

Transcript of OH-00226

Miel D. Burgee

Interviewed by
Kim Warren and Bob Middleton

on
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Typographic Note

- [Inaudible] is used when a word cannot be understood.
- Brackets are used when the transcriber is not sure about a word or part of a word, to add a note indicating a non-verbal sound and to add clarifying information.
- Em Dash — is used to indicate an interruption or false start.
- Ellipses ... is used to indicate a natural extended pause in speech

Subjects

Charlotte Hall School
Education
Military education

Transcript

Kim Warren [K]: This is December 16, 1980 Kim Warren and Bob Middleton interviewing Major Burgee at his home in Mechanicsville on of Charlotte Hall.... What is your full name?

Miel D. Burgee [M]: My full name is Miel D. Burgee.

K: And where were you born?

M: Frederick County, Maryland on a farm.

K: What was your date of birth?

M: May the 20th 1904.

K: What schools did you attend?

M: Oh my gosh. I went to Pleasant Grove Elementary School. Frederick High School. [Bromley] Hall military academy, University of Maryland, Columbia University, George Washington University, and Davis Elkins [all good schools].

K: What year did you go to Charlotte Hall?

M: 1927 in the fall. September 1927.

J: What made you decide to go there?

M: Well I went to Charlotte Hall in 1927 I came out of college I had three majors. I had one in Mathematics, one in Science, and one in Business. And I was an athletic man and I wanted to coach athletics. You couldn't get a job in those days. I came to Charlotte Hall because Charlotte Hall was thinking about going into junior college and I was qualified to teach math at a junior college. They offered a job I could come there and teach Mathematics and coach athletics so I did.

K: So when you first went there you taught math?

M: Oh yeah I taught Math and I have taught English. I've taught most subjects.

K: Who hired you?

M: Professor [Code] and Colonel B. F. [Prowse]. He was the headmaster.

K: Who were the Board of Trustees?

M: Oh my God. [Inaudible] get a catalogue to tell you. Truman Thomas was the President of the Board of Trustees in those days. And it had Colonel [Fey] was on it. It had Carlisle Turner, Judge Maddox, Spencer Turner. Oh God I can't it had 20.

K: And what was their job? What did they do?

M: What'd Trustees do? They helped formulate policy of the school. The main job what they did in those days was attend meetings and have a good meal.

K: How did you become a member of the Board of Trustees?

M: I became a member of the Board of Trustees years ago. They...let's see I knew so much about the school I'd been there so long you see. So they decided it'd be good to have an active person at school on the Board. So they appointed me to the Board of Trustees. I was appointed for life.

K: What type of training did you have to become a member, a faculty member of Charlotte Hall?

M: Oh good question. Member of the faculty I—college graduate, certification from the Maryland Department of Education for teaching and for administration. Those things to become a member to teach yes that's right.

K: What was the school like when you got there?

M: When I came to Charlotte Hall we had just the front part of the old school hall, the White House, just a part of a gymnasium, and that is all. They were just building the main dormitory. The first half of the year I was there we had for the teachers we slept in the gymnasium and had corner rooms and the students slept in rows of beds going down through the gym, see, until the barracks were finished.

K: So everybody slept together?

M: Yes that's right dormitory type things. Open dormitory.

K: What was the enrollment at that time?

M: 71 students.

K: When you were on your way to Charlotte Hall I understand you had some problems getting across the Zekiah Swamp?

M: Yeah they washed all of the—oh it had big floods. Back in those days we had to come down to the Zekiah Swamp, bus run down through that, and then we walked across on planks to get over Zekiah Swamp. Then a bus picked us up there and took us on see?

K: You had to walk across on planks?

M: Yeah.

K: Did you have to carry everything?

M: Yeah, yeah buses couldn't go over the road.

K: What was the reputation of the school throughout the country and state?

M: When?

K: When you got there.

M: When I came? Well it was hardly known when I first came there. I didn't know about it myself until I got a notice from the teacher's agency.

K: What about later after you were there for a while?

M: We became known in the state and country...nation throughout. See back in the 40's we had a boxing team and we had one of the best prep school boxing team in the United States. We put on tournaments. We held at Charlottesville, at the University of Maryland and we had schools down in New Orleans and all around over the country attending those things.

K: What were your duties as headmaster of the school?

M: What were my duties as a headmaster of the school? Everything. In charge of everything. As the headmaster of school I have done everything. If the boiler would kick off I [fired] a boiler. When I first went there they had an old plant, electric plant generator. I started the thing and I'd cut it off. I'd always start it in the afternoon about the end of football practice and then I'd cut it off about 11 o'clock at night. Supervised the faculty, had faculty meetings, disciplined the cadets, and attend funerals and things like that.

