

# Oakland University Chronicles

*Interview with*

**George Karas**

Map Talk

Transcript of Oral History Interview

Interview date: May 19, 1999

Interviewer: Paul Tomboulian



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## **Oakland University Chronicles**

### **GEORGE KARAS**

Date of birth: June 2, 1925

#### **EDUCATION**

B.S. Michigan State University 1950

#### **PRIOR TO OAKLAND UNIVERSITY**

1957 Michigan State University  
Physical Plant Engineer

#### **OAKLAND UNIVERSITY**

1961 Director of Physical Plant  
1973 University Engineer  
1987 Retired  
1989 Project Manager  
*(to oversee construction of  
Kresge Library and its additions)*



**Photograph of George Karas**

November 7, 1996

Photographer: Rick Smith  
Oakland University Communications and Marketing

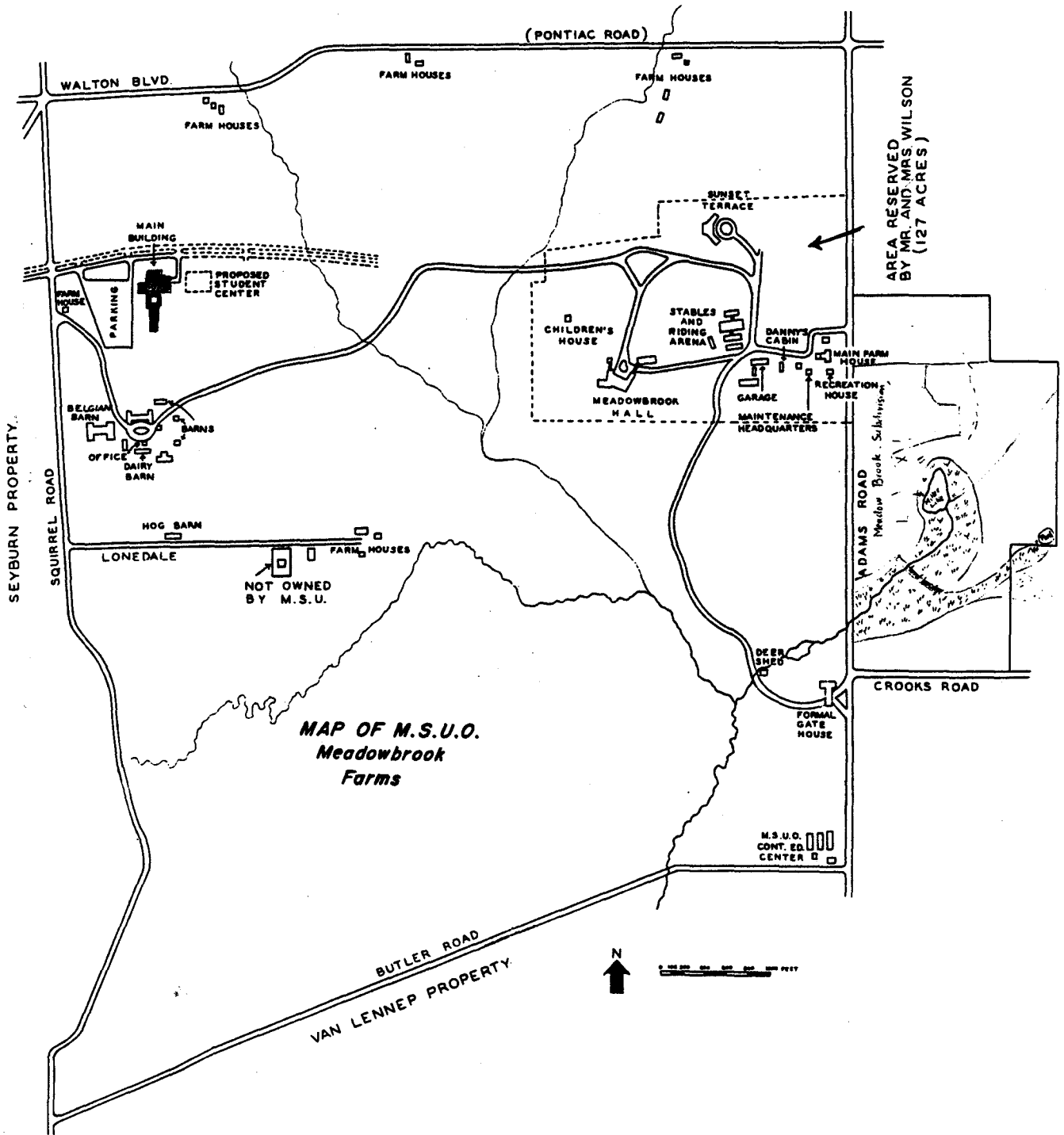




George Karas  
*Director of Physical  
Plant*

**Photograph of George Karas**

MSUO Yearbook 1963



**Oakland University Chronicles**  
**Interview with GEORGE KARAS**

**Map Talk**  
**May 19, 1999**

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: This is one of the interviews in the Oakland University Chronicles Project supported in its third year by a special university allocation. Today is May 19th, 1999 and we are speaking from Varner Hall on the campus of Oakland University. The goal of the project is to record oral histories dealing with the beginnings of Oakland University and especially the period before the graduation of the first class. My name is Paul Tomboulian and I have been professor of chemistry at Oakland University since 1959.

