

Oral History of Charles T. Duncan
First Interview
August 15, 1997

This is an interview of Charles T. Duncan conducted as part of the Oral History Project of The Historical Society of the District of Columbia Circuit. The interviewer is Myles Lynk. The interview took place on August 15, 1997.

Mr. Lynk: Mister Duncan, can I call you Charlie?

Mr. Duncan: Please. C'mon what are you talking about?

Mr. Lynk: And of course, your full name is Charles T. Duncan.

Mr. Duncan: Right.

Mr. Lynk: What does the T stand for?

Mr. Duncan: Tignor. T-I-G-N-O-R.

Mr. Lynk: Tignor. Are you any relation to the Judges Tignor?

Mr. Duncan: Yep. Might as well get to it, out of the way. My natural father was Doctor Charles A. Tignor. And my original name was Charles A. Tignor, Jr., and my dad died; my natural father died in 1935, or thereabouts. And my mother remarried Todd Duncan, and in due course, I was adopted by him and assumed his name, but I retained the "T" as my original family name. My full name is Charles Tignor Duncan. But the Tignor is indeed from the Tignor family of Washington, D.C. which –

Mr. Lynk: There's Michael Tignor.

Mr. Duncan: No.

Mr. Lynk: Mitchell?

Mr. Duncan: Before him.

Mr. Lynk: Okay.

Mr. Duncan: What else.

Mr. Lynk: Okay. When were you born?

Mr. Duncan: In 1924. Halloween, October 31st, 1924.

Mr. Lynk: October 31, 1924.

Mr. Duncan: Yes, yes.

Mr. Lynk: Were you born at home or in one of the hospitals?

Mr. Duncan: I was born at home. That was done in those days; at 473 Florida Avenue, N.W., right where New Jersey Avenue runs into Florida Avenue.

Mr. Lynk: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

Mr. Duncan: I'm an only child.

Mr. Lynk: Can you talk a little bit about your early years in Washington?
Where did you go to school?

Mr. Duncan: Kindergarten through fourth grade: Mott School; that's Fourth and Bryant Streets, N.W. The school is still there, but the building's been torn down and moved over to R_____ by University. Do you know where it is?

Mr. Lynk: Yes I do.

Mr. Duncan: Segments of the old wall are still there on Fourth Street. Grades five and six, I went to Morgan School and Garnet-Patterson Junior High School through the ninth grade, and then I went away to school to preparatory school – Mount Hermon School for Boys, now called Northfield Mount Hermon School in Northfield, Massachusetts.

Mr. Lynk: How did you happen to go away to Mount Hermon School?

Mr. Duncan: One day my mother came in and said, “You're going to Mount Hermon School,” and I said, “Where's that?” And she said, “It's up in Massachusetts.” And she had heard about it otherwise.

Mr. Lynk: Now this would have been in the 1930s?

Mr. Duncan: I started there in '39, graduated in '42. I graduated from Garnet-Patterson in June of 1939.

Mr. Lynk: I would imagine it was very unusual for an African-American, at that time, after just coming out of the depression and all, to get that opportunity to go away to school.

Mr. Duncan: That's probably true. I should say, with modesty, that my natural father, Dr. Tignor, was a physician. My mother, Gladys, who is now 101, by the way, was a school teacher. So I came from, by any definition, a middle-class family, even in those days. I should tell you that in 1934, 1935, my mother had remarried Todd Duncan, and by 1939, he had done *Porgy and Bess*, so he was beginning to

prosper economically. So, as an economic matter, it was not a big thing. I was, by no means, the first person from here, from Washington, to go to Mount Hermon; John Tyler Phillips had gone there before I had. I'm sure some other people. I had gone to school in England for a year in 1938. My stepfather, Todd Duncan, was over there in a show, so I had a year in English schools along with the Garnet-Patterson experience. So, by the time I went to preparatory school at Mount Hermon, I was very well, academically, prepared.

Mr. Lynk: I was just going to say, you were probably one of the most sophisticated kids in your class.

Mr. Duncan: Well, I don't know about that, but I must tell you that Garnet-Patterson, in those days, segregated though it was, was a superb Junior High School, as Dunbar was a Senior High School and people to this day don't believe that, at Garnet-Patterson, when I graduated, I had two years of Latin in the ninth grade under Mary Delaney Evans. We had studied *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*. So, when I went away to prep school, I was equal to or ahead of the other kids there, most of whom were white; all of whom were white.

