

IN ITS BEST HOUR: COEDUCATION COMES TO WASHINGTON AND LEE

BY
WENDY LOVELL '90



Photos by Patrick Hinely '73

Twenty years ago this fall, the first undergraduate women arrived on campus. Their presence resulted from a debate—definitely serious, sometimes contentious, usually thoughtful—that formally began in 1983. However, it wasn't the first time W&L had considered coeducation. Nearly a century before, in 1896, Professor Addison Hogue proposed that the University admit women; the faculty voted no, 7-3. In 1902, the faculty again voted against coeducation, 9-1. During World War II, 28 women attended in the summers of 1942 and 1943, filling spaces left by male students in the service. In 1971, the Board of Trustees reviewed the issue but took no action. In 1976, the board voted no.

The issue stayed in the background until 1983, when John D. Wilson became the president of W&L. Such pressing matters as the quality and number of applicants, as well as current educational and societal trends, meant that coeducation became a topic the W&L community couldn't avoid.

Better Dead Than Coed

Wilson, in fact, hadn't even been sworn in before the discussion began. As soon as he was named to the post on Sept. 1, 1982, he traveled several times a week from Virginia Tech, where he had been executive vice president, to meet with faculty and staff. Unsolicited comments about coeducation often slipped into the conversations, making it clear to Wilson that most of the faculty favored admitting women.

He began hearing from students as well. "Once I moved to Lexington in January, I invited 10 to 20 young men to dinner each night," says Wilson. "I didn't get the sense from these conversations that the students thought we needed to coeducate; however, some would come into my office the next day and amend their opinions."

Opponents on campus—and they were plentiful and vocal—expressed themselves through such means as bumper stickers and T-shirts reading "Better Dead than Coed" and "Girls in the Hay, Not Everyday!" along with a banner proclaiming "No Marthas" flying below Ol' George himself atop Washington Hall.

A student opponent, Lee Hollis '86, "liked the all-male environment at W&L," he says. "You had the fraternities, but in a way it was one big fraternity. The atmosphere was very relaxed, and there were few distractions during the week."

Hollis and several like-minded students even conducted a sit-in at Wilson's office in May 1984. While it didn't do much for the cause, such a protest at a conservative university like Washington and Lee drew the attention of regional media, the AP wire, even *Rolling Stone* magazine. "I think we knew we weren't going to accomplish anything with the sit-in," says Hollis, the son of Sam Hollis Sr. '51 and brother of Sam Hollis Jr. '83. "President Wilson wasn't in his office the day we did it. It was a purely symbolic protest; in fact, people came and went so they wouldn't miss their classes."

"The difficulty about momentous decisions of this sort is that no one can see the future with absolute clarity."

**W&L President
John D. Wilson**
**IN THE SEPTEMBER/
OCTOBER 1984 ISSUE OF
THE ALUMNI MAGAZINE**

Alumni Weigh In

Off campus, Jack Warner '40 eschewed bumper stickers and T-shirts for a letter that appeared in the alumni magazine. "I am totally against coeducation for W&L now and in the near future," wrote the chairman and CEO of the Gulf States Paper Corp., in Tuscaloosa, Ala. He resigned from the Board of Trustees in protest and spoke for many alumni when he called it "a highly controversial possibility that merits serious thought," pointing to the school's "dominant character, excellent

tradition and recognized high principles. It is *different* from other schools, and that *difference* will continue to make it flourish."

Other alumni around the country pricked up their ears after they read an article in their local newspapers by Phil Murray '83. A reporter for the *Ring-Tum Phi*, after graduation he joined the Newport News (Va.) *Daily Press*; today he is the senior vice president of Dirks, Van Essen & Murray, a merger-and-acquisition firm specializing in newspapers. In 1983, as a rookie reporter in Newport News, he interviewed Wilson when the president spoke to a local alumni group. The wire services picked up his story, which quoted Wilson: "I want to put the question of coeducation to rest by May—one way or another. . . . I will either ask the Board of Trustees to approve a change or tell them that we should remain all male at the undergraduate level."

