In 1949, Ralph Crane visited the Purple Valley, camera in hand, to document life on campus. The result was a nine-page spread in the Jan. 24, 1949, issue of Life magazine, featuring photos and text that today remind us not only how much Williams has changed since then, but also how much it has remained the same. As Crane observed, "Williams is a small college in a small town and it wants to stay that way." Here is some of what he saw.

The following is excerpted from the original Life magazine article.

This year as the winter term begins, Williams College finds itself nearly smothered with students. They are swarming over the pretty campus at Williamstown, Mass., jamming their cars into every available parking space, lugging skis, skates and suitcases into their dormitories and fraternities. Altogether there are 1,123 of them. This is less than the enrollment of the freshman class at a big university like California (Life, Oct. 25). But it is the biggest Williams has ever seen, and as far as Williams is concerned it is far too big.

Williams is a small college in a small town and it wants to stay that way. It was founded in 1793, under the will of Colonel Ephraim Williams, killed in the French and Indian War. It has always believed strongly in small classes and the need for a friendly intimacy between its students and its faculty. Its famous Mark Hopkins, president from 1836 to 1872, was especially insistent on class discussion. It feels an enrollment of 850 is just about right. But in a time when U.S. colleges are moving more and more toward mass education, this sort of custom-made learning is an expensive luxury. Today hundreds of small liberal-arts colleges like Williams, unable to depend on state funds and unwilling to expand or raise tuition, must now get out and beg for money or shut up shop.

PHOTOGRAPHS FOR LIFE BY RALPH CRANE

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TEACHING English, professor shows his students lantern slides of some Hogarth paintings.

In era of mass teaching it considers smallness a virtue.
Possibly the most familiar remark ever made about U.S. education was made about Williams. Speaking about Williams President Mark Hopkins, U.S. President James A. Garfield, Williams 1856 (who was assassinated on the way to a Williams commencement), said, “The ideal college is Mark Hopkins on one end of a log and a student on the other.” Not much more than the length of a log separates teacher from student at Williams today. Professors are often guests of students and some of them occasionally hold classes in their own houses. Because the classes are small (average: 20), most can call all their students by name.

FacultY
It has a close and friendly relationship with students

TWO PROFESSORS combine to teach a political economy course to a class of only 16 students. They are (head of table) Professors Schuman (left) and Gordon.

IN PROFESSOR’S HOUSE members of creative-writing class sit around living room while Professor Roy Lamson (under lamp) reads their short stories aloud.

UNCROWDED LIBRARY is one advantage of a college like Williams. All students have free access to the stacks.

FACULTY PARTY, an old-fashioned square dance, is given by Dean Robert Brooks (right, checked shirt). Teachers do a lot of entertaining among themselves.
A visitor to Williams 146 years ago observed that “the situation of the college is a decent, thriving country town” where there are “comparatively few temptations to dissipation and vice.” Williamstown today has grown a lot, but it is still small and still a college town. It is an important part of Williams education. A Williams man sees a lot of his campus in four years. Because he is allowed only three chapel cuts each term and because he is not within easy range of a big city, he is apt to participate in more sports and attend more college functions than his opposite number in a big city college. In the winter, when the first snow falls, he gets out his skis and joins the rest of the college on the ski slope. In the evenings, when there is not much to do, he goes to the town movie house or drinks beer in the local bar. After he graduates he never forgets the lovely campus and the elm-lined streets of the town.
FRATERNITY ROW is on Main Street. Houses here are (left to right) DKE, Phi Delta Theta, Alpha Delta Phi. Phi Delt donors stipulated it must be tallest.

PINK ELEPHANT made of snow in front of the Zeta Psi house is hardened with water. Ice sculpture blossoms around Winter Carnival weekend.
SHOVELING SNOW off a fraternity roof is one of the jobs usually relegated to freshman pledges. This is the Sigma Phi building, an old mansion which was moved piece by piece to Williams from Albany.

ON GUEST NIGHT in St. Anthony house (below), student wives and faculty members are invited to fraternity candlelight dinner. This happens about once a week.

CLASSROOMS ARE BRIGHTENED in winter by the loud sweaters and woolen shirts which almost all Williams men wear. These students are taking notes at a biology lecture, one of the few big lecture courses, where about 130 students meet once a week. The rest of their work is done in labs or in small sections.