

# **Oakland University Chronicles**

*Interview with*

**"Alice Tomboulia**

**Paul Tomboulia**

Transcript of Oral History Interview

Interview date: May 27, 1999

Interviewer: Harvey Burdick



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## **Alice Tomboulia Paul Tomboulia**

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### **ALICE WARREN TOMBOULIAN**

Date of birth: August 22, 1933

#### **EDUCATION**

A.B.	Cornell University	1953
M.S.	University of Illinois	1955
M.Ed.	Cornell University	1956

#### **ASSOCIATION WITH OAKLAND UNIVERSITY**

Wife of Professor Paul Tombouljian, who has taught at Oakland  
from 1959 to the present

Instructor in trigonometry	1960-1961
Instructor in freshman exploratory program	1968-1972
Coordinator, Oakland University Chronicles Project	1996-2001

#### **EMPLOYMENT AND OTHER ACTIVITIES**

Township Trustee and Planning Commissioner, Oakland Township	1972-1978
State Representative, District 61, Oakland County	1979-1980
Coordinator for Paint Creek Trailways Commission	1981-1992
Owner/Consultant, Resource Policy Services	1981-1999
Park Commissioner, Oakland Township	1992-present

#### **CHILDREN**

Jeffrey Alan • July 1960

Mark David • March 1962

Nancy Ruth • December 1964

## **Oakland University Chronicles**

### **PAUL TOMBOULIAN**

Date of birth: October 19, 1934

### **EDUCATION**

A.B.	Cornell University	1953
Ph.D.	University of Illinois	1956

### **OAKLAND UNIVERSITY**

1959	Assistant Professor of Chemistry
1962	Associate Professor of Chemistry with tenure
1967	Professor of Chemistry
1963 - 1997	Chair, Department of Chemistry
1974 - present	Director, Environmental Health Programs

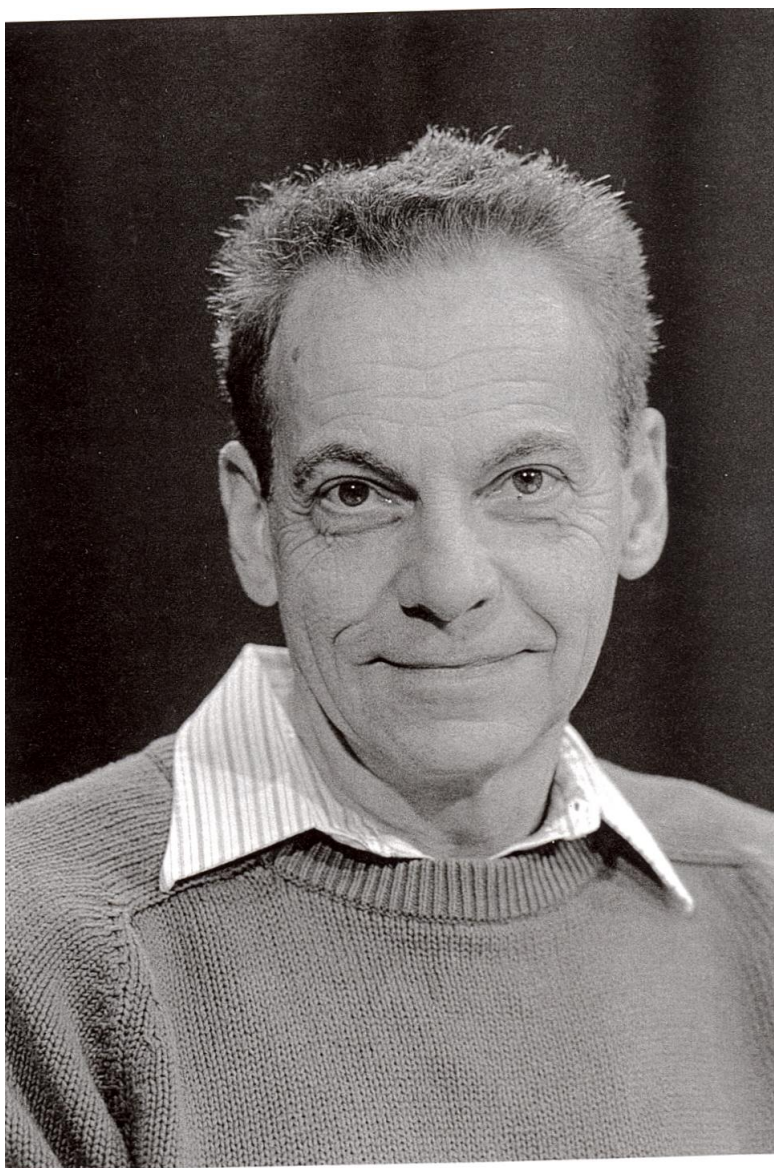


**Photograph of Alice Tomboulian**

May 27, 1999

Photographer: Dennis Collins





**Photograph of Paul Tomboulian**

May 27, 1999

Photographer: Dennis Collins



**Photograph of Alice and Paul Tomboulian**

Photograph taken in 1959

Source: Loan from Alice and Paul Tomboulian

**Oakland University Chronicles**  
**Interview with ALICE and PAUL TOMBOULIAN**  
**May 27, 1999**

HARVEY BURDICK: The interview today is part of the Oakland University Chronicles project, now in its third year and supported by a special university allocation. Today is May 27th, 1999 and we are taping this interview in Varner Hall. Our guests today are Paul and Alice Tomboulian, the initiators and project directors of the Chronicles project. Welcome.

ALICE and PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Good morning.

HARVEY BURDICK: Paul, you have already been interviewed as a charter member of the faculty and gave us your recollections, and today we're going to be focusing on the project itself, the Chronicles project: why you did it, how you did it, and so on. But before we begin, I'd like to get some sort of personal background information, since this is Alice's first time, particularly from Alice: How you met Paul, when you got married, and when you first came to MSUO.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: The way we first met was, believe it or not, we met in high school.

HARVEY BURDICK: Oh, it goes back to high school.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: It goes back to high school, to math classes in high school [in Ithaca, New York]. We started actually going together when we were seniors in high school. We went both to Cornell University. Our fathers were both professors at Cornell and that made it particularly inexpensive for us to go to Cornell. We went to Cornell together and graduated at the same time and both made the decision to go for graduate school at the University of Illinois. So, we had met in 1950 and we got married in 1957. Actually, by that time, Paul was a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Minnesota.

HARVEY BURDICK: Then when the opportunity came from MSUO, at that time you and Paul talked about it, I assume. Is this so?



ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Oh, absolutely.

HARVEY BURDICK: What are the things you remember talking about: Should we go, shouldn't we go, is this a good opportunity, things of that nature?

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Of course, as always, Woody Varner was very emphatic that the wife should come along on the interview trip and, as you know, I did so—and I think got infected with the same things that Paul did, with Woody's obvious capability and enthusiasm and the excitement of starting something new. We checked into it, in the sense of thinking it through in terms of: Is this probably really going to last? It seemed as though it would. I do recall that I spoke with my father, who knew of Michigan State, of course, and he said that [connection] probably would mean that this [new school] would have some longevity here and some security.

HARVEY BURDICK: So even though it was an adventure, there was still some security that this was a legitimate decision on your part.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Yes—not that we were against adventure. This was appealing, far more appealing, I think, than some of the more established kinds of schools that Paul might have considered.

HARVEY BURDICK: I know that during those early days when there were some problems with the preparation of the student body, you got involved in doing some of the preparatory teaching.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Yes, since I happen to have a bachelors degree in mathematics (that isn't a field that I pursued any further). Jim McKay, whom we knew very well, was looking for people who could for a year or two provide these catch-up courses in trigonometry, to prepare Oakland students for calculus.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: The sub-collegiate courses that we weren't supposed to teach.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: So for a year, I think, I did do that. Our family was just starting, and in fact I left our baby Jeff with Jim's wife [Virginia] when I came to class.

HARVEY BURDICK: And you also got involved in the freshman exploratory program. Is this something you did with Paul or did you have your own class to teach?

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: We were both independently recruited for the freshman exploratory, an introductory reading and writing course, by George Matthews who was putting it together. I think he got to almost the night before the first classes would open and realized that he was short an instructor. He called me up on the phone and said, "Alice, how would you like to teach?" Paul and I had already planned the books and the subject matter that he was going to be covering, which was probably in 1967 or '68. At that time he was going to emphasize the emerging environmental concerns that there were throughout the country, and I wanted to do it, too. So we actually both used the same book list.

HARVEY BURDICK: So you were teaching two separate exploratories but they were—

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Two different sections, with the same subjects.

HARVEY BURDICK: When you finished doing that I noticed that you got involved in the community. I see in your vita, you've indicated you were a township trustee and planning commissioner, and in '79 you ran successfully for state representative. That's not bad for someone who's also raising a family and things of that nature.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: It's interesting [how we made ] the decision about whether I should actually run for state representative. I was asked to do this by the county party chairperson, and we had a little family consultation about that. Our children were in junior high and high school by that time. One of them said, "Well, it's okay if Mother is away, she's gone all the time anyway to meetings," because I had already been so involved.

