



THE OAKLAND UNIVERSITY CHRONICLES *

Paul Tomboulian and Alice Tomboulian

The Oakland University Chronicles are a set of oral histories about the beginnings of Oakland University, which was then called Michigan State University Oakland or MSUO. The Chronicles focus mainly on the years 1957–1963, before the graduation of the first class. Starting in fall 1996 and ending in fall 1999, oral history interviews with 30 of the early faculty and staff, faculty wives, and alumni were recorded. The purpose of the Chronicles is to provide insight into those early times, and record the perspectives and personalities of some of the pioneering individuals who built the foundations of the institution. Special emphasis has been placed upon information not readily available from written records.

Circulating copies of the transcripts are available from the Kresge Library at Oakland University. Copies of the videotapes are available for viewing at the university's Instructional Technology Center, where many of the interviews were recorded. Archival copies and supporting documents are in the Kresge Library archives.

Each transcript was prepared initially by a court reporter based upon the reporter's records and/or the audiotape of the interview. The transcripts were edited by the Project Coordinator as necessary to clarify the meaning. The editing followed accepted practice for oral histories. Each interviewee has approved the edited transcript, and has granted Oakland

University the rights to the videotape and transcript of the interview, to be used only for research, scholarly studies, or outreach purposes of Oakland University.

The Samplers

In order to provide an easily-viewed glimpse of each Chronicles interviewee, we have excerpted brief segments, typically one minute in length, from the longer videotaped interviews, and joined them together in short composites that we call "Samplers." The text of Sampler 1, comprising 11 excerpts from the first year of interviews, is provided below. The video version is about 17 minutes in length.



TRANSCRIPT OF SAMPLER 1 EXCERPTS

Series 1: 1996–1997

George Karas, Director of Physical Plant

Years of OU service: 1957–1987

Interviewed by David Lowy, November 7, 1996

GEORGE KARAS: Before we actually started construction, Mr. Varner, Mr. Lautner (who was a master planner at Michigan State), his right-hand man Mr. Barron, and myself came down to look this site over. There was someone at Michigan State who had done a lot of preliminary work and in our archives and in our files we have a topo map showing the location of the first building which we called Foundation Hall—North and South Foundation Hall. That building was shown right at the deer park. Part of the educational tower extended into the deer park. And as we drove down Adams Road, Mr. Varner, Mr. Lautner and the four of us decided that no way could we build a university that close to Meadow Brook Hall.

So in a matter of five minutes we picked the building up mentally and brought it over here on the west side of the campus.



George Matthews, Charter Faculty, History
Years of OU service: 1959–1985
Interviewed by David Lowy, October 24, 1996

GEORGE MATTHEWS: So the Meadow Brook Seminars, which became rather famous on campus and elsewhere, were staffed by most eminent people from around the country. Presided over by Woody Varner they were charged with making recommendations for this new campus. Now, they recommended high-flown things, most of which actually the committees over in East Lansing had already recommended to John Hannah. The Meadow Brook Seminars became a kind of a Holy Grail for the faculty of this new institution, for the newspapers and so on.



Richard Burke, Charter Faculty, Philosophy
Years of OU service: 1959–present
Interviewed by David Lowy, December 5, 1996

DAVID LOWY: So when you came, were the courses all set up?

RICHARD BURKE: None of the courses were set up at all. The initial faculty were told to develop courses and we weren't even particularly told, I think, to read the results of the Meadow Brook Seminars and follow them. We were just told to do what we thought ought to be done in our courses and

we got together in groups, basically I think from the beginning.

I appreciated so much the chance to be in on the big decisions that were being made from the beginning, instead of just other people making them who were above me on the totem pole. You know, there really wasn't much of a totem pole. There were a couple of people with higher ranks and we had a dean but everybody was getting input into big decisions. I remember I had some input into the decision about inter-collegiate sports that we made, for example.



Gertrude White, Charter Faculty, English
Years of OU service: 1959–1981
Interviewed by Paul Tombouljian, January 15, 1997

GERTRUDE WHITE: Paul will tell you that those early years were just sort of out of this world, they really were. We were—there was a small faculty, we were all very well trained, we came from the great universities and we were determined that we were going to live up to Loren Pope's publicity, in spite of the fact that we had many students that made it very difficult to do that. But the general atmosphere was one of such enthusiasm and hope and optimism and also one of easy comradeship.

My approach to my discipline was to enjoy myself. I wanted to talk about things that I liked, and if you want a recipe for teaching, that's my recipe. I have a teaching excellence award and every time I look at it I feel like a faker, you know. I feel as if there is something I did under false pretenses because actually I wasn't trying to teach, I was just trying to say, "Look, look, isn't this beautiful, isn't this wonderful! Look, see what he is saying, what—come on—what is he saying?"



William Schwab, Charter Faculty, English
Years of OU service: 1959–1993
Interviewed by David Lowy, November 21, 1996

DAVID LOWY: When you came, did you have any impression as to the kind of students we would have?

WILLIAM SCHWAB: Not very much. As you know, there was considerable talk about this institution being the Harvard of the Midwest, and when I mentioned that to a good colleague of mine who happened to be associate dean at Michigan State, he set me straight. He said, “Bill, remember, this may be a new institution, it may be an institution with a superb faculty, but the students are going to be Michigan students, but they are not going to be students who would normally go to the University of Michigan, or Michigan State, or even to any of the regional colleges.”

So I must confess that I never had the mistaken notion of a student body that compared, let’s say, with an undergraduate student body such as Harvard or Johns Hopkins. I was under no illusion about that.



