

# Oakland University Chronicles

## W. Eugene Deskins

## Laszlo J. Hetenyi

Transcripts of Oral History Interviews

Interview dates: March 1 and May 24, 1999

Interviewers: Alice and Paul Tomboulian



Supported by

Oakland University Foundation

Office of the President, Oakland University

Department of Chemistry, Oakland University

Published by Oakland University

Rochester, Michigan

Copyright 2001

# **Oakland University Chronicles**

**W. Eugene Deskins**

**Laszlo J. Hetenyi**

## **Transcripts of Oral History Interviews**

Interview dates: March 1 and May 24, 1999

Interviewers: Alice and Paul Tomboulian

### **Contents**

#### **Preface**

About the Oakland University Chronicles

Editing of the Transcripts

#### **Interview with W. Eugene Deskins**

Biographical Sketch of W. Eugene Deskins

Photograph of W. Eugene Deskins Taken in 1990s

Photograph of W. Eugene Deskins Taken in 1963

Transcript of the Interview: 19 Pages

Index of Topics in the Transcript

#### **Interview with Laszlo J. Hetenyi**

Biographical Sketch of Laszlo J. Hetenyi

Photograph of Laszlo J. Hetenyi Taken February 7, 1998

Photograph of Laszlo J. Hetenyi from MSUO Yearbook 1963

Transcript of the Interview: 21 Pages

Index of Topics in the Transcript

## **Oakland University Chronicles**

### **LASZLO JOSEPH HETENYI**

Date of birth: March 8, 1921

#### **EDUCATION**

B.A.	Penn State University	1942
M.A.	University of Michigan	1946
Ed.D.	Michigan State University	1956

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

Associate Professor  
University of Florida

#### **OAKLAND UNIVERSITY**

1960 Associate Professor, Director of Teacher Education

Other positions held:  
Professor  
Dean of Teacher Education  
Dean of Performing Arts

1982 Retired

1989 Distinguished Professor Emeritus  
of Performing Arts and Education

#### **SINCE LEAVING OAKLAND UNIVERSITY**

Courtesy Professor of Humanities  
University of South Florida  
Tampa, Florida

#### **CURRENT OCCUPATION**

Retired



**Photograph of Laszlo J. Hetenyi**

February 7, 1998

Photographer: Alice Tomboulian



Laszlo Hetenyi  
*Professor and Director of  
Teacher Education*

**Photograph of Laszlo Hetenyi**

MSUO Yearbook 1963

**Oakland University Chronicles**  
**Interview with LASZLO HETENYI**  
**May 24, 1999**

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: This is one of the interviews in the Oakland University Chronicles project, supported in this third year by a special university allocation. The goal of the project is to collect oral histories dealing with the beginnings of Oakland University. We are going to focus on the first few years, the time prior to the graduation of the first class. My name is Paul Tomboulian and I have been a professor of chemistry at Oakland University since 1959. Our major interviewer for today will be Alice Tomboulian, Project Coordinator. I will assist her.

It's 10:00 a.m. on Monday, May 24, 1999 and we are conducting a telephone interview with Professor Laszlo Hetenyi, who came to MSUO in the summer of 1960 to be the director of the teacher education program. Dr. Hetenyi retired from Oakland University in 1982, and currently resides in Temple Terrace, Florida. Earlier, as part of our second year of the Chronicles project, we conducted a videotaped interview with Les Hetenyi on February 7, 1998.

Today, we are mainly exploring the role of MSU Academic Vice-President Thomas Hamilton in the period starting in 1956, and especially his influence on the early curriculum at MSUO.

Les, welcome back to the Chronicles project, and let's go to our first question.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: You told us previously that the last course that you took towards your doctorate was actually a course you took from Tom Hamilton.

LASZLO HETENYI: That is correct.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: So that had to be prior to the issuance of your doctorate, which was sometime in 1956.

LASZLO HETENYI: Yes.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Would that have been in the summer?

LASZLO HETENYI: I'm almost certain it would be the summer.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Because you were only doing summers there?

LASZLO HETENYI: The way it was, they didn't hold me to any residence requirement beyond what I had already done, and so I only showed up for a couple of summers, but I turned in umpteen papers that I did in Florida.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: So you would have been on campus the summer of '56 taking your last course.

