

Oakland University Chronicles

Interview with
George Karas

Transcript of Oral History Interview

Interview date: November 7, 1996

Interviewer: David Lowy



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Oakland University Chronicles

GEORGE KARAS

Date of birth: June 2, 1925

EDUCATION

B.S. Michigan State University 1950

PRIOR TO OAKLAND UNIVERSITY

1957 Michigan State University
Physical Plant Engineer

OAKLAND UNIVERSITY

1961 Director of Physical Plant

1973 University Engineer

1987 Retired

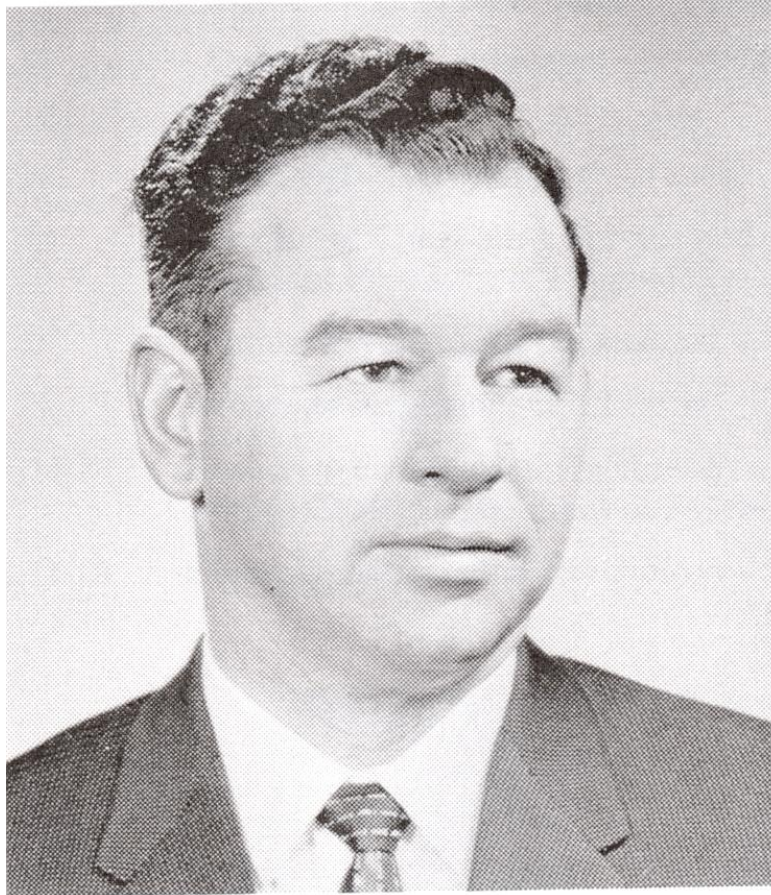
1989 Project Manager
*(to oversee construction of
Kresge Library and its additions)*



Photograph of George Karas

November 7, 1996

Photographer: Rick Smith
Oakland University Communications and Marketing



George Karas
*Director of Physical
Plant*

Photograph of George Karas

MSUO Yearbook 1963

Oakland University Chronicles
Interview with GEORGE KARAS
November 7, 1996

DAVID LOWY: This is one of the interviews for the Oakland University Chronicles project. The goal of project is to collect oral histories dealing with the beginnings of Oakland University. We are going to focus on the first years, the time prior to the first graduation.

My name is David Lowy, Chair of the Psychology Department, and I have been at Oakland since 1962 for a grand total of 35 years. Today is November the 7th, 1996 and we are in Varner Hall on the campus of Oakland University.

It is my very great pleasure to be talking with George Karas, who was the first university engineer, who came in the fall of 1957, two years before the first class of students enrolled. He retired in 1987 after 30 years at Oakland. I have known George since 1962 when I first came to Oakland. George, it is good seeing you again.

GEORGE KARAS: Thank you.

DAVID LOWY: Can you tell us how you first heard about—it was MSUO at the time? That must have been long before students came on campus.

GEORGE KARAS: I was working at Michigan State in their physical plant as an engineer. In the early part of '57 we heard some rumors about a granting of an estate or land given to Michigan State. My first contact with MSUO was in the fall of 1957, when I received a call from Woody Varner asking if my wife and I could attend a meeting at the Kellogg Center with Mr. and Mrs. Wilson, himself, and President Hannah. I had an idea that it might be related, because of the Wilsons being present, to coming down to Oakland. We met with them, we discussed the children that we had, what I was doing. The thing that I remember from the conversation was Mr. Wilson's disappointment that I wasn't a Presbyterian. However, it was a pleasant interview. My wife was pleased and we decided if and when the call came that we would come down to Oakland, a brand new virgin territory for construction.

