

Dartmouth College Oral History Project  
The War Years at Dartmouth  
Interview with Joseph Vancisin '44  
By Mary Stelle Donin  
October 10, 2008

DONIN: How is it that you chose to come to Dartmouth as an undergraduate back in 1940?

VANCISIN: Well, I really didn't have much to do with it. There was a gentleman up here by name of Gus Broberg, who was an All-American basketball player for Ozzie Cowles. I was down in Bridgeport, Connecticut. I played for a high school there, Bassick High School. And we won the state New England championship. Gus's parents lived in Torrington, Connecticut. And evidently they must have been sending Gus all these clippings about this state high school tournament because he turned them over to Ozzie Cowles. Between Ozzie Cowles, Gus Broberg and Dean Strong, I was fortunate enough to be accepted here at Dartmouth.

DONIN: What did you know about Dartmouth before you came?

VANCISIN: I didn't know a thing about it. I did not know a thing about it. I never expected to go here. I was thinking of Connecticut or some other university until Gus and Ozzie stimulated the interest in me. I had never seen the campus. I'd never had a trip up here.

DONIN: So you were a recruited athlete to play basketball.

VANCISIN: I guess you would call me that if they were recruiting back then.

DONIN: Yes. Were you on the famous team that went to the NCAAs? Is that the right way to say it? I'm not an athletic person, so....

VANCISIN: Well, Dartmouth had several teams that went to the NCAA. They had a team in '41 and then '42. I played on the team that went to the finals of the NCAA tournament in 1944.

DONIN: Wow.

VANCISIN: We played against Utah. It was a difficult time. It was during the war. And we had a lot of transfers in from other colleges—they had the V-12 program going on. And I think there were just three

original Dartmouth people that were on those teams: Mo Monahan, Audley Brindley, and myself. All of the others were transferred in. And basically our team was transferred out. So it was an unusual situation.

DONIN: And some of those players were probably older players, weren't they, because they were officers training here?

VANCISIN: Yes. Absolutely, there were. Officers that came from... I remember I was one of the guards with Dick McGuire who played for St. John's and was a New York favorite. And Dick went on into the professional ranks and played for the New York Knicks for a number of years. So we had a very good team, yes.

DONIN: It must have been a very exciting distraction for the campus to be watching this team go to the finals.

VANCISIN: Well, I don't know. I wasn't on campus. [Laughs]

DONIN: Right. So let's go back to your first impression when you came up here. Did you drive up here with your family or take a train?

VANCISIN: I drove up. And I can remember taking Route 5. It must have taken about seven hours to come up. And when we came up 5 and I saw the Baker Tower, the Baker Library tower, I was in awe. It was just a terrific sight. And then when I landed on campus, I was assigned to College Hall. My two roommates were Clark McGregor and Sherman Pinkham, both from Minneapolis.

DONIN: Oh.

VANCISIN: And Clark, I don't know if you remember, was a congressman from Minneapolis and ran against Hubert Humphrey for the Senate because President Nixon more or less forced him to. And of course no one was beating Hubert Humphrey at that time. So he ended up by being a lobbyist in Washington for United Technologies.

DONIN: Pretty distinguished roommate you had.

VANCISIN: Yes, I did. He was. And I was sorry to see him leave. But you see I ended up as an assistant basketball coach at the University of Minnesota when he was running for this office.

DONIN: Oh!

- VANCISIN: And he had a truck. And he would go around with a loudspeaker. And at times I would accompany him. And I helped him build—he built his own house on Lake Minnetonka, and I used to go out there on weekends before the season and help him build the house.
- DONIN: What a coincidence that you would end up coaching at Minnesota. And how nice.
- VANCISIN: How I ended up in Minnesota?
- DONIN: No, it was just a coincidence.
- VANCISIN: Oh, yes.
- DONIN: That you ended up in Minnesota coaching and had this roommate out there.
- VANCISIN: Except that, you know, Ozzie Cowles originally came from Minnesota.
- DONIN: Oh, I didn't know that. Uh-huh.
- VANCISIN: Yes. And I joined him when he left Dartmouth and went to Michigan. And then I stayed with him when he took the Minnesota job. It was the best thing that ever happened to me. I met my lovely wife of 57 years.
- DONIN: Out in Minnesota?
- VANCISIN: Out there in Minnesota.
- DONIN: Oh. Minnesota's been good to you.
- VANCISIN: Yes, it has.
- DONIN: [Laughs] So let's talk about your freshman year here. It must have been an unusual experience because you were, I assume, very busy playing basketball.
- VANCISIN: My freshman year here was very sad as a matter of fact. I was captain of the freshman basketball team, and I was out playing baseball when the weather turned. And evidently I did something stupid. I tried to get a tan. I took off my shirt, and it was a little chilly,

