

# Oakland University Chronicles

*Interview with*

## Robert W. Swanson

Transcript of Oral History Interview

Interview date: January 22, 1997

Interviewer: Harvey Burdick



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### **ROBERT W. SWANSON**

Date of birth: January 6, 1924

#### **EDUCATION**

B.S.	Northwestern University	1948
M.A.	Michigan State University	1951

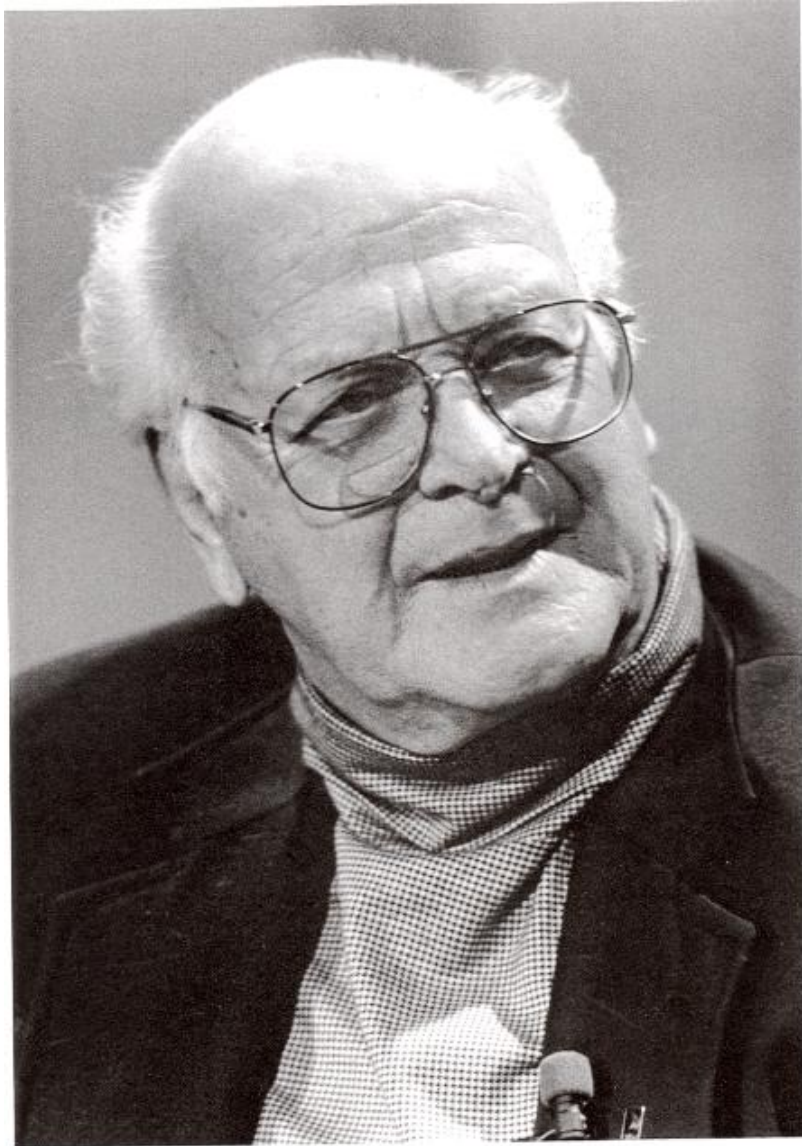
#### **MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY**

1951 • 1956	Educational Cost Analyst
1956 • 1959	Finance Officer for MSU Advisory Group in Saigon, Vietnam

#### **OAKLAND UNIVERSITY**

7-1-59	Director of Business Affairs
7-1-66	Professor of Administration and Director of Business Affairs
12-1-70	Professor of Administration, Treasurer for Board of Trustees and Vice President of Business Affairs
4-16-81	Vice President of Development and Treasurer for Board of Trustees
5-6-82	Vice President of Developmental Affairs
6-30-89	Retired

*Current as of January 22, 1997*



**Photograph of Robert W. Swanson**

January 22, 1997

Photographer: Rick Smith  
Oakland University Communications and Marketing



Robert W. Swanson  
*Director of Business Affairs*

**Photograph of Robert W. Swanson**

MSUO Yearbook 1963

# Oakland University Chronicles

## HARVEY BURDICK, Interviewer

Date of birth: February 18, 1926

### EDUCATION

B.A.	Syracuse University	1949
Ph.D.	University of Minnesota	1955

### OAKLAND UNIVERSITY

8-15-62	Associate Professor of Psychology
8-15-64	Associate Professor of Psychology with Tenure
7-1-64	Acting Chair, Department of Psychology
7-1-66	Professor of Psychology Chair, Department of Psychology
7-1-69	Professor of Psychology
2-15-96	Phased Retirement



**Oakland University Chronicles**  
**Interview with ROBERT SWANSON**  
**January 22, 1997**

HARVEY BURDICK: Today's interview is one among a number of interviews being conducted for the Oakland University Chronicles project, whose goal is to collect oral histories dealing with the origins and early years of Oakland University. The project is supported by a grant from the Oakland University Foundation. Today is January the 22nd, 1997, and we are in Varner Hall on the campus of Oakland University. My name is Harvey Burdick, and I am a professor of psychology and I have been at Oakland since 1962.

Our guest today is Robert Swanson, who came to MSU Oakland in 1959 as Director of Business Affairs. He was later given the academic title of Professor of Administration and then has served as Treasurer for the Board of Trustees. In 1970 he was made a Vice-President and in 1981 he was put in charge of development. After 30 years of dedicated service, Robert Swanson retired in 1989, but he has maintained his relationship with the university as a consultant for the Oakland University Foundation.

Welcome, Bob, and thank you for coming—

ROBERT SWANSON: My pleasure.

HARVEY BURDICK: -- and sharing some of your memories of the early days of Oakland. Let me start by asking you how you first heard of Oakland, and then perhaps you can tell us how you ended up coming here.