I was working one Saturday in the old power plant at Michigan State. My boss, Mr. Ted Simon, who had been very influential in our early years, came up the stairs and he had a smile on his face and he said, "George, you have been selected to go to Rochester and work with Mrs. Wilson on her estate at Meadow Brook Hall and help the development of the new building, the first building." I went home and confirmed it with the wife that, yes, indeed, we were going to move. So we came down, Trudy and I and the family, and drove down Adams Road. Right at the old entrance was one of the employees who was selling apples, Mr. Seyburn. We bought a dozen apples and thought, "Gee, this is nice country."

We went back home, and I got a call that I should come down and meet with Mrs. Wilson, who wanted to show me Meadow Brook Hall. I had never been in Meadow Brook Hall so she said, "Can you be here, between Christmas and New Year's?" and I said, "Yes, ma'am." So I came down and we started at 8:00. I was there early, and from 8:00 until 5:00 we covered literally every room in that building.

For lunch we had lamb chops, I will never forget—four massive lamb chops. Well, I was so nervous, I ate one, and she thought I didn't like it but later we confirmed that I was just too nervous.

DAVID LOWY: Was it a difficult decision to come here because you were in East Lansing at the time?

GEORGE KARAS: We thought I probably would not move to another established university, but we liked the university environment. We had three small children. We liked Michigan State and the opportunity to start from nothing, just what a young engineer thinks of.

DAVID LOWY: So then actually your initial contact was to work both on the university and with Mrs. Wilson at Meadow Brook Hall?

GEORGE KARAS: My charge was a little vague. Mrs. Wilson requested that someone come down and learn how to operate and take care of Meadow Brook Hall. When I came down I brought with me an employee from Michigan State who worked directly for Mrs. Wilson to do the day-to-day efforts on Meadow Brook Hall. She shared with me the concerns that she had

and many ideas that she wanted to continue. She wanted someone to know how the hall operated—the water system, the septic tank system, the electrical system—not necessarily the day-to-day light bulb changing or checking boilers or things like that. It included the Dodge farmhouse, it included the farm buildings around this campus, and it included 16 residences that she had in the area. She wanted me to be knowledgeable of that, so when she gave everything or when she left us, someone would know something about it.

DAVID LOWY: So when you came it was still the working estate. What was it like with all of this land?

GEORGE KARAS: It was nice. They had a poultry farm at Butler and Adams and I can remember going down there the early part of '58 and buying eggs. They had a freezer there and they had these three buildings that they called the poultry farm. It was my understanding that Mrs. Wilson developed that so her son Danny could take over and manage it or just have it. That naturally didn't work out. We converted that poultry farm to the headquarters for MSUO before the buildings here were completed, and Lowell Eklund had his first class in the fall of 1958 in one of the buildings. Mrs. Wilson was his prize pupil in speed reading.

There were dairy cattle just where the new science building is now. There was a dairy cattle farm, home, and there were the Belgian horses that were her pride. She also had hackneys over on the estate, so there were horses and cows and a lot of nice things.

DAVID LOWY: There was also a deer park at the time.

GEORGE KARAS: That was her pride, yes. At the intersection of Avon and Adams there is a small lake which is now number three on the golf course. In there behind a 16- or 18-foot fence was a herd of deer, both white Virginia deer and ordinary deer that we have in Michigan, with a feeder and a gate. I used to feed them on days off—I would have the opportunity to go down there and feed the deer. Very friendly.

DAVID LOWY: So then the land on which the university now stands was just farmland—there was nothing here in terms of buildings.

GEORGE KARAS: There was nothing here as far as the university was concerned. But one of our anchors was the water tower. There was no other facility other than the water tower, although that wasn't our prime location.

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

So in a matter of five minutes we picked the building up mentally and brought it over here on the west side of the campus. As it turned out we had a water tower here and we had a water tower over there. But there was a lot of buildable land and we thought about being so close to Mrs. Wilson's Meadow Brook Hall and so forth.