My guest today is George Karas who started in 1957 as the construction engineer for the developing campus at Michigan State University Oakland or MSUO. George was the first employee of MSUO and he retired from his position as university engineer in 1987 after 30 years at Oakland. A previous Oakland University Chronicles interview on November 7th, 1996 with George Karas focused on his role in activities in the period from 1957 to 1963.

Today we are presenting a map talk on the important physical features during the early years of change from a farm estate to a young university campus. Our assistant with the maps will be Alice Tomboulian, the coordinator of the Oakland University Chronicles Project. And in order to keep the wealth of material in an orderly fashion, we will be referring to maps and notes during the presentation.

[Editor's note: The five maps listed below were used in this interview.

The full-size originals are located in the Kresge Library Archives.

- Map 1. Oakland University campus map, May 1999
- Map 2. MSUO, simplified schematic map, 1958
- Map 3. Meadow Brook Farms, 1938
- Map 4. Tentative Development Plan for MSUO, October 30, 1958, from MSU planners
- Map 5. MSUO Master Site Plan, January, 5, 1959, from MSU planners]

No one is more knowledgeable about the early conditions on the campus site and the early development of the MSUO campus than George Karas. Welcome back to the Chronicles, George.

GEORGE KARAS: Thank you, Paul. I'm pleased to be here.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: As we learned from the previous interview, starting in early 1957 George also served as the 18th engineer for Meadow Brook Hall. He worked directly with Matilda Wilson at the Hall and he came to know many features of the Meadow Brook farm estate and its residents. The George Karas family lived for five years in one of the five service cottages of the estate located along Adams Road across from the farmhouse, known today as the John Dodge House. George's first office was in the area known as the poultry farm at Adams and Butler Roads. George, is this the description that you've told me as being correct?

GEORGE KARAS: Absolutely correct, Paul.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Let's get oriented by looking at this map of the campus as it appears today in May of 1999. *[MAP 1]* We see a campus with number of buildings, including two that are recently completed: the Science and Engineering building and the Student Recreation and Athletic Center. A new building is under construction just northwest of Varner Hall.

The student body today numbers about 14,000 including about 1,200 resident students. Almost all of the academic buildings and residential units are clustered in the northwest corner of the Oakland University property. For ease of discussion, we will orient each of our maps so that north is at the top. The surrounding road network is in blue, with Adams Road on the right side, Walton Boulevard—earlier called Pontiac Road—on the north at the top, and Squirrel Road on the west at the left. Butler Road, which is not shown here, will be at the bottom.

Our maps were all copied from originals in the map files of the physical plant offices at the Campus Facilities and Operations building. We have added some colors and lines to the maps to indicate special areas of interest. On this first map, the academic support buildings are marked in blue. The residence halls are marked in green. The remaining original buildings from the Meadow Brook Farms are colored in orange. All of the campus buildings in blue and green have been



constructed after 1957, the year when Michigan State University Oakland was founded.

I might note that on the northeast part of the property which is currently called the East Campus, the only buildings new since 1957 are the Baldwin Pavilion and the associated structures shown in yellow, and the renovated Dodge stables plus the indoor riding ring, which became the Health Enhancement Institute. The other buildings shown in orange predate all the academic buildings; these include Meadow Brook Hall, Sunset Terrace and the Dodge farmhouse.

There was a groundbreaking in 1958 for the first building shown here, now known as North and South Foundation Halls. George, you were there. Tell us about what happened.

GEORGE KARAS: It was a very exciting day. It was on May the second, 1958, and in attendance were Mr. and Mrs. Wilson, President Hannah, members of the State Legislature, members of the Board of Trustees, and all of the local dignitaries. The enthusiastic welcome was led by Michigan State alumni. There were other guests that were also invited. And it's a very interesting tale of the Belgian horses who were viewing the groundbreaking from the east.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: They were outside the fence, though.

GEORGE KARAS: Outside the fence; they were there for many years.

The contractor was very anxious to get started and Woody was just as anxious to have them start. So at the termination of the ceremony, the earthmovers and bulldozers roared into action, and began clearing and moving earth on the site.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: George, could you point to any buildings in the current academic area of the campus which remain from that old estate? Tell us what they were originally used for, and how they're now being used.

