

Lebanon Valley College®



Voices of Lebanon Valley College
150th Anniversary Oral History Project

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Oral History of

Robert Hamilton

Vice President *Emeritus* of Administration

Date: January 26, 2014

Interviewed by Art Ford

Professor *Emeritus* of English and Alumnus, Class of 1959

Transcribed by Lori Kortright

Vernon and Doris Bishop Library Technician

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Dr. Robert Hamilton, Vice President *Emeritus* of Administration—Hamilton, who arrived on campus in 1990, was responsible for the physical plant, security, auxiliary services, and athletics. Hamilton oversaw the dramatic physical growth of campus during the 1990s and 2000s.

A: Ok, I'm here with Bob Hamilton, who was vice president for administration of the College.
We're at his home in Dillsburg.

B: Dillsburg.

A: And the date today is what? We're both retired so we have no idea what the date is.

B: Whatever you want to make it. (laughing)

A: Okay, I'd say this is January 26.

B: January 26, 2014.

A: And we are going to be talking about some of the experiences that Bob had at the College.

But before we start there Bob, let me just ask you a couple of questions about yourself. What is your hometown?

B: You mean where I was born?

A: Where were you born?

B: I was born in Shippensburg, Pennsylvania.

A: Did you grow up there as well?

B: I spent most of my years up until my adolescent years in Shippensburg.

A: Your mother and father...what was your father's occupation?

B: My father was a farmer most of his life.

A: Did your mother work or did she work around the farm?

B: She was a farmer's wife most of the time. I recall, she did some work outside the home in a dress factory in Shippensburg, but not over an extended period of time.

A: But basically you grew up on the farm then?

B: Yes, we were farmers.

A: Do you have any siblings?

B: I had three brothers—two older and one younger brother.

A: Did they go to college?

B: My two older brothers did not go to college and in fact they did not finish high school and that may have been the reason why my parents tried to get me away from the farm (laughing) and get onto an educational track. My younger brother did go to college. He finished a degree in accounting at Shippensburg.

A: Is that where you went to school too? Shippensburg?

B: No. My parents sent me away from home to a boarding school which was here in Grantham called Messiah Academy—for four years. Then I thought about going out of the state to college because during those four years I developed some other ambitions. Then the opportunity came to stay at the college and so I did and became a history major with a science minor.

A: When did you graduate from Messiah?

B: '62.

A: Back when you were in high school, was that Shippensburg High School?

B: No.

A: Oh, you did say that was an academy that was your high school. Ok. Were you involved in many extra-curricular activities when you were in high school?

B: At the academy I was involved in the athletics. I always liked sports and I was involved in the drama club. I was active as a class officer and I was involved in the music groups like the choirs and things like that.

A: In college you said you were a history major and did you say a science minor?

B: Yeah, general science.

A: General science. Ok. So you graduated—that would have been in '66 from Messiah College?

B: No, in '62.

A: Oh, from Messiah in '62. Ok.

B: Yeah, I graduated from the high school in '58.

A: Ok. When you were at Messiah, extra-curricular activities of any sort?

B: Again, I was heavily into sports activities—basketball, mostly. I was part of student government. It's been so long, Art, I can't remember what I did. (laughing) Oh, and a big activity was singing in the college choral society.

A: Ok, but there may have been some other activities and jobs and things like that before you came to Lebanon Valley College as well. When you left Messiah, what did you do?

B: I didn't actually anticipate remaining in higher education. I thought that after that many years at Messiah maybe I wanted to try something else so I considered that and when I inquired about the position that I saw advertised at Lebanon Valley I didn't actually anticipate that I might go there. You know, I had spent a good many years in higher education, 14 years, and I thought well you know maybe I'll inquire anyway. But I was further intrigued by it once I got there and met Art Peterson.

A: So would that have been in the middle '60s or middle '80s I guess it would have been.

B: Well yeah, it was actually '86.

A: '86, okay. Now you had about 24 years before you came to Lebanon Valley after you graduated. What did you do in those 24 years?

B: Well, after I graduated from college I spent about 10 years in the public school system.

A: Teaching history?

B: No, I was an elementary school teacher and an elementary principal.

A: And where was that?

B: In the West Shore School District here in Lemoyne. Then I spent 14 years as an administrator at Messiah.

A: Oh, okay. What position did you have there?

B: It was very similar to what I did at Lebanon Valley, vice president for business and finance. It was one of those jobs where you have a lot of responsibilities for different kinds of things which made it interesting to me. The controller reported to me. I had the physical plant, the HR, a lot of things like that, including auxiliary services. Just about anything that was not directly related to academics, I oversaw those activities.

