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Interview with Robert D. Hanson, October 2, 1998

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Gettysburg College

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Interview Participants

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Interview with Robert D. Hanson, October 2, 1998

Description
Robert D. Hanson, son of Gettysburg College President Henry W.A. Hanson, was interviewed on October 2, 1998 by Michael J. Birkner & David Hedrick. He discusses his father's presidency, and what it was like to grow up in Gettysburg College's White House. He also describes his experience as a student in the class of 1939--what it was like to be the son of the president as a student, fraternity life, academics, and his service in World War II.

Length of Interview: 134 minutes

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ROBERT D. HANSON Oral History

Key
* = unknown spelling
[ ] = unintelligible
( ) = explanation

David Hedrick: October 2, 1998. We’re in the faculty lounge, Musselman Library, Michael Birkner and David Hedrick interviewing Mr. Robert Hanson.

Michael Birkner: Mr. Hanson, would you tell us a little bit about your father’s life before he came to Gettysburg College?

Robert Hanson: Father was born in Wilmington, North Carolina. His family had come over after the Civil War. Father went to Roanoke College, where he graduated, and then he came to the Lutheran Theological Seminary here in Gettysburg, and he graduated. After that, he went to his first charge, which was in Pittsburgh. This, of course, was before I was born. And then he went to Messiah Lutheran Church, which is right here in Harrisburg. And from there, he was called – I think it was ’23 – to the presidency of Gettysburg College.

Birkner: That’s a very quick synopsis, and I thank you. Let me ask you a couple of questions about it first. I realize that it was very common, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, for a denominational college to have a pastor as president, but obviously there are many Lutheran pastors. Why would Henry W.A. Hanson be a logical candidate to take an important college presidency?

Hanson: That’s an interesting question. I don’t know that I’ve ever really discussed it, with my parents, for example, for some reason or other. I do know that Dad was a tremendous success at Messiah Lutheran Church. And I do know that one of the members of his church that he was close to was the chairman of the board of Gettysburg College.
Birkner: That seems to be a pertinent issue, I would think. Was Messiah Lutheran a large church, comparatively?

Hanson: Yes.

Birkner: Could you give any sense of the membership of a church like that, when your father was the pastor?

Hanson: No, Dad was a pastor at the time that Messiah Lutheran was in an ideal location in Harrisburg. It was at the edge of the nice residential area. Subsequently, it became part of what was at one time called the slum. But when Dad was there, it was still at the edge of town, where things were very, very nice. That helped, of course. He had future parishioners all over the place, and he was highly successful. In special services, the church would be packed, and it’s a huge church. The present edifice was built by Dad, during Dad’s term, and it’s a semi-gothic, huge church, and beautiful. After I graduated from law school, I went to Harrisburg, and I went back to Messiah Lutheran, of course, and I’m active in the church now.

Birkner: You’re still active in that church?

Hanson: Oh, sure.

Birkner: So there’s an interesting circle that has been closed; that’s a great story.

Hanson: I was just appointed chairman of a committee.

Birkner: Is the church doing well today?

Hanson: Yes. All Harrisburg churches face what every other downtown church faces, throughout the country, and that is difficult times. But the present pastor, who has been there for going on four years, has started a renaissance. And I think we’re about the only
church – only one of the eight Lutheran churches left – that is really going through a renaissance.

Birkner: Very interesting. Let me ask you this. It’s my understanding that your mother comes from a family of Virginians. How did your mother and father meet?

Hanson: That’s the simplest thing in the world. Father was a student at Roanoke College. My mother was a daughter of a professor, Dr. Painter, who felt so sorry for some of the poor students who couldn’t go home; they lived too far away. And one of those poor souls who was invited to dinner was my father. He then was 16, and my mother was 15. And Mother felt so sorry for this lonely boy that she went out and clipped a rose and gave it to my father. My father went home to his room, got out his bible, pressed the rose into the bible, and told his roommate, “I met the woman I’m going to marry.”

Birkner: And he was 16 at the time. That’s a great story. So, I take it that as they got older, they began to see each other socially.

Hanson: Oh, no, I think Dad fell in love, boom. But they waited. They waited until after college and after the seminary, and then Father approached his father, who had become wealthy, about sending him for two years of postgraduate work in Germany. Lutheranism, you know. The center is Germany. And his father said, “Well, Henry, if you marry Elizabeth and take her with you, I’ll finance both of you.” So that’s what happened. You can imagine the daughter-in-law and the father-in-law got along pretty well. (laughing)

Hedrick: So where did he study in Germany?
Hanson: Various cities, various universities, in the two-year period, to get the latest theological Lutheran view.

Birkner: Do you suspect that your father’s experience as a postgraduate traveling in these cities in Germany affected his later policy as president to encourage his faculty when they took study leaves to actually use them to travel to Europe?

Hanson: Well, it certainly wouldn’t have hurt, at all. And Dad traveled throughout his life. And so have I.

Birkner: So he liked the idea of getting out and seeing another culture.

Hanson: Oh, sure. He went to the Holy Lands on that trip, that two-year trip. They went to the Holy Lands, and saw where the Savior lived, studied it all.

Birkner: Let me ask you a follow-up question about your mother. The name Painter has two prominent historical associations in my mind, and I’m curious if either one is a connection to your mother. One is, there was a professor mentioned in our interview with Charles Glatfelter, named Sidney Painter, who taught for many years in medieval history at Johns Hopkins University. And then there was Professor James G. Randall, who was a great Lincoln biographer, who was married to a woman named Painter; I believe her name was Ruth Painter.

Hanson: Who was the man?

Birkner: James G. Randall.

Hanson: Oh, sure. Uncle Jim.

Birkner: My question for you is, does your mother then have a connection to either of those Painters?

Hanson: Sure, Uncle Jim.
Birkner: Okay, so Uncle Jim Randall.

Hanson: Yes.

Birkner: So it must have been your mother’s . . .

Hanson: They came to me about Mother for the alumni. I don’t know if you knew, but I got one of the three Brenneman awards. Remember? Well, it was for 57 years; now I guess it’s 59 years, isn’t it? But during that period, they came to me about something about Mother, and I said, “How much do you want to know?” And they said, “Well, all you know.” Well, okay, so I told them. And it was rather interesting; they wrote a whole article in the alumni bulletin about the Painters of Virginia. And Uncle Jim was one of them. Then Dr. Painter was a president of the University of Texas. And another one was married to an expert in – well, he’s a professor in Pittsburgh – but he became an expert in petroleum, and he was hired by the big corporations in addition to being a professor. Another was vice-president of a bank

Birkner: What were their relationships with your mother? Were they brothers or cousins?

Hanson: They were brothers and sisters. All of them. It was just one family.

Birkner: So it was a very distinguished family, wasn’t it?

Hanson: Yes. Almost by any standard. I mean, there weren’t any governors or generals in the family, but . . .

Birkner: Your father married well is what we’re reaching here; I think your father married well.

Hanson: Well, he certainly married smartly.
Birkner: So your father got his theological degree here at Gettysburg Seminary, which would make him familiar with the Gettysburg area in the first place, and then, of course, as you suggested, he had a church up in Harrisburg. Had he ever been involved in any way with Gettysburg College before he took the call to the presidency of the College?

Hanson: No, interestingly enough . . . (laughs) Interestingly enough . . . Have you ever seen “The Vigil” over in the SCA building (Weidensall Lobby)?

Hedrick: Yes.

Hanson: Did you notice whom it’s dedicated to?

Hedrick: Yes.

Hanson: And that was the year before Dad came. That’s interesting, isn’t it?

Birkner: Well, why don’t we put on the tape whom it was dedicated to?

Hanson: My mother. So Mother was president of the Women’s Auxiliary before Dad became president. I know of no connection, but it is just rather amusing to me that Mother was president of then a very strong body.

Hedrick: Of the entire League.

Hanson: Yes, the entire League. You see, it’s dedicated to her, and the reason I had – are either of you Masons?

Hedrick: No.

Hanson: Well, then you wouldn’t know. But that painting I had done by a Baltimore painter, and it’s hanging over in the Harrisburg Consistory, called “The Vigil” because it has this particular significance to Masonry – not that painting, but what was involved.

Hedrick: The symbolism.

Hanson: The symbolism. And so, the marriage was a nice one to grow up in. (laughs)
Birkner: Remembering your boyhood, you have some memories of growing up at the parsonage outside the Messiah Church in Harrisburg. But most of your youthful memories are going to be of Gettysburg College and living on campus.

Hanson: Oh, yes, my memories, you see, are of a kid from zero to six; I had memories, but nothing of significance.

Birkner: So what we want to do is get some sense of growing up in the White House as I assume you did, and your sort of routines and the things that stick out in your mind about being a special person on the Gettysburg College campus, the son of the president. And the son of a president, who was certainly in the 1920s when you were a small boy, was very ambitious for the College and trying to make his mark at the College. So tell us a little bit about that.

