

Oakland University Chronicles

Interview with

Melvin Chernoff

Transcript of Oral History Interview

Interview date: July 8, 1999

Interviewer: Harvey Burdick



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Melvin Cherno

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Oakland University Chronicles

MELVIN CHERNO

Date of birth: February 24, 1929

EDUCATION

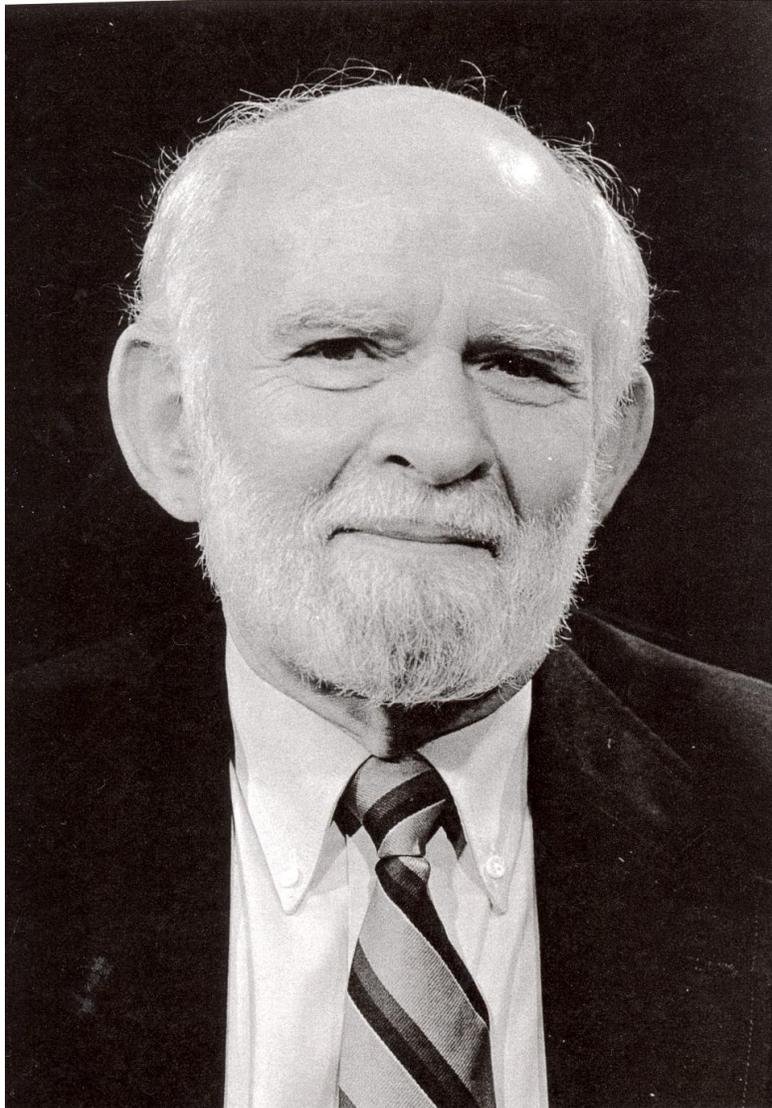
B.A.	Stanford University	1950
A.M.	University of Chicago	1952
Ph.D.	Stanford University	1955

OAKLAND UNIVERSITY

1960	Assistant Professor of History
1963	Associate Professor of History with tenure
1968	Professor of History
1967 - 1971	Faculty Chair, New College
1971 - 1974	Chair, History Department
1976 - 1980	Director, Honors College
1980	Resigned

SINCE LEAVING OAKLAND UNIVERSITY

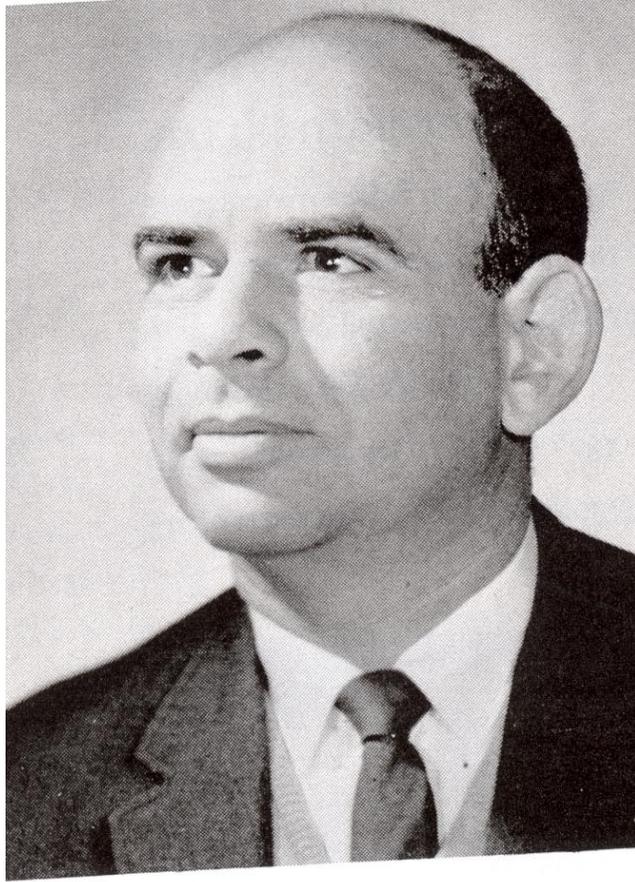
1980 - present	Professor of Humanities School of Engineering and Applied Science University of Virginia
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Photograph of Melvin Chernobyl

July 8, 1999

Photographer: Dennis Collins



Melvin Cherno
Assistant Professor of History

Photograph of Melvin Cherno

MSUO Yearbook 1963

Oakland University Chronicles
HARVEY BURDICK, Interviewer

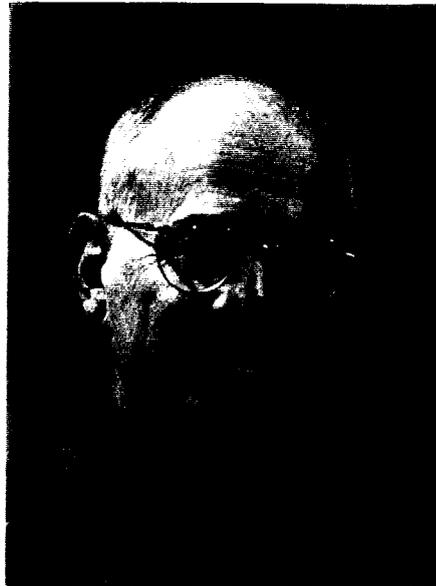
Date of birth: February 18, 1926

EDUCATION

B.A.	Syracuse University	1949
Ph.D.	University of Minnesota	1955

OAKLAND UNIVERSITY

1962	Associate Professor of Psychology
1964	Associate Professor of Psychology with Tenure
1964 - 1966	Acting Chair, Department of Psychology
1966	Professor of Psychology
1966 - 1969	Chair, Department of Psychology
1999	Professor Emeritus of Psychology



Oakland University Chronicles
Interview with MELVIN CHERNO
July 8, 1999

HARVEY BURDICK: Today's interview is one in a series being conducted for the Oakland University Chronicles Project, supported in its third 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 have been faculty, administrators, and students who pioneered a new university.

Today is July 8, 1999, and we are in Varner Hall on the campus of the university. My name is Harvey Burdick, I'm a professor of psychology, and I'll be doing the interviewing. Our guest today is Mel Chernob, presently professor of [humanities] at the University of Virginia. Mel has been kind enough to come and chat with us about his experiences when he was at Oakland University during those early years. I think it's accurate to describe Professor Chernob as one of the pivotal players during the formative years at MSUO.