LASZLO HETENYI: I imagine so, but I'm not positive, because the degree was in '56 and this [course] could have been earlier.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Maybe in '55?

LASZLO HETENYI: Yes. I don't think it was then, but it's possible.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: It doesn't sound so likely, because that would have been a whole extra year [before] you got the degree.

LASZLO HETENYI: That was the last course, then I had to still do my prelims and write the dissertation.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Oh, so it's conceivable it was in '55. What was the course about?

LASZLO HETENYI: I have been racking my brains to figure out what it was. I can't remember. I do remember that I enjoyed it, and Tom and I hit it off very well.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: What subject matter did he actually teach?

LASZLO HETENYI: Well, he was teaching something like the university in the community or something like that. But I won't swear to that.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Do you know what department he was in?

LASZLO HETENYI: Oh, yes, education, foundations of education.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: That was his niche?

LASZLO HETENYI: I don't know if that was his niche all around. You see, he was a little bit of that same maverick type as I was. He was really primarily interested in the arts. That's what, most of the time, we talked about after class.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: So he did foundations of education, but he liked the arts.

LASZLO HETENYI: Oh, very much so. As a matter of fact, he was very much active in that in his previous job. He was either president or vice president of what was then called Pennsylvania College for Women.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Would he have been teaching something there? Was he a professor there?

LASZLO HETENYI: I don't think so. I think he was either a vice president or even a president, and then he came over [to MSU]. There had been all kinds of confusion and foul-ups in the college of education—it had a very unpopular dean, whose name I have forgotten. He got to be known as John Hannah's henchman. I believe that was the appointment that Tom held, as dean.

And then, you know, there was this big academic administrative reorganization. It used to be that John Hannah wouldn't have any vice presidents or anything. He had one man who was the secretary of the Board of Agriculture under which Michigan State functioned.

ALICE and PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Oh!

LASZLO HETENYI: But that was not Hamilton, that was a different man. When the big explosion took place, over all the veterans coming back, all of a sudden Michigan State blossomed out with more vice presidents they could shake a stick at.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Now, you say Michigan State had been under the Board of Agriculture, rather than a Board of Trustees?

LASZLO HETENYI: That's correct. Now, remember, the major schools all had their own boards—still do so far as I know.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Now this explains something, and this is the reason that Paul and I both said, "Oh!" We had always been told that Matilda Wilson had been on the Board of Trustees at Michigan State and we assumed she had been appointed, maybe, to fill out a term or something. But then we read another reliable document that said that Matilda Wilson had been on the Board of Agriculture.

LASZLO HETENYI: Well, that was also the Board of Michigan State.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: So Michigan State was under the Board of Agriculture, and Matilda Wilson was on the Board of Agriculture which was [equivalent to] being on their Board of Trustees.

LASZLO HETENYI: Yes.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Would that have been appointed by the governor?

LASZLO HETENYI: I suspect so, but again I can't tell you for sure.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: It makes sense that Matilda Wilson could have been recommended by Hannah because we found out that back when he was a poultry extension expert, he came and advised her on constructing that whole poultry complex and all the chicken coops.

LASZLO HETENYI: As far as I know, that was John Hannah's only earned degree—in animal husbandry. I don't believe he even had an earned master's degree.

Anyway, I think that Tom Hamilton came in originally as dean of education, and then he went to—I don't whether it was called academic vice president, or what.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Now, you told us that Tom had asked you to be on the committee to help plan or design MSUO.

LASZLO HETENYI: There was a committee at Michigan State, which had as its charge designing this new college that Mrs. Wilson gave money for. Now, in that year I was there—and I'm trying to remember, it probably was '56 or maybe even '57—I got ticked off at the situation in Florida for a variety of reasons. Tom Hamilton no sooner heard that, than he talked to Milosh Muntyon—who was both my dissertation chairman and under whom I sat on several faculty committees, because I was also full-time faculty—and within, I think, an hour or two after I was bitching to Tom about [Florida], I got an offer from Milosh to join the faculty, and from Tom to join this planning committee. I was employed at the University of Florida in a tenure track position, but I was in East Lansing at that moment.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: The people at Michigan State knew of the impending gift from the Wilsons no earlier than the late fall of '56. From all the testimony that everybody's given, Woody Varner and John Hannah were working with Matilda Wilson in the fall of '56 to gently usher her towards giving the gift to Michigan State University. In fact, when she finally did it, we know it was hunting season.