HARVEY BURDICK: So you were a pretty much involved person in the community, working here, working there—finally, as a state representative. You continued your interest in the environmental issues right to the present time, and I notice that you are a consultant on resource policy. Is this a private consulting firm that you're running?

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Very much so, yes. It's a kind of one-woman show. It's a business through which I have received contracts to do environmental studies and projects. They have all been for non-profit or governmental agencies, not for the profit-making private sector.

HARVEY BURDICK: I might make an assumption that you don't get rich serving as a consultant.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: No, but it's nice to get money for doing what you like to do.

HARVEY BURDICK: That's true. A little money says that you're of value of some sort. So, it's not surprising that you and Paul are equal project directors on this project.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: No, Alice is in charge.

HARVEY BURDICK: Alice is more in charge, Paul.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Now, wait a minute! He runs the budget.

HARVEY BURDICK: Well, I don't know how you divide your responsibilities, but you're both initiators of it.

As we said, our primary focus today is to talk about the Chronicles project. The first question I have, of course, is: Why did you do it? How did you begin? What was motivating you to begin this project?

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: I'll answer that on behalf of both of us. We wanted personally to honor and celebrate the people who were with us, who worked so

hard to make MSUO succeed. We felt that that was a special group of people. We wanted to capture history about them in an oral history fashion, so that we could get their thoughts and their personal experiences and their reflections, and not to go over things that are already in writing someplace else, in documents. We felt this kind of videotaped interview would show the personalities of the people, and help to explain why these people were able to carry out pretty difficult assignments. Basically, we just had this strong personal allegiance to Oakland, and it came out of being pioneers.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: We were interested in this approach to oral history—using video rather than the standard method, which was audiotape recording—as a new idea. Nobody on campus had done this before, except one person we knew of, Jack Barnard. He said, “Oh yes, that gets out a lot of information about folks.” But nobody had done the video part so we said, “Let’s try this because it looks like the thing that people would want to do.” So it was, again, a new venture, and we had to talk to everybody about how we were going to figure out the ways of doing it. There was a little bit of pioneering there.

HARVEY BURDICK: And it costs a little money, I take it, in order to do it—to set up the cameras, get the people to do it. You had to seek out some monies. How did that work?

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: It works first informally, because when you think you have a good idea, you approach the people that you think might fund it. In this case the first year was funded by the OU foundation, and the proposal was taken there by our president, Gary Russi. The second and third years have been funded through his office, rather than through the foundation.

I think it was a recognition, for the first time that I recall, that there was some information here that needed to be recorded, needed to be captured, and no one else was doing it. We had heard, as you probably did some years ago, that George Matthews would have been the obvious person—

HARVEY BURDICK: Because he’s a historian.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Yes, and he actually started, didn’t he?

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: He did audiotapes of [two] people [Woody Varner and Donald O'Dowd].

[Editor's note: The Oakland University Chronicles project has produced unedited transcripts of the two audiotapes done by George Matthews in 1993 (with the assistance of Robert W. Swanson), and of the 1992 videotaped program called "Down Memory Lane" with reminiscences by Woody Varner, George Matthews, and Lowell Eklund. These transcripts are located with the Chronicles project archival materials in the Kresge Library at Oakland University. Portions of "Down Memory Lane" were published in the *Oakland University News*, May 1, 1992.]

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: But they never turned into a more complete document of any type. So we had these bits and snatches from the early '90s—'92 and '93—but it looked like nothing was coming out as a history. (And we're not writing it.)

HARVEY BURDICK: You're not writing, but you're developing some written materials. It isn't as if you're sitting down to write a history, but you're certainly collecting written materials that will be available to people who might write a more definitive history.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: *[To Alice Tomboulia]* Tell us about the outputs of the project.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Of course, there are the videotapes which are going to be available from the Instructional Technology Center [and on loan from the Kresge Library circulation desk]. Then from each interview we create a written transcript, edited to some degree, and a little volume that goes into the university library, into the archives but also for circulation. People are already looking at these quite a lot. It's very encouraging to realize that.

HARVEY BURDICK: Is that right! So they have access to written material and can do the classic sitting down at a table and just reading the material, but also they have an opportunity to actually look at the characters who made it happen, and to get a feeling for their personalities and so on.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Yes, which is what we hope is useful, too.



HARVEY BURDICK: A small question I have, and you can respond any way you want, is whether one of the issues that might have motivated you is that you thought Oakland had a very special kind of beginning. It was just not an ordinary school, it was different, and [its beginning] had something to contribute perhaps to historians about education. Did you have that feeling at all?

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: There was certainly something about Oakland that made it possible for it to succeed, that was different from just the way you would sit down and say, "I'm going to plan a new school." One of the things that many of our interviewees have talked about is the so-called "dream." It seemed like things weren't written down but somehow people got the idea of a dream. There are some different components of it that have come out through the interviews.

It started really with Matilda Wilson, who had several options proposed to her, or that she discussed, about what to do with her large land holdings and her manor hall—which is something that one has to think about, it's the future of one's holdings. You have to believe that she had the sense, or some kind of dream, that turning this all into a university, a center of learning, would be a better idea. You have to think she had a goal. Woody Varner did comment to us that this turned out to be the happiest time of her life—a person with all that wealth, and yet the happiest time of her life was after she had given it away. She then could see, and she was certainly helping to facilitate, the growth of this college—without in any way meddling in it. What a wonderful thing to have done!

HARVEY BURDICK: I have no doubt that it was a glorious moment because she certainly participated in the early activity.

But before we get into the dream—we want to get back to that because it ties into why you did [this project]—could you describe just a little bit about how you went about doing [the Chronicles]? How was this structured? You and Paul sat down, you said, "Okay, it's a good idea, but what do we do, how do we go about it?"

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: As with most academic [projects], you start with a committee. We developed a committee of Oakland folks who had been here at the beginning, our advisory committee. You were part of that. We had meetings to talk about what was the best thing to do, what was the most efficient way of operating,

who should be interviewed, what kinds of [topics] should we explore. We developed the concepts, the background, the ideas of what we would do in the project. We got advice later from some colleagues elsewhere.

One of the important pieces of direction was to make a cutoff date. Don't try to be inclusive; put a stop in there, just do a period, because someone else will do [later periods]. Otherwise the project gets too big. We're emphasizing the early period, the period from 1955 or '56 when the Wilsons first decided to do this, through the Varner years, especially the early Varner years. A little bit [of the subject matter] is towards the end of the '60s, but most of it is before the first graduation.

We interviewed, according to the priorities given to us by the advisory committee, about 30 people: early faculty, early administrators, some students from the first two classes and, actually, one planner retired from Michigan State.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: He was actually a professor of mathematics at Michigan State, but he happened to have been on one of the planning committees that helped plan the curriculum for MSUO. We were able to interview him.

HARVEY BURDICK: And it was very important to move quickly. Let's not kid ourselves, people don't live forever.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Some of the people we [would have] wanted to interview, we couldn't. The only person who initially declined [our request] will be interviewed [soon], so we will be able to capture essentially everyone whom the committee thought was a priority person—

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Who's still living.

HARVEY BURDICK: Was there anybody you would have wished to interview, you couldn't because they had died?

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Yes. [At least] three people come to mind.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Bill Hammerle.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Bill, yes, of course. John Hannah.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Yes, John Hannah, the president of MSU.

HARVEY BURDICK: A very critical mover.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: And Tom Hamilton, the first person given responsibility for the campus.

HARVEY BURDICK: Tom has died—

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Long ago. And I think that if Lowell Eklund had been here, we probably would have talked to Lowell, because he was in this continuing education phenomenon that we started with in 1958, the “foot in the door”—the answer is certainly.

HARVEY BURDICK: So it was important to move on this and gather those early people and get them on tape.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Forty years later is possible, fifty years is getting difficult.

HARVEY BURDICK: Right. So, actually having only lost three or four people, it was fairly successful.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: And nobody during the period of our work has dropped away.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: We invigorated them.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: They’ve got to check their transcripts.

HARVEY BURDICK: When you planned these interviews, you had some notion of the kinds of information you wanted to get from them. You talked about that, I’m sure. What did you have in your heads regarding that?

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: We came up with some general topics and then we tailored them to what the interviewee actually wanted most to speak about with us. It was topics such as: How did you first find out about MSUO, what attracted you here, how did it actually work out for you, what were some of the difficulties? That elicited a great deal of very personal response.

HARVEY BURDICK: The two of you had your own recollections of the beginnings, you were involved with the community, so you were essentially part of the set of interviewees. But having done the Chronicles project, I assume that you've learned a great deal about the beginnings—the confusions, the goofs, the dream—and I think we ought to get back to that. Having done the project up until this point, I'd like to have you talk about the things you've learned that perhaps you yourself personally didn't know.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: It certainly has been a privilege to be able to pull all these things together, and we're still doing it as of yesterday.

