

Oakland University Chronicles
Interview with
Durward B. "Woody" Varner

Transcript of Oral History Interview

Interview date: December 2, 1996

Interviewer: Paul Tombouliau



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Chancellor Durward B. Varner

Oakland University Chronicles

DURWARD BELMONT (WOODY) VARNER

January 1, 1917 to October 30, 1999

EDUCATION

B.S. Agricultural Economics A&M College of Texas 1940

M.A. Agricultural Economics University of Chicago 1949

Honorary degrees from several institutions

A&M COLLEGE OF TEXAS

1945 - 1946 Assistant Dean of Students

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

1945 - 1949 Assistant Professor of Agricultural Economics
for Extension Services

1952 - 1955 Professor of Agricultural Economics
for Extension Services,
Assistant Dean of Agriculture,
Director of Cooperative Extension Services

1955 Vice President for Off-Campus Education,
Director of Continuing Education

OAKLAND UNIVERSITY

January 1959 Chancellor of MSUO

February 1970 Resigned from MSUO



WOODY VARNER

A Profile

by Carol deSmet

Until the railroad came, Cottonwood, Texas was a thriving little farming community. Located in Callahan County, about 35 miles southeast of Abilene, it consisted of four stores, three churches, a bank, barbershop, post office and schoolhouse. It had its own newspaper and a well in the middle of the road that went through town.

In a farm house on Cottonwood Creek, Durward B. “Woody” Varner was born on January 1, 1917. The youngest of seven children and the son of the school superintendent, he would someday create a university in the pasture of the Meadow Brook farm in Rochester, Michigan.

Growing up in a small town as part of a community, Varner said, helped to shape his future. He remembers a comment made to him by sociologist David Riesman. “Let me make a guess with you, Varner,” Riesman said. “I’m going to guess that you grew up in a small town.” “I confess it’s true,” Varner replied, “but I didn’t think it still showed.” Riesman explained, “I can tell by the way you react to other people. People who grew up in small towns didn’t have any sense of class distinction — everybody’s on the same level.”

Except for a few years spent in other towns and another few years when they leased a farm in Cottonwood, the Varner family lived about 100 yards from the Baptist church. Recalling the summer revival meetings followed by potluck dinners, he said the tabernacle was the center of life then.

His father taught him school in a two-story schoolhouse that had a belfry, outdoor “plumbing” and a playground with a basketball court. When Varner was about 13, the schoolhouse was torn down, and the lumber was used to build a one-story school with four rooms. A gymnasium for basketball was built with the lumber left over.

The new schoolhouse is the one he remembers best. “My father taught me every subject in high school in one room,” he said. And their basketball team, although small in number, won county and district championships.

Varner remembers his father as a stern fellow with a sense of humor. He was a thorough teacher and taught three generations of Cottonwood families. Referring to his father’s teaching career, he said, “It wasn’t the most lucrative field in the world. The highest salary my father ever had was \$150 a month. During the Depression years, you only got 25 of that in cash and 125 in what they called script.” Paying with script, he said, the grocery store may only give you 50 cents on the dollar. “Those were the character-building years,” he said, “the early 30s.”

One of the lessons he learned from his father is one that he now passes on to his grandchildren. “Be your very best person and (do) whatever it takes to be your best. That’s all I ask of you,” he says. “You don’t have to be like someone else. Just be the very best person you can be, and that’s good enough for me.”

Varner was a three-time valedictorian: at the Cottonwood school, at the school in Cross Plains where he had to pass exams to enter college, and when he graduated from Texas A&M. In college, he said he was involved “in virtually everything,” including being class president and captain of the basketball team. “I’ve always been involved. I like to think I’m making a useful contribution.”

As a vice president at Michigan State University under John Hannah in the late 1950s, Varner had an opportunity to make what has turned out to be an extraordinary contribution.

Mr. and Mrs. Alfred G. Wilson, who owned the 1400-acre Meadow Brook Estate in Rochester, Michigan, had been approached by the chairman of the Oakland County Planning Commission about donating their estate for a campus. As Varner tells the story, the Wilsons were “somewhat interested. “ And, since Mrs. Wilson had served on the MSU Board of Regents at an earlier time and “had some affection for MSU in general and for John Hannah in particular,” she asked Hannah if MSU would be interested in having an affiliation with a new campus. Hannah was definitely interested. At that time, however, he was leaving the country for six weeks and designated Varner to be in charge of following up in his absence.

As history has recorded, Varner continued discussions with the Wilsons and on January 3, 1957, the announcement was made that the Wilsons had donated their estate and \$2 million to MSU to build Michigan State University Oakland. It was not a branch of MSU; it was a sister school, responsible for establishing its own curriculum, hiring its own faculty.

To understand the vision of this new university, it is important to understand the times in which it was created. In 1957, the U.S.S.R. launched the first earth satellite. “Sputnik One sent a chill across the nation,” Varner said. “The nation’s leaders were saying: How could Russia put something in space, and we haven’t been able to do that? What has happened to our educational system? How has it let us down?” He explained that it was in that environment — that mind-set of the nation — that Oakland was created.

Varner called together leading educators from around the country. They met for two weeks in what is known as the Meadow Brook Seminars. They were asked: What would you do if you were starting a college today? What kind of program should it have?

Dr. Richard Burke, philosophy department chair and a member of the charter faculty, said the vision of the university came from those seminars.

“We were going to give a serious, intellectual-based education,” said Dr. Burke, “such as you got in the top private schools — at a public school.” He said the idea led to MSUO being referred to as the Harvard of the Midwest. “I don’t know where that phrase came from,” he said. “The idea was that we would give just as good an education as Harvard, but to average students.”