A: Before you came to Lebanon Valley then, and you said it was mainly because you wanted to do something different and so you continued doing something like you had been doing before and so you answered the ad or something?

B: Yeah, there was an ad in the local paper that caught my eye and I inquired...

A: Had you been on the campus before? Lebanon Valley.

B: I had not. No.

A: Ok. I'm curious when you arrived...you probably arrived first of all for an interview.

B: Yeah.

A: And ah, did they show you around the campus and all that sort of thing at that time?

B: Yes.

A: What were your impressions do you recall? Of the campus. The physical campus itself.

B: Well, my impression was that it needed some upgrading and I could tell that a lot of the buildings had not been maintained adequately. And I thought, 'Well, here's an opportunity maybe to make some kind of a difference.' You know I had a lot of experience in physical plant planning, construction, with architects and engineers and I thought, 'Well, if there's a way to make this happen, if the right resources could be found, you know it could be a very interesting job.'

A: Did Art Peterson seem to be interested in upgrading the physical plant itself when you talked with him? These are just your impressions as you were walking around looking?

B: Well, he did. But Art wasn't there long enough for me to really get a good assessment of what his long-range plan might be or what his vision was. It was at that time that they were doing a planning for the sports center. The first phase of that. So I was there when that was being planned and when that was constructed. That would have been the Arnold Center.

A: What kinds of responsibilities did you have over the years as vice president there?

B: At Lebanon Valley?

A: Mmhm.

B: Well, when I came I had responsibilities that were very similar to what I had been accustomed to the Business Office, HR, physical plant, security, and auxiliary services. These were all activities that needed to be covered and I was responsible for seeing that they worked. I guess I felt that given the needs and available resources it was going to take a little bit of time and a little bit of work to pull those things together in a way that would function really well because the College needed, some infrastructure. Its physical plant needed some major attention. For example, the heating plant there seemed like it was in a very difficult situation

when I came. It was actually an oil fired plant and then later we changed it to gas fired plant. The gymnasium at that time needed some upgrading and some of the early projects involved taking space from that and converting it into classrooms and areas that were better utilized by the athletic teams and so on. So they were very small steps to get going in the right direction and I think everybody felt that the construction of the Arnold Center where there was a swimming pool and racquet ball courts and basketball courts were major improvements. These were major attractions to kids because the competition had those kinds of facilities and so that was one of the first projects that I was involved in when I was there.

A: And Art Peterson was quite interested in that then wasn't he?

B: Oh definitely, yeah.

A: Especially a swimming pool.

B: Yeah. Art actually left before everything was finished and then when the building was dedicated Art came back on campus and I think he initiated the use of the pool by actually diving in and swimming the length of the pool. (laughing)

A: So he was the first one to use the pool.

B: I think he may have been the first person, I don't know.

A: Officially anyway.

B: And if he, yeah. It was a good story.

A: Why did he leave? Did he ever tell you that? He was here such a short time.

B: You know, I don't know.

A: Between the times he left and the next full-time president probably was John Synodinos?

Wasn't it? Did we have a temporary...was Bill McGill an acting president for a couple of years?

B: Bill McGill was an acting president, yeah, yeah.

A: So that was the difference. So with an acting president I guess there wasn't a whole lot initiated anyway. Just completing some things. When did you feel that the campus was really heading in the right direction? That things were getting done that needed to? The things you talked about—deferred maintenance and that sort of thing. When did that finally get started?

B: Well, you know Bill McGill had some good plans in mind and we talked about that as a general officers group. I think when it really got headed in the right direction was when John came and I think John did some of the right things first. He reorganized the board. He realized that it was way too large. I think it was 50 or 60 members. The way the board members were chosen, some were appointed by church conferences, I believe.

A: Conferences? Church conferences?

B: Well, conferences, yes. That's probably what they were, and I think there were people on that board from as far away as State College as I recall. Well, I think John realized that people who were appointed by the church constituency didn't necessarily have the expertise of running a college and they might not have the interest in really diving in and learning how to make a college function well. And so I think John reorganized the board and found a way to reduce the size of the board, brought on members who had expertise and interest. I know a lot of them I think were graduates who had an interest in the College, upgrading the facilities, and making it function well. I credit John with that.

A: Were there any other changes that were made? We're talking specifically now John's tenure that you felt improved the College? Made it a better place in one way or another? Talking about

the physical plant and the Board of Trustees. What was it about John that allowed him or made him do these things?