Once that Matilda and Alfred Wilson had decided that they were going to make this dream come to life, make a university happen in Oakland County, they offered this to President John Hannah. Getting a picture of his personality from 40 years later—we never did know him directly—he was obviously a person with a mission to build up public education in Michigan, and Michigan State University in particular. He really was acknowledged as a leader, which is one of the reasons that Michigan State had a reputation that was known as far away as Cornell.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: [Michigan State] had undertaken a very aggressive program to upgrade their student body. They were giving fellowships to students in Ithaca [New York] High School, where we grew up. I remember in 1950, when we graduated, that kids were being recruited out of Ithaca High School and were thinking seriously about Michigan State. They wanted honor students, they wanted people who scored well, and they were willing to reach out and seek these students wherever they were around. We got to thinking that we never had heard of Michigan State in this context before, because it was called Michigan State College then, and it didn't have the reputation that some other Michigan institutions had. I think we started getting feelings that this was an institution

on the move, trying to upgrade its operation—and in retrospect, now we can see it certainly did that.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: In addition to upgrading the campus and the work in East Lansing, it was perceived that it was a strategic move for Michigan State to start a campus in southeast Michigan, and Woody Varner detailed that [in his Chronicles interview]. They wanted to be first, before the University of Michigan announced its Dearborn campus. This gift came at just that strategic time to make it possible for MSU to show that they could start a campus and they could do it very well.

Yet John Hannah—Woody gives him so much credit—he wanted to have this campus happen but he in no way wanted to control it. He told Woody, “Do it your way but don’t embarrass us.” So really part of the vision was that we had a free hand. We had support, we had the strong backing from Michigan State, but it was with a free hand.

HARVEY BURDICK: Alice, the comment you made about a free hand, I’d like to pick up on that. I’m so struck by a major university opening up [branch] campuses in different parts of the state, but this wasn’t true here, we were not an extension of MSU from East Lansing. Can you explore that with us?

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: The colleges you referred to, the branches of the University of Michigan at Flint and Dearborn, were senior colleges and they were clearly set up by sending faculty and ideas and materials over to those new spots. They represented outposts rather than new starts. The attitude here seemed to be to develop a new operation—a sister university, as it became clearly identified by Michigan State. They became very proud of it.

They gave us, through Woody Varner, the only real contact there ever was, the only person who worked between the two institutions. None of the other relationships existed from a practical standpoint. They said to Woody, as he’s told us, you do what you want but don’t embarrass us. In other words, “Do your thing,” and they were proud of what we did.

They wrote in this alumni magazine [*showing document*] of November, 1959—after the university was open—a whole issue on Michigan State University Oakland, including what it was going to do, how we were going to do it, and all the glowing things that we couldn’t have said better if we had written it ourselves.



They were talking about how great and how different this campus will be. So they had bought into or caught the dream as well. This [magazine] is where John Hannah himself, the president, is quoted as giving Oakland University a clean slate and a free hand. So he himself had that idea, that image. We can say he was a person of grand vision. He wanted to do this.

HARVEY BURDICK: They still called this MSUO, Michigan State University at Oakland, so it seems that connection was continued for the first few years.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Yes, until 1963.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: The name connection stayed for four years.

HARVEY BURDICK: How about the Board of Trustees, did we have a separate, independent Board of Trustees here?

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: No. We were actually operated under the Michigan State University Board of Trustees until 1970. But the name change came readily after the first four years, just in time so that the first graduating class could be graduates of what was going to be Oakland University. They changed it with no apparent difficulty. Woody could hardly remember how it happened, it was so easy. John Hannah just apparently said, "Sure, whatever's best for you."

HARVEY BURDICK: My recollection of the independence was that if a student wanted to move from Michigan State to Oakland, it was as if they were going to a totally different school.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Oh, absolutely, and this was a surprise to the students. They thought, "I'll just transfer," but the courses aren't the same, the credits aren't the same. There was no attempt at any level that I know of to do the same material work, interface in any way with Michigan State—so it was a different world [at MSU]. It was much more like they [would be] transferring to a smaller, undergraduate college [than to a branch campus]. And so it was not an easy transition for students to make.

HARVEY BURDICK: How did MSUO begin, as you have learned through doing this Chronicles project? After the giving of the money and the land by Matilda Wilson, then what happened?

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: After the decision was made to accept this gift, of course there were a lot of tasks to be undertaken at Michigan State to get prepared.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: As far as we can tell, John Hannah gave the project to the vice president of academic affairs named Tom Hamilton, who was evidently asked to go, carry forth, and do this. Hamilton drafted, about one month after he was given the assignment, a proposal dated December 29th, 1956 called the Matilda Wilson College of MSU. In this he lays out a set of assumptions and parameters that would be the basis for what we do here. Actually many of them are still there, so it was a very far-thinking document. What he apparently was doing was getting away from the things that he did not like or directions that he perceived needed fixing at MSU.

We do not know enough about Tom Hamilton to figure out how he came to this educational philosophy, but his assumptions became the basis for the MSUO curriculum, the planning and the dream. He set up some committees at MSU to do curriculum planning—this would have been early 1957—so they were starting. He had faculty and deans from MSU meeting and talking about what could be done at Oakland, presumably using his assumptions.

HARVEY BURDICK: Now here we have at MSU, [the intent] to make MSU into a better school, a more significant school—this is Hannah's dream. Then Tom Hamilton set up some committees within MSU, to create another school which they wouldn't have anything to do with. I think that's kind of funny in a way: "We're making up a school down the road."

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Those committee members felt very invested in the excellence of this new school. They took, in fact, a great deal of interest in being sure that this was going to be something they would be proud of, and that would not reflect badly on Michigan State. We have a letter signed by about 29 members of the English department, who were protesting for quite a while because the planning for MSUO had no freshman English or rhetoric.

It was stated right out that all of that would be taught in the regular subject-matter courses: [students] would read and write about the subject matter they were studying. The English department said, "This will reflect badly on MSU, if people graduate from MSUO and they are not conversant with their native tongue. We can't do it that way." The whole English department was involved.

HARVEY BURDICK: That's interesting. In other words, the people at MSU felt very fatherly and concerned about this place that they personally were not going to be involved with. But yet they wanted this child out there to grow properly, speak English, write English properly and so on.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: So that they could be proud of this child.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: It's not an attitude you would predict.

HARVEY BURDICK: No. It was like, "It has nothing to do with me, I have my own work to do and you do your own thing," but also, "I want you to do it right." So they had those committees. They set up this dream curriculum, probably out of their own personal fantasies.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: We don't know how much of the curriculum they set up at that point, not very much.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Not the specifics.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: They covered most of the general things, like how much time should the students spend in liberal arts, and whether there should be physical education and ROTC, and that kind of thing. Most of those ideas, however, can be directly traced to Tom Hamilton's original proposal and his subsequent written documents, which we've looked at. In June of 1957 he says the same things: There will not be these essentially diversionary activities that we've come to associate with the decline of educational standards in the '50s.

He worked with these committees until late 1957 in trying to formulate some of these features. There were some deans involved and ultimately a group of the honors college [students] reviewed the final output. But then something

happened that we have not ever been able to pin down exactly, with Hamilton's plan and his movement. He was given primary responsibility for [MSUO] and yet something happened.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: We can discuss that in a few minutes.

It's interesting that Woody was very keen to tout the Meadow Brook seminars and their bearing on the MSUO dream and curriculum and concept. Those did not happen until August through December of 1958, well after the curriculum committee at MSU had turned in its report in December of '57. Woody, in fact, said personally to us that those Meadow Brook seminars were a kind of "window dressing." He certainly used them to the hilt, because of the prominent people that came to the seminars, to show that MSUO was somebody and had good thinkers behind it. But you will find in the outputs from the Meadow Brook seminars—Tom Hamilton's ideas.

HARVEY BURDICK: Many of us thought that somehow it all began with those great seminars and those great thinkers, and they created this lovely place. Yet they were after the fact.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: That was a convenient image to have.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Those people who assembled at each of the four seminars (and there was a fifth one, on continuing ed in early '59), those basic four seminars about the MSUO curriculum, those people came in for one day, from every place around the country. They were highly qualified people but they had never met together before. How were they going to do this in a day? No, they couldn't. What was given to them to discuss at the outset in the morning was, "Here are these ideas that we have"—they were Tom Hamilton's ideas—"and how do you react to them?"

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: How would you do it? They just had committee meetings for about two hours.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: They [mainly] said, "Fine, that sounds really great."

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: No final reports and no minutes, no record [of the discussions]. Later Tom Hamilton and Woody Varner put together reports, a synthesis. We asked, how did they do that? Woody, who was the only person we could talk with, said, “We just ferreted out the ideas.”

What I think happened was that Woody just looked to see what Tom Hamilton had said, and continued that flow of the curriculum from there. When you look at the actual output of the seminars—I have the written report from the engineering seminar—it looks like something: “Higher Learning, a Summary, prepared by Hamilton and Varner.” But when you look at it, the specifics aren’t there, that’s not a curriculum. You couldn’t possibly run an institution based on the output of that seminar. It had philosophical directions on what engineers might like to do, or should do, and what the future will hold, but there’s not curricular advice you can use.

HARVEY BURDICK: I think we finally have put the seminars to a gentle rest. I appreciate that. I had a myth that we had begun with these highly sophisticated knowledgeable people, culled from various universities around the country—

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: So far, you’re right.

HARVEY BURDICK: —to come and sort of develop what this beautiful place is going to be. But really they were there to only respond to ideas and to be used as a kind of window dressing.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: I think George Matthews described this as the energizing myth.

