

Oakland University Chronicles

Interview with
Joan Gibb Clair
and
Thomas L. Werth

Transcript of Oral History Interview

Interview date: April 3, 1998

Interviewer: Harvey Burdick



Supported by
Oakland University Foundation
Office of the President, Oakland University
Department of Chemistry, Oakland University

Published by Oakland University
Rochester, Michigan
Copyright 1999

Oakland University Chronicles

Joan Gibb Clair
and
Thomas L. Werth

Transcript of Oral History Interview

Interview date: April 3, 1998

Interviewer: Harvey Burdick

Contents

Preface

About the Oakland University Chronicles

Editing of the Transcripts

Introduction to Interview

Biographical Sketch of Joan Gibb Clair

Photograph of Joan Gibb Clair Taken April 3, 1998

Photograph of Joan Gibb Clair from MSUO Yearbook 1963

Biographical Sketch of Thomas L. Werth

Photograph of Thomas L. Werth Taken April 3, 1998

Photograph of Thomas L. Werth from MSUO Yearbook 1963

Biographical Sketch of Interviewer

Transcript of Oral History Interview

Transcript of the Interview: 42 Pages

Index of Topics in the Transcript

Oakland University Chronicles
JOAN B. (GIBB) STINSON-CLAIR

Date of birth: December 30, 1941

EDUCATION

St. Michael's High School Graduated 1959
Pontiac, Michigan

B.A. Oakland University 1959 • 1963
Major: English—Secondary Education

SINCE GRADUATING FROM OAKLAND UNIVERSITY

English Teacher
Central High School
Pontiac, Michigan

Materials Manager
Fisher Body Division, General Motors
Pontiac and Flint, Michigan

Director of Alumni Relations
Oakland University
Rochester, Michigan

Assistant Vice President for Development
Wayne State University
Detroit, Michigan

CURRENT OCCUPATION

Technical Analyst, Pre-production Builds
Megatech Engineering, Warren, Michigan

Current as of April 3, 1998



Photograph of Joan Gibb Clair

April 3, 1998

Photographer: Alice Tombouliau



Joan Bernadette Gibb
Secondary Education
April

Photograph of Joan Gibb Clair

MSUO Yearbook 1963

Oakland University Chronicles

THOMAS LESLIE WERTH

Date of birth: November 9, 1940

EDUCATION

	Rochester High School Rochester, Michigan	Graduated 1958
B.A.	Oakland University Majors: Psychology and Sociology	1959 • 1963
M.A.	University of Detroit	1974

SINCE GRADUATING FROM OAKLAND UNIVERSITY

9-63 • 4-65	Project Director Market Research Company Royal Oak, Michigan
4-65 • 8-96	Probation Officer and Juvenile Court Referee Macomb County, Michigan
11-73 • present	City Councilman and Mayor Rochester, Michigan

CURRENT OCCUPATION

Between careers

Current as of April 3, 1998



Photograph of Thomas L. Werth

April 3, 1998

Photographer: Alice Tombouliau



Thomas Leslie Werth
Liberal Arts—Psychology
April

Photograph of Thomas L. Worth

MSUO Yearbook 1963

Oakland University Chronicles
Interview with JOAN GIBB CLAIR and THOMAS L. WERTH
April 3, 1998

HARVEY BURDICK: Today's interview is one in a series being conducted for the Oakland University Chronicles Project, and supported in its second year by a special university allocation. The goal of the project is to collect oral histories of the beginnings of Oakland University—then called MSUO—from various members of the MSUO community. The interviewees are the faculty, administrators, and students who pioneered a new university. Today is April 3, 1998, and we are in Varner Hall on the campus of Oakland University. My name is Harvey Burdick; I am a professor of psychology and will do the interviewing on this occasion.

Our guests today are Joan Gibb Clair and Tom Werth, who were members of the Charter Class. Joan took the secondary teacher curriculum and Tom took a double major in psychology and sociology. They both graduated from MSUO in April, 1963 in the first graduating class. That's 35 years ago.

THOMAS WERTH: And you were one of my professors.

HARVEY BURDICK: I want to welcome you both. Thank you for coming and sharing your memories with us.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Thanks for having us.

THOMAS WERTH: I appreciate it very much.

HARVEY BURDICK: Now, I know you both have had distinguished careers. I wonder, perhaps, if you could tell us something about those careers. We have to start with somebody, so let's start with you, Joan. What did you do after you graduated from Oakland University?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: I left here in April and began my teaching career at Pontiac Central [High School] in the fall; I taught 10th grade English to a variety of students. It was quite a diverse student body in those days. By the middle of

that year, however, I discovered I was expecting my first child so I stepped out of teaching full-time, and stayed home with my children for about 10 years. During that time, however, my husband was transferred to the East coast and we lived there long enough that my Michigan [teaching] license lapsed.

So when we returned to Michigan, I was faced with how to get back into the job market. I needed too many credits to resume teaching, but luckily industry was looking for college-educated women at the time and so I was hired by Fisher Body, a [now-]defunct General Motors Division. I began a career at a manufacturing plant in Pontiac as a materials manager, one of the first women in that field. I stayed there seven years with Fisher Body, and concurrently was a member of the Oakland University Alumni Association. So a fortuitous thing was that as the auto industry was taking one of its usual spirals, I was invited to apply for the alumni director's position here at Oakland University.

HARVEY BURDICK: When was that?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: In 1981. So I stayed here.

HARVEY BURDICK: And you became the director.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: I was the alumni director, yes. By the time I left I was also an assistant director of development, and worked on the capital campaign that expanded the library. So I was able to conclude my career here at Oakland on that very proud note—in my view—and was invited to go to Wayne State University as their executive director of development. I stayed there for five years, left as assistant vice president for development, and took a couple of years as a fund-raising consultant. I then looked after some family matters with elderly relatives, and when I went back into the world of real work, I decided that I wanted to get back full circle, and went to an engineering firm in Warren. That's where I am now.

HARVEY BURDICK: So you had a whole variety, but also you began here and now you're back here, in a kind of "what goes around comes around" or something like that. That's interesting—you did a variety of jobs.

Tom, what about you?

THOMAS WERTH: When I was a student at Oakland, I had a student deferment—as many young men did at that time—from the draft. As soon as I graduated I felt that Uncle Sam would be calling on me, so I really didn't do much recruiting on campus or look for full-time work. I figured I would be drafted and I would get my service out of the way. I did take a summer job at that point with General Motors in their security department at Fisher Body— actually it was at the Warren Tech Center.

During the summer I was waiting for my draft notice, which subsequently came that fall. As soon as I got my draft notice I also got a call from an army recruiter in Pontiac that basically said, “Mr. Werth, we are aware that you spent four years at Oakland University and during that time you had two years of Russian language. We would like for you, after you go down and go through your draft physical, to contact our people at Fort Wayne. We will try to line you up with sending you to foreign language school at Monterey, California for six months, and then to Europe to be a translator.” Unfortunately, I flunked my draftee's physical.

HARVEY BURDICK: Nothing serious, I hope.

THOMAS WERTH: No, just some knee joint problems and some other problems. The army at that time saw me as a loser for their finances and on-going medical care. At that point I was fairly well broke. I had spent most of my money—after leaving General Motors—to go to California for the better part of a month. I took one of the "you-drive" cars out, and saw some friends in California, came back, and did look for work.

I was hired by a small market research firm in Royal Oak. I did have the great experience of working on market research for the original Mustang. I did meet Lee Iacocca at that time, and had some interesting experiences. I had some bad experiences also, with some problems that you may get into doing market research, and that type of thing. I worked in market research until April of 1965, and wanted to use more of my behavioral science background.

A job opened up as a probation officer at juvenile court in Macomb County. I applied for the job, was hired, spent basically five years in straight probation work with delinquent boys, then was promoted and transferred into the legal department. I spent basically the next 26 years as a court referee,

handling beginning cases at the intake level, but as time progressed I was allowed to handle most of the cases that the judge would handle also, on probation reviews and all types of court cases.

I retired from that position in August of 1996, but parallel to that [career] I ran for public office. I started, actually, in April of 1973 looking at public office in Rochester and was elected to the Rochester City Council in November of 1973, and have spent 25 years both as a councilman and mayor. I spent twelve years as mayor in the City of Rochester. That brings us to where we are today.

