

**ORAL HISTORY OF
HARRY C. MCPHERSON, JR. - THIRD INTERVIEW
JANUARY 30, 2003**

This is the tape recording of the third interview of Harry McPherson at his office on McPherson Square in Washington. It is January 30, 2003.

Mr. Vanderstar: Harry, when we last spoke, you got into the college years a little bit and I want to pursue that, but first, as I said before we got on the record, I want to go back and ask you about two other things. The first is your mother's death. You were an only child, your mother died when you were what, 13? or 14?

Mr. McPherson: I had just turned 14.

Mr. Vanderstar: Okay. This may be difficult for you to talk about, but I will ask you anyway and you can say I'd rather not. First of all, did she die suddenly or was it a prolonged illness?

Mr. McPherson: She was ill with cancer for about, as far as we knew, for about a month or six weeks. I didn't know it was cancer. In those days you kept, the parents kept things like this from children. When I got to law school later, I didn't know what a mortgage was, at least I didn't know what people did with a mortgage. My parents, like many parents, just kept these adult things apart from children.

I remember one morning an ambulance coming and picking her up in my grandfather's driveway, which was between our house and his. He had died three years before, and that had taken a huge chunk out of my life. I loved him so much, I loved being with him and crossing the yard and seeing him. His leaving was an enormous loss to me.

And then my mother suddenly went off in an ambulance. I don't remember what

I was told it was. She had to have an operation in Dallas, which was about 100 miles away. She was driven over there and went into the hospital. A cancer specialist performed the operation on her.

I was taken over to Dallas maybe three times in the next month. I remember only one of them really vividly. My uncle Alex Woldert sent his large Cadillac to pick me up at high school one afternoon. I was called and told to be out front in ten minutes, “You’re going to Dallas.” There were a couple of my cousins, Uncle Alex’s children, in the car. The car was driven, I think, by their chauffeur. I knew that something momentous must be happening.

Mr. Vanderstar: Had she already had the surgery?

Mr. McPherson: She’d had the surgery.

Mr. Vanderstar:’ So you knew she was over there and—

Mr. McPherson: I’d been to see her about two or maybe three times. My father would drive me over. One time I remember staying two or three days in a very plain place, it may have been a house that he rented for us, and I stayed and studied, tried to keep up with my classes.

When I would be taken in to see her, she was always profoundly loving to me and concerned about me, as parents tend to be in such situations — more concerned about me than about herself. This time, when my uncle’s big car drove me over I really had a feeling of something very momentous, something very near in time. That afternoon and evening I walked around the hospital and went outside, Kids are hard to read. I remember being overwhelmed by what was happening but also wishing that I could hear Bob Hope, whose radio show was on. I remember feeling the gravity of the moment, but not knowing how to show it and being visited every half hour by some adult—my father or my aunt or somebody—to see how I was doing.

They were very solicitous of me, and I did my best to seem mournful, I guess. You know you are sort of playing a role and it makes you uncomfortable. They wouldn't let me see her.

Mr. Vanderstar: Even though you had seen her a couple of times before.

Mr. McPherson: I had seen her during the month, when she was in the hospital, but this time she was dying. Finally I went to sleep on the sofa in the hospital waiting room. I was awakened about midnight and told that she had died. I remember the wish to cry and the inability to. I was trying to figure what I was supposed to do next. It was decided that we would go back to Tyler, 100 miles away.

We got in the car and we were driven back to the Wolderts' house, and I was shown to a room. It was getting to be almost dawn. I woke up about 11 o'clock in the morning, and I could hear people in the house gathering for the funeral baked meats. It suddenly hit me: she's gone. It was inconceivable to me before then. I suddenly realized, I can't go see her, I can't go ask her to do something or to tell me something or anything, not ever.

There was a Cherokee Indian woman named Meryl Chapman, who had come to the Wolderts' house. She was married to a well-to-do oil field operator and wore silver hoops in her ears and Indian jewelry. I think she may have been a Christian Scientist. In any event, she lived next door to the Wolderts and she was a good friend of my mother's. She, more than anybody else, reached me that day. She talked to me in a serious, respectful way that invited me to have feelings; instead of imposing feelings on me, she let me have them.

The next few days were a kind of a haze, the funeral, such things, and then one day my father said, "Well, we're going to have to learn how to do a lot of things." Ela, our cook, stayed late every day for several weeks, maybe months, and made dinner as well. Before, she would come at seven or 7:30 in the morning and leave about three in the afternoon.

I started focusing on school. My friends were very helpful, and a number of men, my father's friends, and people that simply I had known and my mother had known started taking me to games or hunting. While I knew this was being done for me out of pity, there were a lot of men who really conveyed a serious interest. They were very fond of my father and everybody I knew adored my mother. She was really a beloved person in Tyler, and that meant that people focused on me as an only child and helped me.

Months would go by and I would suddenly feel the weight of it for a few days. The nature of the loss would suddenly become real to me, without my thinking about it or trying to perform some role. Like all teenagers, I was trying to get along with my father, who was very much unlike my mother. He was very talkative, quite combative about politics, and he couldn't change that nature. He was very loving to me, very warm and very concerned but occasionally he would behave like the combative, sometimes irascible man that he was. And I, a teenager, wasn't thinking about my mother, I was thinking about how to deal with this guy and what I wanted him to do.