It's a pleasure to have you here, Mel. Thank you for coming and reminiscing with us. I would like to start by simply going back to the time when you had yet to come here. What was going on? You got your degree, I understand, from Stanford University in 1955. Then what happened?

MELVIN CHERNO: I was teaching mostly European history at Bakersfield College, California. In the fall of 1959 I was beginning to be interested in leaving that position because it didn't offer any opportunity to teach anything [above lower-division courses].

HARVEY BURDICK: Bakersfield College was a—

MELVIN CHERNO: Community college. It offered lower-division courses, high-quality lower-division courses but, nonetheless, lower-division courses. I was seeking a more conventional university career, so I started looking around, as we say. In the process, a former advisor of mine put me onto MSUO as a likely and, in his mind, desirable thing to consider. I assume from some of my correspondence

that they must have been seeking applications, because I sent in a letter in October of '59, and started the process that led to my being hired in the spring of '60 and coming here in the summer of '60.

HARVEY BURDICK: You had been in contact with your advisor, you indicated an interest in going on to a full-blown university, he recommended to you that you look into MSUO?

MELVIN CHERNO: I think it was on the basis of his personal contact with Bob Hoopes, who was then dean of the faculty here, who had been at Stanford. I gather they were similar in age and had known each other pretty well. I have a hunch that what happened was that Bob Hoopes sent letters around to a number of people he knew, asking them if they knew of young people who might be interested. So Stuart Hughes, who was my advisor, got one of those, I think, and that's how that started. The personal recommendation by Hughes gave a big boost to my considering coming here. It wasn't exactly a guarantee or anything, but it was certainly a personal recommendation.

HARVEY BURDICK: So you sent a letter to Hoopes pointing out that you were available?

MELVIN CHERNO: I don't have a copy of that one, but there's a little more. I sent a resume at least, because what happened was that within a week I got a letter from George Matthews, who was then the "non-head of the non-history-department." There weren't any departments then, but that was the way he described himself in his correspondence. He said that Dean Hoopes had passed along my materials to him and that he was very much interested in my credentials. I think what I sent him was not only a resume but a pretty detailed syllabus of my Introduction to European History course, because he refers to that a lot in the correspondence subsequently. It appealed to him, and I think I know why it appealed to him. So that was the early stage.

The next stage was our meeting in Chicago at the American Historical Association meeting, when George [Matthews] and Peter Amann and Gerry Straka were all present. At the same time, the MLA [Modern Language Association] was meeting in Chicago, so Bob Hoopes was there. So I met all of them and had

elaborate conversations, I guess. I was also under consideration for another position and I met those people, too.

HARVEY BURDICK: I want to just pick up a bit, because I do know that your degree from Stanford was not just in history. It was a kind of combination Ph.D. in both history and humanities. Was that something you thought that maybe Matthews and Hoopes found attractive?

MELVIN CHERNO: Probably. It turns out, just reflecting now at the end of my career—because I'm going to be retiring next year—there's been a considerable continuity in my teaching assignments all the way through, along those lines. That graduate program in humanities had just been started and I was the first graduate of it. Actually, I think it had started sometime in '53. The idea was to require us to fulfill all of the Ph.D. requirements in our own discipline, but also in addition to that to fulfill the Ph.D. requirements in this cross-disciplinary program. That entailed a number of cross-disciplinary courses and additional foreign language study, and so forth. That integrative idea has pretty much lasted all the way through.

Another thing just flashed in my head as we were talking a few minutes ago about what I'm doing now. I noticed that in one of my letters to George—after he had commented on my syllabus—I told him that I had just revised it in the direction of placing more emphasis on the role of technology in the development of European history. It's kind of interesting that way back at the beginning I was already trying to tie in technology with general political, social, and cultural history. So, yes, I think George liked my syllabus. George's field basically was early modern European economic history, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century economic history. The syllabus that I worked out was based on the idea that there had been shifts in European history, in cultural clusters that connected political, economic, and later technological aspects of life. That probably appealed to him. It wasn't a cut and dry [history], there wasn't just the French Revolution one day, and Napoleon the next day, and so forth—it had a basis to it.

HARVEY BURDICK: The course you were teaching, the degree you had—let's say, they were appealing to the people of MSUO. What about MSUO was appealing to you?

You were looking for a job, so that was appealing. But you got some response from Hoopes and Matthews?

MELVIN CHERNO: Right. The answer is not going to be all that easy, but one way to focus on the question is to say that at the time I was being considered by two places. Actually, as it turned out, I got offers from both of them.

The other was what became SUNY [State University of New York] Stony Brook. At that time, we were calling it Oyster Bay, and I met with the people from there at that same AHA meeting. Then sometime at the end of February, I received an offer from them, and I hadn't heard from the guys here yet. So I got in touch with them and I got an offer from them.

So the question is, why would I pick MSUO over Oyster Bay? I cannot honestly say that I remember sitting down thinking about that. Just looking back at it, and knowing myself as of then, I think that what appealed to me was that the people here seemed more willing to break away from conventional patterns. Particularly one aspect of the early Oakland, that has become relegated to a really secondary part of the MSUO myth—but I think it really meant a lot to me—was the fact that we weren't going to have departments here.

HARVEY BURDICK: That was something that for some reason really caught you.

MELVIN CHERNO: Again, it goes back to the same thing that led me into that Stanford graduate humanities program. I won't say I was trying to avoid a narrow departmental specialization, but obviously I preferred not to be bound or limited by that.

When I was at Bakersfield College I had much more personal and intellectual contact with people outside the history department than people inside the history department. To a certain extent, that was true here, too, at both the MSUO phase and later. Obviously I liked that, and I got the impression that we weren't going to be limited by the conventional structures of departments. Instead, the whole thing would be a kind of wide-open intellectual forum, which it turned out to be, especially during the MSUO years when the total size of the place was very small. Random office assignments helped a great deal. It was possible really to have an intellectual community that was more than just a collection of specialists.

That's been a thread that's run through my whole teaching. That's certainly true where I am now, where we have people from a number of different disciplines, people from humanities and social sciences, in a department embedded within an engineering school. I think it sounds consistent. Whether I am creating consistency because it's psychologically desirable to do so—that I don't know.

HARVEY BURDICK: What stands out in your memory was, at least in the early period, that it wasn't going to be this separation into small departments.

MELVIN CHERNO: The mentality that I detected was a very maverick mentality: people who were going to be willing to be adventurous and creative, and who were likely to be impatient with the tried and true, intellectually anyhow.

HARVEY BURDICK: Did other aspects [stand out], such as no fraternities, no intercollegiate athletics, no ROTC [Reserve Officers Training Corps]? I remember in talking to Paul Tombouljian, he had grabbed onto the ROTC issue, like, "Great, they don't have ROTC!"

MELVIN CHERNO: To take that one, ROTC meant nothing to me because as a student, I had never been in a place that had ROTC. I had never been in a campus where people walked around in uniforms, as they do at UVA [University of Virginia]. Probably, had I had that kind of experience, that would have meant something to me. The other things did [mean something]: the lack of fraternities, the lack of elaborate intercollegiate athletics, that whole little cluster. But in my mind, that was a second order of consideration below the business of no departments.

[Another aspect] really impressed me, although in looking over my correspondence from before I came here, I don't think it really hit until after I got here. Probably it was after I started working on the Western institutions course, and also after I had been through the experience in the fall and early winter after I got here, of serving on the educational policy committee that hammered out a curriculum. I didn't really realize until all of that, how significant it was to have the commitment to have a general education requirement that took 50 percent of all students' curricula, regardless of their major. And that became almost an obsession with me, I think.

HARVEY BURDICK: But that came after the fact.