ROBERT SWANSON: It may be both of some interest as well as a bit unusual, but I was in Saigon, Vietnam, as a member of the Michigan State University advisory group and had just arrived in November of 1956. That was almost concurrent with the announcement of the gift of the Wilsons of their estate, and it invoked a good bit of both curiosity as well as interest. It was followed up by a visit in, I believe it was December of 1956, of President Hannah, who was making an inspection trip of the advisory group in Saigon. And so we had an opportunity then to learn from him more about the gift

and the development, and what the plans were for the development of another institution of higher education in Oakland County.

HARVEY BURDICK: Was he full of excitement about this potential project?

ROBERT SWANSON: Well, I don't know as I recall that he related a lot of excitement. I don't think that was much in his personality. However, he was very positive about it, and he was very pleased about it, and was looking forward to the subsequent development.

HARVEY BURDICK: So, you just heard about it, you weren't personally or immediately involved or given any interest or anything like that?

ROBERT SWANSON: Oh no, had no idea nor any speculation at all that I might eventually be involved with MSUO.

HARVEY BURDICK: And you had lots of stuff to be doing and you stayed there for the next few years, didn't you?

ROBERT SWANSON: It was nearly three years that we were in Vietnam with the advisory group. We returned in May of 1959 to resume my career, having been on leave of absence from the financial administrative staff at Michigan State, and that was pretty much concurrent with the impending development here at Oakland. The charter class was to be enrolled in that fall, and we had a very precious short period of time to get settled and reacclimated to the East Lansing campus scene.

My wife and I bought a home, and we ordered drapes and carpeting and a new laundry. Eight days after we occupied the house, I got a call from Woody Varner whom I had known as an administrator at Michigan State, but not closely, not intimately, but knew him of course by reputation. He presented the initial MSUO story to me and was sufficiently persuasive that he created a rather high degree of excitement, although that was hardly the description of my wife's reaction when I told her of the possibility. But after a visit down here to get acquainted more with the proposed development, it wasn't too difficult for both of us to make the commitment and agree to become part of the initial development of MSUO.



HARVEY BURDICK: So, from what I understand, you come back intending to pick up where you had left off some three years earlier. Woody Varner gives you a ring, calls you, speaks to you, and gets you interested in this new exciting project enough so that you consider it—he persuades you. You just bought a house, you give that up, and with all that entails, and you come on down into the Rochester area. Do you recall some of the things that got you so interested that you were going to turn around and come down here?

ROBERT SWANSON: Well, there were several things, one of which was that it seemed to be a rather unusual, or unusually good, career opportunity to become the chief financial officer.

HARVEY BURDICK: And you were just a young man at that time.

ROBERT SWANSON: I was 35 years old, and it would have taken me a good bit longer to develop to that area at Michigan State. But also there was the interest and excitement of being involved in this new development of a new institution. It's a rare opportunity to be involved on the ground floor of the development of a new institution from what was described as the horse pastures down here. And it was not quite referenced as the clean slate, but just out of an expensive piece of farm property a university was created. It was a matter of excitement being invited to be part of it.

HARVEY BURDICK: There was a career opportunity for you, but there was the Oakland story, obviously. It wasn't just any school, it wasn't just any new campus, but it was a special kind of campus. What were some of the images that Woody Varner created for you regarding this—do you recall those?

ROBERT SWANSON: I think it has to be realized that the time was almost the immediate post-Sputnik era. There was a great concern expressed nationally about really where we stand competitively in terms of our education, primarily science education. There was a feeling of, I think, some embarrassment and possible inadequacy in terms of where we stood nationally. We were still in the throes of the Cold War at that time, it was at its peak. So there was a lot of national concern, public concern and interest

about the quality of education. And Woody had projected, really, this as an opportunity to be on the ground floor of creating an institution that wouldn't be fettered by historical traditions in higher education, and that added to the appeal and the excitement as well.

HARVEY BURDICK: Well, the timing is interesting. In '56, as you said, was the willingness to donate the land. Then in '57 you get Sputnik. And then you get the development of a new kind of place. Am I getting the sequencing down, so that there was not just, "Let's have a new part of MSU, or just a regular old school," but something really different? And that you think it was motivated a little bit by the Sputnik affair and the concern with our education?

ROBERT SWANSON: Oh, I think very heavily influenced by that. And there was also a feeling of confidence being a part of Michigan State University, you know—its image, prestige and support that it would give to the development, which was very heavy in the initial phases. So there was a feeling of confidence that the resources of Michigan State were there and behind the development.

HARVEY BURDICK: Certainly you were knowledgeable about that area and I'd like to explore it with you, and particularly how Oakland really came about. I wonder if you could now go back into that early period in which the land was donated, and where the money first was starting to be considered as important, and the status of the Oakland County area, things that you know so much about. Can you go back to really digging out those origins for us?

ROBERT SWANSON: I was not here at the time, so I cannot speak about my personal familiarity with it. However, through the years, I developed a rather warm relationship with Howard McGregor, who was an icon in the Rochester area. He was the owner of the National Twist Drill and owned extensive property holdings that now are the Great Oaks Country Club property. That club house was his mansion - residence - at the time. He also donated the property that the Crittenton Hospital is on.

Howard and Kay McGregor were social friends of Alfred and Matilda Wilson. In conversations through the years with Howard McGregor, he

would relate to me the early discussions that the McGregors would have with the Wilsons as they were playing cards or socializing either at Meadow Brook Hall or at their residence there at Great Oaks. He indicated that prior to their decision and in their social conversation, Mrs. Wilson would explain the concern that they had about what was to become of the Meadow Brook Estate, and what would be the most sensible outcome, because I'm sure they realized that it wasn't suitable or sensible to pass that on, to pass the estate on to their children.

