

# Oakland University Chronicles

*Interview with*  
**Gertrude M. White**

Transcript of Oral History Interview

Interview date: January 15, 1997

Interviewer: Paul Tombouliau



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## **Oakland University Chronicles**

**GERTRUDE M. WHITE**

Date of birth: May 8, 1915

### **EDUCATION**

B.A.	Mt. Holyoke College	1936
M.A.	Columbia University	1937
Ph.D.	University of Chicago	1950

### **OAKLAND UNIVERSITY**

9-1-59	Assistant Professor of English
7-1-62	Associate Professor of English with Tenure
7-1-66	Professor of English
8-15-81	Retired Distinguished Professor Emerita of English

*Current as of January 15, 1997*



**Photograph of Gertrude M. White**

January 15, 1997

Photographer: Rick Smith

Oakland University Communications and Marketing



Gertrude White\*  
*Associate Professor of English*

**Photograph of Gertrude M. White**  
MSUO Yearbook 1963

**Oakland University Chronicles**  
**Interview with GERTRUDE WHITE**  
**January 15, 1997**

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: This is one of the interviews of the Oakland University Chronicles Project supported by the Oakland University Foundation. Today is January 15th, 1997 and we are speaking from Varner Hall on the campus of Oakland University.

The goal of the project is to collect oral histories dealing with the beginning of Oakland University. We are going to focus on the early years, the first four years, the time prior to the first graduating class.

My name is Paul Tomboulian, a professor in chemistry at Oakland University. It is my very great pleasure today to be talking with Gertrude White, Professor Emerita of English. I have known Gertrude since 1959, over 37 years ago, when we both came as members of the charter faculty at Oakland University.

Professor White retired from the University in 1981 but came back on two occasions to teach a Shakespeare course.

Gertrude, it is good to see you and welcome to the Chronicles Project.

GERTRUDE WHITE: It is always good to see you, Paul.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Gertrude, tell us, when did you first hear about MSUO?

GERTRUDE WHITE: Actually I didn't know anything about MSUO until my students at Kingswood—which is part of the Cranbrook Foundation, the girl's school—told me about it. I was teaching biblical history because I had to get back into a classroom. And when they offered me a chance to teach there, my husband said, "Go for it." So I did.

I had two students whose mothers were on the original [MSUO] foundation. So these girls, without consulting me, went to their mothers and said, "You have to get Mrs. White a chance to see Mr. Varner at Oakland." This was Kathie Kyes whom some of you know, and Tibbie Gossett whose mother was quite prominent. So somewhat to my surprise, Mr. Varner

called me up and said that he had been commanded to interview me. I went over to Oakland which at that time was nothing but—well, there was North Foundation and they were building South Foundation; the workmen were very busy building it. I had just had a spinal operation for a ruptured disk, and I could hardly walk. Woody didn't know this and he greeted me—I will never forget it, this tall, good looking congenial man—and he said to me, "You certainly must have some good friends." He was really half kidding and he was half angry, because he thought I was a historian because I was teaching biblical history—he didn't know that I was in English.

In any case, when I told him that I was in English he said, "Well, Mr. Hoopes isn't here and he is the one that does the hiring." And then he looked at me again and he thought about Mrs. Gossett and Mrs. Kyes, and he offered me a job, a nine-month contract at \$6,000 which was the only contract of that nature that was offered to a member of the charter faculty. And I grabbed it like a trout grabbing a fly.

At that point I thought I could just get up and somehow get myself back to bed but Woody insisted on showing me around, everything there was. There I was, trying not to limp, you know, for fear he would think that he had hired a cripple, and going around everything there was. By the time classes started I was better. But that's how I first heard about MSUO.

And I hate to tell you that I was not seduced by the propaganda about it being the Oxford of the Midwest or a chance to do great things, I was just so happy to get the chance to teach again at a university. I had taught at the University of Chicago and at McGill and at the University of Maryland, and I didn't feel quite at home at Kingswood. I was very happy when these girls took the initiative and got me here. I would have come no matter what they had offered me, but I don't think that was the general attitude.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: You said you hadn't been seduced, but presumably you had heard about some of these other [stories]—tell us about that.