MELVIN CHERNO: Yes, interestingly enough. I have all the material that I was sent during that period before I was hired. It was in there but—judging from what I told George and Bob Hoopes, in my letters to them—I don't think that that was the magnet that drew me here. It was after I got here that I realized how important that was, or how impressive it was, really, because I don't think anyplace else, except maybe St. Johns, has done anything with that kind of a concept.

HARVEY BURDICK: I'm very curious. Did you think that "no departments" was going to be something that would continue, or was it just to be in the beginning period, just when they were forming?

MELVIN CHERNO: I think officially it was going to continue, and I kind of expected or hoped that it would.

Practically, the fact that George kept signing these letters with "Department of History" made it clear that for practical purposes of recruiting, and giving people a sense of discipline unity or identification, that it was necessary to talk as if there were departments. The transition to establishing departments was very simple.

But what I thought would continue even after that, and what could have continued, I think—this is one of the chips on my shoulder that is still there—was the random office assignments. I don't see any reason why we couldn't have continued to have random office assignments after departments were formed. That would have preserved most of what I thought was important. I didn't really object to having a history department because we were going to be offering history courses, and I knew that. By the spring of '61 I was heavily involved in working up syllabuses for the courses that I was going to be teaching in the fall of '61. So I don't think I really objected to having a history department. But a clustered history department with a bunch of historians on one hall, that's what I didn't like.

Or more positively, what I really did like was the kind of thing we had there in North Foundation Hall, when Dick Burke was in the first office, and Peter Amann was in the second office, and Howard Clarke was in the third office, and I was in the fourth office, and Helen Kovach was across the hall or next to me: a real mixture of people from departments, and we talked all the time, it was just endless

conversation. We had two-hour lunch periods and it was not only enjoyable, but very productive.

HARVEY BURDICK: [You had] people dropping in.

MELVIN CHERNO: Oh, yes. I never thought that that precluded being able to put together a history program, or even having an occasional meeting with the other people who taught history. But somehow, as soon as we officially had departments in '63, there were a lot of people who thought that people had to be clustered. There was one chairman, but I really don't remember who it was, who said at one point, "Over my dead body will people in my department not be all together. How am I ever going to get them together for meetings?" You know, as if telephones didn't exist—something like that. But anyhow, that's out of the past.

HARVEY BURDICK: The cross-disciplinary value that you had, that fitted also the image of MSUO at that time.

MELVIN CHERNO: I really liked that, along with the things like no fraternities and no intercollegiate athletics, no ROTC, no required physical education. You know, nowadays there's no required physical education anywhere, but at Stanford we certainly had required physical education. I remember that, it's in the documents.

HARVEY BURDICK: We haven't had a chance yet to talk about the experiences when you came. You now were confronted with your students. At Bakersfield College, were they reasonably good students at that kind of college?

MELVIN CHERNO: My students were excellent students. We used to get six to eight out of the top ten graduates of all the local high schools. Bakersfield is 100 miles from Fresno and 100 miles from Los Angeles. At that time, access to Los Angeles wasn't as easy as it is now, so there was no four-year college within 100 miles. So we used to get, in our transfer program, very large numbers of good students, most of whom transferred to the University of California at Berkeley. There was nothing wrong with the quality of those students at all. The only limitation there was just the nature of the courses that I was offered.

HARVEY BURDICK: And using that as a student background, you began your Oakland teaching in the fall of 1960. What courses were you teaching that fall?

MELVIN CHERNO: That whole year, I taught three sections of Western institutions each quarter—we were still on the quarter system then. We didn't have history courses until the fall of '61.

HARVEY BURDICK: So that first year it was an interdisciplinary course.

MELVIN CHERNO: Oh, yes, a hundred percent. That course was transported by George Matthews from Columbia where it was essentially the Columbia University freshman Introduction to Contemporary Civilization in the West course. It certainly was cross-disciplinary. There must have been six or seven of us all together teaching it those first two years.

George was the chairman of it—coordinator I think we called him—and he was really in his element there, unlike in his administrative capacity. He loved it, he knew the Columbia course backwards and forwards, and he was really personally devoted to teaching a course like that. By “a course like that,” what I mean is, the thing that was really important about the course was that—unlike the course that I'd been teaching at Bakersfield College, which was largely a lecture course with occasional discussions based on readings—this course was a discussion course with no lectures and a lot of readings, and very tough readings. As I said, George really enjoyed doing that. We had Dick Burke from philosophy, Peter Amann and Gerry Straka and Sam Shapiro and myself from history. Sam Shapiro was hired the same year I was. He was a member of the group, but I would say, as one of my Bakersfield College students once said, “half-hardly.”

HARVEY BURDICK: “Half-hardly”?

MELVIN CHERNO: I think he wasn't personally very enthusiastic about teaching it. As I recall, he didn't really participate very actively in developing the course. But the rest of us did—Dick, Peter and I really were [active], and Gerry Straka, too. The four of us, after a couple of years, by 1967, put together an alternative book of readings—a collection or set of readings, a big four-volume anthology as a matter

of fact. It was along the lines of the Columbia series but we felt it was better. These are all original writings—

HARVEY BURDICK: —something by Descartes, something by Aristotle—

MELVIN CHERNO: —going all the way back to Hammurabi and including the Indian chief [Red Jacket], and down to Veblen. Also, [Bill] Kluback was part of that group. History of Western Institutions and Social Ideas was the name of the course.

HARVEY BURDICK: Exciting. It came from Columbia; Columbia had good students, and now you're going to present this course with original readings.

MELVIN CHERNO: A hundred pages a week, a heavy dose.

HARVEY BURDICK: You yourself felt it was a heavy dose?

MELVIN CHERNO: I think we all felt it was a heavy dose.

HARVEY BURDICK: This was a serious heavy course and there were what, 20 or 30 students each professor was assigned to?

MELVIN CHERNO: Maybe more like 30 than 20, but I don't remember exactly.

HARVEY BURDICK: They are to read these writers, come in with their ideas—

MELVIN CHERNO: And talk about it.

HARVEY BURDICK: Do you remember how that worked, what was the reaction of the students, and your reaction to the students, and so on?

MELVIN CHERNO: My reaction was that I was working awfully hard to keep the thing going well, but I was personally buoyed a great deal by the group, by the frequent meetings that we had. I recognized that we had a mission, and we met so often and talked so much about it, that I got very clearly in my mind immediately

what that was. We shared a lot of ideas, too, about particular readings and how to motivate [the students]. George was very good about that kind of thing, too.

The first year there were some students who clearly weren't suited for that sort of thing, who found the readings tough and who didn't participate much. I don't think that bothered me all that much. I had—and this may have been due to hour scheduling and so forth, kinds of things that mean something to students—I had a very high return rate of students coming back to my sections in the second and third quarters. So I got the impression that I was probably doing the right thing. I always had to curb the temptation to take over myself, that is, the students are always wanting you to turn this kind of thing into a lecture course, but I remember being very conscious about not doing that, so I think I struggled with it and tried very hard.

I also had a strong interest in reading and analyzing materials, sort of along the lines of Mortimer Adler's book *How to Read a Book*, although actually, I had never read it until I got to Oakland. But I had a lot of experience myself, especially one year when I was in that cross-disciplinary program at Stanford, that humanities program. The visiting faculty member was a man named Ronald Crane, who was a faculty member from the University of Chicago, from the English department. His whole method of teaching was to pull apart texts with students. I learned to do that, and I learned to do it his way. By the way, one of his students at Chicago had been Gertrude White, and his way was her way. I had a lot of conversations with her about particular texts and the kinds of things you go for—looking for key metaphors and structural factors and things of that sort.

I don't think I ever remember bemoaning the low quality of the students, ever. I'm pretty sure that their quality got better. I remember, for example, along about '64, thinking to myself that definitely the quality of the students was strong, that some of the deadwood, some of the almost "hood" types that we had the first couple of years just weren't there anymore. So that really was my life.