Howard McGregor had indicated to me that one discussion focused on whether or not there was a sensible relationship of the estate to the hospital development that Howard McGregor was involved with in Detroit. I believe he was Chairman of the Board of the hospital in Detroit that later became the Crittenton Hospital. He said that his response to Mrs. Wilson was that he really couldn't quite see a fit between the estate and any hospital development. Then the conversation later turned to the development of an institution of higher education, which then seemed to catch her interest more. I think, based on the fact that she had developed a rather close relationship and become quite familiar with John Hannah at Michigan State, and she also had been a member of the Board of Trustees at Michigan State, that it was her preference and her interest in giving consideration and giving direction to the development under the aegis of Michigan State.

HARVEY BURDICK: Now, we're talking about 1955-ish period, right, '54-'55? Here Matilda Wilson has this great home, this mansion, and she is considering donating it to some kind of major phenomenon like a hospital or higher education. But there were other things going on as well, I take it, in Oakland County with the University of Michigan, is that correct?

ROBERT SWANSON: I think the possible involvement of the University of Michigan related to the fact that the Chairman of the Oakland County Planning Commission at the time was a rather devoted and dedicated person to the interests of the University of Michigan. And I think he made every effort to direct her consideration towards the development of a campus of the University of Michigan here.

HARVEY BURDICK: But she had been on the [MSU] Board, she has a special relationship with President Hannah. What was the nature of that relationship? Were they good friends, was it because of their backgrounds, common interests, or anything of that nature?

ROBERT SWANSON: I believe that it developed out of his early specialty as a poultry specialist on the faculty and the extension faculty at Michigan State. He was a poultry specialist, and as you undoubtedly know, the Wilsons operated a comprehensive farm program here that included a rather expansive poultry operation.

HARVEY BURDICK: No, I didn't. Is that right?

ROBERT SWANSON: The home that became the Chancellor's residence, the Varners' residence, the home that's on the corner of Butler Road and Adams Road, was the home for the poultry manager. And then there are, I think, three or four poultry houses behind there. So [Hannah] would pay visits down here, which called upon his expertise as a poultry specialist. So I think that's how they initially got acquainted, but of course, John Hannah progressed administratively at Michigan State and the relationship grew from that.

HARVEY BURDICK: And was it her suggestion that she donate the land to Michigan State? Was it Hannah's suggestion that she donate? Do you have any idea about that?

ROBERT SWANSON: I believe that she expressed the interest in contributing, donating the property for the development of an institution of higher education, and I think she raised the question with President Hannah and I think he probably endorsed it as a mighty good idea.

HARVEY BURDICK: I see. In other words, he was delighted to accept.

ROBERT SWANSON: I think part of his ready acceptance was the fact that concurrently the University of Michigan was given the Fairlane Estate in Dearborn, and had announced the development of the Dearborn branch of the University of Michigan at Dearborn. President Hannah, I suspect, was

reacting also to the opportunity to plant the Michigan State flag in the metropolitan area, and this no doubt was viewed as a good opportunity.

HARVEY BURDICK: I get the feeling there was a little competition then between the two schools?

ROBERT SWANSON: Yes, and John Hannah by his nature was an expansionist person. I recall that so frequently on the Board agendas at Michigan State he would make a recommendation to acquire another farm that was contiguous to the Michigan State campus. And he would describe it time and time again as an opportunity just to "square out this area."

HARVEY BURDICK: And so our destiny.

ROBERT SWANSON: I think he wound up with sixty-five or sixty-seven hundred acres ultimately. It was a very frequent matter on the Board agenda, the acquisition of another piece of property, which I'm sure was a sensible thing to do. What I'm trying to describe is, I think it was part of his nature also to be an expansionist.

HARVEY BURDICK: So he accepts this large chunk of land and then he was starting to think what to do with it, right? How and when does Woody Varner get into the act; do you have any sense of that?

ROBERT SWANSON: Woody at the same time had come out of the extension program at Michigan State. He was the head of the Cooperative Extension operation. But President Hannah had named him Vice-President for—I forget the exact title—but for university relations. A primary assignment of his was to "influence"—quote, "lobby"—the Legislature to approve of the change of the name of Michigan State College to University, to be concurrent with their centennial celebration in 1955. That was to be a logical time to make the name change designation. An effort, incidentally, which was very strongly opposed by the University of Michigan, who declared that there is only one university in the State of Michigan.

HARVEY BURDICK: Michigan State College certainly is a lower order status, isn't it, than Michigan State University? So it's clear that Hannah was trying to not only expand the physical characteristics of Michigan State, but also its status in higher education?

ROBERT SWANSON: Well, yes. It didn't command the prestige that the University of Michigan did, and that probably follows from its origin as a land grant college. It was the agricultural college in the state of Michigan and there's one in each state. Initially it was the Michigan Agricultural College, MAC, and then - I forget the year - but then it became Michigan State College, and then in 1955, it was legislatively changed to Michigan State University.

HARVEY BURDICK: So Woody Varner was quite successful as a lobbyist in that regard.

ROBERT SWANSON: Oh, he was.

HARVEY BURDICK: I guess I'm trying to find out how Woody and the grant from Wilsons got together under the aegis of Hannah. How did that marriage take place? Do you have any impressions of that?

ROBERT SWANSON: Woody, as we all came to know, had a very friendly and persuasive personality. The economic tenor of the times was very bad right then, and that was during the era of the so-called "payless paydays" in Michigan. To launch a new campus or even to get it accepted, you know, by both the Board of Trustees and the Legislature, required some persuasion of the need for another institution of higher education, and also to try to project what ultimately might be the appropriation obligations of the Legislature to maintain it and keep it going. I think John Hannah called on those personality traits and persuasiveness of Woody, to sort of be the point man in his relationship with the Wilsons.

HARVEY BURDICK: The willingness to give the two million to go along with the estate -- do you recall when that takes place?