One night, I think probably the summer when I was 15 just about to go off to college, I came home from a movie and went to bed, and he came in the house with a woman. In some way I knew about her. She was from West Virginia, and she came down with her sister and brother-in-law when the brother-in-law bought a stove factory in Tyler and moved his operations there. They were, I'm sure no worse than anybody else, they were people who enjoyed a good time, so they drank.

My father had not had anything to drink from the time he married my mother in 1928 until 1945, as far as I know. When he did tell me he was going to stay at the club and have a drink with his friends after golf and I should just get on with your studies, I found that

interesting. Then he went to New York a few times to sporting goods shows, retail shows. He told me about some wonderful experience he had in the Village, where he had wandered into a little Italian restaurant and the people there had been enormously gracious and warm to him. These Italians had insisted that he sit with them and drink with them, and he would come back filled with love for Italians. All that was great.

So I knew he was back socializing and drinking some, when not at home. I was in bed and I heard him with this woman and I thought, “Ah, that’s, she’s the one from West Virginia.” They came back into my bedroom, I had the light out and was lying on my side facing away from them with my eyes closed, and I heard them speaking very low. “There he is,” he said. “He could be yours.” He was clearly proposing to her. I was thunderstruck, I was at a loss. I didn’t know her but I didn’t think about myself as being any woman’s other than the woman whose child I had been. I wasn’t prepared to transfer the feelings of a possessed child to some other woman. I didn’t roll over or introduce myself; I just laid there—

Mr. Vanderstar: —played possum?

Mr. McPherson: —played possum, right.

Mr. Vanderstar: Did anything come of that relationship?

Mr. McPherson: They married.

Mr. Vanderstar: How soon after that?

Mr. McPherson: Within about six months.

My grandmother, who still lived across the yard, was outraged. This was two years after the death of my mother. She called me over and expressed her profound disappointment in my father. My reaction essentially was one of the inappropriateness of this old lady telling me how she felt about my father and his social life. It seemed beyond me, it

seemed as though I was being asked to get engaged in something that I didn't know anything about, to side with her or him on a very adult matter.

Mr. Vanderstar: What was your reaction to his getting married or about to be married?

Mr. McPherson: Okay. I probably told myself—I didn't have to be told to think this—that if this was going to make him happy while I was away flunking courses at SMU (laughter), that was okay, that was all right. I did not have, either then or later, any warm feelings for his new wife, Mary Frances. I didn't dislike her, but I just never connected with her in any real way, any deep way. But I thought, okay, that's fine if that's what he wants to do.

There was a rather elaborate wedding in the home of a friend of my father's. I remember feeling uncomfortable. I thought I would have been happier if it could have been very simple—simply happened—and then they could have gone off somewhere together. I guess what I'm saying is that it was more of a problem for me than I was prepared for. On the other hand, I was looking down my own track, thinking about what I was going to do and how life would be for me, and not looking back to my nest where the father bird had just married another mother bird.

Mr. Vanderstar: That last ride over to Dallas in your uncle's car, you said it was not just the two of you.

Mr. McPherson: No, there were several cousins were there, in the car, and I think either my uncle or my aunt, my mother's sister, were in the car. There were several people there. It was a great big Cadillac, and I think the chauffeur was driving, so it was a full car. Everybody was in it when I got in. They all were waiting for me. So I got in this rather dark car on a bright October day, and we drove off. I said, "What's going on?" I was told, "Well, your

mama needs you.” It doesn’t take the brain of a rocket scientist to know that this was a euphemism for dying.

Mr. Vanderstar: Especially with your cousins and so on in the car.

Mr. McPherson: Yes, they were all leaving to go over and provide comfort, it became pretty clear.

Mr. Vanderstar: Between visits to your mother in Dallas, did you and your father talk about the prospect that she might not survive this?

Mr. McPherson: No.

Mr. Vanderstar: No?

Mr. McPherson: If we did, I don’t remember it. I knew that it was very serious, but I didn’t know how serious. On one of the trips during that month Dad and I drove back to Tyler, just the two of us. He had a disconcerting habit, for a former traveling salesman, of falling asleep at the wheel. I sat next to him and would periodically shake him to wake him up. You know, the poor guy was probably not getting much sleep to begin with because he was worrying about her and spending a lot of time at the hospital.

Mr. Vanderstar: Did he ever go over there without you?

Mr. McPherson: He may have, I don’t remember. If he did, I probably stayed with my grandmother. He had his business to run, so he couldn’t be over there the whole time.

Mr. Vanderstar: Had you, before that, had any experience in your family or among close friends with a death?

Mr. McPherson: My grandfather was the only one.

Mr. Vanderstar: Oh, he had died three years earlier.

Mr. McPherson: He died three years earlier —n the day France fell in June

1940. I was driving back again with my uncle from Dallas, and I did not know Papa Hight had died. It was midday on a cloudy, dark day, and I think we were listening to something about France, and I said, "When Papa Hight comes home . . ." and my uncle said, "He's not coming home. He died this morning." That was the first knowledge I had of death.

Mr. Vanderstar: Did your church provide any support to you or help to you at the time, especially when your mother died?