Towards the end of that first year I was also engaged in what has been, all the way through my teaching career, my favorite occupation: putting together my syllabuses for the history course. [This was] mostly totally apart from what was going on at the university politically, so to speak. What I was really doing was meeting with Dick and Peter and George and so forth, about the Western institutions course.

HARVEY BURDICK: In those meetings, do you recall discussion of how the students are responding to the material, whether they are assimilating it, whether they're having confusion?

MELVIN CHERNO: Sure, we did, but I don't think we sat around "picking scabs." That is, I don't think we just sat there bemoaning, saying, "Oh my God, what a bunch of idiots we have!" We really tried to figure out ways—the whole idea was to get an ordinary kid from Hamtramck to be able to read 25 or 30 pages of John Locke intelligently. So we tried to figure out ways to do that and I think we succeeded, at least as much as anybody could reasonably expect.

HARVEY BURDICK: I just want to put that point out, that this was a very fine type of course that's usually found in the elite universities, and now is going to be presented—

MELVIN CHERNO: We said that to ourselves, so that was almost the slogan or motto: provide a very elite, high-quality education for students who would not normally be able to get it.

HARVEY BURDICK: I don't hear any bemoaning that these students simply were not up to that task.

MELVIN CHERNO: Not in the circles that I moved in, although I'd be very much surprised if there weren't some people who did some bitching and griping. I don't think we got so much really serious flak from the students because I don't think we were quite so punitive. [I heard that], during [the first quarter of] the first year there [were] courses—chemistry [and calculus and economics] courses—where a phenomenal percentage of students failed—40 percent or something like that—and I can [imagine] that those students were probably very disgruntled and probably weren't all that quiet about it. But I don't think we would have ever had anything like a 40-percent failure rate in our [Western institutions] courses, although we might have given a lot of Cs and Ds. We got the impression from the students that they thought we were doing a good thing.

HARVEY BURDICK: They worked very hard, they said, “This is what you think we should know.”

MELVIN CHERNO: Most of them really tried, you know.

HARVEY BURDICK: So they came from backgrounds where perhaps they would not normally have come across materials like this.

MELVIN CHERNO: Yes, I think for at least the first year they were practically a hundred percent first-generation college students. That changed by 1964.

You know, it seems to me, that personally and intellectually and professionally, in those first couple of years, working up that course was probably one of the most important things that happened to me.

HARVEY BURDICK: Well, you’re into a cross-disciplinary course which is part of your background. You are attracted by the adventurous attitude that you found among your colleagues about how to design courses that you were interested in. You’re developing your own syllabuses, you’re preparing for the sophomore level.

When you came in 1960, my understanding is you were put on the educational policy committee—a new assistant professor and you got elected to that committee.

MELVIN CHERNO: Yes, to my amazement. I cannot explain that. That was a committee of seven people.

HARVEY BURDICK: Tell us—that’s a fairly important committee, right?

MELVIN CHERNO: It was a very important committee, very, because that was the eye of the tornado, in a way. That is, if we were going to live up to the principle of having a general education program that embraced 50 percent of every student’s curriculum, we had to make sure that we could put together a set of curricula that did that, and that’s what that committee was supposed to do. I don’t think we started from scratch in September because I have a document here that was sent to me when I was still in California. It’s dated April and it has a first draft of a curriculum that does just exactly that, not with regard to departmental courses at

all, but it lays out a possible general education component for every possible major type: liberal arts majors, and teacher education majors, and so forth. There are about eight or ten sheets.

What happened on that committee was that we started with that and refined it and were faced with the greater reality of putting it together, because by the second year we had a lot more faculty members who were going to be modifying the idea. Particularly from the word “go” that second year, we had a school of education, and we had Les Hetenyi looking out for the concerns of the teacher education program. Probably the biggest constraint against the 50 percent [general education] for all majors came from teacher education.

HARVEY BURDICK: I want to pull you back, because I want to set the stage for the issues that you were confronting on that committee. When MSUO began, somebody or some group established the notion that regardless of the area of majoring, regardless of the school—engineering, education, whatever—that the students at MSUO will have at least 50 percent that had to fall into—

MELVIN CHERNO: Actually, they didn’t use the word general education much—they usually called it liberal education.

HARVEY BURDICK: It was one of those things that perhaps attracted to you and attracted other people.

MELVIN CHERNO: Oh, yes. And particularly that committee was very important in crystallizing my own attitudes because there we were, really on the battle ground. I think we were all sympathetic to both claims, that is, the urge to keep the 50 percent, but also the need to accommodate to the clear needs of certain programs.

HARVEY BURDICK: Mel, I want to ask—is this exceptional? Did you know of any other school anywhere that was going to make that kind of demand?

MELVIN CHERNO: No. At that time, my experience was that in most schools that had general education programs, they had just sort of grown like topsy, nobody had particularly planned them, and they weren’t very carefully thought out. The

only exceptions that I personally knew about were: Stanford itself, which had a freshman Western civilization course that had been established just before the war, I guess; the University of Chicago that had the famous Hutchins program that had been going on since the '30s; and Columbia. But, for the most part, general education programs were pretty haphazard. The idea of a planned general education program was something that didn't exist all that much. And the other [aspect]—the 50 percent [requirement]—I don't think existed anywhere then.

HARVEY BURDICK: So that really made MSUO fairly special in—

MELVIN CHERNO: Certainly in my eyes.

HARVEY BURDICK: So you had that early period of a kind of hope and vision or dream. And now, it was still early, after one year you then sit down with your colleagues to see how you can keep it and make it work.

MELVIN CHERNO: Well, as it turned out, to see to what degree you could keep it and make it work out, because there were inevitably problems. If it hadn't been for those problems, the committee could have made its report within a week, after one meeting, by just decreeing [the policy] and then compelling the [major] programs to cut back on their side. We didn't do that, and I don't remember the nature of the compromises much, but I think they had to do mostly with cutting back on the foreign language requirement from two years to one for certain majors and certain combinations of majors. We did that, and we started in September, finished our work in February. That was a very interesting exercise in trying to achieve practicality out of something visionary.

HARVEY BURDICK: So you had people from education who were concerned, perhaps engineering—

MELVIN CHERNO: I remember the sciences being concerned about the fact that they could not live up to whatever accrediting agencies they had, and [also meet] the 50 percent.

HARVEY BURDICK: So this committee was struggling to maintain the thrust of the 50 percent, with some modifications, and in the middle of that year, you then presented it to the Senate. Was everybody in the Senate at that time?

MELVIN CHERNO: Yes, all the faculty and administrators, but I think part-time faculty may not have been there.

HARVEY BURDICK: So you're talking about 40 or 50 people approximately, at that time, coming into the Senate, and you have this committee presenting.

MELVIN CHERNO: If they all attended, and attendance was very high, as I remember.

HARVEY BURDICK: So, tell us about that presentation.

MELVIN CHERNO: Oh, yes, the famous "Black Saturday." [I felt] the combination of a number of things. [There was] my own inclination—I've always been averse to divisiveness—but more than that, my own sense of professional responsibility, which was: if a faculty committee has knocked itself out for five months hammering out a delicate compromise on a very important issue, then pretty much you should accept it, unless there's some really compelling reason not to. So I just assumed that when we made our report it would be accepted. Instead of which, as a result of a movement that I was not in on and really knew very little detail about, the report was rejected by the Senate.

I remember being very, very disillusioned about that, and personally very uncomfortable about the fact that we had been rejected in favor of a plan that provided even more of the general education component, which would clearly have compelled people in some majors to spend more time at the university.

HARVEY BURDICK: To take more than four years, which was the normal period of time?

MELVIN CHERNO: That was theoretically possible and I expect, from the standpoint of the people who carried out this move, not all that undesirable. But again, not so much from the professional standpoint, but looking at it from the

standpoint of the students—most of whom were not affluent, and probably most of whom would not really understand why they had to come for five years when everybody else was coming for four years—it just seemed like a very poor idea to me.