K: Did you actually live on the school grounds?

M: I lived on the school grounds my entire time yes.

K: And what were the quarters like?

M: What were the quarters like? Well when I first went there course being a fellow right out of college I didn't mind because in college we had rooms two together you get the idea? And first went to Charlotte Hall of course I had a corner room in a gymnasium you know. It was just one bunk. When I went into the dormitory I had one room. I had a room, had a washbasin, and a private bath right there together.

K: And then what about later?

M: Later on we opened up the room next to it and put two teachers together. We got two rooms, two of us then. And then when I became headmaster then I moved into the attic of the White House and stayed there until I was burned out in 1945 or 46 or something like that.

K: How did the fire start?

M: We don't know how it started, but electrical fixture. We were attending a boxing match in the gymnasium in the winter time and we came out of the gym the thing had smoke coming out everywhere all around it you know. See we had a dog, lost the dog, lost everything I had. And then the Trustees we decided to build a headmaster's hall. Of course all the schools [because] they had a nice headmaster's home. So then we built a headmaster's home over there on the side of the road. You saw it coming down didn't you?

K: Yeah.

M: Yeah I built that.

K: What was the relationship between other nearby schools and how did it change over the years?

M: What was the relationship when I left there or when I first went there?

K: While you were there between the other schools in Southern Maryland.

M: When I first went there they weren't so hot. They weren't so hot because Charlotte Hall school at that time the headmaster and the people there didn't care too much for the parochial schools. This county was filled with them, Catholic schools. But when I got into the system I mean they didn't have any on the faculty or anything like that. See a teacher couldn't be a Catholic and be there then in those days. They had one Professor [Code]. He taught there for 52 years longer than I and grand old man but he never became headmaster because of that one reason. The Board of Trustees were very narrow in those days. But then it was spread out. And then we finally got—I hired Catholics that [make it so the man] was qualified and had him on the Board. And in my athletics I played to parochial schools, and private schools, and public schools. We all worked together and got along nicely.

K: What effect did the Depression have on the school as far as enrollment?

M: You mean back in the 30's?

K: Yeah.

M: It had a right tough pressure on the school. It hurt us a great deal.

K: Did the enrollment drop?

M: Oh yeah the enrollment dropped. Yeah the enrollment dropped but we kept going.

K: Was it hard to get supplies?

M: No it wasn't hard. No the hardest time to get supplies was during the war. You had to have points. You have to have like food points and things like that. We always had the money but never had the points to get the points, that's what—

K: How did you get points?

M: How'd we get points? You know like you want to buy so much meat you want to buy so many groceries you've got to have—you see the Charlotte Hall School after I was there when I was at it first year about Christmas time the treasurer left. And I was the mathematician so they asked me to be treasurer. So I became treasurer and I was treasurer all during the—during those days until I became headmaster in 38. I learned, didn't know anything about it, didn't know anything about book keeping, all I knew was debit credit. But the only thing—the main thing about treasurer's work, just be honest, write checks. When the money comes in count for it when it goes out. You said how'd we get the food?

K: How'd you get points?

M: We had to earn those with so many students you got or what not you see. Depends on the [student life so much.]

K: What impact did World War II have on the school?

M: World War II? Didn't affect us. Well we built up here increased tremendously. As a matter of fact I had a letter from a telephone call from the President of United States Office to get a certain boy in there. I said, "If I don't have room put a hammock up in the hall and put him in there."

K: Were there problems getting teachers?

M: The problem my dear in getting teachers was this, see we were set up in those days, we had no place for married teachers. All the teachers had to be bachelors, see. So during the war, see the war took all the single men. And to get enough married men what am I going to do so occasionally we'd get a married couple, single no children, and they'd live in the dormitory but they had a private room and bath what not but it wasn't the best life for a lady you see. It was an awful hard job getting men teachers yes.

K: So all the teachers lived on campus?

M: Yes.

K: Because see one of the first things I did when I became headmaster I decided well one of the most important things at a school is faculty. They got a faculty that's got to be happy. For faculty to be happy if they're married you've got two things to think about. You got to think about the wife. She's got to be happy and what not. I never hired a man, a married man, unless I met his

wife. I would see her too was she gonna have it. So I fixed up nice quarters and built nice quarters for them. We bought homes [till my regime] and well they could live in these homes you know right on the campus. On the campus but live in these houses. So then we start hiring a lot of married teachers. But they still performed their duty like the single teachers, you know. Take a dormitory duty and what we call OC. Officer in Charge duty.