HARVEY BURDICK: I have no problems with myths that energize.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: It certainly energized Woody. He behaved like a missionary. He was so convincing. He had gotten this dream and he conveyed it to everybody. People, interestingly enough, did not insist upon seeing corroborating written materials that this place could or did exist. One after another, when we asked the interviewees, “What written materials did Woody have, and how did you know that all of this would happen?” they said, “Oh, Woody just told me.”



That was what they answered. He was so convincing, and of course the fact MSU was behind it was always a stable factor. Even Loren Pope, who was the publicist of the myth, the dream—we asked him, “How did you find out all of this material that you turned around and wrote in the newspaper articles in the *New York Times*?” “Well, I just heard it from Woody Varner.”

HARVEY BURDICK: Tell me about Woody Varner—where did he come from? Was he always a dedicated missionary, an adventurer in educational projects? Or was this an “on the road to Damascus” episode for Woody?

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: We think it was the latter. Certainly, he was always an up-and-coming person and very capable at what he was assigned to. As you’ve heard us describe, he was the person, when he was vice president for off-campus education (that was his title at Michigan State), who got the legislature to change Michigan State College’s name to Michigan State University. That was a real political coup. But, this is very interesting: Les Hetenyi, who came here to Oakland in the second year to direct teacher education, told us that when he had been teaching at MSU in musicology back in 1955 or so, he had had occasion to meet Woody Varner and he had not been impressed.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: He knew both Tom Hamilton, who was a professor in one of his classes, and Woody Varner. He was very much impressed with Tom Hamilton as an academic.

HARVEY BURDICK: As an academic, as a man committed to a certain quality of education and things of that nature.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Yes. In fact, Tom had been Dean of Education before he became Vice President for Academic Affairs.

HARVEY BURDICK: And Woody was just a good administrator.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Right. He had come up through being a professor in the ag school and the director of the Agricultural Extension Service, and then became this [unusual] vice president for off-campus education, which could include

educating the legislature. I must say that Les became very impressed with Woody later. I don't want to leave the wrong impression. By the time Les came here he saw what a man Woody was.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: That gets to the issue of a change in personality.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: We just have to gather [the idea] and assume that some kind of change came over him, some kind of epiphany. He was a convert and he was more excited than anybody else because he was a convert. He carried this dream around and he infected everybody with it. It became their dream just because he was so good at it.

HARVEY BURDICK: I have a notion of Tom Hamilton describing this Garden of Eden and all the flora and fauna that were involved in it, and for some reason, about which you said you're not quite sure, Hamilton is pulled off this project. How does Woody get involved?

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Can we back up a little bit on this, historically, because Woody is part of the picture of what happened to make the accident of the MSUO [origin] actually turn into a good happening.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: There were three primary people. There was Tom Hamilton, the academic vice president of MSU; there was Woody Varner, who was this vice president for off-campus education; and there was, of course, President John Hannah. So there were three major people at MSU, but the context here is not unimportant.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: There was this unusual set of happenings and people coming all together. You couldn't have predicted or planned that this could all happen at once. The first of all, obviously, was that the Wilsons made these gifts— otherwise nothing would have been going on at all. That was announced on January 3rd of 1957.

There was a climate of the times in the '50s, there was a perceived national crisis and it was going on well before Sputnik [the Russian satellite] went up. There was a crisis in education, there was a shortage of teachers, and there was a sense

that we needed to do some experiments and new departures in education. I myself spent a year—after I had already received a masters degree in another subject—I decided to take this exciting experimental program in elementary teacher education that was funded by the Ford Foundation. They were putting on programs of different sorts trying to find out if there is a more efficient and effective way to train teachers, because we needed teachers. Our schools weren't producing. I did that in '55-'56. So there was a readiness to try new schools.

Then Sputnik came along, but that was later.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: People like to pick on these unique phenomena, [such as] a satellite overhead that they didn't expect. But that wasn't until October 1957, so that came well after the Wilsons' gift. People point to Sputnik and the times, but the answer is that there were a lot more things before Sputnik. Sputnik may have been the final event, or one of the many events, which caused Congress to get involved with education. The National Defense Education Act provided money and support and also, perhaps, made possible the legislature's deciding that they should fund a new institution in Michigan. Certainly the Sputnik overhead explains the inclusion of Russian language in the early [MSUO] curriculum, which isn't part of any of Hamilton's descriptions. It comes along much later, the idea that people should have to learn Russian as part of their curriculum. With this combination of events that we call an "accident," it sort of comes together.

Then there was this willingness, this terrific willingness on the part of the folks at MSU to share materials and staff [time] and facilities. They shipped down lab supplies and materials, provided food that first fall from their food center, shared things with us. There were never any negative features about that [but rather], "You have to go and take care of the new sister," as it were. We were always amazed. Well, I guess we were a little irritated that some of the [operations were] being run out of East Lansing, like all of the automation for registration, which had to be done at the computers of those days in East Lansing, which were punch-card systems. So Herb Stoutenburg would take the punch cards from registration, run up to East Lansing, get them processed, and come back and we'd get our class lists. It looked like we really knew what we were doing, but all the [administrative operations] were done in East Lansing.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Herb turned these things around overnight, burning up the road.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: All the budget [management] was done in East Lansing, all the fund ledgers and all the record-keeping would come from East Lansing, all the purchasing was done from East Lansing. You couldn't buy anything without getting it there. Somehow that sharing was done by those folks up there without any hard feelings. There was a feeling that it was something that they were supposed to do, but never any grumbling about it.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: We did get some interesting information from the math professor we mentioned, Eugene Deskins. He had been on the latter-most MSU curriculum planning committee, that fourth stage of curriculum planning which happened in the early spring of 1959. They decided they had to get down to a little more brass tacks [in planning], as MSUO was going to open in the fall.

One of the things that they needed to do was to figure out how to get faculty. Eugene Deskins told us that he was approached to see if he'd like to go down [to MSUO] for a few years. [The MSUO originators] had the assumption that maybe the way they could staff this new school would be to ask faculty that they had at Michigan State to spend a couple years down there, until new faculty could be hired. Hardly anybody at Michigan State responded to that. There were [only] two people that we know of who did: Bill Schwab and Bill Hammerle came from Michigan State University to MSUO that first year. So all of a sudden that theory didn't work. Woody Varner, as you know, was stuck with this in early 1959, much later than you normally would do with trying to roust up a faculty.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: There were none of these [curriculum] planning documents, and the plans were all very vague on a lot of administrative detail, like how to hire faculty. I think there was an unwritten assumption on somebody's part that "We'll just get some folks from MSU to go down and sort of teach extension courses," but it didn't work.

HARVEY BURDICK: I hadn't thought about that. We've been talking [previously] about waiting to the last minute to go out and hire people, and asking how could they do that? But if they were operating on the assumption that "We have these

people, they're going to go on down and they'll be teaching for one or two years," then they didn't worry.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Yes, but [the faculty] didn't want to interrupt their careers. They were in places in their departments, they didn't want to go away.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: They didn't talk to the people that might [go to MSUO]; they [just] had a theory.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Another thing that I think did hold off the hiring of faculty was the fact that there wasn't a curriculum plan and there wasn't the vision until the Meadow Brook seminars blessed Hamilton's ideas, and that didn't wind up until the end of '58. Things were getting into a very big time crunch and Woody Varner was appointed chancellor January 15th of 1959, although he had been given responsibility for the job a year earlier.

I want to go into that right now, this change from Hamilton to Woody. Looking at it, you can say that to President Hannah it looks reasonable that the person he would select that's going to be the chancellor of the new school is his current academic vice president. That makes sense, that's like the person-in-waiting to become president of something—he could be the chancellor down here. As we know, Hamilton started off doing curriculum planning right off the bat, even before the Wilson's gift was publicly announced. But it took till the end of '57 to get a committee report, and in October of '57 Hamilton asked another committee member to take over and be chair. So something was slowing down about Hamilton.

We know that Varner went to Hannah and offered to take over the project. Varner told us about that, and he said that actually Hannah tried to dissuade him. He said, "Why would you want to go down to something like this, that isn't even there, why would you want to do that?" Woody told Hannah that he thought it had a lot of promise. He got the assignment to be responsible for the project on January 15th, 1958, one year before he was named chancellor. Basically, Hamilton was in charge for a year and then Woody was in charge for a year, and then Woody was named chancellor nine months before we were supposed to open.

HARVEY BURDICK: Help me to understand this. Woody became head of the project in the beginning of 1958, so he had to start asking himself, “What do I do about this whole thing?” What did he do in 1958? Do you have any sense of that? Was it primarily just setting up buildings?

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: The first building was called Foundation Hall, later called North and South Foundation, but that was already being planned by J. Robert F. Swanson, the architect who had been selected early in 1957. Presumably by the end of ‘57 there was some building planning in the works, there were some committee reports coming out, but we think that the total output that was to be described, and the curriculum and catalogue that would be needed, were missing. There just wasn’t anything there, and so that’s why we’ve come to the conclusion by our own analysis that something went wrong, and there had to be a change there from Hamilton to Varner.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: We’ve given some thought to why that would have happened, that Hamilton would have been phased out and Varner phased in, and we’ve come up with several causes or possible causes of that. Woody told us there was some sort of faculty unrest at Michigan State and so Hamilton was needed on campus. Les Hetenyi, who was in close contact with the faculty at that time, says that none of them remembers any unrest, so I don’t know about that. Maybe something was going to brew [on campus], maybe there was some personal issue of Hamilton’s, a health issue or something like that. Possibly Hannah really saw that Hamilton wasn’t moving fast enough.