B: John was a very driven person. (laughing) He had the capacity to find the right people and get them interested in the College. Of course, his background had been raising money and it was my understanding that he had done it successfully. So, he was very focused on making that happen. I often thought about other people that were involved and I'm not sure they were all new people to the board. But Tom Reinhart for example, I think Tom may have been on the board when John came. He may have actually been involved in helping to convince John to come (laughing). I think John had been hired to find a president and then when that didn't happen I think certain members of the board who had the most influence said to John, 'You know you really need to consider doing this,' and I think he says in spite of his better judgment he decided to do it. But I think once John decided to do that he was determined to make it work and I think he really stretched his physical and mental capacity to do that and he was a bright guy.

A: So you enjoyed working with him then?

B: Yeah. John was an interesting kind of person—not that I always agreed with John but I often said to other people, you had people like Tom Reinhart. I think maybe I shouldn't say this because I'm not certain, but John may have said to Tom, 'Okay, I'll be president if you'll be chairman of the board.' I think that's what happened and I think Tom was a real help to John. Tom was on campus a lot. I mean if he missed being there a week, I'd be surprised. Tom was there and I think he and John discussed things about the board, about the College and I'm not sure that people have recognized how much Tom really contributed. In my mind, not knowing

what their conversations were in the President's Office, I thought Tom probably exercised a lot of influence over how things actually transpired.

A: As you worked with other members of the administration and general officers particularly, in addition to John, were there other administrators that you in particular worked with that you thought were important to the College in contributing that sort of thing?

B: Well, you know I think all of the people I worked with were competent and I think they all had the interest of the College at heart. You know when it comes to people like Greg Stanson who had all of this information in his head and he had a lot of energy and I think he knew how to run the student affairs area. He was respected by the students. I think he was an especially good person because of his ability to communicate among the general officers. But, you know, all the people I worked with were I think really quite talented. Especially the ones who graduated from Lebanon Valley. I think they really had the interest of the College at heart and I think they worked hard to benefit the College.

A: Between the time that John came and that would have been shortly after you came and then when John left I'm not sure was that late '90s or something like that? The College seems to have changed pretty dramatically. Did you sense that when you were there?

B: After John left.

A: No, no. Between the time John came and before then when he left.

B: During that period of time?

A: Yeah. Just from your perspective and particular office that you held.

B: Yeah, I think so. John like I said had this energy, he had an idea of what he wanted to accomplish and I thought that what happened was that John convinced people that he had a

vision for Lebanon Valley and he got people on board with that. Yeah, I think there wasn't any doubt that it had changed quite dramatically and people give a lot of credit to the scholarship program.

A: Yup.

B: You know, where you had a major discount if you were at the top of your high school class, top 10 percent or whatever. It's interesting how that worked because it impacted the way students and the number of students came in and I think it impacted the quality of the students because it did provide financial support for the kids who were highly qualified. I think whether that was coincidental or whether it really worked, (chuckles) it seemed to. I had seen the data on the kids that were coming in, and there was an improvement in the quality of the students who enrolled.

A: So when you retired, who was president then? Was it....?

B: McDonald.

A: McDonald was president. And ah, before him?

B: Pollick.

A: Pollick. Okay, so it looks like it went from Synodinos to Pollick to McDonald. Okay. Any impressions of those two successors to John? Let's take Pollick first.

B: Yeah, yeah. Well, Dave had somewhat the same kind of aggressive personality that John did and he found ways to get things done. He convinced the board to follow a program that he had in mind and financially he found ways to raise most of that money and I think that was a good thing to accomplish, a lot of physical plant improvements without getting buried under a lot of debt. You know, we were able to accomplish those things that included a couple of additions to

the sports center including the Physical Therapy Program, the new basketball arena, major upgrades to the track and outdoor athletic facilities. Then he had the major improvement renovations of what was the old gymnasium.

A: Lynch.

B: Lynch. Yeah. So there were those kinds of things that he found a way to get funded and to move ahead on and there were other things in the works that I think showed the right direction. He knew he had a pretty good hand on what it was going to take to attract kids to Lebanon Valley and he knew that whether we like it or not, a lot of it had to do with facilities, had to do with the campus ambiance. I know I'm skipping over the academic side because I don't know much about that. But it was my impression that the quality of the instruction also improved. But I shouldn't venture there, because I really don't know.

A: How about Steve McDonald? Any impressions you want to share?

B: Well, I think Steve picked up where Pollick left off. You know it's not clear to me how Steve might have viewed Dave Pollick toward the end of his tenure. But, I think during the time that he was there with Dave, I think they worked together well. And I think Steve had an idea what he would like to accomplish if he had the opportunity and Steve had generated a lot of respect as an active community person, and I think he kept the board together. He became known in the Harrisburg community, he had connections there. So I think he worked out well. I know when I left, Steve said, 'Well, I'm only going to be here a few more years. I'd prefer you not share that.' (laughing) I didn't. But he had an idea what he wanted to accomplish and how many years he had left in his tenure. But Steve's a great guy and I appreciated working with him.

