

ADMITTING SUCCESS

For thousands of high school students across the country, Fred Copeland '35 was their introduction to Williams College.

BY PHIL SMITH '55

PHOTOGRAPHY BY WILLIAM H. TAGUE

Like so many Williams graduates, I first met Fred Copeland '35 during my college interview. In the late spring of 1951, he was the first Williams person I had ever met, and both my parents and I were immediately charmed by the warmth of his welcome and his infectious enthusiasm for the advantages of an undergraduate liberal arts education at Williams. I decided on the spot to give up my early acceptance at Harvard.

Eight years later, when I joined Fred in the Admission Office, I foolishly looked up what he said about me on that interview card, and, as usual, he was right on target: “Funny looking kid from the country with big ears. I think he can do the work.”

At the time of Fred's hiring, President Phinney Baxter '14 charged him with a mission to diversify the student body by increasing the number of public high school graduates as well as the number of financial aid students. Phinney and Fred always remained close, and the internal passageway in Hopkins between their offices—which were sometimes known as “the presidential bulge” and “the admission bubble”—was a frequently trodden path.

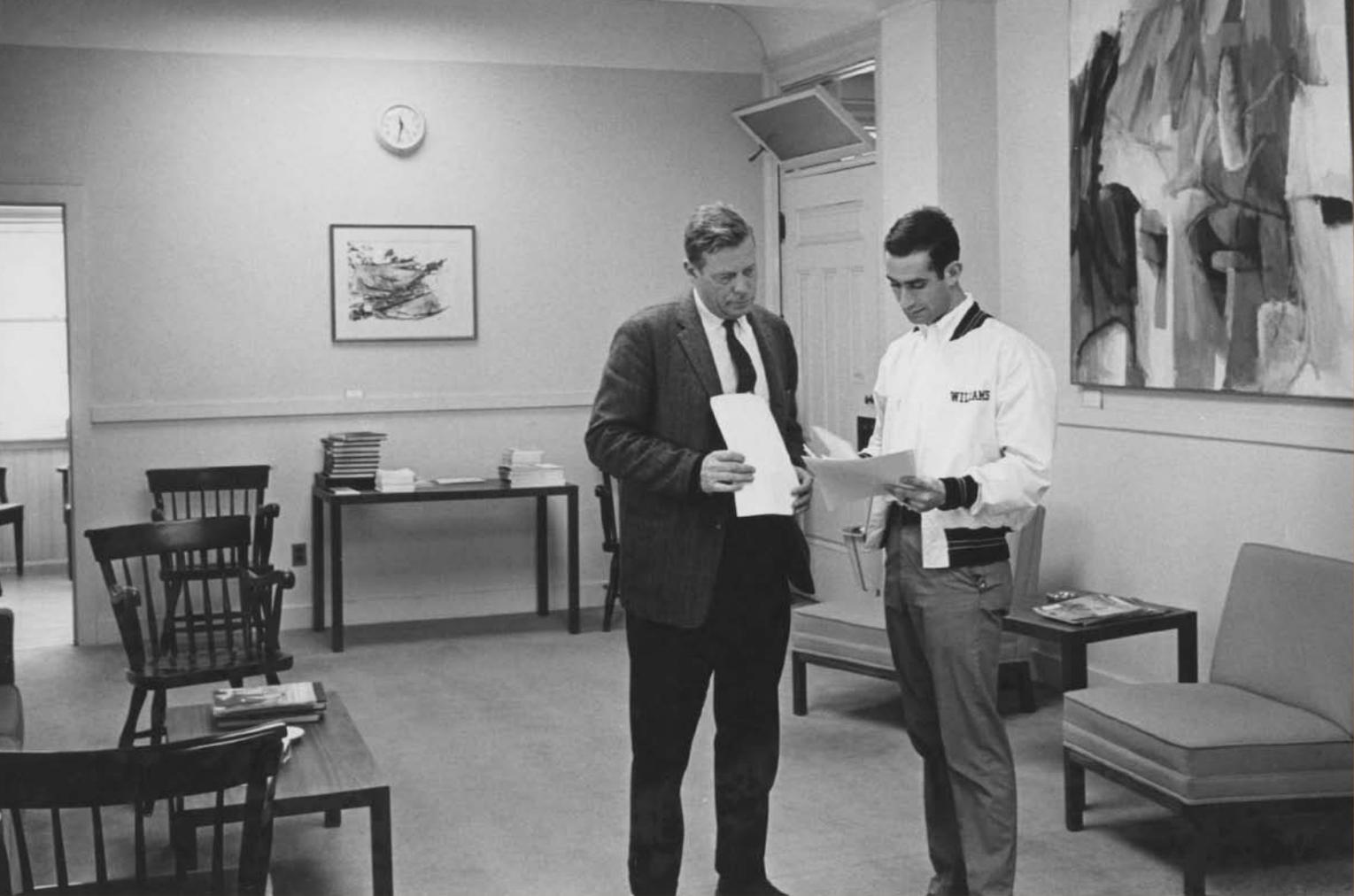
A lot of admission changes were necessary. In 1946, his first year at Williams, Fred sent a prospective financial aid student to see the director of financial aid. The student returned very quickly to report that the financial aid director was lying on the floor and not talking. He wasn't dead; just dead drunk.