Mr. McPherson: The funeral was in the Methodist church, and I was surrounded mostly by women who were friends of hers, a number of them members of the Methodist church. Dr. Richardson, the minister, was comforting in the traditional Methodist ministerial way. I didn't really know him very well.

Dad had, as I mentioned in an earlier tape, started going to the Episcopal church with Meade Brown, and it wasn't long after her death that he suggested that I start going with him to the Episcopal church. Not long after that, Meade Brown said maybe you'd like to take confirmation classes and become an Episcopalian. I thought it sounded good to be with my father and learn to be an acolyte and carry the cross and all that stuff.

Mr. Vanderstar: Okay. Well, thank you for talking about that. I can tell by the way you were talking it's not easy.

Mr. McPherson: Well, I'm not sure its an easiness problem as much as a difficulty recalling feelings at particular times. I can remember the way things looked early in the dawn on getting back to my uncle's house, and I remember Belle, the large, warm, ink-black woman who was their cook. I can remember those things, the feeling of the room, the sounds of her, but what I'm struggling for is an accurate recollection of how I felt at different times.

It's wonderful to be an older man and to have a teenaged kid, because you are

reminded of how unpredictable the emotions and thoughts of teenagers are. Perhaps not unpredictable, but certainly *sui generis*, the feelings and reactions of teenagers. When you think that they would be shattered by some event, on the floor and weeping, they're thinking about whether some contemporary is going to call about something that will happen four days later. They live in a world that is not ours; we are much more predictable than they.

Mr. Vanderstar: Do you think a teenager is more inclined to live in denial of things by reverting to the routine of life, which is what you were describing?

Mr. McPherson: A very good point. Yes, as a matter of protection. Sure. I'm sure you are right.

Mr. Vanderstar: A lot of people are in denial when things happen and wonder why they are not listening to Bob Hope or whatever the equivalent is.

Mr. McPherson: Yes.

Mr. Vanderstar: But you think teenagers do it more. And I think protection is probably the right word. They can't cope as easily as adults and so they resort to other techniques to deal with that. Is that fair?

Mr. McPherson: I think that's fair, yes.

Mr. Vanderstar: And you described it in yourself.

Mr. McPherson: There was certainly no ambiguity in my feelings about her. She and I looked a lot alike, and we had similar temperaments. I have pictures of me as a one-year-old standing next to her, and my daughter just sent me a beautiful photograph she had been given of my mother years ago. My daughter just decided that I should have it again, and so she had it nicely framed. Nan Hight was a beautiful woman. I said earlier I look like her. She was beautiful and I'm certainly not. But we had the same big face and the same prominent chin and

jaws and so on, and on her it looked fine.

There was no ambiguity about my feelings about her. I didn't resent her, I didn't wish she was different, she was perfect as far as I was concerned.

Mr. Vanderstar: So she was one of the most profound influences on your life, probably for a long time afterward.

Mr. McPherson: Yes, absolutely.

Mr. Vanderstar: Your father, of course, and your grandfather, you've spoken quite a lot.

Mr. McPherson: Right, those are the three main ones in my family.

Mr. Vanderstar: And who else in Tyler outside of your family would you list on a list of five or three or nine, whatever number, of people who had the most effect on you in one way or another, looking toward yourself as an adult.

Mr. McPherson: Yes. Well, among adults, a man named Abe Pounds. He was the president of one of the other banks in town and was a very significant figure in the Texas Bankers Association. He was one of the founders of an organization called the Texas Regulars. These were people who, while remaining Democrats, wanted to deny Roosevelt the fourth term nomination in 1944. My father was a Rooseveltian, I was a New Dealer, and "Uncle Abe," my godfather, was working on the other side.

Among friends, there was a set of well-to-do boys in my class and in the class just ahead of me with whom I partied a lot, and one or two of them were very significant in setting taste for everyone else.

Mr. Vanderstar: This was in high school?

Mr. McPherson: This was in high school. And into the first year or two of

college. As I said, they were wealthy, in all cases much wealthier than we were, but we all belonged to the country club and my father let me use the car, and so for most purposes we were equals. The leader of the group, the taste-maker, was I am sure a gay boy—I think I mentioned him last time—Burt Scott. His father was a tough, successful oil man and, as sometimes happens in families, his daughter was rather mannish and strong, and Burt was kind of like a young Clifton Webb.

Mr. Vanderstar: Oh, you talked about him.

Mr. McPherson: Yes, right. But like Webb in some films, Bert was a taste-setter, a taste-maker. People wanted to be dressed like him, they wanted to like the music he liked, and the kinds of things that he excelled in, which were high society kind of things, certainly for a little town like Tyler. He went to the University of Texas.

Another guy, Henry Bell, was a rather tall, gawky, very pleasant guy close to Bert Scott but I think not gay. He became the president of the bank that my grandfather ran, just as his father had succeeded my grandfather. He became quite an important figure in Texas in civic ways. He was on the board of the commission that managed the Texas retirement funds.

Mr. Vanderstar: State employees retirement fund?

Mr. McPherson: State employees retirement fund. He was on that for years. So he became a very respectable person. He went to Yale, and I think maybe Harvard Business School and came back to the bank. He and I were friends until he died about four years ago.