So Tom Hamilton apparently went full steam right then, because there is a document, a proposal he made for what he called Matilda Wilson College, and it is dated December 29 of '56. It's quite a document. It actually turned out that it became the design of MSUO. So already, he had conceptualized this by the end of '56. But then he had to go ahead and get a committee together. He might have heard from you—

LASZLO HETENYI: I told him that I thought I was short-changed. I mean, I got some kind of ridiculous raise, like \$200 or something.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: But you recall that you were telling him about this in person at MSU, and not by phone from Florida?

LASZLO HETENYI: I'm almost certain that I was there because I have a memory of his basement, which he had fixed up as a good English pub. And I'm remembering that Mary [Hetenyi] and I were sitting there guzzling down Bourbon and talking about these things.

Getting back to that general period, I was under the impression, and that was a generally-held impression at Michigan State, that Tom Hamilton would be the first chancellor at MSUO. And then, one fine day I got a letter from Tom saying that that wasn't going to happen, he was going to stay at Michigan State—there will be a footnote for this in a moment—and that John Hannah nominated Woody Varner. I don't have the letter.

Now, this is the interesting thing: I either wrote or telephoned Tom and said I had just lost all interest in MSUO because I had known Woody—we were working on the proposed faculty subdivision where we hired Stubbins to design it. Woody just didn't impress me. Tom came back again, I don't know if it was a letter or a phone call, and said, "Les, the Woody whom you knew and the Woody today are not the same person. Don't just eliminate that because I'm not going to be there, and Woody will."

In any case, now comes the part that I am kind of mixed up about. You see, I am under the impression that Tom did not stay at Michigan State. Very shortly after it became clear that he wouldn't be chancellor at MSUO, I think, he went to the State University of New York, in basically the same capacity that Don O'Dowd later had, a very elevated position.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: You're absolutely right.

LASZLO HETENYI: And what happened there, I don't know. The next thing I knew—I had not heard from him, we lost contact—he went to the University of Hawaii.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Yes, and Paul thinks that was kind of a step down.

LASZLO HETENYI: Well, that's hard to tell, I mean, after all, that's a presidency. It may very well be a step down because it is a much smaller job than the New York one. But, on the other hand, it is, in quotes, "the president."

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Right, and it is Hawaii, which is a lovely place to be if you're towards the end of your career. So he had been the MSUO chancellor-elect, so to speak.

LASZLO HETENYI: Well, he was never officially that, but faculty friends I had at Michigan State were quite firm. It was all across the campus that he was going to be the chancellor. Anyway, he went to New York, seemingly didn't stay terribly long, and then became president at Hawaii.

Now, here comes the mystery. What happened there, I don't know—I don't know whether there was a personal difficulty, a health difficulty. There was a rumor that it was some other kind of difficulty, and eventually that situation, somehow, went to pieces. But how and exactly and with what timing, I don't know.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: So you think it was personal with him, rather than some event on [the MSU] campus? The reason that we ask you that is that Woody said to us that, yes, Hamilton had been the apparent intendee to be chancellor and that Hannah wanted Tom back on campus at MSU to "straighten out an academic crisis." But Woody never said what it was, and we don't know whether that was, in fact, an event or Woody glossing over some not so happy part of Tom's personal situation.

LASZLO HETENYI: Well, I might as well come out and stop beating around the bush. Tom became an alcoholic.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Oh, this is known?

LASZLO HETENYI: I don't know whether this is known. Woody knew it, I knew it. And I imagine lots of other people knew it, too.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: And so, would Hannah have known this?

LASZLO HETENYI: No—I think, shall we say, the flowering of that thing happened after he got away from MSU. Now whether that was in New York already, or whether that was only after he got to the University of Hawaii, I don't know.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: You're saying it got more pronounced after he left. But you had to have known it while he was at MSU.

LASZLO HETENYI: No, I had not. I was not perceptive enough to know it. It had not been in full flower.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: So you don't know if he really was, in fact, displaying alcoholic symptoms when he was at MSU; you don't know that for sure.