This later proved as a very wise decision. On ground breaking day, May the 2nd, 1958, it was my responsibility and good duty to pick up the Wilsons. I drove over to Meadow Brook Hall and went into her study and when I entered she was crying, she was very unhappy. Mr. Wilson was there with her and someone had shot two of the deer in the deer park with a bow and arrow. So he said to her, "Mother, I told you this would happen." [That is, because of the university.] She calmed down a little bit, and then we drove over here to the dedication [As it turned out, the poachers were found and they had no connection with the university.] So it was a good move, an excellent move.

DAVID LOWY: So then there were plans for buildings done at MSU?

GEORGE KARAS: Yes, and I was not involved in the original plans of the buildings. There are some features in the buildings that I never found out who did them or why. But as time progressed I got more involved in the utilities, the water, the sewer, the roads, and had an office here to

accommodate the planners, which were Swanson Associates. It is interesting that Mr. [J. Robert F.] Swanson traveled in the same social circle that the Wilsons did, and it's our belief that Mr. Swanson approached Mrs. Wilson about donating the land to [the University of] Michigan. He was a graduate of Michigan and she had been a trustee at Michigan State. So she thanked him for the idea, and picked up and transferred all of her allegiance to Michigan State, including funding to build the first building. So I believe there was a thank you to Mr. Swanson for introducing it: he later did our library and the Oakland Center, too.

DAVID LOWY: So was Swanson the one who suggested a university or Mrs. Wilson?

GEORGE KARAS: It was his concept that Oakland County did not have a four year university within its boundaries. And Mrs. Wilson was approaching the time where she was thinking of what to do. She shared with me one time that she thought of donating the land to the Salvation Army. She was a general in the Salvation Army, a very fine lady.

DAVID LOWY: So then eventually it was decided that this would be a university. I think you mentioned that one time they were thinking of this as a junior college.

GEORGE KARAS: I wasn't privileged to be on the academic planning, but to the best of my knowledge, Dave, we were always looking for something much, much larger than that.

Part of the development of the university includes all of the physical features. [Architect] Albert Kahn did a study based on the topo of the land that we controlled, and suggested it might be wise to put the heating plant in the center and use four quadrants for the educational purposes. This [idea] came about since we had to accommodate the heating needs and accommodate some future growth. That did not fly because of the difficulty in funding such a massive beginning, but it was interesting that they had so much interest in the physical features.

DAVID LOWY: So one of the original plans was to have eventually four different schools or units on the campus?

GEORGE KARAS: Yes.

DAVID LOWY: How large were they going to be?

GEORGE KARAS: The word forty thousand was used, ten thousand students at each corner. There is still some thought of this. They refer to the Meadow Brook Hall and the Meadow Brook Festival as the cultural corner, with the golf course and the center section as the athletic quadrant. The quadrant down at Butler Road and Squirrel is still unknown, but in most of the master plans they consider that as an interacting corner where they would work with public and private funding in developing something at that area. And, of course, we have our main academic campus here.

DAVID LOWY: It is interesting that back then they were thinking in terms of large numbers of students.

GEORGE KARAS: Oh, yes, a lot of buildings, too. In fact, when we started, Detroit Edison, one of our suppliers of electricity, changed our design from an electrical distribution system of 4,800 volts to 14,000. They came in and picked up all of the [costs of the] change because they thought they could see a lot of growth.

Our community supported us very well. The original design and first building concept had a small sewage treatment plant just behind us outside of Varner Hall, on what we used to refer to as the ski slope. When I speak of the community I speak of the Oakland County Public Works, who came to Mr. Varner and myself and suggested that money might be invested in a sewer system that would serve [Michigan] Christian College, University Hills, and our [faculty] subdivision on Avon Road. Woody's words to Mr. [R. J.] Alexander were, "We are in the education business, we are not in the sewer and water business." So with that statement we gave our appropriation to the Oakland County DPW, and now we have an MSUO sewer that runs from here down to the old deer park and up and down Avon Road.

When I use the word "up," there is a pump station that later has been tied into a larger master sewer by the deer park.

So I believe that Oakland University's impact has been very strong in the utilities. The same thing happened on Squirrel Road. We had the single well that Mrs. Wilson had here, and her [water] tower for the farm group. As Murphy's laws would indicate, the pump failed one day and we had no water on the campus. It took us a little bit of scurrying around, but we had only one pump and one tower, which in hindsight is not very good.