Anyhow, that was a blow, that “Black Saturday.” It was a blow to the committee and, yes, it was a blow to me, partly because of this divisiveness business. It hadn’t occurred to me until that point that the faculty were not united, but instead were obviously very badly divided. And that troubled me. I don’t think the university ever really recovered from that either.

HARVEY BURDICK: Would it be fair to characterize that as a conflict between people who got swept up in the image of this school being dedicated to this vision of the liberally-educated student, and those who said, “Can we be reasonable and look at the case for what it’s worth, and how the student can live?” And that kind of division continued from then forth, you think?

MELVIN CHERNO: Yes, and was exacerbated. I don’t know—it’s so hard to know how much one is over-interpreting from almost 40 years of hindsight. I think what happened was that that event led the other side, the people in charge of the professional programs and people concerned about professional accreditation, to react even more strongly, and to say, “If they want to fight, we’ll give them a fight because we have to uphold our accreditation procedures.” The upshot of that was a fairly rapid deterioration of that original 50 percent vision, as a strong university component.

I remember standing in the hall in front of my office, and pretty much across from my office was the office of Norm Prady, who was the PR person for the university. We were probably having a conversation, and this must have been maybe in ’63, and I remember saying, “Well, of course everybody here believes in the university courses.” So at that point I still had the idea that, at least pro forma, everybody was behind it. But it was obvious that after that event in early ’61 there was not going to be the same crusading fervor to have everybody knock himself out in order to provide that 50 percent component.

By 1964, there was a critical moment—I don’t remember what the crisis was, but I do remember writing a letter to Peter Amann, who was then in France. By that time I was the coordinator of the Western institutions course. George served

for two years, then Dick Burke served for two years, then I served for two years. I remember writing Peter, saying, "I am presiding over the collapse of the Western institutions course." So something happened in '64 that really weakened the university course structure somehow, certainly our course. I don't know what it was. That in turn led to the development of the two inner colleges, and later, three inner colleges. What we tried to do was to preserve, at least for a segment of the student body, some of that early vision.

HARVEY BURDICK: Let us get into those inner colleges. My image is that after that '61 event—

MELVIN CHERNO: A debacle or—depending how you look at it—a victory.

HARVEY BURDICK: —that what happened for the next few years was essentially erosion here, erosion there, moving towards separate areas of concern, like "We've got to make sure the education people get out in time, and are meeting the standards," and "Engineering [students] can't be here five years."

MELVIN CHERNO: Before you proceed too much along those lines, there's something else that happened then, in '63, and that is that we officially established departments. So from that point on, we were organized in such a way that people in the departments naturally would look out for the interests of their departments first.

Everybody did that, and so there was no organized body anymore looking after the university courses. The courses were still there, and stayed there until into the '70s. My guess is, in some form they may still be here. But people's interest shifted from the university-wide concern to the narrower departmental concern, maybe in some cases because people were disillusioned with the previous effort and thought that it was easier just to have a smaller scope to worry about.

So, anyhow, that contributed to it, and all together, you're right. The general trend was that by '65, we no longer thought of ourselves as a place that was trying to pioneer this idea that all students, regardless of major, would do their general education work in a prescribed 50 percent program. We just moved on to other claims, other interests.

HARVEY BURDICK: I don't want to move too rapidly to the breakdown of the nation into dukedoms, because I think Oakland continued struggling with the freshman exploratories, senior colloquia, still holding onto those threads of "we are together."

MELVIN CHERNO: Harvey, there's just a tag end to what we were saying a minute ago. Once we had the departments, we began hiring a lot of people for those departments. Those people were not recruited to come to help shape the university courses, they were recruited to come to help shape departments. By the end of the '60s, the [percentage] of people who had come here with that [earlier] mission was much lower. The number wasn't much different, because I think we were almost all still here, despite some defections—but the percentage was much smaller.

The reason I want to emphasize that is that part of the myth that we started [hearing] towards the end [of my time here], at least from some people, was that the whole university course system had been done in by evil opponents, by people who didn't like it and wanted to get rid of it and scrapped it, and were determined or nasty administrators. And I think that was not the case.

I remember later, in the '70s, talking to people who had not been here during those early years, who simply accepted as conventional wisdom that there had once been this marvelous general education program, but that the administration decided it wasn't a good thing and had killed it off. And that was very far from accurate, I believe.

HARVEY BURDICK: To go back to that period after the beginnings, when the general education issues were now up for attack—tell us about it, because this is the beginning of some inner colleges at this time.

MELVIN CHERNO: The inner college movement existed independently—they were springing up all over the place. There was Monteith at Wayne [State University], and eventually three inner colleges at Michigan State, and Grand Valley [State College] was a collection of cluster colleges, and there was the residential college at University of Michigan. We had a consortium by the end of the '60s, after we formed our three inner colleges here, and we had an annual meeting at one or another of the campuses. So there was a trend toward the inner

colleges. The basis for that trend was that you were hoping to provide more of a small college experience within the larger university. So you would have the advantage of intimacy and yet the resources of a huge university. So the inner colleges were in the air.

I remember some conversations with Shelly [Appleton] in '64 probably, in which we talked about the original, if you want to phrase it so, experimental question: "Can there be this 50 percent general education for all majors?" The answer had obviously been "no." So we started talking about dividing [the experiment], and we came up with the [idea] that what we could do for a limited number of students was to have some programs, one of which would preserve the general-education-for-all-majors idea. That is, if you had to cut back from 50 percent, the Charter College curriculum—as I discovered in one of my documents—was a third instead of 50 percent of the student's full curriculum. What Shelly was interested in doing with that group was to put together a curriculum that provided the least common denominator number of courses that you would need, to be able to bring in students from all majors. Whereas, what I started working with, with Dick [Burke] and Norm Susskind and Jay Blair, was the other principle, the 50 percent principle—to work up a curriculum that would embrace a general-education-50-percent program even though we knew it could not take in all students.

Sometime along about then at a party at Varners', I remember Shelly and I asked Woody if we could talk to him. We sat down and asked him if he would approve of our doing that—setting up alternative general education programs along those lines. He said he thought it was a great idea, he certainly encouraged us to do it, and he brought it before the university Senate, which then gave each of the two teams permission to develop programs. Charter College [Shelly's program] got started in '65 and New College [my program] got started in '67.

Then Carl Vann's Allport College got started at some point. But, even though I heard Carl Vann many times introduce Allport College at freshman orientation, I never did understand really what the concept was. That was because—well, I don't want to go into Carl Vann's manner of presentation at orientation—but the last thing in the world he talked about was his program. We asked people to sign up for the three colleges, and I remember Shelly would get a handful and I would get a handful, and Carl would get this enormous number of applications from people who wanted to get into Allport College, even though all

they knew was that Carl was an extraordinarily active, vivacious person who was able to talk well.

So Charter College got started in '65 with no prescribed curriculum at all. That was also part of Shelly's plan. That is, Shelly's idea was that you don't need a plan, you don't need a prescription—you hire faculty members. In his view, the impact of a general education program came largely from the personality and personal knowledge of the instructors. He said, "If I can hire the right people, put together the right package of instructors, I will give students a first-rate general education, and I don't have to say a third of it needs to be this and a fourth of it needs to be that." So his concept was really a faculty-focused non-plan. It was really interesting. Whereas in the case of New College, we ended up with a much more complex plan, and it was certainly prescribed.

HARVEY BURDICK: [Charter College had] a very free, open attitude, letting the faculty come in and teach anything they wanted, and so they were teaching "themselves and their interests."