We know that Hamilton evidently had some concern that the project was risky. I’ve just found in his convocation speech—he came to the first convocation and gave one of the many speeches in September of 1959—and here’s this interesting statement, I want to read it. He’s saying what a wonderful act of courage it is to be starting this university, and congratulating everybody. Then he says: “I must confess that in the early months of the planning of Michigan State University Oakland, as I would on occasion accompany Chancellor Varner to this site and would think of the many resources well over 100 years in development on the parent campus in East Lansing and reflect on the complete absence of these in Oakland County, I wondered at times where the line between courage and fool-hardiness was properly drawn.” So maybe he got cold feet, and then maybe finally

Hannah realized that the only person that really could pull this off was Woody Varner, and he ought to do it.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: He became, as one of our interviewees remarked, the right man at the right place at the right time, the accident kind of thing, the hero. He had charisma, he had this educational entrepreneur attitude—he even describes himself that way—and he knew how to interact with people. For instance, he visited my parents when he was in Ithaca, New York once. My mother wrote about the visit that “Your prexy stopped in to see us.” They were probably astounded that the president or the chancellor of a university would come and see them, but it seemed to us just normal, that’s just the way Woody operated.

HARVEY BURDICK: Very interpersonal.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Can I tell a funny story about Woody and the football games, before you get on into more serious things?

Fred Obear, who was the second chemist on campus—he came in the second year—told us in his interview that he and his wife took advantage of the opportunity to go to a Big Ten football game, which they had never gone to before. They could get inexpensive tickets and sit with the other MSU people up there at Michigan State in the stadium. They happened to notice that Woody Varner was there and he was very involved. He was getting up and cheering, and just right “with it.” So at the halftime, Fred approached Woody and he said, “I notice that, although we’re very much against intercollegiate athletics and particularly football at MSUO, here you are. Now, how do you explain this?” And Woody, without batting an eyelash, said, “Oh, yes, I come here as often as I can to just to renew my disgust.”

We’re stealing [the story], but Woody was a charmer.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: As we’ve discovered, he knew how to not say things that would offend people, and say things that they wanted to hear, or by not saying [something] the listener went away with the idea that Woody had agreed with them.

HARVEY BURDICK: I want to pick up on that in just a moment, about people talking to Woody and coming away with their own impressions confirmed, whatever they happened to be. A great talent on the part of Woody.

I just want to pick up again: Woody came into the project, not as a revolutionary in the educational world, he was vice president for off-campus education. Hamilton seemed to be the one who was very gung-ho about a new concept, and somewhere along the line Woody got the bug, right? He got infected and as Alice pointed out, he was a true convert. He volunteers for this even though Hannah asks, "Are you sure you want to do this?" Or [perhaps Hannah] has the same thinking as Hamilton: "How risky is this project, do you want to give up your career and take this chance?" Woody goes for it and he is in charge of the project in the beginning of '58. So I want to come back to my question. Do you have any sense of what happened in the year of 1958? What was Woody doing?

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: We do have one letter [by Woody]. We must say we have to thank Herb Stoutenburg, and his thesis on the origin of MSUO's curriculum, for many of these documents. In the thesis is a letter that Woody wrote in early '58 to the curriculum planning committee that Tom Hamilton had organized, congratulating them on having done a good job and saying that this looked like a good basis for moving forward.

But honestly, we don't know what his thinking was. It was certainly not a question that occurred to us when we interviewed him: "How did you get so enthused?" I do have to say that it's clear that Woody Varner wanted John Hannah's job. At some point, for some reason John Hannah asked Woody Varner, "What do you want?" (I don't know what the conversation was.) Woody's answer was, "Your job."

HARVEY BURDICK: Woody's taking over this project might have been seen, on his part, as a stepping stone to some future large job as chancellor of a large university.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Any one of us, looking back on it, could have thought that that would have been in a person's mind, but of course we didn't want him to ever think of that.



HARVEY BURDICK: That's right. [We wanted him] totally dedicated forever and ever to us.

Now, he finally becomes the chief officer of the project in the beginning of 1958. You've been telling of the problems of hiring and curriculum planning which were put off until 1959. What was Woody doing during the year of '58?

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: He certainly did do one important thing that helped publicize the curriculum: he and Tom Hamilton together worked on putting together the Meadow Brook seminars. It must have taken some [serious] organization to call on those people and get them all to come on a certain day. There were four seminars and they happened August through December, but it takes a long lead time to put something like that together. That he did do.

Also it seems to us that the thing that Woody Varner was very good at, and which he was doing that year, was working the community. He was working Oakland County and to some extent Macomb County, identifying community leaders, pulling them in on the MSUO Foundation as well as in every other way, getting community leaders to see that this was going to be a wonderful school and they should rally around.

Of course, John Hannah and Woody jointly launched this idea of putting together a foundation, even way back in '57. But I think it fell to Woody to really put the money behind the names. One of the influential people, critically influential, on the foundation was Harold Fitzgerald, president and publisher of the *Pontiac Press*, the main newspaper in the county. Harold's publicity locally meant a great deal in bringing students, it turned out. The kids read about it in the *Pontiac Press*. How about this: Saturday, January 4th, 1958, even before Woody was put on the job, here is an editorial that says, "It seems to me MSUO is certain to become one of our great universities." This is a year and a half before it's going to open.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: No curriculum, no faculty, but it's "certain to become a great university" because Fitzgerald had bought into the dream.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: He could see that it was good for Oakland County to have a major institution, which they did not have, a four-year school. Of course community colleges hadn't even come up on the horizon by then. It says further down in this particular editorial: "When Vice President D. B. Varner recently

addressed a meeting of the Oakland and Macomb County supervisors”—those were the governing bodies of the two counties, the boards of supervisors—“he made a deep and lasting impression on everyone that heard him, just as President Hannah had done earlier at a downtown luncheon.”

They were out spreading the gospel and getting the kind of support that comes with the publicity from the *Pontiac Press*. They were getting bank people to put money behind scholarships. They were getting significant monies towards the new Student Center; they got money from the Oakland County Board of Supervisors to help pay for that—the Oakland Center. And I think there must have been some Foundation money in the Foundation Halls besides the Wilson’s two million dollars. You know, you look at it and you say, if this was going to really be a school on its own, not a branch of MSU, it needed to develop its own community base, both of people who understood and cared about it and people who would put money into it. So I think that’s a lot of what Woody did.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: The MSUO Foundation was a very critical feature in that year in spreading the message, getting the image of the institution out. Apparently the feeling was that you’ve got to make this institution known somehow. One of the features was to get Lowell Eklund to run a continuing education operation here, and they did that starting in the fall of 1958. They taught continuing education courses in what we now know as the Child Care Center. It was the chicken coops of the poultry farm at the corner of Adams and Butler Roads.

HARVEY BURDICK: What [courses]?

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Speed reading was one of them—I don’t know [the details]. They had hundreds of students, even more. This became a very major feature of the outreach in the community. Here was education going on a year before any college classes were beginning, people were taking courses at these chicken coops, and so [MSUO] had a presence. Woody always talked about having a presence, starting to show that something was going on. I think he felt the need, as you’ve suggested, to show that some education was going on.

HARVEY BURDICK: While the buildings were being built the community was being educated. This is a place that a fine university is going to be and we’re going

to show you and reach out, we're going to make these classes available to you. So that's what was his investment during the year of '58. As you pointed out earlier, he might have assumed the MSU faculty would drift over for a year or two and help us out, and that would be okay. What we had to do was develop a financial base and that's what he did.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: But then it became painfully obvious that they weren't going to get the faculty by that method of bringing them from Michigan State, and Varner had to step up to doing that, too. Here is a man who had not been dean in any academic area, having to hire people in every area. He basically did it single-handedly or, in a few cases, by hiring somebody who then hired another person. But it all emanated from Woody.

*[To Paul Tomboulia]* I think you should talk about how Woody felt about his faculty.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Woody really appreciated and respected his faculty. He made that very clear. He was a quick study, he could pick up on things. He learned about music, which you wouldn't have expected from a person who came from Texas A&M and his background. He got excited about the Meadow Brook Festival later, as you know. He would learn about things and put them in his memory bank and communicate about them as if they were part of what he always knew.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: You remember when we had our interview with Dick Burke, who teaches philosophy, he said that when Woody came to have dinner with him, Woody just said, "Tell me about philosophy." Woody listened while Dick talked about it and then he decided this would be a fine philosophy professor, just on the basis of his sense of a person's capabilities.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: He was judging communicators. I think maybe that was one of his major attributes, the ability to judge someone else who could communicate. Maybe that's why he came and talked to people like me at Minnesota. I don't know that I fit that model, but he wanted to see what people were like in person.

Not only did he trust the faculty, but we trusted him. I think we trusted Varner to supply what we needed, to bring the resources needed. So when Varner said, "I need something to happen," the faculty said, "Okay, we'll do it for you and we'll not worry about the details." So they had this same sort of entrepreneurial attitude.