HARVEY BURDICK: So in your case [Tom], you wanted to use some of your undergraduate training in your job. You [Joan] did it for the first year and [then with] all that lovely work—you ended up doing other kinds of things. We're going to get back to what Oakland University meant to you regarding that career.

Let's go back to those pre-Oakland days. Can I get you to remember when you were very young, when you were growing up and going to high school, and how you ended up coming to Oakland? Joan, can we get you back to high school?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: I went to St. Michael's High School in Pontiac, which doesn't exist any longer. I came to Oakland mainly because it was the one institution I had to choose from. I'm from a farming background. I grew up here in Rochester. I have a number of siblings and we had very little wealth, extraordinarily little wealth. We were very poor.

But I was blessed with parents who had a high regard for education, in spite of the fact that neither of them finished high school. Some of my older brothers and sisters attended school in a one-room school here in Rochester. One of them wasn't doing very well at all, so my mother, bless her heart, drove us to school in Bloomfield Hills, which was 18 miles one-way from our house.

I think it was that, probably, that positioned me most effectively to do well here at Oakland, because I had just an outstanding education in the Catholic schools. It was small, I was used to the small environment, and that was exactly the environment that I got into here at Oakland. I was taught to read and write very well, and there was absolutely no way to get out of Oakland University without that skill at the time; I hope it's still the same way.

So I went to St. Michael's in Pontiac, and I think in some previous conversations I mentioned the fact that the principal of our high school was very much opposed to any of us going to a public institution. He was very energetically steering us towards Catholic schools, which of course I could not afford. So Oakland University "grew up" here in this corn field right in my backyard. If it hadn't been here I wouldn't have gone anywhere.

HARVEY BURDICK: So you didn't come to Oakland University because it was a special place—it happened to be convenient. So this turned out to be lucky. If Oakland were not here, what would have happened?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: My very luckiest job opportunity probably would have been as a secretary in one of the car companies.

HARVEY BURDICK: But if I recall from one of our previous conversations, you talked about an aunt who had heard about Oakland University and pushed it. Do you recall those conversations?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: That particular aunt was herself a school teacher, and read the various newspaper articles at the time, mostly through the spring and summer of 1959, I think. I don't have a very clear recollection of when I actually applied, but my student number was 341, which tells me that I was sort of at the center of the cohort. So I was not aware of Oakland early on in my senior year [at high school]. This aunt kept encouraging and encouraging, so she got me to apply. I think I had to search around for applications because there were none to be had at my high school—the principal systematically threw them away, I found. So I did apply, and that same aunt forever after, so long as she lived, referred to me as one of those "guinea pigs" from Oakland University.

HARVEY BURDICK: She thought of you as a kind of a guinea pig, to go to this brand-new university?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: A brand-new university where they were going to try all sorts of things. I was just sort of a "test-tube" student.

HARVEY BURDICK: You graduated from St. Michael's in 1959, and you were all primed to continue and go into teaching, probably in line with your aunt's interest and the fact that you were "worked over" so well in the area of writing and reading.

Yours is a different story, isn't it, Tom? I recall your telling us you graduated earlier than '59—in '58? Tell us, where were you in school?

THOMAS WERTH: I graduated in the class of '58 from Rochester High School. I did take what was known at that time—and I think they still call it—a college prep course. I was not a brilliant academic scholar at that point. I guess you would describe me at that point, I was probably more of a "good time Charley." I wasn't really interested in athletics.

I started working relatively young. There was a friend of mine whose dad was the general manager of a large stock farm that is now a country club and condominiums in Rochester, known as Great Oaks. I started working with him when I was about 10 years of age; I started peddling papers when I was 12. When Joan talked about the lack of wealth in her family, that was similar to my family. My mother died when I was quite young, actually when I was 10 years old, and my dad was a tool and die maker at Chrysler Corporation, which is a skilled trade.

There was always adequate money but there wasn't extra money around, and going to college—at least at home—was not discussed a great deal. Some of the friends that I chummed with were talking about going on to college, and I was trying to prepare myself academically, I guess, so if the opportunity came for me to go to college that I would have some background. I don't remember exactly, but I probably graduated in the middle third of my high school class.

In talking about graduation, you know in your yearbook under your picture, sometimes they put down about your academic abilities or your athletic prowess. In mine they said that "his ready wit and attraction for fun were contagious," which was not all bad, but they didn't talk about any other things. I was a good time Charley. I loved to dance and have a lot of fun. I probably suffered from that, although if there was one high school class that did more than anything else to prepare me for the rigors at Oakland University, it was a class called senior English. Senior English was taught by Ray Lawson, who I believe still teaches at Rochester. He was an incredible English teacher and he really was a gentleman, a scholar, and

probably did more to prepare me for an academic future than any of my other teachers, or at least I picked up more at that point.

I did go to work right out of high school for a local finance company, and was making loans, repossessing cars, collecting bills, and that type of thing. After a few months of that, I felt that in order to further myself I would need more education. Not having a whole lot of money, and that was the time that Oakland University was being discussed in the local media, I applied and my student number was 469, so I was a little bit past Joan. I was exceptionally excited about coming to Oakland, because it was offering me the opportunity for a college education that I probably wouldn't have been able to go after, if it wasn't for Oakland. So it was a real opportunity for me.

HARVEY BURDICK: In your case, very similar to Joan's, if Oakland hadn't started in this area, you wouldn't have gone to college.

THOMAS WERTH: I probably, with luck, would have landed maybe a line job at one of the automobile companies.

HARVEY BURDICK: Even though you felt you still had to do something to get ahead: if I recall, we were talking about your sitting with some colleagues on the farm, and your promising them something.

THOMAS WERTH: Going back to my farm days, we used to spend some time at the lunch hour sitting on the green and white wooden fences that were trademarks of Great Oaks. One of the older fellows would make some comments about me not ever amounting to anything, and I said to him, "Someday I will show you that I will accomplish some things in my life." I told him that I'd drive my sports car up to show them.

Well, by the time I got my sports car—which was in 1964—the farm had been sold at a dispersal sale, but I still drove it up that lane. Maybe it was to satisfy myself that I had at least accomplished the academic part of it, and had a job at that point. I was able to afford a Porsche roadster at that point, because the gentleman that was selling it didn't know the true value of it, and the person

that bought my old Volkswagen probably paid me more for that Volkswagen than it was really worth.

HARVEY BURDICK: I missed something—was it after you finished at Oakland you drove that car?

THOMAS WERTH: Yes.

HARVEY BURDICK: The reason I'm asking is: were you also proud of the fact that you had finished the university, when you were sitting in that sports car?

THOMAS WERTH: Absolutely. I was the first member of my family to complete four years of college, and to me that was a great accomplishment, a lot of it because it was to some degree self-motivated. My dad told me that if I wanted to live at home, he would cover my living expenses but don't expect more from him at that point, and it was an opportunity.

I think there was a little bit more. I had an older stepbrother who had gone off to a university at that point, but didn't finish, and I think there was a little competition there. I was going to show my older stepbrother, who was much more—at that point—of a student, an academician, than I was. It was a real accomplishment for me to be able to complete Oakland, and also in the Charter Class. At the time, graduating in the Charter Class, I believe, didn't have the aura that it has now. But now, to be a member of that Charter Class, you're a special individual on this campus and I enjoy that.

HARVEY BURDICK: You have the ring to prove it.

THOMAS WERTH: Yes, the ring is very significant. In fact, I thought so much about it, I tried to get a wax casting of it done by a local jeweler who was told, after they contacted the company that made the ring, that they couldn't take the casting. If I needed the ring to be repaired, or even replaced, I would have to contact the company who made it. I often tell the story of dancing at Meadow Brook Hall and having Mrs. Wilson announce to come up to her study, and how she had all of our names and we even got our [ring] deposits back. It was really a great evening. I think that was the day before graduation.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: It was.

HARVEY BURDICK: [Joan] I see you're wearing your ring, too.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Yes, I am. Now, I didn't get my deposit back because I couldn't afford to make a deposit. So Mrs. Wilson announced that those of us who hadn't ordered rings should go ahead and do so, because she was going to pay for them.