Varner describes those early years of building a university as “a pioneering adventure.” He helped select the initial building site in what was then a pasture, turned the first shovel of soil for the groundbreaking of North and South Foundation Halls, and personally hired each member of the charter faculty — a group he refers to as “a hardy band of pioneers.”

Among those who were here in the Varner years, there is no doubt that it was a special time in the history of the university.

Dr. Burke said those were the best ten years of Oakland University and the best ten years of his life, too. “That’s the golden age as far as I’m concerned, and Woody was the leader during the golden age.”

Varner himself admits that it was “probably the best slice of life” and that creating Oakland University was “a golden opportunity.”

According to Dr. Paul Tomboulion, chemistry department chair, member of the original faculty and director of the OU Chronicles project, “It’s not a story that’s going to be repeated. There just aren’t those situations out there any more. It was a very unusual activity in time.”

Varner resigned from Oakland University after ten years and accepted a position as president at the University of Nebraska. In a front-page story in The Pontiac Press on December 15, 1969, he is quoted as saying, “It may well be that our greatest contribution has been made, and that now is the time for new leadership to provide the energy and creativity for the next decade.”

It was in a conversation with Mr. Varner in early December 1996 that he recalled his early days growing up in Texas and the story of Oakland — a story that he can retell many times over, with accuracy and consistency, never missing a beat.

He considers the founding of Oakland University foremost among his accomplishments. What was it about Oakland? “It was starting from scratch,” he replied. From turning the first shovel of earth to seeing it healthy and growing ten years later — for Woody Varner, it was the fulfillment of a dream. “I guess a characteristic of mine may be: I like to grow things. I’m a gardener,” said Varner. “I like to grow things, and the university was a great thing to grow.”

After retiring as president of the University of Nebraska, he served as chairman of the university foundation and has been very active in fundraising and in community and church activities. He is still a gardener. In his Nebraska garden, he now grows mostly flowers.

Carol de Smet is a member of the advisory group and works as a project research assistant for the Oakland University Chronicles oral history project.

This story was originally written for a journalism class assignment at OU and is based on her telephone interview with Mr. Varner during the first week of December 1996.

At the request of Paul and Alice Tomboulion and with the consent of Woody Varner, the story was donated to the OU Chronicles.

Oakland University Chronicles
Interview with DURWARD B. "WOODY" VARNER
December 2, 1996

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: This is one of the interviews for the Oakland University Chronicles Project supported by the Oakland University Foundation. The goal of the project is to collect oral histories dealing with the beginnings of Oakland University. We're going to focus on the first few years, the time prior to the graduation of the first class in 1963.

My name is Paul Tomboulia, Professor and Chair of Chemistry at Oakland University. I was a member of the first faculty who started teaching at the opening of Oakland University in September of 1959. It's my great pleasure today to be interviewing Woody Varner, the first chancellor of MSUO and the person responsible for much of the original organization of the university, especially prior to 1959. Woody Varner continued as chancellor until 1969, actually the last day of 1969. I've known Woody for 37 years.

Today is December 2, 1996, and we are at the Nebraska Educational Telecommunications Center in Lincoln, Nebraska where Woody and his wife, Paula, now live. Good morning, Woody.

WOODY VARNER: Good morning to you, and it's nice to have you and Alice [Tomboulia] with us. I can't think of anyone that's more appropriate to talk with about the beginning of Oakland University than you and Alice, because you were a part of that hardy band of pioneers back in 1959 that really launched the enterprise. So it's good to see you again.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Woody, I'd like to start by asking you to describe the factors which led to the founding of MSUO in the late 1950s. What were the political and educational factors that were going on in Michigan at that time?

WOODY VARNER: When we talk about the beginning of Oakland University, I almost have to set the stage and the environment in which this all happened. There were bits and pieces that I'm sure have never surfaced in the discussions—because in some ways they were confidential or semi-

confidential, at least not in the public view.

There was a rivalry between Michigan State University and the University of Michigan that was beginning to warm up some. The roots, I suspect, perhaps go back to the relationship between President Hatcher at the University of Michigan and President Hannah at Michigan State University, two very distinguished men in their own rights but two very different men. Dr. Hatcher was a very scholarly person who, I believe, came out of the field of English literature. John Hannah was a man of agriculture, a man of the soil. He was a farmer at heart. He had various agricultural relationships. He himself was an agricultural extension specialist in poultry science. He grew from that to the presidency of Michigan State University. So here was a man with a poultry science background and one with an English literature background, each heading a major institution. John Hannah was a personable, friendly, open person who related particularly well to people. Dr. Hatcher, on the other hand, was more dignified, a scholarly man. That they just didn't hit it off real well was a statement of fact.

This is exacerbated by the fact that John Hannah was a pretty ambitious administrator, without any public fanfare, and he set an agenda to make Michigan State a university: when he came into Michigan State College, he would make it a true university. He set out doing that in a variety of ways. For one thing he made the decision we had to go after quality students, upgrade the academic level of Michigan State. He assigned one of his more vigorous deans to the role of director of admissions on an interim basis, where the specific assignment was to make Michigan State attractive to the top students of the state. The facts are it had not been so, prior to that time. But a vigorous, all-out campaign was launched, a very creative one to attract bright, young students of Michigan to Michigan State. This, of course, caused some concern at Ann Arbor. There was a counteraction on their part. So the stage was set for some less than warm relationships.