GERTRUDE WHITE: I made it my business to know what was happening at that point, you know, and I was very enthusiastic. At that point Bob Hoopes, chairman of the department and dean of the faculty, came back from whatever trip he had been on, and he discovered that Woody had landed him with this unknown female and he was very cross. For the first

few weeks he went around complaining—mumbling and complaining about this woman who had been wished off on him.

To me he was nothing but extreme courtesy. About three months into the term he came to me and said, "I have looked up your record and why do you have this contract of nine months and so on, how come?" And I said, "Because I am a married woman living in the vicinity and because Woody was wrestled to the ground by a couple of members of the MSUO Foundation." He said, "Well, I am going to give you a three-year contract and make it retroactive to September."

That was the greeting that I had and the atmosphere that I walked into. I have never forgotten and I can never thank both Woody and Bob enough, really, for the way they treated me, in spite of the fact that the first year or so I wasn't making much money. But I was having the time of my life, because Paul will tell you that those early years were just sort of out of this world, they really 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, despite the fact that we had many students that made it very difficult to do that.

The general atmosphere was one of such enthusiasm and hope and optimism and also one of easy comradeship. One of the reasons is something that I should mention, because I think it is very important and it is no longer the case: we had a faculty lunchroom. That meant that you could meet members of different departments and get to know them, just as I got to know you and Bill Hammerle. It was a victim of the rising tide of populism, you know, the idea that there was something wrong about having a faculty lunchroom. The faculty, by God, could lunch with the students and like it. Anyway, they closed the faculty lunchroom and from then on it became impossible to meet other people in other disciplines, as had been possible.

You know, if you talk about a change in atmosphere, it wasn't just the fact that we were getting bigger, it was that we no longer were brought into easy contact with one another, don't you think? You met people if you were sitting on the same committees and, of course, you knew people in your own department, but you no longer met people in other fields the way you used to. So I think it is a great mistake to think that a division between the faculty and the students means that you think the faculty is in some way better, you know, "in the sight of God and the face of this company" and all of that—they

are not. But they are colleagues and they should have a chance to meet and to talk informally and socially and not just academically. Meeting people in the Senate and on committees is not the same as eating a tuna sandwich with them.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: What other aspects of MSUO at that time were of special appeal to you?

GERTRUDE WHITE: To me personally or in the light of the university?

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: To you—what did you like about it?

GERTRUDE WHITE: What I liked about it is that I had got back to university teaching. The first year, of course, was really quite awful because all we were teaching was freshman courses. When you have 30 people in a class and the English faculty was asked to teach four classes a week, we had a hundred and twenty students each of whom wrote one paper a week. Around about February of that first year I began to have dreams of drowning in freshman papers. So the second year when we were actually giving literature courses was like being released into another world.

I think that the weather was a terrible shock for the people who hadn't lived in the Midwest. I remember some incidents—one girl was actually killed driving her Jaguar too fast on Opdyke. She came from New York and she either didn't know how to drive or she was used to thruways, and I remember how upset everybody was over that. Academically, though, the thing was that we were just all getting organized. I think it was in February of that year that this occurred, the famous Black Saturday. Do you remember that, Paul?

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Yes, we are not clear exactly what that was. What is your impression?

GERTRUDE WHITE: My impression is that everybody was terribly upset. The faculty thought the administration was trying to run them, and the administration thought that the faculty was trying to run them, and they met like two bulls going at a gate. You know, I have always thought of that as a

kind of a prelude to the actual strike that occurred in '71. But the thing was, everyone was so upset about it. People knew one another, that was the thing. This was a quarrel among friends, and they remained friends even if they differed on technical matters. But I remember how upset everyone was.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: You have mentioned that people interacted in the lunchroom and because their offices were close to each other. How did the faculty interact with the students, what kind of situations were there?