The state supported us and gave us enough money to drill another well and start a water treatment. Woody used the same decision again. He said, "We are not in the water business," and he joined hands with Pontiac Township (which is now known as Auburn Hills) and a developer named Bert Smokler, who put in the Oakland Apartments where a lot of our students and faculty and staff stayed. So we joined hands with him and brought up a 16-inch water main that serves the university. So I think we were very good to the community in those terms.

DAVID LOWY: So that at that time—obviously this is not my field—but planning for utilities, water, electricity, waste was a major issue. This was about 1600 acres of really undeveloped land.

GEORGE KARAS: Yes. And we have never lacked for any water. We have another tie-in on the north end and I hope some day soon we will tie it at the Meadow Brook Festival. We have a line there and we have a line by the married student housing which would give us a tie from Adams Road. So we are very well blessed with water. The sewer is no problem, unless you get into the details of sewer taps, but the sewer line is large enough to accommodate us. Recently we went into gas distribution with a large transmission main. So I don't think utilities would ever restrict us in any growth.

DAVID LOWY: And the development of the university coincided with the development of the area around the university?

GEORGE KARAS: The price of land went up about \$2,000 an acre when she made her announcement and like everyone else we [Mr. and Mrs. Karas]

invested in some land north of [the current] Meadow Brook Mall. But the financial conditions weren't so good so we lost the land because we couldn't afford payments. We had ten acres north of Meadow Brook Mall.

DAVID LOWY: I'll bet you wish you still had that.

GEORGE KARAS: Well, through Mrs. Wilson's efforts and Anchor Realty we purchased ten acres and a former house that I used to maintain. So we have a retirement home just north of Walton.

DAVID LOWY: So then your major focus, at least initially, was getting the utilities in and so on. The original plans for the buildings were worked out at MSU?

GEORGE KARAS: Correct. Our original plan—and there are copies of it that entail a ring road very similar to Michigan State's—was done by Harold Lautner and Milt Barron. That was the basis, and the engineering complex—the three buildings including the science building that is now being finished on campus—was part of the master plan that we had then. We had the library in the center at the highest point of the campus, and then they determined that the residential would be at the north end.

This was done very carefully and later modified when the state wanted to have a master plan of every university in the state of Michigan. A firm called Johnson, Johnson and Roy from Ann Arbor modified Mr. Lautner's master plan. From his master road system the only thing that remains is the little boulevard between Wilson Hall and North Foundation. That used to extend [westward] out to Squirrel Road, and was our original entrance. The road continued on [eastward] but that was terminated when O'Dowd Hall went in.

DAVID LOWY: So when you came there was no building going on?

GEORGE KARAS: No, there wasn't any construction of anything until the groundbreaking in May of 1958.

DAVID LOWY: And that was when North and South Foundation were built?

GEORGE KARAS: Yes, and concurrent with that, Woody and one of the Oakland County Commissioners, a very strong person called Delos Hamlin, were instrumental in funding a little bit of Oakland Center. I say a little bit, because it was probably less than a quarter of its present size that was under construction concurrently.

During the early time that we were here, Woody brought forth the idea that he would contact some very prominent and very nice architects in the area—Odell/Hewlett, Giffels and Rosetti, Redstone, Swanson Associates—and propose to them that if they would start on some planning now, when and if the buildings were funded either by bond issue or by the State of Michigan or hopefully some gift like the library was, they would be the architects. And several of them did and we had a nice head start. There were some young faculty that came here with us that were able to work out of Foundation Hall, but yet were able to do some planning for their own building.

North and South Foundation Hall had our heating plant, had our classrooms, had our administrative offices, had our faculty offices, all in the one building, including the library, too. Everything was right there, and in the parking lot there was ample parking at that time. We had the large parking lot to the west.

As time went on Woody's vision proved to be a time saver and a quick way to get some of the buildings done. The building construction is a little different now than it was then. I can remember going to the state legislature committees with Woody and one time walking out of the door with a grant of two million dollars. He said, "Now you can call Odell, Hewlett and Luckenbach and tell them we're on our way." That was the beginning of many, many buildings.

DAVID LOWY: So at the beginning Foundation Hall held everything—the power plant, the library, the labs, classrooms and so on?

GEORGE KARAS: Yes, and the administrative offices. That was a very interesting period, the early years that we had.

