

OU is 25 years old

'Harvard of the midwest' grew out of Rochester cornfields

By James J. Ritz
staff writer

MAGIC — that's the word George Matthews, one of Oakland University's original "59ers," uses to describe the day in September 1959 when the school first opened for classes.

A great deal of it came from Durward B. (Woodie) Varner, the university's first chancellor and a man Matthews affectionately calls the "local Merlin." Varner's enthusiasm proved contagious to the 24-member charter staff.

Matthews recalls a dreary, drizzly day in May 1959 when Varner hauled him west from his job as history professor at Columbia University in New York City and "trotted me around" the grounds in one of the school's first recruiting efforts. Varner was organizing an elite cadre of professors to build for his school a reputation of academic excellence.

"It was one of those grey, cold weekends," recalls Matthews. "The Wilsons' Belgian horses were grazing around the area where construction was underway on North and South Foundation Halls." The horses' stables, along with \$2 million, 1,400 acres of land and Meadow Brook Hall were donated by Alfred and Matilda Wilson to establish a university.

"Who else but Woodie Varner could take you on this site and conjure up visions of this great university growing out of the cornfields? Only the 'local

Merlin," said Matthews.

VARNER SOON imbued his hand-picked cadre of professors with his lofty visions of a "Harvard of the Midwest."

The 14 members of the original staff still on campus were the guests of honor at a testimonial dinner Sunday night in Meadow Brook Hall. The dinner followed fall commencement exercises which began the university's 25th anniversary celebration. Each honoree received a plaque and a pat on the back from OU President Joseph Champagne.

The story of the "charter faculty" is a fascinating one, says Matthews. The new faculty members were educational pioneers from such places as University of Chicago and Columbia — one was a Russian immigrant — and they carried two or three job offers in their briefcases from other colleges and universities.

Instead, they chose Michigan State University-Oakland as it was called then. Why did they stay? Matthews says Harvard professor David Riesman supplied the answer in his book, "Academic Values and Mass Education."

"RIESMAN STUDIED MSU-O as an example of the crop of new universities springing up at the time," recalled Matthews. "Riesman's book characterized the early faculty as more than 50ers. He saw them as pioneer settlers and as highly qualified people willing to move to the frontier. They had a certain spirit of adventure. They were in-

terest not on carving out a farm and moving on, but on carving out a homestead and staying."

"The most critical job was to recruit a staff for the future. 'We used to say our job was to recruit people better than we are. That's the only way you can grow,'" Matthews said.

Grow it did. From its original population of 24 faculty members and 550 students, to a faculty of 450 and an enrollment of 12,000.

Excellence has been the byword from the school's early days as a small liberal arts college to its status as a full-fledged university.

"I don't think we ever lost our sense of excellence and drive to always be better," said Matthews. "We've always had this sense of striving. We managed to build. And we did it in one of the world's toughest academic markets."

AS THE UNIVERSITY grew, so did the faculty's reputation. Some moved on. Those who stayed carved their niches.

Chairman professor Paul Tomboulain functioned as the department's chairman even before he obtained the title, says Matthews.

Linguistics Chairman William Schwab had had that post since the department was established in 1964.

Other members of the charter faculty and staff are:

• Richard Burke, a philosophy professor imported from the University of Chicago, who became department chairman in the late 1960s.

• Helen Kovach. Born in Russia, she escaped to Hungary at the end of World War II, earned a doctorate in Budapest, came to Canada, then the U.S. The Russian language and literature professor holds the title of "Earth Mother of the University," says Matthews. She's tough but warm, he says.

• Thomas Fitzsimmons is an English professor who came from Yale. He's a highly published professor doing intensive work in cross-cultural literary studies, especially in the role of poetry in different countries.

• James McKay, mathematics professor, served as dean of sciences and math.

• Gertrude White, English professor emerita, retired in 1983.

• Robert Swanson, now vice-president for development, came from MSU. He served as business and finance manager through 1981.

• George Karas, university engineer, has supervised all construction since the university began. He was the first employee hired by Varner.

• Lowell Eklund, dean of continuing education and executive director of Meadow Brook Hall was the second employee hired by Varner. Eklund says the first classes at the University actually took place in 1958 when continuing education courses in speed reading were offered in the converted farm poultry buildings. One of the students was Matilda Wilson.

• Richard Moore, associate director of campus facilities, was originally hired by the Wilsons, who also em-

ployed his father.

• Clare McVety, who started as a grounds worker is now general foreman for plant maintenance.

• William Hamerlee is a professor of engineering.