This was further exacerbated by the fact that John Hannah decided Michigan State should be part of the Big Ten athletic conference, which had been major state universities. The University of Michigan didn't cotton up much to that idea. They felt this was something that was adequately covered by the University of Michigan. Hannah persisted and put one of his very persuasive deputies on the mission and they pulled it off, much to the

chagrin of the University of Michigan. So there was another blow struck on that friendship.

I think it's reasonable to say the next phase of this evolving relationship between the two campuses was the fact that Michigan State decided to change its name from the [former] Michigan Agriculture College to Michigan State University. This was opposed by the University of Michigan. They felt that there was one University of Michigan, it was there, it was in place, had established its tradition, and there was no need for a second major university. John Hannah was persistent. He took the battle to the legislature. It became kind of a statewide issue—unfortunately, in my judgment. I was given a mission by John Hannah to represent Michigan State's interests in legislative relations. This broke out into full-scale warfare. I remember distinctly going before the Appropriations Committee in the State Senate when the whole University of Michigan Board of Regents were present. I remember when Harlan Hatcher came by me, he said, "And how is the vice president for name change?" Which was not exactly a warm greeting. He marched on into the committee room, had the committee hearing. It became a major incident of the legislative battle of the year, and finally we won it with a sizable margin. We became Michigan State University. And the University of Michigan was quite perturbed by this development.

The next kind of phase—I'm giving labels to the periods and it might not be justified—an added dimension to this rivalry had to do with the establishment of branch campuses. The University of Michigan had a branch at Flint. As I recall it was the junior and senior years primarily. Rumor was circulating that there was a strategic commitment on the part of University of Michigan administration that they were going to surround Michigan State with branch campuses to sort of choke it out. This may or may not have been factual, but at least it was the rumor that was circulating, and it caught the attention of John Hannah and his staff. So Michigan State was prepared to try to face that issue. There was some talk about Michigan State creating a branch campus in Grand Rapids, which was a population center—a good junior college there. John Hannah's earlier home had been in that area. So there was a good deal of growing interest in doing something in Grand Rapids.

This whole series of discussions took an interesting turn when on a Saturday at a Wisconsin football game at East Lansing, there was a pre-game

luncheon held for state senators and some special friends including Mrs. Alfred Wilson. I didn't know Mrs. Wilson, I had never met her. I had heard about her, but never heard about Meadow Brook Hall, Meadow Brook Estate. I knew there was a Mrs. Wilson somewhere in the background. She had served on the Board of Trustees on an interim basis back several years earlier. She knew John Hannah very well and admired him very greatly. She came to that luncheon and asked for a private session with John Hannah. They met for a few minutes. He signaled for me to come in and join them, which I did.

The story she was telling to Mr. Hannah was that she had been approached by the chairman of the Oakland County Planning Commission, Mr. J. Robert F. Swanson, to give her estate—Meadow Brook Estate, which was some 1,400 acres—and Meadow Brook Hall to the cause of a new university established in Oakland County. This had some appeal to her. First of all, Oakland County is a very populous county—some million people in the county as a whole. There was no university activity there. She was intrigued by the notion. She wasn't quite sure what all was involved in this, but she said, "If we're going to do something like this, I would like for you to be a part of it." She said this to Mr. Hannah. He listened with great interest and because of this background of the rumored competitive campus-building, this began to fit right into the thinking of the day. He said to her, "I'm leaving tomorrow for a several-week trip to the Far East for the State Department, but while I'm gone, I want Woody Varner to be my representative. If there's any issue that arises between now and the time I get back, feel free to talk to Woody about it and work out whatever it is to be worked out." She said, fine, that was good with her.

He left the next day for the Far East, and things were calm for a while, but not long after that, the telephone in my office rang and there was one of our eager young alumni who was working for Ford Motor Company. He called and said, "I'm at the pay phone and I can't talk long, but I've just seen come across my desk a press release that's due to go out about a week from now, announcing that the Ford Motor Company is giving the Henry Ford Estate to the University of Michigan for the purpose of creating a branch campus in Dearborn." That was a shocking bit of news, and seemed somehow to call for action, but there was a question what the action was to be.

So we assembled our little cabinet—the Vice President for Finance, the Secretary of the Board, the Vice President for Academic Affairs—and we decided the best possible thing for us to do was to go confront Mrs. Wilson directly with this new information.

I went over on a Saturday morning and met with Mrs. Wilson and Mr. Wilson. I shared with them as honestly as I could what I had picked up. I said, "I thought you ought to know this, given the discussion we had several days ago." She said, "Well, this is very interesting, I'm interested in hearing it." Somehow there evolved in this discussion the fact that she didn't have a warm feeling toward Henry Ford. She felt that Henry Ford had been at a different social level or perceived himself to be at a different social level: that John Dodge—her former husband, now deceased—that he was a roughneck and Henry Ford was several cuts above John Dodge in the social ladder. This always kind of stuck in her craw. She always had this kind of resentment toward Henry Ford for her perceived social snub. She said, "I'm interested, let's talk about it."

She took me down to Meadow Brook Hall, which was my first trip there. It was a sight for a young west Texas boy's eyes, to see that place. I learned it cost over three million dollars to build back in the early '20s, pre-income tax days. I don't know what the hell it would amount to now but a very sizable amount of money. When Mr. Dodge died—she had been John Dodge's secretary for a long time—after his death, she met Mr. Wilson who was a son of a minister in Wisconsin. She met Mr. Wilson, and they married. They decided to build a new home out on the estate. They retained an architect and took him with them on the honeymoon, which struck me as kind of an awkward way to do business, but that was her idea. She wanted a honeymoon and she wanted the architect to study particularly the English castles—I guess, some ideas from that, that she could incorporate into her home.