LASZLO HETENYI: I don't know that. But, you see, I saw him one more time, and I think there should be a record of that somewhere at MSUO. Didn't we give him an honorary degree?

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Yes. [Editor's note: Thomas Hamilton received an Honorary Doctor of Humanities degree at the fall 1967 commencement.]

LASZLO HETENYI: Yes, and that was at the same time that David Riesman, the well-known sociologist from Harvard, also got an honorary. The reason that stuck in my mind so much was, since Mary and I had been reasonably acquainted with Tom, we expected, of course, Virginia to come with him—his wife. Now, whether they were still married or not, I don't know, but we certainly expected that. So then Woody asked Mary and me to join Paula and him, and supposedly Virginia and Tom Hamilton (Tom's Virginia, however, didn't appear) for dinner. After that, we were going to entertain Tom. That same evening, Don O'Dowd, who had known Tom very well, was entertaining Riesman, and Tom said he would like to meet Dave Riesman.

Now, Tom used to have a marvelous sense of humor, self-deprecating, funny, and all that. We noticed that when he was having after-dinner coffee at our house, he was telling us these stories as if they were by rote. Then, later on, Tom said, "Why don't you come over to meet Riesman, and join the party," which Mary

and I did. And to my immense shock, he was telling the exact same stories still as if by rote, and never let Riesman get a word in edgewise. Again, he supposedly went over there because he was so anxious to meet Riesman, but the behavior certainly didn't match that. In general, both Woody and I kept saying, "This is not the Tom Hamilton we knew." So that's when I guessed he was an alcoholic. Woody never discussed that, but I suspect Woody guessed that.

There was some trouble at the University of Hawaii, too—I don't know, a faculty uprising or attempt to discredit or some kind of blow-up like that. So in addition to concerns about his personal problem, there was—it actually hit some of the newspapers—the uprising at the University of Hawaii.

You see, the thing that struck us so much was that we were both, Mary and I, very much impressed by him when we knew him in East Lansing. I mean, we weren't close buddy-buddies, but we were renting the house of another faculty member and that was only about a block and a half, if that, from Tom's place. So we met back and forth and we admired his British pub-styled basement, and all that. And he was funny, he was sensitive, he was pleasant. We were discussing all the things that he'd hoped to do in the arts and particularly in drama. That was his main interest for when he went to MSUO, and then everything fell apart. The story we got, that Tom alluded to, was that John Hannah wanted to keep him on campus, and so he was going to nominate Woody instead. But Tom didn't stay on campus.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: He left, and you just don't know whether he had a behavior problem, or there might have been a real reason why Hannah needed him, or maybe—this is another thing—let me try this out on you. We got the sense that maybe Hamilton wasn't progressing very fast with planning for this school.

LASZLO HETENYI: That's possible. I didn't get any feedback on that.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: The gift was announced to the public on January 1st of 1957. Within two months, they had an architect, J. Robert F. Swanson, and then they had until the fall of '59 to get this thing going, and Hamilton was supposed to be in charge of planning the curriculum. Well, you know that they didn't hold those Meadow Brook seminars until August through December of '58, and they still

didn't have anything really concrete about curriculum. They still had to send it back through an MSU committee.

LASZLO HETENYI: It was probably that planning committee.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: It was a third version of it, a new set of people, partly. We interviewed one of them [Eugene Deskins] just a couple of months ago. He had been a young faculty member in mathematics at that time and had been on that committee in the spring of '59 trying to dope out what this curriculum was going to be, and Woody then had to go and hire faculty. The first faculty were appointed in April. I mean, things got into this time crunch.

LASZLO HETENYI: Well, I remember when we were trying to put together the teacher education program and there was nothing there.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Nothing specific, right.

LASZLO HETENYI: That's how come we eventually got into "Black Saturday."

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Yes. And you were very helpful in explaining Black Saturday [in your earlier interview]. That was very revealing because you were in the thick of it.

LASZLO HETENYI: I sure was.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: So we just wondered whether maybe there was something about Tom, maybe being more reflective whereas Woody was obviously an entrepreneur, or a buccaneer, as Mary said. Do you think that might be part of it, that Hannah realized that?

LASZLO HETENYI: It is entirely possible and let's face it, in some ways, so was Hannah.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Was what? A buccaneer?