Dick Sessoms had been W&L's director of alumni programs for just two months when the article appeared. "The first phone call I received was from an alumnus who stopped to call me from a pay phone on the New Jersey turnpike to find out what was going on in Lexington," says Sessoms.

"That was one of many calls I fielded from alumni who opposed the idea, but I also heard from those who supported it."

Sessoms had planned a series of alumni chapter events in the fall of 1983 to introduce the new president to graduates. Thanks to Murray's article, talk of coeducation soon dominated the events. "John (Wilson) could articulate better than anyone why W&L should stay all male," says Sessoms. "Then, so cleverly, he would dismantle everything he had just said to explain why we should consider coeducation."



MONICA BURKE '89 BECAME THE FIRST WOMAN UNDERGRADUATE TO GET HER ID PHOTO. PRESIDENT LEE WATCHED OVER THE PROCEEDINGS.

A University at Risk

In October 1983, the Board of Trustees, led by Rector James M. Ballengee '48L, instructed Wilson to re-examine the issue. Over the next few months, the board sent out a questionnaire to alumni, and committees explored the impact of coeducation on W&L's academic programs, institutional size, admissions policies and practices, faculty and staff growth and change, athletics, residential facilities, relations with alumni and other constituencies, and quality of student life and traditions.

Predictions of a national drop in college enrollment and a decline in the number of quality applicants proved big factors in the discussion. Accordingly, all eyes turned to W&L's admissions office, not only to provide crucial data for an informed decision, but also to ensure that then-director Bill Hartog and his staff were going about their business the right way.

From an admissions perspective, W&L had little choice but to go coed, says Hartog, now dean of admissions and financial aid. "Demographic projections for the number of high school graduates, together with our ongoing desire to enroll the very strongest student body by all measurements, left the University at risk," he says.

"Time also had changed," Hartog adds. "In the '50s and '60s, our distinctive qualities had more to do with the Honor System and the depth and breadth of our curriculum than with our all-male status. By the '80s, however, the reverse was true."

Hartog found himself in the hot seat with opponents almost as much as Wilson did. Some of them, however, saw a bright side to the debate. "Bill Ford ('61L), a big player in Atlanta who was against coeducation, came up to me one day on campus and asked how I thought the decision would go," says Hartog. "He said, 'If it has to happen, will it happen in time for my daughter, Delia, to apply?'"

Everyone Spoke Their Mind

Armed with survey results (see sidebar at right) and committee reports, the board met in special session on Friday and Saturday, July 13 and 14, 1984, to decide on the issue. The trustees conferred Friday afternoon, over dinner and late into the sleepless night, and then took up the debate again on Saturday morning. At 10:40 a.m., someone made the motion on the momentous resolution: "Resolved, that Washington and Lee University shall admit qualified students, regardless of gender, to all of its degree programs commencing in the Fall of 1985." Before he took the vote, Ballengee asked each trustee to state his or her position once more. Although the board's rules called for a simple majority on such votes, the trustees had determined in advance that the question would require more than a simple majority. The answer came at 11:45 a.m. It was yes.

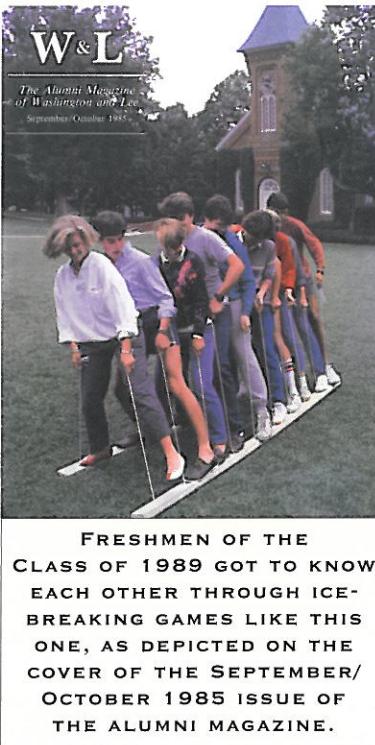
"I had no idea what that vote would look like, and I didn't think it would pass," remembers Wilson. "It was a very moving meeting, and everyone spoke their mind. The first three votes were negative, but in the end, the motion carried with a 17 to 7 margin." Some observers thought that Wilson had made his mind up long before July 14; in any case, he first declared his own position on coeducation when he cast his "yes" vote that day.