GEORGE KARAS: There are three, and these are not ordinary buildings. They're very well constructed. The first is the Belgian barn. The Belgian barn was in existence and used during many years of our early campus life, using the pasture to the north area. The other building is the sheep barn, and the third building is the

piggery. All three buildings are now used for storage. I'd like to comment on the piggery very briefly. This was a structure that had electrical radiant heat in the ceiling to keep the pigs comfortable. It was done by Jamesway and it was state-of-the-art. The buildings are watertight, well-constructed, and used for storage at the present time.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: The piggery is this one up here?

GEORGE KARAS: Yes. It's along Walton Boulevard.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: George, let's go back to the time when you first came down to visit the area from MSU in late 1956. Does this map show about the way the property looked when you visited it in 1956, probably November or December? *[MAP 2]*

GEORGE KARAS: Yes. It was a day that the wife and I drove down to become acquainted with the area. The highlight of the trip was stopping at the entrance to the estate on Adams Road and purchasing some apples from Mr. Seyfert, who was later to become my neighbor. He was the master gardener for the entire estate. We drove around. It was very beautiful and well-maintained.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: It's interesting to note that when the Wilsons gave their property to Michigan State, some of the areas within the property that we call the campus were not available to the university. Could you point those out?

GEORGE KARAS: The Wilsons had acquired most of the land by purchasing small farms. There was an area in the center, of slightly over 200 acres, that was owned and controlled by a gentleman named Mr. Barnett. There were also several five-acre parcels contiguous to his property that were not part of the grant. Later, the university was able to obtain ownership to all of the internal land with the exception of one five-acre parcel. In the gift, the Wilsons maintained a lifetime lease on the majority of the buildings on the East Campus, within a line from Adams Road to north of Sunset Terrace, to a line south of Meadow Brook Hall.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Now, to begin with our discussion of campus origins, let's go back to an earlier time shown on this 1938 map which describes the property known as the Meadow Brook Farms. [MAP 3] Tell us about where this map came from. I see some names down here.

GEORGE KARAS: It's an unusual origin. One of the names is Mr. Dick Wilson, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Wilson, and the other is D. B. Eames, who was a major mechanical engineer and contractor in the area. His responsibility was the maintenance of all the boilers and utilities on [the estate]. It was my pleasure to get acquainted with both of these gentlemen, and Mr. Eames was a contractor on some of our academic buildings. Dick Wilson is still very active in many of our functions at Meadow Brook Hall.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: George, could you tell us first about what you know about some of the features shown here? Let's start with the original estate entrance over here on Adams Road.

GEORGE KARAS: This was an entrance to the estate that was guarded or observed by a guard 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. And for better than a year and a half, I was logging in and out. Every person who entered the estate had to log in and log out. The parcel of land at the [northwest] corner of Walton and Adams is a five-acre parcel that had a wellhouse on it. Mrs. Wilson explained to me that the wellhouse was the beginning of a subdivision that she wanted to develop to serve the people, because she had about 13 homes on the estate and in the surrounding area. The 41 acres that exist west of Squirrel Road, where Squirrel Road deviates a little bit to have a more stable passageway, was later sold to Chrysler as they developed their tech center and their property to the west. We mentioned earlier about the excepted area. It's shown here a little better.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: It's shown a bit bigger here. I see the Barnett property looks much larger than the 200 acres you mentioned.

GEORGE KARAS: I think we have to assume that from 1938 to 1956 there was some acquisition by the Wilsons. But, as I mentioned earlier, in this entire property

there is only one five-acre parcel that is not owned and controlled by the university today, and it's on Lonedale.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: How did the Wilsons maintain the security of this large 1400-acre estate?

GEORGE KARAS: It's interesting. Because of the secure gate, there was never any roaming security—it was at the point of entry and exit. But the entire property is surrounded by a chain-link fence, 6 feet high with barbed wire on the top. With the many parcels—the sheep farm, the piggery, the poultry area, etcetera—Mrs. Wilson had the fence duck or move behind the residence, so that people could come and go without having to check in at the main entrance. However, the managers of the respective groupings had a gate that they could pass through that was padlocked. The public had no access to the openings behind their residences.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: And by no roaming security, you mean no police force?

GEORGE KARAS: No police force or anyone traversing the roads, checking the fence. I might add that occasionally I had the unfortunate experience of having to report some fences that were cut or open. This was a beautiful hunting ground and people will be people, and they would actually physically cut the chain-link fence and go inside to hunt fox, rabbits, pheasants, etcetera.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Let's talk about some of these areas of the estate as they were used. Tell us about your recollection of some of these areas. We've marked them with squares here, but let's start with the area up where the future campus would be.

GEORGE KARAS: Mrs. Wilson had a great love of horses, and when I came down she had Belgian horses, she had hackney horses, there were Shetland ponies, riding horses; and for a period, she and her granddaughter Judy were training thoroughbreds. During my time here with Mrs. Wilson, they developed an actual horse training track at the northeast corner, at Walton and Adams. They also had the poultry development on the south corner at Adams and Butler. They had

kennels, they had sheep that we mentioned earlier, and they had the piggery. They had dairy cattle and beef cattle. It was a large operating farm.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: So there's pasture on the west, on the northwest here, and fields around the top [north], and fields over here [center], and more pasture. I see something over here [along Adams]. What was this orchard?