There was a very good-looking guy, a cousin of the Woldert that my family was married into, another Woldert family who lived down the block from them. This fellow's name was Dan Woldert; he died only last month. He was the last living person besides me from this whole crowd as far as I know. Dan was very good looking and was adored by the high school

head cheerleader, Nell, and—this is kind of like a Theodore Dreiser story—they all went to the University of Texas. Dan, while he was no doubt the lover of Nell, had his eye on bigger things, and he abandoned her and took up with and later married the daughter of the Dealey family, the owners and publishers of the *Dallas Morning News*.

Mr. Vanderstar: Oh, yes.

Mr. McPherson: Nell, on the rebound, married Henry Bell, this tall, gawky guy, and they were married for 45 years. So Tyler society was very much an internal thing.

All these people had a huge influence on me. Unlike them, I had two other circles of friends. As I mentioned, another guy and I were the tennis team, and so to some degree I had friends among jocks, guys who liked sports a lot.

And finally I had number of friends who were working-class kids. A boy named Ray LeBaron's dad was a train engineer, and another guy's dad was the county sheriff. There were sons and daughters of farmers and property custodians that I knew and liked. More and more as I'd come back from college in summers I would see less of those two groups and more of the social group. Even when I had a job, I would party in the evening with them.

Mr. Vanderstar: Did your high school have different tracks that students went through?

Mr. McPherson: No.

Mr. Vanderstar: Mine had a college preparatory and an industrial boys and commercial, did you have that?

Mr. McPherson: No. Everybody was thrown together. There wasn't one Black, but the school had far more children of the working class than children of the well-to-do. The railroad and the oil refinery and the oil drilling operations near Tyler all produced children for

the one high school.

Mr. Vanderstar: How big was the high school? How many students did you graduate with?

Mr. McPherson: I think about 1,200 in the whole school.

Mr. Vanderstar: Four-year school?

Mr. McPherson: 9, 10, 11—3.

Mr. Vanderstar: Oh, that's right.

Mr. McPherson: Through the eleventh.

Mr. Vanderstar: So you graduated from high school with about 300 or 400 other students.

Mr. McPherson: Yes, exactly.

Mr. Vanderstar: Roughly, what percentage of them went on to college? Ten percent?

Mr. McPherson: Probably more, maybe 20, I think. Without student loans, in those days, probably 20 percent. Today, from the same kind of school, a much higher percentage would go. There was a junior college, which was right next door, across a yard, from the high school. It was pretty good. It had a national fame: the cheerleaders, a corps of about 40 girls, were trained to be spectacular half-time performers.

Mr. Vanderstar: Is this Kilgore?

Mr. McPherson: Eighteen miles away was Kilgore, Texas, where the Kilgore Rangerettes were as good as or maybe better than the Tyler Apache Belles. But these junior college girls were exactly the same, they both went to the Rose Bowl and were half-time entertainers at a lot of college games. They went to Chicago, everywhere. Good-looking Texas

girls, and I'm not sure whether they got scholarship money but they certainly were energetically recruited. They were a big deal.

Mr. Vanderstar: Oh, yes, I know. I mean, I remember the Kilgore Rangerettes from half-time shows decades ago.

Mr. McPherson: Sure. Not quite up to the Dallas Cowboy cheerleaders.

Mr. Vanderstar: Maybe "not quite up to" is not the phrase, but different, let's put it that way (laughter).

Mr. McPherson: That's right.

Mr. Vanderstar: And did most of the students who went on to four-year college from Tyler high school go to school in Texas, whether the University of Texas or somewhere else?

Mr. McPherson: Yes, they did. Texas A&M took many of them, SMU, Baylor—there were a number of kids who went to Baylor. I think that was pretty much it.

Mr. Vanderstar: Texas Tech?

Mr. McPherson; Texas Tech was really in another world, way out in Lubbock, probably 400 miles away and really in a different category.

Mr. Vanderstar: And what about Texas Christian?

Mr. McPherson: TCU in Forth Worth. TCU was magnetic for the same reason SMU was. Texans loved their football. Sammy Baugh was at TCU,

Mr. Vanderstar: Oh, yes.

Mr. McPherson: Davey O'Brien.

Mr. Vanderstar: **Yes.**

Mr. McPherson: Wonderful players, and then SMU had Doak Walker and Kyle

Rote. Football was fun when the guys played both ways.

Mr. Vanderstar: Both ways, yes. What about Rice?

Mr. McPherson: A word about Rice. In later years, I'll skip some here, I came to know a guy named Raymond Hedge. Raymond was a year behind me in high school. I thought he was a cheerful kid but a little nutty. When we would play touch football and tackle—without pads—he would just put his head down and go crashing into people, which I thought was a danger to himself and others.