Mr. Lynk: You just alluded to the fact that your stepfather, Todd Duncan, had performed in *Porgy and Bess*. You told me earlier a fascinating fact about his relationship to *Porgy and Bess* and George Gershwin. I wonder if you could tell me that again.

Mr. Duncan: Yes. In 1934 – that was the actual year he married my mother – he was a professor in the school's music department at Howard University, and he was active in local musical circles. He headed the choir at Plymouth Congregational Church, which used to be at 17th and P Streets, N.W., and now is out at Riggs Road and North Capital Streets, N.W. Gershwin had, somehow, heard of him and auditioned him for the role; he was chosen for it. So he was the original Porgy in *Porgy and Bess*, which I think opened for the first time in '35 or '36. That launched his career as a singer and later as a concert artist.

Mr. Lynk: Did he tell you any stories about how he first met George Gershwin?

Mr. Duncan: Oh yes. There are books on that. One of the stories is that he was invited up to New York in 1934 to meet Gershwin. When Gershwin first wanted him to come up, my father said, “Well, I can't come because I have a singing engagement. I can come the next weekend.” The singing engagement was the choir in front of the church; that's what it was. He went up the next weekend and knocked on the door of the Fifth Avenue apartment – this is all documented – and Gershwin opened the door and said, “Where is your accompanist?” And my father, not knowing he was supposed to bring an accompanist, said, “Well, I don't have one. You play, don't you? Or if you don't, I can play.” So, he went in and Gershwin said, “What do you want to sing?” So, dad selected an aria from something,

which surprised Gershwin because most of the people that he interviewed were singing “Old Man River,” or a spiritual or something like that. Dad selected an aria. He got quite – according to the story, I wasn't there – he got fifteen-twenty bars into it. Gershwin stopped him and said, “Can you sing that without the music?” And he said, “Yes, sure.” Gershwin said, “Sing it.” So dad sang it *a capella* and Gershwin heard a little bit and he said, “Will you be my Porgy?” So, dad said, “Well, I don't know. Let me hear some of your music.” (Dad thought Gershwin was Tin Pan Alley at the time, and therefore was below his dignity.) They got together and he became Gershwin's original Porgy and created the role in *Porgy and Bess*.

There was an obituary in the newspaper a day or two ago of someone named Kay Halle. I think it was in Monday or Tuesday's paper. She tells the story of having been there at the audition. *Washington Post*, August 12, 1977, B4, Obituaries, Kay Halle, “Washington Grande Dame Dies at 93.” It says, “She made a career of knowing and cultivating famous people. Her chief one was Gershwin.” Let's see. It mentions the people that she had met. It goes on to say, “In the natural course of things, Ms. Halle met Gershwin after a concert in 1934. President Roosevelt and family invited the composer to come, and Ms. Halle, to New Year's Eve at the White House. That the president requested Gershwin play the

piano. It was with Gershwin that Ms. Halle met Astaire and Waller – Fats Waller – and such musical luminaries as Cole Porter, Richard Rodgers, Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin, and Oscar Levant. She was present when Todd Duncan, the head of the voice department, Howard University, auditioned for the part of Porgy in *Porgy and Bess*. Gershwin gave it to him. Ms. Halle and Duncan were friends for life.” I called dad and I read this to him and I said, “I remembered the name, but I didn't know that she was there when you sang.” “Oh, oh, yes. That's true.” And I told him that it also said, “You were friends for life.” And he said, “Yeah, that's true, that's true.” In my personal knowledge, they never communicated in the last 20 years. But that's the way it is.

Mr. Lynk: That's the way it is. So, you came back from Europe and then you went to –

Mr. Duncan: I went to Mount Hermon in 1939.

Mr. Lynk: How many years were you at Mount Hermon?

Mr. Duncan: Three.

Mr. Lynk: Three years.

Mr. Duncan: Graduated in 1942. The war had happened in the meanwhile. I went straight from Mount Hermon to Dartmouth.

Mr. Lynk: Dartmouth College?

Mr. Duncan: Yes.

Mr. Lynk: Tell me a little bit about that. One of the interesting things about Dartmouth is the number of very accomplished people in this area, you just mentioned them earlier, Bob Wilkinson and his family, who were there. What was your experience at Dartmouth? How did you find that?