I guess. And I ended up with pneumonia and pleurisy. I lost about 60 pounds, and I almost passed away. And if it weren't for Dr. Milliken, another terrific Dartmouth man, I don't know that I'd be here today.

DONIN: Did they take care of you in Dick's House or did you have to—

VANCISIN: I was in Dick's House. Now this was the middle of April, I guess. I was in Dick's House for two months. I missed my finals. I went home. I had to come back and take my exams in the fall. The next two years Dr. Pollard, who was team physician, wouldn't let me play. So Ozzie Cowles put me in charge of—I coached the freshman team one year here at Dartmouth.

DONIN: Ah-hah!

VANCISIN: I don't know whether he felt obligated. But he kept my interest going. And my final senior year, I had pneumonia and pleurisy. And they were afraid it might develop into tuberculosis, I guess. So they wouldn't let me play. And even my senior year they were not going to let me play until I had to sign my life away that I was responsible for anything that happened. So fortunately I got through the senior year.

DONIN: Did you play both basketball and baseball?

VANCISIN: Yes.

DONIN: Wow! And you were fine. Were you fine?

VANCISIN: My senior year.

DONIN: Yes.

VANCISIN: Yes. I got through.

DONIN: What a relief.

VANCISIN: I was very fortunate. And things happen for the best. I agree with that wholeheartedly. And I think the Good Lord had a plan for me.

DONIN: Right.

VANCISIN: That was the plan.

DONIN: Now, I was reading... What was I reading? I guess it was in the Aegis. You were selected by Palaeopitus to be one of the vigilantes when you were, I guess a sophomore and a junior? You know what the vigilantes were? The guys that went around to make sure that the freshmen wore their beanies? Do you remember that?

VANCISIN: I don't remember that.

DONIN: And you were like an enforcer to make sure the freshmen wore their beanies. [Laughter] And carried furniture for the upperclassmen.

VANCISIN: Well, it could have happened because when I was a freshman, I wore my beanie religiously, and I helped people move. And after I was here about three weeks, I found out that this freshman—I don't remember his name—but he forced me; he didn't wear his beanie, and he forced me to move up some of his furniture for him. [Laughter] He was a foreign student from Hungary, I think it was.

DONIN: Ah-hah!

VANCISIN: But anyway, that's— Might have motivated me to...

DONIN: Want to be an enforcer the next year. [Laughter] So what was your impression of meeting President Hopkins during the matriculation ceremony in Parkhurst Hall? Not Parkhurst. In Webster Hall. I think it was here. Do you remember?

VANCISIN: Yes. I was impressed with all of the people I met at Dartmouth. Dean Strong, Dean Neidlinger, President Hopkins, John Dickey, all of these people were phenomenal people really. I was just fortunate I came along when I came along with these great people.

DONIN: Did you know what you were going to major in when you came here?

VANCISIN: No. No, I had no idea. But once I got here, I thought I would major in economics. And as a matter of fact, my senior year I transferred to Tuck School.

DONIN: Oh, yes.