And he's not least, Matthews, who had distinguished himself at Columbia as a history professor and department chairman, Matthews became involved in administration and program development soon after coming to OU.

From 1970-81, he served 18 months as interim university president between the tenures of Donald O'Dowd and Champagne. He's returned to classroom teaching and plans to retire next year.

DID OU change directions and abandon its ideal as a midwestern Harvard when it grew from a small liberal arts college into a full university during the 1960s?

That question's spurred some bitter debate.

As Matthews sees it, there never was an question that OU would grow into a big university. Varner kept emphasizing that message to all who cared to listen.

"The question was whether we were gonna be a good, big place," said Matthews. "I was always of that persuasion rather than the small liberal arts college persuasion."

Another phenomenon that hastened the growth of Oakland into full university status, said Matthews, was the collapse of liberal arts, general education curricula in the late 1960s and the advent of professional and vocational programs.

When the demand for teachers dipped, enrollment in OU's College of Human and Educational Services which made up half of the liberal arts program, took a nosedive. For OU, then primarily a liberal arts college, the decline in its teacher training programs could have triggered a financial crisis.

Expanding into new programs was a case of survival, said Matthews. "By

doing this, we were trying to save — not abandon — liberal arts," he said.

Most of the charter faculty called coming to MSU-Oakland in 1959 a "once-in-a-lifetime" opportunity to build from the ground up.

In established schools, said Schwab, "it's generally more difficult to be innovative. It's been a very exciting and stimulating experience here at Oakland."

He pointed to the development of a strong linguistics program at the graduate and undergraduate levels and of a cross-cultural effectiveness program for American executives doing business in Japan as examples of the opportunities for ground-up building.

Tomboulain said OU has weathered the winds of change and grown into an established school. It must continue to cope with change, he said. He still considers a strong teaching faculty as the school's greatest asset although it is gaining stature as a research institution.

"In some areas, we're No.3 in the state in funds (allocated) for outside research and I feel that research activities will continue to take an increasingly greater focus here. We're proud of that record," he said.

But, Tomboulain added, "The teaching faculty is our greatest strength and I doubt that any outside forces will change that."

Eklund called OU a school that has "come out of nowhere in the last 25 years" and taken its place among the leading state and national institutions. "We've established ourselves toward the top of the heap, from a tuition value standpoint," Eklund said.

In the future, the university will be judged on its ability to serve the public, Eklund said. "There's an old axiom that if you would be served, you must serve."

"In order to get the financial support we need, we must serve the state's institutions. Our future will depend on how we meet that public service need, along with having the highest-quality academic program possible."

Country store re-opens at Marian Oct. 12-13

More than 100 exhibitors will display their wares in Marian High School Mothers' Club Friday and Saturday, Oct. 12-13.

It will be at Calico Country Store, an old-fashioned bazaar offering more than 1,000 articles, including a wide variety of handmade gift items, objects d'art, wood sculpture, country furnishings, folk-painting, jewelry, unique Christmas decorations and boutique items.

Church back on fall schedule

First Presbyterian Church of Farmington resumes its full fall schedule this week with worship services beginning at 10:30 a.m. Sunday. The church is at 28165 Farmington Road.

Unlike other arts and crafts shows, Marian's Calico Country Store is comprised mainly of independent Michigan exhibitors. There are no commercial stores represented.

Among the exhibitors are three Farmington Hills residents. Marilyn Levin will offer "Susie's Stuff," a little boys line of hand-painted and appliqued clothing. Chandler and Helen Simonds will be taking orders for personalized watercolor or pen and ink drawings.

Calico, which regularly attracts hundreds of bargain-seeking shoppers to the school on Lahser and 1/4 Mile Road, is chaired this year by Carol Condit and Kathleen Cahill.

Among their committee persons is Elaine Hoogerwerf, another Farmington Hills resident, who does double duty this time around by also manning a booth called "Calico Lady," which offers only items made of country calico. For the second year, a Fine Arts Gal-

lery will be a highlight of the event. The high-quality gallery will feature pa dao stichery, which is ancient needlework of invisible stitches created by the famous people of northern Laos, watercolor paintings coupled with illustrated children's books by an award-winning husband and wife team, refined pottery, colored concrete sculpture resembling the Victorian era for indoor or outdoor use, framed calligra-

phy, original prints and etchings.

Calico Country Store's hours are from 9:30 a.m. to 8:00 p.m., Friday, and from 9:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., Saturday. The "Calico Cafe" serving light lunches, desserts and coffee, will be open during exhibit hours.

Admission is a \$1 donation; family rate is \$2. Parking and shuttle service are available.



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