The usually quiet campus teemed with visitors who had come just for the occasion—students, faculty and staff, plus reporters from outside news organizations as well as from the *Ring-Tum Phi* and WLUR radio. One of the visiting students, John Lewis '86, opposed coeducation and was devastated by the decision. "When the trustees came out of the session, it was apparent that the vote had been difficult," says Lewis. "Some of them were crying. While I realized that coeducation would probably enhance the institution, I also knew it would change the place forever."

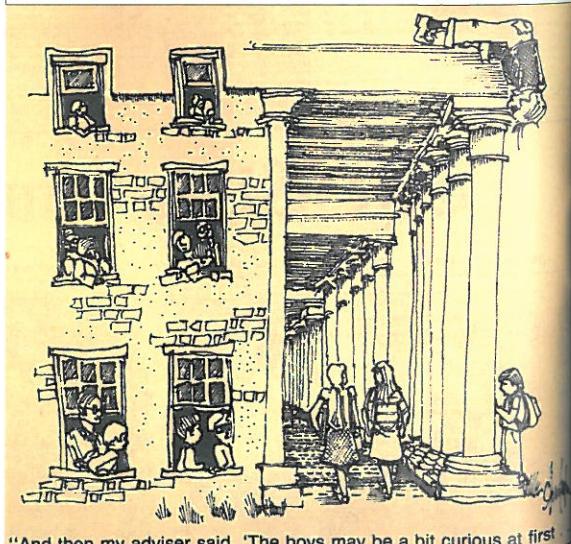
Another student, Cole Dawson '85, president of the Executive Committee at the time, took the opposite view. The son of John C. Dawson '60, he thought coeducation was "a positive move and one that will make W&L a stronger institution," he told the *Ring-Tum Phi*.

Wilson (and many others) took heart in the comments of trustee and opponent A. Christian Compton '50, '53L. At the press conference after the vote, he said, "Those of us who love and support Washington and Lee . . . will work just as hard to make coeducation another positive factor as we worked against the proposal."

Compton, with his generous attitude, had plenty of company. On their way home to Richmond following the vote, trustee Frances Lewis and her husband, Sydney Lewis '40, '43L, decided then and there to fund a scholarship for women who might not be able to afford W&L's tuition. (They later donated to another cause—honor scholarships named for John and Anne Wilson.)



A CARTOON FROM THE SEPT. 12, 1985 ISSUE OF THE RING-TUM PHI POKED SOME GOOD-NATURED FUN AT THE NEW COEDUCATIONAL SCENE.



I'm Coming Here

Hartog was grateful for people like the Lewises who helped him market the school to women and attract strong female applicants. "We knew we needed women at Washington and Lee, but we didn't know how much women needed W&L," he says. His initial goal was to enroll 80 women in the Class of 1989.

Hartog's worries began to ease on the Monday following the decision. The phone in the admissions office began to ring, and four female high school students stopped by for information on the University.

Another visitor to the admissions office was Delia Ford '89—daughter of opponent Bill Ford. "I was a summer scholar at W&L at the time," says Ford, one of the theater department's first female majors. "I was studying writing and radio journalism and happened to be on air with WLUR when the decision came down. I remember screaming, 'I'm coming here, I'm coming here!' into the mike." Now a writer in Chicago, Ford also is raising a young son.

For admission in the fall of 1985, the University received more applications than ever—2,639 total, 697 from women. It offered places to 886 seekers, 33 percent of the total applicants. The previous year, W&L had accepted 60 percent of the total.