GERTRUDE WHITE: Well, it depended on the faculty, of course. You take somebody like Tom Fitzsimmons. At that time Tom was only 31 or 32, a very young man and he had been editing some journal—what was it, the *New Republic* or something of that kind. But he was interested in poetry and in works of the imagination, and he rapidly grew to be kind of a cult figure on campus. Some people didn't take this very kindly—they felt, I suppose, that it was kind of showing off. Actually I think he did a great deal of good, but of course the funniest thing that happened—it seems funny now, but it didn't seem very funny to poor Woody then—was the Elbinger incident. Did Woody happen to mention that?

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: We have heard about that, but you tell us about it.

GERTRUDE WHITE: Well, Tom was teaching a Yeats course and he wanted to get away from the normal academic notion of writing papers and making reports. So he told his students, one of whom I knew very well, to express their sense of Yeats and his poetry in any creative way they could. Most of them did things that were quite impressive. I remember one man wrote some kind of musical composition which was supposed to sound like the Celtic twilight, and the woman that I knew painted a painting in which she introduced characters from Yeats' early Celtic poetry. It was very impressive.

He got his class together and invited an audience for various kinds of dramatization of Yeats' poetry which, you know, I think sounds really like a very good idea. But this Elbinger guy was one of the early hippies, and when it came his time to do whatever it was that he was going to do, he got up and started taking his clothes off one by one. He did this in such a calm, unhurried way—I wasn't there, I have always regretted missing that—that

nobody quite realized what was going on, I gather, until he was actually stark naked and walking around as naked as God made him, with a basket of candies which he was handing out.

Now, this is the extreme negative side of the kind of attitude Tom had in teaching. I mean, the positive sides outweighed this and were many and various, but this is the extreme idiot side. Maybe you can imagine how some of the audience felt. Actually, Tom's wife was in the audience and she told me later that she couldn't understand why people were making such a big fuss over such a little thing.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Indeed. This is about 1961, or '60.

GERTRUDE WHITE: It was later than that but not much later. Anyway, Elbinger left Oakland and went off and became, I understand, some kind of a monk in a monastery in India somewhere. Then he came back and became a businessman, certainly a 180 degree turn.

For a time it looked as though Tom would be the victim of this ploy. I really don't know and I am not prepared to say, but Tom told me that he did not see this, as he had gone to the men's room. As Mel Chernow always says, "that's all I know." But it looked pretty bad for Tom for a while, so in the English department we gathered our forces and reasoned with Woody, and just sort of tried to persuade him but it didn't amount to anything. He was wrestling in prayer.

What was the guy's name, he was an enemy of Oakland—

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Senator Huber.

GERTRUDE WHITE: That's the one. Woody was terrified of what Senator Huber would make of this and I don't blame him.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Tell us about a few other faculty that come to mind that are no longer with us, somebody that you had interactions with.

GERTRUDE WHITE: Well, of course, from my point of view there are a lot that are not with us. Did you have anyone in particular in mind?

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: I was thinking of folks that were here the first year, like Bill Hammerle, Peter Amann, Bill Kluback—folks that left but we won't be interviewing them, so we are looking for your impressions.

GERTRUDE WHITE: The Kluback episode was the one that seemed to me to be the most serious in every possible sense of the word. Here was this man who presumably had a doctorate from Columbia, who could speak several languages and who diffused about him an air—a kind of compound of the intellectual and the esthetic, you know what I mean, Paul. And I rather liked him. Bob Hoopes was very impressed with him and felt that he was one of the outstanding members of the faculty. It transpired at the end of the year in a very roundabout way, someone came across an article which Kluback had cribbed for his doctor's thesis. Therefore, Columbia deprived Kluback of his degree and left Woody and the university at large with a problem of how to handle this scandal in academia.

What impressed me first was I couldn't understand why it had been necessary for Bill Kluback to do anything of that kind, because he certainly had the capacity to get an orthodox and, you know, kosher degree without cheating, so I couldn't understand him.