Well, I lost track of him, and then I learned to my surprise when I was in my twenties or thirties that Raymond had gone to Rice, had done spectacularly well, and then had gone to the University of Texas Medical School, where he had been the principal assistant to Dr. Michael DeBakey. He returned to Tyler, which, because of Henry Bell and several other guys in this group that I was just speaking of, had become the medical center in east Texas. Dallas, of course, was grander and the work was much broader, and Houston was the broadest of all. But for this part of Texas, Tyler had hospitals where a lot of sophisticated surgery was being done,

My dad had carotid artery blockage, and it was very dangerous, very close to causing a stroke. Raymond Hedge repaired both of his carotid arteries with shunts. I will never forget that. I had begun to realize, as I would come back to see Dad, that I liked Raymond more than anybody else I knew in Tyler. He was more interesting. He had a Renoir, he had a Pissarro, he had a fantastic collection of medals for heroism—the Croix de Guerre and the Iron Cross and all that, that he collected. He had a beautiful collection of British toy soldiers, ones from India. But he was just interesting, he just challenged me about everything. He wanted to know everything I had learned. I remember when he came out of the operating room the first time with his smock absolutely covered with my father's blood, and he said, "It's just great, it's

wonderful, he's in the recovery room, he came through it wonderfully." And I said, "God, Raymond, you look awful. Have you done any others of these today?" And he said, "He was my fourth."

Mr. Vanderstar: That day?

Mr. McPherson: That day. He did four a day. Then one day at the age of 44 he dropped dead of a heart attack.

Mr. Vanderstar: My goodness.

Mr. McPherson: Yes. All this came from your asking about Rice. Raymond was the only guy that I knew that went to Rice in my era, but I'm sure more went subsequently.

Mr. Vanderstar: Of all the youngsters that were in your class or the class ahead or behind you from Tyler who went on to college, did most of them go into business?

Mr. McPherson: Yes.

Mr. Vanderstar: Not many lawyers and a few doctors?

Mr. McPherson: Very few lawyers in the group that I had anything to do with. One guy did, and very successfully, and he asked me to come into his firm when I was getting out of law school. Mostly guys went into banking, business and this one physician.

Mr. Vanderstar: And to what extent did the ones who went on to college return to Tyler and live there for most of their lives?

Mr. McPherson: I think almost everybody.

Mr. Vanderstar: Okay.

Mr. McPherson: Tyler is perceived by a lot of people as an ideal place to live. At least it used to be. It's very pretty. It's one of those places that **looks** best in spring. It's full of dogwood and azaleas, and so homes tended to be quite fetching and wives loved to think of

themselves as living in such places, and that helped husbands to come back.

Mr. Vanderstar: And there was enough economic opportunity so that people went off to college and came back.

Mr. McPherson: Yes, at least the people I've just been describing here pretty much came back into family operations. The handsome guy I was speaking of, Dan Woldert, came back and ran the Woldert company, canning and wholesale groceries and that sort of thing. The son of the banker came back and followed his father into the presidency of the same old bank, the main bank in town. Abe Pounds, the son of the Abe Pounds who was my godfather and the Texas Regular, was an extremely interesting guy. He was a very handsome person, he looked a little like Tyrone Power. He went off to spend a year in Aspen, to learn how to ski to his own satisfaction. And he loved serious music, he loved a lot of the more cultured parts of life. He ultimately used his family's money, what his father left him, to make some very shrewd investments and, at the same time, he became a Zen Buddhist. He came to visit me and my first wife in Chevy Chase, and after he was upstairs for half an hour or so we began to smell incense. When we went to find him he was in the lotus position with candles burning.

Mr. Vanderstar: How charming.

Mr. McPherson: Yes, indeed.

Mr. Vanderstar: Now, at the time of Pearl Harbor you were only 12?

Mr. McPherson: 12.

Mr. Vanderstar: Did you know fellows who were six, seven, eight years older than you that went off to the service after the war started?

Mr. McPherson: A few. I'm not sure whether I knew them or knew about them and persuaded myself that I knew them, probably the latter. There wasn't much interaction

between the ages.

I remember being in church on Palm Sunday when someone came in and told whoever I was sitting next to that some particularly fine and admired young man had been killed in Belgium. He was in the glider operation that got so badly mangled. And I remember that news trickling through the church even as the service was going on. You could hear people talking and hear people groaning and sighing.

Mr. Vanderstar: But can you remember during the war the town changing or the town somehow responding to the war, the newspaper stories and that sort of thing?

Mr. McPherson: Yes.

Mr. Vanderstar: Activity in the town?

Mr. McPherson: Activity in the town, yes, in two ways. An Army camp was established right outside of town, Camp Fannin. It became a major infantry training base, with a couple of divisions out there at any given time—a lot of people. After the war the hospitals originally built out there were turned over to the state for the care of people with asbestos, and a very good *New Yorker* writer, Burton O'Shea, wrote the preeminent piece ever written in the early days of the legal struggle over asbestosis.

The air field in Tyler, which had been a commercial air field, was lengthened and was used for basic training of the Army Air Corps. Abe Pound, Sr.'s (my godfather) older son, Jack Pound, was killed out there. He was an instructor, and he and his student went down, The field today is known as Pounds Field for his son.

Mr. Vanderstar: So there were uniforms everywhere.

Mr. McPherson: Yes, a lot of uniforms. My dad, like everybody else who had a business that might be of some use, did his best to sell things to the camp, sporting equipment

and that sort of thing. He was such a sentimentalist about his patriotic emotions that he practically gave it away.

Mr. Vanderstar: Not a war profiteer.

Mr. McPherson: He was a war non-profteer. (laughter)

Otherwise, I remember ration cards. I remember my father coming home—I think this was after my mother died, it must have been in '44 – and very proudly telling me that he had bought a steer and had had it slaughtered and made into steaks and various nutritious meats, that it was all being put into some kind of very large refrigerator or cold storage, and that he and I would never go without steaks. We were all struggling with the C cards and how much gas you could buy for this and all that.

