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UA68/8/2 Evelyn Hooser Oral History

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Produced by Oral History Committee
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Will Fridy: A teacher of Robert Penn Warren, a friend of Robert Penn Warren, who's agreed to help us with the oral history project of Robert Penn Warren and this is the second tape and we're talking on the 3rd of February 1977.

WF: Alright. Ms. Hooser, you and I both forget this tape recorder and we'll just talk about Robert Penn Warren as a young man and we were talking earlier of and I would like you to tell me some of the experiences that you've had or anything you can think of that relates to Warren.

EH: You want the first one I told you about?

WF: Yes, ma'am. I would like the things we were talking about as well. Our kind typist will remove all my comments from this tape and we'll get the information, but you were talking about.

EH: I first heard of Robert Penn Warren when his mother made a statement to a young cousin of mine that he had a regular jackass for a nurse which was an unheard of word from a lady at that time. Robert Penn was an unusual child. He was a brilliant student and it was my pleasure to have him in Junior High.

WF: What grade was that? 7th or 8th?

EH: 8th grade in Junior High. I remember very plainly his coming up to my desk with quite a bit of material in science and he would stop and talk with me and explain his projects and he was quite interested science and a - he would explain as I said his projects and I of course

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a scholar of the old school. He, I forgot what I was saying, he was just the most knowledgeable person I have ever known.

WF: She's very knowledgeable too. (yes) She lives in Princeton, New Jersey now. Before we started talking earlier you were telling me something about the birth of where Warren was born. And something about the family, the Penns. Would you mind to come back to that a little bit?

EH: No. I don't mind. Well, Robert Penn was born on, I guess you - you - I don't know what the street is called.

WF: Third Street I believe.

EH: No, it wouldn't be Third Street. I guess it would be Park Street. Park Street goes up the extension goes on up to Tiny Town. _____ Street is the one that goes the other way to the Clark stately manor. That's where he was born. You know very small cottage little house which is still there. I don't know the fellow who lives there now. Well, and - I've been sidetracked.

WF: What did his father do at that time?

EH: He was in the bank. He was President of the Farmers & Merchants Bank. The bank later folded and Mr. Warren. I think he did think he found something maybe. I don't know with that deal, You need not recall this - he was bankrupt. Not a very successful businessman. Mrs. Warren was very proud of the fact that she came from William Penn and put the Penn name in print everytime they get a chance.

would listen with great interest. One time - we always had in my class - we always had - one night and we had a valedictory speech and I shall never forget what he said - the closing statement - " There will be more stately mansions on my soul as the swift seasons roll." Do you want the rest of it?

WF: No.

EH: Alright. Well, Mr. & Mrs. Warren felt that Clarksville Tennessee High School would be able to give more to Robert Penn than would Guthrie High School. So, he went for his 4 years at Clarksville High School and from there he went to Vanderbilt University. And he was under the tutorage of the late Dr. Mims who was one of the outstanding educators in the south at that time. He was head of the English Department at Vanderbilt University. Robert Penn had went to school with a fugitive group; the members of which were Alan Tate was one and Carolyn Gordan Tate was another, Donald Davidson was another, and Robert Penn, and the others I do not recall.

WF: Carolyn Gordan - was she from here also?

EH: Carolyn Gordan's father was a christian minister and he preached here at two different times. He preached here at Trenton, Kentucky among other places and I should like to mention that Carolyn Gordan's father was the most knowledgeable person I have ever known intimately. I think that's the truth.

WF: In what sense...

EH: Well, he was a graduate of the University of Virginia. And he was

WF: Penns from Pennsylvania, is that right?

EH: Robert Penn or William Penn.

WF: Does her family go back to them?

EH: Well, presumably. She had a sister who probably influenced Mary Penn, who probably influenced Robert Penn quite a bit. Robert Penn had a nurse named Jeraldine, a colored nurse, who read stories to him and the other children when they were children. And Jeraldine was a very kind, nice, colored person and really rather smart. And that is where he really - I suppose learned the children's stories was the colored nurse reading them to him. Well, he - I'll go on now. I had him in Jurnio High School. I recall very vividly where he set - towards the rear - right at the rear with the - Warren you know - seated them alphabetically. He set right at the rear. And he was very interested in science at that time and he would come up to my desk and discuss and explain some of his projects that he was working on. And he would talk with me about his projects. And I would say that Mrs. Warren was very cooperative because I was only 20 years old with very little hesitation or knowledge, but anyway, he was so far ahead of the other children that he did not identify to easily with them for that reason. There was such a wide gap between their interests. He had a sister Mary Cecilia Penn. Later bacame a Thomas.