ROBERT SWANSON: Well, again, I was not here at the time, but Woody, on several occasions, has described how that came about: that John Hannah and Woody were leaving the campus at Michigan State to drive down to Rochester to meet with the Wilsons about the development of the property and the estate into a university. They both acknowledged and recognized that it would be rather futile to appeal to the Legislature right at that time for an initial capital outlay appropriation to get the program launched, because it would carry with it, very likely, a dual commitment to appropriate something for the University of Michigan at the Dearborn campus as well, which the Legislature was in no condition to do. So, as Woody described it, as they left the East Lansing campus, they passed the new East Lansing High School that was either just completed or nearing completion, and they declared that was accomplished with about two million dollars. And you know, if they had a facility about that size, they thought they could get it launched. So they decided on the way down to make an appeal to the Wilsons to make a cash contribution in addition to the property and estate, so that could get the educational program launched.

HARVEY BURDICK: So, that's how the two million dollars came up.

ROBERT SWANSON: That's how it came. And then in the course of the conversation as Woody described it, they made the pitch to Mr. and Mrs. Wilson. Alfred's response was the first one, and he sort of declared that, "I don't see how we could do that." Mrs. Wilson's response was, "Alfred, I think we could." And that was it. And so they came back with the commitment for two million dollars that they declared would be adequate to get the initial construction for North and South Foundation Hall and to get the project under way.

HARVEY BURDICK: So the day ended very well with Matilda Wilson saying they have the money, Hannah and Woody go back feeling very good about what they've accomplished, and now the work begins. Now you have to put everything into some sort of operation, and one of the things you were confronted with was the relationships with the immediate community. How did Woody approach that problem?

ROBERT SWANSON: Well again, you know, I was still on the other side of the world in Vietnam at this time, but a very early effort on the part of both John Hannah and Woody Varner was to establish contacts and relationships with the prestigious, significant, credible people in the community, to launch the operation and to give it a sense of support and endorsement. Early on, a meeting that I've heard described by both Woody and by Mrs. Roger Kyes, was a meeting that took place in her home in Bloomfield Hills. Roger Kyes at that time was a group vice president of General Motors. He had recently returned from a stint in Washington as Deputy Secretary of Defense under C. E. Wilson, in President Eisenhower's administration, where, incidentally, John Hannah had also served as Assistant Secretary of Defense—so that's how he got well acquainted with Roger Kyes.

So they met with the Kyes's in their home and Mrs. Kyes has described that meeting to me firsthand. Incidentally, Mrs. Kyes remains a very stalwart friend of Oakland University, having been appointed by Governor Milliken to the Charter Board. She was on the Board for a period of eight years. A very charming woman.

Both John Hannah and Woody Varner recognized the importance of establishing this community base. So they formulated there the development of a foundation, and it wasn't long thereafter before the MSUO Foundation was established. I think perhaps it was in 1957, although I wasn't here at the time. They enlisted, oh, the likes of Harold Fitzgerald, who was the publisher of the Pontiac Press, and Al Gerard, who was chairman of the Community National Bank. They were the stem-winders of the City of Pontiac and the Pontiac area, and had entree into the Bloomfield Hills community. It was out of this initial cadre that they identified the initial Trustees of the MSUO Foundation, which was rather broad. There probably were more than 40 individuals, leaders in Oakland County. They included county government, city government, [Pontiac] school superintendent, and the like to develop this community base and relationship.

HARVEY BURDICK: So, the MSU Oakland Foundation was made up of the leaders, financial leaders as well. Did some of them donate any money, do you recall?



ROBERT SWANSON: Oh yes, yes, indeed, they did. And they made initial contributions that were very helpful in establishing scholarships. Mrs. Kyes, for instance, has been very generous. She contributed funds for the commissioning of the Kyes organ that's located in the Varner Recital Hall. That was done rather early on during the Woody Varner era. And, oh yes, quite a number were very generous contributors.

HARVEY BURDICK: Well, I'm aware that is how some of the buildings on campus were named. Fitzgerald House, I take it, is after Harold Fitzgerald.

ROBERT SWANSON: Pryale House where your office is located: he was an industrialist in Pontiac, and he made a generous contribution, as did Mr. and Mrs. Ben Anibal, who made the gift that caused that dorm to be named after them. So there are quite a number of individuals who came on board with their generous support.

HARVEY BURDICK: But they just existed as a set of prestigious names of people who were giving their moral support, but they were not part of any governance process or anything like that?

ROBERT SWANSON: No, no, not at all. But it helped to establish a prestige image of the institution in its development.

An anecdote that I hadn't thought of until just now might be of some interest. There was a bit of a contest between the City of Pontiac, where Harold Fitzgerald reigned as the potentate, and Rochester being the postal address of Meadow Brook Hall and Meadow Brook Estate.

Harold Fitzgerald wanted mightily to have Pontiac as the postal address for the MSUO development. Technically, the campus here is in what was then Pontiac Township—now it's in Auburn Hills. But there's a township line of demarcation that's just about where the married student apartments are now.

Mrs. Wilson was rather adamant about maintaining the Rochester post office address for the university's development. And as was described to me by Woody on several occasions, the matter actually went as far as the desk of the Postmaster General in Washington, who at the time was Arthur Summerfield, and this was during the Eisenhower administration. I think

Mrs. Wilson, having been a very generous contributor to the Republican Party and supporter for the administration and Arthur Summerfield, prevailed. So the postal address was established as Rochester, as it still is to this day, even though technically we're in Auburn Hills.

HARVEY BURDICK: I think that's a great anecdote, I thank you. I've always wondered why we ended up with the particular address that we have and this explains it. This was a possibility that could have gone either way?

ROBERT SWANSON: It could have gone either way, and it had to have been settled by the Postmaster General of the United States.

HARVEY BURDICK: That's very interesting.

So, we now have the university established, we have some moneys, we have the buildings being built, you come on board in '59. As I said earlier, you're a relatively young man to be given the position of chief financial officer. What kinds of problems and functions, or what have you, were you confronted with at that time, do you recall?