Mr. Duncan: This is interesting to me. I had a very good academic record at Mount Hermon. I was class salutatorian and on the ski team. I learned about skiing at Mount Hermon. I chose Dartmouth because it was a prestigious school, but primarily because it was a big ski school in those days. I only applied to Dartmouth. In those days, you could do that. I only applied to Harvard Law School, four years later, five years later, and was accepted. In Dartmouth, in the whole school of 3,000 students, maybe there were four, five, six Negro students, black students; two or three of whom were from here, the rest of them elsewhere. I guess, in a word, black students at Dartmouth in the early '40s were numerically so insignificant that we were not a problem; nobody paid attention to us. And there was a lot of anti-Semitism, and I'm sure there was a lot of other stuff. There was racism, to be sure, but again, we were so insignificant, numerically, that nobody paid a lot of attention to us. In my case, because I skied and played tennis and could sing, I was accepted as the EXception. You're different. I was one of the boys, by and large, not totally, as things went in those days. My college career

was interrupted by military service. I completed three years, then went in the Navy and came back in 1946 and completed my fourth year of college and graduated in 1947.

Mr. Lynk: So, you spent one year in the Navy?

Mr. Duncan: Two years.

Mr. Lynk: Two years in the Navy. Where did you serve?

Mr. Duncan: That's a story, too. I was drafted. But first I was deferred. People talk about Clinton staying out of the war. You tried to stay out of the war in those days if you could, if you were black, in particular, because the armed services were strictly segregated; STRICTLY, strictly, strictly segregated. We _____ as we do now, less than full service. So this business of going down and signing up after Pearl Harbor did not exist in the black community. And I stayed out of the military as long as I could through a chemistry deferment. But I finally got caught up with and was drafted in February of '45. Went to boot camp at Great Lakes.

Mr. Lynk: Great Lakes Naval Station?

Mr. Duncan: Yes. Great Lakes, Illinois. Happily V-E Day happened while I was in boot camp. While I was in boot camp, long story, but I finally got sent to midshipmen's school at Cornell in the summer of 1945. And while I was in midshipmen's school, V-J Day occurred. So I came along at the very end of the war. I was commissioned in November

of 1945, and I served into the next year. Then I returned to Dartmouth in September '46, graduated in '47.

Mr. Lync: Now you referred to a chemistry deferment. Were you a chemistry major?

Mr. Duncan: I became a chemistry major. I was an English, political science-type, but it was possible to be deferred if you were majoring in chemistry or physics, so I became a chemistry major. I wasn't the only one, I might say.

Mr. Lync: Now during this period of time, the thirties and forties; to the mid-forties; let's say from 1936 to '46, you had gone from junior high through high school, college, the Navy, and then had completed college and that was also at a time when, I gather, a lot of changes were taking place in Washington as a place, which you would have seen directly through '39, and then on visits back and over the summers after that. How was Washington, or did you, in fact, experience it as a changing environment?

Mr. Duncan: Oh, hell yes! It didn't change that soon. It didn't begin to change until the early fifties. In the thirties when I grew up, Washington was strictly, strictly, strictly segregated. The only white people that I knew, forgive me, operated the "Jew's store" across the street; that's what we used to call it, "the Jew store." I lived at 16th and T Streets, N.W. If you go by there to this day, on the northwest corner, 16th and T Streets, there is a store. It's no longer a "Jew store," to be

sure, but when I was growing up, that's what it was known as. The people were perfectly nice. They were operating in this mixed neighborhood, but we used to call it "the Jew store." It didn't connote any conscious-level disparagement; that's just what we called it, "the Jew store." Except for that, I didn't have any contact with any white people. Ever, ever, ever, ever. Certainly not in school. You go downtown to the stores, you'd see white people, but in those days, you couldn't try clothes on; you've heard all the stories: couldn't do this, couldn't do that. But you still, you know, had to buy clothes. The store called Palais Royale; it was on 7th Street on the north side of F Street, N.W.; I think that Hecht's was on 7th Street on the south side of F between E and F Streets, N.W. Now if you go there, Hecht's is no longer there. The big department store known as Palais Royale, down the street on 7th was Lansburghs, and there was Goldenberg's, I remember all that. It was a segregated town, there was nowhere to go to a restaurant, you couldn't go to theaters, downtown theaters. There was Lincoln and Republic and the Booker T, of course, on U Street. The changes didn't really occur until the early fifties. I guess it was the *Thompson's Restaurant* case in '53 or '54 in which Charlie Houston, the revered Charles S. Houston, discovered something called "the lost laws." You ever heard of them?

Mr. Lynk:

No, please.