We had a heating plant that's a little different than the normal heating plant. It is called a high temperature/high pressure heating plant. It was manned Monday through Friday by our mechanical staff. But on Friday afternoon at 4:00, two students would check in, a Mr. Williams and a Mr. McAllister. They would come aboard, come to the boiler room Friday at 4:00, and between the two of them they watched the boiler and the controls, and made adjustments from Friday afternoon until Monday morning. It is interesting to note that one was a chemistry student who later got into chemical sales and was one of our best vendors of [water treatment] chemicals, and the other one is a member of our foundation—two bright, young, energetic students. It was a lot of fun working with the young people.

DAVID LOWY: You mentioned that it was a new system, high temperature/high pressure?

GEORGE KARAS: Yes. The ground [elevation] changes—as you know there is about a 100 to 200 foot difference from the lowest point to the highest point. The four corners are high and in the middle we have a [lower] level area that is the golf course, wetlands, and a drain that goes through there call the Galloway Creek. Based on the existing heating systems that they had, if it's level, [that allows] steam and condensate. If [the ground] is level [steam and condensate] is easy to use, it is easy to maintain. However, if there is a grade change, and there are many here, it is difficult.

So we designed a system that existed in Fraser, Michigan at the Cross Manufacturing Plant, and at the Wurtsmith Air Base. It is this heating system that they brought back after World War II from Europe. The size of the piping is about a tenth as large, and we can heat Varner Hall or any of our buildings with a pipe no larger than two inches. It's a very difficult system to understand at the beginning, but it has good results in the quality of heat and the quantity, and the cost was very minimal.

DAVID LOWY: So that was the forefront of technology at the time?

GEORGE KARAS: Yes. And based again on our topography, it was the beginning of our large master central heating plant which, by the way, can

provide all of the heat for the 40,000 students. We have the heating ability and the transmission ability, now, to take care of that.

DAVID LOWY: So a lot of the engineering was state-of-the-art at the time?

GEORGE KARAS: Yes, and we had what we thought was the state-of-the-art in North Foundation Hall, where we had the heat in the ceiling. The first building was not air-conditioned, you know—we had good cross-ventilation, though, but no windows.

DAVID LOWY: Why no air-conditioning?

GEORGE KARAS: It wasn't until after a few years that we realized, with our summer trimester system, that it would be rather uncomfortable. Frankly, there weren't many other buildings on other campuses that were air-conditioned. I think it would have been just a little bit too pompous to start off with an air-conditioned building. Later we air-conditioned that building, North Foundation Hall, concurrent with Wilson Hall and the rest of the campus.

DAVID LOWY: Was there any move at that time to make Oakland strong and Spartan, to be solid and simple without much ornamentation, since we were going to be young and strong?

GEORGE KARAS: I think that came from some of the design that we had in the buildings. One thing that comes to mind very quickly would be our restrooms. In the restrooms at Michigan State over many, many years they developed a system where everything was supported from the ceiling and everything was ceramic tile. It was sort of like maybe a hospital, very antiseptic. And they put their money in the type of construction that would be easy to maintain. We deviated from that a little bit as time went on and architects and the staff, both academic and administrative, wanted to have a little bit more in the buildings. We gave that up, it was not such a major portion of our development.

I am referring back to the early days when we were still part of Michigan State and we did not have a Board of Trustees at that time. In the

selection of our architects, we had discussed asking them to do some preliminary work with the same expectations that we had of funding, and hopefully they might help us fund, too.

We had an architect that agreed that, yes, he would do it. Then the funding was made available through a state appropriation and we sat down to continue to go into detailed drawings. The architect elected to question the fees, which were set by the Board of Trustees of Michigan State. We had no ability to raise them or certainly couldn't lower them. The architect was very, very strong on that point and Mr. Varner was just as strong. Sitting at the table, he had indicated that their services were no longer necessary. He turned to me and said, "You work out the funding for what they have invested." He looked at his watch and he said, "I have got five minutes to catch an airplane, good-bye."

The architect was really stunned, I guess would be the word. So he and I were left in the room and he said, "What did he say?" I said, "Well, you are no longer our architect." It was things that [Mr. Varner] did, he didn't waste time, he didn't have a committee, he didn't have anyone to work with except himself. We called it expediting.

DAVID LOWY: Apparently the bureaucracy was not huge. You mentioned earlier that you moved the [planned] location of the building from one site to another in a short period of time. You didn't have to go through committees and all of that.

GEORGE KARAS: It was good. And I don't think that those types of decisions that were made in the early years have been detrimental at all.