K: And what was an average school day like from sun up to sun down?

M: Oh gosh. First thing you'd have in the morning would be first call, the bugle would blow. That sign means get ready, get up and get ready. And then you have [revelry]. That's when all [boys] brought outside if the weather was fair outside the building and you know you check roll's called and everything. But after that you go back to your room and get ready for the meal. We called it mess or breakfast. I'd call for that [inaudible] everybody [was a check]. Then after that they go back to their rooms and they wait for school call. Then we have school call. Our classes were one hour long. And you had school call, the classes they changed every hour. Five minute break in there of course like our periods. And then lunch. They'd come out at lunch and full lunch. We have three quarters of an hour. Then school in the afternoon again. Classes pick up again quarter of one. One to quarter of three. Then you have drill. You got an hour of drill [inaudible phrase] if the weather is permitting. Then after that you have your athletic program. Everybody takes part. Then after that at 5:30 you have retreat. Six o'clock you have a dinner some course supper whatever the occasion might be. And then you have study period at eight o'clock. Call to quarters would have it. And students who were passing everything and doing satisfactory work we called it, they had the privilege of studying in their rooms. But those who didn't have that had to go to assembly hall to study under the direct supervision of an instructor. The study period lasted two hours. Study period over at nine then at 9:15 you'd have call to quarters. All come to the room you know and wash up and get ready for bed. 9:30 taps before they go to bed.

K: How did you handle discipline problems?

M: How did I handle it? I loved it. I believed in being strict but being fair. Never had any trouble with any cadet the whole time I was there 40 some years. Never. Course I'd take hold of them if necessary. They knew that see. Being the athletic coach and all. Never had any trouble with them at all. I had some teachers that did but never had any trouble with discipline. I loved it.

K: What was the cost of attending the school when you first came there?

M: What was the cost? I was treasurer. I think it was 535 dollars. Get all that from the catalogue.

K: What about when you left?

M: Let's see well the catalogue. I think about 1,500. Let's see.... [Not exactly but] it's been several years now you see.... [Let's see]. I wrote this catalogue. I know I put it in there because—
[Inaudible from 19:59 to 20:25].

K: What were some of the other expenses for the students?

M: When I left? No other expenses. All the spending money PDA we'd call it, personal drawing account. We recommended two dollars a week.

K: Was the tuition the only form of income for the school?

M: That's all. We had state scholarships was all the same thing.

K: What were the uniforms like?

M: We had a forest green uniform. Like the Marines, more like the Marine uniform.

K: Did everyone have the same uniform?

M: Everybody the same yeah. Same thing.

K: Did the uniforms change over the years?

M: Not much, no.

K: Where did they come from, the uniforms?

M: We got them from Baltimore [Inaudible], private maker, uniform maker manufacturer.

K: Were they expensive?

M: The uniforms yeah were a couple hundred dollars. Yeah.

K: Was that covered in the tuition?

M: No. Separate. Course that's [the only changes] you only buy the uniform once you see then you add parts to it each year. Uniform the first time when you come in that's when uniform costs you money. You got to buy a new uniform about [250] dollars.

K: How many girls attended the school?

M: Well until we took them in? Until we took them in none.

K: What about after you started taking them in?

M: I think after they must have had—the first two came in there when I was there. But they had about it must have gotten up to about 50 in 68. Day students only.

K: What was your relationship with students?

M: What my relationship with the students? What do you mean? I was more—I was if you want to bring it back to what they have in public schools I was a guidance counselor and everything like that for students. Every morning at assembly, every morning. I opened school every morning. Opened Lord's prayer and remarks. I always gave the students a little talk on ethics or something of that nature you know see every morning.

K: Could you explain what a barrack looked like inside?

M: A barracks? Oh yeah but ours were not like, not open barracks, they were not open barracks. Ours was just like you got one long corridor going down here, see. The long corridor and on the east side of the corridor going down have a room, rooms, rooms all down the line. And then the bathrooms all in the middle. And the bathroom had two doors to it. You go in one side and come out the other go in the other, vice versa, you see. But they were nice rooms, very nice, all of them nice. Now some schools have it that all of them go in there and 30, 40 boys all in one open space sleeping. We don't have that.

K: Is it true that you called the teachers captains?

M: That's right.

K: Why didn't you just call them by their names?

M: We were a military school and under the ROTC rules. If you got a degree a college degree you're entitled to be called a captain in the military you see. And they had to wear uniforms too. Like ROTC uniforms with buttons on them.

K: Have you ever heard the stories about the underground tunnels or Pier's ghost.

