

THE WAY IT WAS . . . I THINK

By W. W. Pusey

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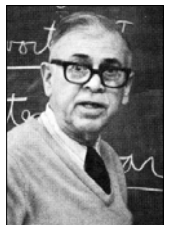
SHALL ATTEMPT HERE to reflect on life at Washington and Lee from the fall of 1939 to the spring of 1942. The first person will be used quite often, if not in this sentence — but it is as observer (or, with Van Druten and Isherwood, “a camera”), not as protagonist or hero. The effort will interweave remembrance of things past — facts and memories — into a kind of impressionistic mosaic rather than to strive for a total remembrance of things past.

Arriving in Lexington and fortified with a mustache to conceal my youthful appearance — I was twenty-eight — I took up my duties as acting head of the German Department the day the Nazis launched their blitzkrieg into Poland, possibly not the most auspicious date for a Yankee to make his appearance at General Lee’s college in the “Athens of western Virginia.”¹

¹ In *Lexington in Old Virginia*, Henry Boley boasts that Lexington is the “Athens of the South.”

Coming from an unambiguously northern background — my grandfather, for instance, spoke of the Civil War, if he mentioned it at all, as the “War of the Rebellion” — I found Lexington and its educational institutions almost as much of a cultural shock as Germany and Bonn University had been five years before. The mildly Southern accent seemed strange to me, as did many of the names. At first I was not sure whether Claytor and Tayloe were misprints or not, and even to one himself bearing a somewhat unusual name, Pancake, Dinwiddie, and Letcher sounded a bit droll. And how curious was

William Webb Pusey III (1910–94) taught German at Washington and Lee University from 1939 until his retirement from an endowed professorship in 1981. For 11 of those years he was also dean of the College (effectively, chief academic officer) and with the backing of President Robert E. R. Huntley he led the transformation of the faculty and curriculum from small regional school to liberal arts college of national reputation.



W. W. Pusey, 1978



Mary Hope Pusey, 1963.
Pusey family photo.

that predilection for double names for girls! (Mary Hope, indeed.)

I was at once confronted with three phenomena I had not encountered growing up in Wilmington, Delaware: the great cousin-

wealth of Virginia, the lingering presence, even omnipresence, of the “War between the States,” and something that might be called “Southern discursiveness.” Of these cultural manifestation, more later.

Those of you who are college professors will probably remember the interview that led to your present position. This was mine. Late in May 1939, Robert Herdon Fife, head of the department of Germanic languages at Columbia University and a native Virginian, called me into his office and told me he had recommended me for a position at a college in Virginia named Washington and Lee. If I were interested I should write its president at once. I was, I did, and soon I received an invitation from Dr. Francis Pendleton Gaines to visit Lexington, which, he informed me, could be reached easily by overnight train from New York. Dr. Gaines picked me up himself in Buena Vista, for in those less hurried days the president often met prospective professors at the train. I was put up at the Dutch Inn, then operated by Mrs. M. W. Paxton Sr.’s mother, Mrs. Owen. On my way to Washington Hall, a “Herb the Dog Man” tried, unsuccessfully, to sell me a dog. What kind of a place had I come to?, I wondered. Dean Frank Gilliam showed me around the campus, and Dr. and Mrs. Lucius Junius Desha had me for lunch — would I use the right fork? — and took me to a lovely river gorge called Goshen Pass.

That night, before leaving for New York, I had received an offer of a position, which I accepted a few days later.

Before the war (World War II, of course) Washington and Lee was much smaller than it is now — in the number of students, the size of the faculty, the extent of the campus, the scope of the curriculum. The university catalogue for 1939–40 showed an enrollment of 837 undergraduates and 107 law students. Two years later the numbers had fallen to 808 and 89. In the 1939–40 year approximately 21 percent of the students came from Virginia. The next-largest contingents were from, in order, New York, New Jersey, Kentucky and West Virginia. In 1939–40 there were only fifty-seven full-time teachers, of whom nineteen were full professors.

The staff of many departments was small, in some instances, for instance geology, psychology and German, consisting of only two persons, or as Ollinger Crenshaw² was wont to say, “a man and a boy.” There were, mirabile dictu, only four deans and two professional librarians. The Colonnade had, of course, been in place for almost a hundred years and Lee Chapel and the Lee house for about seventy; yet to be built were the dining hall, the enlarged student union and gymnasium, upperclass dormitories, du Pont, Lewis and Parmly halls, the University [now Leyburn] Library and an array of athletic facilities beyond Wilson Field.

