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2019

Benjamin Panciera-Platt Townend Arnold '64

Benjamin Panciera

Platt Arnold

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Recommended Citation

Panciera, Benjamin and Arnold, Platt, "Benjamin Panciera-Platt Townend Arnold '64" (2019). *Alumni Oral History Project*. 21.

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Benjamin Panciera: So my name is Benjamin Panciera. I am the director of special collections and archives and today is May 31st, 2019 and you are

Platt Arnold: I am Platt Townend Arnold.

BP: Of the class of?

PA: Of the Class of 1964.

BP: Good. Alright.

PA: This is my 55th.

BP: Fifty-fifth? Have you been coming, because you live locally. Have you come to them all?

PA: I live locally now, yeah. I've come to every reunion, except my 45th when I had some of the people I moved with were staying at my house and that was the weekend my nephew was getting married. So, I just said "I'm leaving the house to you guys," and I wasn't there. And I missed my fifth reunion, but I was at- I've been to all of them.

BP: Fifth doesn't really count, I think.

PA: I don't know.

BP: So what made you decide to come to Connecticut College in the first place?

PA: Oh, this is embarrassing. I applied to Skidmore where my mom went and to Conn. We- the year before my senior year in high school, my mom and dad and my sister, who is two and a half years younger than I, did the rounds of New England colleges. Wheaton, which is way too far out in the middle of absolutely nowhere, and we looked at Wellesley and I must say that Wellesley was just an awful inter- the interview wasn't terrible, but there was- there was a girl who was also a prospective student and she wanted to see the darkest room and, I mean, a dark person and I thought, "Oh, my goodness." So, anyway, it came down to Skidmore and- and-I lived in Pennsylvania-Skidmore and Conn and we sort of looked at the logistics of-I must say my mom was a really good sport because she would have loved to have me go to Skidmore and that interview or that campus visit had been wonderful. It was the last place we stopped and- and

everybody was pretty worn out, but Mom said, “I want to show you the library and I’ll show you the carrel that I- that I mostly studied at.” And so we went in and Daddy and my sister stayed in the car. And we were coming into the kind of, there’s a very, sort of, small home, it was before Skidmore moved out to the country, so it was an in-town old building. So we went and looked at the carrel that Mom had used and we were coming back through sort of a main area of carrels. And a little old lady jumped up and said, “Why Alice Bullock, what are you doing here?” My mom- my mom had left Skidmore before her senior year and- and she was an English major and this was one of her teachers. She grad- I mea, she would have graduated in ‘39. So, it was just absolutely amazing, to me, it was amazing that this woman actually recognized Mom. So that sort of argued for choosing that school, but somehow Conn, the physical layout here, really appealed to me and both places were fairly inaccessible from Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. We looked at all the local possibilities because they were all- they were both women’s colleges. There were a lot of men’s colleges around here and a lot of men’s colleges there. And we just- I just said, “It looks like this is going to be easier, nearer Boston, nearer New York.” So, that’s that was how that pretty much happened.

BP: What, if anything, surprised you during your time here?

PA: Well, gosh, a- a welter of things are going through my head. The weather, for one thing, was- was terrible that year and my roommate and I decided after it had rained every day for 80 days, literally, that it was probably time to take our desks apart and make an ark, because it was awful. And it felt—we were- we- there were no- there was very little access to New London. I mean, we were up on this hill and there were a lot of in loco parentis kind of rules that kept us here. So, I didn’t get into New London very much, but when I did I was impressed with how New England felt familiar somehow, even though I was from northeastern Pennsylvania. And I’ve since read a book that sort of describes—there were a lot of, actually, Groton people that moved to the part of the country that- that I grew up in and put a stamp on the kind of hospitality, kind of thing. Let me see, what else? I loved being away from home. I- I had a terrible time academically my freshman year. I just really couldn’t get a handle on how to study and I just had such a good time going away. I was dating a fellow at Princeton and I was dating a fellow at Wesleyan and it was just, really, you know, a lot of—dating was different in those days than it is now, because we- we- you didn’t sort of single one person out, so there was a lot of- a lot of visiting. Trying to think, what else?

BP: Was there still a chaperoning requirement at- at the College then? I’m trying to remember when that was dropped.