LASZLO HETENYI: Yes. I remember one thing in the years after I went back to Michigan State, there were signs all over the place: "Building so-and-so, erected without any state money, doing thus and such, self-supporting." Hannah was really playing that.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: He certainly knew that game—he did that very well. So, I guess we have several different hypotheses, but we do know that it was apparently traced to Hannah saying, "I want Tom on campus."

LASZLO HETENYI: That, I remember vividly, from the various people who were on campus at the time.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: And they didn't seem to know why, then?

LASZLO HETENYI: Well, I don't know, either. But I do know about this [keeping Hamilton on campus]. You see, in that time, there wasn't much teaching for me to do at MSUO, and at the same time, my salary wasn't exactly munificent. So I taught a course for the college of education in the extension program. I used to have to go up in the northern part of the southern peninsula, so I got some feedback from the ed faculty, too. But everything was very vague.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: This was while you were in your first year at MSUO, and you talked with education faculty and they told you vague things?

LASZLO HETENYI: Well, everybody was saying, "I heard so-and-so, I heard thus-and-such." But nobody claimed to have been there or actually witnessed anything.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: You know, if there had been an academic crisis—even a suggestion, as we got from Woody, of a faculty uprising or some organized or consistent faculty displeasure—people would have known about it, it seems likely.

LASZLO HETENYI: But, you know—now, what I'm about to say, I have not substantiated but I've heard often enough. John Hannah was supposed to have said on more than one occasion, "Well, let them bitch, but I'm paying them enough that they can't afford to leave."

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: [Speaking] about the faculty?

LASZLO HETENYI: Yes. Now whether that was true or not, I don't know. I don't know what the salaries were.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: So John Hannah might have had a rather tough stance and some of the faculty didn't like that?

LASZLO HETENYI: Oh, I'm quite sure of that. Remember, for a long time—now this is going back a little further, to when he was in the Eisenhower administration—nothing could get done on campus of any major import because there were no vice presidents, power wasn't delegated, and so everything was pushed back until he would come back for a weekend. And then, everything had to be done at once. Now, that's not hearsay.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: That's interesting because obviously, by the time MSUO started, he was quite comfortable in just saying to Woody, "You go run it, don't embarrass us." Which was, you know, one of the great ingredients for Woody's success.

LASZLO HETENYI: Oh, yes. And that, I might say, I always thought was a very positive mark for John Hannah, because the "powers that be" at Ann Arbor didn't act that way at all vis-a-vis their branch in Flint. In fact, they couldn't make a faculty appointment or anything more than instructor or some non-tenured person, without the approval of the powers that be, including in the department of the home campus.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Which certainly ties your hands. You can never become anything great if you have to function that way.

Moving to Tom Hamilton's conceptualizing for this college, which he had already done by December 29th of 1956: Knowing what you know, were the design precepts for MSUO—the liberal arts emphasis plus the no-frills, getting away from the big campus atmosphere—is that at all consistent with what you think would have been Tom's thinking?

LASZLO HETENYI: Oh, if anything, even more so in some ways. In other words, Tom's thinking would have hit the arts even harder, much harder, and drama in particular.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: So it is entirely consistent that Tom could have sat there and said, in late December of '56, by himself in an office, "What would I do if I were in charge of this?"

LASZLO HETENYI: I wouldn't be at all surprised, unless, by that time, his thinking was affected by his addiction. I'm serious. It's just that I wonder whether in the evenings when he was alone, whether he was in much of a shape to plan curricula or anything like that. But I don't know. You see, I never had an inkling that he had that problem, and I sure knew when I saw him again. And Don O'Dowd was really shaken.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Because Don had known him earlier.

LASZLO HETENYI: He had known him [at SUNY], and I think he was very much aware of the personality change. Tom was already at Hawaii [in 1967].

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Hamilton came to [speak at the MSUO] convocation in September of '59, and he already was at SUNY.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: The point that Les is making is that by the time that the honorary degree was given from MSUO to Tom Hamilton, he had already changed a lot.

LASZLO HETENYI: Well, all of us were shaken. Mary was shaken and Woody was shaken.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: You know, when you look at it, you say, "My goodness, this man was so influential. He is the man who designed MSUO." In fact, the committees at MSU simply took Tom's ideas and maybe they said them in more words, but the same thread came through. The Meadow Brook seminars basically

said, "Yes, those are good ideas." They didn't add new ideas. So all the way through, it's Tom Hamilton.

