

Allen B. Sanders – His Life and Times

By Daniel Shutt

January, 2008



In the course of nearly one hundred and twenty years of existence, Elon has attracted countless talented faculty members. Each of these people has left an indelible mark on Elon as an institution and as a community. One of those distinguished individuals is Allen B. Sanders. The course of Sanders' life has taken him to a great many places: his bucolic boyhood in West Virginia, the frigid North Atlantic seas during the Second World War, the Pacific warmth of Hawaii, and the quiet and warm climes of Elon. Now, beginning his ninth decade of life, Sanders has time to reflect on his experiences. His reflections on the things he's seen, the people he's met, and the places he's been, should be instructive for all.

Allen Sanders was born in 1918, in Akron, Ohio. The United States was one year into its involvement in the Great War, Russia was becoming the Soviet Union, and a flu pandemic emerged, destined to take millions of lives. Sanders' father worked at one of Akron's many rubber plants as an inspector, an occupation classified as "defense-related"¹. Because the elder Sanders had a pregnant wife, he was exempt from military service. During Sanders' youth, the family moved around frequently as his father looked for jobs -- in Harrisonburg, Virginia and Washington, DC². Eventually, Sanders' father returned to West Virginia, where his family owned a farm. There, in Romney, West Virginia, he opened a country store near a railroad crossing³. He sold railroad crossties and mine props, finally fulfilling his dream of going into business for himself⁴. Located on West Virginia's angular eastern panhandle, Romney is officially the oldest town in the state, chartered in 1762. The Sanders family decided to put down roots in Romney, building a cobblestone house in 1929⁵. Young Allen Sanders went to Romney

¹ A. Sanders, Interview (January, 2008).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Elementary, proving a good enough student to pass the state placement exam⁶. He continued on in Romney High School, where he continued as a successful student. He also stayed active in local 4-H clubs, eventually representing Hampshire County at the state 4-H's Older Boys Camp in Jackson's Mill⁷. His youthful adventures at Jackson's Mill proved formative, and the camp became something of a second home for Sanders. By the time Sanders graduated from high school in 1936, he was working at the camp as the manager of the craft shop⁸. There can be no doubt that in these experiences at Jackson's Mill, Sanders acquired his passion for management and solid accounting. Sanders acquired another passion at Jackson's Mill, though. The camp's Director of Grounds and Buildings, who lived just up the hill from the camp, had a young daughter named Maple⁹. The two were fond of each other, talking late into the night¹⁰.

In the summer of 1936, Sanders received a telegram from a friend, telling him that he had a room at West Virginia University in the fall¹¹. Sanders had assumed that his family couldn't afford college, but his father had made the arrangements. So Sanders enrolled at the University, while still working some at Jackson's Mill¹². To help pay for his tuition, Sanders washed dishes in the dining hall. It was hard work, but he needed something to supplement his family's slim earnings¹³. It wasn't enough – after two years of college, Sanders' family ran out of money. He would have to quit school and find a job¹⁴. He hopped around a bit, working a couple of years at Jackson's Mill before moving to Washington, DC for awhile. He sold hosiery door-to-door for a

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

few days, before he grew tired of it¹⁵. Finally, he sat down with an uncle, chairman of the Civil Aeronautics Board, in search of a job. After a few unsuccessful job-hunting attempts, the uncle made clear to Sanders what he needed to do: it was time to go back to college¹⁶. So, in 1940, Sanders returned to West Virginia University to complete his college education.

Sanders was a student when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, hurtling the United States into another World War and changing Sanders' life. Sanders seemed to know the changes that were afoot, and sought to break the news to Maple:

“The Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7th, [19]41, and Maple and I were scheduled to get married. So, I went to see her and said, ‘We’re not going to get married, I’m going to war.’

And she just cried. And she insisted – so we got married in December of 1941.”¹⁷

In 1942, when Sanders graduated from West Virginia, he received a commission as an Ensign in the Supply Corps of the U.S. Navy¹⁸. He was sent to Boston to train for three months, then ordered aboard an escort vessel as a supply officer¹⁹. These vessels were charged with the task of accompanying convoys across the icy cold North Atlantic, traveling back and forth between various ports. Thus began Sanders' Navy career, which would last over two decades²⁰. In his capacity as an officer in the Supply Corps, Sanders put his management and organizational skills to work for his country. The talents he acquired at the craft store in Jackson's Mill, the talents his father employed at the country store in Romney, West Virginia, proved pertinent to the task of supplying huge Navy vessels during wartime.

When the war ended in 1945, Sanders was faced with a choice: he could remain in the Navy and become a career military man, or he could return to civilian life and find another job.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Elon Speaker's Bureau Information (mid-1970s). Elon University: Belk Library Archives and Special Collections.

He had an offer from International Business Machines, but Sanders opted to stay in the Navy²¹. Maybe it was his unhappy experiences in Depression-era job-hunting, or maybe it was his appreciation for life at sea, but Sanders wasn't eager to return to civilian life. As a supply officer, he served in ports from Hawaii to Washington, DC, always letting it be known that he wished to serve on an aircraft carrier. Finally, one day in the late 1950s, Sanders' wish was granted: he was ordered to take his place as supply officer on the USS Kitty Hawk, which was under construction in Camden, New Jersey²². The Kitty Hawk embarked from the East Coast, circling Cape Horn, resting in San Diego and San Francisco before settling with the Pacific fleet near the Philippines and Japan²³. Sanders spent three years stationed aboard the Kitty Hawk, visiting much of Japan and the Pacific, as well as witnessing President Kennedy's speech to the fleet from onboard the Kitty Hawk²⁴.

