Yale and Columbia, isn't that right?
- SILLS: That's right.
- DONIN: So right after the war you went back to Yale to get your master's?
- SILLS: Went back and got my master's. Then I— Oh, I know. My friend Jack Handy had a job in Japan, and he said, "Why don't you come and take my job?" My mother insisted that I come back to Boston. So I went to—I did graduate work at Yale for a year, and I was running out of money. And this fellow Jack Handy said, "I've got a job in Japan. Take my job." So I went to Japan. And the first week I was there, I met my now sleeping wife. And we stayed four years."
- DONIN: Oh!
- SILLS: It was a wonderful, wonderful experience. Then we came back from Japan, I was now four years of war and four years in Japan. And I was just beginning to start a career. And I went to graduate school at Columbia and ultimately got my Ph.D. And no regrets. Had a good, good life.
- DONIN: Have you any thoughts about the unity of your class, the identity with the class of '42 because some of your classmates had to leave before graduation, before they got their diploma? Did that make the class feel sort of broken up or splintered in any way, do you think?
- SILLS: As far as that, I don't think so.
- DONIN: So you stayed—Did the class stay pretty close over all these years?
- SILLS: Compared to what? I don't know. There are just three or four fellows that I see: two of my roommates. And I saw Harry, and I saw Jim Thompson and Bob White, but not many times.

**[End of Interview]**