One time we had a little trouble which was normal: a salesman had promised windows in our first dormitories, and we were behind schedule and that was the critical item. So what did we do? Maybe once a month or whenever a problem came up, we would have a meeting. So we called in the general contractor, Mr. Varner, the window salesman, and myself.

We were sitting in this room and they were discussing and talking about where the windows are, and the timing and so forth. It was a firm in Ohio. Woody opened the conference room door and said to Nadji, his secretary, "Nadji, schedule a plane for six of us at the Pontiac Airport, we are going to fly down to Ohio this afternoon." That salesman, a real nice

fellow—I felt a little sorry for him—he turned beet red and said, "Don't, that's not necessary, they haven't even started production." So Woody said, "Well, we would appreciate it, you know, if you would expedite it." And they did it, they stopped the middle of their production, inserted our windows and we opened on time.

DAVID LOWY: Apparently you had a lot of contact with Mrs. Wilson during the early days? I think at that time Meadow Brook Hall was still her residence, and they were still living there. And so Meadow Brook Hall was not given to the University at that time?

GEORGE KARAS: That's right. My charge in coming down here was very simple: to make Mrs. Wilson happy and to relieve her of any engineering problems. And a lot of things happened, some were good and some were bad.

DAVID LOWY: So she kept Meadow Brook Hall and an area around it that was not part of the original gift?

GEORGE KARAS: That's correct. She had a legal description made of the property surrounding Meadow Brook Hall, and there was a fence erected around Meadow Brook Hall up toward the Festival and then around Sunset Terrace. The arrangement was, and it's a very logical one, that if Mrs. Wilson passed away first, then Meadow Brook Hall would be ours. We would have the responsibility and Mr. Wilson would live in Sunset Terrace. There was a fence that surrounded a hundred foot right-of-way, so to speak, out to Adams Road. It is a coincidence that the road that now comes into our campus is the same road that was isolated by the fence. So Mr. Wilson would have Sunset Terrace and access to Sunset Terrace without going through the original road, you know, the original entrance on Adams.

DAVID LOWY: Did you ever get any notion of what life in Meadow Brook Hall was like with a family living there, albeit perhaps a trifle large and a little grand, but it was a family home then, wasn't it?

GEORGE KARAS: Yes, it was very pleasant. [Mrs. Wilson] had a personal secretary, Mrs. Scott, who later became an executor of the Wilson Foundation.

When I would check in with her—it was not quite weekly as time went on—but we would go in and go through Meadow Brook Hall, with a problem or without a problem. She got sentimental for a while—she would take us through the building and tell us about objects. One that I remember is a red china set that she bought in Egypt when she was on her honeymoon with John Dodge.

She took me through the whole area, she took me upstairs. In the attic or the third floor, which is normally not a place where many of us get to be—but with my responsibility she showed me Danny's playroom above his bedroom, where he had a boxing bag hanging from the ceiling, and he used to work out. She showed me where Francis had her little play area, where she would have a theatrical stage set up there.

DAVID LOWY: These were her children?

GEORGE KARAS: Yes, the two children. And she showed us the bedroom that Mr. [Wilson] passed away in, the bed and all of his dressers and his machinist's tools. But she would never open that to the public.

She had her store room. I smile a little bit because when I went there I tried to get some soap—I had asked for Bon Ami or something like that. She would advise me that Bon Ami is not available; any harsh soap is not available, the only soap I could get was Ivory. When you got your hands dirty, Ivory didn't do much, but it was because of the fixtures. She controlled the gold plated fixtures, she didn't want anything injuring the fixtures.

In my exuberance to make her life easier, there was some good and some bad. I thought I was knowledgeable of the lock system so I was going to change all of the locks in Meadow Brook Hall. I proposed that—I asked her and she didn't say no but she said, "I would rather you wouldn't do that." She pointed out that I was her eighteenth engineer, and if there were a nineteenth engineer she wanted to know about the lock system so she could tell the next engineer. So I got the warning. But she seriously indicated that at one time there was a gardener who had a key to the laundry room. One of the children wanted to get into the laundry room and he, being gracious and nice, opened the laundry room and [the child] injured her hand.

So her system divided the mechanical engineering problems to the lower floor, and the houseman could not get down into the basement where

all of the mechanical stuff was. The mechanical engineer couldn't get up to the other floors unless they both went together. So she had tremendous planning in her lock system.

DAVID LOWY: So it sounds as though she really ran the operation.