Mr. Duncan: Okay. He was the leader. He was local, but he was also national. But in his local capacity, he discovered a post-Civil War statute, a congressional statute that prohibited discrimination on the grounds of race. I think what it really said was that any – the word disorderly was in there – you had to admit anybody except disorderly persons, that's what it said.

Mr. Lynk: Was it in the District of Columbia?

Mr. Duncan: Yes, yes. It was a congressional statute, but it applied to the District. And he looked at that and he said, "Hey, this would cover us." So, he carried that case to the Supreme Court. I think it was 1953 or 1954, *Thompson's Restaurant*. It was sort of like an original sit-in case. And in the District, the Supreme Court held that that law was in effect and the local restaurants could not discriminate on the grounds of race. So that in '53 or '54, restaurants became public accommodations, legally were open. It began to happen and then came the civil rights acts of the '60s.

Mr. Lynk: What was it like growing up in a segregated city; in a city where you did not interact with whites at all? You saw them, literally, in a variety of certain situations?

Mr. Duncan: Those of us black kids, Negro kids, in those days colored people, if you will, who grew up in the middle class were very protected by our parents. We were shielded from this and we had our own little clubs and Jack and Jill, you've heard of. You only went downtown if

you had to, and you couldn't eat, you couldn't get a hot dog at Woolworth's. My mother used to tell me, "Well, let's wait 'til we get home because the hot dogs at home and the food we have at home is better than these down here." And I could never understand why you couldn't go to the bathroom. I can't tell you how many times I've gone like this, waiting to get to the bathroom at the public library at 7th and Massachusetts Avenue, N.W.

Mr. Lynk: The Carnegie building?

Mr. Duncan: Is that what it is?

Mr. Lynk: Yes.

Mr. Duncan: That used to be the central public library. And, for whatever reason, that was open and down in the basement there was a bathroom and many was the time I'd run in there and gone to the bathroom on the way up 7th Street to home. But our parents shielded us. You can have this conversation with contemporaries of mine, as I did just recently, and they will tell you that we didn't notice any segregation, we had everything we wanted. There are people who thought that way. And in a sense, I did, too. But I was also aware that there was something funny about why you couldn't get a hot dog at Woolworth's; had to go up to the public library to go to the bathroom at Mount Vernon Place. I suppose, if you look around the world today, whatever you are born into, whether it be abject poverty or the situation in Russia, wherever you're born; that's what you're used

to and that's what you adapt to and we adapted to segregation. We didn't have to ride on the back of the streetcars, but then, in my situation, we didn't ride the streetcars anyway because our parents drove us around wherever we were going to go. That's a terrible thing to say, isn't it? But it's true.

Mr. Lynk: That reality, many people who did not live through it really cannot understand it, because it makes perfect sense that certainly the parents and the community would try to ameliorate the effects on their children.

Mr. Duncan: Yes, like there's nothing wrong. We were certainly exposed to so-called cultural things. All the little boys in my group took violin lessons up at Howard University; all little girls took piano lessons at Nickerson's. I'm talking about 10, 11, 12, 13 years old. I've friends to this day that I met in violin class. There was a nursery school, Mrs. Howard. Mrs. Howard's nursery school in the 800 block of F Street, N.W.; all the kids went to the nursery school. I can't tell you how many times I was dragged down to Constitution Hall. There was a little section up in the balcony where you had to sit to hear Yehudi Menuhin, Gloria Perkins; that was a cultural ritual, we were exposed to that. We could hardly claim to have grown up in an educational or cultural ghetto because we didn't; that term wasn't really known at the time, ghettos. Within the context of segregation, our parents carved out for us a comfortable upper-class life, by

today's standards.

Mr. Lync: I was going to say that while there was not a lot of contacts with whites, there was also, I gather, not a lot of contact with poor blacks.

Mr. Duncan: Ah! You got it, you got it. My mother wouldn't let me go into the Boy Scouts, for example, because she didn't know who "those people" were in the Boy Scouts – not a doctor's and school teacher's son! So I couldn't join the Boy Scouts. I did not, I was not exposed to poorer, less-educated blacks until I was in the Navy in boot camp. And this was in '45; that was my first exposure to people who couldn't read or write, or who were, what we would now call, "off the streets." That was the best thing that could have happened to me; I didn't know it at the time, in retrospect, but you're absolutely right, I led a very sheltered life.

Mr. Lync: Were you active in any sort of formal, extra-curricular activities at Dartmouth?