Hanson: That's a fair statement. He was ambitious for the College. No question.

Birkner: Can you elaborate a little bit for us?

Hanson: Sure. When Dad was called, he was a very young man. When he retired, he had to leave because of the 70-year age limit that he put through himself. But he was young when he came, the youngest one in, I presume, the east. And apparently now – this goes beyond my time of knowledge, except I heard about it – the College needed some improvement. That's one reason why they took a young man like Father. They wanted to have the place straightened out. I think between a third and a quarter of all the faculty and students were fired the first year. And then things got straightened out. It's not the father I know, but he could do what he had to do.

Birkner: What about your experiences growing up in the White House? What connection did you have with the day-to-day life of the College? To what extent were
you sensitive to the fact that you were not growing up on Springs Avenue or Stratton Street but growing up right in the center of a campus?

**Hanson:** Well, I think maybe the best way to explain that is to give you what I consider the changing point in my life, and how the College affected it and where it led, if you’d like it that way.

**Birkner:** Sure, certainly.

**Hanson:** My life is divided into two sections. Up to my junior year in high school and from my junior year in high school until now. As a boy, I was a physical boy. I loved football, basketball, baseball, hunting, fishing and trapping; studies did not really interest me, okay? My junior year in high school, I went through a tremendous right angle turn that never changed. All of a sudden, I worked my fanny off, studies, all of the non-athletic extracurricular activities. My change was so **violent** that it brought about the only confrontation I ever had with either parent! (laughs) And that was very, very interesting. I had some signs in high school that there were faculty people who were concerned about me, about the way I was working and driving myself. The only one who took an odd angle to it was a Professor Thomas, who was the algebra professor. Now, he didn’t work with me at any of my activities. The teachers who worked with me in activities never had any problem at all with me and how hard I was working. They were just glad I did. But one day, in front of the whole class, he looked at me and said, “Bob, you’re bad for this high school!” I said, “Professor, why would you say a thing like that?” He says, “You’ve got the whole student body standing around watching you perform and do your thing instead of getting off their butts and getting up there and performing doing their things. And that’s what they’re here for!” And I simply weakly
said, "Well, it depends on what's best for the high school," which was not necessarily, I think, probably clarification for him. But maybe it was for me. I have always been a conformist, and a part of an apparatus in my concepts. Well, in any event, that's a background to let you know what happened in the only confrontation I ever had with either parent. Father was a warm and wonderful man, and I got the full treatment. One evening we were sitting alone in the living room, and Father turned to me and said, "Son, I would like to talk with you." I said, "Yes, Father." He said, "Son, all you do is work, work, work. You never play anymore; you have no fun." He said, "I've been warned that you're going to be burned out before you ever reach college. In fact, I've even been told you're trying to kill yourself!" I remember these words [...]. And he said, "You're going straight from childhood into manhood. You're never going to have any youth." And then he paused for a moment and with all the persuasion of a college president, he said, "Son, I am your father! And you think in a more mature manner than I do!" At that point he nodded his head, and I got up and thanked him, and as I usually did when I left his presence, I reached down and kissed his forehead, and that was the end of that. That night, my supreme court went into session, I'm sure, as they crawled into bed. And the next morning — no, the next afternoon — I got the verdict. Not surprisingly, by my mother. Now, you must understand, as you said, Michael, Mother came from the heart of Virginia. You probably know that down there, duty is everything. It's the sublimest word in the English language; you know that. Mother stopped in the living room, and I stopped (we were going in opposite directions) and she said, "Son, I understand you're trying to kill yourself." "Yes, Mother, I understand that I am." She paused a second. "Son, never forget this. If you kill yourself doing what you think is right, you'll die
happy.” I knew that I’d gotten my answer in final form. That, I’ve never forgotten. You can imagine how I felt about World War II and the four campaigns in Patton’s Third Army, where I was a major in operations. I literally came out of the war simply adoring my mother, with adoration in its fullest. So, Father continued to have a concern.

Strangely enough, Father, at that one confrontation we had, showed me clearly how much he loved me, to confront me. But the interesting thing is, I went straight ahead for the rest of the high school period and came to college, and there I really settled in.

Birkner: I want to, if I may, stop you here, because I want to hear about your college years in as much detail as you’re willing to tell us, but let’s back up for a little bit. I’d like to ask you a little bit about the daily warp and woof of life in the White House. I’d like to know a little bit about where you had your bedroom, where your parents had their bedroom; you did have a brother, did you not?

Hanson: Two.

Birkner: Two brothers. If you could tell us a little about your two brothers and where they fit into the pecking order of the kids and a little bit about them. So, tell me a little bit about your family, first, and your brothers, and then we can talk a little about whether you ate dinner together in the evening, or what other rituals or routines were commonplace in the Hanson household.

Hanson: I was the youngest son. My two older brothers were independent individualists. They wanted to do it their way. My parents had no alternative, really. But they let them do what they wanted. Brother Henry was the oldest; he’s nine years older than I am. Tom was three years older than I am. Both of them were out of the nest by the time I hit college. You must understand, I’m a conformist, as I told you before. I was not
interested in changing the family, for example. I was interested in being helped to achieve the goals and dreams I had. And my mother and father were determined that I should have a full opportunity to take a crack at it.

**Birkner:** All right, let me ask you this. You mentioned that you’re the youngest of three sons. What was the daily routine like in terms of getting out of the house in the morning or eating lunch, or eating dinner together? When you were a boy, did you have a regular dinner together where the five of you sat around the table, or was that not a commonplace?

**Hanson:** Back in those days there were maids, so we could live the old-fashioned way.

**Birkner:** So you had maids in the house.

**Hanson:** Oh, yes.

**Birkner:** But the five of you assembled and sat down at a certain hour each evening and ate dinner together . . .

**Hanson:** Sure.

**Birkner:** And made conversation, or did your father simply run the meal? How did it work?

**Hanson:** Well, I think, to understand how the house operated, you must understand Dad ran the College and Mother ran the home. Period. And that’s the way they both wanted it. The kids were part of the home. That’s the way it should have been. That’s why the verdict was given by mother. We had a very nice life, the five of us. I was the one who became an integral part of the three. We were very close. Dad and Mother lived in this room; there was an adjoining bathroom, and I was on the other side of the adjoining bathroom from my first year, as long as Dad and Mother were in the house. Through
college, you know, and then when I went off to law school and when I came back, it was my room; you know.

**Birkner:** What about your brothers?

**Hanson:** One had a room across and the other – well, you go into the White House – it’s quite – they had other rooms.

**Birkner:** Upstairs?

**Hanson:** All on the second floor.

**Birkner:** So all the bedrooms were on the second floor.

**Hanson:** Yes.

**Birkner:** Okay. Tell me a little bit about your brothers. You said that they were independent-minded. Were they interested in going to college? Did either of them attend Gettysburg College?

**Hanson:** Both of them attended and graduated from Gettysburg College in a normal way, yes.

**Birkner:** And what did they pursue as their lives’ work?

**Hanson:** Brother T – he was the second – started out as a professor and switched to being a minister, which he stayed the rest of his life. Brother Henry became a lawyer, and for a time we were partners. *My* close association was with my parents. I had a very nice association with my brothers, but they were different. You know?

**Birkner:** It’s understandable. Kids are not all cut out of the same cloth.

**Hanson:** No.

**Birkner:** I take it, then, that you didn’t play as a boy a lot with your two older brothers. You had other playmates.
Hanson: Yes, and there was an age differential. Three and nine years as a boy is a mile, not a foot.

Birkner: So who were your playmates when you were growing up and you were in elementary school?

Hanson: Well, I grew up in what we called “the gang.” And one of them was the son of Dean Tilberg. There was only one dean in those days. Dean Tilberg’s son, Ced. He’s still in town. He’s a minister. Very fine guy. I suppose he was one of the closest friends I had. Jim Hartzell, son of a conductor on the train that ran to Harrisburg was another one. John Deardorf, the son of a vice-president of the bank was another one. And so forth. Do you want me to get into the College?

Birkner: Well, we’ll wait on the College for a second. But these were the three or four kids that you hung out with.

Hanson: It was closer to six or seven, and much of it had to do with the Scout troop up at the College church. It knit us together, I suppose, really.

Birkner: Where were your favorite haunts in Gettysburg?

Hanson: Loved the battlefield, of course. So did my parents. But starting my junior year, I was a busy boy.

Birkner: I do want to go back again, though. You mentioned your father’s love of travel. Did your parents have an annual vacation, which they took you on? Do you have specific memories of going with your parents to either places in Virginia or abroad or anywhere else that you can share with us?

Hanson: Sure. They loved to travel, and I went along. We traveled in Europe, traveled all over the country, took cruises, and all the rest.
Birkner: You enjoyed that. Did you participate in the colorful activities at the College relating to football contests or basketball contests or homecoming events or other fraternity events, things like that? I'm talking about as a boy, growing up, whether you were a youth or whether you were a teen. Would you hang on beyond the edges of all that activity or did you ignore that kind of college activity?