Mr. Vanderstar: A little sticker on the windshield of your car?

Mr. McPherson: Yes, it had the letter on it, yes.

Mr. Vanderstar: Okay, let's get on to college or back to college. You told me the other day about your experiences at SMU and the junior college.

Mr. McPherson: Then my dad got Bishop Quinn to recommend and help me get into Sewanee.

Mr. Vanderstar: Okay. Had you been conscious of the University of the South?

Mr. McPherson: No, I never heard of it.

Mr. Vanderstar: Never heard of it? Okay.

Mr. McPherson: But I started learning about it. After that trip west with my friends in my new Buick convertible, I took off in early September of 1947 and drove by myself up through Arkansas and across Tennessee, and one afternoon drove into Sewanee. I stopped a tall, fine-looking man, George Campbell—his father was the preeminent surgeon in

Memphis—and asked him were certain things were, where I might find someplace where I could sign up as a student. He looked at the car and thought, “This ain’t bad!” (laughter) He got in and steered me down to where I could make my entrance into the school and get my bunk assignment.

I was put in a small house with eight other guys. The dormitories were filled, and we were assigned to this house. Out of it came several life-long friendships. It’s curious that it should be so. There was a couple, a veteran and his wife, who were kind of the house “father and mother,” and then the guys.

I remember the first evening. I was kind of pooped, I had been driving from Texas, so I was sitting up in bed talking to one of the guys, who was sharing the room with me, and another guy, Christopher Fitzsimmons Allison, came in and said, (accent) “I’m Fitz Allison. Where’s the john?” “Right there.” so he went in and took an extremely noisy crap (laughter) and came back and said, “Man’s most underrated privilege.” (laughter) I’ll never forget that, that was my introduction to Sewanee. Years later Christopher Fitzsimmons Allison was the [Episcopal] Bishop of South Carolina.

Another guy, Harold Barrett, whom I met simultaneously—Harold “Bobo” Barrett—was also one of the South Carolina fellows with a big, wide geechee accent. He became the rector of Trinity [Episcopal] Church on Wall Street.

And so this class was pretty productive when it came to clergy of note. I’d never been anywhere like this. Sewanee is a marvelous place. William Alexander Percy, the uncle of Walker Percy, the Mississippi novelist, wrote an autobiography called *Lanterns on the Levee*. It has a chapter about Sewanee with a sentence that everybody knows who went to Sewanee. He said somebody is apt to be describing young students and their behavior with old ladies, their wit

and their courtesy as well. He said, “Sewanee is a place that unfits a young man for anything but the good life.” (laughter) And he meant it, not just a posh life but a life of humane values. I think it is that way.

It’s up on the Cumberland Plateau, has many thousands of acres of its own land, and much of that is dense woodland. It has a very fine forestry school; it and Duke and Yale are probably the premier forestry schools, the others obviously much bigger and more complex but Sewanee’s awfully good.

It has ties to the Episcopal church. It’s formally owned by the 22 southern dioceses. It also has academic and literary ties to Oxford [England], in the sense that a lot of its students go over there for junior year and some professors come from Oxford from time to time. A literary quarterly, *The Sewanee Review*, is well known and respected.

Sewanee had, as I learned as an English student, a marvelous magnetism for writers, particularly a group of writers who were prominent in the ‘20s and ‘30s and ‘40s and were known as The Fugitives, the Fugitive Movement—essentially, anti-industrial people who hated the South becoming an indistinguishable part of industrial philistine America. People like Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Andrew Lytle, wonderful people.

Mr. Vanderstar: And what was their connection to Sewanee?

Mr. McPherson: There always seemed to be one of them in residence. Many years later I was invited to a conference in Kenyon College. I was supposed to speak on a subject that I cared only modestly about. I went in order to meet Ransom, who was a poet that I deeply admired. Well, it was set up right after lunch one day. He was in his eighties and living alone and absentminded, but we had a bourbon and water, just a little bit. I was trying not to be

painfully worshipful to him (laughter) and he said (accent), “Where were you schooled?” I said, “Sewanee.” And he said, “Oh, they wanted me come down there to speak on the anniversary of The Fugitives. I told them I didn’t think I wanted to do that. They ought to get that boy from down there, that boy who lives there. They should get him to speak.” I said, “Allen Tate?” Tate at the time was about 74. (laughter) “That’s him.” (laughter)

Mr. Vanderstar: That’s wonderful.

Well, go back to when you first arrived at Sewanee; you had been at SMU, you’d been at the junior college, maybe you had been to Austin to see the University of Texas.

Mr. McPherson: To see friends there.

Mr. Vanderstar: Yes. But what was your impression when you drove onto the Sewanee campus? Did you say, “Well, I feel at home,” or did you say, “What in the world have I gotten myself into?”

Mr. McPherson: Well, a little bit of both, although the period of acclimatizing myself was pretty short. I really liked it. The idea that you were really supposed to go to class, if you cut more than three times a semester without an excuse you were out, well that was pretty shocking. Suddenly, I realized I was in a really serious school.