LASZLO HETENYI: I suspect that Tom, in those days, was still very much with it. And I must say, I found him absolutely charming, very put together, excellent sense of humor. I didn't notice any of that, until when I saw him when he came back.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Would he have been of a frame of mind to say, "We don't want big school football, we don't want fraternities and sororities. We want to be seriously academic?"

LASZLO HETENYI: I wouldn't be at all surprised.

On the other hand, I remember it was during the first two years I was at Oakland, I can't remember now exactly which year, that I saw and listened to Woody talking about the plans for an institution of 10,000 students.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Oh, yes. The size of the institution is a very interesting matter. We now have done some research into the early plans for the physical plant, plans done in late '58, early '59, emanating from MSU, and on the side of the map it says "Planning Guidelines." It says "Number of students: 25,000."

LASZLO HETENYI: There you are.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: And 6,000 on campus in residential units. This was before Woody even hired anybody, and this stuff was on paper.

LASZLO HETENYI: Well, as I say, it was probably in the first year, at the latest in the second year that I had that conversation with [Woody] in his office. And there was just no question, that this was going to be a large institution.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Yes. And Paul has found information where this was announced very early in public to the faculty, but somehow, some of them just didn't want to believe it, I guess.

LASZLO HETENYI: Well, you know how that is. People in general, and academics in particular, like to hear what they themselves believe. And Woody was a master at that. He's never lied to me that I know of, but he always let me walk out believing what I thought he meant, and it was what I had meant. It turned out to be not so.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Yes, but [apparently] he never said it in a way that you could have said he lied, but you got, maybe, the impression you wanted to get.

LASZLO HETENYI: Yes. Of course I was not at all averse to a serious state university concept, except minus football, varsity basketball, etcetera.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: I think you have given us tremendous help here. Is there anything else you can add about Tom Hamilton or that you didn't get a chance to say so far?

LASZLO HETENYI: No.

ALICE TOMBOULIAN: Now Paul wants to ask you if you are willing to stay with us for a little bit longer. He has a couple of areas to question you about that are not about Tom Hamilton.

LASZLO HETENYI: Okay. I'll be happy to oblige you if I can.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Two questions. The first one has to do with actually the David Riesman book. We found a number of people who had things to say about it that were good, and a number of people who had things to say about it that were not. We wondered what your perspective was on that. He does, in fact, in the preface, indicate that people at Oakland did not agree with everything he said and they didn't even agree with each other.

LASZLO HETENYI: Let me start off by saying that I am a great admirer of David Riesman. I liked his writing and I was very much taken by him personally. So I may be a prejudiced witness. I liked the book. Offhand, I remember there were

some little errors in it but I don't remember them any more, specifically. But, by and large, I thought that it was an equitably fair presentation of Oakland.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: So the people that didn't like it, how would you interpret that?

LASZLO HETENYI: I don't know. It may be simply that he was not taking the same slant that they took.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Oh, you think he took a slant?

LASZLO HETENYI: Well, I won't say it's a slant. That's maybe not the right word. I don't think it as was much of a slant as it was a sense that he was selling a particular point of view. Some people, for example, might have taken umbrage at the way he described Don O'Dowd—remember, he called him the "sergeant." Some might have said that he was not that tough, and some of them might have said that he was not that forceful. So, I don't know. I liked the book as a whole. Now it's been years since I read it.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Sure. The area that was troublesome to some of us who looked at some of his numbers was that—and he even says this—that he didn't study the student body. So he draws some conclusions about the curriculum which are not based on an analysis of the students taking the courses, they're just based on the results of the grading. And since the student body changed dramatically in about the first 4 or 5 years and consequently everything else changed along with it, he interpreted that as a changing in the behavior of the faculty, rather than in the character of the student body.

LASZLO HETENYI: I would say—and this a weasel-worded way of saying it—I would say it's both. The faculty originally took the position that this is what we have to offer, you live up to it or else. And as time passed, more maturity set in, and so on—I'm only talking about chronological maturity—and I think this attitude changed. It was not so much "We have the gospel and you'll like it." I don't think that was as pronounced after the first couple of years. Not only with the student body but with the surrounding schools, things got a lot better.