D. B. “Woody” Varner, Chancellor of the University
Years of OU service: 1959–1969
Interviewed by Paul Tombouljian, December 2, 1996

D. B. “WOODY” VARNER: The recruiting of the students was an interesting exercise. I spent an awful lot of time at this. Roy Alexander was dean of students, came out of the high school environment in Oakland County. He was out recruiting students. It was a matter of face-to-face, one-on-one kind of discussions. There was a lot of interest on the part of the students, because it was a high visibility operation. There was a

lot of interest but also some misgivings. They weren't quite sure that it would fly. They could see it and they could feel it, they could hear us talk about it. But whether that motor would crank up and get airborne was something else.

My role is undoubtedly exaggerated in this situation. I guess I could liken it more to one of the players on the team, the captain of the team. We were working together. We had some problems; we solved them. But I never assumed I had all the answers. I needed all the help I could get. There was a very constructive attitude on the part of the faculty.



Sheldon Appleton, Year 2 Faculty, Political Science

Years of OU service: 1960–present

Interviewed by Harvey Burdick, January 8, 1997

HARVEY BURDICK: What was campus life when you first came here?

SHELDON APPLETON: I think of David Riesman's phrase from his book, *Academic Values and Mass Education*, that it was "redolent of a Marine boot camp." The students didn't have any seniors and juniors there to set the pace, to tell them how to get around, things to reassure them that you could survive without killing yourself. The faculty were very young, they were the norm-setters. So it was really a very earnest environment.

I can remember having classes, but it wasn't a "ten to eleven" class—if you went a little longer, you went a little longer. People didn't start shuffling at two minutes to the hour. I can remember once I must have had a lunch appointment or a committee or something like that, and I had an eleven to twelve class, or whatever it was, and they were in a hot argument. I said, "Stay here, if you wish, I'm going to

lunch.” After lunch, whatever time it was—1:00 or so—I passed the room and the guys are still going at it. But now, if that happened, you’d have a heart attack, wouldn’t you?



*Robert Hoopes, Charter Faculty, English, Dean of Faculty
Years of OU service: 1959–1969
Interviewed by Paul Tombouliau, February 3, 1997*

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Bob, wasn’t it sometime either at the convocation or soon thereafter that you discussed a famous remark about abrasive edges?

ROBERT HOOPES: Yes, that particular locution, “abrasive edges,” achieved such wide currency, I think even beyond the borders of Michigan.

Well, the sharp angular student with fine edges began to assume a cartoon outline and he turned up in cartoons all over the student newspaper and the local rags. That got a wide currency, but it did promote the idea of individualism versus mere or sheer conformity. And to that extent I don’t regret it. It got to be a kind of a funny thing after a while because it became so overly used, but on the whole I think it was healthy.



*Helen Kovach-Tarakanov, Charter Faculty, Modern Languages
Years of OU service: 1959–1986
Interviewed by Harvey Burdick, February 12, 1997*

HELEN KOVACH: But you know, I spent lots of time—I like teaching. That’s why it was not difficult work for me, you know, because sometimes people would say, “Ah, it is so diffi-

cult, this and that.” But it was not difficult for me because I just loved teaching.

Every year when we finished class, I had— at that time I had a big basement, and we had a big, big—this party. They would come first before. By Saturday we had a party, so they will come downstairs and they will decorate the basement and we had food we prepared. I prepared lots of food and they prepared something, their mothers prepared, and I said that all their parents are invited, but somehow parents never came. I believe kids never invited them, so they didn’t know it. But they had beautiful parties, and they danced, and they chatted and they—it was so: in here, third year, and first year, and fourth year, and so on—they got together and they loved it.



James McKay, Charter Faculty, Mathematical Sciences
Years of OU service: 1959–1997
Interviewed by Harvey Burdick, March 12, 1997

JAMES MCKAY: Over the time that I’ve been here, I’ve done a variety of things in math competitions. And also one very satisfying thing was that I decided I’d like to work with some very bright high school students to let them know something about Oakland. I went in and talked to Woody one day, and I said, “I want to bring in two bright high school students from each of the good high schools around the area, based on teacher’s recommendations. But I know that we shouldn’t have to ask them to pay tuition for this, and so I need somebody to pay for the tuition.” And so Woody says, “Just a minute.” He dials the phone and talks to this person on the other end and all that person (after he listened to Woody for a little bit) said was, “Where do I send the check?” And so— and that does happen; I mean, there were those people that would be willing to do that.



*Robert Swanson, Director of Business Affairs
Years of OU service: 1959–1989
Interviewed by Harvey Burdick, January 22, 1997*

ROBERT SWANSON: He was very adventuresome and I would describe Woody as a risk taker. And he was almost the eternal optimist, and it was infectious. It permeated, I think, the attitudes of so many folks, myself included. And I recall on several occasions his comment would be, “Not to worry,” he said, “Tomorrow the bomb may drop.” And so, you know, that kind of describes both his level of optimism as well as the degree to which he felt comfortable in taking risks.

HARVEY BURDICK: And you felt comfortable in going along with his risks?

ROBERT SWANSON: Oh no, I’m not saying that. No, I’m not saying I felt his degree of comfort, but he was the boss and, you know, I would wind up with that feeling that somehow, some way, he’s going to pull it off.



OAKLAND UNIVERSITY CHRONICLES ADVISORY GROUP 1996–1997

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*The Chronicles are dedicated to George Matthews