Just about everyone on campus, from the staff of the physical plant to the denizens of the president's office, had their work cut out for them during 1984-1985 to prepare for the coming of women. President Wilson convened the Coeducation Steering Committee to advise the University on how best to prepare. It comprised students Michael J. Black '86, Lee Hollis, Christopher Williams '85 and Lee Doane '86L, a female law student; faculty members Jean Dunbar, Joseph Goldsten, Nancy Margand and Andrew W. McThenia '58, '63L; and staffers H. Robert Huntley, William D. McHenry '54, Frank Parsons '54 and Anita Williams. Chaired by Pamela Simpson, art professor and then-associate dean of the College, the committee examined every aspect of University life: academics, athletics, social organizations, campus security and student housing. It also talked with representatives at recently coeducated colleges such as Davidson College, in North Carolina. In just one example of the care with which the committee attended to its duties, Parsons toured the campus at night with female law students to decide where to add lights and thereby increase security measures.



SIGNS OF THE TIMES: AMIDST BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN POSTERS, FAMILY PHOTOS AND CASSETTE TAPES, NEW FRIENDS GOT ACQUAINTED IN A DORM ROOM.

STATISTICALLY SPEAKING

During the winter term of 1984, while the board conducted its own research, a Richmond firm surveyed the alumni body, and Professor David Novack's sociology class did the same for the students and undergraduate faculty.

The alumni survey, completed by 40.6 percent of the constituency (about 16,500 alumni total), indicated that 58.5 percent were opposed to coeducation, 28.9 percent were in favor and 10.6 percent had no preference. Some 55.1 percent preferred decreasing the size of the student body to coeducation, and 64 percent indicated they would rather coeducate than lower admissions standards.

Of the 85 percent of faculty who responded to Novack's survey, 82.3 percent either strongly or somewhat favored coeducation, 14.3 either strongly or somewhat opposed coeducation, and 3.4 percent had no opinion. A whopping 84.8 percent said coeducation would be in the best interests of W&L.

Major points from the student survey, completed by 84 percent of the student body, indicated that 52.9 percent strongly or somewhat opposed coeducation, 42.4 percent strongly or somewhat favored it, and 4.7 percent had no opinion. A majority of 62.1 percent said coeducation would be in the University's best interest. More than 80 percent worried that coeducation would negatively affect fraternities, and 44.8 percent thought women would be "somewhat" of a distraction in the classroom.

In 1986, after eight months of coeducation, Novack again set his sociology students to the task of polling students, 94 women and 890 men. A majority thought coeducation was good for W&L, and three-quarters (including 95 percent of the women) approved of the administration's handling of the transition. (Nearly a third of the women, however, thought the administration had been too attentive.)

More than 52 percent of junior and senior men said they had been opposed to coeducation in 1984, but now only 34 percent and 29 percent, respectively, remained in that camp. Interestingly, 45 percent of the freshmen men and 40 percent of the sophomore men thought the University should have remained a single-sex institution, an attitude that Novack attributed to the overwhelming attention that had been directed at the freshmen class, women especially.

When asked if the Honor System was the school's most important tradition, 69 percent of the men and 87 percent of the women concurred.

Hollis is pretty sure why he was asked to serve on the committee. "The administration wisely wanted to have someone who was against coeducation involved in the planning process," he says. "They didn't want a hostile environment on campus when the women arrived, and our job not only was to recommend changes to accommodate female students, but also to help prepare current students for their arrival. I think serving in this capacity helped me accept the decision, and I assumed a big-brother role when they came."

"Things have dramatically changed in 20 years, so it's hard for us to imagine some of the hostility toward women then," says Simpson. "We wanted to make sure we were being responsible in the admission of women, and there was an awful lot of anxiety among the faculty, even though most of them favored coeducation."

Not every issue Simpson and the committee had to address was monumental. Several male students complained that they didn't receive shower caddies like their female classmates, and others raised a ruckus when the 1985-1986 point cards for the Letitia Pate Evans Dining Hall were printed on pink paper. Dining personnel assured everyone that the color was only a coincidence, and a waggish administrator told a distressed male student, "It's probably worth more on quiche day."