Originally, I understand—and not just from people at Oakland but from the people in the school districts—that the counselors wouldn't advise their students to go to Oakland.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Oh, it was creating quite a stir, no question. But on the other hand, the students—and we've interviewed several of them from the first class—the students in the first class were exceptionally weak in numerical skills. So it turns out that the courses where they had numerical challenges were very difficult for them.

LASZLO HETENYI: But not just in the beginning. I remember still [engineering dean] Jack Gibson—and that was quite a few years later—saying, "I will not have the math department generally, and McKay in particular, decide who can be engineers." I remember it almost verbatim. The strength, I think, of the curriculum—just [in terms of] how many faculty were doing what—was more in the humanities and social sciences. I mean, you people [in the sciences] were living in isolation, not by choice.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Oh, that's absolutely true.

LASZLO HETENYI: Now, what else do you have in mind?

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: The other question is an entirely different subject. It has to do with Hamilton and the phenomenon, or the characteristic, of basic college at MSU. The basic college principle, idea, theory, whatever it is, it did not show up in any shape, form or whimper in the Hamilton documents or the curriculum stuff that the committees put together. So tell me about what was the purpose of the MSU basic college and did it survive, and why was it liked or not liked by these dreamers for the MSUO curriculum?

LASZLO HETENYI: First of all, I don't think it was liked by the great majority of the faculty, except the people who were in the basic college. There was a definite sense that we were treated as semi-pariahs—I know, I was one of them.

Secondly, some people, for example, in biology—the reason I speak of that, is that I had a very good friend of our family, now dead, named Mac Elliot—he was

in the biological sciences or something like that in the basic college. That [basic college] faculty and the biology department in the upper school were not getting along well at all. One reason for it was, according to Mac, anyway—and I remember that very clearly—he said the upper division started students at the base, with the lowest level course as the "care and feeding of the microscope." In other words, unless you were headed towards a career or at least an upper division major in biology, they didn't want anything to do with you and they structured the curriculum accordingly. But the basic college had exactly the opposite idea. Whether they did it well or not, that's another question. But the point was, that [the upper division was] trying to teach biological science, not biology, as the introductory course in a specialized major. And this kind of dichotomy went through many departments.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: What was the philosophy behind the basic college, then?

LASZLO HETENYI: The basic college philosophy was that there were concepts, certain disciplines that every college graduate ought to have at least some acquaintance with. For example—and I'm making this one up, but it's the sort of thing—they were not teaching cell biology or anything like that, but they were talking about the whole concept of evolution in the basic college. Now, you didn't get to that until your junior or senior courses in the upper college.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: You use the term upper college. Is that the distinction?

LASZLO HETENYI: The upper college being the three- and four-hundred courses.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: And mostly taught by the departments?

LASZLO HETENYI: Oh, exclusively.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: And the faculty for the basic college was not drawn from the departments?

LASZLO HETENYI: In every basic college department, at least when I was there, there used to be at least one who also was in the upper division. One of my

officemates was one of those, David Llewellyn Jones. But, by and large, there was very little cross-fertilization, either in terms of personal relations or in terms of curricular planning, and so on.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Some people have said that the basic college was the general education. Would you characterize it that way?

LASZLO HETENYI: That was the purpose of it. The different departments were carrying it out in different ways, with different degrees of success.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Would there have been any of these so-called general education courses taught in the upper division?

LASZLO HETENYI: I can't really speak to all departments. I certainly, personally, never had any contact with upper division departments that interacted or intermingled very much with the basic college. But in order to set up a basic college department, they had to have at least one member of the upper division. Now, I don't know whether that was policy or it was just coincidence. I know we had one member from the upper division .

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Would the faculty in the basic college have had different requirements for promotion?

LASZLO HETENYI: Many people thought there should be different requirements, but so far as I know, we also had to publish or perish in the basic college.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Getting back to the [MSUO] planners, they disdained this?

LASZLO HETENYI: Oh, yes, definitely.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Why do you think they didn't like it?

LASZLO HETENYI: Of course I wasn't on the planning committee. But from what I can imagine, what they objected to was that general education ought not to be

something that you do in the first couple of years and then forget about, but that it should go throughout the curriculum.