They came back and built this place. You have to see it to believe it. It's adequate, I think is reasonable to say, adequate housing for a young married couple. They lived in Meadow Brook Hall, equipped it with Gainesboroughs, Romneys, Stuarts—beautiful paintings. The paintings have been valued at millions and millions of dollars themselves. They came back and built it, finished it in about 1929 as I recall. They lived there for several

years until the war clouds began to gather. They decided as a patriotic move, they would cut down the utility bills at Meadow Brook Hall, and built a new home called Sunset Terrace, a much more modest home but still very adequate. I think that it cost \$300,000, to give you some sense of the proportion. She and Mr. Wilson lived in Sunset Terrace.

And it was on this Saturday morning that I went over to see her that we met in Sunset Terrace, after touring Meadow Brook Hall. We sat in Sunset Terrace. I could get the aroma of chili and beans she was cooking in the background. It occurred to me that rich folks ate about like poor folks do, because that's what we all probably would have been eating if I had been at home. We talked openly about the telephone call I received, about the likelihood that the University of Michigan was going to be announcing a branch. If we then announced her gift following that, it would look like kind of a "me, too-ism." I suggested that if there was any way to do it, it would be smart to make our announcement first, if she was indeed in the mood to give her estate to Michigan State University. After we talked for a while, she said, "Well, I want to give it to Michigan State. I want it to be under Michigan State's control. How we do it, I don't know, but that's what I want to do. I made that decision."

She said, "Before we make an announcement, I owe it to Mr. [J. Robert F.] Swanson"—who was chairman at Oakland County Planning Commission and who had introduced the idea to her—"I owe it to Mr. Swanson to let him know what we're talking about." She said, "Let me call him." She went to the telephone and called Mr. Swanson's home. Mrs. Swanson—who is the daughter of Mr. [Eliel] Saarinen, a great famous architect—Mrs. Swanson answered the phone and said he wasn't in town, he was out hunting, but could she convey a message to him. Mrs. Wilson told her roughly what we had decided. Mrs. Swanson assured us she'd get Mr. Swanson back with minimal delay. He must have broken all speed records in Michigan because it seemed to me within an hour he was there. He had come from Alpena which was a good long two-hour drive. But he came in his hunting clothes, full of eagerness for discussion.

Mrs. Wilson told him what had been decided. He was quite distraught, obviously, by that turn of events, because he had envisioned something quite different. He had proposed to her that he thought it would be better to make

it independent and not related to any existing institution. I must confess that I personally thought Mr. Swanson's agenda was to move it to the University of Michigan if he couldn't have it as independent. She held her ground, said, "No, this is the way I want it to be." He left distraught, I must say, by the whole turn of events. We then terminated our discussion. I went back home, much too late for a party my wife had assembled at our home. She was forgiving when she learned the results of the mission. I brought her a large bouquet of chrysanthemums which Mrs. Wilson had given to me out of her greenhouse—a double armful of beautiful chrysanthemums, each must have been a foot across.

Well, here we're ready to take a swing into action on a different front. I had informed our staff what had happened. Of course, they were pleased with this. Mr. Hannah was due back, as I recall, the next day from the Far East, or soon thereafter. He did come back. I brought him up to date on what had happened. He was quite pleased with this development, and immediately made an appointment that he and I would go over and see Mrs. Wilson and formalize the agreement. You see, it's "Mr. and Mrs. Wilson," but the facts are it was Mrs. Wilson. She made the decisions, it was clear. He was her escort and I'm sure a fine Christian gentleman, but he wasn't the decision-maker around there.

Mr. Hannah and I drove to Rochester to visit with the Wilsons. On the way out of East Lansing, he said, "You know, we really need to put a building up, some evidence that we're in business so people know it's real." Just then we passed by the new East Lansing High School and he said, "You know, a building like that would be ideal just to get it started." He said, "That building cost about two million dollars." So he said, "Let's suggest a two million dollar gift from Mrs. Wilson." My eyes boggled a little at that notion of so casually asking for two million dollars. He had my ready concurrence on that mission since he was going to do it.

We went over to Meadow Brook Hall, and met in Mr. Wilson's study in the Hall: Mr. Wilson, Mrs. Wilson and Mr. Hannah and I. He told her how pleased he was with her decision, that Michigan State would give it all the support they could. He said, "Incidentally, we could get started much sooner if we had a building on the property. It's a beautiful property, and we can talk about what's going to happen in the future, but it would be more

meaningful to the people in the area if they could see something physical established there." She said, "What would that involve?" "Well," he said, "I think if we had two million dollars, we could build that first building." She said, "I think we could take care of that." Mr. Wilson spoke up and said, "Dearie, do you think we can afford that?" She said, "Yes, Alfred, we can afford it." That was the end of that conversation. The deal was made. She agreed to give the estate of 1,400 acres. She did want to reserve a part of it for her private use as long as she lived. She agreed to give the two million dollars and we scheduled an announcement a few days later. My memory tells me it was early January, when the public announcement was made.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Well, Woody, so what happened right after that time, when the official announcement was made at the country club? That was January of 1957, I think. What was the mood and what happened?

WOODY VARNER: First of all the mood was one of celebration. The leadership of Oakland County had really been assembled there for this announcement: the chairman of the Board of Commissioners (or whatever they're called); the editor of the newspaper, Harold Fitzgerald, who was a prominent figure in the community; and, of course, the automotive community leadership, which was largely concentrated in Bloomfield Hills, except for the Ford Motor people who tended to be in Grosse Pointe. General Motors and Chrysler tended to be in Bloomfield Hills.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: I understand that the MSUO Foundation was established very early. Could you describe for us the thinking and the function of the foundation at that time? Why did it get established and what was its purpose?