A: The one thing you didn't mention when you mentioned your responsibilities as vice president was your involvement with the athletic programs. Did that not come early on or when did it, when did you get that responsibility—oversee the athletics?

B: I actually got that responsibility under Johnson Synodinos. I'm not sure how that decision was made. He just called me in one day and said, 'We're going to make a change in the reporting of the Athletic Department and our decision is that it should go to you.' (laughing) And he said, 'Now I don't want you to take it unless you are committed to doing it.' And he said, 'This is what I want you to do.'

A: What vision did he have for the athletic program then? That he want to change it?

B: I think he felt it could be upgraded. I think he felt that at that point we had not made a lot of major changes to the athletic facilities. You know, we were in the process of doing that. But I think he felt that attention needed to be given to attracting good quality athletes but also good sound academic athletes. There was sort of a feeling that some of the athletes that we were bringing in were not necessarily qualified academically to stick with the Lebanon Valley program. So he said, 'I just want it to be better. I want good quality athletes. I want it to be competitive.'

A: What was your responsibility then to accomplish that? What did he want you to do to get to that point? Or was that pretty much up to you?

B: I did meet with John on a regular basis to talk about the progress we were making. The coaches did not report to me individually. I worked with the athletic director.

A: Oh, [Lou] Sorrentino.

B: Sorrentino.

A: Sorrentino originally.

B: Sorrentino was the athletic director when I came and the change was that he reported to me. So there was also Kathy Tierney who was also the assistant and those were the two people I worked with. So I actually met with them pretty much on a weekly basis and we talked about the athletic programs and the needs and laid out some plans for the program.

A: Did you feel some progress was made over the years then? You're working with them?

B: Yeah, I do. I think the improvements were largely from the standpoint that we started getting better quality students.

A: Hmmmm. Academically?

B: Academically and I think they pushed for that. Oh, and the other thing is we set up a program whereby each sport had a target for recruitment and we felt that athletics had a responsibility to contribute to the enrollment. But they should be good quality kids and so each sport had a target to bring in so many athletes and we monitored the quality of those athletes. I think we felt we did make some progress on that. And they coordinated that activity with the Admissions Department.

A: Let me broaden the discussion a bit then, get some more general impressions that you might have there. You touched on these but I just wondered if you had any other memories from those years that you feel good about, more pleasant memories, rewarding times or events that took place during that time period. You look on back, back now with some satisfaction.

Anything like that pop into your mind?

B: Well anywhere I worked in the college environment I was pretty heavily involved in the planning, designing, construction, and renovation of facilities. These activities crossed the

academic areas, the athletics, student housing, auxiliary services, and I think I probably, looking back, would say that the progress we made in those areas were probably my most satisfying activities. The other thing was we knew this sort of meant a reversal. When I came there, no one seemed to feel that we needed to be buying more property and in fact, a couple of properties on College Avenue were sold. Well, later on we wished we had that space. And also, interestingly enough when I came there we had empty beds in the residence halls. All the residence halls were being used, but the beds weren't full. So you had all the expense of operating those residence halls without enough students to fill the beds. Well, it's interesting that it didn't take that many years after the implementation of the scholarship program that we started to pick up enrollment. We knew we had to fill those beds. That was wasted space, and that's where we first concentrated our efforts. And then low and behold, we had more kids coming in than we had beds. So, we could tell by spring that we needed to find room and we were renting and buying properties in Annville and turning them into student housing. You may remember a row of houses down on Main Street that we had renovated, turned them into student housing until we were able to construct new student housing back on the northeast corner toward the concrete plant. Those were the kinds of things I enjoyed. They were problem solving kinds of issues. You really had to get on it and I enjoyed that. So it finally got to the point where I don't know if there is any student housing down Main Street. Those houses have all been made a part of the Annville Project.

A: The Redevelopment Project.

B: At least that was the discussion when I left, that that would be turned over to them.

A: The opposite of that then—terms of memories. Any things that you remember as disappointing. You were disappointed at or difficult or even embarrassing during that time?

B: You know to be honest, Art, I couldn't point to anything that I thought was disappointing. I mean, there were certainly times that were, more difficult and we had to find solutions on the spur of the moment and we had to really rush to do that. But, there was a great deal of satisfaction in finding solutions to those things. And then the purchase of that farm east of the College was a major achievement.

A: The Heisey farm.

B: Yeah. Well was it, Heisey? The farm east of Heisey's.

A: Oh.