Hanson: No, I was at the edges of it. Your use is a good one, of the word “edges.”

Birkner: So if they were having a bonfire, you might be out there watching the bonfire.

Hanson: Sure, sure. My brothers were fraternity people, and I would go over occasionally with them.

Birkner: How did the college kids treat the son of the president?

Hanson: You mean the college students? Oh, I had a wonderful time, from first grade through law school.

Birkner: It was a comfortable relationship.

Hanson: Oh, yes, just delightful. Delightful.

Birkner: Did you have any particular favorite people who were on the faculty or in the administrative or staff jobs at the library who you either would go to gab with or get a piece of candy from or just, you know, say hello to? Were there favorites of yours on the faculty or staff as a boy growing up?

Hanson: Oh, sure. My favorites were the faculty that my parents were with. That’s natural. Dr. Kramer was our travel companion on our trips to Europe, for example. Did you know him?

Hedrick: No, sir.

Hanson: How many years have you been here?
Birkner: Well, I first came to Gettysburg in the year 1968.

Hanson: And you?

Hedrick: Seventy-two.

Hanson: Sixty-eight and seventy-two, yeah. Okay. A lot of these people you won’t remember.

Birkner: But of course we know about Dr. Kramer.

Hanson: Yeah; Dr. Kramer traveled with us. He was a traveling companion. Two trips to Europe, really. So naturally, he was a dear friend. And then he married a delightful woman late in life. She was late in life too. I called her Aunt Flossie. Aunt Flossie just fitted in with the campus, like a glove. And I was close to them. And of course the Clines.

Birkner: English?

Hanson: English. Head professor. I had a very warm and friendly relationship with most of the faculty – all the faculty I knew, really.

Birkner: What about Dean Tilberg? Was he a social friend of your father and mother’s?

Hanson: Oh, sure. Oh, yes, I mean, one president and one dean. Sure. Now, I don’t mean they went on trips together, or anything, but they had a nice social relationship, just as I had with Ced.

Birkner: Did your parents have a regular ritual of either playing canasta or some other card game with friends on a Friday or Saturday night, or did they have other kinds of activities that they enjoyed doing with friends, whether it was even just having coffee and cake once a month? Do you recall any of the specifics?
Hanson: Well, there are two facets in my parent’s life in the period you’re talking about. One was the home, here, and the other was the cottage up in Caledonia. And life was quite different, obviously, up there. The golf, and for me, the trout fishing was the big deal. Here, it was a whole different world.

Birkner: What about during the nine months of the school year here? Did your father and mother have a ritual on a Friday or Saturday night of doing certain things with close friends?

Hanson: No, the demands on Dad’s time were such that the things you point out were not too feasible.

Birkner: Right, I follow you. Did your parents have students into the house fairly regularly?

Hanson: Dad had an interesting concept that gets into a whole different field. In one history book, they referred to Dad’s period as the “paternal age” on the campus. Dad was, in a sense, a loving father. He could be severe when he had to be, as you found out when he arrived the first year. But basically, he loved the students. And it was reciprocated. The students didn’t pour in and out of the house. In fact, I don’t recall any student coming to see me at home. You know, it just wasn’t done. But Dad was always with the students. And he had a tremendous rapport with them.

Birkner: He did have a good rapport with them, as you remember?

Hanson: Oh, my, that rapport was such that in the 59 years I’ve been active in the College, the alumni during almost the whole time, someone will buttonhole me at a function here, the trustees or whatever, to tell me something Dad did for him while he was in need, while he was in college. It’s almost strange.
Birkner: So when people were having rough going, they might go to your father, and he could give them counsel.

Hanson: Dad had a very simple setup at the office. They would come to the secretary, and she would say, “There’s nobody with him,” and knock and walk in, and that’s it.

Birkner: Why don’t we clarify for the record where his office was.

Hanson: Glatfelter.

Birkner: On the first floor of Glatfelter?

Hanson: Yes.

Birkner: And he essentially had a pretty small operation, right? You said one dean; he probably had a secretary and didn’t have a lot of staff, right? Your father did the business of the College out of his head, didn’t he? He didn’t have a business manager for a while, did he?

Hanson: No. No, the College president in a college of 600 was expected to do what had to be done, largely. He had lots of help.

Birkner: Do you have any reflections on the fact that during your father’s presidency a high percentage of the faculty members he recruited came from Virginia?

Hanson: Not ‘til now that I can even think of. Many of those Virginia professors were here when Dad arrived, I believe.

Birkner: So he didn’t necessarily recruit them. I’m thinking of Warthen and Mason.

Hanson: Well, the English Department. I don’t know. Dad might have; I’ve never thought of it.

Birkner: That’s not something that he talked about and say, “I want to get another Virginia man into the faculty.”
Hanson: No, no, no. No.

Birkner: Do you remember any particular high points or low points for your father during his years as president? I'm sure the Depression was a tough time.

Hanson: Well, let me put it this way. Yes, go ahead.

Birkner: No, I was just giving that as an example of a possible low point, were the economic problems of the Depression.

Hanson: I've had a very happy relationship with the presidents of the College, General Paul, the second Mr. Hanson, and Dr. Glassick and now our fine president Dr. Haaland. And I was talking one day with Dr. Glassick. And we were discussing the history of the College, and he said, "You know, your father had two of the toughest – both of the toughest problems the College ever faced in modern time. He had the Depression and World War II." And I thought about it, and I guess probably Dr. Glassick was right. He didn’t know about the first one I told you about. That was really the most difficult one. But yes, Dad had two real pistols. And I was old enough to know.

Birkner: I don't know that you would have been old enough to hear this, but it surely must have been a frustration to him to have a commitment from a donor for a new library in 1929 and to go so far as to have printed up the brochure, the flyer for the dedication of that new library and then having that man abdicate his responsibility and fail to fulfill his pledge. I'm talking about the Emma Weber Library.

Hanson: Oh, sure, I know all about it.

Birkner: Do you know the circumstances of that?

Hanson: Well, I would just like to say, "he blew it."

Birkner: Mr. Weber. Or whatever his name was.
Hanson: He blew it. He blew his money. And he didn’t have it.

Birkner: But he left the College high and dry in some respects.

Hanson: Absolutely. That, I suppose, is part of running a college. We had the same thing just a few years ago.

Birkner: So you have to roll with it, is what you’re saying.

Hanson: You have to roll with the punches.

Birkner: Was your father a person of moods? Did he have high highs and low lows, or was he pretty steady state?

Hanson: Steady.

Birkner: And I take it from other evidence that he enjoyed his job, that he liked being president.

Hanson: He loved it. As a matter offact, I’ve told many people, Dad and Mother had a honeymoon for 29 years with the College. And I think it’s not an unfair statement. He had to work hard. Always worried about me working too hard, he had looked in the mirror. (laughing)

Birkner: What do you think was his philosophy as president, in terms of directing or encouraging his students in a certain way? Clearly he had an opportunity regularly to exhort them in chapel.

Hanson: That’s right.

Birkner: And his exhortations in chapel are part of the folklore of Gettysburg College history. I’m just curious if you could give us an abstract, in a way, of his approach to life and the way he would talk to the students.
Hanson: Well, I think you have to say this: the way he talked to the students was what he thought life was. And I agree with him. I was there the whole time; I was there when he preached sermons.

Birkner: Tell us more about that.

Hanson: He had a very warm love for humanity and it showed itself. He was, in thinking about this, one of the things that occurred to me, to him, our Savior was not a “maybe,” he was a reality. I think that tells as much as I can tell you, really.

Birkner: So his deep faith infused the way he approached his job and the way he spoke with the students.

Hanson: That’s right. The reason he could speak that way in chapel was because he thought that way.

Hedrick: Did he write his sermons for chapel events?

Hanson: No.

Hedrick: Or was this totally extemporaneous?

Hanson: Do you remember Sir Winston Churchill?

Hedrick: Yes.

Hanson: He would spend weeks preparing an extemporaneous speech, okay?

Hedrick: So you’re saying your father did that quite a bit?

Hanson: I suspect Dad was thinking a great deal of the time about what he was going to say next.

Hedrick: Did he work from notes in his sermons?

Hanson: I think he had his notes; that’s it, but never reading. Oh no. That was strictly out.
Birkner: Did he like to use his arms and did he gesture a lot when he talked?

Hanson: To some extent.

Birkner: Was it your father who invented the “four no’s” at Gettysburg College?

Hanson: I think so.

Birkner: Can you still remember what they were?

Hanson: Sure, I think so. No drinking, no cheating, no immorality. I remember those three.

Birkner: The three no's; okay. And he would frequently invoke them, would he not?

Hanson: Oh, yes. And he would act on them.