In a way (I underline "in a way"), Black Saturday was also a manifestation of this conflict between people who came with very much upper division notions to this (at that time) totally undergraduate university, and other people who— particularly given our student body—didn't think that that made sense. I think that kind of dichotomy existed at Michigan State.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: There were several members of the planning committee [for MSUO], including a Mr. Blackman from the English [communication skills] department, who were quite concerned about the rhetoric requirement that was being put in the curriculum. So I'm trying to figure out why the English department, and Russell Nye in particular, were so incensed by some part of the curriculum planning. Do you have any recollection of what that might have been about?

LASZLO HETENYI: Russell Nye was an amazing person. I knew him very well. We weren't buddy-buddies except that we would play poker together. He was chairman of the English department, and head of the division of language and literature (whatever it was called), and he was a Pulitzer Prize winner. I think he had written about 1000 articles and maybe twenty-some books. He was a historian not just in literature, but American culture—he was one of the people who started the American studies movement.

I'll give you one incident. My office at one point was just a few doors removed from him, and there used to be a restaurant across Grand River [Avenue] where faculty frequently used to go for afternoon coffee. I was meandering down the hall and stuck my head into Russ' office and asked if he wanted to join us for a cup of coffee. He was writing something, part of an article or something, put his pen down and took off. When he came back, his assistant chairman, Wally Moffit had some question. He put his pen down again, discussed the problem, picked the pen up, continued the same sentence.

He was also an excellent teacher. He was very much interested in rhetoric.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: How would you characterize Nye's commitment [to rhetoric]?

LASZLO HETENYI: I think he was going back to a classical concept of rhetoric, but not a classical example. In other words, the idea of expression, and particularly expression for persuasion. That of course implied that you should be able to communicate.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: So it's not at all inappropriate or inconsistent with his philosophy that he would have been concerned about what was going on in the planning of the curriculum.

LASZLO HETENYI: I wouldn't be at all surprised, for a very simple reason. Russ Nye was a very influential member of the faculty, in very many contexts. I wouldn't be at all surprised that on a senate committee, or elsewhere, he really got involved. Russ Nye was not a faculty member who was being ignored by anybody. I could certainly see—now this I don't know, but I'm just basing it on our conversation—since Tom Hamilton was so interested in drama, I [might suspect] that when he got out of the picture, somebody devoted to rhetoric would feel that something had been given up. You know, frequently, drama and rhetoric go together.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: That ends our questions for today. Thank you, Les. You've been very helpful. We needed some pieces filled in.

LASZLO HETENYI: Thank you.

# Oakland University Chronicles

LASZLO J. HETENYI

Index: Transcript of Telephone Interview

May 24, 1999

Basic college model:	
Dichotomy among faculty .....	17-19, 19-20
Basic college philosophy .....	18,19
Curriculum planning committee for MSUO:	
Invitation to join original committee .....	5
Time lag before completion .....	8-9
Lack of detail for teacher education .....	10
Growth of MSUO/Oakland .....	14-15
Hamilton, Thomas:	
Professor for Hetenyi's last course .....	1-2
Interest in the arts .....	3
Dean of education at MSU .....	3
Original curriculum planning committee .....	5
Matilda Wilson College curriculum proposal .....	5, 12, 13-14
Not nominated as MSUO chancellor .....	6, 9, 11
Positions after leaving MSU .....	6-7
Problems with alcoholism .....	7-9, 13
Hannah, John:	
Administrative reorganization at MSU .....	3-4
Connection with Matilda Wilson .....	4-5
Strong management style .....	10-11, 11-12
Michigan State University:	
Governance by Board of Agriculture .....	4
Curriculum planning for MSUO .....	5, 8-9
Basic college model .....	17-20
Muntyon, Milosh .....	5

O'Dowd, Donald .....	8
Nye, Russell .....	20-21
Riesman, David:	
Honorary degree from MSUO .....	8-9
MSUO descriptions in book.....	15-16
Students at early MSUO:	
Effect of weak numerical skills .....	16-17
Varner, Durward B. (Woody):	
Nominated to be MSUO chancellor .....	6
Wilson, Matilda Dodge:	
Service on Board of Agriculture.....	4
Gift to MSU.....	5