B: I'm not sure if that was Heisey or not but it's where the facilities offices are now.

A: Hmhm.

B: Yeah. That big brick house.

A: Yes.

B: And I'm not sure. It was an interesting problem to solve because it sounded like the owners didn't feel that kindly toward the College. So we never thought we would get it. But we did get a part of it. We were able to buy a part of it which was expanded into athletic facilities. And then later on the surviving children came to us and said, 'We want the College to have the rest of this,' and we got it. And so you know I have been in there since the house was renovated into offices but I have not been in to see the barn that has been turned into the facilities, shops, and things like that. But there were things like that that really needed to be done to make the whole thing function well. And I think, we hired some great people. We have some people who are

really talented people. So I would say working through those infrastructure problems, physical plant, finding the right people to make the programs work. I think those were the most satisfying times that I had there.

A: A variation of that would be since you spent a significant amount of time at the College if someone were to ask you what does Lebanon Valley College mean to you? How would you respond to that?

B: Why I think, I have a lot of respect for Lebanon Valley College. You know when I went there I wasn't sure that I knew what to expect. I had a good friend who went to Lebanon Valley when I was in college, he was my college roommate at Messiah. But he was a pre-ministerial student. He transferred to Lebanon Valley. His Methodist Church felt that he needed that environment. Later he became a minister and he died suddenly, which was really a shock to me. But the only thing I knew about Lebanon Valley was what I had learned from him. So when I came, I wasn't sure I knew what to expect. I'll tell you what really impressed me and I hope you take this well (laughing). What surprised me and pleased me was the commitment of people like you, the Wolfe family, and others who had been there for years and you didn't have the most pleasant environment in which to work. You had needs but you seemed to love the place. You know, I don't know how it gets better than that. So I said, 'My goodness. These people,' and I know that I'm quite certain that the salaries were not what kept you there, (chuckling) because for the most part I knew what the salaries were. And I thought, 'My goodness. I mean, these people have an affection for this place and for the students' and that is people like that in the academic area and I didn't know most of them. But those are the people who attracted the students and kept them there. And so, I worked in the area that primarily had something to do with the

physical plant. I knew that had to be up to date because that's important to getting kids on campus. You had to get them on campus and it had to be an attractive place and you had to have them meet the right people there. But meeting the right academic people was part of that too but also keeping them there. You know I think it was the people they met in the classrooms and in all the academic areas as well as the student life. And I think I just really I admired the people for that. I'm not sure and I can't speak for most of the people there now. I just know that when I came there I thought, 'I don't know that I've seen dedication anywhere else that surpassed this.'

A: Did you feel that way when you left then as well?

B: I would say I did, Art. But then I don't think I knew a lot of the new people as well when I left. Because, some of you people, had retired. And so the new people coming in I was not that acquainted with but, I felt the quality of the instructional staff was really quite commendable.

A: So you had a pretty good feeling then when you had retired from the College about the College?

B: Oh yeah. Absolutely.

A: Where it was going and what it accomplished at that point and possibly....

B: Yeah. I mean, when I came there, there were fewer than 800 hundred students there.

A: That's right.

B: And you know, when I had left there were close to 1,800? I mean how could you not be excited about getting that done in that amount of time? I mean that's what was satisfying and I think that was the possibility I saw when I went there that could happen. And with the right

kind of leadership I think it did. You know the board, you know just how exceptional some board members were and a lot of those board members had been students, I think.

A: Mhmm.

B: Yeah.

A: We'll about to wrap this up. Any further thoughts? Assuming that ah, a 100 years from now, 200 years from now somebody maybe listen to the transcript (both laughing), as well as read the transcript, what kind of thoughts would you like them to have at that point about the College?

B: I think if somebody would look at the history of the College or they'd listen to the transcript they really need to know what the journey was from that time up through this period to get a complete appreciation for what has been accomplished there. You know, as I recall, Art, the endowment was very minimal when I went there. And I thought that's not enough money to accomplish much. We didn't have unrestricted assets that a bank would look at and say we can give you the support you need financially. But what it took was some really hard work on the part of the board members and the Development Office to get people on board to make that happen and it really is quite amazing when you think about the amount of money it took. I don't know what that is now. I just know that at one point it was a lot of money that we had put in to that campus. You know, in order to get an idea of what has been accomplished you almost have to have a picture of what the place looked like at that time and what it looks like now to comprehend what had really been accomplished on the physical side but also in terms of the student body. I mean, I just felt the quality of the students had just improved so much. And I think everybody ought to feel good about that.

A: Okay. Well listen, nice note to end on, Bob. So thank you very much. I appreciate your thoughts. Okay.

B: Okay.