PA: By which you mean ... There was, but ...

BP: People had to be accompanied off campus.

PA: You had to- you had to have-I can't remember exactly what it was. I think you couldn't go off-campus by yourself in the evening. You had to be with some- I don't know whether you had to be with another- whether you had to be with a man or whether you could be- I think maybe it was three women. I can't remember, but, yes, there- there was. Yeah, yeah, and no men were allowed in the dorms, in the dorm rooms until- my junior year there was an- there was an application to allow men in the- in the dorms on Sunday afternoon, in your room with the door open and all four feet on the floor and, you know, all that kind of thing. And- and that had to get- I think that had to get passed by the board of the College as well. And I- some- someone commented in the amalgam, the- the all-college meeting that happened once a month, there was a great discussion about whether that was fair or whether that was- and somebody just said, "For Heaven's sake, let's just get in the rooms and we'll close the doors later."

BP: Where did you live on campus?

PA: On- on the first floor in the corner of Plant, freshman year. And then sophomore year and every ensuing year there were seven of us who moved together and we were together in JA for Sophomore year on the fourth floor. And then- and then we moved to the new-they were called the new dorms-the Plex, it was called, the new dorms and then we were all in Hamilton. And we were on the third floor and all seven of us were- sort of took over, sort of, one end. There were two doubles and- and then three of us in singles. And then-was it that year? I can't remember. No, it was-and then we were in the same place. I moved rooms, but we were in Hamilton the senior year too. And senior year we were sort of given a- a fourth- a- an eighth roommate Willenor Carruthers came up from Spelman College and- and she was a senior spending her six months here and- and she was- everybody else on that floor were juniors and sophomores and so it was clear they had placed her with us so that she could be part of our gang. So she became part of our gang. And I went to see her. She had a very Southern accent, very soft-spoken and a great sense of humor. Anyway, I went to say hello to her the very first day and I asked what she was majoring in. She was majoring in Biology or Zoology or something and what courses she was taking. I was an Economics major. She said she was studying- she was taking histology and I said, "I don't- what is that?" She said, "It's the study of sales." And I said, "Sales? In the economics department?" And she said, "No, sales C-E-L-L-S." Anyway, I kept up with her for- for a bunch of time until ...

BP: Did that whole group of you, that all- all- have you continued to keep up with each other?

PA: Yeah, this is the first time-I think this is-we almost all of us get back every time, but one person's husband is not well and another person has just been diagnosed with cancer in our group. There are four of us will be back this time. And another person is out on the West Coast and has a grandchild graduating from somewhere, I can't remember quite where. But she has- my email is littered with her pictures from past times. We've- we've gathered as-we called

ourselves the CC Seven—and we’ve gathered for our 40th? Our 50? Our 60th summers? And our 70th? Yeah, I think for our 70th too, all of us managed to get together with our spouses and we are in touch throughout the year too. So, that’s nice.

BP: What drew you to Economics?

PA: It was somehow so sensible to me and my dad went to Princeton and he had majored in Economics and I admired him a lot and I thought it would be something else to share with him, although we really never did. I- I don’t- I- it’s not a major that I would have chosen today.

BP: Come to it on your own, yeah.

PA: When we- I- I got out of Conn. Graduated on a Sunday and was married the following Saturday and I met my Coastie fiance at the end of freshman year. Didn’t really settle for him until a year later, or about a year later, but—where was I going with this? I had a train of thought. I don’t know, it will be back.

BP: Is there any- any professors who stood out to you?

PA: Oh, that’s what it was. I- David and I came back in 1973. He was- he was teaching in the Coast Guard Academy and we were living in Quaker Hill and I learned that I could take- I could take a free audit. So I thought, “What- what did I miss when I was at Conn?” I thought, “Mr. Cranz.” So, I audited a course with him, and in, just I think it was ancient- that one was ancient history and it was clearly an audit and I was supposed to be a fly on the wall and he asked a question in the class and nobody had an answer and I kind of ... And I actually didn’t think in the moment, “You’re not supposed to be speaking.” But, so, I went up afterwards to say, “I’m sorry, I was an audit.” I was an alumni audit. And he said, “Oh, don’t pay any attention to that.” He said, “If you want to write the papers, write the papers. Just make sure that you put ‘Audit’ on the front of it so- so, you know, it doesn’t go down to the registrar’s office.” So, I took two or three courses with him and then I took two courses with Lester Reese. I took a daytime course with him but then my husband and I, who was teaching at the Academy and could also do- I think he could take those for credit, but we took- we took a couple of courses, evening courses from him that were wild. I mean, trying to think of- one of them was about science fiction and fantasy and we read- and- and tied that in with philosophy, which was really interesting. Sort of the last time I have read very much science fiction, turns out not to be ...