WOODY VARNER: Immediately following the public announcement, there was a private meeting held in the home of Roger and Helen Kyes. He was executive vice president of General Motors. The purpose of that meeting was to talk about the creation of a support group. It was the feeling of President Hannah, and concurred with by all the people involved, that we

needed a prestige group, a support group, a credibility group, if you please, and that we would call it the Michigan State University Oakland Foundation. And we proceeded immediately to name the names of the people who should be on that. Roger Kyes had the overview of the automotive world. John Hannah had a sensitivity to the educational component and also state leadership. Harold Fitzgerald knew the community extremely well. I was primarily a listener, because many of these people I didn't know personally. They created a committee, a sizable committee, maybe 50 people to be on the broad committee. They identified a smaller executive committee of the really top-flight leadership in the whole area to be the executive committee of the MSUO Foundation.

That was a critical move. I think the casual observer would wonder what role they played. Were they in a policy role or what? They were really kind of a background committee. They were supportive, they were helpful, they were counseling. They didn't have any authority—they knew that, we all knew that—except a kind of hidden authority that their position or their influence would give them, a special status. They were people who knew John Hannah, trusted him. They were willing to trust me, at least try me out. So it was launched. And honestly in retrospect, it was a critical move. It brought an immediate acceptance in the community, that if these people like the president of Chrysler or General Motors—or executive vice presidents—were involved, this was serious business. So that was a strategic move that, I think, paid rich dividends.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: After the announcement of the Wilsons' gift to MSUO in early 1957, what was done to define the character and curriculum of the new university?

WOODY VARNER: There was a key player in all this that we haven't talked about yet. That was Tom Hamilton, Dr. Tom Hamilton. Tom was Vice President for Academic Affairs at Michigan State University. Tom was a very personable, knowledgeable person and a very realistic person. As a matter of fact, Tom Hamilton was initially designated to go to Oakland to head it up. He was the president's choice. But unfortunately, there was some faculty commotion or disturbances or issues that were beginning to bubble, and finally President Hannah decided he couldn't afford to have Tom Hamilton

leave the East Lansing campus in the face of this.

I volunteered my services. It struck me as an exciting venture. And interestingly, President Hannah tried to dissuade me. He said, "I don't know why you would give up the vice presidency here to go to something that's nothing—because it's just a piece of ground, an idea. It's fraught with all kinds of problems. You would be infinitely better off to stay right here at Michigan State." Well, I didn't see it that way. I thought, "a lot of excitement," and I felt like a real pioneer going down there. It was a beautiful part of the state. Paula and I decided we would like very much to go to Oakland and take on the mission of launching the enterprise. President Hannah agreed to this, ultimately.

But then Tom Hamilton came back into the picture, because Tom and I had a very close working relationship, and he sort of headed an on-campus committee that would look at the Oakland program and what were the building blocks of this new campus. I don't recall all the members of that committee, but a fellow named Russell Nye was a key player. He was out of the English department and Arts and Sciences. Jack Ryder, Dean of Engineering, was also a key player. Cliff Erickson, who was the dean of the teacher's college, was a key player. There were three or four others, but these are the ones I recall most vividly. And working with Tom and me, we began to talk through the kinds of things we would do if we had the freedom to start a new institution. Some people often said I had the best of all worlds. I was a president of a university that had no students, no alumni, no faculty. Couldn't beat that for a job. So we were taking advantage of that by creating this new mythical university on this "clean sheet of paper," as we kept referring to it. Tom was a key player. I think it was Tom's idea that we assemble the best leadership we could identify in the several areas where we would be interested. It was clear in the beginning that we would be relating this to the automotive leadership, because they were so prominent and they were close by.

There was another element that came into play at about this time. Sputnik One had been launched by the Russians. We'd been pretty much a failure in the space program. We had talked about it but had not done much. Here Russia already had Sputnik One going around the world, and we were sitting here twiddling our thumbs wondering why we hadn't been able to do it.

And a lot of criticism was directed toward higher education in America: Why hadn't we been advanced enough to be there first, or at least be a tough competitor in space? There was a lot of heat generated about what higher education was doing, that maybe it was frittering away its resources when we should have been doing things more visible in terms of world leadership. That was part of the background of this whole institution and the development of it and its curriculum. So it was against that background that we said, "Let's pull the brightest people we can find in the fields in which we want to work, to meet and discuss how we go about setting up this institution, what the components should be, what slant it should have, what stance should it take." The Meadow Brook Seminars were created, where we did bring together very distinguished leaders from several fields to spend a long weekend at Meadow Brook Hall.

That was in 1958. Tom Hamilton was the secretary of the group. He took notes and ferreted out the ideas, sifted out the ideas. After the seminars had dissolved, Tom took the leadership, and then he and I worked out the broad curricular structure that seemed to come out of that discussion. We addressed issues that the counselors had identified and certainly among these was the notion this should be a new-look university, that it was going to be no nonsense, no frills. It was going to be meat and potatoes, as we often said. We're going to zero in on academic strength. We decided early on there would be no sororities, no fraternities—they fell clearly in the category of frills. No athletics, which was a jolt to a lot of people. We had no dormitories so it was going to be a learning setting.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: And those decisions were made both by the seminars and you and Tom?