An example was the development of graduate programs. All of a sudden one day—it must have been in '65 or about that period, very early—Varner came and said, "We need to set up graduate programs as soon as possible." This was not in the [current] plan anywhere, I hadn't seen any timetable, so this was something brand new. He sought departments at Oakland who could do this. This was not a direction favored by many faculty because it seemed to be getting away from the liberal arts focus and into professionalism, something we didn't want to talk about at a liberal arts institution.

Yet Woody saw it in the cards, I think, the political cards, that you needed to establish your institution as one which had graduate programs. This is part of the higher education picture, you don't want to be cut out of that area. Politically, he said, we've got to get into graduate work. He went around—as he came, I'm sure, to your department—and asked people to hold up their hands if they could do a program. It was "Can you do one, can we do one over here?" So Jim McKay and I held up our hands and got our first graduate students in right away, and were graduating masters students as early as '66. And you were in that, in the psychology department.

HARVEY BURDICK: That's right. We had designed, over the weekend, a masters degree program.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Nobody ever asked Woody: "How are we going to pay for this? Are we going to get new staff, get books, get support, are we getting teaching assistants?" It was just "We'll take Woody's attitude, somehow we'll get what's needed."

HARVEY BURDICK: I'm going to go back to a point that we raised earlier. We have a man who, as you say, was a quick study. He had to learn about liberal arts, it was not in his background, and yet now he was running this institution that was dedicated to this. People were attracted by the kinds of things they read from

Loren Pope and Harold Fitzgerald: a great university dedicated to the liberal arts, educating all sorts of people that didn't have an opportunity. Woody was at the head of the line, leading the charge, and he was very persuasive. Yet, he was also very much in touch with the money and the future, where things were going. He kind of knew that we couldn't stay as a small liberal arts college with the support of the legislature.

And yet people had these different beliefs. They believed we were going at least five different ways, and everybody thought [their own belief] was true. How did that happen? Do you understand? Everybody knew their vision was the right vision and yet they were different visions.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Right. What we've learned, after looking at all the documents and the early plans and then reading the materials, was that if anybody cared to pursue the [design for] the future of the institution, it was all laid out.

The earliest document we have is a planning map of October of 1958 in which there are the planning parameters for the university. It would be 25,000 students, 6,000 students would be dormitory residents and 70% would be commuters. Numbers like that—just a very large institution. Then, when you start reading the materials, they're all consistent with that plan, a trajectory toward being a large institution. The first recruiting document we've ever found is probably from 1959. It's for students, it talks about a school which will have, again, about 25,000 students.

HARVEY BURDICK: And that couldn't be just an undergraduate school, could it?

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Nobody says anything about that. It says the growth projections were apparently based on some numbers that were obtained by talking to the Oakland County Planning Commission and the Macomb County Planning Commission. The growth trajectories for these two counties were—as we've discovered often in these political areas—unrealistic and inflated. There were far more possible students suggested that would come to college, than would [realistically] ever come. Nobody considered the issues of perhaps competing colleges, junior colleges. Then we get into the other area, the quality of the students needed.

The dream was also promoted, of course, by the early publicist Loren Pope. He was writing profusely, selling the image or mission of this institution. Again, the numbers are there. He talks about 10,000 students by 1970, 20,000 students by the late '70s or '80s. So there's no question that the numbers were there, if anybody wanted to read the materials or look at the plans. Why [faculty] who came from undergraduate backgrounds at small institutions felt that was what they were going to have, we're not sure, except that Fred Obear has said, "People hear what they want to hear." Woody had this great ability to [let that happen].

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: We talked with Les Hetenyi again just a few days ago and he corroborated this capability that Woody had. Les said, "He never lied to me but," he said, "I would always come out of his office thinking that I had heard exactly what I wanted to hear." Woody made it come across so that you could get out of it your wishes, and you would be happy and you would be inspired and you would move forward.

Obviously, what people actually came to in the fall of '59 was a small school, very small, with a high degree of commitment to the liberal arts. That was true. That attracted some people because that in particular was what they wanted, and they didn't hear, didn't care to hear, or didn't believe the projections that there would be growth.

PAUL TOMBOULAN: We began with 570 registered students.

I have the minutes from an early faculty meeting. Varner is talking to the faculty November 24th, 1959. Everybody would have been there, the whole faculty, administration, everybody. He says 25,000 possible students, 6,000 in dormitories, 30% married, 70% unmarried. In other words, he's talking about a young age group and those same planning parameters, again. He was addressing all the faculty and saying it out again, so how could anyone confuse that issue and not hear those words about 20,000, 25,000? We found one plan that had 40,000 students on it as a possibility.

HARVEY BURDICK: Yet that was one of the arguments that went on among the faculty: How big we were going to grow, how small we were going to keep it?

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: After a while, it became: How do we keep the lid on, from getting to be that big? But it was no longer a question of 40,000, it was a question of 15,000 or 20,000.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: I think we were all so imbued with the idea that we were going to do it, we could each do it our own way. We had a clean slate, we could do it the right way. The faculty who felt that the right way was to stay small probably said, "I don't believe that, I don't care about that, it's not going to happen and we're going to keep it from happening, too." You know, so many things were said, they could selectively sort out what they didn't want to believe. I have a sense that might have happened.

HARVEY BURDICK: Given the fact that they didn't have the trappings of a large university, they didn't have intercollegiate athletics, they didn't have ROTC, they didn't have fraternities and sororities—

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Right, so how are you going to get all these kids to come anyway?

HARVEY BURDICK: Exactly. So everybody had a good rationale for their own position.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: And as we said, Woody never lied, but people were able to come out with what made them feel satisfied.

HARVEY BURDICK: And committed—because obviously they were giving much more to this institution. There was a sense of identification with the school rather than with their particular profession.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Yes, this is the pioneering. This is the we're-all-in-this-together kind of thing: "We're going to make this a success. And it isn't my discipline, it's the institution." Somehow we were working in a bigger context.

HARVEY BURDICK: You know, as a member of the faculty it was very clear to me that in the early years we were working together across disciplines. Then

somewhere that changed, and people lost their sense of commitment to the university and went back to their disciplines.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Starting to compartmentalize and go off and develop programs that were focused on their own disciplines, that's right. There were a lot of reasons and that's a little beyond our time frame.

HARVEY BURDICK: I know you made the point that we're focusing on the first four or five years, but still these are the Varner years. It's very difficult, you know. You slip over, as you yourself did when you went up to '65 about the masters degree programs and how easily they were incorporated. The role Varner played was critical.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: When we interviewed Bob Hoopes, the first dean of the faculty, he probably put it more clearly, as he has a way of doing: that having the same chancellor for 11 years—because you can count the year before we opened, so we had Woody for 11 years up until 1970—that made the experiment work. Bob felt that [because] there wasn't the changeover in presidents which is so frequent now in higher education, and [we had] the same continuing stabilizing influence of Woody, plus the allegiance that we all felt to Woody—that was, to Bob, what actually made it work. I know that both of you can well comment on how there were relationships and communications between the faculty and the administration. That deteriorated after Woody left—again, for many reasons, but part of it was that Woody had held it together.

HARVEY BURDICK: We've talked among the three of us about Woody's leaving and how much we were hurt. It was like a father leaving the family and going to another family. It was that relationship we had to Woody which was very special.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Yes. It was certainly something that we'd never expected. That's okay, you don't expect it—but he didn't even prepare us for it. It was so out-of-the-blue. As you said, it was like he walked out on a party that we were having, just said good-bye. We know he received a very fine offer from the University of Nebraska where he could be the president of an entire system. That was a wonderful step upwards for him. He was, again, the man in the right place at the



right time, because he had a direct connection with the preceding president of the University of Nebraska, so it was kind of reasonable they would turn to Woody. We don't know all the reasons and we have heard from a number of our interviewees about different reasons, probably the facets of it. There were probably many reasons why Woody chose to leave. But I guess we'll never know why it was quite so suddenly done. I have to tell you that his wife Paula told us personally that when they left, she said, "I cried all the way to Nebraska."

HARVEY BURDICK: Is that right?

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Yes, they had had a wonderful time here.

So we don't know the whole story. And Woody, when we asked him why he left, the only reason he could really give us was that he felt he had done his part here, but he had also gotten tired of going to the legislature for money. Certainly he could anticipate that the president of the University System of Nebraska didn't have to compete with anybody, whatever money was going into higher education would be his money to manage. So that could be a part of it.

HARVEY BURDICK: There were other regional schools that developed [in Michigan] that he had to compete with as well, [eventually]. We were no longer that distinguished, were we?

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: That's right. That was, I think, one of the features that got people thinking more in terms of disciplines and departments than previously, because we had lost a lot of that character that was unique. So we said, "Well, we don't have that, but at least we can do our own departmental thing, we can have our own program. We can do good works for our students in our discipline rather than for the whole university."

HARVEY BURDICK: You mentioned you were involved in freshman exploratories. I certainly was. I remember that as another example of the faculty saying, "Yes, we can all teach writing." I mean, how do you do that?

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: It took extra time, I know.