The board of trustees, whose rector in 1940 was John W. Davis, 1924 Democratic candidate for the presidency, were distant and indistinct figures who rarely impinged on the faculty’s consciousness. I do remember having Harrington Waddell pointed out to me, the sole local trustee and principal of Lexington High School practically from its establishment in the 1890s.

The most recent registrar’s report reveals that the college offers about 550 courses, a fact of which we have become justifiably proud. It was not always so. In 1939–40 there were, by catalogue count, only 300 — though the broad areas represented were about the same as they are today. Russian, Chinese and Japanese were not available, and the work in fine arts and sociology was very limited. On the other hand, there were fourteen courses listed

2 Longtime professor of history and official university historian, author of *General Lee’s College* (Random House, 1969).

under “education.” In pre-war days, history probably had the largest enrollment, and by many it was considered to be Washington and Lee’s strongest department.

In other, less measurable ways, the university was also smaller in those days, it seemed to me. Despite the generous infusion of students from the North, it was more parochial, more narrowly Southern in attitudes, and less cosmopolitan than it is today. Yet when I recently asked a colleague who was then a student what he thought was the chief difference between the college of 1940 and today’s, he answered, possibly generalizing from his own superior secondary education, that the students of those days were far better prepared for college work.

It seemed that everybody who was anybody in Lexington was related to everybody else. I was almost at once warned of the danger of making an even slightly disparaging remark about any person, since he, or she, would invariably turn out to be a cousin, at least in the Southern extended sense.

It was also difficult to adapt to what appeared to be the backward-looking attitude of so many people, both esteemed colleagues and respected citizens of the town, for whom “bitter memories had become wistful and history had taken on the glamour of myth.”³ After all, I thought, the Civil War had been over for about seventy-five years and it was clearly time to turn one’s attention to a future that was already heavy with threats of Nazi aggression. But there were many other people who were growing tired of the unremitting eulogies of General Lee (see *The Marble Man*⁴), despite the impressive eloquence with which they were uttered by Dr. Gaines each January 19. In those days I was about the only fan who did not rise at football games when the band struck up “Dixie.”

It was even harder to get used to the discursiveness, which turned every incident or personal foible, however

3 Quoting Harvey Fergusson, a 1911 W&L graduate, writing in his autobiography *Home in the West*, 1945. See Pusey, “Washington and Lee University in Fiction,” *Rockbridge Epilogues*, Spring 2017.

4 Thomas L. Connelly, Knopf, 1978, an early revisionist appraisal of Lee’s life, career and heroic postmortem status,

trivial, into a story. This was especially annoying when the event or person was unknown to me. I know now that this talent is a mark of the best Southern writing from William Faulkner and Thomas Wolfe to Charley McDowell Jr. It is this proclivity that gave Charley’s father’s *The Iron Baby Angel* its indisputable charm.⁵ To be sure this ability is not characteristic of Hemingway or Flaubert.

In the late thirties and early forties teaching loads were heavy, averaging fifteen hours a week — in smaller departments reaching eighteen or nineteen.⁶ There were, of course, classes on Saturday morning. The “J” hour from noon until one o’clock on Tuesday–Thursday–Saturday was as unpopular with professors as it was with students. Only strict absence regulations assured good attendance at this period on Saturdays.

In 1939–40, in addition to President Gaines, twenty-three faculty members had doctorates, the advanced degrees coming from such diverse institutions as Oxford, Harvard and Washington and Lee. In spite of the many hours taught, the pace of academic life was quite leisurely. There was no trace of a policy of publish or perish, and there was little sign of research and publication. Promotions during the Depression years came slowly, and tenure — the term was not widely used then — seemed to depend on “fitting in,” usefulness on committees, and such non-academic matters as interest in athletic teams. In those days, and indeed until 1954, Washington and



The author in his first year on the W&L faculty. Photo from *The Calyx* (student yearbook).

5 Charles McDowell Sr. was for many years a well-loved professor of law at Washington and Lee, and Charles Jr. — Charley — was a 1948 W&L graduate who became a prominent political reporter known for his occasionally folksy manner.

6 Today a typical classroom load might be nine hours a week.



Lawrence Edward Watkin,
professor of English and author.

Lee's major sports, in particular football, were subsidized, and the Generals' rivals on the playing field might include Auburn, Army and West Virginia. High point of the football season was the Virginia game. Preceded by a pep rally in which the alumni secretary raised a willing crowd of students, old grads and some profes-

sors to a spectacular peak of frenzy, the game was hotly contested and not infrequently won by Washington and Lee.