Birkner: Let me ask you about another commonly attributed phrase that your father used. I get the sense that he wanted most of all to help create Christian gentlemen at Gettysburg College. Does that phrase ring a bell with you?

Hanson: No, wait. He never used the word “Christian gentlemen,” I don’t think. He used the word “gentlemen.” “Christian” was implied, but I think with the Jewish people on the campus, I think he would not have used the word Christian.

Birkner: Were there Jewish people on the campus?

[End of Tape 1 Side 1]

[Start of Tape 1 Side 2]

Hanson: Yes.

Birkner: Students or administrators?

Hanson: Students.

Birkner: There were Jewish students?
Hanson: Oh, sure.

Birkner: Did your father have any feeling one way or the other about recruiting people who were not Christian to the College?

Hanson: He may have – let’s see – he might have used the expression “Christian gentlemen.” He used the word “gentlemen.” “Gettysburg gentlemen” was more likely what he said.

Birkner: Do you remember the phrase, “my boys?”

Hanson: Oh sure, and he meant it. He looked at them as his children, actually. And the students liked it.

Birkner: I want to ask you a question; I know you may not know the answer to this, but I feel in case you know anything about it, it would be helpful to get it on the record. During your father’s presidency, Gettysburg College briefly retreated to a single sex school and then gradually began accepting women back by the late 1930s. Do you have any knowledge of how that policy came about in terms of your own thought, your father’s role? My assumption has been that there were trustees who put pressure on your father to not admit women anymore, but I don’t know what your father’s perceptions were, or what his own priorities were. Did he ever discuss that, or do you have any other direct knowledge of how that came about?

Hanson: I cannot tell you what happened between Dad and the trustees. I would say this: in 29 years, the trustees always seemed to have the same position Dad did. (laughs)

Birkner: So this wasn’t likely a matter of conflict with the trustees to eliminate women at the College?
Hanson: I can only say I know nothing about a controversy with the trustees about anything, really. I mean they worked it out.

Birkner: Okay.

Hanson: Actually, what happened, as I recall it, at least as I saw it, the girls became less and less; we didn’t have any facilities for them. And the time came when it was no longer feasible to run a college for coeds – they were so small – that it became almost ludicrous. Now then, when the Academy in effect went under, in the Depression, they had the space, and they had to do something with it. Women were the answer.

Birkner: I follow what you’re saying. When you came to Gettysburg College in the late 1930s, how many women were in your entering class? A rough estimate.

Hanson: I went into the class of ’39.

Birkner: So you would have come here in ’35 as a student.

Hanson: Yes. At first, there were not too many. Then it reached 10 percent, and the coeds all said, “That’s enough! That’s the right ratio.” That amused Dad and Mother and me. And particularly now, where it’s just the opposite. I mean, “we want rights for women!” They wanted to have women eliminated except for 10 percent. (laughing)

Birkner: I follow you. Now, we just addressed the fact that you came to Gettysburg College in 1935, and you’ve given us a somewhat extended account of your move into a very serious mode as a student . . .

Hanson: No, wait. Dad came in ’23.

Birkner: Right, but you came to Gettysburg as a first year student in 1935, yourself. My question is, was it always assumed, once you became more serious about studies, especially, that you would come to Gettysburg College, or did your father at some point
say, "Bob, if you want to go to Muhlenberg or Susquehanna, it's fine with me. Or Yale, or Haverford, it's fine with me." Or was it just assumed you would go to Gettysburg?

**Hanson:** That's interesting. I've told several people, not too long ago. The matter was never even mentioned.

**Birkner:** Meaning that it was set.

**Hanson:** It was not mentioned. I mean, uh... The day came and registration, I went out the side door, registered and came back and said, "I registered."

**Birkner:** Probably it was the same thing for Ced Tilberg as well.

**Hanson:** I would think so. Back in those days, it would have been considered a matter of disloyalty not to go to the institution where your father was president.

**Birkner:** I see. You didn't have any qualms about being in classes with professors you knew socially, because they were friends of your father's?

**Hanson:** Well, let me get into the whole issue of my period here, that's what you'd like. Before I came to Gettysburg College, I thought the matter over and decided I had to be two people if it was going to work. And I became two people, utterly and completely. I was the son of my parents, and I was a student. And I never mixed them. When I was on the campus, I would never mention my parents. In any way. (laughs) And when I came home, I wouldn't discuss anything that I thought should be kept outside the house, as far as I was concerned. It went to a rather amusing degree; sometimes it's the little things that happened that can give you an illustration. We had a scandal at my fraternity my senior year. A very fine boy made a dumb, dumb, dumb mistake. And we had a first-class scandal, and he was a very prominent member of the fraternity and the campus. Instead of hiding it from Father, the president of the fraternity paddled up to his office
and told him the whole story, and said, “What do we do?” (laughing) But before he opened his mouth, he said, “Doctor, you’ve already heard all about this from Bob.” I’m sure Father bristled and said, “Bob never brings stories in about the students. And he never takes anything out of the house, either.” But it was interesting. Dad was just a trifle bit put out that somebody would think I had blabbed. It’s the two people I was telling you about.

**Birkner:** However, let me push you a little on this, because it strikes me that the separation of those two people is not quite as easy to do as it might seem in saying it, because if you were sitting in chapel listening to your father’s sermons, surely students who were sitting around you might be cognitive of the fact that they were sitting near the president’s son, and the way they might react to your father, or comment on what your father said, surely there were times when you must have taken some either ribbing or hazing from fraternity brothers or other friends on campus, maybe in a completely jocular spirit, sometimes maybe not, on the grounds that “Oh, Bob can get us out of this one,” or “Bob will get us special treatment on that one.” I’m just curious to what extent that resonates with your experience.

**Hanson:** What you say is logical but didn’t happen. I became two people. I remember one time a group of students were in a little huddle trying to guess what the College was going to do about a matter that was important, and finally, one of them said, “There’s Bob, and he knows everything.” I said, “I don’t know anything.” The person they were talking to didn’t know anything.

**Birkner:** I follow you. So you were very stringent about keeping those two Bob Hansons apart.
Hanson: Ooooh, absolutely. I would have nothing to do with going – you know where we lived. You know, a stream of traffic went down past our house to the chapel every morning. Father would want me to walk out of the house with him and join the stream going past the house. I would never go out with him. I said, “No, Father, you go. When you’re into it, I’ll start.” “Oh,” he said, “You’re carrying it too far.”

Birkner: I take it from that remark that then during your college years, you were living in the White House.

Hanson: Oh, heavens yes.

Birkner: And did you take your meals at the White House or at the fraternity?

Hanson: Absolutely.

Birkner: At the White House.

Hanson: Sure.

Birkner: Okay. Were you a good student at college?

Hanson: Summa cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa.

Birkner: I think that answers my question.

Hanson: Did I give you my resume?

Birkner: No sir.

Hanson: Ah, nuts. (searching through papers)

Birkner: Tell us when you get a moment, a little bit about your memories of being a student at the College, and some of the better moments that you had or your favorite professors.

Hanson: Now, wait one minute . . . (pause) I’ll send you several of them.
Birkner: Okay, good. Thank you. The question was, could you remember some of your experiences as a student at the College, say, some of the more interesting classes or some of the more memorable things that happened while you were a student at Gettysburg?

Hanson: I would say this. I never took a negative attitude with a professor. Period. I would never – to me, if I had brought home an adverse criticism of a professor, I would have considered myself a Benedict Arnold and a Judas Iscariot. Okay?

Birkner: Well, let’s look at the positive side. Who were the professors who energized you or stimulated you the most?

Hanson: Oh, I would say probably Dr. Cline. I took a pretty positive approach.

Birkner: You were a different fellow than me, because I certainly would have made invidious comparisons, constantly, during my years as a college student. Maybe I wasn’t as cheerful as you were as a personality. But I certainly knew which ones I liked and which ones I thought were boring.

Hanson: Well, I didn’t permit myself to think that.

Birkner: Okay. Well, let me ask you this. You obviously had a wide range of subject matter you could gravitate toward, and you had to gravitate somewhere. How do you make a decision where you’re going to major and . . .

Hanson: Well, that was the easiest thing in the world. I majored in history because from childhood I was going to be a lawyer. So my whole life was following in that direction.

Birkner: So you took Dr. Fortenbaugh’s classes.

Hanson: Oh, heavens yes.

Birkner: Did you like Dr. Fortenbaugh?

Hanson: Terrific.
**Birkner:** I think it came in later, David, I think you were asking Bob to remember something that maybe he didn’t have to do, because I’m not convinced that they had a senior thesis when he was a student.

**Hanson:** Let me put it this way: I wrote things, but I don’t think I wrote a thesis on graduation.

**Hedrick:** It might have been post-World War II.

**Birkner:** I think it was, though I couldn’t tell you what year they introduced it.

**Hanson:** I’m almost certain that something of that significance I would remember it. And I remember the orientation thesis, first year sort of thesis we were supposed to write on our philosophy of life, and so forth. Rather interesting reading four years later.