Heeding Compton's call to "make coeducation another positive factor," the admissions department and the steering committee did their jobs thoroughly and well. In the fall of 1985, the campus was ready for not the 80 hoped-for women, but for the 105 women who actually enrolled.

No Agenda

Jenny Bray Stratton '89, a native of Houston, felt welcome long before she set foot on campus that September. "Alumni in Houston decided that if coeducation was going to happen, then they wanted women like their own daughters to attend W&L," she says. "They actively recruited us; it was like being a football star."

"The summer before I left for Lexington, we lunched with several Houston alums," she recalls. "Only later did I realize that many of them must have been coeducation skeptics, and our meeting was meant to show them we were very much like their own daughters and granddaughters. It became obvious that we didn't have an agenda, nor did we want to go and change the place."

Stratton adjusted to life as a W&L freshman—with one exception. She found that the men sitting at the tables in front of the Co-op always stared at the women who walked by. "As a freshman,



PRESIDENT JOHN WILSON TALKED WITH REPORTERS IN SEPTEMBER 1985, WHEN THE FIRST FEMALE STUDENTS ARRIVED ON CAMPUS.

you are always trying to blend in, so it was very embarrassing when they stared at you, and they always seemed to know you were coming before you rounded the corner," she says. "A male friend of mine told me that the sound of girls' shoes clicking on the bricks was so foreign to them. I immediately ordered a pair of rubber, L.L. Bean Maine hunting shoes that I wore with almost everything that year, even dresses."

Julie Snowden Drake '89 found the hostility of some of the upperclassmen intimidating, as they had passed their harsh feelings down to their younger fraternity brothers. Further, some of the students from neighboring women's colleges who frequented the fraternities often acted rude to Drake and her female classmates. To add insult to injury, some of these same outside women bunched uninvited in the lounges of the W&L women's dorms on the weekends.

"The fall was bad that way, but looking back now, I think part of the problem could have been just being away from home for the first time," Drake says. "Being one of the only women in class was sometimes difficult, too, although I was never afraid to speak out. In my high school math class, I was one of four women in a class of 25, which helped prepare me in a way for W&L." The

daughter of W. Latimer Snowden '60, Drake married another student, Bob Drake '88, worked as a school counselor, has two children and lives in Oakton, Va.

"I had thoughts about leaving W&L during fall term, but there were a lot of people who were really caring," she says. "The hostility of some of the students and the fact

SALES OF BUMPER STICKERS BOomed
IN THE LEXINGTON AREA.

SCREW Tradition
DATE A W&L GIRL



SOPRANOS AND ALTOES JOINED BASSES AND BARITONES
IN THE UNIVERSITY CHORUS IN OCTOBER 1985.

that the anti-coed bumper stickers and T-shirts were everywhere made our nerves raw." Drake credits staff and faculty members for getting her through that first semester, such as J. Holt Merchant Jr. '61, her father's fraternity brother and her adviser; Sessoms, who lunched often with the freshmen women in the dining hall; and Lewis John '58, dean of students, who visited Drake when she spent several days in the infirmary.

T-shirts and bumper stickers with a fresh set of slogans still reminded everyone that some wounds would be slow to heal: "Women at W&L: the Beginning of an ERROR!" "The Road Trip Continues '85-'86" and "There's Nothing I'd Rather See Less Than W&L Girls at Fancy Dress!" Stratton fought fire with fire—and a sense of humor. She and Ted Le Clercq '86 manufactured 125 T-shirts proclaiming, "W&L Women . . . Quality Doesn't Need to Travel." They sold out.

"Despite returning the jab, I understood why some of the upperclassmen were unhappy with the decision," says Stratton, who worked in the investment field and is raising two children at home in Austin, Texas. "If St. Agnes Academy, my all-girls Catholic high school, had coeducated without my consent, I'd have been furious. Fortunately, any hard feelings eased over time." She served as the first female president of the Alumni Association, from 2000-2001.