I remember the first evening, standing outside Gaylord Hall, an old frame dining hall, waiting for the door to open. Boys were up a long set of stairways on the side, and I could not get over the accents. I’d never heard anything like them in my life. (accent) “Joe, how are you?” (laughter) “Oh, I’m fine. How’s your summer?” “Oh, it’s good, how about yours?” There were these geechee accents, there were Mississippi accents, New Orleans, Virginia, fellows from all over the South. The warmth of the place was quite wonderful.

The teachers, I think I mentioned two who had been left as part of Norman

Thomas' crowd in the '30s.

Mr. Vanderstar: Yes.

Mr. McPherson: One of them, Charles Trawick Harrison, was a magnificent teacher. He taught Chaucer and Elizabethan poetry and drama. Extremely high standards. He looked rather like Joseph Cotton. He was extremely kind to me. I think he could recognize that I was desperate to become an adequate student in English because I meant to be a writer.

Tom Govan taught history. He was the other fellow, the other Norman Thomas supporter. He may not have been the world's greatest historian but he had an infectious enthusiasm for history and really got me going. I adored his classes. He taught American history.

Another historian, Arthur Dugan, once brought his friend Alexander Kerensky, the Menshevik who lost out to the Bolsheviks, into our class. We were astonished.

There is a picture in my mind—I've described it to a number of people going down to Sewanee—that to me sums up Sewanee. There was a philosophy professor, I can't remember his name, an elderly, white-haired man who was as absentminded as philosophy professors are supposed to be, and one extremely cold, brittle, sunny day, he was talking about the process of learning, the process of acquiring knowledge. I forget who the philosopher was, but it was someone like Hooker, it wasn't one of the Germans, it was one of the English, probably church-related philosophers of the eighteenth century. He was writing a long sentence on the blackboard, and when he came to the end of the blackboard he just kept writing on the wall there (laughter) and turned the corner and kept going to finish it. Well, I loved seeing that, so I got up and walked over to the window to watch it and to sharpen my pencil.

I looked down on the quadrangle of the school—I was in this old classroom in

Walsh Hall—and I saw a friend of mine wearing his gown. Juniors with 85 or 90 averages wore a black academic gown every day to class, and seniors with a 75 average wore it. They were members of the Order of Gownsmen, and that gave them certain privileges—for one thing you could cut class. I looked down and saw this friend who was wearing a gown walking across the quadrangle in cold sunlight. On the path there was an old dog with rickets, and its back leg was shaking. Everybody loved him, and this boy stopped and squatted down on the gravel path and scratched this dog behind the ears until the dog's leg quit bouncing. It just stayed there.

The professor was still talking about how one learns, and it was a wonderful moment that kind of summed up higher education and humaneness; this was all against a background of this very beautiful chapel. That was the nature of the place and it's why people go back to it and enjoy saying that they're from Sewanee.

Mr. Vanderstar: It does sound Oxfordian.

Mr. McPherson: Yes, it is, with a country side to it, a Tennessee country side. Scholarship, good humor, and in the woods there were stills where country people made whiskey.

There was plenty of racism around. I remember chasing a Black guy one evening who had been a peeping Tom at our house and, I don't know how all this developed, but it was decided we had to catch him. And we all went chasing him. He hid under the steps of the dining hall. The police car and the deputy sheriff were running up and all of us, we wanted to catch this guy, he shouldn't be a peeping Tom—but we didn't quite like the way it was developing into something that might get him hurt.

Sewanee was “dry.” Five miles down the road was a place called “Clara's.” Very nice woman—Clara Shumate—ran a roadhouse and it was the favorite place to go. Her

husband, Tubby Wallace, sold bootleg whiskey next door. If you had money, you bought Jack Daniels. He had Jack Daniels and Lem Motlow, which said on it, “flavored and colored with wood chips; guaranteed to be less than one month old.” (laughter) I guess if you didn’t have much money, that’s what you bought.

At Clara’s one evening I saw a pickup truck from Tracy City, Tennessee—a very poor place where Tennessee Iron and Steel had a coal mine—with machine gun bullet holes in the door. The owner had obviously had a fight over whiskey, nothing else was of any value around there.

In the back of Clara’s where the Sewanee boys would go, it was all our place. A professor named Abbott Cotton Martin, known as Abbo Martin would join us. He was our most beloved professor; B.A., University of Mississippi, not a lick beyond that, wonderful teacher. Taught Romantic and Victorian verse. An alcoholic, to be sure. And he smoked cigars. He would come into his classroom with ashes and whiskey stains on his gown, which was in tatters as well. I was usually his bait. He would say (accent), “McPherson, what did Tennyson mean by —” or something like that, only in a Delta voice. And he was down at Clara’s three or four nights a week. For the students it was just singing and drinking beer; every now and then we’d have a little whiskey but it was mostly beer.

When I was graduated, on a beautiful June day, I came out of chapel and my dad was there and a bunch of friends. We had the usual hoorah, and I heard this “pssst.” I looked over and Abbo Martin said (whispering), “What will you take for your gown?” And I said, “What will you give?” He said, “Two dollars,” and I said, “Sold!” (laughter) I took it off and sold him my gown for two dollars and he threw away his tattered gown.

Mr. Vanderstar. Yes, that’s a lovely story.

Did you go to Sewanee as a junior? After the experience at SMU?