MELVIN CHERNO: Yes. Shelly's idea was that if they did that, things would balance out. I remember, at one point, somebody said, "Suppose two people want to teach the same course?" He said, "They won't do that," and nobody did. His idea was that that would take care of itself. Actually—and it's probably significant that Shelly was part of the team—we incorporated that principle in the Honors College at the end of the '70s. We set that up, too, with hiring a faculty member and letting that faculty member essentially teach whatever he wanted.

HARVEY BURDICK: Shelly brought people [into Charter College] from the university, he didn't go outside the university—he went and selected those people.

MELVIN CHERNO: More than that, he very consciously went to people he knew. He went to his friends because that way he knew what he was getting into. He asked specific people to join his team. It was a very nice concept. And although I was working with the other concept, I became inadvertently a member of his team when one of the members of it dropped out at the very last minute. Shelly, in great panic, called me and asked me if I would teach one of those courses, and I did. So I was part of Charter College for a couple of years and enjoyed it greatly. One of

the interesting things about general education is that there are, in fact, so many different ways you can conceive it.

HARVEY BURDICK: [Shelly was] turning to the faculty to teach what they thought would make sense.

MELVIN CHERNO: Not necessarily their own [professional areas]—unlike the Honors College, where we expected people to work up courses that really were part of their professional interest. Shelly's idea was you could teach anything. The course that I taught in Charter College was a course on the 16th century and I had never done anything professionally, to speak of, with regard to that. I put together a lot of readings of 16th century writers, but it wasn't a history course. It was really much more of a literature course than a history course. We read a lot of plays and epic poems and things. It was a lot of fun, and it was wonderful having autonomy like that.

HARVEY BURDICK: I wonder if you would make a few comments on the trip that Charter College sponsored. Do you recall how that began?

MELVIN CHERNO: Actually, they did it for a couple of years. After we did it, there was another one where everybody went to London, I believe.

[As a beginning] I remember that sometime during that first Charter College year, Fred Lessing and Shelly and I—and it must have been mostly Fred Lessing because I remember meetings with Fred Lessing in the Oakland Room, but I don't remember much with Shelly—we decided that we would have a study-semester-abroad program. The way we would do it would be to have three faculty members go to three European cities, and to each teach a course. We would have a group of 60 students, and we'd divide the group into three subgroups of 20—all of that we thought out very quickly and very early. We would rotate the groups so that each of us would have all three groups over the course of a semester.

What I remember mostly in the meetings with Fred was trying to figure out what the cities would be. It must have been Fred who got in touch with a travel agent, I think in Lansing. There was a couple—a husband and wife, English—who ran a travel program. Fred got in touch with them, and determined that it was in fact viable. We got enormous support from the university that allowed us to work

out the logistics, with regards to tuition and costs of various kinds. Shelly was supposed to be one of the three [faculty], but then Shelly dropped out and you and Dolores [Burdick] joined as the third spot. That was probably the single most interesting semester I've ever had. It was very successful, although a lot of hard work.

HARVEY BURDICK: You mentioned that the university at that time really put itself out and supported this program.

MELVIN CHERNO: They were able to do that [at that time]. In my memory, one of the first major financial setbacks we suffered was in 1968. I remember when Woody called everybody into the Gold Room for a terrible meeting in which he announced that Oakland had been relegated to the level of the regional universities in Michigan, and that we weren't any longer going to get the favored financial treatment that we had had up to that time. So our financial resources really suffered.

After '68 it would not have been possible, but in '65 the university was flourishing and it cost the university a lot. Because we still had the *in loco parentis* rules, there had to be a dean of students available for undergraduates, so each of us had to be appointed a kind of interim dean of students, and we were compensated for that. In order to make it possible for the students to afford it, we had to cut back the tuition costs for out-of-state students so that they would pay the same as in-state students, and that was a considerable loss of revenue for the university. The university at one point sent over Fred Obear, who was a coordinator for Charter College, to visit all three of the sites. The university spent a lot of money on that deal, and it paid off. It was a very, very successful program.

HARVEY BURDICK: Yes, I know—and it had a chancy quality to it, you didn't know how it was going to work out. People could get into trouble.

MELVIN CHERNO: That's for sure. Did you ever have to take a student to a doctor? I had this woman [student], whose name I don't remember any longer, whose boyfriend was Jim Goldberg.

HARVEY BURDICK: Oh, sure, I remember Jim.

MELVIN CHERNO: His girlfriend saw me at class one morning, and said, "You've got to get me to a doctor." She didn't tell me what it was, but I took her over to the clinic. The doctor assured me that there wasn't anything seriously wrong with her, which was good. Oh, yes, we had crises.

Remember Nancy Dinerman who ran away and joined the scientologists in London? She just left our group, midway. All of a sudden, she and Regis Kozlowsky one day were not there. After about three or four days, Regis came back, and explained that he had taken her down to Italy and for some reason they had gone from there to London, and he had deposited her at this scientology camp in London and he had come back. I remember my son and I going to the police station in Mainz trying to get some help in finding out where Regis was. Actually the students knew that Nancy Dinerman wasn't coming back, but we didn't know that Regis was going with her.

HARVEY BURDICK: It was '67, everything was breaking apart, your students were exploring and experimenting.

MELVIN CHERNO: That's interesting, too. The cultural revolution of the '60s hit while we were in Europe. When I taught my last term here, before we went over, which would have been the winter of '66, male students were still wearing slacks and women students were still wearing skirts. When I came back, when I taught again in the summer of '67, blue jeans had taken over. So the revolution took place during that one year.

HARVEY BURDICK: It was also about Vietnam. I remember spending evenings with a lot of the students, talking about what they were going to do regarding the draft, and so that was all happening at the same time.

MELVIN CHERNO: Yes, and there was a lot of hypothesis that the Vietnam war was responsible for grade inflation, that faculty members were trying to save their students from a fate worse than death: failing. It wasn't worse than death, it was death. I never really bought into that theory but it was common.

HARVEY BURDICK: When you were in Europe, you were in Mainz and Fred Lessing was at Paris, and I was in Madrid, and we were playing "musical

students.” Twenty were with you, 20 were with Fred, 20 with me and then after a certain number of weeks they got on a train and they just rotated. I recall meeting those students in fairly informal settings, I must admit in various informal dress codes, but there was a sense of really relating to the students. Was that happening right through Mainz and Paris as well?

MELVIN CHERNO: Oh, sure. We had each group over for an American-style breakfast on a Sunday, and I remember our children had a lot of contact with the students. During the afternoons, I didn’t officially see them all that much, but there was a lot of social contact. It was very pleasant, they were nice kids, most of them.

HARVEY BURDICK: Mel, I just want to ask, was this a way of carrying on a kind of culture that happened at MSUO, about relationships of faculty and students, so that it wasn’t just [about] Europe.

MELVIN CHERNO: Right. I won’t say he set the tone, but Shelly certainly participated in that attitude very strongly. Shelly was very much a proponent of getting to know the students as well as he possibly could. During the first few years there was a lot of personal contact between students and the faculty. I don’t think faculty members thought that it was a waste of time or beneath them or anything. Now, a lot of faculty members—not here necessarily, but generally—would just as soon not be bothered with personal contact with undergraduates.

HARVEY BURDICK: Was this possible because the faculty were pretty young at that time? The age difference between students and faculty was not that great; they were part of the same generation.

MELVIN CHERNO: That well may have had something to do with it. George Matthews used to say that a clever person can relate any two phenomena. It’s quite possible that there might be a way of relating that openness to contact with students, somehow, to the more open-minded attitude toward university work generally that showed up in the interdisciplinary concept and things like that. Whatever it was, the original MSUO faculty was probably, even then, above average in its willingness to have social contact with students.

HARVEY BURDICK: And there was a lot of pride in teaching undergraduates.

MELVIN CHERNO: Oh, yes. That was our business.