HARVEY BURDICK: She was special, wasn't she? I mean she really felt she would put her arms around the first class, and you were all her children. That's my impression.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: She even at one point lectured me as if I were her child. I have a Mrs. Wilson story, if you'd like to hear it.

When I was a senior, I was an au pair in the Bob and Elaine Swanson household. One summer evening, the Swansons invited Mrs. Wilson over for a come-as-you-are kind of a dinner. We were all sitting at the kitchen table, Mrs. Wilson and all the rest of us, just like family. I recall that I had, I guess it was probably sort of a rare date, that evening after dinner. I remember being probably rather rude because I was in a hurry to "let's get this finished"—you know, kind of antsy to get going. Mrs. Wilson leaned over and said, "Honey, if that young man is worth anything, he'll wait for you." I knew that I was chastised, and behaved myself after that.

HARVEY BURDICK: So, you've come to this very special university because it happened to be in the neighborhood. The university had all sorts of media hype. It got national press. It was in *Time* magazine. But you were just Rochester kids and it was just fortunate that Oakland University was around the corner. So you've come, the Charter Class, you've come to this place.

Tom, didn't you have some thoughts about this new school?

THOMAS WERTH: I had some thoughts—I guess, to be honest, maybe even some doubts. You know, talking with some of the my friends who had gone off

to traditional or established universities, they knew the value of their education, they knew the value of their diplomas. There was still some talk about “who’s going to recognize and how is it going to be recognized”—a degree from Oakland University, or at that time Michigan State University Oakland.

There was probably a little heavier emphasis on Michigan State at that point because we were MSUO until our senior year. We didn’t get the distinction of being a separate university until that point. You felt that since there was a tie to Michigan State University, there was some legitimacy, but there was a question about what the university was going to end up as, where was it going to lead, and also the value of the diploma. But I think the fact that I was here and had the opportunity for a college education overshadowed that doubt.

HARVEY BURDICK: It was just something that was in the back of your head.

Of course in your case, Joan, your aunt thought that you were going to be a “guinea pig” at this crazy new university. Were you a guinea pig? You were going to become a teacher, and you began the curriculum to prepare you to become a teacher. Do you recall the curriculum?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: I recall that the curriculum requirements kept changing.

HARVEY BURDICK: They kept changing—well, there is a mess.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Always a change. There was a lot of debate over whether we’d be required to take political science, and if you’d already taken it how many other of the social sciences would you take, and so on. As a result, some of us, particularly those who were following an education curriculum, ended up taking some summer classes just so that we could graduate on time. So we were taking a full load during the ordinary semesters, and worked in addition in the summer to complete the curriculum.

I don’t think I realized it while I was a student, but I certainly did when I became a teacher, that—I think, in great contrast to the way things are done now—we had almost no preparation for “how do you teach.” So we had wonderful, marvelous English classes that I still recall in great detail, and actually follow a little bit in my private reading, but in terms of how you go

about teaching students, there was very little of that until we went out to do our internships.

HARVEY BURDICK: You were essentially a major in English, weren't you? I mean you were pretty much like people who took a liberal arts curriculum and majored in English.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Absolutely.

HARVEY BURDICK: You know, I think that was special about Oakland University. This wouldn't have happened at other schools.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: I wouldn't trade that experience for anything. The only thing I (maybe) would have improved upon for my own interest, was to take my minor and combine it in some sort of humanities [program]. I minored in history, and I kept being frustrated in attempting to read things in the literature classes without the historical context; and I kept wanting to combine the two. But I certainly never wanted to have any more "how do you teach" classes.

HARVEY BURDICK: You never felt, while you were here, a lack, or "how come they're not telling us what to do when we walk into the classroom?"

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: No, I suppose it never occurred to me. Now, when I did walk into a classroom, I noticed that lack right away. I was in an inner city school with a really, really diverse student population, where some of the students were probably, in the 10th grade, certainly capable of walking into some of the rhetoric and literature classes that I had just left, and competing on a par with me—but there were other students who couldn't read at all, and that was a shock.

HARVEY BURDICK: It was a very special school you went into. Perhaps if you had gone into a different school, you wouldn't have been so confronted with that kind of a thing. But in any case as a person who graduated from Oakland in the secondary teaching curriculum, you were primarily being taught English, weren't you, rather than being taught to be a teacher?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Yes—lucky me.

HARVEY BURDICK: Interesting. Now you, Tom, here you grew up with a farm next door. You worked on a farm, and you are now registered [at MSUO]. What did you know?—this is a new university, you knew you had to go. So what did you do—did you major in something?

THOMAS WERTH: I think early on I was interested in business administration. Since my dad was in skilled trades, I didn't have any role models out there other than business friends who said, "This is where you should be getting a degree." So that's where I started my education. I believe it was in my sophomore year that I had a couple courses in psychology, or one course in psychology, and I found it much more interesting and actually challenging. I found the business thing to be a little bit on the dry side, and not real exciting.

At that point I didn't look at it, so much, as "what am I going to do when I get through, or where is this degree going to take me?" I said, "Hey, this is what I enjoy right now." I don't know whether I should bring this up at this point, but it did influence my going into psychology: it was right at that time in my family life that I had a member come down with a very serious mental illness. I think that it was a combination of not really finding the business administration program to my liking, and needing more knowledge about human behavior and the behavioral sciences that directed me over into psychology.

So from that point as I went on further, not just in psychology but in the field of sociology also—human behavior in groups, and anthropology, and all those things—it was just interesting. Like I said, it wasn't something that I was for sure going to use later on. I didn't have a real goal saying, "when I graduate from Oakland this is what I want to do." Actually I think I was looking for a career in law enforcement. I had a relative who ended up as chief of police in Rochester. I was always impressed with this gentleman, who I thought was just a super individual. I'm not surprised that I ended in law enforcement as a career, although it was in the corrections end of it rather than the strict law enforcement. So it was probably some of the early influences in my life that led me into the type of program I had here at Oakland.

HARVEY BURDICK: I'm just picking up one thing: that is, in Tom's case he goes into psychology and sociology without any pre-professional things in mind; in your case, Joan, it was a kind of professional curriculum, right?—there was a job at the end of it. But you weren't worried [Tom], were you, about getting a job at the end. If I recall, when you graduated [Joan], that wasn't a problem either.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: The school districts were absolutely standing in line waiting for us to graduate.

HARVEY BURDICK: In other words, you knew with that [diploma] in your pocket, you could have a job.

THOMAS WERTH: You know, I was probably looking for some of the worlds that my education had opened for me. [I had] some ideas—to travel, to see some things—and maybe that's why I really wasn't geared early on at saying, "What type of a job is this diploma going to end up procuring for me?" I wanted to kind of see the world a little bit, take on that individualism—the independent and pioneering idea that was part of Oakland University—and go out and see what the world had to offer. It was a great opportunity for me. It worked well.

HARVEY BURDICK: Tom, I want to go back to that Russian class that you took, that the recruiting officer was so interested in. Could you explain why you took Russian? Coming from Rochester, why didn't you take French, or Spanish, or some more typical language?

THOMAS WERTH: I often asked myself that as my stomach would twist and turn on the way to my first class in the morning, which was Russian for two years. Basically the university had the requirement at that time that all students who would graduate would [take] two years of foreign language. The Charter Class had only two choices, either French or Russian. I made my decision to go after Russian because I felt that some of the high school students would have had French—some of the kids coming into Oakland University—and there would be nobody having Russian so we'd all start out evenly. So I figured that would be the way to go. There was maybe a little bit of a challenge with Russian. I think as we talked earlier, that was the era of Sputnik, and the Russians were

so far advanced as far as technological things went—maybe that was added in a little bit, too. At the time, I thought there was a logical reason.

HARVEY BURDICK: It sounds real logical to me. Very strategic. You didn't want anybody to have any advantage having taken French, so you started off on an even plane.

But, Joan, you took French, I take it.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: No, I took Russian also. We were classmates.

HARVEY BURDICK: Why did you take Russian?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Certainly because there were only two choices, but secondly I recall that it was presented as a challenge, and I don't like to be told I can't do something.