Dick Pinck was the colorful hero of our prewar teams, and his athletic exploits became legendary. Once, for instance, jeered by ungentlemanly Wahoo fans, he caught a punt, paused to thumb his nose at his detractors, and then ran the length of the field for a touchdown. Millard Lampell's novel *The Hero* (movie title *Saturday's Hero*) was dedicated to "an old comrade, Richard Pinck."⁷

As might be expected, there was a group of faculty members who disapproved of "subsidation," as some of its backers pronounced the word, at Washington and Lee, an attitude I shared. My alma mater [Haverford College] had offered no athletic scholarships, and in graduate school in the United States and abroad, sports had to take second place to Beowulf, Goethe or the portentous events in Germany in the mid-thirties.

Once in my first year in Lexington I expressed my anti-subsidization views with frankness and some force to a senior professor, who listened politely, calmly expressed his disagreement, and then quietly informed me that he was Dean Hancock, chairman of the faculty athletic committee.⁸ Fortunately then, as now, there

⁷ See Pusey, "Washington and Lee in Fiction" in *Rockbridge Epilogues*.

⁸ Glover Dunn Hancock, dean of the School of Commerce and Administration.

was a laudable tolerance for Young Turks (what happens to Young Turks when they grow old?) and their non-establishment views.

Athletic policy was not infrequently a topic of dispute at faculty meetings. In general, there appeared to be what would now be labeled an adversary relationship between many, or at least the most vocal, faculty members and the administration, a feeling that fortunately has rarely manifested itself during the last twenty or twenty-five years. The situation was in large part a result of the institution's financial situation during the Depression, which was perceived by faculty leaders as being handled in an arbitrary and insensitive fashion. To be sure, there had been few dismissals, and one year at the opening meeting Dr. Gaines announced that the membership of the faculty was intact, being identical with that of the previous year. Yet sometime during the decade there had been a 12 percent decrease in salaries, and funds were not available for what professors considered necessary teaching equipment. The 1936-37 catalogue description of the biology laboratory, for instance, contains a wry statement, apparently undetected by the volume's editor, that "the museum material, used for demonstrations, is stored in the attic," while "electric lights furnish illumination"!

The story is told on good authority that during the later thirties the even-tempered dean admonished one recalcitrant professor in open meeting to "keep his nastiness over in the law school." Much of the atmosphere of the faculty meetings of those days can be found in *Geese in the Forum*, Larry Watkin's novel about Washington and Lee in the twenties and the thirties. Despite Watkin's disclaimer, there are in his fictitious president of Beauregard College, Dr. Burkholder, traits of both Dr. Gaines and his predecessor Henry Louis Smith, while the stalwart head of the history department, Dr. Samuel Worthington, "the only professor on the faculty who wasn't afraid of Burkholder," is an amalgam of Drs. Bean and Helderman.⁹

⁹ William Gleason Bean and Leonard C. Helderman, professors of history. See Pusey, "Fiction."

Here is a brief sample taken from the climactic scene of the novel:

Dr. Burkholder cowed the ranks with his eyes. "If they don't talk they won't vote," the president kept congratulating himself. . . . Let 'em speak if they dared. His eyes, sweeping like searchlights, focused momentarily on [one poor professor]. "Boo," said Dr. Burkholder mentally. . . .

Dr. Worthington rose. Burkholder said, "Dr. Worthington, do you wish to speak to the motion?" "No. . . . I wish, however to request that we vote yes or no, not by word of mouth, but by secret ballot." . . . He sat down.

"I see no need of it," thundered Burkholder. [Here Watkin gets a bit melodramatic.] Dr. Worthington spoke. "I think a good many of the younger men would feel better to express themselves on paper. I can give you a little history of the reason the Australian ballot was introduced into democratic bodies if you'd care to hear it," he said softly.