**Birkner:** Can I ask you, Bob, about Dean Tilberg for a second? One of the things that one learns from the oral history that was done with Dean Tilberg some years ago by Charles Glatfelter and Basil Crapster was that Dean Tilberg really, although he was called dean of the College, was more effectively dean of the students. He was more responsible for student life. And I’m just curious; what were your interactions with Dean Tilberg during the years you were a student at Gettysburg College, and what are your memories of him?

**Hanson:** Of course I have the fondest memories of both Dean and Mrs. Tilberg, as well as Ced. He was the only child. The fondest memories. Actually, I have fond memories of all the faculty. I didn’t dislike any of them; I didn’t intend to dislike any of them. (laughs)

**Birkner:** Did you have interactions with Dean Tilberg? I mean, were you disciplined by Dean Tilberg, or did you have him give you a friendly piece of advice at some point
along the way? Can you remember any of the specifics of any interactions you might have had with him?

**Hanson:** The only interaction I had was, I was editor-in-chief of the paper as well as president of the dramatic club and I think vice-president of the debating society.

**Birkner:** So you were a busy guy.

**Hanson:** Oh, I worked in a white heat. It's what I learned in the last two years of high school.

**Birkner:** So you didn’t get in trouble that Dean Tilberg had to tell you to get right.

**Hanson:** No, I didn’t have any time or energy left to get into trouble. The only thing, really, that – I was editor-in-chief of the paper, and he called me in, and I had nothing to do with it, didn’t even know it was being published, but – they had a filler they put in an editorial on the easiest and the hardest professors. You know. And I never even saw it until it was published. And unfortunately, one of the dearest friends I had, and my parents had, was Dr. Glenn. You’ve probably never heard of him.

**Birkner:** Sure I’ve heard of him.

**Hanson:** Dear Dr. Glenn. We had connections with him back – his wife was one of Dad’s parishioners. And he was one of my dearest friends. They picked him as “the easiest marker.” Well, that’s not true. And he was hurt. And the dean called me in and said, “How did it happen?” I said, “Dean, darned if I know. I never saw the confounded thing!” And he said, “Well, forget it.”

**Birkner:** If that was the toughest one you had in your years as editor of the *Gettysburgian*, you had a pretty smooth ride, that’s all I can say! When I was editor of
the Gettysburgian, the president wouldn’t speak with me for four months because of something I wrote.

Hanson: Were you the editor of the Gettysburgian?

Birkner: Yes, I was.

Hanson: What year were you?

Birkner: Nineteen-seventy one, ’72, I guess, I was the editor.

Hanson: I’ll be darned. It was – I looked at the four years of college as the final hardening that I needed, along with law school, but primarily college, hardening so that when I hit the world outside . . . As the old saying goes, and “hit the ocean, instead of the ponds, I’d be able to take the gaff.”

Birkner: Do you happen to remember any noteworthy people coming to Gettysburg College to visit during your years, either growing up on campus or as a student, I mean world figures, who might have come to give a commencement address or some other event?

Hanson: Lloyd George was here; but I was a very small boy at the time.

Birkner: I think in fact your father wasn’t yet president when Lloyd George came, or if he was, it would have been his very first year. But I recall it was due to Dr. Granville.

Hanson: I think Dad was here, because I think I remember a photograph.

Birkner: Okay. Do you remember others?

Hanson: Of course General Eisenhower.

Birkner: Right. That would have been . . .

Hanson: That was an interesting sidelight. Dad and the General got to know each other rather well. The General was here on the College property. And there was a function,
and General Eisenhower brought General Eddy, one of his corps generals of the Twelfth Corps, and that was a particular fascination to me because of something that happened in World War II. I was in G3, and we only ever really – in the four campaigns – we only really felt the full brunt of a German attack once, other than Bastogne. And this time, we had pushed across the Moselle River and had formed a salient on the other side, and I was in charge of the Division, in effect, that night. Because not much happens at night, so they could trust a then-captain to be there, because all I had to do was wake everybody up. Well. I got a call before dawn. General Eddy identified himself, I identified myself, and he said, “What’s going on in your front?” And I said, “Everything’s quiet, Sir.” “Thank you.” And he hung up. Well, five minutes later, the assault took place. And they drove through to the point where the artillery, which as you know is behind the lines – our artillery was shooting at the German infantry pointblank. That’s how far they got. That day, when General Eddy was in our home, I went to General Eddy and said, “General Eddy, you remember during the Battle of Moselle, and that tremendous counterattack the Germans made?” “Of course I do.” “Do you remember you talked to an officer who was in G3?” “Why, naturally I remember that.” I said, “General, I was the officer!” I thought that was interesting.

Birkner: It sure was. I’m sure he was very pleased to see you.

Hanson: Yes, of course. But that was interesting.

Birkner: Any other particulars that you would remember about noteworthy events or noteworthy individuals who came to the campus?
Hanson: (Arnold) Toynbee came one time. He was not as good at speaking as he was at writing. I consider him one of the great historians. Somebody thought he had gotten sort of stage fright. We had it in the Majestic Theatre. I don’t know . . .

Birkner: This was while you were a student, or was it later?

Hanson: I don’t know.

Birkner: Because I believe he came to the campus in the 40s when you would have been beyond the student work, but you might have come back for that. Now, you mentioned that as a young person you knew you wanted to be an attorney. Was that partly because your older brother had become an attorney?

Hanson: No, no, no, no. No, no. No, he became an attorney about the same time I did. Or the same time I did. No, I had one uncle who was a law professor and one who was a practicing lawyer. But I don’t know that either of them were controlling.

Birkner: Just inside you knew you wanted it.

Hanson: Well, I wanted what the door would open as a lawyer. I was interested in community service and public service and that sort of thing, which my resume will show you.

Birkner: Where did you choose to go to law school?

Hanson: Dickinson. I knew I was going to practice in Harrisburg so . . . Dickinson doesn’t teach universal law, it teaches Pennsylvania law.

Birkner: And that was good for you.

Hanson: True.

Birkner: Did your brother also go to Dickinson?

Hanson: Yes.
Birkner: And that’s the brother that you wound up practicing with for a while.

Hanson: That’s right.

Birkner: Did you have a pretty good notion that your – obviously you couldn’t foresee World War II – but did you have a pretty good notion that you would practice law in Harrisburg?

Hanson: Oh, yes.

Birkner: Why?

Hanson: Well, you know, it offered opportunities that Gettysburg doesn’t.

Birkner: Well, I mean, why not go to Philadelphia? Why not go to Pittsburgh?

Hanson: I could, but Harrisburg was where I was born, and I had contacts.

Birkner: You strike me as a person who really has a strong commitment to the familiar and to the home turf, the fact that you returned to your church, the fact that you did your career in Harrisburg . . .

Hanson: Sure.

Birkner: . . . the fact that you’ve been so loyal at Gettysburg College as an alumnus and trustee.

Hanson: Absolutely.

Birkner: That’s part of your character, isn’t it?

Hanson: Oh, yes. No question about that.

Birkner: So you went to Dickinson. Did you find Dickinson law school a good experience?

Hanson: Sure.

Birkner: You were well prepared to do law by the time you came out of Gettysburg?
Hanson: My last semester only in law school I was number one in my class. In all honesty, that was sort of a fluke, though.

Birkner: But the point is, you did fine at law school.

Hanson: But that was a sort of a fluke because war was declared. And I was an army officer with a commission and no question about me, you know? And the other number one and two in the class sort of fell apart a little bit. So the last semester I was number one.

Birkner: Did you go straight through three years at Dickinson following your four years at Gettysburg?

Hanson: Yup.

Birkner: And then you went into the armed forces?

Hanson: Yup.

Birkner: So you didn’t have a chance to practice law until you got out of World War II?

Hedrick: Had you been in ROTC as a student?

Hanson: You betcha.

Hedrick: All four years.

Hanson: Sure.

Hedrick: Tell us a little bit about that.

Hanson: Hm, that’s an interesting question. You already know about Mother being a Virginian; we have discussed that. And the concept of duty, the fact that I wouldn’t have been an ROTC student was just not conceivable. Okay?

Birkner: Now tell us your inner feelings once when you hear you are . . . I mean, it’s one thing to have a sense of duty and go to ROTC and become an officer in peacetime.

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It’s another thing when the Nazis are running rampant in Europe, and we face an uphill fight in a world war. I mean, you’re talking about putting your life on the line. How did you feel personally about that?