HARVEY BURDICK: That's interesting. They were saying, "This may be very tough."

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Oh, it was. I dreaded every single one of those classes.

HARVEY BURDICK: Was there only one instructor of Russian?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: There were actually three. There was a Sergei Shishkoff who came somewhere in the middle there.

HARVEY BURDICK: There were two others, and who were they?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Nadine Popluiko: we both started with her. By my second year I moved over to Helen Kovach.

THOMAS WERTH: I stayed with Nadine Popluiko for the two years.

HARVEY BURDICK: And you say you dreaded going?

THOMAS WERTH: I guess the language itself is very difficult. It basically has no characters that are similar to the English language. Even the ones that look like English are not pronounced that way. It is a language that you must continually use on a regular basis if you are going to become at all fluent in it. It just seemed that I would have problems connecting one week's lessons with [the next]—you know, the carryover. It was always, for me, going back and refreshing myself in order to connect. As you progressed in the class, the stories got more difficult, and the text got more difficult. Yet you're trying to learn new [material], and then go back and pick up the old in order to remain fluent, and it was very difficult. It was probably the most difficult challenge that I had here at the university.

Now, it's quite a talking point. When I mention to people that I had Russian, they want [me] to speak right away. I know a few phrases. In fact, last month I had dinner at the Russian embassy in Washington, DC. They catered the meal, but there were some Russian security people there, and I could throw a few hellos, goodbyes and thank-yous at them, and that really impressed them. So there's still an aura about "you took that language, and you passed it, and the army was looking at you to recruit you." So when you look at the big picture, even though it was tough and I used a lot of Alka Seltzer and Pepto Bismol to get through those mornings, it was a great experience.

HARVEY BURDICK: That was somewhat special wasn't it? At Oakland University, here you were given two choices: not French and Spanish, but French and Russian.

THOMAS WERTH: I think that was influenced at that time by the so-called "gap" between what we were doing here in America scientifically, and what the Russians were doing. Do you agree with that, Joan?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: I don't have much recollection of it.

HARVEY BURDICK: Your sense is that you weren't going to be told you couldn't do it.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Yes, even though those other people almost proved themselves right.

HARVEY BURDICK: As you both pointed out, you came from families that didn't have much money. You've come to Oakland, you're working very hard here. Your first year you take Russian. Were you taking a full curriculum?

THOMAS WERTH: Everybody took full.

HARVEY BURDICK: Everybody took a full curriculum. There weren't part-time students at that time, is that it? Everybody took a full curriculum load.

THOMAS WERTH: That's right. Sixteen to eighteen hours, or somewhere in that area.

HARVEY BURDICK: Wow, and as you pointed out, you didn't have too much money, Joan. Were you working also?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Yes, I worked in the registrar's office for 20 hours a week.

HARVEY BURDICK: You were working 20 hours a week at the registrar's, to help you pay for [your expenses]?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Yes, that's after I first... The summer before I started here, I had absolutely nothing to pay the first semester's tuition. So another aunt, not the one who called me a guinea pig, offered to set up a bakery in her garage. She produced many, many loaves of bread and donuts, which I peddled all over the streets to earn my first semester's tuition.

HARVEY BURDICK: Is that how you went—you said, "I have some bread for you, and if you buy it you're going to help a poor student through college"?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Yes, words to that effect.

THOMAS WERTH: Probably a little smoother than that.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: By the end of the summer I had a regular clientele, and it had nothing to do with me at all, but the fact that my aunt is a wonderful cook, and so good to me. Anyway, that's how I earned the first semester. Then after I got here I worked in the registrar's office, as I say, and made friends with a number of secretaries. At the time there was a group of secretaries that did sort of cultural and social activities, but they also had a charitable bent. So they would put on some fundraisers and make awards to students that they chose. I think we had to write an essay or something like that. (There again, bless the nuns for that writing.) So I received a small grant from, I think it was called, the S.O.S.

HARVEY BURDICK: S.O.S. Sounds like a nice acronym. What does it stand for?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: I don't know. Save Our Students? I think it was "Secretaries Organization something." So that was how I earned it. By the time I finished however, and expenses had grown, I had four simultaneous jobs my senior year. I lived with, as I said earlier, Mr. and Mrs. Swanson, looking after their boys. By the way, when I was doing my teaching internship I was still living at the Swansons'. I did not have a car while I was a student here. The Swansons provided their own car for me to drive to Troy from their house every day.

HARVEY BURDICK: The Swansons made a car available to you. So you drove it there, parked it and drove it back home—is that right?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: I paid the gas and I drove it to Troy High School to do my practice teaching.

HARVEY BURDICK: How did you get to campus?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: With Mr. Swanson in the morning.

HARVEY BURDICK: So you drove in with him. And you drove home with him?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Well, no. I'd catch rides with other students, because it was close enough or I could even walk if it was nice.

So in addition to that, I was still working in the registrar's office for 20 hours. At the time there were a number of social activities, catered events in the Oakland Center, and I would wait tables. Then my fourth illustrious job was to pose in the art classes—Professor Beardman.

HARVEY BURDICK: For John Beardman. But we know that you posed clothed.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Yes.

HARVEY BURDICK: We also know he had those who posed unclothed.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Yes. But at the time there was some sort of university requirement that said you needed to hire non-students for the nude [models], not that I would have, anyway.

HARVEY BURDICK: I'm exhausted by the number of jobs you were working, and going to school at the same time. A full [class] load and more than 20 hours a week. Is that true for you too, Tom?

THOMAS WERTH: Yes; in fact, when Joan mentioned the registrar's office, I think that was the financial savior for a number of students, because I also worked in there. The one skill that I really carried out of high school that a lot of men didn't have at that time was typing, and I remember typing in the registrar's office. I think it was 50¢ an hour we were paid, and [I was] using that money to supplement what little money I could save.

Early on, I didn't have transportation. My freshman year a friend of mine who's an electrician was working on the buildings that were being completed on campus, and he would pick me up at my house in the morning and bring me out here to campus. I would stay here until he was ready to go home in the

evening and he would take me back home. That was pretty much my whole freshman year. Then when I became a sophomore I picked up a hand-me-down car from my dad, which I spent more money on than I probably should have, to keep it running.

I think I held at least one job, if not two, all through going to Oakland. In fact in my senior year, I worked full-time. I was a dispatcher for the Rochester police and fire departments from 11:00 p.m. until 7:00 a.m. I would go home and shower, come back to school, do my classes, and go home and sleep from 4:00 p.m. until 10:00 p.m. I did enjoy it.

I had my own car at that point, and there were expenses. I probably could have gotten by with less, probably found other ways of transportation, but even then (as now) there was no easy way to get from Rochester to Oakland University. There was no bus service, and we still don't have any bus service, which I'm through working on now. But I was required to carry on a job in order to afford [my car]. Even the jobs that I had didn't cover all my costs. I remember taking out a student loan, a National Defense [Education Act] loan, and paying that back.

HARVEY BURDICK: Joan, you did, too?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Yes.

HARVEY BURDICK: Let me sit back with some awe. You had a university which had essentially a daytime program. (Tell me if I'm wrong.) It wasn't flexible, it didn't design a program to fit your needs. You fitted yourself into Oakland. Oakland insisted on a full schedule; you graduated in four years. In the four years you moved through that curriculum, you had essentially a full-time job.

THOMAS WERTH: Maybe more so, when you added all those hours.

HARVEY BURDICK: Were you unique? Were you different from all other students?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Oh, absolutely not.

THOMAS WERTH: I think we were the rule rather than the exception.

HARVEY BURDICK: Your fellow members of that Charter Class were doing things comparable to what you were doing.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Right.

HARVEY BURDICK: Isn't that special? I'm struck, because today we of course have night courses; you can work during the day, go at night. There's some flexibility. At the time, there was none, right? Even to the point where you had to take Russian!