BP: Yeah, it’s never been my thing, no. Were there any extracurriculars that were particularly important to you when you were here?

PA: I played- I played hockey in- in high school and I loved playing it, but I didn't play it intramurally. I didn't play it intermurally, I played it just- just in gym classes. And I loved swimming, but I didn't do any competitive- I may have done- I may have done one water ballet thing, seems to me, yeah, but ... And then I got into my senior year, never having gone to a mixer, I somehow got roped into being the social chairman for- that- that ended up being the person who arranged mixers. And it went from like two or three mixers a year to a whole bunch of them, like 30. And- and sort of managing those and renting buses and making sure that there were chaperones and all that kind of thing was challenging. I don't think there was much else, just ...

BP: What was- what was the campus climate like. Were there any particular controversies, or ...

PA: Yeah, there were. There was what was the starting of the Civil Rights and I guess that was one of the reasons that- that Will had come up from- from Atlanta to- to be here.

BP: Well it was just a few years after that that one of our students got- was involved in protests ...

PA: Mardi Walker?

BP: Yeah, Mardi Walker.

PA: That was- that was that same year.

BP: Oh, was that '64?

PA: Yeah, because I was still here. I was- I was sort of disturbed about her- about her intransigence that felt like it was- she was representing the College as well as us, I mean as well as her own opinions and that felt a little troublesome to me. And one of- one of my roommates, one of the CC Seven, is Jewish and she very much took exception to how I felt about it and so we had some talks about that.

BP: Was there- was there active debate across campus about her- her- her role?

PA: Somewhat. Yeah, there was. And when I look back on it, I think I was wrong, because I think you have to stick your neck out. And I grew up in a part of Pennsylvania that had very few Black faces, right? There was one very light-skinned African-American woman in my class, so I- I just really didn't know. I just didn't know. I did- I- I remember, though, going to knock on doors to leave voting materials.

BP: Yeah, because there was also fair housing activism on campus from- from students working in New London around that time.

PA: Yeah, in the big old Victorian houses, which had- which had gazillion people in them—you know, big old house with fourteen mailboxes and that kind of thing. So, I did- I did do some of that. And that was really one of the few times that I- that I sort of felt like I met New London until I moved back here in 1973, which was around the time that that part of New London—and it was the African-American part of New London—got knocked down and low-income housing went in, that's the projects that are still, sort of ... And the wrecking ball was in place to take down the Richardson Train Station and I'm still active, actually, in New London Landmarks, which ...

BP: Oh, are you?

PA: Yeah, yeah.

BP: I'm afraid we only have a couple minutes left, so real quick if you've got a thought about it, in thinking about your experience and about the experience of students today, is there anything that- that- about the college experience today that you wish you had and conversely is there anything students today are missing that you had in your time?

PA: Well, I don't really know very much about what their experience is. I think one of the things that was most valuable for our class as a class was that we were housed in Plant, Branford, and whatever the other one is next to ... Most- all of us were in a single dorm- were in dorms with just freshman. I mean it was crazy, but and then we all ate in the cafeteria which is now the development center. And that made for a really cohesive class. We really- we really still know each other pretty well. I mean, there isn't anybody who's come back to this reunion that I don't- that I don't recognize from- from having been back there. I don't- I don't know whether that still exists and I'm not sure- I mean, I think the cross-class thing is also a good way to go. There are cars on campus now, so there's a lot more sort of in and out traffic, and of course there's the internet, which is a lot more in and out too. I think if I have any regrets it's that I just didn't take it seriously enough. There was so much more here.

BP: I don't know what- what percentage of students do take it seriously.

PA: Oh, God. I mean, really.