And the other thing that impressed me was what a gentleman Woody was in the way in which he handled it. I don't know exactly how he did it but he somehow or other just managed it so very few people knew about this. Kluback was just kind of eased out without any kind of scandal at all. But it scandalized me and I guess it did anybody who knew about it. I heard later that Bill Kluback had been teaching in Israel, but I really don't know what his career has been from then on.

But the things I really prefer to remember are things like George Matthews, a good friend of mine, who came here at the ripe age of 38 not knowing how to drive a car, because he had been living in New York and he had never had to drive a car. So here, of course, he had to learn but nobody had ever taught him how to park, and he couldn't park. After all, there are only so many parking spaces and he used to take up three parking places with that car, and everybody was mad with him because of the way he parked. It is silly little things like that that you really think of, it is part of living.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: There was a style of teaching or interacting with students, wasn't it true, in the early days, that sort of disappeared later?

GERTRUDE WHITE: Yes, we were lucky. I made friends with Mel Chernow who was in the history department. He was at that time—they were all young, except me. He and I decided that we wanted to teach a course together and we managed—it is something that you would find very difficult to do now—but we managed to schedule two classes: one they registered for was a history class and one they registered for was a literature class. We, Mel and I, put the two classes together in a double session which we met for three hours at a time three days a week. Now this meant that he and I were teaching in effect an extra course. We didn't care, we wanted to do it. And the two of us, we gave a course that was a sort of all-around humanities course. We began with the Greeks, of course, and went on to the Middle Ages and then to 19th century America and so on. And we taught it absolutely in the round.

Nobody did any lecturing, Mel and I just talked about the text and asked questions about the text. If I felt like talking about history, I talked about history. If Mel felt like talking about poetry, he talked about poetry. We had a wonderful time and Mel made it his business to follow that class—that combined class—through to graduation. He discovered that statistically each one of them had done 'way above average, not just in the classes that we taught but in all of the classes. We take leave to think that our class had something to do with that, you know: they were our kids and we were their professors.

Well, the funny thing about this is that when we sent around the evaluation forms, most of them were very high on the class but the one thing that they said over and over and over again was how polite we were to each other. They had never seen people who behaved like this. Mel and I consulted one another because we didn't think that we were doing anything unusual. And it turned out (we had questioned them to some extent on this) we walked over to the class across campus—we walked together—and Mel opened the door, stood aside and allowed me to precede him into the classroom, and I said, "Thank you." And this was the extent of the tremendous politesse that laid them low.

The other thing that they said—and this was not the women, it was the men who apparently had a kind of an epiphany in the course of certain

documents where the subject of sex reared its head. They said, "We have never heard people able to talk about sex except to talk dirty, and the idea of a man and a woman talking to each other on this subject—we just couldn't believe it at first." It seemed to open new doors and, you know, this seemed to me pathetic. To them sex was something that you talked of in a barroom, perhaps, telling dirty jokes or something. I am not incapable of telling dirty jokes but we didn't tell them in class. But if the subject happened to come up, as it is bound to do in history and literature—how are you going to avoid it?—we talked.

Later on I did a class of a similar nature with Clark Heston. Now Clark is one of the people who is not here that I wish were back. He was an assistant professor of philosophy, and he and I taught a combined course in which he was teaching philosophy and I was teaching literature. One of our students was Kevin Appleton, Shelly's son. I always felt that the ability to work the schedule so that we could do that, and that we were not only willing but anxious to do it, in spite of the fact that it meant more work for us, is one of the things that strikes me as being different about Oakland from most places.

I have also taught combined classes with Dolores Burdick, the French professor. Dolores was highly shocked because I happened to know from a friend of mine a phrase which seems quite innocuous in English but which apparently is highly obscene in French. In English it simply means your neck, it's a way of saying, "Oh, go on; your neck, ta gueule." But when I said this in class once Dolores almost had a fit.

And I taught with one of my colleagues, Marilyn Williamson. She was a leader of the faculty strike and is—or was—the provost at Wayne [State University]. I think she has resigned from the provostship now. But Marilyn was a wonderfully influential person here. These are not the early days, these are much later on, you are probably not very interested in them.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: I am very interested in anything that you have [to say].