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: You know, I think there's another part of that, too. Since we talked the last time I was thinking a little bit along the lines of balancing the academic life, work, social life, and so on. What sort of dawned on me is that, unlike today, there was a whole lot less emphasis on GPA [grade point average] as the end, and more on "what is it that you're getting out of your school experience." So I don't ever recall having a great deal of pressure on me to get above some certain point level. It was always the expectation to do well, to do the best you can, to get everything you can out of it, but I knew that when I got out of school, no one was going to necessarily look at that grade point as a way of weeding me out from all of these other applicants. I think that was a tremendous advantage we had.

HARVEY BURDICK: That's interesting. That picks up a classic story—and that is, the kind of standards that the faculty were demanding from the students, to a point where a lot of students got chewed up. At least that's the way the story goes, right?

THOMAS WERTH: They probably did.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Well, it's true. The first semester of rhetoric served as a great weeding-out for our classmates. We began with something like 535 students, and by the middle of that second semester we were down by one-third

because many of those students had failed rhetoric. There was a huge debate among the faculty governance over whether to erase those—

HARVEY BURDICK: (You were aware of that?)

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: (Absolutely.) —whether to erase those Fs from people's records, because it became clear that the course was too demanding for the average student.

HARVEY BURDICK: But not for you. You did okay, you got through.

THOMAS WERTH: Yes.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Bless those nuns.

THOMAS WERTH: I think in my case at that point, I was exceptionally happy to be a part of MSUO. My education had become much more important to me than I thought going through high school, and I did apply myself. I did make student of distinction or honor roll basically two or three semesters that I was out here, which I never came close to, in high school. In fact, I think that my freshman year was actually better than my sophomore year. I think I got into what they at that time called a "sophomore slump." I just kind of bogged down or something. It was really my freshman year that I got a good grade point average on, that gave me a cushion in what was not a great second year. It was to me that challenge, whichever speaker at the [freshman] convocation laid it down, about "look to your left and look to your right, because one of you won't be here next year."

HARVEY BURDICK: Yes, I remember [hearing about that]—Bob Hoopes was the speaker.

THOMAS WERTH: I think it was. Yes, Bob, an English professor.

HARVEY BURDICK: He was also dean at that time.

THOMAS WERTH: That [statement] was scary.

HARVEY BURDICK: But you took it to heart.

THOMAS WERTH: I took it to heart. I mean, once I was in here, I was going to do whatever it took to scratch and claw my way and make it. It was a relief to me to get through that first year. I figured once I got through the first year... even though one of the really unique situations at that point was, there were no upperclassmen here to guide us.

HARVEY BURDICK: Let's talk about that; that's an interesting point. I mean, you were always at the forefront. That was special.

THOMAS WERTH: We were the pioneers.

HARVEY BURDICK: So how did you feel? Do you recall that feeling? There was nobody to tell you, "When you become a sophomore, when you become a junior, this is what you gotta do." You were making it up as you were going along.

THOMAS WERTH: That's how we did our graduation, even. Nobody knew how to graduate. We had meetings with Mrs. Wilson—there was a senior social committee—and [discussed] what was the protocol. You know, "How do you do these things?"—because there had never been one established. There was no established protocol to graduate from Oakland University. What do you go through? How do you line them up and what do you do? So it was that way for all four years. You cut your own brush.

HARVEY BURDICK: When we say Charter Class that doesn't mean "nothing." It means that you were cutting down with your machetes, right?

THOMAS WERTH: It means you laid them down—laying the tracks.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: In everything. I was on the committee that chose the ring design. I was on the committee that endorsed, if you will, Professor Clark's

motto and the design for the [university] seal. Everything was new and that was exciting.

HARVEY BURDICK: What was that motto?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: I can't say it. It was in [Latin] and I can't say it.

HARVEY BURDICK: But what was the concept of that motto?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: It was to search for excellence.

HARVEY BURDICK: Search for excellence, and a sail. What sail was that?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Odysseus'.

HARVEY BURDICK: Odysseus' sail to go out and explore new [places]—

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: —and to be a pioneer.

HARVEY BURDICK: To be a pioneer. Is that what you felt?

THOMAS WERTH: Absolutely.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Just like pioneers.

THOMAS WERTH: It was an experience. I think it became larger in time. When you were going through it, it didn't mean much. Now when you sit back and reflect upon it, what you were actually doing is laying the groundwork for an institution that had never existed before you'd been there. It's a great thrill now to look back and walk around this campus and to see what has happened, and where our little footprints have led this into a fantastic institution. I think it was a great experience for me. Absolutely.

HARVEY BURDICK: I can hear it in your voice now, as you look back—the sense of being a pioneer.

THOMAS WERTH: A sense of accomplishment.

HARVEY BURDICK: Of being the first ones.

THOMAS WERTH: There were very few people. When you look around, there were a-hundred-fifty-some of us that made it, and [can say], “Hey, you know, we were there.” We were there at the beginning, whatever else goes on.

HARVEY BURDICK: It partly helps me understand why you were willing to really put yourself out. You worked very hard supporting yourselves. You had to work hard on the curriculum. Today I don’t think you’ll find students capable. It doesn’t make sense to them, they’ll cut back on something. They won’t take four courses. They’ll take three courses, or two courses, or something like that. But you invested yourself in a very, very special way. My sense is that being a pioneer, feeling that you were pioneers, was part of that commitment. There was a commitment to the university.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Sure there was. We were made to feel special; we’re always made to feel special. I know that in subsequent years, we’ve become aware of the faculty debate about the quality of the students that came here—expecting these honors college quality students, and what they got were the neighborhood high school students. They were probably quite disappointed in what they got, but they always, always made us buy into the dream of starting something important, and making it, making it, making it. Through my whole life since, that notion of “you can do this” has been there over my shoulder every day. You can do this, you can do this. It doesn’t matter what it is, you can do it.

HARVEY BURDICK: And your career, I think, is a demonstration of that—or your many careers.

THOMAS WERTH: Talking about traditional and nontraditional campuses, I think we talked to some degree earlier about how there’s been a change in a name here, as far as the athletic department [mascot] goes. It’s not going to be the Pioneers, it’s going to be Golden Grizzlies. When the university came into existence, it was totally nontraditional. There were no Greek [organizations] on

campus. There were no intercollegiate athletics on campus. It was straight academics.

I was thinking on my way over here, of what has brought about to some degree a change. If you look at the athletic department, Oakland has had championships in Class II, Division II in swimming; we've had some good basketball teams, we've had some great soccer teams. Some things that were not traditional athletic endeavors: soccer just became part of the scene in the last 15 or 20 years.

I think that the university is changing and has looked at athletics to a stronger degree than it did in the beginning, because whether you are involved in them or a part of them, athletics in this country are very important. I mean, you have a whole section of the newspaper devoted to sports. You don't have sections of a newspaper devoted to academics. I think the university has taken itself and said, "Look, in order for us to become a driving force in the century we had to change some of the early traditions." I think academics is going to continue to be the main thrust, but athletics are probably becoming more a part of the picture at this point, out of necessity. Even though we're still in many ways a nontraditional university, as you look back, we're picking up some of the trappings.

HARVEY BURDICK: You mean we're becoming traditional.

THOMAS WERTH: Yes.

HARVEY BURDICK: What's happened to Oakland is one thing. I think the Chronicles [Project] is interested in those early years, and your memories of those early years. What's coming through now is that pioneering feel, and what I'm going to turn to now is your life here on campus. I mean, I've heard about the work in order to get you on campus. You're on campus going to these classes that are demanding. You told me that for one-third of the students, it was suggested they leave and that Professor Hoopes' suggestion was coming alive at that time for you. What kind of a life was it? I mean, was it fun? Were you monks and nuns?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: I had a wonderful life!

HARVEY BURDICK: You had a wonderful life? You'd better tell us about it, because it doesn't sound like you had time.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: There was always time, if you were so inclined. Campus life consisted of a number of things that were self-initiated, or small-groups-of-people-initiated. We had a student government and I was a senator for a couple of years. We had political, religious, and social organizations, athletic organizations. We had intramural sports, so that I can remember playing field hockey where Beer Lake is now. That was also the site of the bonfires of burning of bluebooks after exams.

HARVEY BURDICK: That was a tradition—burn the bluebooks?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Oh, we had wonderful bluebook-burning ceremonies.

THOMAS WERTH: (Get rid of the evidence.)

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: There were archery fields between North Foundation Hall and the Oakland Center—all kinds of activities.