HARVEY BURDICK: In fact, there might have been some resistance when graduate programs were being introduced.

MELVIN CHERNO: I remember that. Myself, I wasn't too keen on the introduction of graduate students. The only time in my life I have ever made a bon mot, I was talking with Norm Susskind over the graduate student thing, and I said that I didn't want to train priests, I wanted to save souls.

There was a lot of resistance, although it was ill-advised because the early documents all indicated that eventually there would be graduate programs here, and it was just a matter of time. But I think that we wanted to slow that up as much as possible. Most of the MSUO people really thought of ourselves as undergraduate teachers, primarily.

HARVEY BURDICK: And a small school, too? Was there some resistance to size?

MELVIN CHERNO: Yes. There, too, the early documentation makes it very clear that a size anywhere from 10,000 to 25,000 students was projected, so it shouldn't have come as any surprise. I personally never resisted on that score, so I don't remember a lot about the size issue but I know that it was [a concern]. At one point Woody invited a lot of people out to a conference somewhere at a place [St. Clair Inn] way northeast of here on the [St. Clair] River and presented three options, [saying that] Oakland can go one of three ways. One of them was to stay very small as a kind of quasi small liberal arts college; one was to become a huge Michigan State; and one was somewhere in the middle, which would be considerably larger than we were then, but reining in any really enormous aspirations. So the size issue came up, but I never got terribly involved in that.

HARVEY BURDICK: I want to just pick up on that problem and close it out. You were aware that the documentation as to the future of MSUO involved growing in size, having graduate programs—

MELVIN CHERNO: —and ultimately having intercollegiate athletics, but I think the phrase was “most likely never football.”

HARVEY BURDICK: On all three of those points, there was fighting, even though the early documentation suggested that would be the future. The faculty resisted, or at least chunks of the faculty resisted, moving in each of those directions.

MELVIN CHERNO: I was negative with regard to the graduate programs and I was negative with regard to the intercollegiate athletics, even though I knew that it was part of the original mission, which I had always viewed as a kind of contractual obligation. If you had asked me during either of those discussions why I was taking the position that I did, I think I would have just said that either we’re not ready for that yet, or it may be ill-conceived and we should reconsider whether we want to do that altogether. Yes, there was a lot of fighting over those issues. They kind of replaced the 50-percent-general-education issue in the minds of a lot of people.

HARVEY BURDICK: You’ve really given a nice picture of the kinds of conflicts that were characteristic of those early days.

MELVIN CHERNO: [Regarding] conflict, let me just say one thought. I wouldn’t want to overdo that. The conflicts were there, they were very traumatic—as a matter of fact, shattering, at least to me in many respects—but at the same time we were doing other things, so that they didn’t loom as large as it sounds when you talk about “conflicts.” All the way through, we were working on the Western institutions course, which I dearly loved and I found completely exciting every time I started it. I always learned something from that enormously. Also, I was working up history courses, which also became a passion in a way. I got into advanced courses eventually. So all of life was not piddling around with the Senate meetings.

In addition to which, there was an amazing social life and personal interaction here on the part of a lot of people who were quite homogeneous in age and interests, and who did a lot of talking and partying together. It just sounds so bleak when you talk about conflicts. They were very real and they were part of our professional lives, but there was a lot going on besides conflict.

HARVEY BURDICK: There was a lot of warmth—

MELVIN CHERNO: That was true until I left here.

HARVEY BURDICK: —that was occurring among the faculty, and among the faculty and administration, in those early periods. You made the point that your friends were equally selected from both the administration and the faculty.

MELVIN CHERNO: Yes. In some respects, that turned out to be a curse rather than a blessing, particularly during the unionization struggle, when I really had to sit around listening to very close friends of mine on both sides calling each other liars—it was a very, very painful thing. I think my wife and I were lucky in that we really maintained [both groups of friends]. I remember at one point, George Matthews telling me I was the only person he knew who was “persona grata” on both sides of the unionization issue.

HARVEY BURDICK: The union issue didn’t occur until around ’70. But in that early MSUO period, from when we came in ’60, there was a sense that everybody was on the same team. They were all working for the university.

MELVIN CHERNO: It certainly seemed that way.

HARVEY BURDICK: There was a sense of gatherings, social activities, like how [Hollie] Lepley used to run those picnics for the children.

MELVIN CHERNO: And most of the big parties—I remember Mary Hetenyi used to have a big party every year, and later Jackie Haden used to have a big party every year—those almost all cut across the university. There really was, at that point, very little social distinction between faculty and administrators, or between clusters of faculty people.

HARVEY BURDICK: This is sort of an aside, but for the [40-year] reunion I might be fortunate to have a film of a faculty party. I’m trying to get it on video, an old party that Dolores and I had. We had the whole faculty come out to Lakeville and we took films.

MELVIN CHERNO: I remember something about rolling down hills. When did you live there, what year?

HARVEY BURDICK: That was '60 to '62, or '62 to '64. It was during that period.

Well, you were instrumental in developing New College and maintaining that 50 percent general education—obviously not for people in engineering, they couldn't come into your college, that was understood.

MELVIN CHERNO: We had, though, an engineering professor teaching one of our courses. One of the courses in our curriculum was a kind of introduction to engineering. It was part of the general education component.

HARVEY BURDICK: But then you ended up leaving that and developing what, the Honors College?

MELVIN CHERNO: I didn't remember this, but one of the documents that I have says that when we started New College, we made two decisions. One was that we wouldn't tinker. Collectively we must have thought that that was one of the things that had gone wrong at the beginning of MSUO, that we started tinkering. [We thought] that if we had only left the original MSUO in place for, say, one student cycle at least—a kind of gentlemen's agreement, "just don't make any changes for awhile"—that things might have turned out differently. That was one of the things that we decided when New College started, that we would not make any changes for a couple of years anyhow, and that I would step down as master (as we were calling my role) after four years, and I did.

At that point I became head of the history department for three years. Then I went to New York for a year and then when I came back in the mid '70s, [there was] a committee for an Honors program that I was the chairman of, and then we developed an Honors College curriculum. Actually, most of the credit for whatever innovation we had in that program really goes to Shelly [Appleton], who was very active on that committee. A lot of the ideas that we embodied were his. We started the Honors College, the first class came in '77 and then I left here in '80. So that was my last Oakland hurrah. That's the only thing that I did that's lasted and prospered under the hands of other people.

HARVEY BURDICK: I get the impression that a lot of people have stayed on at Oakland University—they came early and they've stayed. Obviously, people have left, but people like Dick Burke, Paul Tombouljian, Jim McKay, the early people, have stayed around.

MELVIN CHERNO: I think that a lot more of the second-year people left early than the first-year, that's my impression anyhow.

HARVEY BURDICK: [There was] the sense of commitment and they stayed. You certainly invested a lot of yourself in the university, and not just in the department of history.

MELVIN CHERNO: It was very invigorating, I guess.

HARVEY BURDICK: Then you left, and you became a professor of humanities in the school of engineering [at the University of Virginia] because Jack Gibson, who had been here as dean of engineering, recruited you.

MELVIN CHERNO: He needed a chairman in 1979.

HARVEY BURDICK: When you left, was there a tug, was there a conflict: should you or shouldn't you go, leave Oakland, go to a new place?

MELVIN CHERNO: There really wasn't as much of an emotional tug as you might expect, considering how long I had been here. I think most of what I had to weigh in my mind were more practical matters.

Our little group [at the University of Virginia]—although now we are right on with regard to where engineering education is going, namely in the direction of a far greater focus on humanities and social sciences than ever before—but when I came there, this little division that I joined was pretty embattled. We were cut off from our natural colleagues in the college of arts and sciences, and we were part of the school of engineering. I had to really consider whether fighting a lot of fights was going to be worth it at that point. I also had—looking back at it, it seems very foolish—but I had a lot of trepidation about moving to the South.