GEORGE KARAS: Oh, there is no question about that, yes. But she was a little bit of a problem, too, because on Friday afternoon her cook and houseman would leave. They would not come back until Monday morning at 8:00. So Friday night, all day Saturday, and all day Sunday she was in that home by herself. I spent a lot of Saturdays and Sundays over there checking things that didn't have to be checked, because Mrs. Scott and I had an arrangement that we would be there to make sure.

She could have gotten on her elevator, an old electric elevator, and not make it and get stuck between floors. I asked her if I could put a telephone in there for her, and she would not grant me the permission to put a telephone in the elevator. The elevator—like some on our campus—wasn't exactly dependable. She was a tough old lady, she was very strong.

DAVID LOWY: But you really took care of her, mechanical-wise.

GEORGE KARAS: You know that the entrance to the estate was on Adams near Avon Road. There was a gate house there, and there were two people, a couple who lived there, and their sole purpose was to open the gate and close the gate when the Wilsons came on campus. They also had a code or an arrangement for after they went through the gate. There was a road that extended from there, past the deer park and through part of the golf course—the road is still in existence. They would come back home and drive into Meadow Brook Hall and go to the front door. If the parkway lights did not turn off within three or four minutes, then the gate man was to call the security person to check and see, because once they got into the Hall through the main door, there is a switch that turned out all of the lights that go along the road.

The lights failed over a period of time. When she had her coming-out party for her granddaughter, she had asked me to reestablish the lights. Well, I had about a week to do that and it was a high voltage [system] with buried

transformers, and you just can't get those in a few days. So, working with the electrician, he devised a plan. I think we bought eight batteries at Sears and we put a battery at the base of each light that did not work.

She remembered that. After the party, she took the time to thank me for fixing the lights and I advised her that it was a temporary fix. She said, "George, I asked you to do it for the coming-out party, I didn't ask you to fix it forever." She was nice, she was very nice.

DAVID LOWY: Didn't Mr. Wilson pass away before her? That was in 1962, and then she was there alone for a while?

GEORGE KARAS: Her granddaughter Judy stayed with her for a while, but I think Mr. Wilson was still there. Judy was a very pleasant lady who naturally loved her grandmother and thought the world of her. They got into the race horse business for about a year, I think it was. I remember Judy explaining to me how you bet on horses and how you read the results, and all of that. They built a track right where we presently have the Halloween place at the corner [of Adams and Walton]. They built a full-scale running track with white rails and top posts around that particular area. I think they ran horses on it only four or five times, but she built a nice small track, a regulation track for Judy to train the race horses.

DAVID LOWY: If I remember correctly didn't she eventually move to Sunset Terrace and no longer live in Meadow Brook Hall?

GEORGE KARAS: No, she left Meadow Brook Hall when she went to Belgium to buy Belgian horses with her horseman. She lived in Meadow Brook Hall, she lived literally in both places.

DAVID LOWY: She kept them both going?

GEORGE KARAS: She did.

She was such a nice lady. She let our daughters go over and pick ornaments off the [Christmas] tree. She had a massive tree. Sometime in our weekly and monthly trips checking through the building, I had enough nerve to ask her whether she put the better ornaments higher, and she laughed.

She said, "Now, George, you know me better than that." She was just a wonderful lady.

Like I said, there was some good and bad. They adopted an animal, a dog called Spot that they found wired to the fence at Butler Road where they had the poultry area. The dog was wired there and they stopped and they unhooked the dog. They put him in the car and brought him back, as they were going to church on Sunday. Well, Spot wasn't a very good dog, he was a mongrel but all of the men on the estate liked him.

So I drove in one morning and he was coming around the corner by the stone wellhouse, maybe five hundred yards from Sunset Terrace. I made the turn and Spot ran under me and sort of tumbled a little bit. I don't know whether he hit the wheel and bounced back or what. I drove up to Sunset Terrace a little bit scared. I went in and she greeted me—I went into the breakfast room and she was sitting there and she greeted me. She said, "Spot is all right, George." By the time I drove five hundred yards they got the word to her that the dog was okay. She had a great sense of humor.

DAVID LOWY: You were also probably very much involved when they started what became Meadow Brook Festival and Baldwin Pavilion, starting around 1962?

GEORGE KARAS: Oh, yes. Mr. Varner had the idea that he wanted to do something in the way of cultural entertainment or fine arts. He asked if I could find a natural bowl like the Hollywood Bowl, which would mean we were looking for a difference in elevation of a hundred or two hundred feet and a nice ravine.