HARVEY BURDICK: It sounds so exciting.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Well, no, it wasn't exciting, but it was different from my Catholic high school, I can tell you that.

HARVEY BURDICK: It was [not] high school, but there were other schools. Did you visit other schools?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Sure. I dated a young man who played football at Olivet College. I'd go up to visit and see a football game, go to a fraternity dance, stay in a dorm, and do all sorts of traditional things.

HARVEY BURDICK: You saw the kind of fun they were having at other schools.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Right.

HARVEY BURDICK: Did you say, “Oh my God, at Oakland we don’t do anything”?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: No, but we did do things. We’d have dances. We had athletics. We didn’t play other schools, but we had our own athletics. We had wonderful parties.

HARVEY BURDICK: Parties?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Yes. We used to organize “grassers,” and this is before that term took on another meaning. But the Oakland County sheriff was a regular visitor on campus to break up our parties. We had great fun. There was also a cohort of students that I was involved with—actually married one of them later on. They were young men who had already served in the military and were here receiving GI Bill assistance, and since they were older they could all buy beer for us, and so they would organize parties in their apartments.

HARVEY BURDICK: So they would have a place off campus and you’d have parties?

THOMAS WERTH: Sometimes on campus, if you could find a big field someplace.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: It’s a big campus.

THOMAS WERTH: Fourteen hundred acres, a lot of places to hide.

HARVEY BURDICK: Not in the winter time—more like the spring and summer. This campus was in the middle of a field. Was there anyplace to go off campus? Was there a place to have a hamburger or anything like that?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: There were places on campus to have a hamburger. There was a grill in the Oakland Center which was open in the evening, and there

were all sorts of card games going on there. There was a juke box. I think somebody at some point organized dances in the basement of the Oakland Center every afternoon. That was in the days when the “twist” was big, and we danced there.

HARVEY BURDICK: So you danced in the Oakland Center.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Yes. But you could go off campus if you knew somebody who had a car. There was a small diner across Walton Boulevard called the Oaken Bucket. We’d go to movies, regularly go out to movies, usually in Pontiac.

HARVEY BURDICK: Did they show movies on campus at all?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: I don’t recall.

THOMAS WERTH: No.

HARVEY BURDICK: Plays, did they put on plays?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Plays? Student productions, sure, and the music faculty would regularly bring in performance artists. There were dance ensembles.

HARVEY BURDICK: Did you ever socialize with faculty?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: All the time.

HARVEY BURDICK: Can you tell us about that? Joan, I think you mentioned that the age difference wasn’t that great between the students and the faculty, was it?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: No, in some cases if the faculty member was just out of grad school, he would be maybe six or eight years older than us. Many of them were here with young families. For example, my former husband was an R.A. (resident assistant) in Fitzgerald House when Fred and Trish Obear were the

house parents. They had a young baby and my former husband was their babysitter. I can remember—I don't remember his name, he wasn't here very long—I was so impressed with an English professor who would regularly have us over to his home and he'd play the clavier for us. Then Mrs. Kovach always had an end-of-semester Russian dinner in her home and she organized Eastern European dance performances. All kinds of faculty interactions at a social level.

HARVEY BURDICK: So you felt the social life, thin as it might have been compared to other schools, was rich enough for you.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: It was maybe richer than the traditional schools because there were very few barriers between us and faculty. After all, if we were going to open up and grow, it had to be with the faculty as our leaders, so we were going to have a better chance at that, I think, than some students at traditional schools.

HARVEY BURDICK: What triggers off in my mind is that, here you were in the front lines of the students, and really the only models that you had were the faculty, in a sense. They were the ones who perhaps were a little ahead and showing you what it meant to do this or do that.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Yes.

HARVEY BURDICK: And your social life, Tom, did you have any? I mean was it always off-campus?

THOMAS WERTH: I don't think I spent [time at] the dances in the student center and some of the activities, being that I had been out of high school a year before I came to Oakland, and probably had more opportunities for a different kind of social life than Joan had, going to a Catholic school. I kept in touch with some of my friends in Rochester. I think Joan spent more [social] time on campus because she was actually on campus more than I was at that point.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Well, I lived here for a time, too.

HARVEY BURDICK: You were at Anibal House.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Right.

THOMAS WERTH: I still had time to participate in a lot of the social activities, but to a degree I probably spent more time away from the university than Joan did. I was dating a young lady who was going to a different college at that point, and actually she lived over in Bloomfield Hills. We would attend some campus activities together. Up through part of my late freshman year, I was still working on the stock farm; I worked through the [dispersal] sale for that. So my jobs and my social life were probably more directed into Rochester than they were here on the campus.

HARVEY BURDICK: Interaction with faculty—did you have those?

THOMAS WERTH: I don't think I had that, to the degree that Joan did, to be honest with you. Maybe it was because of the course work, or not being here— with my jobs or whatever I was doing to sustain myself away from here; I just didn't have the same degree of interaction.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: There was another aspect, too, that as we got into the senior classes, the classes became very small—five, six, and seven students in a class—so we would often meet in our professors' homes.

HARVEY BURDICK: You had that special relationship. So the classes were also a social opportunity to sit around talking, and so on.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Right.

HARVEY BURDICK: I want to get some memories of faculty, the faculty that stand out for you a little bit. I know when we were talking before, you mentioned an experience with Les Hetenyi. Maybe you can tell us about that, or if there are any other faculty whom you can think of, and say, "Yes, I remember him."

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: I think the previous conversation came up in the context of not having much training to be a teacher, and that one of the education faculty was Les Hetenyi. My only experience of his ever referring to “how do you teach” was the very first day that he came. I think it was his first class here at the university.

It was winter semester of my sophomore year and we were sitting in South Foundation Hall, a 9 o'clock class, and by 9:20 there was still no professor in sight. By about 9:25 the door burst open, and bounced back because it came open with such a rush, and in came this person. He was sort of a physically unusual person to begin with, but he was an apparition that day. It was winter so he came in, and took off this huge hat—I think it had some fur trim on it—and he threw it across the room. It slid across the floor and ended up on the other side, the window side. He took off this huge wool muffler that he had wound several times around his neck, and dropped it on the floor. He took off his gloves and they went in a couple of other directions. He dropped his huge briefcase onto the table next to the lectern, and took this enormously long time to unbutton his coat, and finally get it off, put it on the chair, make it just right, just the way he wanted it. Then he opened this huge briefcase, and he went shuffling through all of these files. I think he was humming to himself through a lot of this, too—sort of sotto voce.

HARVEY BURDICK: You thought he was crazy.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: We didn't know what this was. I don't know—there were about 40 students in the class and we were all sitting there with our jaws down to here. Finally he pulled out what we took to be his lecture notes, and got them up on the lectern, squared them all off and cleared his throat and in his best Hungarian accent said, “Students, if you expect to be teachers the first thing you need to know is how to get your class's attention.” That is apparently all he thought we needed to know about “how do you teach.”

HARVEY BURDICK: And for him this was a demonstration.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: This was.

HARVEY BURDICK: So that was old Les Hetenyi. Tom, do have any memories?

THOMAS WERTH: Well, yes. I was walking down South Foundation Hall one morning, I think it was my sophomore year. Being that they were stressing the liberal arts and a liberal education here, we had to take lessons in art and music—the kids called it music “depreciation.”

HARVEY BURDICK: Music depreciation?

THOMAS WERTH: It was supposed to be music appreciation. Dr. Walter Collins was trying to get a campus chorus started, and he was recruiting anybody that he could put his hands on. He said, “Tom, I want you to come up to my office on lunch hour and try out for the men’s chorus.” I said, “Dr. Collins, I really can’t sing, and it would be embarrassing.” He said “No, I’m not going to take that for an answer. I want you there.”

So I dutifully went up to Dr. Collins’ office on my lunch hour, and he sat down at the piano and began to go up and down the scales. He said, “I want you to follow me up and down the scales.” I tried to follow him up and down the scales and after about 10 frustrating minutes—I believe on both sides—he turned around and looked at me and said, “You know, when you made that comment earlier about how you can’t sing, you were right. You can’t sing.” I left the room and never tried to go after a singing career from that point on. His concern was he wanted to do something good for the students, and get them to carry over what they were learning academically into the performance arts.

