

MEMORIES OF MSUO

by Nadji White Reynolds, December 15, 2019

In the fall of 1957 I was working at Michigan State University when I interviewed for and got the position of Junior Secretary in the office of D. B. (Woody) Varner, Vice President of Off-Campus Education. His office was in Kellogg Center and also included Natalie Bruinsma, Senior Secretary, and Jack Breslin, an assistant to Woody. My duties included helping Natalie with her work and secretary to Jack. I did the filing for the office, and in one drawer I had a hanging folder for the Meadow Brook Project.

On January 3, 1957 Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Wilson announced they had signed the papers with John Hannah, President of Michigan State University, to turn over their 1500-acre estate to Michigan State for the purpose of establishing a new educational facility in Oakland County. I dutifully filed materials related to this project but had no more interest in it than with other matters the office was concerned with especially the University's involvement with the Michigan legislature for its annual appropriation.

By 1958 I was filing information about forums that were being planned to bring together noted people from around the country for the purpose of planning the

curriculum for this new campus. That year I met Lowell Eklund, who was in charge of Continuing Education classes being planned. However, it wasn't until I was introduced to George Karas, who had been appointed to be in charge of construction of the campus that I really took notice that there were soon going to be buildings erected on the Wilson property and that there was a plan to develop the whole area with future projections of enrollment up to 20,000. Soon after that I learned that Woody was one of the contenders for the position of Chancellor of this new campus in the hinterlands of Oakland County.

In January 1959 Woody's appointment as Chancellor was confirmed by the Board of Trustees of Michigan State, and about that time I was being included in more of the work that was going on near the small town of Rochester. Along about late January or early February Woody asked me if I would be interested in working at the new campus, and I declined as I was very happy with life in the "big city" of East Lansing and all the activities connected with the University (especially my great seats in the stadium during football season) and my social life. I had no interest in going to another small town as I had left one to go to Michigan State. I had also assumed that Natalie would be going as his secretary until March when I learned that she was not going. The MSU Board of Trustees planned their spring

1959 meeting at Meadow Brook Hall, and Woody asked if I would go and help with that meeting.

I rode to Rochester with Ruth Jameson, John Hannah's secretary, and Marie Mercer, secretary to the Board Secretary. When we drove up to the gatehouse on Adams Road, the gentleman told us that Mrs. Wilson would like us to come to Sunset Terrace for coffee before going to Meadow Brook Hall. When I walked into that beautiful house, the first thing I saw was a Frederic Remington sculpture. I was pretty impressed. Mrs. Wilson was very gracious, and I was overwhelmed to be served coffee by a butler—a new experience for this kid from the country. When we entered Meadow Brook Hall for the Board meeting, I was introduced to Christina Scott, Mrs. Wilson's secretary. I was not actually needed to help with the meeting as Christina had taken care of that, but she gave me a tour of the Hall while the meeting took place. Needless to say, I was in awe, especially when I saw the portrait of George Washington by Gilbert Stuart that hung in the dining room. I rode back to East Lansing with Woody, and he asked if I would go to this new campus as his secretary, and I said I would. I have no proof, but I have always suspected that Woody conspired with Mrs. Wilson to get me to change my mind, and it worked.

By June we were in our "no frills" offices in North Foundation Hall, which was not finished and the horse flies had not gotten the message that the Belgians were gone for good. We did our work amid the carpenters, plumbers, electricians, architects, dangling wires, ropes, pipes, saw horses and saw dust. For lunches we drove up to the restaurant at the corner of Walton and Squirrel Roads or into Rochester. When the water was shut off for plumbing work, we made the same trek.

Durward Belmont Varner was an ideal person to launch such a huge undertaking. Growing up in Cottonwood, Texas he had picked cotton and worked in the Texas oil fields, his father was his teacher in a one-room school. As a graduate of Texas A & M College, he was drafted early into World War II as a second lieutenant. His military experience had shown him the devastation of Europe first-hand as his 6th Tank Destroyer Group, part of VIII Corp of George Patton's Third Army had fought their way from Normandy to their meeting with the Russians at the Elbe River.

He understood the value of education. He continued my education. He told me a story of an elderly man, not well dressed, who visited a college president's office. He was refused an appointment with the president, and it was learned later

that he had wanted to make a monetary gift to the college. The lesson for me was to treat everyone with respect, which Woody certainly did. He took calls and met with everyone who wanted to contact him. One time he asked my opinion of something, and I didn't have one. His advice was that when he asked for my opinion, he expected me to have one. I immediately signed up for newspaper delivery and subscriptions to magazines.

Our offices were the first ones inside the door off the parking lot, and everyone who came in and needed directions came straight to my desk. Behind our offices were those of Loren Pope, Bob Swanson, Roy Alexander and Bob Hoopes with their secretaries. Down the north aisle were the liberal arts faculty offices, and the science and math faculty offices were down the south aisle. The steno pool was housed in a niche in the wall across from my office. For the first year we were all housed close to each other and relationships were formed. We felt like family and real pioneers in building this new educational institution. I sat in on some of Jerry Straka's classes, started to learn French with Nadine Popluiko, was included in a class field trip to the Detroit Institute of Arts and lunch at a Chinese restaurant. I picked up Helen Kovach on my way to work and someone else took her home. When Paula couldn't pick up Tom and Judy at school she asked if I would do it.