Mr. Duncan: Oh, yes. I was a BMOC (Big Man on Campus) at Dartmouth, oh sure.

Mr. Lync: Tell me a little bit about that.

Mr. Duncan: Well, academically, as I said, I was very good. Graduated Phi Beta Kappa, eventually; ski team, tennis team. This was during the war years, so it was an unusual college experience for all of us. There was no Winter Carnival; gas was rationed, and basically we went

into a summer semester which was grand. I did three years in two, and I lost two years in the military so I could graduate a year behind when I normally would have.

Mr. Duncan: I guess before the war, staying in school and studying was about the only thing. After the war, it was in the dormitory. We didn't have any bosses or black alumni associations; they didn't have that because there were two or three of us altogether, so I mean, there just wasn't that. There was no Afro-American this or that, so I can't honestly pretend that I was active in the civil rights movement in those days because I wasn't. There wasn't any civil rights movement. I'm sorry, not at the undergrad level.

Mr. Lynk: Now, those two years in the Navy; I see you shaking your head, talk a little bit about that. Clearly a different experience.

Mr. Duncan: As I told you, I was drafted. They finally caught up with me. February of '45, I remember. Is that when Roosevelt died, in '45?

Mr. Lynk: Yes.

Mr. Duncan: Okay. I was in boot camp in April of 1945. I got drafted. I was sent to Great Lakes. Great Lakes, of course, was segregated. Starboard side was all black; the main side was all white. Somewhere toward the end of the boot camp experience, April, May, somewhere around there, we had a black petty officer, third class, something or other, one-stripe, which was in those days, quite exalted, by the way. His

name was David Jakes; he was out of New York; I'll never forget him. He called me over one day, he said, "Charlie, they are opening the fleet." No. "They are opening midshipmen's school to the fleet." Meaning that you were eligible for midshipmen's school if you had three years of college. I've forgotten a big story, which I'll go back to. He said, "You have three years of college. You should apply to midshipmen's school." So, becoming an officer in the Navy was like, you just didn't think in those terms, that's ridiculous! An officer in the Navy?! A Negro an officer?! Ridiculous! But anyway, he said, "Go do it!" So I wrote my mother and said please send me a transcript from Dartmouth and Howard. And to make a long story short, I presented all these credentials. They hemmed and hawed, but I finally got sent to Cornell.

Let me back up. When I was inducted in the Navy out of Washington, D.C., I got on a train to Baltimore. This is the point of my story. And this is an interesting story. We were all going through a line, blacks and whites together. There was a white lieutenant commander in the Navy with – everyone was going into the Navy those days, because the war in Europe was basically over, gearing up for the big push in Japan – so this white lieutenant commander said when we get in the next room, "Take the RT test." I didn't know what the RT was. So I get in the next room and someone says, "Anyone want to take the RT test." So I put my hand

up. And the guy next to me put his hand up. And they said, “You two go over there.” They sent the two of us to Great Lakes. Everybody else in my group went to Perry Point; right up here (Maryland), which was a cooks and bakers school. I would have been sent to cooks and bakers school, and would have still been in the brig. I'm satisfied of that, but for this white lieutenant commander who said, “Take the RT test.” Now, what was the RT test? It turned out it was radio technicians test; that's what it stood for. The guy next to me, I later asked, “Why did you put your hand up?” He says, “I saw you put yours up.” That's the way the world works in the Navy, in the Army, in the military. We got sent to Great Lakes. I guess we must have taken the RT test somewhere along the way. But, you know, whatever. We ended up at Great Lakes and from Great Lakes I went to midshipmen's school. But for that, I would have been sent to Perry Point cooks and bakers. I was that close.

Midshipmen's school at Cornell was interesting. There had been a number of black officers specially commissioned. You read the book these days about the “Golden Thirteen,” and all that. They were specially commissioned in order to have some black officers. I and five others, there were six of us all together, were sent to midshipmen's school. We were the only six in whole history of the United States Navy and those days who went to regular everyday