GEORGE KARAS: Oh, yes. She had a full working orchard. When we came down, the wife and I in 1956, I had mentioned we purchased apples. This was an active apple orchard and there were many weekends when the head gardener, Mr. Seyfert, would sell apples at the [entrance gate]. And if he didn't sell them all, they would store them in a root cellar developed by John Dodge directly west of the Dodge farmhouse. It later was phased out, as she was phasing out most of her farm operations.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Now, some of the lands were operated by other people; right? There was some cultivation by outsiders?

GEORGE KARAS: Yes, there was a farmer who lived [further] north, a Mr. Dobat, who was a resident of the area, who would lease some land from the Wilsons. It primarily was the [current] golf course area—that would extend south from the clubhouse to the deer park—this massive area which was the originally proposed site of the university. There was also some land leased at the Butler and Squirrel area. Mr. Dobat would raise corn and hay and a few other items.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: George, as you noted earlier, your family lived for five years in one of the service cottages next to Adams Road. Could you find that for us and tell us about what those homes were like?

GEORGE KARAS: As I noted earlier, Mrs. Wilson wanted someone at the estate to begin to understand the operation of Meadow Brook Hall. I came prior to the starting of the actual construction of the university and because I was the engineer, I was able to live in the south cottage. Next to me was the head of security, a Mr. Robertson, and it's interesting to note that his son was in our first graduating class. We then had the chauffeur, the farm manager, and Mr. Seyfert, whom I had

mentioned earlier. These “cottages” have a little misnomer because they’re each in reality a four- or five-bedroom house. There were 13 residences on the estate, including the dairy man, the sheep barn, and the piggery—they all had their residences. And the upstairs (I found this out later in talking to Mrs. Wilson), the upstairs was not heated and there were no [kitchen or bathroom] facilities, [because] it was her desire to have all 13 of the residences provide housing for the summer help. Fortunately, her farm was being phased out and I was never asked to have guests in the upper level.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: George, again using this map showing the estate in [1958], would you start at that public entrance by the farmhouse on Adams Road and describe some of the buildings and activities of the farm as you got to know them.

*[MAP 2]*

GEORGE KARAS: Remember, as we’re entering we have to log in. So we log in at the guard shack.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: It’s that first building there.

GEORGE KARAS: We then go by the greenhouse, and this is probably the area that Mrs. Wilson used for recreation more than anything else. Past the greenhouse, we have the farmhouse which is now John Dodge House. Directly south of it is an outdoor pool, and an indoor pool in a building that we call the golf course clubhouse now. The outdoor pool was maintained for several years, and Mrs. Wilson used to invite her guests from the church and the Salvation Army. It wasn’t unusual on a nice sunny day to find her sitting in a chair doing some reading, next to the trickling fountain at the outdoor pool. She enjoyed this area very, very much.

Adjacent to this grouping is a water tower and, as time will tell, this was a very important feature in the location of our first building. It was a 75,000 gallon tower that was fed by a well, an adjacent well. There was another emergency well nearby that had a connection. This tower supplied all the water to this entire development with the exception of Meadow Brook Hall. Meadow Brook Hall was a self-contained building, had its own well and water supply, had its own electrical supply different from the main supply here, had its own septic tank system, and



there was nothing at Meadow Brook Hall that was connected to any of these other facilities.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: George, you mentioned this stand pipe and this enormous tank—why was that tank so big? 75,000 gallons sounds like a lot of water.

GEORGE KARAS: It is a lot of water, Paul, and there were a lot of buildings that it supplied. I believe, also, it was used for fire protection. Unfortunately, we had an incident or two, and when we attempted to tap that water supply we found that the water lines were insufficient in size. Shortly thereafter, we modified this deficiency by surrounding the entire estate with an eight-inch water main and a supply system from the City of Rochester Hills [Avon Township at that time].

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: What year would that have been?

GEORGE KARAS: That would have been in the middle 70s, late 70s.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: So we actually used that water supply for at least 15 years after the campus started.

GEORGE KARAS: Yes, on the East Campus. There was another water tower over on the academic area, in the farm grouping.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Tell us about some of the other buildings on the east side here.

GEORGE KARAS: Well, the most prominent one is the riding ring. This was an indoor riding facility that was used both by the Dodge stables to the north and [Mrs. Wilson's] daughter's stables, called the VanLennep stables, to the south. They had some sort of arrangement for the maintenance of those facilities. One time, with great pride, I reported to Mrs. Wilson that I had repaired a deficiency in the VanLennep stables. And she quickly advised me my duties were in the ring and her stables, and I was not to provide any service for the VanLennep stables unless we were reimbursed. It was my first experience in the division of responsibilities. There was a maintenance building south of that.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Down in here.