ROBERT SWANSON: The primary one, understandably, was limited resources. However, that didn't seem to be an abiding limitation or concern because with the MSU affiliation, we felt that the resources of the mother campus would stand behind this development, and it would reasonably give its support to what was necessary to launch the program. Michigan State was rather generous and supportive in providing staff assistance and development along those lines. But it didn't seem as though the limitations, rather severe limitations, were a paramount problem. You dealt with the resources that were made available.

HARVEY BURDICK: You described Hannah as a kind of expansionist sort of administrator. How would you describe Woody, was he in that same vein? Was this a man who would go forward and try new things, kind of an adventurer, perhaps, in higher education?

ROBERT SWANSON: He was very adventuresome and I would describe Woody as a risk taker. He was almost the eternal optimist, and it was

infectious. And it permeated, I think, the attitudes of so many folks, myself included. You know, you wound up with a high degree of confidence and faith in his ability to pull it off.

HARVEY BURDICK: Pull it off, right. And you are, as I said, the financial officer. Obviously one of your main concerns is whether we can afford these things? And were there times when you might have turned to Woody, saying, "Do you think we can afford this?" or what have you—any of those discussions?

ROBERT SWANSON: Or, "How are we going to pay for it?" I recall on several occasions his comment would be, "Not to worry", he said, "tomorrow the bomb may drop." And so, you know, that kind of describes both his level of optimism as well as the degree to which he felt comfortable in taking risks.

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

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

HARVEY BURDICK: So you weren't perhaps as comfortable with some of the risks themselves, but you were confident in Woody? It was that confidence?

ROBERT SWANSON: Right.

HARVEY BURDICK: If I recall we were talking about how, even coming down here, that confidence in Woody was an element?

ROBERT SWANSON: Right. This was of course an unknown quantity both in terms of the ultimate development and what the future might hold, but also the area was new and strange. It required uprooting my family after having moved into this home that we had just bought, after having been in it only eight days. So it required an act of faith, and confidence, and some risk taking.

HARVEY BURDICK: The willingness to take that risk because of your feelings about Woody Varner?

ROBERT SWANSON: Yes.

HARVEY BURDICK: He was a special kind of character, wasn't he?

ROBERT SWANSON: He was one of a kind, unique.

HARVEY BURDICK: I was just wondering, because I'm going to jump ahead a few years to the time when Woody left. He left in 1970, I think. And during that period—from when you've been around since '59—here you've been sort of going along with Woody's ventures, supporting his image and knowing that somehow he's going to pull it off, as you say. Even the statement, "The bomb can drop any time," anybody could say that. But with him it goes, "We can do it, we can find a way somehow," right?

ROBERT SWANSON: Right.

HARVEY BURDICK: And so the direction I'm going is, where does Oakland stop and where does Woody Varner begin or vice versa? I mean, do they get collapsed into one?

ROBERT SWANSON: I think Woody is integral to the initial development of the university. You just cannot separate the university's development from the personality, and the efforts, and the inspiration that Woody provided. When he accepted the opportunity to become President of the University of Nebraska system, it was without warning and very sudden and, frankly, it was very shocking to us.

A good bit of it was based on the fact that we had made a personal commitment in our confidence in Woody's ability to do the things that were a bit unusual, many of which could not be accomplished now under the conditions or circumstances under which public bodies must operate. Much more stringent than they were at the time. But he was able to convince President Hannah and the Board at Michigan State that they could feel

comfortable in allowing him to take these risks down here. And I recall Woody describing the only admonition he received from John Hannah which was, "Okay, but just don't embarrass us." So Woody tried to strive and live up to that, and I think he accomplished that.

But it was a matter of both surprise and some trauma when he announced so suddenly that he had accepted the presidency of the University of Nebraska. You know, there's been some natural query as to really what prompted him to leave, which seemed to us at the time rather suddenly, or what prompted him to leave at all when things were going rather well down here.

My own assessment of this is that there was nothing negative about his experience or his prospects for further growth or development here, but I think it was primarily the fact that he had a very fine career opportunity to become President of the University of Nebraska system. He succeeded a man who accepted an appointment in the Eisenhower administration as Secretary of Agriculture, who had been a colleague of his at Michigan State. So, there was that Michigan State connection at the University of Nebraska, and it might be that out of that successful presidency of the prior president, that he was also given consideration and ultimately offered the presidency.

HARVEY BURDICK: You know, Bob, I remember when Woody left, and I was very disturbed and a lot of our colleagues were very disturbed. I think for the first time I'm getting an insight into my disturbance, and I'm getting a sense that when Woody left, he took a piece of my sense of Oakland with him. I was angry at that, because he was so much—

ROBERT SWANSON: He was integral to it. I think that reflects a fairly common reaction, because he was so definitely identified with and intertwined with the university and its development. I recall so many of the folks that we've described, in the community, as people that he had cultivated and developed this relationship with. They were left in a state of wonderment and some shock also, wondering who on earth is going to pick up the mantle and who is going to succeed Woody.

HARVEY BURDICK: And in one sense, nobody could.

ROBERT SWANSON: That's true.

HARVEY BURDICK: I wonder, Bob, if some of the feelings towards his successor—who was [Donald] O'Dowd - if some of the negative feelings that did exist among some people, weren't generated because of the feeling of loss about Woody?

ROBERT SWANSON: Well, I think that's true and perhaps natural, because inevitably comparisons are made. Don O'Dowd's style was different than Woody's, and I don't know of anyone else that has Woody's style and personality and unique set of abilities. It doesn't mean that they're not very able and well qualified, but Woody was regarded as a rather unique personality and was integral, really, to the development of the institution.

HARVEY BURDICK: In that context, I recall your making note of both [John] Hannah and Woody as being very special higher education people who might not find a job today.