But I did not do any agonizing about leaving behind all the associations and memories and friends and all that. No, I was just as willing to be adventurous at that point as I had been in 1960 to come here from California, which I've always been told a lot of people wouldn't have done.

HARVEY BURDICK: I couldn't help but hear what you said about the movement towards more humanities for engineers, and yet this is what MSUO wanted to do for the engineers.

MELVIN CHERNO: Yes. The Meadow Brook Seminar on engineering, the summary of it that I have, that was written by Woody and Tom Hamilton, could have been read as a paper about a month ago. I went to the conference of the American Society for Engineering Educators and it could easily have been there.

If I could just go into what's happened, for a [moment]. The engineering accreditation agency has completely revolutionized their accreditation principles, and they are now going to be not so much requiring X number of hours in this and that. They've given up the old idea that one-eighth of the engineering student's curriculum must be in some form of humanities and social sciences. They've gone over instead to a list of outcomes, and they want all engineering undergraduates to have A through K, so the A through K has become very important. They are things like awareness of the social context of engineering, ability to communicate, awareness of the global responsibilities of engineering, ability to work with other people in teams: just a whole series of things that were mandated, apparently, by industry. We at UVA are going to have a very easy time with it, because our division exists and we're already doing most of those things. But most engineering schools are going to have to do what the Meadow Brook Seminars wanted MSUO to do 40 years ago.

HARVEY BURDICK: What a neat turn.

MELVIN CHERNO: Isn't that nice? The wheel comes full circle, to coin a phrase.

HARVEY BURDICK: That leads me to ask: you've been at Virginia now—

MELVIN CHERNO: 19 years. Hard to believe. Almost as long as I was here.

HARVEY BURDICK: And you were here around 20 years. Can you reflect upon—at this distance, at this remove of 19 years—the kinds of things that happened here that affected you, that made a difference in your life?

MELVIN CHERNO: It's too much of a mixed bag, really, to wrap it up in a sentence or two, but I would say some of the happiest hours I have ever spent in my life were during that period when Dick and Peter and I were working up the syllabus for the Western institutions course. We'd sit around for hours talking about these documents and I really loved doing that. On the other hand, some of the most miserable, excruciating hours I've ever spent were also here, during the unionization period.

I really grew up as an academic here, and it was a hard school to learn in. But George Matthews was really a marvelous mentor, and saw to it that my easing into the environment here was very smooth, and it just stayed that way. On the whole, looking back at it, I really wouldn't have wanted to miss it. I'm sure that if I had gone to Oyster Bay, my life would have been very different, much more conventional. I don't think I would have expanded my range of experiences nearly as much as I had to do here, in every respect.

HARVEY BURDICK: What has come up in a few of the interviews is the sense of pioneering. In fact, we called ourselves pioneers.

MELVIN CHERNO: Oh, we were, in some respects.

HARVEY BURDICK: [Including] the unionization. I want to remind you, Mel, that we were one of the first schools in the country, and whether you liked it or not, it was still a pioneering enterprise.

MELVIN CHERNO: And like everything else in the history of Oakland, led by people who were incredibly articulate and energetic and clever. I mean, it was a genuine MSUO phenomenon. I really couldn't fault it, either, because I think the pay scale here was wretched before unionization, and it was vastly improved subsequently. There was one member of the history department whose salary went up 31 percent the very first year under the contract because he had just been viciously underpaid. So that aspect of the ends of unionization didn't bother me at

all. The concern that it was going to lead to other things, and that there was going to be a kind of thought control, or think-alike demand: that disturbed me.

But mostly—I just really have to keep coming back to this—this is almost in the nature of a personality flaw on my part, because I really suffered greatly from loyalty tugs. I just had a terribly hard time when very close friends of mine were at loggerheads with each other.

HARVEY BURDICK: A major division really occurred, and that split the administration from the faculty. As you said, you had friends in both camps, so that was a problem.

MELVIN CHERNO: I guess I wouldn't mind other kinds of splits, like the stupid people from the bright people, or something like that, but not the administration versus faculty. There was the "administrator administrator" type, the person who really wasn't very academic to start with—we had a lot of those in the early years—but most of the academic administrators were really, in personal interests and personality, not very different from faculty. I mean, they were faculty members. So the distinction was a purely artificial one. Fate had put some of them in charge of programs, and fate had kept other people in their teaching positions.

That was not the basis for a split in my estimation, particularly since, on both sides, a mythology about the split began to grow up. Identity politics began to enter—there's us and them, and we of course are the good guys, and they are either the nitwits or—you know, it was just ugly.

HARVEY BURDICK: Well, in a sense you were a little administrator yourself.

MELVIN CHERNO: Yes, I was an administrator. I didn't really ever like it all that much but, yes, I have served in administration.

I thought this as soon as we established the history department and I still think it, although I have never really seen it exhibited much anywhere: I think all administrative positions ought to be rotated. It's a little bit like term limits. I think that nobody should be in an administrative position for more than three or five years, period, with no extensions, and [then they should] go back to faculty.

Once you have been a chairman or a dean or whatever, you are never the same again. Your obstreperousness is about eight percent of what it had been

previously, and I think it [would be] much healthier, especially on the dean level and the presidency level. Chairman is a different thing because in a department there are some people who enjoy it, and there are some people who are good at it. But when you get up into the higher reaches, I think there ought to be rectors of the old form—that's what the University of Virginia had until 1904—in which a faculty member is kind of a *primus inter pares* [first among equals] for two years, and that's it. Then you go back and let somebody else do it for two years. But that's visionary, too, and it's never going to happen.

HARVEY BURDICK: I have one last question. Suppose that I meet you at a conference, we're having breakfast and I understand that you were part of MSUO in the early years. What if you were to give a general impression: what was that place? Now I know it's a large school with around 14,000 students, it's a state school, looks pretty much like any other school, but I hear from others that it was something special. Mel, was it special?

MELVIN CHERNO: A beehive of intellectual activity, how's that? I would like to think that that was the essence of it.

HARVEY BURDICK: A beehive of intellectual activity, a place that took chances?

MELVIN CHERNO: Yes, certainly a place where people took chances; that's very good.

HARVEY BURDICK: Was there was a lot of freedom to do the thing that you thought made sense?

MELVIN CHERNO: Sure. You know, I think there are other ways you can characterize it. You had a bunch of young, intelligent people—all of whom had come from elite institutions, all of whom loved to talk, all of whom were very bright—getting together with the responsibility of doing something that almost none of them had had any experience in doing, that is, to create a university. Wally Collins used to say that the big line of distinction that he saw all through the '60s was between people who had had important positions at other universities and people who for whom this was the only creating job that they had had, and I think

there's probably something to it. We had a lot of very inexperienced young people into whose laps was thrown the job of creating a university with a certain image, and there was a furious effort to do that.

That answers the question in a way. How well we succeeded is something else again. When you get a lot of inexperienced people, no matter how bright and verbal they are, there are bound to be some problems.

HARVEY BURDICK: But a lot of fond memories of the failures and successes.

MELVIN CHERNO: Don't we generally tend to remember pleasant things rather than unpleasant things? Doing it in an exercise like this [interview] is really interesting, because it compels one to go back and relive ancient traumas. My predominant sentiment was that it was certainly not all enjoyable but it was all valuable.

HARVEY BURDICK: I remember when you left, the kind of warmth that was spread around, and sadness that you were leaving. So you had a very good reputation. Thank you so much for coming back and trying to remember those years.

MELVIN CHERNO: It's a pleasure, and actually I feel honored. I know the list of people who are being interviewed is very limited and I'm really happy to be included.

HARVEY BURDICK: Mel, thank you, it was good to see you.

Oakland University Chronicles

MELVIN CHERNO

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