M: Well that's all myth.

K: But did you hear about them?

M: Oh yeah I've heard all those stories. Well you see that's the before I went there they had a pond back there called Smooch Pond and a French boy drowned back there you know see. This ponds all got snakes in it. And this boy drowned and when new boys would come in they would—this was before I went there they talked about that. I never allowed it. They used to have what they called hazing. You know what hazing is? Rat rules they called it.

K: Like initiating someone.

M: Yeah they used to have that. Course I ruled it out as soon as I became as soon as I got into this school. I was even a teacher when I ruled it out. I was the coach and I wouldn't allow any of my players to be hazed or anything like that. I didn't believe in it. The boys would tell some of these new ones sometimes, "Pier is coming back tonight. When he comes back he's gonna. You'll see him he's got red fingers all this stuff." And [they're gonna make appearance] before you so they'd come in this room at night you know blind folded. They'd blindfold themselves come in there and hold hand up in red gloves you know scared the hell out of them see. I don't believe in that stuff. [Inaudible phrase] tunnel [inaudible].

K: What was the PX?

M: The PX was like the post exchange where the students could go in and get knick-knacks and souvenirs and things like that you know. They had music, they had play records and things like that they liked it very much. It was a student PX. Ice cream, they'd get ice cream, and pens and pencils, souvenirs you know, trinkets, rings, bracelets, and things like that.

K: How did the students amuse themselves aside from school work?

M: How'd they amuse themselves? Oh they had all—most of them liked sports, they'd go to the gym and play or the athletic fields. And they had dances, weekend dances.

K: What was the mid-winter hop?

M: The mid-winter hop was the biggest dance of the year. That's when all of them—they put in had it—they used to have it in January, February, well decorated, elaborate. And course before I went there it was the biggest thing in Southern Maryland. Course these people used to come here on the train to go to it and all that kind of stuff. But it was big, fancy bands, a nice band, in the big gymnasium.

K: So they brought—they'd bring girls to—

M: Oh yeah, yeah we used to get the girls from St. Mary's Seminary which is now St. Mary's College and St. Mary's Academy. The two girls schools down there. They'd furnish the girls. And also the school at Bryantown used to bring girls down to the boys.

K: Where did the girls stay? Did they—

M: No [they didn't stay at all]. They just came in to rest around in the meantime we had a room back in the gymnasium [inaudible] the reception room. We had a big reception room at Charlotte Hall School.

K: Did the boys go off the school grounds to pick them up or?

M: No.

K: How did they get there?

M: Parents bring them in or they come by bus. The schools bring them in by buses.

K: Did the students get away with much?

M: Not too much no [inaudible phrase]. We didn't allow anything like—we didn't have dope in those days. Didn't allow it. If we found it we'd take them out [over night].

K: How many times were girls that lived in the area run off the school grounds?

M: Never.

K: Never you never had any problems there?

M: No never had trouble with that. Only girls that would come in on school grounds would be—I mean they were welcome there they were student's sisters you know, part of the family come down to see them see. None of them were run off.

K: Were there any student clubs?

M: Oh yeah.

K: Sports clubs?

M: Oh we had photography club, various clubs...many clubs because—I have some of the list of it here. Where is that all these clubs they had. Each teacher had a club you know. We put teachers in charge of them to sponsor them. Well the news, news club. We had our own printing press at one time you know see. We had a hobby club, all students had different hobbies, science club, music club, scouting, and your athletics, and of course your shooting marksmanship you know see, and language, had a language club. You take like a language club there you say what would they do. Well they would if a teacher were teaching French he'd take his language club into Washington and have dinner at a French restaurant or what not you know. The atmosphere see.

K: What did you know about the Washington Stonewall Debate Society.

M: What did I know about it? Well it was the one of the oldest and the first in the United States to operate as a debating society. And it was 1796 or something like that founded. Washington Stonewall first started out as a Washington Society and then took on the name of Stonewall after Jackson became president.

K: Where did they meet?

M: The old white house had a big room all set aside for them. Colonel F. B. [teach] Brooker New York. He died a pauper but at one time worth about 130 some million. He died two million. He left them real nicely fixed up and everything and they'd [go out and beat]. See we had debating societies all throughout the school. And that was the top one.

K: What did they debate on?

M: Modern day subjects, anything. Now you answer that question I want to ask you. You see [Carsey] of this lady who teaches you at the [inaudible] get you a copy of the program that they had for the bicentennial years ago debate. We had that was a tremendous affair. We had a thing at mid-winter, a big snow storm, a big band came down got caught in the snow up here up at Marlboro but it finally got there and all these judges and everything else for the debate. It was interesting yes. That [inaudible phrase] half of [inaudible phrase].