**Hanson:** (long pause) Well, you’ve asked a far-reaching question. Let me give you a far-reaching answer. When I came home from the war, the day after I came home, Father and I took a walk out on the battlefield. It was nice to be back, and we enjoyed each other. As we walked in silence, Father broke the silence, and he said to me the thing I most remember about Father, “Son, do you realize that the reason the South fought on when there was no longer any hope at all was because of women like your mother? They would have been afraid to go home.” Although Father used one wrong word, it had nothing to do with fear. To me, it was the nicest thing he ever said. It meant that the two men that simply adored my mother saw her through the same eyes. Does that answer your question?

**Birkner:** Yeah, it tells us something about your character. You didn’t have to have qualms and think twice about things, you knew where you were going to be.

**Hanson:** Sure. It may sound a bit startling, but I felt I would probably go down in action. And interestingly, some—I think my top sergeants—felt I would too, when I was a company commander.

**Birkner:** Can I ask you, were you a good officer?

**Hanson:** Well, I started out as green as a lieutenant could possibly be and in three years I was a major in General Patton’s Third Army. Does that answer your question?

**Birkner:** I think so. Were you in Patton’s company in person at various points?

**Hanson:** No. No, he was up there, in the Third Army headquarters.
Birkner: Did you admire Patton?

Hanson: Yes, inordinately.

Birkner: Did the movie Patton capture his character?

Hanson: Yup. It captured both his greatness and a weakness.

Birkner: And he had both, he had both.

Hanson: Yeah. No, there were never any qualms about it. And that admonition that she gave me at the end of the confrontation. It was right on the spot for the thing I just said. She was, I view, the ideal combat officer's mother. The ideal. There couldn't be better.

Hedrick: Did you write a lot of letters home?

Hanson: Mother wrote me a letter every day that I was in combat.

Hedrick: And did you write her?

Hanson: Wrote her when I could.

Hedrick: Did she save your letters?

Hanson: Yes, I think she did. Yeah.

Hedrick: A marvelous record of a family history.

Birkner: We'd love to - if you ever –

Hanson: Oh, I don't know what happened to them.

Birkner: You don't know what happened to them. We'd love to have them at Gettysburg College as a record.

Hanson: No, I think they've probably disappeared.* But Mother to me was utterly unique. On morality, she was an absolutist. And she should have been.

*After this interview occurred, the letters under consideration were found and are being turned over to Gettysburg College.
Birkner: Well, she was from a different era than today, as you well know. Today, morality is not absolute. Today, we are dealing with relativism rampant. I have only one or two more questions, Bob, really, and then we could hit lunch. I was curious about something you said very early on in the interview about your father, when you said that he retired because of the 70-year old rule that he had imposed on others, and he had to abide by it. Would you say that he would have kept going if there had not been such a rule? Because I know he lived on for another 10 more years.

Hanson: Yes.

Birkner: He liked being president. He didn’t want to relinquish it if he didn’t have to.

Hanson: Yup.

Birkner: Was it his idea to build Christ Chapel, or was it other peoples’ ideas to build it in his honor?

Hanson: They wanted to name it after him, and he refused.

Birkner: Did he ever talk about building a big chapel such as we have? I mean, that’s a large chapel for a small college.

Hanson: They wanted to name it after him, and he refused. That’s the Savior’s building.

Birkner: I teach a class in one of the nicest dorms on campus, called Hanson Hall. And in front of the Hall, there’s a very nice plaque in memory of your mother, in honor of your mother, I should say, because I’m sure she was alive when that plaque was placed. But your father was willing to accept a dorm if not a chapel.

Hanson: Oh, yes, a dorm, but not the chapel, because the chapel was the Savior’s.

Birkner: Right. I follow. And your father was able to see Hanson Hall become a reality. He was there for the dedication of that, right?
Hanson: Oh, yes.

Birkner: It must have been a good day for your family.

Hanson: Yes. Now, Dad and Mother did come pretty close to a honeymoon, and they left nothing for me to desire in parents.

Birkner: Was your father happy in retirement, or were those harder years for him?

Hanson: Dad adjusted; Dad adjusted well. It was hard. The intensity of Dad’s work interest may not be totally different from my own. You know? The only reason I retired recently was because I had to. Barbie, you know, can’t even turn over in bed. And I wound up in the hospital from stress and strain from that and everything else I had to cope with. But no, Dad did not want to retire, any more than I did. You might be amused that as I got to be 81, people would come to me and say, “What do you think about retirement?” And if I was in a whimsical mood, I would reply, “Barbie wants me to retire the way my mother wanted me to miss combat in World War II.” And I adore them both. Interestingly enough, I married what turned out to be the twin of my mother. Talk about being a lucky dog.

Birkner: You were.

Hanson: No, she’s been terrific.

Birkner: Well, this has been terrific too. I’ve really covered the ground that I had intended to cover in this interview today, and I think we deserve lunch.

Hanson: We do, but let’s come back, if you’d like.

[End of Tape 1 Side 2]
Tape 2 Side 1

Hedrick: Bob, a question left over from this morning: did you do your high school at the Academy or at the Gettysburg high school?

Hanson: I went to Gettysburg high school. You see, I went into public school in the first grade. I grew up, therefore, with a group of friends. The question is, whether I would go to the Academy or high school, since the Academy was part of the structure that Dad headed, in a sense. And I explained to my parents that I'd like to stay with my own friends, and they discussed the matter and thought it would be a good idea from the standpoint of town and gown to have their youngest son go through the high school. And I've never regretted it. We went there – as a matter of fact, that group of friends, when we arrived at college, seven of us, one night, joined the Phi Gamma Delta fraternity and graduated from Gettysburg College as members of the fraternity. It was a very fine experience, and as a matter of fact, we're still close. One that you probably would know the most about was Ced Tilberg. Ced was one of the group that I'm referring to. And we all enjoyed each other's company and still do. I was best man at Ced's wedding, and I was master of ceremonies at his 50th wedding anniversary, with quite a packed house, actually, at one of the Lutheran churches. It was an interesting relationship, and all the boys have done reasonably well, in terms of success in their careers. Shall we take my experiences at Gettysburg from the beginning until the end?

Hedrick: Please do, please do.

Hanson: As I indicated earlier, there was never any real discussion about where I would go to college. In fact, there wasn't any. Mother and Dad and I all knew exactly what was
to be done. And I did it. Going to Gettysburg, rather interestingly, having lived on the

campus all this time, my first couple of days as a student, I felt sort of strange, like any

student would feel, coming to Gettysburg College or any other college. But that vanished

very quickly, and I felt very much at home. I wanted very, very much, in my four years

of college, to perfect and carry on what I had done my last two years in high school,

namely, work as hard as I could, to discipline myself and to train myself. My schedule

for the four years was to go at it as hard as I could. As I indicated earlier, my hours of

work usually ended around midnight – on one occasion, four o’clock, which made a full
day. One reason I was able to do it – I developed a technique from watching my father.

We were in the middle of the campus, so every day after lunch, Father went up to his

room and took a 20-minute nap. He’d kick off his shoes and kick off his pants and take a

20-minute nap. So that’s exactly what I did. That’s why I was able to sit up so late. We

had a very wonderful relationship. Actually, Dad’s two greatest admirers were Mother

and me, and Father and I both simply adored Mother. So it made it a very nice

relationship. Mother made her full-time responsibility looking after Dad and me at that

period when I was the last one in the nest, and I think she did an amazing job. The reason

why Dad and I could work so hard without getting a mental or physical problem was I

think very largely because Mother kept the house at zero tension. When you entered the

doors, whatever tension there was, vanished, as we entered into the home maintained by

Mother. And it did have a profound effect on both Dad and myself. Interestingly, no one

would come to visit me, but it was logical, because they didn’t want to come to the

president’s home. But actually, it permitted me tremendous freedom to work. The

campus was always available to me by going out the front door – or side door. But I
never got involved in the old bull sessions, as they called them, and all that sort of thing. I was able just to keep working, day and night. And I found it very satisfying, very fulfilling. I did have one experience. Sometimes a story tells more than a dozen pages of discussion. My sophomore year in college, I was in biology; that’s how I know it was my sophomore year. And I was poring over a specimen – I believe it was a night crawler – and dissecting it. And I worked intensely on it. And when I looked up, the room was practically empty. But there was a coed sitting right smack across from me, and she obviously had been waiting for me to look up. And I’d never noticed her before, and I guess I never really noticed her afterwards. But she profoundly interested me in the way she approached it. She looked at me and said, “Why don’t you stop working all the time and start to live!” And I said, “Well, I think I am living.” (laughing) And when I looked down and I looked up again, she was gone. I don’t know if she did it as a dare from the girls or whether she thought of it herself. But I thought it was interesting and indicates a little bit, I suspect, how the students felt about me. I never sensed, once, in four years at the College, any sense of envy or jealousy because I was the son of the president. It was completely void in that atmosphere. I thoroughly enjoyed my experience at the College. It gave me four more years to observe my wonderful parents and to learn from them. It was a perfect place to discipline myself for what was to come, and I took full use of it. I never regretted that at all. Although, it is true, there was no fun and games in that, even on the weekends, even on vacations. If we stayed there, Dad would go in the morning to his office, and I would go over to Glatfelter and go up to one of the classrooms where there were professor’s desks, plop down all my books, and I worked ‘til lunch. At lunch, Dad would leave his office, and I would leave my quarters and go down, and Mother
would have lunch for us. It was just the way we lived. And again, I have no regrets at all. I even worked over the summer. When there was compulsory reading of certain books, I would go to the professor in the spring and find out what books were to be read as collateral reading, and get his permission to read them during the summer. And they would always grant me that privilege.