Hank Flynt '44 was soon hired to fill the financial aid position, and together Fred and Hank became the preeminent admission/financial aid team, known both locally and nationally for their probity and their caring for each student.

Fred quickly expanded admission travel beyond its traditional New England boarding-school base to include many more public high schools all across the country. By the early 1950s, he was regularly making three weeklong trips as far as the West Coast. Fred had a wonderful way of befriending principals, headmasters and guidance directors. On a typical day in a given city, he would walk into five or more schools and ask, “Who do you have who would be good for Williams?” And the school heads would then call their special students down to the office to speak with Fred.

From each trip, he would return with a large number of commitments tucked into his briefcase. In 1947, it was Hodge Markgraf from Walnut Hills High School in Cincinnati and George Steinbrenner from Culver Military Academy; in the mid-1950s it was Bing Crosby's youngest son from Hollywood and Carl Vogt from St. John's School in Houston; in the 1960s he came back for several years with the Head Boy from East High School in Denver and the brightest student from the Portland, Ore., public high schools; and in the 1970s he added outstanding women candidates like Pam Carlton from Highland Park High School outside of Chicago.

As Carl Vogt '58, who would go on to become a Williams trustee and president, has said of Fred, “I doubt that I would have come [to Williams] had it not been for his visits to Texas



and his reputation for openness and warmth. People I talked to about the College told me about Fred Copeland and then about Williams.”

Fred was a quintessential Maine Yankee. Mainers are known to be frugal, but Fred was a genuine tightwad. His travel expense reports were a provost’s dream, consisting only of several \$5 plants or bottles of scotch for hostess presents and the cost of regular long-distance phone calls home to his wife Cal and the family, made, of course, after the rates went down in the evening. Once in a while there was a 10-cent charge for a newspaper.

He always stayed with alumni or friends and always borrowed a car or was driven around to school visits by alumni. Early on, he traveled between cities by overnight sleeper to save on a night’s lodging. Later, when he took airplanes back from California, he always came home via the red-eye special.

Staying with alumni had its advantages, but there were occasional pitfalls—like the time in Buffalo when he was being chauffeured by the elderly composer of “Yard by Yard” and was stranded at an inner-city high school in a heavy snowstorm. It turned out the snow wasn’t the reason; the alumnus had a lady friend in the area. And then there was the time in Marin County when his host’s wife had replaced all the interior doors in the house with colorful glass beads that offered little in the way of privacy.

Fred was a wonderful ambassador for Williams who possessed two important admission requisites: tremendous stamina and an “instinct for the flagpole.” He could always find a school and was never late for an appointment.

On the national front, Fred was central to establishing the only two admission conventions that have survived to this day:

the May 1 candidates’ reply date and a national early decision program.

When Fred began in admission, there was no standard date for candidates to respond to offers of admission. The Ivy League didn’t even send out its acceptance letters until after Williams’ reply date. As chair of the Entrance Procedures Committee of the College Board, Fred actively worked to set up the universal May 1 date, which has remained firm for more than 40 years.

He also served on the national committee that set the rules for early decision programs. Until then, only the favored few who were lucky enough to have been interviewed were eligible for an “A” rating and early assurance of admission. Fred did not think that was fair.

Fred was a wonderful colleague. Everyone who worked with him, beginning with Bruce McClellan ’45, his first admission assistant, has nothing but happy memories associated with him. In a recent letter to me, Bruce described Fred as “a wonderful and important friend and a lovely human being.”

In later years, when the admission staff became larger, the competition for entrance to Williams more severe and admission committee meetings more contentious, Fred could always diffuse any tension by telling one of his Maine stories in a genuine Down East accent.

First and foremost, Fred was an academic, and his prevailing questions in committee were always, “How would the faculty enjoy teaching this student?” and “What would the faculty think?”

He could be firm in his counsel when necessary—be it with student advisees, alumni with an overactive sense of entitlement or colleagues. I still recall him setting one of his advisees straight after

he had missed too many classes. Fred's voice echoed throughout the first floor of Hopkins Hall—but so did his distinctive laugh.