GEORGE KARAS: Yes. And there were also a garage and some storage area and a building called “Danny’s Cabin.” This was a facility that [Mrs. Wilson’s] son Danny had used as a work shop and when he passed away, the building was locked for many years. I was reportedly the first person to go into that building with her when she gave to the Detroit museum a car that he had left in there. When he passed away, she locked the door and there was no activity in there for a long time.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: By the time of this map in 1957, Sunset Terrace had already been built but it doesn’t show up on the 1938 map. [It was built in the late 1940s.]

GEORGE KARAS: The Wilsons had a large farm operation with the many animals, the sheep, and the poultry, and so forth, and they received a priority to build a smaller home. Unfortunately, the home did not please Mrs. Wilson because of the progress and the design, and she was very unhappy with it. I spent many, many days and weekends attempting to convert the system to something that would be satisfactory. Today, our president is living there and I assume, by this time, all of the mistakes have been corrected.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: That’s 50 years later.

George, let’s continue to talk about this property on the east side here. Tell us about some of these other features.

GEORGE KARAS: There’s a building called the formal gate house and it has a nice history. There was a couple who lived there, and their responsibility was to open a pair of massive wooden gates to permit vehicular traffic to follow through from the formal gate house past the deer shed up through the major part of the estate north to Sunset Terrace, and then west and down to the front of Meadow Brook Hall.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: That’s the way formal guests would come—

GEORGE KARAS: When she had a function of some magnitude, or some of her friends [came], or when she opened that for the day that her granddaughter Barbara had her coming-out party. It wasn’t used too often. It was a beautiful

scenic drive. One of the things that I remember is her telling me that after a period of five minutes or so, if they [the Wilsons] did not turn out the lights that were parallel to the road, the couple in the formal gate house were to notify the guard and he was to go out and see if they had any car trouble or something. That magic switch is inside the front door of Meadow Brook Hall, a very fine security measure. That is not used too often. Part of the road exists as our internal road on the golf course. The deer park has disappeared; the deer were all checked and released, and many of them are still on the estate, or their offspring.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Tell us about that deer herd, and that deer shed. I see that it's a special feature.

GEORGE KARAS: The deer park area was surrounded with a very high 14- or 15-foot fence that encompassed the small lake that's next to the deer shed. There was a special gate that you would open to get into the deer shed, and then you would be within the park. I had the pleasure of feeding the deer on some weekends when the staff was not available.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: This was a hobby of [Mrs. Wilson's].

GEORGE KARAS: She liked animals. She had said to me more than once that animals like you for what you are, and not for what you have. She had dogs and she had deer and her horses—I still think her hackneys were her favorites.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Now, on the northeast corner here, I see there are some farmhouses, but those are not there anymore. Tell us about what you remember of that area.

GEORGE KARAS: Those were the farmhouses associated with the sheep barn, the piggery, and what I consider one of her other favorite things: this was a "retirement area." Any of the Belgian horses, the hackney horses, the riding horses that had served their time, Mrs. Wilson would retire them. This is what I call the retirement home for all of her animals. She took care of them forever.

The three homes that existed along here south of Walton were removed to make room for the boulevard road that was constructed. Oakland University

provided the land and the road commission constructed another roadway which would make Walton a double boulevard.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: I see in this particular version of the map, though, it's still called Pontiac Road. So some of the roads changed names as, in fact, this road down here [in the southeast] by the Ross farm changed.

GEORGE KARAS: That's interesting. It's [labeled] as Crooks but it is now Avon. The change happened about 10 or 15 [actually 30-35] years ago. The Ross farm was an interesting area—

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: This is over here on the east side of Adams.

GEORGE KARAS: When Woody first came, he discussed the possibility of a subdivision. I had worked with Mr. Varner in East Lansing in developing a subdivision. He did it privately, and I happened to be the engineer for the contractor who put in the sewer, water, and roads. And he discussed and proposed that we put in a subdivision that would enable the faculty and staff to find nearby housing. If I'm correct, Paul, you were a recipient of this particular housing.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Well, we were in [Meadow Brook Subdivision] along with about 45 [other] lots, roughly. We built a house in there in 1961 and lived there for eight years. It's financially advantageous to get in there because of the way the mortgages are arranged.

So this was Woody's idea to make inexpensive housing available because, I think, he sensed there wasn't much in the community?

GEORGE KARAS: It was very limited. It's hard to say, but Rochester was a closed area. There was very little expansion in the Village of Rochester and, of course, the surrounding area at that time was known as Avon Township. There was very limited expansion and housing available.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: And perhaps, nothing relatively inexpensive.