**Hedrick:** Did you have a summer job or anything?

**Hanson:** Oh, no, no, no, no. I wouldn’t have dared suggest that. (laughing)

**Hedrick:** In 1938 we had a rather momentous occasion here in Gettysburg. The peace light was dedicated.

**Hanson:** I was very much involved as an observer.

**Hedrick:** Tell me about that.

**Hanson:** Well, FDR I think was the President then, and he came. They had the veterans of both the Blue and the Gray there and fixed them up with nice tents, where they were housed and fed, and it was interesting to have seen them, to have been among them. It did leave memories. One interesting thing is, it never got published; but somebody got into the mechanics of the light and fouled them up, but it was discovered and fixed, so we didn’t have a fiasco. Dad was very much involved, of course, in it. I think he was chairman of something, maybe the whole thing, I don’t know. But in any event, it was quite a wingding. What year was that again?

**Hedrick:** Thirty-eight.

**Hanson:** In ’38. Yes, I think that was in the summer, as I recall.

**Hedrick:** Right, over the fourth of July.

**Hanson:** I believe I was at Army camp.
Hedrick: Right when it took place, so you might not have seen the actual event itself?

Hanson: No, I did. No, I came back from – it was a, I think, a holiday of some sort. Dad sent for me, and I got back in time to be there and watch it. And it was quite a wing-ding.

Hedrick: So you wouldn't have been involved if you were in Army camp; you wouldn't have had the opportunity to be involved as many of the other students were, with food stands and selling souvenirs or anything like that.

Hanson: No. Actually, with the degree of work I was doing, and the extremes almost, of hours I was keeping, I would never have considered earning money. Not even my mother would have agreed to that. And Father would have really been upset! (laughing) No, as Father put it, “You train yourself for the life to come. I’ll pay your bills.” And he meant it. No, I was blessed. I’ve been blessed both by my parents and also by Barbie.

Hedrick: And where did you meet your wife-to-be?

Hanson: In the apartment house where I stayed. I just – it was a year and a half after the war, and interestingly enough, my mother, for the only time in my life, was becoming really insistent on something, and what she wanted, becoming insistent on was, I find a wife to take care of me. I had come home from four years of war and four campaigns in Patton’s Army; I was not in the best shape. My mother, better than anybody, knew that. And I think that had a lot to do with it. And sure enough, just about that time, I bumped into Barbie down at the bus stop to the apartment house in Harrisburg. I was back in Harrisburg practicing law at that time. And Barbie looked at the snow on the ground and looked at my shoes and said, “You should be wearing rubbers.” (laughs) Well, for 50 years, she’s been supervising me. But my parents always wanted a daughter, and they let
me know that it would be nice if I would marry one for them. And by golly, I was marrying her as my wife, but it turned out that I was also marrying them a daughter. And it worked out beautifully. Beautifully. As the years went by in college, I became more and more involved, of course, in the extracurricular fields. On the humorous side, between my junior and senior year that summer, I did a quick computation and found out I had to make a straight A my senior year to be summa cum laude. And by golly, I did it! (laughs) So then I went on to law school and had a very satisfying experience. And as I explained this morning, I was number one for the last semester only, by a fluke.

**Hedrick:** You’d finished law school then before you were called to active duty.

**Hanson:** Yes.

**Hedrick:** Bob, would you tell us a bit about your entry into the army at the beginning of World War II.

**Hanson:** There are some interesting facts about that. One of my two best friends came to me and said, “Bob, the community’s talking.” And I said, “What about?” “Well,” he said, “Your father is the state head of the draft board, and all three of his sons are still in civilian clothes.” So I took the matter up with my mother. And I said, “You know, the way things actually are at the moment, after some recent changes, I could get my law school diploma. I could be passed for the bar and taken into the court, by the court, as an attorney if I enter the service now or later. So there isn’t a legitimate reason for the exemption I now have until next August. I think I ought to go.” Mother said, “Of course you should go.” And so, I called up the major down in Baltimore and explained exactly what had happened, that “I had this deferment, but it is no longer a valid deferment in my opinion, and I think in all propriety, I should be serving now.” And so, a short time later,
he called up and said, “Could you be ready to go to Fort Benning in two weeks?” And I said, “Major, you bet I can be ready to go in two weeks!” So off I went. Before I went, I did have one more little problem. And that is, everything in my examination was fine except one item. I weighed 136 pounds, and I was six feet and a half inches, which was way out of line with the military requirements. So, realizing that, I again went to my mother, and said “Mother, I think I’ve got problems possibly ahead of me.” And getting my call-up and into the army, explained the situation, and she said, “Well, I think this is one you’d better discuss with your father.” So I did, and Dad called up the major, who he dealt with, with the ROTC and who was my commanding officer in the army. And we went down to see him. And yes, I was too thin and too light, but he asked Dad an endless number of questions about do we have any hereditary diseases in the family, and all that sort of thing, and Dad assured him, accurately, that no, and furthermore, I hadn’t missed one day of work in college in the whole four years. And so, I finally managed to make it! (laughs)

**Hedrick:** You mentioned that there was some talk in the community that you should have been in the service and you weren’t. Was this because your father had some position with the draft board?

**Hanson:** Yes, Dad was the chairman of the state draft board. . .

**Hedrick:** That’s a very impressive position at that point.

**Hanson:** That’s right. And frankly, it didn’t look good. The middle brother was physically rejected because of heart trouble. And the oldest brother was beyond the draft limits. But he got in later, and we both wound up majors. He was in the air force, and I was in the infantry.
Hedrick: Now, we’ve heard from other interviews with many of our alums that at one point your father promised the student body one semester that they would be able to finish the year and would not be drafted, and that didn’t come to happen. Many of the students did get drafted early. Do you want to comment on that? I know it’s after the point when you were around, but . . .

Hanson: No, as you indicate, I only heard about it, but I felt very proud of Father. He had been given information from Baltimore, which was the military headquarters, that the students were not going to be drafted until a certain point. Unbeknownst to my father, they reversed themselves and sent letters out to the students without telling Dad first. So, in effect, Dad had misinformed them unintentionally about the situation. And Dad bravely, as I would expect him to do, went to chapel, stood up in front of the whole upset student body, explained what had happened, apologized, and I like the way he handled it.

Hedrick: Okay. Thank you. Bob, I believe you mentioned you were a member of Phi Gam fraternity and that several of your high school classmates joined you in that fraternity. Would you tell us a little about the activities of Phi Gam when you were a student?

Hanson: I’d be delighted to, Dave. Seven of us, who went through public schools together in Gettysburg, all joined the Phi Gam fraternity the same night. And it was an interesting and rather novel thing. I found fraternity life, of course, to be very, very fine. I didn’t participate in it as much as obviously I would if I were living there or eating there, but I had a high regard for the fraternity and for the fraternity system. One of the things that a young man or woman must learn to do is to adjust to other people. And fraternities help to teach them how to do that. And I think that’s one of the great
advantages. None of us live in a vacuum; none of us succeed by ourselves. We only succeed as part of the whole. And the fraternity system teaches people how to adjust to other people. I think it's a good system. As far as the extracurricular activities are concerned, I found them to be invaluable in my life. I was editor-in-chief of the paper, and I was president of the dramatic club, the Owl & Nightingale, and I was vice-president of the debate council. I found all three of those to be exceedingly valuable to me as a lawyer. I think they would be valuable to me even if I weren't a lawyer. Again, it's a matter of self-discipline and training yourself to do what you have to do later in life. And although it kept me up all hours of the night, it was worth it.

Hedrick: Did you have leads in the Owl & Nightingale productions?

Hanson: Yes.

Hedrick: Can you remember some of the leads that you might have had?

Hanson: One of the funniest parts I had was the hermit in The Seven Keys to Baldpate, who disapproved of women. And I got a real lot of fun out of that part!

Hedrick: There's a number of photographs in the archives from that production. Evidently you folks were very successful. Can you tell us about that?

Hanson: Well, it's a story that there's only supposed to be one key to this forlorn old house out in the middle of nowhere, and it turns out that seven people had keys. And they were all coming into the house the same night. They all got mixed up, and I was the hermit, and I was one of the people who had a key myself. It was just a humorous thing. Most of my roles, even in high school, were of a mature person. Matter of fact, I acted the part of a 65-year-old judge when I was a freshman in high school.
Hedrick: Where did you do the productions? Were they done on the campus, or were they done in town?