midshipmen's school. I went to Cornell, others went to Columbia, Northwestern, and it was a big experiment. They were going to commission us and send us aboard ships. I'm not making this up! This is a good story. To find out whether white officers would take orders from, I'm sorry, whether white enlisted men would take orders from black officers. Just like Tuskegee; make us fly airplanes. So I got sent to, after graduation in November in '45, I got sent to an oil tanker which was then in dry dock in San Diego, California. For the next six to eight months, I was an officer aboard that oil tanker. You want to know the answer to the question? The white enlisted men, most of whom were southern kids, had no problem whatsoever with taking orders from a black officer. They saw the gold bar; the gold stripe. I didn't know their minds, I didn't care what they thought. But, you know what I'm going to say. The only people who I had any trouble with on the ship were the six cooks and bakers, who weren't exactly sure who this black officer was, but we got along fine. There's more. The ship, the *USS Platte*, A024, since replaced. There's another ship by the name *USS Platte*, which I've since seen. But this was a fleet-going oiler. It had four 5" 38 guns. Ocean-going, fighting tanker. They had been alerted that this person was going. So, I got there. They were cordial, they were nice. The captain tried to assign me to a room. No. He tried to assign me a room, stateroom X. And the guy who was in there was supposed to

move out so I could be in there by myself. The guy that was in there said, "Why do I have to move out?" "I don't know," I answered. "I want to stay here," he said. So he ended up staying there. It worked fine.

One other Navy story. I'd been on the ship for about two weeks. And a new captain came aboard the ship. He was a four-striper from the Annapolis Naval Academy. The fact that he was assigned to this oil tanker that late in the war raised a little question, but, whatever. I was given an order by the executive officer right after this new captain came on board. I was supposed to tell the steward's mates that they could not attend the ship's party, which was being paid for out of funds from the ship's store which everyone contributed to, officers and enlisted men alike.

Mr. Lync: Including the steward's mates?

Mr. Duncan: Including the steward's mates, to be sure. But they were to be given their share of the fund, whatever it was, in cash. So I said to the executive officer, "You all just assigned me to the navigation department; I'm the assistant navigator. Why do I have to tell this to the steward's mates?" "Captain's orders," he replied. So, I'm not making this up. I went back and I thought about it and I said to myself, You've been an officer in the Navy for three weeks, now. You've been a Negro for 22 years. What do you want to be? So I requested permission to go speak to the captain, which you could do.

The executive officer wanted to know, "What do you want to see the captain about?" So I told him. And he said, "Good luck." So I went up to see the captain and I said, "Captain. You've given me this order and I don't think it's fair that the steward's mates contributed to the ship's fund." And I said, "President Roosevelt has just been talking about issuing an order to do away with discrimination in the armed services." Mrs. Roosevelt, in fact, had said, "We're going to do this." It hadn't happened yet. That was the wave of the future. Having said my piece, I got up to leave. The captain said, "Sit down. You don't stand up until I tell you to." He read the riot act to me. He says, "You're obligated by, you're in no position to challenge any order that I give. Whatever I tell you, you do. By act of Congress, you are obliged to obey me." He said, "This is insubordination. If ever, ever, ever you do this again, you will be court-martialed." I thought, Oh shit. Three weeks in the Navy as an officer and I'm about to be court-martialed. Oh, Jesus Christ. He then went on to say, "I did not give that order about the steward's mates. The departing captain gave that order. As far as I'm concerned, the steward's mates can attend the ship's party." To myself I said, Ooooooh, Oooh. Run into that one, didn't you, Charlie? Yeah. The word got around among the enlisted men that Ensign Duncan stood up to the captain. I was God for the whole rest of the next day. So help me, nothing I could do with the enlisted men was

wrong. Got in trouble with the captain a little later. The story got around and I was secure and it lasted the whole time I was there. I could do no wrong. I just sat around after that, smoked cigarettes and played bridge. Oh yes, yes, that's what literally happened.

Mr. Lynk: That is phenomenal. That is a great story.

Mr. Duncan: Yep, yep. I'm not embellishing.

Mr. Lynk: No, I'm sure that's the real truth.

Mr. Duncan: That happened. Got out. I was eventually sent to the Office of Public Information here in Washington, down Constitution Avenue where they used to have Navy temporaries in those days. They're gone now. Released from active service in September '46. Went back to Dartmouth, graduated in '47.

Mr. Lynk: And you graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Dartmouth. Now, did you go straight to law school?

Mr. Duncan: Straight to law school. You didn't go to Europe in those days, by God. Had the GI Bill by then. So when I went to law school, most of the people in my class were 98% veterans, all on the GI Bill; 20% married, as indeed I was, by the way. No fooling around; no bosses, no ballot, no Afro-Am, let's just get out of here and get started. Because everybody's life had been interrupted two-to-six years; some people had been killed. So those were not protest years, those were "let's get out of here" years. That was everybody there. No

demonstrations, no nothing. Let's just go to class, take your exam, hope you pass and leave.