GERTRUDE WHITE: At U. Mass., Boston, I was a visiting professor during the year '70 to '71 when the faculty strike was brewing up, so I missed the whole thing. I came back that fall—the fall of '71—after a summer abroad in Europe and found everybody was just at each other's throats. And, you

know, truly Oakland has never been quite the same since then. Do you think so, Paul?

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: That's right. A number of things changed then.

GERTRUDE WHITE: One of the things that really changed was that up to that time the faculty and administrators could be and were friends. I had as many administrative friends as I had faculty. That changed all of that. I remember I was so horrified, and I said to Reuben Torch, "I just can't believe this." He immediately turned [away]—a friend of mine who dined at my house and all of that. The strike just destroyed the old Oakland. So that what we are talking about is the pre-strike Oakland from '59 to '69. Those were the golden years.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Tell us about some of the students that you had in the early days. Some folks have said that their abilities weren't perhaps properly matched to the curriculum; how would you describe that?

GERTRUDE WHITE: Well, it depends whom you are thinking of. If you are thinking of a man like Bob Richardson who went on to take a doctorate at Harvard and become a professor of—I think of Russian—at Boston University, his abilities were equal to anything. But I think more of somebody like Jimmy Drummond—Professor James Drummond who is on the faculty of Mott Community College and has been for a long time. He was a 17-year-old farm boy from Alma and he wandered into my office one day and [said] very timidly, "Professor White, can I talk to you for a moment?" And he majored in English. He took his M.A. with a dissertation on Thomas Hardy. He named his elder son Thomas Mason (my maiden name was Mason). He has had, I would say, a distinguished career at Mott. We had people like Richardson and Drummond and we have had some excellent, excellent students.

By and large the best students that we had were the women whose children were big enough to be left, and who came back to college to finish their degrees. They were old enough to have lived a little and bring maturity into the classroom. They really wanted the degree, they did the work, they knew that you couldn't get by on just charm. You know, [when] you talk

about names, I was always terrible at names and I can hardly think of a single name at this point, but I remember a whole crew of older women who were wonderful students.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: But they weren't all that wonderful, at least if we read or believe the early reports.

GERTRUDE WHITE: No, they certainly weren't. There were some real "dogs" in that entering class. I think I have mentioned Pat Honeycutt. Pat Honeycutt was a big genial sort of sloppy Irish fella who was in one of my composition courses. He sat in the back of the room with some like-minded people and diffused the general atmosphere of a poker game, although I don't think they were actually playing. He tried, I guess, in his own way. But at the end of the year he came to me and said, "Oh, Mrs. White, I am going back on the assembly line," he said, "and I am going to make a lot more money than you make." Good, go for it!

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Gertrude, you knew Loren Pope pretty well. Tell us what you remember from that era.

GERTRUDE WHITE: Well, Loren really had locked [onto] the notion of the absolutely first-rate small liberal arts college and he had impressed this on the publicity. He was responsible for bringing to campus many students who otherwise wouldn't have come, from various places, and also for bringing young instructors whose heads really were in the clouds, who perhaps hadn't taught in other places, and who themselves had bought this image lock, stock, and barrel. Two of them in particular I knew fairly well, who in effect really sort of came to grief at Oakland.

One of them was a man named Gherity who was a political economist, I think. He was the sort of person who has a very rigid mind and is quite unable to swing with the punches or adapt himself to changes—he couldn't. He just held the line firm and I remember he said to me once, "I will not lower my standards for anyone or anything." And the examinations that he got at the end of the year were so awful. I came across him in his office while he was correcting them, and he looked like a man who has just heard that the world is coming to an end, he was pale and he'd loosened his tie. I

couldn't believe it. Later he simply left and went somewhere else. I don't know where he went. Wherever he went, I hope that maybe he was able either to find a place which lived up to his standards or he was able to relax them. But I don't think that he could, he was that sort of person.