K: Were there any famous graduates from the school?

M: Oh yeah God I wouldn't know them all. I think we produced more lawyers and doctors than any other school our size and [our strength]. We got—I'll give you an example. Right here in St. Mary's County, St. Mary's County yeah he's dead now. Judge [Walter] Dorsey. He was one. Doctor [Inaudible] of Mechanicsville an outstanding doctor, country doctor in the United States. Heard of him haven't you?

K: Yeah I think I've heard of him.

M: He's one of them. Doctor [Inaudible]. His brother Oliver [Inaudible] big lawyer down here in Mechanicsville. And we got Robert [Poole] who wrote the book about Southern Maryland. [People went on sale]. He was one of [them also]. A lot of local people. Special locals.

K: Did you know Sylvester Stallone.

M: Who?

K: Sylvester Stallone.

M: Sylvester Stallone. When did he go?

K: [I don't know when he...]

M: Now the oldest alumnus that we have living today is Z. D. Blackstone. Blackstone [Florence] [Inaudible phrase]. He's about 110 I think now. About a 110 I think.

K: What did a Charlotte Hall diploma mean to a college?

M: They'd take you right in without any question. And my recommendation on it. Didn't have to take an exam or anything. And I had boys that finished Charlotte Hall School [inaudible phrase] and I had boys that finished Charlotte Hall school. And they go to college and take an exam that skipped most of the first year of work. [I like that]. Saw a boy the other day who he took my math at Charlotte Hall school and went up to Penn State and skipped all of first year math. Same boy skipped the first year of English. Don't have to. I say you're foolish to do that. I would never skip it I'd go back in the class and take it. Make the good grades you know it helps you see. Why skip, I wouldn't skip it.

K: Can you describe the 200th Anniversary?

M: I can show you pictures of it.

K: What was it like?

M: I can show you. I got all the—military took all the pictures of it. We had outfits. We [was great up here] and everywhere for it. It was a big affair.

K: When was it?

M: 74.

K: When did you leave the school?

M: 74. I gave them a warning. I told them I was leaving at the end of the 200th Anniversary. I was through. And they didn't pay much attention to it you know like most people do until it was last minute. And I had a man trained for my position but they didn't want him. He's over in Calvert County now. He's at a high school teaching assistant principal. They wanted to change everything. [I] don't want to change everything. And new philosophy and everything else so they did.

K: Why did you leave the school?

M: Well think how long I'd been there. I was getting tired you know. It don't mean I left. In fact if I'd known they were gonna close it I'd have stayed on. I'd have stayed on but I had a man trained for it and they had somebody [inaudible] what I had to take it. And I said, "He'll never make good." In the first place he never had any experience. You gonna bring him in here and set him in this job with no experience he'll only just do bad. But they didn't listen to me. Brought him in there and the first thing he did and they permitted it he changed did away with the military. He told the students that my name is Ben Green, call me Ben. Don't call him a title at all. Oh God [inaudible phrase]. No I'd have stayed on if I'd known because I had a man trained for the job, see. And what I was gonna do was put him it. He could run it and I was gonna help

him if he needed it. But they asked me not to interfere in any operation of the school after I left. I said, "I guarantee I will not if that's what you want." So I didn't.

K: Did it disappoint you when Ben Green did away with the military?

M: Oh sure. It was stupid. And the Trustees permitted it. The old man over there is one of them. [Carsey] Dr. [Carsey] and Judge Digges. They permitted that. I don't know why they did it but it was up to them.

K: Do you know what caused the closing of the school?

M: Yeah it got to the point where it lost students. It wasn't getting any students you can't operate. You got to have them. Wasn't run right.

K: Do you know why they weren't getting any students?

M: Oh sure. You do away with discipline you don't have anything. Any school you have now, military school you got discipline.

K: And how did you feel about the closing of the school?

M: Made me sick. Made me sick. It could have been operating. See I told the Board, it's in the minutes up, you could find it in the minutes of the Board of Trustees, years ago that the time was coming that Charlotte Hall would eventually be a day school. Would operate on being a day school. And the [day she is right there] look at all those big homes around Charlotte Hall School. People want to send their kids to school somewhere [inaudible phrase]. It had a good, wonderful academic program. We really had it. Our kids were really trained.

K: Is there anything you'd like to add? Anything I haven't asked you that you think would be interesting?

M: I think about I'll [tell you].

K: Thank you very much for your time and your effort.

[End of Tape]