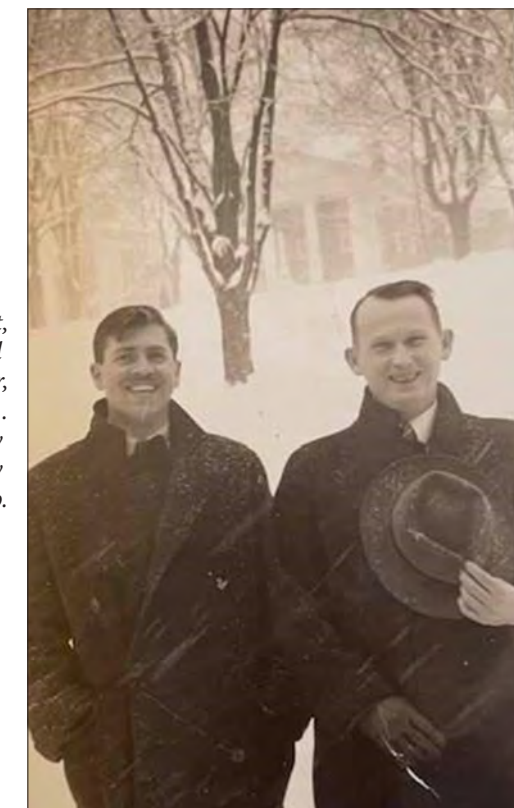
Burkholder glared at him and got back an answering glare. Burkholder's flinty stare was that of a novice compared with the hard glitter Worthington shot from his blue eyes.

And the faculty motion to refer the proposed addition of a school of citizenship to the committee on courses and degrees for study was carried two to one.

Notwithstanding such manifestations of disharmony, social life in Lexington for faculty members was quite pleasant. Its structure, to be sure, was much more rigid than in larger communities in the North. Twenty-minute calls were pressed on new faculty couples by the dean and by their established colleagues and wives, and had to be repaid. The same was true of dinner invitations. For these exchanges of visits it was necessary to leave the proper calling cards. I'm not sure whether this formal procedure was the norm in all smaller Southern towns or whether it may not have reflected the protocol of neighboring Virginia Military Institute.

Growing up during prohibition in a family where a whispered "he drinks" was a pejorative statement

that did not distinguish between alcoholism and social drinking, I was, for a while, nonplussed by the prevalence of faculty parties at which hard liquor was openly served and often consumed in large amounts. The fashionable drink, about the only drink, I soon learned, had the quaint name of "bourbon and branch." Branch? These occasions did not resemble the time-honored Scotch-Irish custom of taking "a little speerit," indulged in a hundred years earlier by the pastor of the Lexington Presbyterian Church. The parties took place practically every weekend and could go on until two or three a.m. The even-tempered and temperate dean was not happy about this type of behavior; "I declare," he was overheard to say, "the party at Professor J's" (I have deleted the name) "lasted until five o'clock in the morning." However, his displeasure could not prevail against the availability of cheap bourbon: \$1.25 for a quart of Paul Jones. One young faculty member, now a distinguished department head at a large state university, used to drive around town on Saturday evening. When he heard loud and happy laughter he dropped in on the party. Among my souvenirs I recently found an old printed invitation issued by Almand Coleman, also in his first year, and me.



The author, left,
and Almand
Coleman, winter,
1940-41.
Pusey
family
photo.

With rather heavy-handed and slightly antiestablishment humor we labeled it an S.O.K (that is, social-obligation-killing) party. “Such, such were the joys”!

The students of those days also led an active social life. In addition to fraternity parties there were four dance sets a year: Fancy Dress, already going into its fourth decade, and Final Dances, each lasting three days. Costumes or formal attire, preferably white tie for the gentlemen were de rigeur. The figure, consisting of the leaders of the dance set and their dates, was carefully rehearsed and offered a kind of glamour rarely encountered today. After an intermission on the last night of Finals many students and professors reassembled at the gym by the footbridge as the sun came up and the honeysuckle smelled its sweetest and sang the now-forgotten sentimental “College Friendships.”

While eccentricity has probably always been a characteristic of college professors, the Washington and Lee faculty of the pre-war period appears to have had a larger share of whimsical personalities than is the case with the highly professionalized and more worldly faculties of today. I ask your forbearance while I describe a few.

Professor Livingston Smith, grandson of Gen. Francis (“Spec”) Smith of VMI, was widely known for throwing chalk at students who had difficulties with college algebra. A pedagogic approach, that may not appeal to all teachers, it was apparently effective for him; at least I never heard a complaint from any student. Professor William Hoyt, widely known (behind his back, I suppose) as “Bugs,” we have already encountered as the sly author of the biology lab illuminated by electricity.