The other one was Peter Amann, who I think is still teaching at the Dearborn campus of U. of M. Peter felt the same way for the same reason. And when he was about to leave Oakland I said to him, "Peter, you know, your problem is just that you haven't taught anywhere else, you don't know what it is like to teach at any university these days. You have to lower your standards in some ways and make adjustments, or it is just like an onshore wind and an offshore tide." I said, "Wherever you go you are going to find the same problem." He left and I forget where he went but wherever he went, he found the same problem, and ended up by coming back to Michigan, to U. of M. at Dearborn.

In this business about lowering standards, I would hate to stand before a tribunal of people from the University of Chicago, where I took my doctorate, and talk about lowering standards, but you really have to deal with what you have got. If you are a cook and you have got chili, you can't make a soufflé. And you cannot give people what they are not equipped to take. So that I think that it is necessary and sensible to temper the wind to the shorn lamb, and give them as much as you can and as high a standard as you can, but remember that things aren't the way they were with Socrates and Plato.

I had one girl whose name was Anita. She was a black girl, quite mature, 28 or 30—something like that. She was taking a literature class with me and she read the material and she was very intelligent in class, but she couldn't write. After I read her first quiz I sent for her and she came to my office. I said, "Anita, you have never had to write anything before, have you, ever?" She said, "No." Now, if we as university people let people in to work for degrees and take courses, and we know (or should know) that these things are true, what is all of this ridiculous business about "I never lower my standards?" Here she was a senior, she was in the department of—what do they call it, human development?—in her last term. She had managed to get through all of her courses with good averages, and she couldn't write. Here I am sitting and looking at her and she says, "I read it, I understand it, I hear what you are saying, I just can't write."

Well, all right. Ask somebody at Chicago or Harvard what they would do in a case like that. I know what some of my colleagues would say, they would say, "That's just tough." What I said is, "Look, Anita, come to class, read the material, participate in the discussions. I will tell you when the next quiz comes, and you come to my office and I will give you an oral quiz," which I did. She got through the class, she took her degree and I hope that God will hold her in his heart and see to it. I just felt so sorry for her. And I felt angry, I was angry with the university that they allowed this to happen. If they are going to bring in people who are technically illiterate then they should see to it that they have [remedial] courses before they get to be last semester seniors.

A lot of these people of course were black. I remember 'way back in the early days, we didn't have any blacks. I was walking with Woody one day and he said, "How are we going to get black students on campus?" Well, then, they began to come but (and here we go into lowering standards) they lowered the admission standards for them.

All right. Here is a black man and a very attractive man, too, very tall. He is a basketball player and he is in a 300 literature course with me. I said, "Look, you can't pass this course, you really have to go back and take some work first. I am awfully sorry, but there it is." We were walking across campus and he must have been about 6' 9" and he looked down at me and he said, "Don't feel bad, Mrs. White." He said, "I know you are right, I know I can't pass this course. It ain't your fault so don't feel bad." He said, "They pushed me through high school because I can play ball, but I knew that I couldn't write."

Now, I ask you! I don't want to hear any of this nonsense about lowering standards. I couldn't pass him in the 300 course, but I could help Anita get through that literature course. I think very likely she got a pretty good job, and a job where she doesn't have to write any more than I have to use mathematics. (I had to take geometry, I had to take it twice in high school because I got a C the first time—not a college entrance grade. I took it a second time and got a C-minus and they figured that I'd better stop there because things were only going to get worse.) But she probably doesn't need to write in the way that she had to for me, to get a good job and be a very good addition to the body politic.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Tell us about your approach, your philosophy about your discipline in your classroom, and your style of looking at yourself as a teacher, as an instructor, as a professor.

GERTRUDE WHITE: I have to make an awful confession at this point and say simply that it isn't so much "teaching." I care about the students really, I love literature, and 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. 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 it beautiful, isn't this wonderful! Look, see what he is saying—come on, what is he saying? No, that's not what he is saying, dummy, that is not it, this is what he is saying." If that's teaching, that's my approach to my discipline. The rest I put into my own work. You know, I taught the courses as best I could with the students that I had, and I tried to be merciful to the people that needed it.