ROBERT SWANSON: That is a matter of real interest, because under the current and very rigid criteria that are employed today in the search and selection of presidential candidates, neither John Hannah nor Woody Varner would make the first cut, because neither had an earned Ph.D.—and both of whom (I think I'm saying this without bias and with objectivity) are ranked in the top tier of educational administrators in this country. It's kind of an interesting paradox that neither of them would be given the first cut consideration.

HARVEY BURDICK: Yes, it is interesting. Before we leave the topic (and certainly we're going to do that and get back to you and your own personal recollections), you've been so informative about those origin—is there anything else about the beginnings of the university that you recall?

ROBERT SWANSON: I could comment on the subsequent development that took place, and this is while Woody was still here, of the Meadow Brook Music Festival. This was an idea of Woody's. I think it's a reflection also of the extent of his willingness to engage in some risk taking because he didn't

have, you know, the funds to support the development of it, except as he picked up some relatively modest grants from here and there: from the Kresge Foundation for \$50,000 for the permanent seating in the pavilion, and from the National Bank of Detroit Trust Officer, Norm Weston, who had the discretionary authority to make a \$50,000 allocation for the shell on the pavilion and the crowds that were there, and so it went.

But to back up about the development of the festival, I recall one day Woody stopped by my office and asked me to join him. He was going over to visit with Mrs. Wilson, who was widowed at the time and living in Sunset Terrace, and he said he was going to approach her about a site location for the festival pavilion.

HARVEY BURDICK: Could you give us a date, approximately?

ROBERT SWANSON: This probably was '64. The opening season, I think, was '65, as I recall. So it probably was '64, and we visited Mrs. Wilson at Sunset Terrace. On the way over he indicated to me that he was going to raise the suggestion of a site location that was immediately south of Meadow Brook Hall, located essentially where the 16th fairway is now on the Katke-Cousins Golf Course. He thought that would be a good site. It had access along Maple Lane and it was a relatively flat area.

So Woody laid this suggestion before her, and her response in her kind of high-pitched, squeaky voice was, "Well", she said, "before you really fix on that site, why don't you let me show you another alternate?" So she had her car parked out by the front door and she got in the driver's seat, and Woody and I got in the back of her sedan and she proceeded to drive from Sunset Terrace directly across the field there to the crest of the hill where the pavilion is located now. And she said, "What would you think of this as a site? It's kind of a natural bowl and the pavilion could be there." And I feel that it was not just a matter of polite acquiescence to her suggestion, but a genuine feeling that it was indeed a better site, which it is. And that was Mrs. Wilson's contribution to the development of the festival and the site location of the pavilion.

HARVEY BURDICK: It's a beautiful bowl, isn't it, where the pavilion is—it's perfect.

ROBERT SWANSON: It is. I think perhaps—and I don't know if Woody had given any consideration to it before—but he might have been reluctant to suggest it because of its rather close proximity to Sunset Terrace, and the noise and crowds and commotion that it would generate, that she might regard as just too disturbing. But this was her suggestion and idea and it was a good one.

HARVEY BURDICK: That's interesting. The Meadow Brook Festival was another example of his interest in going forward, doing the excellent thing. If you were to characterize Woody somehow, it's "doing it well."

ROBERT SWANSON: Yes, that was an admonition on his part to all of us. He indicated to us that, because of limitations and a lot of other factors, not necessarily would it be an objective and a goal of the institution to be more comprehensive and to do all things. He said, "We can't be all things," he said, "but whatever we do, we ought to do well." And I think he was rather successful, and I think it's a good standard that serves Oakland University rather well to this day.

HARVEY BURDICK: Yes, it's a lovely standard. "Don't do everything, but do what you can, and do it well."

ROBERT SWANSON: Maybe tangentially to what we're discussing: Early on—in terms of public relations and the media assessment of the university—as a result of the media that was generated within the institution, a good bit of it was hype. Loren Pope, the initial Assistant Chancellor in charge of public relations, developed some articles that gained rather wide circulation, nationwide circulation, and we got dubbed as the "Harvard of the Midwest," which of course was myth.

But on the other hand, I'm convinced that while inaccurate, it reflects an image that served us better. It did create an image of academic rigor and quality that we aspired to, which I think was a legitimate assessment of what our goals and objectives were. But to classify us as the "Harvard of the Midwest" is stretching it a little, more than a little. I think that it's an



image—the extent to which it was created—it's an image that's far better for us to have tried to live up to than one of mediocrity or lesser academic rigor.

HARVEY BURDICK: Yes, interesting. Should one live with the reality or should one live with an image or a myth? I'm inclined to agree with you, I think the image and the myth.

ROBERT SWANSON: In our society, images count for an awful lot, more than they should.

HARVEY BURDICK: It counts very much in our personal lives too, I think. I know the image had much to do with the curriculum. We know there was a lot of discussion as to the nature of the curriculum, and the standards, and the rigor and things of that nature. A lot of that was turned over to the faculty to help develop, with Bob Hoopes being the Dean of Faculty at that time. I wonder if there weren't things going on among the administrators as well, picking up on the same sort of feelings of rigor, and image and so on. Did that flow over into your work as an administrator at all?

ROBERT SWANSON: No, not really, except as it developed, particularly in that first year, where there was an enormous amount of academic carnage and trauma developed because this young faculty (average age of 33, as I recall) took it to heart that we've swept the slate clean, we're not limited by traditions, and by God, we're going to have an institution with academic rigor. So they struck out with that as the goal and objective, but were a little overly ambitious. Bob Hoopes in his initial comments, as I recall, commented on the idea that we were going to hone the abrasive edges of the students here. We did more than hone, we did a lot of grinding down to beneath the surface.

But much to the credit of the faculty, they recognized early on that they were over-achieving and over-estimating the abilities of the students to deliver. They made modifications of the course content and there was an awful lot of extra effort, as I recall, by that charter faculty. 'Boy, they would work with students, have extra sessions, meetings in the student center, in their homes, and they worked very hard with the kids. The ones that survived and graduated with the charter class, and subsequently graduated

out of that initial 570 students, have a rightful feeling of being pioneers and survivors.