VANCISIN: At that time, if your grades were good enough, you could go to Tuck School for senior year and come back for your fifth year to get your MBA.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

VANCISIN: And that was my intention. I went to Tuck School the first year. Then of course the war came along, and I was 4-F most of the time. But then all of a sudden in my senior year they drafted me. I passed the physical, and I went off into the service. I never did come back to Tuck School. I just—After the war, I figured I've got to get going. See, I was one of seven kids. And my folks weren't born in this country.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

VANCISIN: And I was the first generation that went on to college. So I just felt I had to get out and work. I had been interviewed at Tuck School by Joseph E. Seagram & Son and the Dow Chemical people. They came up and interviewed a bunch of us. After the war, I called up Joseph E. Seagram & Son. I was interested in getting into the personnel work.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

VANCISIN: I thought I had the personality for personnel. They had a very interesting program where in six weeks they would put you in an administrative position. But you first had to learn the business. You had to spend a week milling the grain, a week cooking the grain, a week distilling the grain, right on through the whole operation. And then they would put you in so you would know what you're talking about. Well, after the war, the stocks that they had accumulated were depleted out of their warehouses because, as I understand it, most of the ethyl alcohol was used in making bullets. So after the war, the warehouses were empty, and they were producing this alcohol around the clock. Instead of being there in six weeks learning the business, I was there for six months.

DONIN: Wow.

VANCISIN: They had put me in charge of the bottling house, the bottling house and shipping so that we filled the bottles, and then we shipped them out. And I didn't want to do that for the rest of my life. So Ozzie Cowles left Dartmouth and took the job at Michigan. And he

called me up, and he said he'd like to have me come along as his assistant. Well, I was single at the time and I was unhappy that these people backed down on their word. I went in and I told the man. I asked him when am I going to be placed in this administrative position? And the personnel man says, well, we just don't have an opening for you right now. So I said, well, I'm handing – I'm issuing my two weeks' notice to you. Well, a week later they found an opening in Lawrenceville, Kentucky and I said, I'm sorry, I've already committed and I went to Michigan with Ozzie Cowles. And that's how I got into coaching.

DONIN: Uh huh. Thanks to Ozzie Cowles.

VANCISIN: And I haven't regretted it a bit. And I was able to use my Tuck School business learning. After I coached at Yale for 19 years, this opportunity came up at the National Association of Basketball Coaches which is an organization of all the collegiate coaches. And they hired me as an executive director. I ran their business, representing them at the Olympic meetings, the NCAA meetings, international meetings. And I ran a convention, a one-week convention, for all of the coaches during the Final Four. I've been to 61 straight Final Fours. And if you include the 1944 Final Four that I played in, and they've only had seventy-one of them...

DONIN: You haven't missed many.

VANCISIN: Not too many.

DONIN: Where was the headquarters of the association?

VANCISIN: Well, what had happened was... It started with the basketball coach of Tulane, Cliff Wells. Well actually, it started in Kansas. Fogg Allen. It's a long story, I don't know if you want me to get into this.

DONIN: Well, I'd love to hear the story when we turn the tape off. So let's go back to Dartmouth now. So in December of 1941, obviously Pearl Harbor happened.

VANCISIN: Yes.

DONIN: Do you remember that day? Were you—

VANCISIN: Yes, I was on campus. I remember a lot of the young men signing up, wanting to get in the service. I tried to get in, too, but I flunked my physical.

DONIN: Yes, you were still weak from your illness.

VANCISIN: Terrible.

DONIN: But didn't President Hopkins urge you to stay in school and not sign up?

VANCISIN: Well, I stayed in school. I wanted to stay in school. I loved Dartmouth. When I found out I couldn't serve, I stayed and did the best I could here at Dartmouth, and I enjoyed every minute of it.

DONIN: And at that point they were... After the end of the spring term of 1942, the classes started going year round. You could stay over the summer as well.

VANCISIN: Right.

DONIN: Did you do that?

VANCISIN: Yes, I accelerated. As a matter of fact, if I'd left Dartmouth then, we didn't have a graduation. We didn't get our diplomas. I think they mailed our diplomas to us.

DONIN: Mm-hmm. So when did you finally finish up?

VANCISIN: Between '43 and '44.

DONIN: You finished.

VANCISIN: Yes.

DONIN: And that included your year at Tuck, your one year at Tuck.

VANCISIN: Right.

DONIN: Now did you have a part-time job here while you were here?

VANCISIN: I waited on tables, breakfast and lunches. I didn't wait on dinnertime because it interfered with practice.



DONIN: Uh-huh.

VANCISIN: I waited on tables for breakfast and lunch.

DONIN: That was over in Thayer Dining Hall?