Mr. McPherson: Yes. My grades were getting okay toward the end. Sewanee has comprehensive exams before graduation. You take them in your major and your minor, English and history for me, and then you have about two hours of orals by the whole faculty of the English department.

Mr. Vanderstar: Wow.

Mr. McPherson: You spend two or three months getting ready for these for two or three days. The Shakespeare professor, Tudor Seymour Long, had flown in the Lafayette Espadrille —

Mr. Vanderstar: Oh, boy.

Mr. McPherson: —and had a certain glamour for that. He was a kind character from Somerville, South Carolina.

He taught me, one day, how to read aloud and therefore how to act and how to be a public speaker. One day, we were getting started on Hamlet, and he said, “Mr. McPherson, read me the first four lines.” Horatio is up there on the battlements and the guard, hearing him, says, “Who goes there?” and the words say, “Nay, answer me,” that’s what Horatio responds. And I said, (flatly) “Who goes there nay answer me.” Mr. Vanderstar: “Who goes there” “Nay, answer me.” He called on Calhoun Winton, one of the brighter students who ended up teaching at the University of Maryland. Mr. Winton: “Who goes there?” (loudly) “NAY, answer ME!” Horatio is a friend of the prince. No guard is going to make him announce who he is; you tell him who you are first. (laughter)

And that moment has stuck with me, because it caused me to see that when you look at anything in print—it probably slowed me down as a reader because now I articulate what

I read, I say it aloud in my head. I am a pretty good reader aloud and I'm a ham actor. I've done all that kind of stuff. But it all started with Tudor Long and those first few lines of Hamlet. It was one of those epiphanies.

Mr. Vanderstar: Yes. What did you do in the summertime between the few years at school?

Mr. McPherson: I went to school at Sewanee. I think my SMU experience left me shy of some credits. I had a marvelous time. I had a course under Charles Harrison, Chaucer, and a course under Govan in history, and I played baseball, softball on the fraternity team and tennis almost every day and drank at night and fell in love with a girl from Georgia.

Girls couldn't go to Sewanee except in the summer. Sewanee in the heart of the year had about 450 to 500 boys. In the summer they had maybe 200 and would take in maybe 30 girls, and I fell in love with one of them—Coco Read. She was from Columbus, Georgia. So when I graduated, I took off and went down and spent a while with her and her family, trying to figure out what to do with myself. I thought I wanted to be a writer, and I figured that writers had to live as teachers, so I would try to go some place where I could learn to be a teacher. I applied to Harvard, but they weren't interested, and I applied to Columbia and they said, okay. So, she and I went to New York, she to work for the *Ladies' Home Journal* and I to go to Columbia. Am I getting ahead of myself?

Mr. Vanderstar: We're about to conclude this particular session. What you are doing is identifying where we will start with the next one.

Mr. McPherson: Okay. And I had never been north of Bristol, Tennessee, right near the Virginia border. One night I went to a white tie party in Nashville with a guy named Stuart Childs—Stu Childs, a Charlotte lawyer still very much with us. He flew bombers in

World War II.

I'll have to tell about Bob Thweat, because he taught me something about learning and about the passion of learning. Thweat was a former Navy pilot from World War II. He married some bishop's daughter and they moved into a house at Sewanee. One evening, I think I borrowed his car and I was bringing it back. He had had several drinks, he was studying history and he was on his knees and he had two or three books on the bed and his head was down on the bed.

Mr. Vanderstar: He was kneeling on the floor?

Mr. McPherson: He was kneeling on the floor and he was going, "mmmmm, mmmm." And I knocked on the screen door and said, "Its Harry. What's wrong?" He said, "If Henry VIII had minded his business, and if he had stayed married and stayed in the Catholic church and turned his attention to the discovery and development of America, America would have been populated by millions of Catholics from Europe and we never would have brought the slaves over here."

He was in his mid-twenties, a veteran of World War II, a student and a little bit drunk and just sitting by himself ruminating on this.

The other, Stuart Childs from Charlotte, became a really dear friend at Sewanee. He had flown bombers in World War II. Then he went back later after he left Sewanee and was one of the X-1 pilots, he and Chuck Yeager. Those guys who broke the sound barrier and all that, until his wife one day said, "Either you do that or you stayed married to me. I cannot stand the tension." He quit, went back to Charlotte, and became a lawyer.

Anyway, Stu and I took off from Nashville to drive to New York to see his girlfriend at the time. She was the understudy to Nanette Fabray in "High Button Shoes."

(laughter) We got as far as Bristol, Tennessee—we had driven all night and we were in our tuxedos—and I said, “Childs I can’t do this, it’s 500 miles to go. This old car’s not going to make it.” He said, “You’re right.” And we turned around.

So I’d never been to New York when I got on the train near Tyler, Texas, and went up to New York. Even today, when you take the Amtrak and you go under the Hudson, you come out in Manhattan and there is a nondescript hole in the city, just sides of buildings and walls. That’s what I saw when I came in. That was my first sight of New York. I went down to the Village to stay with Coco Read, her sister Clay—Clayton—and their mother, in an apartment on 12th Street across from the New School for Social Research.

Mr. Vanderstar: Ah, wonderful. Let’s, let’s pick **up** there when we resume.