WOODY VARNER: Tom and I ferreted out the essence of the seminars. We strained out—winnowed out, if you please—the ideas which seemed to be most pertinent and most compatible with the broad overview, so that this was the background. The academic program of Oakland University or MSUO was ferreted out of this kind of process. We used the committee at East Lansing for background, backup, reinforcement, ideas, consultation. But it was out of the Meadow Brook Seminars that the Oakland curricular look emerged.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Did someone have to write that first sort of catalog information for students—that first document to describe what it was the students were going to do? I think you had a role to play in that.

WOODY VARNER: Yes, we had created a product. We had to sell it. We suspected the sale might not be all that easy—because remember we were in the presence of Michigan State University and the University of Michigan carrying on a little civil war themselves, fighting for the good students, and they had a lot to offer that we didn't have in that sense. What we had was a creative new curriculum. We had the fresh look, the opportunity to create something and be a participant in a pioneering venture.

It seemed to us it was an exciting potential, but it had to be sold because we were selling against an established known product with status and reputation. For the student to make the commitment to come to us was a pretty bold commitment, an adventurous commitment. For the faculty to come join us was kind of a very courageous move because it was an untried product. It was a vision. It was, some might say, pie in the sky. But it was real. We thought we could make it happen.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Woody, I understand that you recruited the entire original faculty of 24 in a short period of time in early 1959. That sounds like a terrific effort. How did you do this?

WOODY VARNER: Well, we worked hard. The time was a-running, as they say. As a strategy, first of all we identified an administrative nucleus from Michigan State, because interestingly, the mission to Vietnam, which Michigan State had been involved in, was terminating and some very experienced and effective administrators were coming out of that. The director of admissions at MSU or Oakland, Herb Stoutenburg, was the deputy director at Michigan State before he went to Vietnam. But his term of duty was over in Vietnam so this was a natural for him. Bob Swanson, the chief financial officer for Oakland, was coming out of the same Vietnam experience. There were others. We were able to attract a nucleus of administrative people that happened to fit in beautifully with their return from Vietnam.

Then we went into the institutions that we were most interested in, and made the appeal to the chairman of the department or the deans involved, that we wanted the top flight young graduates. We stressed we wanted the number two and number three graduates, assuming they would hire the number one and two themselves. We weren't coming in and saying, "We're going to compete with you for Paul Tomboulia." I don't know what the situation was for you at the University of Illinois. There must have been two or three people ahead of you—I doubt it, but there must have been somehow. We were told there was a young Paul Tomboulia, who we proudly announced to the world had his Ph.D. at age 24—which might not have been precisely accurate, but it's pretty close. It was workably close, let me say that. You were a kind of specimen, an exhibit of the kind of people to be on that faculty. The process was the one we used at Wisconsin, used at Illinois. We used the east coast schools. This is how the faculty was assembled. Kind of handpicked one by one, with strong recommendations of the deans and chairmen of the departments. It worked out very well.

PAUL TOMBOULIA: Woody, can you tell us who was involved in the recruitment of students? How were they selected and how would you characterize that first student body?

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. They had one commitment to make, and once you made it to Michigan, it was made—or to Michigan State or to Wayne. But fortunately, 570 committed to us.

We went to the top students. I don't think we got the top students. I think we got adventurous students, serious students. Perhaps some of them, for financial reasons, came to us because it was close by. I think it's fair to say we did not get a student body that was academically at the level of the faculty. And the faculty had some difficulty bringing their performance in line with the capabilities of the students.

The result of that was that there was a considerable fallout in that first 570 bold, pioneering soldiers. In many ways they were slaughtered. That's an exaggeration—but they came into the classroom not really prepared for the level of instruction that was coming at them. On the side of the faculty, they were bright young people out of graduate school where they had worked with fellow graduate students and senior faculty. They suddenly were thrust into a classroom with students of marginal ability as a group, and there was some carnage out of that.

There had been national visibility about Oakland and what its curricular design was. There was a story in *Time* or one of the magazines, a small story but a telling story referred to by the quote, "Brainy Flops at Oakland University [MSUO]." So we had some patching up to do, some modification to make. But I'll say this, the faculty was realistic about this. They recognized they had set the goal a little high and made some modifications, and it worked out over time. But it was a tough two or three years in the beginning.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: From what you've described, it sounds like we had a challenging curriculum, a no-nonsense program, a bright energetic faculty, but an average student body. How did this gap between aspiration and reality play out? Why weren't the expectations of the institution changed because of this gap?

WOODY VARNER: Well, there wasn't much enthusiasm for that on my part or your part or anyone else there. There was some slight adjustment that I sensed. I don't think anyone ever said, "We're going to move everything down ten points or five points or whatever," but a general sense that we had to be a little more realistic and relate to the students we had, not to relate to the student body we wished we had. There were some modifications.

As the days went by, the student body began to get stronger, too, began to get more comfortable, and the working environment was more palatable.

There was a period of great performance on the part of the faculty. Young, vigorous, creative, devoted. The sad and true story and also inspiring story of Bill Kluback comes to mind. He was in the faculty of Western Civilization, fresh out of his Ph.D. at Columbia University, and was an extremely enthusiastic and articulate teacher. As a matter of fact, he held study periods for the students to come back in the evenings—whole classes of students for review purposes prior to examinations. He was almost the model teacher, but unfortunately, I received a shocking telephone call from the dean at Columbia University telling me that Professor Kluback at Oakland University, they believed, had been found guilty of plagiarism in his doctoral thesis and they were withdrawing his degree, and he resigned. Last I heard he was in the University of Israel or some such place. Have you heard anything about that?

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: No, I don't know about that.

WOODY VARNER: He disappeared from the Oakland horizon. But he was almost a model teacher in those early days. He believed in it. He met students more than half way. He was a great example. But he had the misfortune in his background that cost him and cost us.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: I think you mentioned that maybe there was a need in this period of adjustment to stake out territory or to deal with some hopeful aspirations—what I think you characterized before as a calculated gamble.