WF: Mary's still living I believe.

EH: Yes, she lives up in upper Kentucky somewhere. She likes too
_____ I haven't seen her in years.

WF: I need to go see her sometime. I'm going to talk to Tom a little later. I've met Tom, but its been a good while.

EH: Tom - he's just as cute as a button. He's a really very clever man... Robert Penn - I said Robert was naturally Valedictorian of the class. And I mentioned how he had closed his speech. And I said he went on to Clarksville from there and now I've gotten over to where he was at Vanderbilt. Now he did not - he was not noticed quite sometime in the class. And Doctor - I've mentioned the students now, did you get their names with who he was associated - the fugitive group.

WF: At Vanderbilt. Yes, ma'am.

EH: The fugitive group. Now that I think this is really rather important. Well, one day after he sat in a class for sometime listening to Doctor Mim's lecture, Robert Penn raised a question some feel to let himself be known. He began than to - this group - to write, which they all do, and they were very very scholarly and very well- known group. That has turned out some very clever boys out.

WF: Certainly has.

EH: Alright. Then he tried for a Rhodes Scholarship after he finished his four years at Vanderbilt. Now, I don't believe this is generally known and I don't think I have my memories mixed; he had a second try before he made it.

WF: I've never heard that mentioned...

EH: That's really true if I'm not mistaken very much, but I don't

think I'm mistaken about that because yesterday... And he did go on from Vanderbilt I believe to Yale maybe, I don't know whether he did or not. I'm not sure about that. But, I know he was a Rhodes Scholarship. He was a Rhodes Scholarship. But, he had to make the second try to get there.

WF: I've never heard that. That's interesting.

EH: That's really a fact. And for a number of years I sort of lost track of what Robert Penn did. He married a girl - I think this is interesting - I like the human interest - Shenina, an Italian name, I've forgotten the Shenina - that's all I can give you. But, Mrs. Warren was quite a good friend of mine.

WF: How did he marry Shenina? When did they marry? Approximately when?

EH: I couldn't tell you. I just really don't know. Anyway, Mrs. Warren told me - she told me she was a Patalian extract and my response was I thought she had extracted quite a bit too. Well, I recieved from the young lady a betrothal announcement - the only one I have ever seen. Not an engagment, but a betrothal announcement. Did you ever see one?

WF: No, I haven't.

EH: Would you like to hear what one looks like?

WF: Yes, I would like to see it.

EH: It was on a card, a little bit like a calling card, beautifully

engraved announcing the betrothal of Shenina, whatever her name is, and Robert Penn. And I would have given anything if I had kept it, but in all my moving around I just couldn't keep everything. And I thought that was really very, very interesting. And Mrs. Warren sent a list you know of the people in Guthrie which was not to very many, that she would like to have announcements - I mean betrothal announcements. And I was fortunate enough to get one. Well, then I don't know - Robert Penn began to write and the first thing I recall he wrote was about this old _____ up here in colored town. Now I recall that and that was interesting. Very interesting. And then...

WF: Was that a poem you say?

EH: A poem. Yes, it was a poem. And the Night Riders that's over there. The Nightriders and he wrote about that. And it was very, very good writing. And that helped established him too. And well documented and very, very good. And then I don't know he had written a number of things I think I have most of them. And I can't find Pick Up the book he did off that one for me. And I've forgotten though which one it was. Now when he first writing - started to write - his - he showed the _____ I guess one would say. But, in order to sell his books he began to write and use words so they and he said his own statement was that he _____ himself.

WF: _____.

EH: _____ . But I didn't. But, and I don't know what else to say.

WF: You're alright. Your doing very fine. I'd like to come back to

relatively earlier years which is one of my major interests really even more than the Vanderbilt background before he became famous. I mentioned earlier the story about him being hanged or suspended that may be a better word in a well by some boys. Did you know about his experience? Could you tell us about that?

EH: Yes. I don't know anything about it cause - a - they probably did. And he did not know how to play. Well, he played fairly well with other children, but his interests were so far ahead of the others kids you know that he jsut couldn't identify to well with them you know. He just couldn't have. And I think one of the funniest things - he had a date with my younger sister and we really kidded her to death.