We had a topo map of the area and we had two or three sites that we were looking at. One was Toboggan Hill, it is over there past the Galloway drain on Lonedale. And another one around the corner from that area, and one right by Sunset Terrace where [the Festival] exists.

We looked at them and we thought the last one was our best location. But we were a little bit concerned about the proximity to Sunset Terrace where she was living, and the noise and so forth. So Woody, as he always did, looked at the plans and we talked the pros and cons and he said, "Well, let's go talk to Mrs. Wilson." He always liked to talk to Mrs. Wilson.

So we went over there and we showed her the locations. We talked briefly about it, and talked about what we thought were good points and bad points, and he asked her, "Which do you prefer?" And she said, "Well, what's wrong with this one?" It was the one by Sunset Terrace and Woody told her, "Honestly, Mrs. Wilson, we thought the noise would be too much." She looked him right in the eye and said, "Woody, I like music too." So that was the selection—she was involved in a lot of those.

She also was involved in the modification of Adams Road. You know where the stone wall is and that hill where the houses are? Well, my daughter was hit by a car crossing that road to catch the bus—it's very dangerous—and the person who hit her was not prosecuted because he was going the [speed] limit and it is just a blind spot.

Well, we were concerned about that and also the [nearby] entrance, that was our entrance. The Road Commission advised Woody that they would modify that hillside if he wanted it modified. They had the plans drawn. On that hillside presently the water main is about 20 or 30 feet deep because we expected that hillside to go down. We had the plans, and we were ready to do it with the money and plans available. We went in and talked to Mrs. Wilson and she said, "I would prefer that you not take down the trees and the walls while I am still around." And so we did not change Adams Road. It is still a bad area but she spoke out and told Woody.

DAVID LOWY: But she kindly said, "I would prefer."

GEORGE KARAS: I think this was loud and clear: "Thou shalt not take down the trees and walls."

DAVID LOWY: We are still are listening to her because we still haven't taken it down.

George, obviously your job was the engineering, so we could have buildings to teach in, heat and water, be able to drive around campus and so on. Did your role and what you did interact with the academic programs?

GEORGE KARAS: Oh, yes. Remembering that the professors and the people who came here were relatively new and we had no established background, we worked with them on many of their own projects, some of their research

projects. I remember a lot of the people—Mr. Tomboulian, Mr. Hammerle, Mr. Lepley—coming forward and sharing with me the thoughts that they had on their buildings. I remember years ago, when I first came here, they asked me, "Why did you come to the university, having been able to go to a manufacturing plant or construction and so forth?" I remember working with the students, it kept you young. It was just a wonderful, wonderful place to work.

I think maybe my views and feelings were somewhat slanted. On some of our budget hearings it would come to Mr. [Robert] Swanson—our treasurer, not the architect—Woody and myself talking about budgets. There would be a question of an extra custodian or an extra mechanical man, and I felt at that time that the instructors and the academic were a little bit more important.

Some of the sacrifices that we made in the physical plant may have hurt us in years gone by, but I don't remember any complaints about the service. So I figured that it's best that the academics—that's the reason we are here—would get what funds they needed and then I would have enough to operate on. So it was a give and take. It didn't hurt us, I enjoyed it.

DAVID LOWY: George we are just about through. I am wondering, after we have both reminisced about what it was like, do you have a general idea of what the memories of those early years were? How do you see them now?

GEORGE KARAS: Lou Gehrig said he is the luckiest guy on earth. I don't think that I am the luckiest guy, but I think I am one of the more fortunate persons in the engineering group having been exposed to an entirely new project, exposed to many, many different people. I enjoyed it, I think it was very exciting.

The first three to five years that I was here I never had a vacation, and I never missed it. My poor wife and children suffered a little bit. The dedication of the Meadow Brook Festival on July the 12th was on our anniversary. Woody being the great gamesman that he is, congratulated my wife, and I didn't even remember. But he remembered it and had her stand up, and I think he presented her with a little bouquet.

So it is that kind of thing that he has done that makes you feel happy that you are here. I don't regret a moment. I wish I could do it over again

knowing what I know now. I might not give up the custodians—but it was a wonderful, wonderful life. I don't regret a moment of it.

DAVID LOWY: George, thank you very much. It has really been great.

GEORGE KARAS: I appreciate it, Dave.

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