HARVEY BURDICK: I still want to go back to your office as chief financial officer, and as I asked you earlier, some of the functions you carried through as a person in that position. I don't want to get into the details of the duties, but how were you involved in outreach, for example, in the community?

ROBERT SWANSON: This was a new dimension that I hadn't really anticipated. However, very early on, Woody involved me and a few other administrators in community relations outreach efforts. We would meet with service clubs and organizations. A lot of interest was generated about this new university, and so there were many requests and demands to have some representative of the university come out and tell them about the university development. So Woody developed a cadre of us that would go out and tell the MSUO story. The first couple of years, probably 20 or more times I would be involved, and Herb Stoutenberg would be involved in that, and Lowell Eklund, to go out and tell the MSUO story to the community.

HARVEY BURDICK: Now, I'm going to ask, can you summarize that story in a paragraph or so—because obviously you knew it by heart after 20 times. What did you tell the people in the community?

ROBERT SWANSON: You know, we've been talking about most of what was in the MSUO story. We've already touched on and described about its development in relationship to Michigan State, and what the basic goals and objectives of the institution were, you know—no fraternities, no sororities, no intercollegiate activities, no ROTC [Reserve Officers Training Corps]. Those were points of both identification and distinction.

HARVEY BURDICK: Oh, I loved it when I came here, I tell you; I was a true believer. So the story affected me.

The problems with finances - you made some reference to some difficulty in the state during this early period, with finances. Did I hear you say payless Thursdays or something?

ROBERT SWANSON: Payless paydays. That was more threatened than a reality, but that was during a significant recession in the State of Michigan, and it affected also the housing market. We had just returned from Vietnam and bought this house, but the housing market was really quite depressed. Having to count on my wife to market our home while I'm commuting between Rochester and East Lansing daily—I didn't have time to do it, but left it up to her and it was a bit of a challenge too. That's just a reflection of the state of the economy in Michigan at the time. But it's reflective also of the fact that the legislative appropriations couldn't be very generous to go along with the development of this new institution. So there were very definite limitations.

HARVEY BURDICK: There were money limits, but as far as the ideas, and the hopes, and the aspirations, they almost seemed to be without limit at that time.

ROBERT SWANSON: That's true because, you know, you felt that this too shall pass, that the recession isn't going to last forever. And once the MSU Board accepted the gift, and the Legislature gave its approval, you know, they weren't going to let this wither on the vine.

HARVEY BURDICK: It was nice to have them as a parachute.

ROBERT SWANSON: You bet, yes, it would have been very different and far more difficult if there had been no such affiliation. If it were just to develop a brand new "Wilson University" here, without that sort of affiliation, it would have been very different.

HARVEY BURDICK: I couldn't help but sense that you think that the early aspects of Oakland—well, some of them are still around. That things have changed, but Oakland today still has characteristics that you can find back in the early period. Do you feel that way?

ROBERT SWANSON: Oh, very definitely. I think the foundation that was laid back then still stands the institution in very good stead. I think we have a program as well as a reputation of having academic respectability and rigor.

That was one of the foundations on which the institution was built, out of the outgrowth of the Meadow Brook Seminars. Again, going back to the post-Sputnik era, that was a reflection of what the nation wanted, needed, and would support at the time. The federal government put an awful lot of money into higher education primarily in the fields of science, engineering, and mathematics. In an effort to catch up, we needed to launch our own Sputniks.

HARVEY BURDICK: Bob, I want to get your remembrances of those early days and the relationships that existed between the academic part of the university and the support and administrative part of the university. I know you all had offices in North Foundation Hall together and so you were able to visit and things like that?

ROBERT SWANSON: Right. There was an unusual relationship that was developed and I attribute it to a couple of factors. Number one, this was really steered and engineered by Woody, who put a lot of effort into creating this sense of unity and involvement on the part of all of us; that we were all part of this development which was pretty much regarded as an exciting one and kind of a rare opportunity, and this is how you do it when you're given this rare opportunity.

Woody would relate on a very personal basis to the whole spectrum of the university staff, from the food service handlers, to the grounds people, to the maintenance people, to the clerical staff, the faculty and the administrators, and he organized a number of events and activities and affairs that would bring the entire university together. I recall several occasions when he'd have Hollie Lepley, who headed our athletic program, organize picnics for the entire university community. He'd have games for the kids to play, and he would see to it that everyone got a prize. They'd have square dances in the sports and rec building. I recall very vividly how complicated it was for John Galloway to master the "do-si-doe's" and "allemande lefts," and he would very often turn around in the wrong direction and someone would have to grab him and steer him.

But it was, you know, a factor of the time that could not be maintained indefinitely. It was reflective of the excitement, and the commitment and the

feeling of participation that the entire spectrum of the university felt during that developmental period.

HARVEY BURDICK: I can't help but think of the contrast. I think there do exist today two communities—that administrators, when they seek out others socially, go to other administrators, and faculty go to other faculty—and at that time there wasn't that sense of separation.

ROBERT SWANSON: No, there was an awful lot of interaction.

HARVEY BURDICK: And not just at the picnics and so on.

ROBERT SWANSON: No, in homes and residences, entertaining. It was unusual and it doesn't exist, you know, to anywhere near that degree.

HARVEY BURDICK: That's interesting. If anyone asked what kind of things have remained, that's one of the things that has not remained—that easy, very family-like, socially-related, let's-get-together aspect.

ROBERT SWANSON: It was also a function of size. We were very small then, as we noted. I think we had 24 faculty and 12-odd administrators, so you could get them all together in a group and not require an awful lot of area.

HARVEY BURDICK: You had mentioned something about making a paella for Francis Tafoya whose roots, I think, are in Spain.

ROBERT SWANSON: Right, a very authentic Spaniard and he declared the end product to be even better than paella, but I think he was just being very generous. It was, I think, indicative of the kind of easy relationship that existed, not just with the Swansons, but the kind of interaction that took place more frequently.