In the early 1970s, Williams football fortunes were at a low ebb, and Steve Lewis '60 was in charge of hiring a new coach while President Jack Sawyer '39 was on leave. Steve made an offer to the coach of Clarion State and then sent him across the hall to introduce himself to Fred, who asked me to join him in the meeting. The coach began by stating, "Of course, I will get the call on 35 football players of my choosing each year." Fred politely and firmly told him that Williams didn't operate that way. The conversation was civil, but not overly cordial, and the coach retreated across the hall. Minutes later we had a call from Steve Lewis: "What the hell did you guys do? The coach has just resigned." Williams made out very well with Bob Odell from Penn as its next football coach.

Always the scientist, Fred kept meticulous records, and his yearly admission reports are a terrific resource for future Williams historians. Starting with one secretary who took down his daily letters in shorthand in an era prior to copy machines, computers or faxes, Fred brought the Admission Office into the modern era by continually embracing change. The first Williams class with more than 50 percent public high school graduates came in 1960, and the first entering class with women arrived in 1971, Fred having served happily on the Lockwood Committee that proposed coeducation for Williams in 1968.

Fred formally retired as dean of admission in 1978, having admitted close to 70 percent of all living Williams alumni. He had received the Rogerson Cup in 1967 for distinguished alumni service. On his retirement, the Copeland Award was established to be presented each year at reunion time to "the alumni volunteer who most effectively represents Williams to secondary schools and prospective students." Fred was also proud of the Copeland Scholarship, established by one of his former advisees, H. Michael Stevens '73, to assist "students from small towns whose positive attitude and discipline lead them to excel far beyond their circumstances."

Fred continued to help out with interviews and occasional travel until the early 1980s. His enthusiasm for Williams only grew stronger with time, and I remember one of his last interviewees saying, as she emerged from close to an hour with Fred, "He really loves Williams and had so many great things to say about the College that I didn't have a chance to say a word." Naturally, she ended up matriculating.

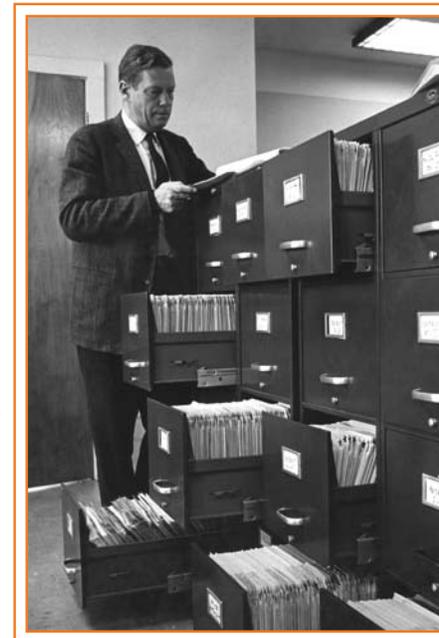
In later years, Fred would stop in the office regularly to pick up stamps for his collection, to deposit extra produce from his garden, to chat and to share his wisdom. In the last 10 years of his life,

and especially after Cal's death, we would get together for weekly meetings.

I used to urge him to talk about his early days at Williams and some of the challenges he faced, but Fred's interests were always in the future and in his family. He kept close contact with his children Rick, Emily and Winsor and was proud of them, their families and their doings. He was happy that his grandson Matthew Leary '03 continued the family tradition at Williams and that his youngest grandson Patrick Leary was working at the Oceanographic Institution and maintaining a year-round tie to Woods Hole, Mass., where Fred spent virtually every summer of his life. Fred had three great-grandchildren born this past year, the youngest arriving the week he died.

He always talked about Williams, what direction the College was taking and what was happening on the admission scene. His last words to me, the week before he died, were, "Make sure your freshman granddaughter has a good Williams experience." ■

Phil Smith '55 spent 40 years in Williams' Office of Admission, including seven as dean, before retiring in 1999. He continues to read all the international applications, which totaled about 1,600 this year.



Frederick Cleveland Copeland '35 died in Williamstown on Feb. 8, 2008, at the age of 95, ending a lifetime of devotion and service to Williams College. He followed his older brother Preston '34 to Williams from high school in Brunswick, Maine, where their father was a professor of biology at Bowdoin College. His younger brother Manton '39 came to Williams four years later. Fred was an active undergraduate, serving as a junior advisor and as president of the Undergraduate Council in his senior year.

Following an exchange year at the University of Munich immediately after graduation, Fred spent four years at Harvard and received his PhD in biology in 1940. He taught biology at Trinity College and what was then the Hartford College for Women for six years before President Phinney Baxter '14—noting his experience as director of admission and freshman dean at Trinity—hired him in 1946 to be a one-man admission office at Williams. In his "spare time," Fred also taught genetics as a full professor of biology and was in charge of all undergraduate campus housing.