After three years in the Pacific with the Kitty Hawk, Sanders was ordered to report to Washington, DC to work as Director of Supply Policy²⁵. Sanders was a master manager, but he found the work dull and unchallenging. He had no enthusiasm for the job, and longed for a new opportunity. He had received an MBA from George Washington, and was thinking about a job outside of the Navy²⁶. Not long after, Elon President J. Earl Danieley, visiting Washington, DC for other business, contacted Sanders about setting up a meeting²⁷. Sanders wasn't entirely surprised – he had already received offers from several other schools in the area. When Danieley and Sanders met, however, Danieley impressed Sanders with his salesmanship – he sold Sanders

²¹ A. Sanders, Interview (January, 2008).

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

on Elon²⁸. When Danieleley left Washington, he had made an impact – Elon was on Sanders’ mind.

When the Navy asked Sanders to consider relocating to the Navy War College to teach, he knew it was time to retire. Sanders had visited Elon and spoken with Fletcher Moore, Dean of the College. He had also discussed the proposition with his wife – they wanted to live halfway between West Virginia and Florida, where his parents split their time²⁹. And so, in August of 1965, Sanders retired from the U.S. Navy after twenty-three years of service³⁰. The next month, he began teaching accounting at Elon College. Sanders remembers Elon College as a small school in the mid-to-late 1960s. Enrollment was less than a thousand, and campus was limited to the brick walls that extended from behind McEwen Dining Hall to the Eastern end of campus, beyond Smith Dormitory³¹. The College was in the midst of a significant push by President Danieleley for higher academic standards. Danieleley wanted more Ph.Ds on the faculty, and he wanted to improve Elon’s academic reputation³². The 1960s and 1970s were difficult times for colleges and universities across the country, and Elon was determined to weather the changes with minimal disruption.

Within a few years, Dr. Alan Sanders was a respected member of Elon’s faculty. President Danieleley asked him to head the committee charged with writing faculty bylaws, and Sanders helped to steer the process to a successful completion³³. Sanders also served on Elon’s first Academic Council, which was charged with improving academic standards at Elon, attracting quality faculty members, and engaging students in intellectual life³⁴. Sanders recalls

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Elon Speaker’s Bureau Information (mid-1970s). Elon University: Belk Library Archives and Special Collections.

³¹ A. Sanders, Interview (January, 2008).

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

President Danieley as being a firm decision-maker, but always respectful of differing viewpoints. When Elon transitioned away from centralized power structures towards a process driven by collegiality between faculty, Danieley remained solicitous of faculty input and considerations³⁵. Sanders also worked with Danieley to establish the College's first computer system, in the basement of the Powell Building³⁶. Sanders used what he knew about IBM to help the College move towards using more efficient technology.

Sanders' success at Elon was accompanied by considerable professional success. In 1973, Sanders passed the first national exam for the Certificate in Management Accounting (CMA)³⁷. The CMA certification gave Sanders additional credibility in his field, and he began working with Isaac Reynolds, professor at the University of North Carolina, who was writing an accounting textbook³⁸. After editing an edition with Reynolds and his collaborator, Albert Slavin, Sanders became co-author of several accounting textbooks, as well as companion study guides and instructor books³⁹. The royalties from these book sales supplemented his modest salary as an Elon professor.

In 1973, when Danieley stepped down as president, Elon was a college facing transitions. President Fred Young embodied these transitions for Allen Sanders. What Danieley had done for Elon's academics, Young was bound to do for Elon's appearance⁴⁰. Sanders recalls Young as "a builder", set on providing Elon with the facilities and the look it needed to compete⁴¹. But Young's efforts were not limited to construction. Sanders points out that when the faculty were divided over beginning an MBA program at Elon, Young spoke out in favor of the program at a

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Elon Speaker's Bureau Information (mid-1970s). Elon University: Belk Library Archives and Special Collections.

³⁸ A. Sanders, Interview (January, 2008).

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

faculty meeting⁴². As a result, Sanders later moved from his office on the third floor of Alamance to the Long building, which would house the new business school⁴³. In 1983, when Sanders reached retirement age, he told Young that he wasn't yet ready to retire. Young suggested that Sanders gradually reduce his course load, easing into retirement⁴⁴. Over the next several years, Sanders began teaching fewer classes. Finally, in 1986, more than twenty years after he came to Elon from the Navy, Sanders retired⁴⁵. He taught an occasional course at the business school and remained active in the community, but he also took the opportunity to travel with Maple. They returned to some of the places he had seen in the Navy – Reykjavik, the Arctic Circle – and visited some new destinations⁴⁶.

Sanders remembers fondly his times at Elon in the 1960s and 1970s. He remembers his colleagues and friends – James Toney, George and Carol Troxler, Rudy Zarzar. He remembers the bright young students he had the privilege of teaching, and even remembers their names from time to time⁴⁷. He marvels at how Elon has changed since his retirement – when Elon announces its latest internationally-known speaker, he and Maple come to campus to watch⁴⁸. He admires the presidents he's known and compliments their commitment to long-range planning. Each of Elon's presidents, he remarks, came at the right time⁴⁹. Sanders still looks forward to seeing how the institution will change and grow as it learns from the past, improves in the present, and looks to the future. Ninety years of life have brought him to Elon, a long ways from Jackson's Mill, and even farther away from the Pacific Fleet. Looking back, Allen Sanders is enjoying quite a view.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.