Mr. Lynk: Now you alluded to something that we haven't touched on at all and that's the fact that by the time you went to law school you were married. Can you tell us a little bit about how you met your first wife?

Mr. Duncan: My first wife's name was Dorothy. She was in our little group. Her mother was a school teacher.

Mr. Lynk: So she was here, from Washington, D.C.?

Mr. Duncan: Yes. Her father worked for the Fire Department; he was a fireman, which in those days was just as good as being a doctor, lawyer, fireman, postman, Pullman porter. I mean those were all good, solid jobs. I don't remember when I met her, but we were courting through the Mount Hermon years, and we got married between college and law school in July '47. Married for 25 years.

Mr. Lynk: And then, Cambridge. You said law school was a no-nonsense time, people wanted to get through and get out. Any classmates or professors or anything stand out in those years?

Mr. Duncan: Yes. I made one lasting friendship in preparatory school and made one or two in Dartmouth, and I made one or two at the law school, some of which carried all the way through. In fact, just last weekend I was in Maine to help celebrate the 50th anniversary of my fourth-

year Dartmouth roommate who was in my wedding party here in July of 1947, and a week later I was his best man up in Maine in August of '47. He had a 50th anniversary and my new wife and I just went up there.

Mr. Lynk: What's his name?

Mr. Duncan: Edward Lane-Reticker. I have a dear friend from Dartmouth days, Norman Weissman, whom I just talked with on the telephone this morning. From law school, two very good friends that we've stayed friendly from then until now. In January of this year, Pam and I went down to Florida for a visit to a law school study group member, Martin Cohen, and the wife of another member, Victor Baum, at their condominiums on the Gulf of Mexico. So the answer to your question is yes, there are some two or three or four college and law school friends who have remained such over the years.

Mr. Lynk: Were you in law school the same time as Bill Coleman?

Mr. Duncan: I met Bill Coleman in law school. My recollection is that he was Class of '48. I think he was finishing his LL.M in '48 or '49. I knew him then, that's when I first met him. You also mentioned professors. I remember professors. Nothing really close. Griswold, Erwin. Griswold was a very austere, Zeus-like man of Harvard Law School. I don't think I ever spoke to him the whole time. I took his tax course. Fast forward to 1977, '78, '79. Howard Westwood of Covington & Burling; you've heard that name, who was great for

integrating things, including the Association of the Bar of District of Columbia, the voluntary bar. He had a lot to do with opening it. Metropolitan Club. He decided he was going to integrate Burning Tree, so I was his nominee for Burning Tree. So he carried me out there. I was eventually admitted to Burning Tree as part of that process. Dean Griswold was a member, wrote this wonderful two-page letter about what a wonderful person Charlie Duncan was. I read the letter. I felt like Flip Wilson, "He doesn't know me." You know like Geraldine who says, "You don't know me." He wrote this glowing letter about what a wonderful student I'd been and what a great scholar I was. Later, we became friends. Griswold. I remember Archie Cox for constitutional law. Thorn, he's the one out of all of those people that if I had to say who was the best, it would have to be Thorn. I had Cox, I had Seevy, I had Morgan on evidence and Scott on trusts, Casner on _____ and property. But being in law school, I hated it, just hated it. Because, you know, I'd been to Dartmouth, that was relaxed, easy, do what you want to, drink beer from cans, throw them out the window. I never did. They did that! Then you get to Harvard and you go up these steps and down these steps. I hated it. I just did not like law school.

Mr. Lynk: And then three years in Cambridge. And then you came back to Washington, directly.

Mr. Duncan: No. That's another whole episode. In those days, we used to

interview during Christmas holidays of your senior year. None of this second-year internship. You do the rounds during Christmas holidays. So I have to get the name of the Dean; he sent me to 15 or 20 Wall Street law firms: White & Case. The one I remember and love is: Cadwalader, Wickersham & Taft. By now I'm a Democrat. I went to firms called Dewey Ballantine; Dwight Royal; Donovan Leisure; you name 'em, I went to them. And rather personally, without exception, they all told me, basically, "Mr. Duncan, we are ready to have a Negro associate, but our clients are not ready. So therefore we cannot give you an offer." In *harc verba*, which probably violated New York law in those days, in 1950, something called SCAD, State Commission Against Discrimination, one of the early, early, early anti-discrimination statutes. Never mind that, they all said this. Later, it turned out that I was sent to these firms because it was part of their education process. I was not on the law review. I was right on the line of upper fourth of the class. They used to grade you just like the Naval Academy, from one down. I was right on the line, the truth to tell, and this is one thing I've always misrepresented on my résumé. I said I was in the upper fourth of the class. If you do the numbers, the upper fourth is like 125. I was 126 or 127, but they were so close that I said, "Well, nobody will notice." So I said that I was in the upper fourth, right on the line. I was given an offer by one of the two Jewish firms:

Rosenman, Goldmark, Colin & Kaye, who up to that point had only, only, only ever hired Harvard, Yale or Columbia Law Review graduates – Jewish. But Rosenman, being a Jew, they said, we're going to make an exception in this fella's case and give him a chance. Early, early, early EEO, before it was called EEO. You could call it that or you could say, do it like that. So I was hired there. I went there for three years.

Mr. Lynk: This was the first time you'd ever lived in New York as well as worked there?

Mr. Duncan: Yes.

Mr. Lynk: Other than your school years.

Mr. Duncan: Other than school and military.

Mr. Lynk: And so you were a newly minted lawyer and you were just married, and in New York City, of all places, at a very exciting time in the early 1950s. What was it like?

Mr. Duncan: For some reason, it was one of these things, I decided in my own mind that New York was the only place to go. Don't ask me why. I had no New York contacts, didn't know anybody in New York. I'd never lived in New York. So I went there. To make a long story short, I hated it. Just hated it. I did what associates did in those law firms in those days. I just didn't like it. Get divorces, and do things, and meet clients. So I stayed there for three years, voluntarily left

and came to Washington. Been here ever since.

Mr. Lynk: Now, how did you like living in New York?

Mr. Duncan: I hated it. That's what I hated. I hated the firm and even more I hated living in New York City. It was dirty. I had to give up my car. I couldn't drive to the tennis court and park next to the court and play tennis like I'd done all my life. I just didn't like it. I was not for living in New York. Some people like it, some don't. I didn't like it. So I got out of there.

Mr. Lynk: I can certainly understand that.

Mr. Duncan: Nothing unpleasant; I wasn't fired or anything like that. I looked at the partners. Believe it or not in those days, the Rosenman firm had the non-partner, 18 associates, two for one. Now I don't know how big the firm is. I'm sure Rosenman himself had nothing to do with it. I just didn't like living in New York, working for the firm.

Mr. Lynk: So about 1953 you came back to D.C. Did you go straight to the U.S. Attorney's Office?

Mr. Duncan: Oh no. There was a lawyer in Washington named Belford Lawson. Belford V. Lawson, who approached me in New York about coming to the law firm and I didn't need much persuading. We had a three-person firm: Lawson, McKenzie & Robinson. McKenzie was his wife, Marjorie McKenzie, who later became a judge. The Robinson was Aubrey Eugene Robinson, Jr.

Mr. Lynk: Oh, yes.

Mr. Duncan: Later became a district judge. I stayed with Belford, Robbie – Aubrey – had been with Belford since 1948. Belford did not have the reputation for being the most ethical attorney, and I stayed there for six months. I said I didn't want to be there. I told Robbie one day, I said, “I'm leaving.” “When are you going to do it?” he said. “Now, Robbie, now, I'm fine so I'm going in,” I said. So he and I left the firm somewhere in the summer of '54 and opened the law firm of Robinson & Duncan at 473 Florida Avenue, N.W., which is where I was born and which I had inherited. It was just a row house, but it was in a commercial neighborhood. So we could practice law there and I lived there. So, we must have spent \$500 to straighten the place out. A year later Frank Reeves joined us.

Mr. Lynk: Yes.

Mr. Duncan: And the firm from '54 to '61 was known as Reeves, Robinson & Duncan. And that would be a good place to stop.

Mr. Lynk: Okay. Belford Lawson, is that the father of the –

Mr. Duncan: Yep, yep yep yep yep.

Mr. Lynk: Belford Lawson is now at Howard.

Mr. Duncan: Now where?

Mr. Lynk: There's a Belford Lawson, III.

Mr. Duncan: Belford, III, yeah.

Mr. Lynk: Okay, that's his father.

Mr. Duncan: Belford V. Lawson, Jr.

Mr. Lynk: Oh, okay.

Mr. Duncan: So, this would be the III, yeah. And he was in the Corporation
Counsel's office.

Mr. Lynk: Oh, okay.