HARVEY BURDICK: Yes, like getting you involved in a chorus, and Helen Kovach getting people to dance in her troupe or something. These were just students, right? Getting them to learn how to dance in a Slavic fashion.

Talking about your great social life, you mentioned a Nancy Kelly who would entertain you on occasion. Who was Nancy Kelly?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: She was just one of our classmates who lived in Rochester, I think. I have no idea why this particular thing was organized, but there were

sort of lunchtime activities in the Oakland Center, and on a couple of occasions she sang “Carmen.”

HARVEY BURDICK: She just got up and sang to whoever was there?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: She got up she had an accompanist and she sang. She had a huge crowd. Last week I had lunch with one of our classmates and he brought that subject up, and said that he had run into her in a social context some many years later, and wanted her to know that he never forgot her. She’s a beautiful woman and he never forgot that music or her.

THOMAS WERTH: She was a graduate from Rochester High School. I remember that she used to perform in all of the stage plays and the high school theater that went on in Rochester High School choir and chorus. She had a magnificent voice; really was a neat person.

HARVEY BURDICK: I get the impression that the social life had a quality where you had to do a lot of initiating. You were creating your social life rather than coming to a university which says, “This is the kind of things that are available to you.” Is that a correct impression?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: That was exactly it. I don’t recall the man’s name, but the director of the Oakland Center took on sort of the role of facilitator of student interests in activities and so forth, but nobody ever did it for us.

HARVEY BURDICK: So in a sense the joy was partly due to the fact that you were the new ones, you had to create, because nothing was there for you. If I recall our talking, even the library wasn’t there for you. (Do you want to make some complaints? Go ahead, feel free.)

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: I’m certain that people did the best they could, but you can’t put much of a library in the space that’s now occupied by—I think it’s the skills center in North Foundation Hall. That was the extent of the library space while we were here, and there was never a time that that library was adequate for anyone’s needs. Certainly not for an English major but for most of us, we needed to go elsewhere

for our library resources. So it was not unusual at all to go to Lansing or Ann Arbor.

HARVEY BURDICK: Driving to Lansing, driving to Ann Arbor for the library?

THOMAS WERTH: Or the Troy Public Library.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: There was nothing such as on-line exchange.

THOMAS WERTH: You did what you had to do.

HARVEY BURDICK: You did what had to do—that's interesting. And you enjoyed it, I think.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Yes.

HARVEY BURDICK: We talked a little about some of your fellow students, like Nancy Kelly. I wonder if we might go on, on that topic. You've come from Rochester-area high schools. Now you're coming to a university with probably a more diverse student population. People coming from outstate [Michigan] and from out of state. I wonder if you recall your fellow students in that regard?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: There apparently had been quite a recruitment effort under way, certainly on the East coast, so there were a number of students from the East, particularly from New York. I remember the first time I met one of them, Les Fingerhut, from Flatbush Avenue. I was very impressed to know somebody from Flatbush Avenue.

There was a student from Alaska. There were a handful of students from other states, but there were also international students as well. One of them, I became quite a good friend with. Dang Lan was acquainted with Bob and Elaine Swanson and Herb Stoutenburg, when they were based in Viet Nam. They arranged for Lan to come to study here [at MSUO], and arranged for a job in the registrar's office. So we were classmates, co-workers, and neighbors. That was really a unique experience for somebody from my background. There were a number of other international students.

HARVEY BURDICK: You mentioned some of the people from the East coast. They behaved perhaps in a non-traditional way, if I recall.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Well, they were on a futuristic crest that the rest of us hadn't reached yet. They had already been influenced by writers like Jack Kerouac and Allan Ginsberg. So we heard a lot of beat poetry and we heard some—for us—very unusual music. There were always guitars slung on the back of the book packs. People were always spouting free-form poetry of some sort. But anyway, they added a dimension to our lives.

THOMAS WERTH: We saw the first sandals with those people. They were the people that wore sandals year-round.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Yes, they were an unusual and healthy mix.

HARVEY BURDICK: They started having their hair grow a little longer? Beards?

THOMAS WERTH: Yes.

HARVEY BURDICK: So they were a "hippies" type of thing?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: It was beatnik, pre-hippy. I hate to admit that I'm pre-hippy, but I sure am.

THOMAS WERTH: Agreed.

HARVEY BURDICK: That triggers off the Viet Nam issue, which was not particularly relevant at that time either—it was also pre-Viet Nam.

THOMAS WERTH: It was very much in the background at that point. It was probably '64, '65 before that really became a hot issue, so we didn't have a lot of campus activities or anything.

HARVEY BURDICK: So things were still pretty traditional, and so these kids with guitars and letting their hair grow—

THOMAS WERTH: Yes, that was not traditional.

HARVEY BURDICK: They were a little different.

I was asking you earlier about recollections of faculty and administrators. You had referred to Bob Hoopes and the great “one-out-of-three speech.” You talked about Wally Collins and Nadine [Popluiko]. Were there some other teachers that stood out?

THOMAS WERTH: George Matthews.

HARVEY BURDICK: Did you have George as a teacher?

THOMAS WERTH: Everybody had George in some degree or another. He was involved in a number of things, but I don’t recall which particular course he taught.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Western institutions.

THOMAS WERTH: Dr. Peter Amann. I remember because he was my main professor. Western civilization was a full year.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Right.

HARVEY BURDICK: Everybody had to take that.

THOMAS WERTH: Everybody took that one, too. So I know that I heard lectures from George [Matthews] but I think Dr. Amann was my main professor at that point. I really believe, looking back, that whoever was responsible for the recruiting of the professors that came to Oakland, I think they brought a great mix. [It's interesting] how these things, in the big picture, how they all come together.

One of the gentlemen who hasn't been discussed much this evening is Woody Varner. Woody Varner, the right man at the right time at the right place. I mean, he probably had the strongest influence on Oakland University and its future success. He was able to make the right decisions, and pursue the right direction at the right time. I remember, he was involved with the beginning of the Meadow Brook Music Festival. He was instrumental in that, and what a great facility—to walk over that hill and look down at that tremendous amphitheater coming up out of there. [He did] the things that, not just academically, [showed] there was a university starting to grow at that point.

HARVEY BURDICK: But that's taking a [longer] perspective on. I want to talk about your personal experiences. Did Woody Varner make you feel—as a student, as a member of the Charter Class—as somebody special?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Oh, absolutely.

THOMAS WERTH: Oh, yes.

HARVEY BURDICK: What did he do?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: It has a lot to do with what his wife did, actually. I don't know if others have mentioned that Mrs. Wilson invited the graduating class to her home for dinner and a ball the night before we graduated. Well, we've gone over my financial situation, but let me just say that not only could I not afford to order this class ring, I couldn't afford a dress to go to the dance either.

So I was living in the Swanson home and Mrs. Swanson just happened to mention this to Mrs. [Paula] Varner. I came home from school one night and was told that I needed to drive right down to the Varners'. They lived [near] where the Lowry Child Care Center is now. So I went down there and Mr. Varner met me at the door and said, "Paula's not here right now but she wants you to do something for her." He took me into the living room and said, "Okay, now you stand right there, and you try on that dress and see if it fits," he said, "and I'm going to stand here and watch." Of course he didn't, but anyway I tried on this dress and it fit well enough. So I borrowed Paula Varner's dress to wear to that ball.

HARVEY BURDICK: That's the picture of the dress and going to the ball. [Looking at a photograph.]

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: That's the dress. Then the night of the ball I'm all dressed up feeling just like Cinderella. Every time Woody came by, he would remind me that I really was not capable of holding up that strapless dress.

HARVEY BURDICK: You know, it does sound like a Cinderella story, doesn't it?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: You know, he was a leader but he was a friendly, approachable leader. He was a cheerleader. When one thinks about the sort of faculty that was attracted here, and the sort of students that they found once they got here, who else but Woody could have kept the faculty keeping the faith? The students might not have been what they expected, but maybe they were going to be okay, and maybe the whole institution was going to be okay.