WF: Who is this?

EH: Mrs. Disharoon. She said that he left about 9:30 and we kidded her to death about what they talked about you know, what they talked about. I'm sure Mrs. Warren, Rosene was a beautiful girl and I'm sure she told Robert Penn to be nice to her. But I don't think he ever asked her for a second one. She was just to wild for Robert Penn Warren boy.

WF: Did he date very much around?

EH? Well, if he ever dated any other Guthrie girl I don't know who it was, but he could have very easily I probably would have know it.

WF: I was talking to Mrs. Disharoon on the phone yesterday and she told me a little bit about the experience. She said she didn't think she had much to say. I said let's talk. I think we do.

EH: Have you ever met her?

WF: No, I haven't.

EH: She was a beautiful child, beautiful child, she really was very, very. She was one of the prettiest little girls I had ever saw. And she's a rather good looking woman. Now, we're coming to questions I don't know. I don't know how old Robert Penn was. How old is he?

WF: He was born in 1905. He's 72 approximately right now.

EH: I don't know if I would guess him 75. But, I thought he was older than that really. Now, I don't know anything about - it seems that when he and Shenina parting of the ways that there was something, perhaps she was not able to combat with the feeling... Raise the feeling that his writing was always more important than she was. That's not well worded.

WF: I understand.

EH: And, now that they are... I don't know who he married the second time.

WF: About Mrs. Warren, was she a teacher?

EH: Yes.

WF: What kind of person was Mrs. Warren.

EH: Mrs. Warren, she was closest as bark on a tree.

EH: Bark on a tree, but she was very, very nice to me. But she could have been very difficult now with my _____ but they learned.

WF: What do you mean? I'm not familiar with that phrase. I should know that I guess. Bark on the tree. I'm not familiar.

EH: That's between the bark and the tree. It's just right there that's closely joined together on the tree, but Mrs. Warren was not the most loveable person I grant you. But I was very fond of her. And she was always nice and considerate of me. And she died - really she was not an old person when she died. And she was much better educated than Mr. Warren. And, of course, she taught school for a number of years. And was very proud of her sister Mary who had taught school and been abroad. You know everybody don't go abroad then, back in those days and that was something. Mrs. Warren was noted for being parsimonious.

WF: Was noted for being what?

EH: Parsimonious. And she was a very good friend of mine. An elderly lady lived across the street from her and they always made fun of Mrs. Warren of course, her idea of a meal a real good meal was beef roast and potatoes and bread. Something made like that you know. And not quite and not quite into caviar. Ahe was noted also for her jewelry. She had one finger that was loaded with diamonds. And she got in some way or something she was in some kind of accident and somebody paid a fortune. Some kind of very potent medication all through those rings you know. But, Mrs. Warren she like to take the children to things that were very worthwhile and I recall one _____, I believe. That's when Thomas came up for the Royal Jam. He wrote me a little thing in class and said he got 130 fish. Well, and a I really don't

know. I have not been associated with Robert Penn for years. But I will tell you this, when he was in Vanderbilt he was uncomfortably homely. And I don't know how he lost one eye and _____ when he had lost that eye I don't know _____ they turned him around this way very plain looking and you turn him over this way and he was equally plain looking. And they turned him back just to see if they could make him a little bit better.

WF: Well, they talk about his eye injury being the reason he didn't go into science and went into literature. I thought that was kind of funny I think he's reading more probably in literature than he would in science.

EH: I don't know how he - I probably heard, but I don't know how.

WF: You was talking about Mrs. Warren again and her influence on Robert Penn. Do you - she seemed to be the kind of woman who would push a bit.

EH: Well, I would say she is.

WF: What about that? Do you think that could have contributed to his success?

EH: Somewhat, I would say. Now, Mr. Warren was not, the fact being I think Mr. Warren took bankrupt long after - so many years after Mrs. Warren died. I think he did; just didn't have very much left. Yes, Mrs. Warren, I think, irritated people by choking Robert Penn down their throats you know people just don't react well to something like that. Just plainly don't. Now, that was never my reaction. I'm not talking

about mine and I know you can mention. And, you would be suprised at the few people, so far as my knowledge goes now. I don't get out and mingle with them much now. And I was out of Guthrie so long. And it really does make a lot of difference. But, Mrs. Warren was not - Robert Penn either - they just - and people nowadays do not seem to me appreciate Robert Penn for really his literary ability. I'm talking about everybody in Guthrie. _____ Guthrie people _____ I don't think do. Now for instance, last year this couple came up and this is interesting to me. This Dr. Embry and his wife came up and interviewed me. And they were just lovely people. Have you heard this story?