Meanwhile, I was writing my own articles on everybody from Chaucer to Hemingway and there I didn't have to relax standards. Quite the contrary, that is where I could put my own standards to work. I tell you, it's a dreadful confession because you will get people [saying], "Oh, isn't it wonderful that all of these young people do this and that." Oh, nuts! I mean, sure it is wonderful but the thing is, well, you probably feel the same way about chemistry. I hated chemistry, but I loved literature and I still do. It is my impression and opinion, firmer than ever in my old age, that you cannot teach anyone how to teach, that all of these education classes are just a snare and an illusion. What you have to do is grab somebody who really loves something and force them into a classroom and say, "Make these people love it."

I know the one thing that I managed to do was—this doesn't sound like much either, and it probably isn't—I managed to teach the students that there were people like me who loved Chaucer. One of the big thrills in my life was when we used to require Chaucer, not just of English majors but I would have fifty people in a Chaucer class. They would be sitting there looking like somebody who is waiting for the "iron maiden" or something. "Oh, God, what am I doing here?" you know. So I would say, "Hey, listen, I

am going to read this stuff to you." So I would read it to them and then they would read stuff like the "Miller's Tale." And to see farm boys to whom Chaucer was like—oh, you know—rolling on the floor: one them actually did when we got to one particular part of the "Miller's Tale." He could not stop laughing and he lay down and rolled on the floor. Well, I am sorry, but this is my big thrill in teaching.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Why not!

GERTRUDE WHITE: Just think, here are people who are brought into contact with the second greatest poet in literature, and they dread him and all of a sudden they realize what it is really like. Now that's a thrill.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Well, it sounds like you mostly made up your own materials and followed your own way.

GERTRUDE WHITE: Afraid so!

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Many folks have commented that there was an influence or a heritage from the documents called the Meadow Brook Seminars. Tell us your impression about that.

GERTRUDE WHITE: Well, my impression is, it was very highly prejudiced. My impression is the Meadow Brook Seminars were responsible for all of the grief and sorrow that we have had at Oakland, that people were constructing an ideal university which was "a house not built with hands, eternal in the heavens." (I am quoting St. Paul.) Anyway, they were putting this stuff together without any reference to the actual nature of the people that they would be teaching—well, the possibility of teaching them. You can't drag people in from the pool halls of Pontiac and do anything except begin at the beginning. So I think that they were very idealistic and very well educated people, and that they didn't—I am striving to find a genteel phrase for it—they didn't know this from that.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: It was very hard on that first group of students then, wasn't it?

GERTRUDE WHITE: Yes, it was. I think it was terribly hard on them and it was hard on people like Gherity and Amann, too. And it was even harder on Bill Schwab and me, who knew what we were doing.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Do you think that the ones who survived had a positive impression?

GERTRUDE WHITE: Ask Jimmy Drummond. Now, in his freshman year I told him that he needed to take a remedial course in writing. I thought he was [getting sick]—he turned about six different colors and choked and gagged. I mean, he was the top graduate of his high school. Well, Jimmy has been teaching other people to write for many the long year, and by the time I got him through the M.A. he was able to write, but they aren't all like that.

It is not just the teacher in the classroom, it is the student and you cannot teach people what they don't want to learn. Nobody could have taught me chemistry, Paul.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: As we sort of wind up, tell us about some of the changes that you saw over the years. What was the difference in some things about the way the administration or the faculty operated, or the Senate?

GERTRUDE WHITE: Well, the changes all were related to the fact that the place got bigger and bigger, and that a great wedge had been driven between the faculty and the administration with the faculty strike. Up until '69 administrators were not that distinguishable from faculty because a great many of the faculty were, in fact, administrators or vice versa. After the strike they were simply separated, that's one big change.