HARVEY BURDICK: I remember going over to the English department, asking, "How do you do that, do you know?" They said, "Don't worry, go ahead and do it," and we all jumped in. In your case, Paul, it was a very useful thing in your own interests, getting involved in environmental [subjects]. It was that quality that we could do these little unusual things.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: We could solve problems for the university that came to us one way or another, like graduate programs, teaching exploratories, dealing with inadequate support in one way or another. It was a matter of "How are we going to do this, how are we going to solve this problem?" And we'd do it with a standard way that we approached these problems, which was "Let's think of the right answer, and then let's get as close as we can and not worry about it too much."

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: That's what pioneers do, you know. You're in a situation, nobody predicted it, it is happening in front of your eyes. You're in it and you'll have to make do. You'll have to improvise and you'll have to do it together in cooperation.

HARVEY BURDICK: I'm not sure you can answer this question, but there were other regional universities comparable to Oakland, developed in Michigan. They didn't have this kind of beginnings, did they?

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: I certainly can tell you that Central Michigan and Eastern Michigan grew out of teachers' colleges that had been there for a long time. So it wasn't like something brand-new and exciting, it was just that they evolved into full-scale universities over time.

HARVEY BURDICK: So what do we have? We have a beginning place from a plot of land, people not too clear about what they're going to be doing, except that they were going to do something exciting. I think it was at first "It's going to be exciting, it's going to be different, this is going to be such a special place in Michigan," and nobody knowing exactly what it was, and they went forward there. Woody Varner was the Pied Piper, playing his flute, picked up people from here and there and they in turn bought into the dream, picked up other people.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: And Loren Pope was out in front selling the story to the world, mostly to future faculty as it turns out. The students didn't much care about what Loren wrote, but the faculty would always point to these articles of Loren's, or the people out in the world away from Oakland would be able to read Loren, and wonder and marvel at the new academic experiment being conducted here.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: You might want to talk a little bit about what was important to the students and how they rose to the challenge.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: The faculty liked a lot of things about the institution: the clean slate we talked about, the chance to make our own mistakes, as George Matthews said it. We could build programs of the type we wanted or dreamed about, that we couldn't do or didn't have elsewhere. We'd get rid of some of the things that we didn't want, even though we didn't always agree on size and direction, as well as the role of some of the other associated trappings of big universities.

The students were inspired, as we learned after talking with them later, not because of the same things the faculty were. They got inspired because they were the first. They rose to the challenge somehow, they bought into this dream. A couple of them told us they felt "We've got to do this." To use current jargon, they overachieved in many senses, they worked very hard, they felt a responsibility. The faculty inspired them to work hard, super hard. They developed a loyalty to the institution beyond what you would expect from this group of kids who just were going to a school because it was there in their backyard.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: And that they could afford.

HARVEY BURDICK: It makes sense. If there had been a community college, they would have gone there. But they are entering into [the MSUO] world and everybody is [cheering], and the kids just bought into it.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Some of those Charter Class graduates have been stalwart supporters of this university, and they are so proud that they were here in the beginning. It has become something that's permeated their whole lives, for some of them that we've interviewed.

I have to tell you about one person we interviewed. Bill Kath was in that Charter Class and I think he graduated at the top of that class, certainly at the top of engineering. He's now retired from being a vice president for Ford. It served him well. When we interviewed him, he brought out so many things that he had saved. His mother insisted that he keep a scrapbook. He said, "I didn't ever paste anything in," but it was tucked into the pages of the book. He even had the receipt he had gotten for the few dollars he paid as his application fee to apply to MSUO. He had everything else besides, that he had saved all this time from 40 years ago, it meant that much to him.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: There are few today that would think of remembering going to college by saving those kinds of memorabilia.

This pioneering that the students got into was part of their social glue, it held them together. They've been loyal and committed over the years. These are the ones that survived. Many would say that there were a lot who didn't survive, and we'll mention that in a minute. There were a lot of difficulties, but the center focus of the students who were doing well was to meet faculty expectations, work hard, produce.

As I recall we did the faculty meetings that first fall as a committee of the whole, a senate kind of concept. There were no written documents about how to proceed but you do things, you circle the wagons and have a meeting of the community, with everybody there.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Including all the administrators—they met at the same time because everybody was in it together.

HARVEY BURDICK: In that sense, it was a family, administrators and faculty.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Exactly, a committee of the whole. We made decisions about issues brought to us, the whole list. Everybody voted on everything, and this seemed to work for a couple of years. Things fell apart later for obvious reasons, political reasons, power reasons, and other dramas that we discussed in some of the other interviews. But at least initially this committee of the whole, this idea of everybody making the decisions as pioneers, worked.

HARVEY BURDICK: I'm reminded of the sense of a honeymoon. You just don't get into an argument on your honeymoon, but after a few years, little things do develop.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Could I mention some of the things that I particularly participated in, that were examples of where we all got together, regardless of who had what job assignment or whose husband had what job assignment. It didn't even matter—we all got together to do things. I know you interviewed Millie Hammerle and Uni Susskind and they talked about the faculty wives, but I have to point out it was the Women's Club, it wasn't just faculty wives, it was the wives of anybody on the staff. We did the typical things that you do when you're thrown together with a group of folks and you're the foreigners, the outsiders. You've got to cling together.

We had a group who played recorders together, and we weren't so hot but we enjoyed it. We practiced together. I remember sessions where we had Norman Susskind and Jerry Straka [and myself], and I don't remember who else played recorders. Then there was Harold Fromm from the English department for a while. He had a harpsichord and we went out to his house and we played. Then we thought we were good enough, we were invited to play for a faculty dinner. Maybe some of you writhed through all of it, I don't know, but we were invited to do that.

People have mentioned how the faculty interacted with students. I remember that we had chemistry department students over for dinner, which we haven't bothered with for years. We would have picnics for the whole department. And of course, the students came and worked for us. One of the young women cleaned house for me, and her husband—who also was an Oakland University graduate—went on to become a very high man in the state DNR [Department of Natural Resources].

I have to tell you about one special event. Our first child Jeff was also the first baby who was born after MSUO assembled. He was the first baby coming along and there was a lot of interest in this. There was a shower given before he was born. All the women were invited, not just the faculty—we were all friends. We were with a group of friends and I believe it was at the home of Inge Fritz, whose husband was director of student activities for a while. Everybody came

including Paula Varner and Matilda Wilson—they all came. It was just that delightful sense of “It doesn’t matter who you are, we’re all friends.”

Then we did a number of things that were even more pioneer-like, where we were trying to pool our resources. Jim McKay had worked in a butcher shop at some point in his career. The first year we were here, he suggested that his family and the two of us share a quarter of beef and it would be a way to save money, you see. He would go and pick it out and tell them how to cut it and wrap it for us, and we did that. The furnished house we were renting had this great big freezer in the basement, so we could keep all this beef and we lived high on it for a year at small expense.

Then, after we had moved into the faculty subdivision—the Meadow Brook subdivision—and the Susskinds moved in, we found a place where you could go at small expense and dig trees and shrubs from a nursery that was going out of business. So the two families got together and we’d watch each other’s kids out there in the nursery and dig plants together to save money. We were all doing that sort of thing.

HARVEY BURDICK: I remember, in interviewing Uni {Susskind} and Millie [Hammerle], when there was a problem of payment once. Do you remember? Woody was concerned and he wanted to do [something].

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: He came around to people individually.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: I think maybe it was before we moved [into the faculty subdivision], I’m not sure. Anyway, he came around and offered that you could go and select some plantings from the home where he was living, which had been the poultry manager’s house, and move them to your own lot in the Meadow Brook subdivision.

HARVEY BURDICK: Dig them out, soften the blow.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Something that he could offer, and they appreciated it.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: You asked [before] about early colleges. Not all of those succeed. We were one of about 200 institutions, as I understand it, in the period

from 1957 to '64 that were new in the U.S. Apparently we had just the right combination of attitudes and personnel and factors which made it work. In reviewing the history of successes of the colleges from that era, some of those attitudes that you've identified certainly were part of that. The idea that the students had: "We can do it." They committed, they rose to the challenge: "We can do it," as Joan Clair [told us]. Herb Stoutenburg was imbued with the idea that you've got to make this project work. You do what you have to do to make it work. So if it meant getting more resources from Lansing, or taking something up there, or borrowing something from there, that's what you did. My attitude was always, "If it's broken, let's fix it."

HARVEY BURDICK: There was a tolerance for goofs, a lot of tolerance for error, right? You weren't going to jump on the deficiencies and the omissions and say, "I made a big mistake coming here." What I'm hearing is that if there is a problem here, let's work with it and bring it around. This is a real sense of willingness to make this succeed—that identification with the school itself.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Make the pioneer settlement work.

HARVEY BURDICK: And teach. If you were doing your own research and scholarship to increase your status and your discipline, that [originally] was secondary, and now it is primary.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Yes, once your city is built you don't have to be a pioneer anymore. But there were some omissions from that early design that have struck us, since looking back—things didn't always work.

HARVEY BURDICK: Pick out a couple that you really think were big problems.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Two or three come to mind. There was a major omission in the curricular planning, about how to find space in these complicated programs like business administration, engineering, and teacher education for the liberal arts courses. We were supposed to have 50% of the students' time in a four-year curriculum in liberal arts, and if you do that you don't have curricular space.