WOODY VARNER: It was a calculated gamble. We didn't know what kind of students we would get. We didn't know how they would react to the curriculum. Remember it was the post-Sputnik era, and the aroma of Sputnik was falling all over America. Somehow we had to address the problem with a more vigorous, more concentrated learning experience. We had to avoid some of the wasted effort, and focus on the real issues. We gave that a good hard try at Oakland. I think it's paid off in the long run.

I think Oakland's academic reputation is good. It's recognized as a quality institution. It's done that because the faculty held the high ground they seized. They made it possible for the troops to survive in that environment.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Well, we had a lot of good administrative encouragement.

WOODY VARNER: We were a team. It's one of the great strengths of Oakland. We had a family mentality that we had a task to do, and we buckled down, all of us. We sort of held hands and gathered in a tight circle.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Woody, tell us a little about the relationship between MSUO at that time and the role of John Hannah, in all this drama.

WOODY VARNER: Well, John Hannah was a very significant player in this whole game, kind of a quiet player, but his position with me was very clear: "It's your responsibility, it's your job, you run it, just don't embarrass us any more than you have to." That's exactly the way we worked. John Hannah would come maybe once a month down to Oakland but always on our insistence. We had to urge him to come down. He sort of begrudged giving away the time from East Lansing to come down there. What he saw, he liked, and what he heard, he liked for the most part. His motto was, "Just don't embarrass us." I don't think we did.

A few little incidents ruffled him, I think. I think Loren Pope's extravagant press releases got under his skin a little bit. I remember one time when some newsman asked Loren Pope, "What's the difference between Michigan State University and Oakland University [MSUO]?" and he said, "Exactly 180 degrees." Well, he elaborated on that, that Michigan State focused on agriculture and these sorts of primarily agrarian interests, and Oakland was more interested in the intellectual side of things. Well, that didn't fly too well at East Lansing. It took quite a little while to recover from that.

Other than that kind of incident, John Hannah was a great champion of what we were doing. Champion at best, but letting us have a free hand, backing us up when we needed backing up.

I couldn't ask for a more compatible working relationship than that which John Hannah created. We don't give him enough credit at Oakland for his role in getting Oakland started. Because first of all, the gift from the Wilsons was given to John Hannah, that's the truth of the matter. They didn't know me. They didn't know anyone else involved at Oakland. They took that on faith—John Hannah's commitment that would make them proud of it. He was the guy that stood and battled for Michigan State at the legislature. Across the state he created the base from which we operated, and gave us a free hand. I can't say enough in appreciation for what he meant in starting this institution.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Somehow it was consistent that early in 1963, I think, the name of the institution changed.

WOODY VARNER: John Hannah certainly gave the green light for the change. His question always was, "What is in Oakland's best interest?" I think if we had gotten into territory where there would have been disadvantage to Michigan State, he might not have been totally compatible with that. But his general position was for what's in the best interest of Oakland. He put his stamp of approval on it, the board adopted it, and away we went. It was a fortunate move.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Now I would like to ask perhaps some questions reflecting on your experiences with Oakland. Perhaps something more philosophical, such as what were the unique circumstances that allowed the establishment of such a university? How could this have happened?

WOODY VARNER: It was the environment in which we were created. It was very important. I come back again to Sputnik. The nation was distressed about how higher education had been spending its money. If we couldn't put a rocket in space and the Russians could, what was going on in higher education? So we felt very much a product of that environment, that we needed a no nonsense, no frills, serious-minded academic program that stressed academic qualities. That was the environment in which we operated. I think that's been a feature of Oakland from the beginning. We owe it all to Sputnik, maybe.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: So perhaps it would be not possible to think that it would be happening again today, or could happen again?

WOODY VARNER: I think there's been a relaxation. There's a serious mentality in higher education but not a crisis mentality as we faced back in the late '50s.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: One of the characteristics I always appreciated in our early management style was the way that you interacted with both the faculty and the administration, especially with difficult situations. Can you describe some of your own styles, how you saw your role in this situation?

WOODY VARNER: 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. We made some changes. I always regretted the fact that we abandoned as quickly as we did the Far Eastern or the nonwestern studies. Has that still survived at Oakland?

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Absolutely. It's not called nonwestern, but it's called Area Studies. It's Japan and China and India and Africa. It's a whole set of nonwestern civilizations.

WOODY VARNER: That part of the world had generally been systematically ignored or just waved to as we went by it, whereas Western civilization was studied in great depth—the Greeks, the Romans, and all the way through. The nonwestern civilizations were sort of given the back of the hand. This was a strong recommendation from the Meadow Brook Seminars. I thought it made a lot of sense. But there were a lot of ideas that we played around with. I felt that we should have a thesis, a kind of a paper on some appropriate identified subject the student could address, drawing on the tools they'd acquired at Oakland for four years. That didn't set too well.

That didn't fly, and probably for practical reasons. We said in the early days that every student must be able to have a competency in one foreign language. I don't believe that survived very long. And for good reasons. But I was disappointed to see those two requirements abandoned.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Well, Woody, we're interested in some of your reflections again, and one of the people I know that was always in the background at the university was Mrs. Wilson. How did she really relate to the operation of the institution? What was her role? How did she get along with the administration and the students?