GEORGE KARAS: No. The arrival of Michigan State University Oakland produced what I believe is a major development. If I can digress for a moment—on our first building plans, we had proposed to develop a sanitary treatment plant right next to the sports and rec building on that hillside. Mr. Varner was approached by the Oakland County DPW [Department of Public Works] and asked if he would consider contributing those funds, in conjunction with several developers and with a small university called Michigan Christian College, to develop an MSUO sewer system. It's my belief that that union of two developers (Burt Smokler and Wake-Pratt), Michigan Christian College, and MSUO led to the tremendous funding for the master sewer and water system in the development east of this area. Also, we cooperated with Pontiac Township in bringing water up Squirrel Road in lieu of drilling another well. So, I think MSUO's impact on the area has been through utilities, and naturally the faculty and staff.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: We've zoomed in on the southeast corner of the Meadow Brook Farms. We're at the corner of Adams Road here and Butler, looking at the area called the "poultry group" by the farm's folks. Tell us about some of these buildings down here in this corner.

GEORGE KARAS: Of all the buildings that we have observed on campus, I believe that the poultry group is probably the most historical and the most universally accepted. We had three major buildings. The one to the east, the laying house, was converted to a continuing education classroom, and that building historically was the site of our first academic class on the estate.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: In a chicken coop.

GEORGE KARAS: In a chicken coop. And one of our leading students was Mrs. Wilson—and it was on speed reading.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: And this was, what, fall of 1958?

GEORGE KARAS: Right. The other two buildings have been converted to child care use, and are now called the Lowry Early Childhood Center. Directly south of that is a [smaller] building that housed all of the facilities for these. It had a

refrigeration system that would maintain the poultry and eggs. And it was the site of my first office on campus.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: In that building—in that office building there?

GEORGE KARAS: In the office building. The [manager's] residence there was converted by our first president—[Chancellor] Varner, Woody Varner—he converted that to his residence, and he lived there for about 10 years. It is still used as offices. So, of all the four or five major buildings, all of them are being used, and they're not being used for storage. There is a detail there that stands out a little bit, and it's [Mrs. Wilson's] method of securing the [estate]. There's a fence that goes behind the residence that permits the use of the residence without interfering with the operation of the poultry group. Mr. Hannah, Mr. John Hannah, was active in the development of [this area] with Mrs. Wilson, when she started the poultry group.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: So she knew him, well before the contact in late 1956?

GEORGE KARAS: Yes.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: I think they worked together on the state agriculture board.

GEORGE KARAS: That's right. She was a trustee or a member of that board.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: So they had a long relationship, and a lot of it had to do with, perhaps, a mutual interest in what was going on down here in the poultry group.

GEORGE KARAS: That was the beginning, as I understand it.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Now we've moved to the west side of the campus just off Squirrel Road, and we're looking at what was called the "dairy complex" or in this particular map, the "farm group," close to our academic area of the current campus. Tell us what you remember about the buildings that were over here, as they became converted to university use.



GEORGE KARAS: The most impressive one is the Belgian barn. I'm remembering, and you were here, when the Belgian horses were stabled there and traveled north through the academic campus to pasture on what is now the dormitory area. That was a very functional building.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Moving east from the Belgian barn is a big building called a machine shed or implement shed, right?

GEORGE KARAS: That was very important to us. For many years it housed the motor pool, and on the west end we converted that into several staff offices. It was an important building used for many years by the university.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: And then south of that I see an office building.

GEORGE KARAS: It's a very unusual building. It contained, number one, Mr. Wilson's office; number two, the creamery office; and number three, access to the second floor. Remember how we discussed the fact that all residences had sleeping quarters with no facilities on the second floor? And just as unusual, this building had three entrances and there was no way that you could get from Mr. Wilson's area to the creamery office or upstairs. It was used for many years as staff offices, and the last few years it was used with the student theater. We made some openings in the walls.

The building directly south of it was a dairy barn which was converted by the students and the university into a student theater, a very interesting project. To the right were some supporting buildings, and one of those buildings—I believe it was a [granary]—we converted that for the use of the students to prepare and store their sets for the theater.

Adjacent to that site are the stand pipe, pump house, and water tower. This is a facility comparable to the 75,000 gallon tank on East Campus, and this water tower served us for many years.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: On the west campus?

GEORGE KARAS: On the west campus, the academic campus. Remember then, when we built Hannah Hall, we supplemented that well with a new pump. As time

went on, the university elected to join hands with Pontiac Township and develop a water main on Squirrel Road, which is our present water supply.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Just north of the farm group, or the dairy complex, I see there is a house along Squirrel Road, and I recall that was in use for many years.

GEORGE KARAS: That's the little white house on the hill, and that served as offices; it also served as our major headquarters for security. With the expansion of Squirrel Road, we lost that house. It's interesting to note, in your first years here, Dr. [Frederick] Obear had a class where the parent and the child would go to a chemistry class. My wife and my son, who later graduated from Oakland University, attended a summer chemistry class in that building. So we made efficient use of whatever space was available.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: When you say building, this must have been more than just a little house.

GEORGE KARAS: It had the size of a three- or four-bedroom house. They also had the same upstairs without facilities.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Without bathroom facilities.