HARVEY BURDICK: Was that in the original Hamilton commitment?

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: [In 1956, Hamilton originally proposed having liberal and cultural arts courses as a “firm under-girding” for all majors, side-by-side with technical courses throughout the four-year experience. The May 22, 1959 MSUO curriculum document, the final report from all the work of the advisory committees, states (page 8) that liberal studies courses will constitute about half of the total curriculum for all students, and will be distributed over the entire four years.]

[Editor’s note: The preceding paragraph was re-worded by the interviewee to provide greater accuracy.]

HARVEY BURDICK: All students, regardless of major, must devote 50% of their four-year curriculum to liberal studies. That is different. No other school, I think, had ever made a commitment like that.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: No, and this includes engineering and education.

HARVEY BURDICK: And so that was a problem and yet there was something beautiful about it.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: A very attractive feature, but it ultimately caused unhappiness in certain disciplines.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: But even as much as was able to be retained—of this liberal arts portion of the curriculum—meant so much to those people who were in teacher ed or engineering whom we’ve interviewed. They said, “That’s what made me able to have my career—the liberal arts part of it—that gave me the sense of where we’re all going.”

HARVEY BURDICK: Of course, that’s lovely in retrospect. As young students they said, “Who needs this?”

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: That’s right. I’m sure they complained.



Another feature that was missing was that there was no laboratory science anywhere in the general ed program. There was a requirement that got introduced, the philosophy of science, and somehow this was supposed to substitute. We discovered [a possible explanation] for this, mostly from [interviewing] Gene Deskins, who was on one of those planning committees [at MSU]. A faculty member named Stanley Idzerda, who was the head of the honors college at MSU and came from the philosophy of science, was on this curriculum planning committee at MSU, planning for MSUO. By suggesting this [requirement], probably in a committee meeting, [Idzerda] would solve a serious problem: How are you going to start expensive science programs? So he [may have come] up with this answer. The other scientist on the curriculum committee was a physicist—

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: But he was a theoretical physicist, he didn't need a lab.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: So when Idzerda [suggested] the philosophy of science, everybody [may have said] that was okay, they didn't object. So we had a curriculum that had no laboratory science.

HARVEY BURDICK: It solved the financial problem but didn't really deal with reality.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: No. It's certainly not what other institutions have. In most schools we're still fighting for a piece of science in this general ed program. It has always been a struggle.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: I remember how mystified you were when you started, because you had clearly been hired to be a chemist, and you would clearly have some labs, but everything you read said that the students were supposed to be taking philosophy of science. Somehow there had been a last-minute amendment, and lab science had somehow gotten in the door but had not really been fully funded.

HARVEY BURDICK: So when you did come and you taught your first year, you had some laboratory [space for students].

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Oh, yes. Somebody [may have] said, "That's a problem, because if you're going to have engineering, you've got to have chemistry, in the lab." So the lab got funded and built as part of the operation.

The other major [problem], and we sort of mentioned this before, was the plans for the size of the student body. They were made based on these wrong assumptions that we've indicated. [The planners] expected to get a far larger percentage of a far larger group of people than were really there. And the idea that the student body could be as big as 20,000 by 1980, in retrospect, doesn't make any sense if you look at real information that they should have been looking at. So they were very unrealistic about the size projections, and the rates of growth.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: One of the things that they didn't address at all was any strategy to actually identify and recruit students. Apparently Herb Stoutenburg and Roy Alexander, the first dean of students, were on their own to figure out how to get students—first of all, a sufficient number to start the school, but secondly, students that would be of any kind of quality to match this curriculum that was being planned, which was far more challenging than most of the curricula that were offered at Michigan State. Yet we were not supposed to have unusually talented students coming in. That was obviously a mistake that wasn't foreseen.

HARVEY BURDICK: That caused course problems.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Yes, because of this famous mismatch between what the faculty had been told was going to be a high-quality curriculum and high-quality students, when the latter wasn't true. The students weren't adequately prepared, as Paul mentioned in his interview, for the kinds of courses that he and the mathematicians taught. Somehow nobody scrutinized the assumption that the quality of students would materialize.

As we know and you know, there were a number of students who failed quite miserably across the board, others who failed in particular the courses that required skills with numerical work—and people tried to explain this failing. Don O'Dowd came in the second year and he did some studies along with David Beardslee, and then a few years later, David Riesman came from the East.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: He talked to the same people who had done the studies.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: They devised the idea, by using some of their calculations, that the reason why students got failing grades was that this young, exuberant faculty had unrealistic expectations of the students, and that they were just offering courses that they should never have been offering, that were outlandish. And I have to speak for Paul. He found that irritating over the years, very irritating, at least in the case of science and math, which he knew about. He proved that the students were well below the numerical capability that the students in the same courses at Michigan State came in with. He and Bill Hammerle and Jim McKay and Orrin Taulbee were teaching from the regular texts, teaching regular courses, and yet they had to give Fs because people just didn't do the work.

HARVEY BURDICK: So it wasn't a case where good students were confronted with extremely high standards, but poor students were confronted with normal courses.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Yes, the spread of talent was enormous. We had the high end—we had people like Bill Kath and a few others like that—but the bottom end had an enormous number of folks. I'm talking about the students that I had in freshman chemistry. These were folks who declared themselves to be interested in engineering. We had about 111 who identified that area and many of them were just not mathematically prepared, plus a few others who got thrown into chemistry because it was a science course, and they were even less well-prepared. So the combination of the marginal engineering-interest students with [poor] math backgrounds, and the non-technical backgrounds of the other people, just made for a class that really couldn't perform at the level needed for this one introductory science class.

HARVEY BURDICK: You've triggered off my next question. In your experiences throughout the Chronicles project where you've interviewed a variety of people, did you come across people who have simply different views of what happened, different opinions of what was going on, what was wrong, what was right? Or are you getting the same story from everybody?

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: We have to say, of course, we interviewed people who were part of the success. We started out [in the Chronicles] to show the people

who made it work and we didn't interview people who left unhappily from the faculty or the administration, or who stayed only a short time and maybe made no particular contributions to the progress of the enterprise. Loren Pope only stayed maybe five years—but he made a great difference.

Of those people that we interviewed, there was a consistency that was amazing. These are people, some of them approaching their 80s, who are remembering things that happened to them 40 years ago with great clarity of detail, especially, as with all of us, the longer you talk about it, the more of it your mind brings up to the fore. They were very consistent about what happened, very consistent—to the point that sometimes it sounds like we're hearing the same story, told by another person from their point of view. We did all see it in very much the same way.

HARVEY BURDICK: Even though they had different positions at the university.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Oh, yes. There were obviously some very illuminating insights, some of which we've shared today, that came from individual people. But they were illuminating the story that we're getting consistently from everyone.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: And they were willing to share their experiences. Without exception, anyone we asked said, "Oh, yes, I want to—I'm happy to talk about that, I want to talk about that."

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: They would ask, "Can I tell you this little story, and do you mind if I say this thing?"

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Again, we're talking about the ones who were successful and who looked back on this event as a pleasant experience. They had feelings of being happy about the very difficult, challenging beginnings of the institution.

HARVEY BURDICK: So what started as a very happy experience continued for a chunk of time, the period of time where you've been focusing in the Chronicles. Of course, what happened after Woody Varner left around 1970, that's another project.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Yes, it is, but it's not going to be done by us. We've put in our time.

HARVEY BURDICK: You have a couple more people you're going to be interviewing. Do you think the project is going to be wrapped up this year?

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Yes. We hope to be wrapping it up at the time in September when they have the 40th reunion here.

HARVEY BURDICK: Oh, we're going to have a 40th reunion? So there's going to be a return of the early group in September?

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Yes, it's being planned.

HARVEY BURDICK: You're going to finish up the Chronicles about the end of the year. When it's being completed, what is it physically, what is it going to be? Is it a bunch of videotapes, and where will they be?

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Currently, they're available from the Instructional Technology Center. Then the bound volumes—there will be about 30 of them, that look like the one that Alice is about to show you. They look like this [*holding up book*] and these are in the library in two places: one of them is for circulation and the other [is in the Archives.]

HARVEY BURDICK: So each video will have a bound document just like this, that's the transcript of the interview.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: And there's a photo of the person, both at the time of the interview and at the time of 1963, the first graduation, so you can see how time treated people.

HARVEY BURDICK: The last question is: It's been what kind of experience? How would you characterize the Chronicles project for you? You've invested four years of your time?

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Three, but we thought about it beforehand, so, yes, you can say four years.

HARVEY BURDICK: It's interesting how four years goes by so quickly.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: It's been a very exciting adventure for us, something to do that we've never done before. We hope that our information is valuable to others.

HARVEY BURDICK: Even though people were saying pretty much the same thing, obviously they were not saying everything the same, right?

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: They all added new material. And I'll tell you, it's been a lot more work than we ever expected, of course. But we've been really glad to do it.

HARVEY BURDICK: Now you're going to have to find something else to do.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Well spoken by someone who's already retired.

HARVEY BURDICK: It's been lovely talking to you. Thank you so much.

**Oakland University Chronicles**  
**ALICE AND PAUL TOMBOULIAN**  
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