Hanson: The productions were done in the gymnasium.

Hedrick: In Plank.

Hanson: Eddy Plank. Yup. Seating capacity was the problem. And there we had plenty of seating capacity, and I was in plays, I guess all four years. Had a lot of fun.

Hedrick: The newspaper. You say you were editor-in-chief. Did you do a lot of writing as editor-in-chief or was it primarily an administrative function?

Hanson: I had the feeling that I did not want to use the paper to push my ideas. I wanted to turn out the best possible paper that the College could have. And that was where I strove. I did not do a lot of writing myself. I felt that would be pushing myself, and I didn’t want that.

Hedrick: Did you occasionally write editorials?

Hanson: No, never wrote an editorial; I don’t think I ever wrote an article in my year as editor-in-chief. One thing of course as you understand, I was in somewhat of a tender position. (laughing)

Hedrick: Right.

Hanson: So naturally I had to watch myself.

Hedrick: But that doesn’t mean that you didn’t do proof-reading and . . .

Hanson: Oh, no, no, no, that’s part of my job.

Hedrick: That’s what I mean; you did the proof-reading and the layout and . . .

Hanson: . . . Financing and all the rest of it.

Hedrick: And selling ads. Or was that somebody else?
Hanson: Well, the editor-in-chief was responsible for everything in the final analysis. And it was wonderful training. That paper had to go out, if you had to sit up ‘til four o’clock in the morning to get it out.

Hedrick: And who was actually doing the printing for you at this time?

Hanson: The Gettysburg Times.

Hedrick: Okay, so you had to take finished work up to the Times.

Hanson: Yup. When I got finished that night, whenever it was, we took it up. We put it in Dr. Cline’s apartment, which was right opposite, right near the Times. And he was the censor. But I don’t recall that my year he made any comments at all. I was not a very radical person.

Hedrick: But you did have to submit the copy to him before it was published.

Hanson: Yup, that’s right.

Hedrick: That’s interesting.

Hanson: And never once in the year I was editor did he ask anything.

Hedrick: About anything.

Hanson: About anything. They just were approved, and that was it. But I think the value of extracurricular activities, certainly to a lawyer, but I believe to a businessman too, is one of the most important things in the college education.

Hedrick: Were you involved in other extracurricular debate or anything?

Hanson: Oh, yes, I was vice-president of the debate council. Four years.

Hedrick: And this is debating totally on campus, or would you be going off campus to do the debate?

Hanson: Off campus.
Hedrick: With other institutions.

Hanson: Yes. This was competition between schools.

Hedrick: Were you successful as a team, as a college, not necessarily personally?

Hanson: I would say we held our own. My last year something humorous happened. I was on the go a good deal, and I was off on, I think, the southern debate trip and got back and went over – there was IB planning that day. And there was a copy of the Gettysburgian. I was no longer the editor. I had turned it over at midyear to my successor. And there was an article, “Hanson to Attend.” And I thought, “Well, I wonder what Dad’s up to now.” And I looked at the article, and it said, “Robert D. Hanson!” And I was going to represent Gettysburg College at a model senate in Harrisburg, a newly created institution, the next day!

Hedrick: Oh, my heavens. And you didn’t know about it.

Hanson: Didn’t know about it. So, I called up Dr. Cline who appointed me, and he said, “Oh, yes, yes, yes.” He said, “I know you’re on a debate trip, but we wanted you to go because you know what you’re doing. Try to see if you can’t get it launched right.” Now this was the day before! And I went home and said, “Dad, can I have the car tomorrow? I’ve just been appointed to go to Harrisburg in the model senate that’s being formed.”

And off I went. I always felt that was quite a compliment to me.

Hedrick: I think it is.

Hanson: You know. Something like that happened to me in high school, I think in my senior year. Miss McIlhenny, who was in charge of dramatics and all that sort of thing, left a message that when I came to school that morning, I was to report to her immediately. And this may show you the intensity of my effort in high school my last
two years. I went to see Miss McIlhenny, and she said, “Last night we had dress
rehearsal for a play next Saturday.” (I have to catch my cab at a quarter of three, but
that’s not for a while.) And she said, “We put together a little skit. You are to be the
master of ceremonies.” Now at that moment, they were starting to march down to the
assembly, the whole school. I said, “Yes, Miss McIlhennie.” She said, “Now, here’s the
deal, boom boom boom boom boom boom boom.” And sure enough, I went out, master
of ceremonies of the whole works, and when it was over, I went to Miss McIlhenny, and I
said, “Miss McIlhenny, did I do all right?” “Yes, but you had a sweater on.” (laughing)
You know, that killed me, with sweaters. Oh, my. But it was interesting. In all honesty,
my junior year in high school I lost my appetite.

Hedrick: Because you were working so hard?

Hanson: Yup. And I really didn’t gain my appetite back in full force until I got married.

Hedrick: Which is a long time after you’re out of the army.

Hanson: A year and a half . . .

Hedrick: Several years.

Hanson: Yes, once Barbie got into the picture, things changed in a hurry.

Hedrick: Let me change tacks here a hundred and eighty degrees. We were talking
earlier this morning before the tape recorder turned on about your involvement in your
congregation in Harrisburg.

Hanson: Oh, yes.

Hedrick: And that triggers your father being an ordained minister. Was he active in the
hierarchy of the national church? And could you tell us about that?

Hanson: You mean at any point?
Hedrick: At any point.

Hanson: At one time, Dad was given support to be president of the national church. I think that was – I’m not sure whether it was before or after he became president of Gettysburg College. I think it was after he became president of Gettysburg College. And obviously he wasn’t interested.

Hedrick: Was his name even put in nomination?

Hanson: I think it was killed ahead of time.

Hedrick: Before he got to that point. Was he active on any boards or commissions?

Hanson: Oh, yes.

Hedrick: Do you know any of that that you could talk to us about?

Hanson: No, not in detail. But he was on one of the mission’s boards of the national church. I don’t know much more about it than that.

Hedrick: Was he active with the synod, either with central Penn or Maryland?

Hanson: Oh, sure. Oh, yes.

Hedrick: Which synod was he a member of?

Hanson: They had different names back then. But he was always an active minister in every sense of the word.

Hedrick: And he would have gone to the annual convention every year, both representing the College and as an ordained minister.

Hanson: Primarily representing the College, yes.

Hedrick: Did you go with him on any of those occasions?

Hanson: No.

Hedrick: Did your mother go with him on those occasions, or was this totally business?
Hanson: I would think so. I can’t answer in detail. I know I didn’t go. Whether Mother did, I don’t know.

Hedrick: Being college president, I’m sure there was a lot of travel involved, to visit trustees, to visit potential donors, to visit congregations, to preach on Sundays . . .

Hanson: That’s right.

Hedrick: Did your mother go with him on many of these trips, or was she staying home to take care of the family?

Hanson: Whenever it was possible, Mother would be going. But she had two responsibilities.

Hedrick: Would she leave you at home alone?

Hanson: In college, she wasn’t anxious to. We usually got one of my friends to come in and spend the night.

Hedrick: When you were still in high school or younger.

Hanson: Yes. It was a great experience to live as I had the opportunity to live.

Hedrick: Well, now growing up on a college campus, you didn’t have the opportunity to have to mow grass or rake leaves because you lived in the official residence. You didn’t have a garden or anything?

Hanson: Mother had a garden, but what she didn’t do the caretaker did.

Hedrick: And this was flowers or vegetables?

Hanson: No, no. Just flowers. Well, there were some grapes. And flowers.

Hedrick: You mentioned earlier that you had a maid in the house.

Hanson: Yes.

Hedrick: Was this someone employed by the College or by your parents?
Hanson: My understanding was that she was employed by our parents.

Hedrick: Do you remember the names of any of these people?

Hanson: No.

Hedrick: Okay. Were they members of the local black community?

Hanson: I think they were white.

Hedrick: Okay.

Hanson: Usually from the farms. What killed that arrangement was the opening of factories in Gettysburg. Shirt factories, and things like that. Shoe factories.

Hedrick: So the people who might have been employed as household domestics were able to get a better job in the factories?

Hanson: Eventually, Dad and Mother couldn’t find any, but that wasn’t the norm.

Hedrick: Let me ask another question that you may not be able to answer, but again, your father may have mentioned this to you. During World War II there was a prisoner of war camp here in Gettysburg. Did he talk to you any about that?

Hanson: Didn’t know it; you told me something I didn’t know.

Hedrick: Okay.

Hanson: What country?

Hedrick: Germans. German prisoners of war.

Hanson: Germans. In Gettysburg? Didn’t know it until you said it. I’m learning a lot today.

Hedrick: We’ve been trying to find out some information about this, and it’s hard to come by. Bob, unless you’ve got something else that you want to get on the record, I think I’m going to turn the tape recorder off. [End of Tape 2 Side 1]