Larry Watkin, suddenly affluent as the author of the popular *On Borrowed Time*,¹⁰ is said to have built Castle Hill (now occupied by Dr. Ned Brush) to surpass the mansion owned by a colleague in his department. A talented writer with an impish sense of humor, Professor Watkin, with an assist from a young colleague, George Foster, is the author of the inimitable and widely quoted

(that is, in Lexington) verse on the plight of poor Mrs. Moffatt:

Old Mrs. Moffatt
Sat on a toffet
Under the UDC
She was so busy thinkin’
How stinkin’ was Lincoln
She forgot about Robert E. Lee.

After three or four years in the Navy, Larry moved to Hollywood to work for Walt Disney for the then-unheard-of salary of \$100 a day.

Reminiscing about his college days, Tom Sugrue, of the class of 1929, writes in his *Stranger in the Earth*¹¹ affectionately about Professor Fitzgerald Flournoy and his escapades. Fitz, whom a few of you will recall as an enthusiastic member of the “Fawntly,” was still going strong in the nineteen-forties, and in the spring and fall, when classroom windows were open, students and Fitz’s colleagues would slow their pace through the Colonnade, pausing to listen, spellbound, to his booming intonation of the great Shakespearian soliloquies. And then there was John Graham: descendant, I suppose, of William Graham, rector of Liberty Hall Academy; composer; music lover; professor of Spanish. In the last-named capacity, the story goes, he would begin each semester by asking his students how many funny men there were in the class. On hearing the expected answer that there was only one, he inquired as to his identity, to which the class would respond in unison: “You, Mr. Graham.”

Mervyn Crobaugh, commonly called “comrade,” was purportedly an honest-to-goodness Marxist. A man of sharp intelligence and unflinching good nature, he was fun to argue with. His presence in the possibly sensitive department of economics didn’t seem to bother anyone save the dean of the university, who expressed his disapproval not of Crobaugh’s political and economic views but of his proclivity to drink with students at Steve’s Diner on North Main Street. The young instructor whom we met as the Saturday evening pilgrim was known for



Charles Rice McDowell Sr.,
professor of law and raconteur.

his fondness for mildly taking the Lord’s name in vain. The scion of an old Quaker family, he once explained the long hours he spent at the Presbyterian Church with the remark: “I sing in the choir, for Christ’s sake.”

Charley McDowell [Sr., the law professor] was one of the wittiest men I have known. Although the bearer of an old Scotch-Irish name, McDowell was an avowed free thinker, the closest thing Lexington had to a village atheist. That this did not bother most of his more pious colleagues is a mark of tolerance in an institution with Washington and Lee’s long Presbyterian heritage. Charley was a raconteur par excellence who told “long, fantastic, completely unbelievable stories which invariably turned out to be true,” as Sugrue had remarked about a prominent lady in town. Charley also had a serious side and would argue for hours at parties or over lunch on the second floor of McCrum’s with his good friend and equally able colleague from the law school, Raymon (“Red Eye”) Johnson, on the merits of helping the Western allies against the Germans.

Doubtless the VMI of those days also had its characters, but I did not know them then. Nor were unusual personalities limited to academe. The town abounded with formidable older maiden ladies with distinctive personalities. I think of Miss Edmonia Smith, an alumna of Ann Smith Academy, where her father had been principal in the 1890s. Miss Edmonia taught private first grade. Writing was learned with the use of slates, excellence was rewarded by the right hand of fellowship, and deportment was emphasized. (Never did pandemonium break out!) Miss Mary Barclay of the Barclay sisters was famous for her malapropisms (possibly committed on purpose). A sample: after making her first airplane trip she expressed her relief to be back again on terra cotta.

One of the Misses Gadsen, identical twins, worked in the VMI library and the other in the Washington and Lee library, to the bafflement of any student or cadet who visited the other library. Less kindly was a lady of distinguished Rockbridge name who called the couple from New Jersey who lived next to her “aliens.”

“Those piping days of peace, those glorious autumn days of 1941. Nature never looked more lovely, the blue mountains and green fields of old Rockbridge never more beautiful; all nature seemed to be at peace. But soon the ominous portents of the times gave forecast of the storm that was about to break.” These were the words, only season and date have been changed, with which A. T. Barclay had told a student assembly of the coming of the Civil War. Again the tranquility of the small college town comfortably nested between the Blue Ridge and House Mountain was shattered by war — the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor. Although faculty members had for some time been debating the need for intervention, the attack took them and the rest of the college community by surprise. *The Ring-tum Phi* [student newspaper] of Tuesday, December 9, 1941, carried cheek by jowl an announcement that Woody Herman had been signed for Fancy Dress and the report that the United States was at war.