In 1996, President John Elrod assessed the first decade of coeducation, focusing on the Class of 1989. "In retrospect, we may say that their role was to help W&L become comfortable with itself as a place where men and women could study and play together," he said on Founders' Day, "and they did this very well."

20 Years and Counting

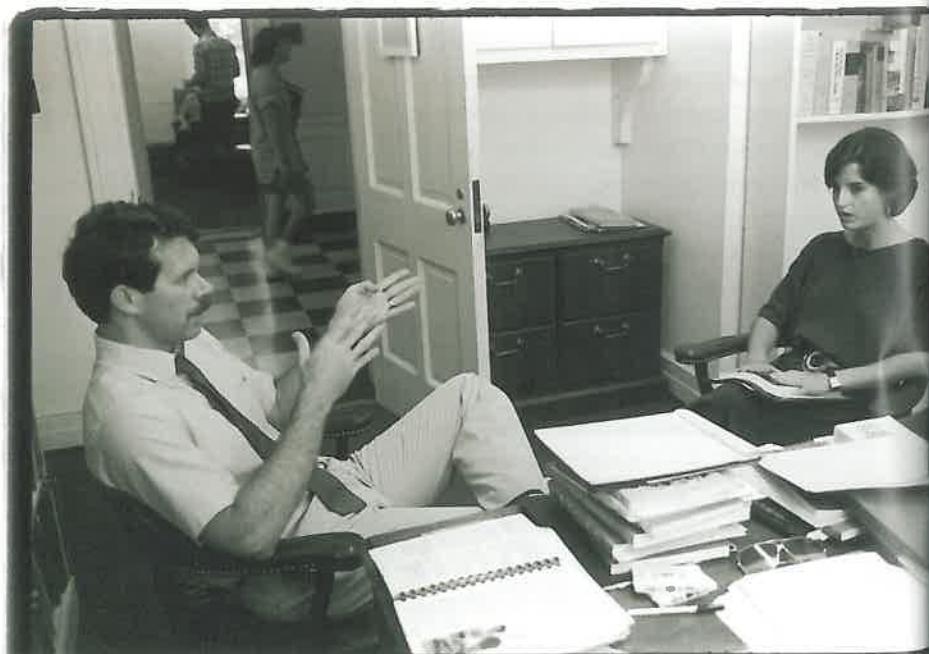
Now we commemorate 20 years of undergraduate women at W&L. "Nearly all coed opponents have

grown to love the outcome and admit they were wrong," notes Sessoms. At Homecoming 2002, Jack Warner stunned everyone at a meeting of the Washington Society, the Alumni Board and the Law Council with two announcements: his change of heart on the issue and his sizable donation to the University. When the applause had died down, Emily Bevill Lordi '89 stood up and gave Warner a heartfelt thank-you.

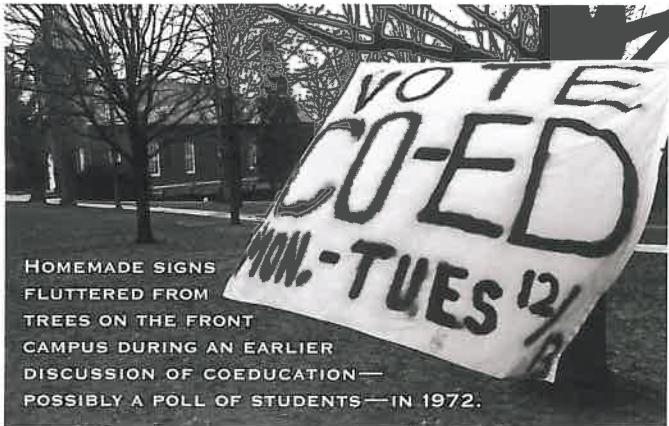
"Not only did Mr. Warner announce that he was wrong about coeducation, but he backed it up with a \$1 million

check to fund student scholarships primarily for women," says Lordi, who serves on the Alumni Board. "I publicly thanked him for his generosity on behalf of my class. While (knowing about) alumni who were opposed to coeducation didn't bother me when I was a student, it's nice to know that they've finally come around."