GEORGE KARAS: Without bathrooms, and no heat in the winter. We modified that, naturally, so we made use of the upstairs.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: George, I want to thank you for that tour of the Meadow Brook Farms.

Now I'd like to turn back to that time in 1957 when you came down to the campus, after the Wilsons had made their agreement to donate their farm to Michigan State [University]. Tell us about the planning for that first building, North Foundation Hall and South Foundation Hall, or as it was called then, just Foundation Hall. How was that location determined?

GEORGE KARAS: After I was advised that I would be coming down to Rochester to help Mrs. Wilson on Meadow Brook Hall, I became interested in the site location

and began working with Harold Lautner and Milt Barron, two planners at Michigan State University. And one afternoon, Mr. Varner suggested that the four of us drive down and look at the site. Now, we have to remember that a gentleman by the name of J. Robert F. Swanson was very active as the chairman of the Oakland County Planning Commission, and he was actively [trying to] acquire land for a new four-year [university].

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Well, he was interested in that idea. I don't think they bought any land, did they?

GEORGE KARAS: No, you're correct. They didn't buy any, he kept looking for it. He traveled in the same social circles with Mrs. Wilson, and it was our understanding that he was the first person to approach Mrs. Wilson.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: But he was a graduate or connected with the University of Michigan.

GEORGE KARAS: To the best of our knowledge, we believe he wanted the land to go to [the University of] Michigan rather than Michigan State. To make a long story short, he was selected as the architect [for MSUO], and he proceeded to locate a building on the campus. We received a preliminary site plan from him. As we were driving down Adams Road, just past the public entrance and the Dodge farmhouse, the site was right adjacent to Adams Road, north of the deer park and east of the formal drive.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: So, Swanson had selected this site.

GEORGE KARAS: He had recommended and proposed that the first building, Foundation Hall, be constructed there.

The planners from Michigan State University were concerned about several things: number one, and foremost, was the proximity to Meadow Brook Hall; number two was the lack of expandable buildable land. As you notice, on the west side of the formal drive, it's wetland and rather unstable. Directly to the south were some limiting hills and woods and, of course, Adams Road on the east.

The major reason that [Swanson] selected this site, it was our belief, was that the 75,000 gallon water tower influenced him.

After we reviewed this site and found some objectionable things to the location, we traveled around the campus looking for large tracts of buildable land far enough away from Meadow Brook Hall. And we discovered the 75,000 gallon water tank at the farm group. We believed [water supply] was one of the anchors for the architect's selection [of the original campus site]. It also proved that there was a large area of flat buildable land which was the pasture for the Belgian horses. We also were pleased with the fact that this site was as far away from Meadow Brook Hall as we could get.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: So, in a matter of moments you moved the building over there.

GEORGE KARAS: And all of the requirements that we found objectionable in the first site on Adams Road were now acceptable here, with plenty of land, no unstable limits for expansion. It was also reported to me by some planners, that the land that's buildable as academic and dormitory space in this corner is equal to the land available for the main campus at the University of Michigan.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: In other words, several hundred acres.

Now we've moved to a map entitled the "Tentative Development Plan for Michigan State University Oakland," dated October 30, 1958. [MAP 4] This plan was done by the planning staff of Michigan State University, and is one of the first serious sketches of a major campus, with the guidelines listed on it for the campus. Apparently this early MSU plan was made in order to demonstrate that the estate could encompass a very large university, not necessarily to show what actually could [or would] be done. The plan shows essentially all of the estate converted into campus uses. I see the academic area over here [on the northwest], intramural sports down here [on the west side], housing in here [the southwest corner], married student housing [on the south side], spectator sports [in the northeast corner], faculty housing [on the east side], and an area called park and lake [in the center]. Nothing of this magnitude of campus growth has occurred in 40 years.

George, could you point out those excepted properties we talked about before?

GEORGE KARAS: In the heart of the campus was the area known as the Barnett property. The university was fortunate enough to obtain ownership to this land. The funds strangely enough came from easement rights. The Board of Trustees granted to Consumers Power an easement through the campus, and with those [easement income] funds we were able to provide Mr. Barnett with a lifetime lease on his land and upon his passing away, it would become ours. Unfortunately, there was one five-acre parcel that never came to our possession.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Yet.

GEORGE KARAS: Yet. It was vacant and the university offered that gentleman five acres anywhere in Oakland County and he elected to keep his five acres, and he has a home on it. It has not interfered with the expansion, but is a five-acre parcel in the heart of the campus.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: And, of course, there's the Wilson exception.

GEORGE KARAS: Yes, that was a lifetime lease and upon their passing it would become Oakland University's property.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: So that was the character of the [land] as the MSU planners looked at it, then—right?