HARVEY BURDICK: We were chatting a little earlier, and we were talking about some of the ways we were dealing with one another socially and so

forth, and the ease in which we were socially interacting with one another, and the Jim McKay episode came up.

ROBERT SWANSON: That was early on also. We had a group over—I don't recall whether it was the same occasion as when the paella was produced—but in any event, Jim McKay and his wife were over. In the course of the evening I think there was an expression that Jim needed a haircut. I think we had become sufficiently convivial by that time, that I volunteered to do the honors because I had had a little experience, having two young boys that I gave haircuts to—just one style, and that was the crew cut. I wasn't able to do much beyond that, but that turned out to be the style of Jim's hair at the time. So I got out the clippers and proceeded with cutting Jim McKay's hair. As I recall, he was sitting at the end of the sofa in the living room, and I took him out on the deck to brush him off at the end of it. I don't recall that either I charged him for it, nor did he give me a tip.

HARVEY BURDICK: Was he as generous as Tafoya?

ROBERT SWANSON: You know, I don't think I recall even giving him an opportunity by handing him a mirror.

HARVEY BURDICK: So now you're retired, and you can reflect back to those early times and your choice in coming down to the Rochester area, which was fairly primitive, I think, wasn't it?

ROBERT SWANSON: It was a sleepy, bedroom, semi-rural community. I recall during the first months that we were here, when we were still in a rented house down in Rochester before our house was built, and we attended a church service on Sunday morning and locked ourselves out of the house. I recall having to break a basement window to lower my son down to go in and open the door. The next day I asked [my wife] Elaine if she would take the casement window down to the hardware store down on Main Street, Case's Hardware. It was located just across the street on the west side of Main Street from Mitzelfeld's store.

She took the casement window in, they allowed as how, yes, they could repair it, and so they took it. She was ready to go, and she said, "Don't you

want to take my name with that?" "Well, if you want to," they said. So she gave them the name Swanson, and one looked at the other, and said, "My goodness, do we have two Swansons that live in the Rochester area?" That was kind of the way it was, and there was a grain store that was just down the block a bit. And this was an old-fashioned hardware store, with the ladders on rails and all those bins where they had a little bit of everything, and they knew almost exactly where to go to put their finger, what drawer to pull out to get it.

HARVEY BURDICK: Sounds like a 19th century type of store.

ROBERT SWANSON: Yes, that's the kind of community Rochester was when we got down here in 1959.

HARVEY BURDICK: You built a house here in the faculty subdivision?

ROBERT SWANSON: Ours was the first one completed and occupied in the subdivision.

HARVEY BURDICK: Could you tell us a little bit about the faculty subdivision: what was that all about?

ROBERT SWANSON: I think it reflected Woody's particular interest in development. He had been involved in the development of a parcel of property up in East Lansing, I think it was called Lantern Hill, which was aimed primarily for faculty development. They had kind of a common architectural theme and so on. So I think he wanted to create those housing facilities here since there was plenty of property as part of the gift from the Wilsons. He arranged to have it platted out and initially, as I recall, 50 lots were platted out for the development.

When we first came down, we were made acquainted with that option for housing. As we explored it, and it was very early on, there was no road that extended up on Heidelberg Drive yet. It just had been laid out with a bulldozer, a little bit of dirt pushed around there. We looked at the plat and the options, and we decided that for a variety of reasons it would be a rather desirable and suitable location for commuting purposes.

HARVEY BURDICK: It's right across the street.

ROBERT SWANSON: Yes. Except for my need to have a car after I got to work, I could easily and would easily have walked. But it was five minutes from the office to home, and over these intervening years I have speculated at times how much time I've saved in commuting time. It's turned out to be, from our point of view, a rather ideal location. The school system was a good one for our kids, and we've been very comfortable there, and we still are comfortable—to the point where we choose not to move away.

HARVEY BURDICK: It was another way—even if not its intention—but it certainly was a way of also building community, wasn't it? Faculty would be living all over the place, but they had a place where they all could gather and live next door to one another as neighbors.

ROBERT SWANSON: That's true, and there's interaction to the extent that individuals wish to interact.

HARVEY BURDICK: Was it a good financial deal?

ROBERT SWANSON: No. I think more recently the university has, under the lease agreement, repurchased homes that they have subsequently rented. I don't think it's been any financial benefit to the university, although it was never really launched as a benefit to the university.

HARVEY BURDICK: My question was, was it a good deal for the faculty and administrators who bought their homes there? Was it attractive financially to them?

ROBERT SWANSON: I think, as it turned out, it has been. You know, one of the limitations is that ownership of the home, not the lot but the home, is limited to members of the faculty or the administrative staff, so that it's not a free, open market. So the value of it isn't judged by the greater Rochester Hills area where comparable property has a higher value. So from that



standpoint, an investment outside of the faculty subdivision could have been more beneficial to the homeowners there.

HARVEY BURDICK: I have one last question to ask and that is, as you reflect on that choice as a young man of 35, how do you feel about it now? Was it something you would do again?

ROBERT SWANSON: Oh, it's been great. It's been great for our entire family. No regrets at all and no disappointments. It has afforded, I think, a fine career opportunity, but also just the involvement in the development of a reputable, quality, new educational program has a lot of psychic rewards. I take a lot of continuing personal interest and pride in the university and its development, and I feel that I've made a rather significant investment myself.

HARVEY BURDICK: —and contribution.

ROBERT SWANSON: Well, I would hope it would have been worthwhile. I try to continue to be a decent ambassador of the institution, as I continue my relationship out in the community with a lot of the friends that I've developed over the past 38 years.

HARVEY BURDICK: On that note, and a high one, we can end the interview and thank you so much, Bob, for coming and being a delightful guest.

ROBERT SWANSON: Glad to have had the opportunity.

# Oakland University Chronicles

ROBERT SWANSON

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