WOODY VARNER: I don't think there's any question but that the involvement of Oakland University would be a source of great pleasure to her if she were here to see what has happened. I think the truth of the matter is she never quite knew what to do with that estate—1,400 acres of beautiful land within 25 miles of Detroit, a magnificent home, one of the few such homes in the world. There it was. She knew she was sooner or later going to die. She did, as we all do. She knew that was coming. And then what was going to happen to it had to be weighing heavily on her mind. Here was a very productive use that she could see in her lifetime. She could see it happening. She moved into Sunset Terrace and sort of seized the high ground, as the military say. She could look out over the estate and see what was going on. She enjoyed the students. She enjoyed the faculty. She was proud of what was happening. She frequently would come down and have dinners with us—ate hamburgers like the children do. We took her to East Lansing for football games. She loved that, she loved involvement. She felt a keen kinship with students.

One thing she wouldn't tolerate: she wouldn't tolerate them getting over her fence. That 160 acres of hers was a religious enclave with her. The rest of it was fine for the students to do as they please, but she didn't want them over that fence. I remember one night the phone rang and we were having dinner—Paula and I were with the kids at home, and the phone rang and it was Mrs. Wilson's secretary saying, "You'd better come up here, she's real mad—some students got over that fence." I went up there, and there was Dave Lewis who was "nailed to the wall" and some other student, whose name I have forgotten.

They had been out on a sightseeing trip on a warm spring day, and they decided to get over that fence to see what was behind the fence, and her guard found them and brought them up to her. She really had them scared to death, first of all. She lectured me substantially about protecting that 160 acres and that fence. And I found little room for argument. I was very congenial about that discussion. We had that little instance and a few others where the fence was the problem. Dave Lewis went on to become maybe one of the outstanding graduates of the institution. He was named the Alfred Wilson Award winner. I thought that was kind of an interesting incident where the youngster she caught violating her inviolate fence was named after her husband.

I remember some vivid memories. The first dinner meeting of the faculty—do you remember that dinner at Meadow Brook Hall? With the gold plates, the gold silverware, an enormous flower arrangement. That was living like they lived in the good old days.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: But she didn't become involved in any of the academic or administrative operations?

WOODY VARNER: Oh, absolutely not. Never even a hint of it. I remember she came to my office toward the end of the first year with her secretary. We had, what, 170 in the graduating class? These 170 students had stuck it out. She wanted to host a ball for them at Meadow Brook Hall. She made the decision to give each of them a senior ring with a diamond in it. I said, "Mrs. Wilson, some of the students have already bought their rings." "I'm not worried about their rings," she said. "I'll give them their money back. Give me the list of names of students who have already paid for their rings and I'll give them their money back, and we'll put a diamond in them." I think every one of them had a diamond. And she gave Paula and me the same. Excuse me. When you get old, you get emotional.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: We all do. That's a great story. So she presented everyone with one of these rings?

WOODY VARNER: Each with a diamond in it. She was very proud of the students—and the faculty.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: But at a distance. Not to get involved with the day-to-day operations. You've mentioned from time to time a couple of other key people that were in the background: George Karas and Lowell Eklund.

WOODY VARNER: Well, it seemed important, when the announcement was made, to have some physical presence of the new deal. We sent George Karas down—he was the physical plant man. George was an engineer and sort of jack-of-all-trades, he could fix anything. We thought it would be important to have someone on the spot to understand the physical workings of the place because it was quite a complex. George cheerfully went down, and he was "Mr. MSUO" for two or three years until the full contingent came down. I think George resented anybody else coming in his territory finally, but he was a good soldier, very sturdy, a reliable part of that early team.

The second bit of physical evidence was the continuing education classes held in the old chicken barn that we dolled up some. We had continuing education classes and rapid reading was the first one. Mrs. Wilson enrolled. She didn't flunk the course, she passed it, fortunately. I think a grade might have been doctored by the professor, I'm not sure. But these were early people, Lowell Eklund and the continuing education program, to give an evidence of physical presence, that something's happening.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: That was actually before 1959?

WOODY VARNER: That's right. Soon after the announcement. That would have been in 1957.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Well, Woody, in conclusion, how do you look back on that period at Oakland University? What were its greatest successes in your mind?

WOODY VARNER: I can't think of anything except what was pleasant. I'm sure there were some unpleasant moments—now that I think about it, I can think of one or two. But for the most part, it was an extremely pleasant experience. Probably the best slice of our life given the fact it was at that right age, our children were growing up, a lot of freedom. I guess looking at Woody Varner as I see him, I'm happy building and creating, and that was a golden opportunity to build, to create.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: We all know that Paula [Varner] has been a very important part of your life, and those of us who were at the university saw her as an important figure of support. Could you describe some of her role in all these things?

WOODY VARNER: She ran the shop. She took care of the family. She was a strong supporter, as she has been for 56 years. She was as devoted to Oakland as I was, to the faculty, to the students, to the whole enterprise. I would give her a key role. And I must say that we never could have pulled it off without a faculty that committed itself to Oakland University. They weren't shopping. They were not out looking. They were building. You're Exhibit A.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Well, yes, there was a strange characteristic of wanting to put down roots and not be part of a mobile academic community—to stick with it and do something new, that you don't always find among faculty.

WOODY VARNER: I think Dave Riesman wrote a [book] on the study he made of Wayne State's new college [Monteith] and Oakland University—the faculty characteristics. He described Oakland's as settlers and the Wayne faculty as transients. I think that's right. The faculty settled down to build an institution. Now 14,000 students later, it's there.

PAUL TOMBOULIAN: Well, Woody it's been very pleasant visiting with you and having this interview, and thank you for so much for being who you are and all your contributions to the world.

WOODY VARNER: Great to have you in Nebraska, Paul. I appreciate you coming.

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