WF: No, I haven't.

EH: Well, I think this will go alright on maybe something that you want to know and he came to interview me about Robert Penn Warren. And what the man was trying to say and did say in essence was this: That a prophet is not without honor say in his own country. Consequently, the Guthrie people and the Todd County people really did not apparently appreciate Robert Penn like - as a world citizen. Don't you see? There was just nothing what so ever wrong with it. You've never heard such a stir and a mess in all the days of your life. Oh, they _____ paper baba I said well you misinterpreted what the man was saying. Absolutely. And I told them what I just told you. And that is true. The people - I don't believe that there are not some intelligent people in Guthrie, there are some intelligent people; but, now Guthrie doesn't have to torture him they might as well face up to it. There's a lot of these little towns _____. It's a railroad town, was a railroad town, was a railroad center really for years. Of course, it's past that now. But, you can see now how _____. I just couldn't understand

the people's reaction to it. The more I tried to explain it the deeper I got involved. So I just stopped.

WF: I was talking to an intelligent fellow this morning and he said he couldn't really understand Robert Penn Warren. Nevertheless he said this he _____ it's hard to take _____ if you don't get to the deeper you really miss a whole lot _____. _____ for many people who don't understand the philosophical undertones undercurrents of what he's really writing about from some of the more offensive sections for example.

EH: I think it's a shame, personally, for a man with a God-given gift of a very great mind, and I think he does have it, to become so commercially minded. In order to sell, this is from his own statement his literature is just crammed full of these obscene words.

WF: Faulkner did the same thing if you remember _____ and no one pays any attention and then he turns around and writes Sanctuary which is a very questionable...

EH: We heard the words - we heard the voices, but that doesn't make me like him any better.

WF: Well, it doesn't. This is a problem. You were mentioning about his commercialism. Would you comment on that? Or do you have any ideas on this?

EH: I think that's the reason he puts the dirty words in his books that's very plain. That's his own statement in order to make them sell he puts the dirty words in there. That's commercialism isn't it?

WF: Yes, it is. I think you could call it that.

EH: That's what I call it.

WF: The end justifying the means and two or three other things are involved in there, depend upon is that really in there to make money or is that necessary to get your message across. The more people who read the book the more people are going to really understand what you are really saying.

EH: Well, that's one of his own statements. That's why he put them in there to make the books sell. It wasn't any secret cause I'd had heard about it before.

WF: How about the other members of the family who watched this monster _____ . The other members of his family like Mary. What was his relationship do you think?

EH: Fairly nice as far as I know. Mary was real smart, but she wasn't she wasn't, Mrs. Warren thought she was smarter than Robert Penn and she wasn't. Really and truly of all the three students, a, I'm not so sure Thomas has a good mind. He has brilliant mind perhaps that Robert Penn has, but he was clever. In fact, all three of the children were smart, no doubt about that. And now Mr. Warren he had a pretty good mind. But I think he did take up bankrupt though.

WF: You can't be good in everything.

EH: Well, a _ Thomas was a very interesting student. Now Robert Penn Warren -I want to make this very clear - Robert Penn Warren was probably

certainly one of the most brilliant students. I remember I had him in Junior High. Robert went on to college and its unfair to make a comparison between the college student and the Junior High student. Now, I had students in college that were not as brilliant as Robert Penn, but they were something.

WF: You taught. Where did you teach now?

EH: Tennessee Poly. Tech. University. And the president of Tennessee Poly. Tech was a Rhodes University Scholarshipman too, and he's one of three people who made straight A's at UT when he went to the school. I've been a lucky thing.

END OF SIDE 1

WF: Something else I want to ask you about in the family. I'd like to know more about Tom Penn too, because I think he's important in the relationship, but there's a grandfather who's mentioned in some of the stories. Do you know or an uncle? I was talking with Bill Jenkins - Dr. Jenkins and he was first talking about an uncle and then he shifted it to we got to talking about a grandfather. He said maybe it was a grandfather, maybe he was confused. Could you clarify that any?