VANCISIN: No, it was in College Hall. Then the war came along, and I was still working, waiting tables. I waited tables over at the Hanover Inn.

DONIN: The inn, yes.

VANCISIN: Hanover Inn.

DONIN: I assume you got some meals at the same time.

VANCISIN: Oh, yes. That's how I got my meals as a matter of fact.

DONIN: Now did you live in dormitories your whole time here or did you move off campus?

VANCISIN: No, I lived in College Hall the first year. I lived in Crosby Hall the second year. I lived in Beta House the third year.

DONIN: Oh, so you joined a fraternity.

VANCISIN: Yes.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

VANCISIN: And then I lived off campus. I don't know if it's 22-1/2 or 32-1/2 South Main.

DONIN: Oh, yes.

VANCISIN: It was a building.

DONIN: Down the hill there.

VANCISIN: Yes.

DONIN: So what was the social life for you like? Was your social group made up of your teammates, even though you weren't able to play? But was it made up of your teammates, or was it made up of your fraternity brothers? What was your social group?

VANCISIN: Well, it was mostly the Betas. They were mostly basketball players. But there were some Sphinx, too. I was a Sphinx. And I wouldn't say that—My social life was kind of dim and dull as a matter of fact. I had to work awful hard. As a matter of fact, I used to spend an awful lot of time in that Baker Library.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

VANCISIN: So on the special weekends, you know, Green Key, Winter Carnival, I socialized a lot more. But prior to that, I was a bookworm. I was back at the library grinding away.

DONIN: Well, between your job and you classes, and your practice when you were well enough to be in practice, that fills up a schedule pretty much.

VANCISIN: It sure does. That's why I think it's a big joke that these big universities with these big football and basketball schedules and when they play 36 games in a season, I don't think they're doing a very good job academically.

DONIN: I don't see how it's possible to have the time. What'd you think of the teachers you had here, the professors?

VANCISIN: I thought they were great. My favorite, of course, was Herb West, and I don't know. All of them were very helpful, you know. They were encouraging. None of them put you down. And that's what I needed, I guess, a little encouragement to get through. So I have a very, very warm spot for this college. And I love it and still love it. I had a son and a daughter, and I wanted my son to go to Dartmouth. He was accepted at Yale, and he could have gone free. And he spent a weekend here at Dartmouth and a weekend at Williams. And he chose to go to Williams. And I was happy for him because he went to Williams, and I think it was the second week, he was up there, it was Parents' Weekend. And my wife and I, we went up, and he says, "Mom and Dad, you don't have to worry about me flunking out of this place. I love it." And I think when he went to Williams, it was like when I went to Dartmouth. See, Dartmouth has gotten much larger, and Williams was still about the size Dartmouth was when I came here. And I had a daughter, and I wanted her to go here. [Laughs] And she ended up at Gettysburg. She fell in love with the Dutch country down there.

DONIN: Mm-hmm. Now let's talk about the experience of your class as a whole. You were one of the two classes that never got to have a graduation ceremony. And because of the war, a lot of the sort of college traditions that surround graduation, etc., you were deprived of that because so many of your classmates went off early to, you know, sign up for the service.

VANCISIN: Right.

DONIN: How did that impact—How do you think that impacted your sense of identity with the class of '44? Or the sense of sort of togetherness of the class. Did it make it hard because you were all so fragmented?

VANCISIN: No, I think it unified us. I think it brought us together more. When we had mini-reunion—We still have mini-reunions here, our class. We'd get a good turnout all the time. And whenever I traveled, I made it a point to check to see if there were any Dartmouth '44s anyplace. I took my teams up to Cornell when I was at Yale and Jack Snickenberger, I don't know if you know him. He was assistant to the president up there. And every time I had my team up there, he'd bring me over and we'd visit about Dartmouth. There's this feeling about Dartmouth that I think all Dartmouth people have.

DONIN: Where does it come from?

VANCISIN: I think it comes from Hanover and its surroundings, its people, its faculty, its student body. I think it— And the basic setting of the college, I think has a lot to do with it.

DONIN: Mm-hmm. It's a beautiful place, isn't it?

VANCISIN: It is.

**[End of Interview]**