GEORGE KARAS: They also had the 41-acre parcel along Squirrel Road that they did not identify as we know it. It's wetlands and very difficult to develop.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Now, I'd like to go through this list of planning specifications that the planners were using, in thinking about how to design the campus here. These are their planning guidelines. It would be based on: a maximum of 25,000 full-time students; an academic floor space of 200 square feet per student; 6,000 residents in the university, 70% in dormitories and 30% in apartments; parking for 100% of the staff and 50% of the students. So that was a very large set of students to be planning for.

George, are there some other features of this early map that you would like to mention?

GEORGE KARAS: It's called a tentative development plan, but you can recognize Foundation Hall and Oakland Center and then the library, which is shaded, is on the high point of all the land in this area. There are two major malls, one north-and-south, and one east-and-west. These malls and the other buildings that are shown in here are patterned after the development at Michigan State. The important thing here to Michigan State planners and to all students is the walking circle. Centered on the library there is a diameter indicating 10 minutes, and another diameter indicating 15 minutes. These are centered on the library and are walking distances.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: And, interestingly enough, they put the dormitories about 25 minutes away.

GEORGE KARAS: I think the walking distance is for the change of classes, but you're correct.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Where did they get these shapes for buildings that I see here?

GEORGE KARAS: If you were to look at the "footprints" of some of the [existing] buildings at Michigan State University, you would find that these duplicate, or these were copied after, their existing "footprints."

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Let's move to another map—from that tentative one to the "MSUO Master Site Plan." [MAP 5] This plan does not show any of those buildings that we just looked at, or the footprints of them, but it does include the locations of the Foundation Hall, the Student Center, and the library. The plan is dated January 5, 1959. It's only two months later than the last one that we just looked at. It sounds like MSUO planning was moving at high speed.

GEORGE KARAS: Paul, you know what Woody was like. He had made arrangements with several architects to do some preliminary drawings. This was sort of unheard-of at this particular time. He engaged an architect to do an academic building. He engaged an architect to do a science building and he engaged an architect to do the library. The understanding was that upon the



receipt of funding from the state or from a gift or whatever, that the plans would be partially completed and ready to start building. As time went on, this proved to be correct, and the architect selected for the academic building proceeded, and the architect selected for the library proceeded, and the science building came on line shortly thereafter. It was his rapid growth policy that promoted this type of arrangement. So, yes, he was moving very, very fast.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: The dormitories that we ultimately built were not built in the remote area of the campus, but, instead, were built up very much closer to the academic area. Can you explain what you think happened here?

GEORGE KARAS: Well, it became a matter of economics. Building that close to the academic buildings gave us a source of utilities: water, sewer, electricity, gas, and even heat. The buildings were designed to be small and compact with a limited number of students living on campus. However, the design was so made to accommodate offices at a later period. So the dormitories were small, they were designed for future conversion, and they were very close to the campus. Later, some larger dormitories were built north of these small dorms.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: But even today, we have less than 10% of our student body living on campus, and that's quite a contrast with these guidelines which project 25% of the student body living on campus. So we're a long ways from that even today. We can conclude that over the years, anyway, Oakland University has remained largely a commuter campus.

Now, as we near the end of our story about converting an estate to a campus, we've returned to our first map showing the current university campus. *[MAP 1]* Here we can see that all of those dormitories we were just speaking about, shown in green, are close to the academic part of the campus, shown in blue. So this design has quite changed from the original plan in terms of its density.

GEORGE KARAS: Yes, we lost the north-and-south mall. We developed a much more compact campus than originally planned.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: So the mall that was going to be here [north-and-south] is no longer there, and O'Dowd Hall seems to be built in that mall.

GEORGE KARAS: In the middle of it.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Even so, our planners were able to put the buildings so that we retained some of the original features of the campus, and some of the large trees of the estate, especially those near the library. And speaking of trees near the library, the Kresge Library, I'd like to have you tell us a bit about some of your personal activities related to the trees on the mall here. How did it come to happen that there are crabapple trees on the mall?

GEORGE KARAS: Originally, when the campus first started, it was planned to be a roadway that would be centered on the library. That was not very attractive and with the MSU planners and Mr. Varner's concurrence, the roadways were eliminated and a pedestrian mall was designed. Concurrent with this design, a layout included some crabapples running east and west. The family and I decided that it would be nice if those crabapples came to fruition, so the wife and I and the family planted what was commonly called "sticks." [whips] They're little tiny crabapple trees, a little bit bigger than that [gesturing], and I can remember placing clay tiles around the crabapples. Fortunately, most of them have grown and it was, as I say, a labor of love. The family and I spent many weekends [on campus], maybe sometimes we would be just cleaning the dormitories or the buildings, to prepare them for occupancy. But it was a family affair and it was very, very enjoyable.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: George, you've been one of those steady influences on Oakland's campus for 30 years, and that dedication and commitment has been evident in the things you've described today, regardless of the fact that the plans have changed from time to time. So I want to thank you again for your contributions to Oakland University and for sharing this wealth of information about the campus today.

GEORGE KARAS: Thank you, Paul, for inviting me.

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