HARVEY BURDICK: I'm going to ask you a personal question, if you don't mind. Did you feel responsible—that somehow you wanted to prove that really you deserved this kind of curriculum and standards, and something like that? Did that ever come across you?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Oh, absolutely.

THOMAS WERTH: Oh, we were special.

HARVEY BURDICK: You've mentioned more than once that the student body wasn't [academically] special, and that you had this faculty—

THOMAS WERTH: They made you feel special though, Harvey. When I look back in talking about Woody Varner, no matter how many people you were with or around, Woody always—when you were talking with him—you just felt that there was nobody else around. He had that ability to just focus in on you.

HARVEY BURDICK: Did he know your name?

THOMAS WERTH: Oh, absolutely.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Of course.

HARVEY BURDICK: You say “of course.”

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: I mean he knew everybody’s name.

HARVEY BURDICK: Everybody—the students, he knew the students’ names?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Yes.

HARVEY BURDICK: Now, that’s impressive.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: I have a nearer-history kind of a story to relate. My daughter graduated from Oakland a few years ago. This was when I working here on campus and she came to visit me in my office, and she said, “Gosh, the President opened the door for me when I came into the building.” I said, “Wasn’t that nice!” Then she said, “You know, I’ll bet you I’m the only student around here who knows who that person is!” That would never have been said about Woody. First of all because we were a small group, but also because he was just part of the family. He was the family leader.

THOMAS WERTH: I think the unique part of being the Charter Class, was we all felt like family. It was small enough, it was intimate enough and you had that kind of special feeling about—it’s hard to describe what it was—but you were part of a unique experience, a unique experiment. Joan, you talked about being a guinea pig.

As you look back, and you talked about the graduation night—the dinner dance down there—I will never ever forget that we had a live orchestra. We were in that ballroom, and we were dancing and Mrs. Wilson opened one of those little doors up there and she said, “Students, I want you to come up to my study, I have something for you.” I remember she had all the rings in little gift boxes, and in front of the gift box was a little card with your name on it. Inside the gift box was your ring and inside the card, if you had the money for a deposit, your deposit came back.

They really made you feel special. It was a great experience.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Not just Woody, though. The faculty made you feel special. I was thinking just recently that, aside from the Russian classes, I didn't have a class here that I didn't write a term paper in, including science and math. So basically maybe they didn't find what they were looking for, but they weren't going to stop expecting us to be what they were looking for.

Shelly Appleton is an example of that. I don't now recall exactly the class, but he conducted his class without ever telling us that it was the class itself that was the lesson. He organized us at the beginning of the semester into small work groups, and each cohort had to go through the term as a group, do all of their work together. We could not submit any work that was not part of the group activity. When it was all over we graded ourselves, justified our grades, and so forth. It was a long, long time later when I realized that this class was intended to demonstrate what it was like to live as a member of a cadre in a collective society. Shelly never told us that. But we got it. Maybe I would have gotten it faster if I'd been the kind of student he was maybe hoping to find when he got here, but I did get it. I've been getting a lot of the lessons all my life that I encountered here, thanks to people like Shelly.

THOMAS WERTH: One of the things, among the many things that I've carried on from my experience here at Oakland, was that life itself is a total living and learning experience. Maybe there is a point in your life that your formal education is over with. But if Oakland had really done its job then it doesn't stop at that point, that you continue to explore, you continue to investigate, you continue to challenge. I think that's the legacy that I have taken with me out of Oakland University. It's been a wonderful thing to carry with me.

HARVEY BURDICK: I'm going to end with a last question. These Chronicles are not designed as a selling of Oakland University, and I hope that that's clear. However, I would like to ask a hypothetical, because you've been saying some really nice things about your experiences at Oakland. If you now had a choice where you could have gone to another school, looking back now—of course at that time you couldn't possibly have made the decision—what do you think?

Can you try to answer that? If you could have gone to Michigan State? If you could have gone to Olivet? But you went to Oakland because it was in the neighborhood. Do you have any thoughts, or is that an unfair question?

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: No, I think it's very fair. It's provoking, though. I would have missed more of what I got on weekends when I visited my friend, but I'm not sure I would have "missed" it. You see, once I had a small taste of Greek life or intercollegiate athletics or whatever, I realized that that wasn't everything. I was getting a lot of the things that I needed at Oakland. I was being forced out of my background, to grow and explore new things. I know categorically I would not have gone for the traditional group. I liked it then and I like it now—being singled out as attempting to do things that people haven't done before. I like the notion that we were pioneers. I deeply resent that the university has sort of lost touch with that pioneering spirit and has attempted to be more traditional, because I see that as an attempt to be just like everybody else. I liked the distinction that I felt.

THOMAS WERTH: I really believe, as well as I know myself now and looking back, I would probably still have chosen Oakland. Because, and I admit this to a lot of people, I have a lot of varied interests. I have a difficult time focusing sometimes: here and there, and I've got six projects going, and don't complete any of them. I think possibly had I gone to a "traditional university," there may have been too many non-academic things that would have distracted me from my real academic pursuits. I really believe that, and that's because I know myself, and the fact that Oakland at that time focused on the academic end of things. Yes, there were activities on campus and yes, there were intramural things. The athletic part of it back then was the small part of it. You could go out and participate, if you wanted to get involved with the archery or whatever it was, but the thrust of the school was the education, it was the learning and it was the studying. Knowing me as I do, it was really a great opportunity.

HARVEY BURDICK: So for you it worked out quite well.

THOMAS WERTH: Absolutely.

HARVEY BURDICK: That seems like a good note to end this interview. I really had fun. I appreciate you coming, Tom and Joan, and telling us about it. I learned a lot today.

THOMAS WERTH: It's been great bringing back some things, and having the opportunity to digress and talk about things that were important in our lives— and the university is still important in my life.

JOAN GIBB CLAIR: Thank you, Harvey.

Oakland University Chronicles
JOAN GIBB CLAIR and THOMAS L. WERTH
Index: Transcript of Interview

Amann, Peter	36
Appleton, Sheldon	40
Athletics	24-25
Atmosphere on campus	24, 38
Career after graduating:	
Joan Gibb Clair	1-2
Thomas Werth	3-4
Charter Class significance	22-23, 39
Class rings:	
Joan Gibb Clair	9, 22
Thomas Werth	8
Collins, Walter	32
Curriculum:	
Requirements for teacher education	10-11
Few educational methods courses	11, 31
No part-time students	16
Employment while a student:	
Joan Gibb Clair	16, 17, 18
Thomas Werth	18, 19
Experiences prior to MSUO:	
Joan Gibb Clair	4-5, 16-17
Thomas Werth	6-7
Faculty:	
Expectations from students	24, 38, 40
Social interactions with students	28-29, 30
Financial aid	17, 19
Hetenyi, Laszlo	31
Hoopes, Robert	21

Library resources..... 33-34

Matthews, George36

Phrases:

“Oakland grew up in my back yard”5

“Guinea pigs from Oakland University”5

I’ll show you”7

“You cut your own brush”22

“You can do this”24

“They were on a futuristic crest”35

“The right man at the right time at the right place37

“Varner was a cheerleader”38

“Someday

Pioneers:

Joan Gibb Clair.....23, 41

Thomas Werth 13, 22, 23-24

Reasons for coming:

Joan Gibb Clair.....5

Thomas Werth7-8, 9-10

Reflections on experiences at MSUO/Oakland:

Joan Gibb Clair.....20, 24, 41

Thomas Werth8, 40,41

Russian language courses:

Joan Gibb Clair.....14

Thomas Werth 13-14, 15

Selection of college major:

Joan Gibb Clair..... 5-6

Thomas Werth12

Social life at MSUO:

Joan Gibb Clair.....25-29, 32-33

Thomas Werth 29-30

Students:

Difficulty with curriculum	20-21
Out-of-state and foreign students	34-36

Transportation to campus:

Joan Gibb Clair	17-18
Thomas Werth	18-19

Varner, Durward B. (Woody):

Strong influence on Oakland's success	37-38
Interactions with students	37-38, 38-39

Varner, Paula	37
---------------------	----

Wilson, Matilda Dodge:

Gift of Charter Class rings	8, 9, 39-40
Advice to Joan Gibb	9