When a family car was in the shop and Paula needed the other one, Woody would take my stick-shift Ford to his meetings. He would come back asking me to buy a better car (which I never did).

One day Mrs. Wilson came through the door with a stack of folders in her arms. She had not let us know that she was coming, and Woody was not in the office. I offered her a chair in his office, but she said she would prefer to sit in the hallway. My only way of finding Woody was to call some of the offices, but not locating him, I had to walk around North and South Foundation Halls until I found him. She left the folders with him, and he walked her out to her Dodge car that she had driven over.

Another day, Woody and George Karas were leaving the building, and Woody told me to come along. We drove through the estate and stopped in a wooded area. They took off through the trees with me following as best I could in my high heels. They stopped at the edge of a natural bowl, and Woody said he wanted to build an amphitheater there for a music/cultural festival.

When Woody had to go to East Lansing for a meeting, I would ride along in the back seat while a student drove Woody's car. Woody would dictate answers to correspondence, speeches or proposals he needed to work on while I took it down

in shorthand. While he was in his meeting, I found an office where the secretary could lend me a typewriter and I could transcribe my notes so Woody could edit them on the way back to Rochester.

I was impressed by the quality of people who came to the forums put together by John Hannah, Tom Hamilton, another Vice President at MSU, and Woody. They had attracted the top people in a variety of fields from all over the country. One day Woody was going into a meeting in his little conference room and told me he didn't want to be disturbed except if the President called (Dwight Eisenhower at that time). I received a call from the secretary of Dr. Milton Eisenhower who was coming to MSUO for the Liberal Arts forum. She said Dr. Eisenhower (brother to Dwight and President of Johns Hopkins University) needed to speak with Mr. Varner urgently before he left to catch his plane. What to do? I interrupted the meeting to let Woody know that President Eisenhower needed to speak with him (Milton, not Dwight). He took the call and didn't fire me, so I felt I made the right choice.

Woody had honed his diplomacy skills while working with the Governor and legislature to get appropriations for MSU and later MSUO. He put those skills to good use in putting together the various volunteer committees he formed to get

MSUO under way. Committee rosters included local educators, corporate leaders, union leaders, community leaders—a Who's Who of people in Southeast Michigan. He knew exactly who to call upon for which job he needed their help on, and he got it.

Woody supported the development of the local community colleges. He understood that not all young people were interested in a four-year college education and that the skills taught in community college were valuable in the community. If a student desired more education after two years, then MSUO and the Continuing Education programs would be nearby to provide that.

He wanted to assist students who needed help in paying their fees and encouraged senior staff to find placement for them as student assistants. We started in our office with Joyce Rose as our helper. Joyce and I remained friends until her all too early death from cancer.

He met often with William Stirton, the Chancellor of the University of Michigan branch being constructed in Dearborn. Because of the intense focus on education at MSUO, he received correspondence and calls from all over the country from

those establishing educational facilities in response to the awakening that Sputnik had ignited with the realization that the U.S. was behind Russia in the space race.

The emphasis on intramural sports at MSUO has been attributed to Mrs. Wilson. Woody understood the importance of sports from his own life as captain of basketball teams. But both of them knew that football had become a major influence in the college experience at MSU and the concern caused by an NCAA investigation there in the early 1950s for improprieties in their football program. I believe both of them wanted the emphasis to be on learning with sports available but not the focus of campus life. In an interview with Glenna McWhirter of the Detroit Free Press in 1963, Woody said, "A high-pressure athletic program is objectionable."

My best friend was a staff member. When I visited at her home, her brother, who was a student in the Charter Class, asked me about plans and what might be happening at the school. My standard answer always was "I don't know." One day Woody asked me if I was asked and what my answer was. I was evidently under suspicion as a leaker of confidential information. I told him that I was asked and what my answer was. No more came of it, and he didn't ask me to stop my friendship.

It became apparent early on that MSUO needed dormitories as the school was attracting students from beyond Southeast Michigan. The boys were housed in one of the barns, and Roy Alexander wanted to place the girls in a house on the property on Squirrel Road. He asked me if I would be the housemother. I declined the invitation as I was only a few years older than the students and concerned that I wouldn't have much authority in that position.

Woody went to Flint one day to meet with Charles Stewart Mott. He came back to the office chuckling that one of the wealthiest men in the country had taken him for lunch at a cafeteria in an elementary school. However, the visit did result in a long-term grant from the Mott Foundation.

It was a totally unique experience, but I had my own life. I married in 1964 and had to leave the University in September 1965 when I was five-months pregnant with our son. That was the standard in those days. Woody asked me a couple of times after that to come back, but family considerations prevented it.