The news of Pearl Harbor came on a Sunday afternoon when students “were preparing for weekend jaunts to Randolph-Macon Woman’s College, Sweet Briar, Hollins, and [Mary] Baldwin or collecting their books for an afternoon of library study.” The immediate



The author as a naval intelligence officer during World War II.
Pusey family photo.

10 His 1937 novel became a Broadway play in 1938 and a movie with Lionel Barrymore in 1939.

11 Sugrue was a disciple and biographer of the clairvoyant Edgar Cayce. *Stranger in the Earth* (1948) is Sugrue’s own autobiography.

effect on the average student, the college paper continued, was one of uncertainty, but soon this “uncertainty gave way to a feeling of calmness and determination.” The dean opined hopefully that there was little evidence that the war in its present scope would cause drastic changes in policy “in the immediate future,” a sentiment echoed by Dr. Gaines, who, however, reported that he had telegraphed President Roosevelt pledging full support of the university. But as the academic year wore on, changes did take place, and with increasing frequency. At a packed assembly “We’ve done it before and we’ll do it again” was enthusiastically sung. “Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition, and we’ll all stay free” soon became popular. Only later would such ditties be replaced by the more wistful “I’ll be seeing you in all the old familiar places” and “long ago and far away.” The faculty was not long in approving an eleven-week summer school, to which co-eds would be admitted, patriotically if somewhat naively

voting with but a single dissenting voice to teach for nothing in support of the war effort.

The spring term was shortened by two weeks. Selective Service registration netted 244 student and fourteen professors. Colonel Charles P. Light Jr., on leave from the law school, wrote an article from Bermuda, where he was serving as judge advocate general of the army command. The dance board approved a ban on flowers at Fancy Dress. Courses were announced in military geology and in military explosives and chemical warfare (prerequisite: organic chemistry). A course dealing with the fundamentals of military organization and practice was being instructed by Lieutenant George Brooke, of VMI. A course including readings in military German was introduced into the curriculum by the professor of German, who was not harassed by Germanophobes, as his predecessor, a native of Virginia and holder of three degrees from Washington and Lee, had been in World War I, although “Railway

Express” Agnor (not to be confused with his twin, “Liquor Store” Agnor), confided to the professor’s wife that “German was kind of a bad thing to be teaching now.”

By the opening of the fall term in 1942 there was a large exodus into military service of students and professors, including the author of the present memoir. During the years I was gone from Lexington, as far as I recall, I received only one official communication from Washington and Lee. This was a form letter urging faculty member on leave to stay in service as long as possible, clearly reflecting the administration’s (understandable) concern with low student enrollment. In 1945 only eight degrees were awarded and in December of that year enrollment came to 167. When in 1946 students and faculty finally flocked back to Lexington they — and I — found a university that was both similar to and different from the one I had joined seven years before, but that is a story that goes beyond the confines of this paper. ■



Christmas 1945, at the family’s new home on Marshall Street in Lexington, with daughter Mary Faith. (Second daughter Diana came a few years after.) Later, the author wrote book reviews about baseball under the pseudonym Marshall Street. Pusey family photo.

“Remembered joys,” someone once wrote, “are never past.” There are other memories, good and bad, that have come back to me as I “try to remember that day in September” when I first took up my residence in Lexington and became a member of the faculty of Washington and Lee. In conclusion, I’ll list — but only list — a few at random; perhaps some will bring back memories also to you.

- The superb meals served at the Dutch Inn
- The obligatory hike to Student Rock on House Mountain
- A visit to a small missionary church at the foot of the mountain
- Local ownership of the banks
- The difficulty of registering to vote
- Free medical care for faculty families by the university physician
- Conventional dress¹
- Mr. Mattingly²
- Telephone numbers with three or fewer digits

- VMI cadets marching in formation to church on Sundays
- Banquet-like meals at Herring Hall and Forest Tavern³
- The North River before its name was changed, and the old no-longer-used covered bridge across it⁴
- The 25-cent-an-hour baby sitter
- The old two-lane road over Afton Mountain
- And finally, the Virginia Creeper, chugging and mournfully whistling its way toward Staunton or Balcony Falls

¹ That is, coat and tie for students.

² Earl Mattingly, W&L’s longtime treasurer, eccentric and tight-fisted.

³ Antebellum country inns near Natural Bridge.

⁴ Renamed the Maury in 1945. The 19th-century covered bridge across the river at East Lexington was replaced shortly before the war.