John Lewis served as Executive Committee president during the first year of coeducation. Emotions ran high for some of the men in his class, he remembers, but many, like him, eventually accepted the decision as a positive step in the growth of the University. The senior vice president of a Richmond investments firm, he is pleased with the way the school has flourished in the past two decades and hopes his children will consider W&L when they are ready for college.



A MEMBER OF THE CLASS OF 1969 (LARRY BOETSCH, THEN-PROFESSOR OF ROMANCE LANGUAGES) ADVISES A MEMBER OF THE CLASS OF 1989 (JULIE SALERNO) DURING REGISTRATION IN FALL 1985.



While Cole Dawson says his experience as a W&L student was incredible, he thought the University needed a change like coeducation to reenergize and to improve its value to students. Now a senior vice president for Merrill Lynch's private banking group in Houston, Dawson visited the University with his wife and three daughters in August 2003. "I think coeducation had the impact we thought it might," he says. "The new Commons is amazing, and the campus as a whole is over the top."

"W&L has a more vibrant atmosphere, in my opinion, than when I was there, and I think that can be attributed to the arrival of women," Dawson adds. "The unique character of W&L was, and is not defined by, the coeducation issue but by the Honor System, small class size and the profile of the student the University accepts. The women I meet who have attended W&L have the same characteristics as the men—they are well rounded, have sales skills and communications skills, and are interesting people both intellectually and socially."

"I've never been happier to be wrong about something in my life," says Lee Hollis, the current president of the Alumni Board. He's an attorney in Birmingham, Ala., with three children. "I think if W&L hadn't gone coed, we would be floundering, and the University would not be as well respected as it is today."

"There are differences at W&L since coeducation, but I'm always struck by how little things have really changed," continues Hollis, who returns to campus several times a year. "Sure, there are new buildings, we now have sororities in addition to the fraternities, and the drinking age has changed the social scene. But the speaking tradition, the Honor System and the collegiality and friendliness of the campus are as strong as they ever were."

"The coeducation decision was an incredible exercise for the University, and to me, it was Washington and Lee in its best hour," says Bill Hartog. "The trustees started thinking about the decision with their hearts and ended up making the decision with their heads. The process was conducted with the highest degree of civility, and it was done beautifully." *

For much more on 20 years of undergraduate women at W&L, including a timeline, profiles of notable W&L women, details of the celebration week (March 6-12, 2006) and of Reunion Weekend activities (May 4-7, 2006), see women.wlu.edu. Material is being added to the site continuously.

Author's note: My journey at Washington and Lee began in 1985, when I was accepted to the University. I was set on attending the College of William and Mary until my high school history teacher and a W&L alumnus sold me on Washington and Lee and its journalism program. I was not intimidated by being a member of the second coed class at W&L, and I've never thought of myself as a pioneer. My mother was more concerned about the 7-to-1 male-female ratio at W&L at the time, and she made it clear that she and my father weren't paying for an "M.R.S." degree. I got my B.A. in journalism and, unintentionally, an M.R.S. too, when I married Tom Lowell '91. We moved back to Lexington in 2000, when he joined the Alumni Office.

Since I set foot on campus for the first time in 1986, I've been impressed with the way the University prepared for coeducation. Physically, the campus was ready for our arrival, and the staff and faculty invited and encouraged us to take part in just about every organization. I was impressed by the women in the class ahead of me and assumed their freshman year had been tougher than my own. Despite the sentiments of T-shirts and bumper stickers, I felt I belonged at Washington and Lee.

To write this article, I didn't rely on my own institutional knowledge, but instead combed University archives and talked with some of the men and women who were part of the early years of coeducation. My research has sparked an even greater appreciation for the leadership of the University during the 1980s. I think we are fortunate that our leaders follow our motto, "non in cautus futuri"—not unmindful of the future. That insightful spirit has made this University a great place, and I am confident it will remain so.—WENDY LOVELL '90



A PHYSICAL EDUCATION CLASS
WARMED UP AT WILSON FIELD.