Another big change is just the size, which makes it almost impossible. Before 1964 I could know personally every member of the faculty. When I came back from Korea in '64 the place had already grown so big, it became impossible. So that the change is one from a small, rather personalized kind of place and experience to a much more impersonal one, and from a faculty where everybody was known, people were known to one another and most of them were friends. Now it is just that it is less personal. It is bigger, and

it is run not really by the faculty, no matter what the Senate may think, but by administrators.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: You were in the faculty Senate for 14 years.

GERTRUDE WHITE: Yes, I was.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: That says it all.

GERTRUDE WHITE: The story that I want to tell you, but you keep putting me off, is a story about Woody back in the late '60s when we had built some dorms. Along with the dorms came the difficulty with drugs because that, of course, was the beginning of the big drug problem in this country. One day I was in Woody's office for something or other—anyway, it was just he and I. [He was] sitting at his desk and I was sitting across from him and the door was shut, so we were very private. And he leaned across the desk and he said, "Gertrude, do you know what they say, they say they take drugs to enhance their sexual pleasure. At 19," he said, "they say this." He said, "Why, if it were any better I wouldn't be able to stand it!"

Woody was such a wonderful human being and still is, I am sure, although I haven't seen him for some time. But that was his comment about the drug situation. I don't know what they do about it now.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: You also belonged to a department that certainly has a reputation for being very pleasant.

GERTRUDE WHITE: Oh, yes, very congenial. Bob Hoopes put us on that track and we have stayed on it.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Tell us about that.

GERTRUDE WHITE: Just that he was so courteous, he was so considerate in the way he treated me. He hated the sight of me at first because I had been pushed off on him and he didn't want me. But he was perfectly willing [to take] what he saw. Inside of three months I was his right-hand man, as it were. It wasn't very much later that, against my protests and feeble croaks,

he insisted on making me assistant chairman. He wanted it "officialized." He was a man who treated everyone with courtesy and consideration. He was made to be the head of a department, not of anything much bigger, but that was it.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: But that reputation for courtesy has persisted—

GERTRUDE WHITE: —and civility and consideration. I mean, he was willing to adjust my schedule so that I could get home when my children came home from school, things like that. You know (talking about lowering standards), he didn't think that he was behaving in an unacademic way by doing that.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Then the final story I think you mentioned about faculty participation in a play or something?

GERTRUDE WHITE: Now, you see that is the sort of thing that could happen as it did in '69 and couldn't happen now. A bunch of us decided that we should have a faculty play and we picked the worst possible play, the worst one we could find. It was called "Under the Gas Lights," and it's a play not even the most penetrating intellect can possibly make sense of. Really nobody ever figured out exactly who did what to whom or why.

Norm Susskind, who was a professor of French, was the villain and he was really great, and I was his assistant villain, Old Judas, and had to crawl around on planking and stuff like that. It was at that time, you know, that we first realized that Norm was coming down with multiple sclerosis.

There were two things that stand out in my mind. [One was] the time that I threw Dolores [Burdick] off the bridge. Dolores was one of the heroines and she fell at least 18 inches onto a heap of cushions. But when I seized her, in order to throw her off, she panicked and said, "Gertrude, no, not yet, wait, wait," and I paid no attention to her and just hurled her off onto the cushions. The other thing that happened was that—and this was one of my own students who was helping to change the scenery back stage—and just as I was running fast along the edge of the stage chasing Dolores, he pushed a plank out and tripped me up so that I fell. I took this tremendous fall and was still young enough to pick myself up and resume my pursuit

yelling, "I will get you for sure!" And nobody in the audience, so I am told, ever knew whether I did that on purpose or whether I was actually tripped up. I know that I was black and blue for weeks afterward.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: I think you had us all fooled.

GERTRUDE WHITE: Anyway, it was wonderful fun. And I gave Bob and Jane Eberwein my prompt copy because they were so interested in what had happened here before they came. But they are carrying on the old tradition—my department is carrying on the old tradition.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Any final thoughts about your life and experiences here?

GERTRUDE WHITE: Well, I wouldn't have missed it for anything. I had a marvelous time here, really.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Good. Thank you very much, Gertrude. Good to see you.

GERTRUDE WHITE: Thanks, Paul.

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